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Heading for trouble

Non-human futures in recent art



Susan Ballard

*I am an artist too, and therefore a liar.
Distrust everything I say.
I am telling the truth.*

Ursula Le Guin, introduction to
The Left Hand of Darkness (1969)

Sometimes the truth is impossible to hear. At year's end, dinner table conversation turns from climate change to mass extinctions, and people consult their pocket encyclopaedias for facts. Someone asks: "Exactly how many birds in Aotearoa have gone extinct?" Even Wikipedia claims an incomplete list.¹ In *Te Ara* ecologist Richard Holdaway tells the numbers more clearly: 50% of vertebrate fauna gone in the 750 years since human arrival in New Zealand.²

Anne Noble
Dead Bee Portrait #01, 2015
from *No Vertical Song*
Pigment print on archival paper.
Courtesy the artist and Two Rooms Gallery

Numbers overwhelm in Australia too. Here, humans have been living amidst other animal species for tens of thousands rather than hundreds of years, and the lists of extinctions add to our dinner table litany.³ Ecologist Chris Johnson tells the 50,000-year history of Australia by assessing the domino effects of the extinction of at least sixty-five mammal species. He notes that the broader ecological impacts are always more than we can measure. When confronted with the death of an individual animal humans draw on experience: we mourn until the grief within fades, but the death of an entire species means something different. We turn to other stories. We start to imagine; we work out strategies to “save them,” we share images of starving polar bears, and purchase fluffy wombats, kakapo and pandas online.

Immediately there are problems. What is the word for nearly-but-not-quite extinct? Is there a special name for the last of the species? What kind of acceleration is this? Should we build more sanctuaries and kill all introduced and feral species? Is this kind of speculation appropriate? To ask these questions is to embark on a process that Donna Haraway has called “staying with the trouble.”⁴ Haraway challenges the fictions we are already telling of the Anthropocene, she suggests that before anything else we must cultivate responsibility that feels for both the human and the non-human. It is a call to shift our response into one of relationships built at the edge

of trouble. Émilie Hache and Bruno Latour suggest that any response to these questions is dependant on our hesitation at the borders of definitions of nature.⁵ We are, they suggest, sensitised beings that exist along twin axes of morality and moralism. To address the challenge of thinking with nature, including animals, the rocks and minerals that form the planet, they argue that we suspend distinctions between human and non-human, and consider the etymology of response: “I become responsible by responding, in word or deed, to the call of some one or something.”⁶ These philosophical approaches share something: they suggest that fictions (or the stories we tell) offer new responses in our relationships with others. Such fictions are speculative world-making devices that remake our relationships with other animals and the planet. Artists have been using these techniques of fiction and response to break the old textual stories of the world and speculate on our collective futures. In their responses to the current environmental crises, the artists discussed in this short essay use speculation and fiction to tell the stories for which we have run out of words. They help us think together about the future of our multi-species world.

New Zealand photographer Anne Noble’s series *No Vertical Song* (2017) is a collection of fifteen portraits of individual dead bees installed as a speculative future museum. The work presumes that all bees are now dead, and only survive in our memory and

images. In *Dead Bee Portrait #01* (2015) the bee rests in a halo of light, feet tucked under its body and face resting on a round plinth. *Dead Bee Portrait #14* (2015) shows a bee, arms and legs folded, head up, antennae alert. In *Dead Bee Portrait #02* (2015) we see the bee from behind, seated upright, its wings soft veils of drapery hanging over the plinth. Glowing with the chill of a mortuary table the plinth is a stabilising tool of the scanning electron microscope Noble uses to take the photographs. The portraits speculate on the aftermath of the future present: of ecological collapse, of societies that have struggled to function as the environment became poisonous. Scientific knowledge and method lends the story an element of truth. The scanning electron microscope that produces the portraits uses an electron beam that is excited by the element gold. Heavy metals shadow the surface of the bee, and it shimmers like a mirage. It seems that each individual hair vibrates with an ancient sound. In the presence of these magical beings, looking becomes a process of listening. As J. M. Coetzee’s *Elizabeth Costello* tells us “animals have only their silence left with which to confront us.”⁷ These bees are no longer a part of the songlines that connected their complex communities. The silence of bees points to a much deeper problem.

Singaporean artist Robert Zhao Renhui founded the Institute of Critical Zoologists (ICZ) in 2008. A speculative museum, the ICZ offers training in the aesthetics of

Michele Beevors

After Stubbs Equus ferus caballus (horse and rider and shipwreck), 2015
Installation view, *The Wreck of Hope*, 2015, wool, aluminium, rope polyurethane, rubber and wood.
Photo: Carl A. Mears.
Courtesy and © the artist

Opposite:

Robert Zhao Renhui

Memorial to the Last Cat on Christmas Island, 2016
Installation, wood and resin.
Installation view, Biennale of Sydney.
Courtesy the artist and Biennale of Sydney



the zoological gaze. The collection includes documented, framed, and taxidermic specimens collected as tourist shop souvenirs (ICZMC/101 *The Bat*) and displays of “whole newts preserved in resin with a green base and sold in a general convenience stall as a keychain” (ICZMC/110).⁸ The ICZ also conducts natural history research projects. In 2015 Renhui visited Christmas Island (an external territory of Australia settled only 150 years ago, that remains a disputed site as it houses the Christmas Island Immigration Reception and Processing Centre). *Christmas Island, Naturally: The Natural History of an Isolated Oceanic Island with Photographs from the Archive of the Institute of Critical Zoologists* (2016) is a book written for an audience in fifty-years-time documenting the disappearing or extinct species from the Island.

When exhibited in the 2016 Biennale of Sydney the book was accompanied by a *Memorial to the Christmas Island Pipistrelle* (2016) that included a solar-powered ultrasonic location device used to track the bat before its demise, and images of the frequencies of the tiny bat last heard in 2009. In 2012 Tim Flannery also documented this extinction event: “In late August 2009 a tiny, solitary bat fluttered about in the rainforest near Australia’s infamous Christmas Island detention camp. We don’t know precisely what happened to it. Perhaps it landed on a leaf at dawn after a night feeding on moths and mosquitoes, and was torn to pieces by fire ants; perhaps it succumbed to a mounting toxic burden placed on its tiny body by insecticide spraying. Or maybe it was simply worn out with age and ceaseless activity, and



died quietly in its tree hollow. But there is one important thing we do know: it was the last Christmas Island pipistrelle (*Pipistrellus murrayi*). With its passing, an entire species winked out of existence.”⁹

Through Renhui’s memorial we listen to an absent call from the past. Recording technologies present us with sounds captured out of time, and a memorial to an animal that lives on without its body. A second memorial, *Memorial to the Last Cat on Christmas Island* (2016) is a resin skeleton of a feral cat on sand, with a microscope-trap paused above and about to capture the beast. The book contains a narrative that explains the sculpture: “A widespread search in 2015, using automatic cameras, yielded only a rear glimpse of a single individual. A long time has passed without conclusive evidence of the cat’s survival, and sadly this domestic species must be considered ‘probably extinct’ on Christmas Island.”¹⁰ It is hard to tell at this moment whether we are in the present or the future. In stark contrast to the usual discourse surrounding the eradication of feral cats, the language is of sorrow. Fiona Probyn-Rapsey has highlighted this tension: what right do we have to shift our definition of an animal from domestic to feral, from pet to escapee?¹¹

Have we become desensitised to these (actual and potential) deaths? Australian sculptor Michele Beevors identifies the loss of awe that accompanies the current crisis of extinction by revisiting Casper David Friedrich’s painting *The Sea of Ice*

(1823–24), also known more pointedly as *The Wreck of Hope*. A blend of local weather events and imagined horrors, the painting is a frozen and violent space of mourning; its wrecked boat remaining a salient metaphor of the Romantic imagination. In *The Wreck of Hope* (2014–17) by Beevors, skeletons of animals knitted from bone-coloured wool and drawn from memories of childhood visits to the Australian Museum in Sydney make up an obscure grouping that extends the narrative. In this three-dimensional world, Friedrich’s ice flows are now replaced by shattered and blackened furniture. Each life-sized animal stands astride the destroyed remains of human domesticity: wardrobes, truck tyres, a chair, an office desk, and a potted cactus. Individual works are vignettes of potential disaster.

In *Run From Fear* (2014–15) a knitted diamond python, each rib a bony entanglement of wool and motion, rears up on top of its truck tyre pile. *Last Plague* (2014–15) shows a bright green tree frog clutching a potted cactus that teeters precariously in a rubber life raft. Beevors connects extinction with its grim reality: the tension between violence and survival. This image of nature upending itself as an update on Friedrich’s nineteenth-century touchstone enables Beevors to invoke both the agency and continuing incomprehensibility of nature.

When, in 1796, Georges Cuvier managed to persuade others of his belief that fossilised bones were evidence of “the existence of a world

previous to ours, destroyed by some kind of catastrophe,” humans were forced to reimagine the future as well as the past across species lines.¹² But no one craves the violence of extinction. In the Holocene, who could have anticipated the images we might need to make now and the stories we might be too afraid to tell?

Plotting the potential for creative engagement through the lives of other species, the Argentinian–Australian artist Fernando do Campo established the *House Sparrow Society for Humans* (HSSH) to trace fictional and real encounters through image, typography and narration.¹³ In *Painter of Landscapes for an Introduced Species* (2016) do Campo imagines the animals as commentators on human art-making practices. These amateur avian art critics provide a convivial and absurdist critique of institutionally sanctioned art practices.

In *The Colours of Federation* (*WHOSLAUGHINGJACKASS*) (2017) do Campo reimagine the introduction of the Laughing Kookaburra to Tasmania and Western Australia between 1881 and 1906, as practised by a network of enthusiastic acclimatisation societies. Considering the desire to “improve” upon nature, acclimatisation societies exchanged animals for both aesthetic and “useful” reasons. Hidden amongst the truth-telling spaces of the archival vitrine is a photographic image of a pet kookaburra posing on a Tasmanian porch for a family portrait, and strange paintings in that authoritative pre-photographic



European style adopted by artists who never witnessed these species firsthand. The project also maps the task of scientists cast in this conflicted space of negotiation to proffer the exchange of a few-remaining thylacine for pairs of kookaburras.

Do Campo explores another possibility for the kookaburra. Having established itself so well across Australia, he asks, should we not be considering its characteristic colours as an alternative to the British-aligned preference for red, white and blue of Federation? Do Campo constructs a set of conceptual parameters for a palette drawn from the birds. He then translates it across the gallery to suggest a new kind of Federation more aligned with the Australian vernacular as determined by bird aesthetics. This new aesthetic functions as a form of camouflage for both artist and bird. Exposed, the kookaburra holds a mirror to European settlement, from which it has clearly attracted



some advantage over other species.

In his discussion of the extinction of the Christmas Island pipistrelle, Tim Flannery draws attention to the waves of Australian mammal extinctions that resulted from European settlement. As he points out, our reaction to extinctions tells us something about our soul: “As with human rights, extinctions beg the question of where we draw the line. If we can stand by as a species of bat is snuffed out, then why not other species as well?”¹⁴ He also points out the erroneous focus on individual species, rather than entire ecosystems, one outcome of which is the decision to cull native animals due to perceived overabundance. The population of kangaroos, bats, dingos, even koalas are managed by humans. This disproportionately impacts the apex predators, who fare worst of all.

As an example of a significant species aligned with the fate of our own, New Zealand-born Australian-resident artist Hayden

Fernando do Campo *The Colours of Federation (WHOSLAUGHINGJACKASS)*, 2017
acrylic paint on wall, acrylic paint on poplar plywood, vitrines with archival material.
Installation view, Artspace Sydney.
Photo: Zan Wimberley

Fowler draws on the special relationship between humans and dingos in his recent virtual reality landscape installation and live performance work. Neither wolf nor dog, the dingo is a unique species with a significant history and place within the Australian imaginary. *Together Again* (2017) appears to test the limits of this special bond, as human and dingo occupy a large cage. The title belies the separation between the virtual world (a generically beautiful outback Australian landscape made in collaboration with Andrew Yip), and the physical reality of the space of the exhibition and performance. While the dingo, wearing a VR tracker, and the human wearing VR goggles physically roam the cage, their movements are mapped directly into the virtual world.



Amidst the noise and traffic of an art fair, in this contained space at Sydney Contemporary, there is a single, soft-padded platform for human and dingo to occupy together. Despite and perhaps because of the spatial constraints the artist and the animal are clearly in a relationship of intimacy. Joseph Beuys's combative caging of human and coyote in a gallery space for the action *I Like America and America Likes Me* (1974) is here replaced with a relationship of apparently mutual benefit defined by soft touch and slow movement.

The cage appears bleak, but the virtual world is filled with colour, light and the apparent splendour of

nature. Yet the limits of this world are also evident; after the same three cockatoos fly past again and again the visionary experience flattens. Fowler is within this endgame of nature mapped through the flat planes of repetition as a thinned-out, artificially distilled experience. The reduced experience is countered by the restorative consolation of the human–dingo relationship, pointing the way forward. Haraway would call it evidence of the process of making kin: an activity of living and being together that is never complete and is neither about domestication, nor a reduction to human models of behaviour. Rather, it crosses those palpable borders to communicate

across species: part dingo, part human.

This is also testing for the viewer. I sit outside the cage, and the dingo gently presses against the bars, sniffing me out. A branch of banksia floats above us: an apparition and energy from this familiar yet-strange landscape to a briefly shared site on a screen inside a cage, inside a booth, inside a trade fair, occupying the space of a decommissioned railway yard, now Carriageworks. We have moved on from the machinations of the colonial acclimatisation societies, but still harbour a similar curiosity around cohabitation with different species subject to the limitation of environmental conditions.

Parallels can be made across these diverse arenas for practice briefly traversed: from the alchemical processes where—as in the works of Anne Noble—gold replacing silver engenders the transformative process of photography; to the storytelling efforts of house sparrows as they encounter modernist art; to a human and dingo together occupying dual models of nature. And, not fitting neatly into either, there are many strands to the speculative invocation of responsibility. So too fictions of storytelling and reinvention are forms of creative world-building that take on these new responsibilities and temporal probabilities that are the challenge for the geohumanities in the age of the Anthropocene. They are all true stories. In each of these works the human is forever present as instigator and arbitrator, and most often as transformative force. We can immortalise the bee as a portrait of great delicacy, the equivalent of portraits of the pharaohs, or our own ancestors, find new spaces for cohabitation with our non-domesticated animal others, and provide refuge for fringe-dwelling displaced native species. But the dingo can't return to the wild, and nor can we.

Hayden Fowler
Together Again, 2017
 Installation and live performance: cage,
 Australian dingo, virtual reality landscape.
 VR designer: Dr Andrew Yip, UNSW Art & Design

Opposite:
Hayden Fowler
Together Again, 2017
 Installation and live performance: cage,
 Australian dingo, virtual reality landscape.
 VR designer: Dr Andrew Yip, UNSW Art & Design.
 Photo: Joy Lai

¹ See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_extinct_animals_of_New_Zealand ² Richard Holdaway, "Extinctions—New Zealand extinctions since human arrival," *Te Ara: The Encyclopedia of New Zealand*; <http://www.TeAra.govt.nz/en/extinctions/page-4> ³ Chris Johnson, *Australia's Mammal Extinctions: A 50,000 Year History*, London and Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007 ⁴ Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2016 ⁵ Émilie Hache and Bruno Latour, "Morality or Moralism? An Exercise in Sensitization," *Common Knowledge* 16, no. 2, 2010, pp. 311–30 ⁶ Ibid ⁷ J. M. Coetzee, Elizabeth Costello, London: Vintage, 2004, p. 70 ⁸ See <https://www.criticalzoologists.org/museum/museum.html> ⁹ See Tim Flannery: <http://www.smh.com.au/environment/conservation/unmourned-death-of-a-sole-survivor-20121116-29hbg.html> ¹⁰ See <https://www.criticalzoologists.org/christmas/index.html> ¹¹ <http://animalstudies.org.au/archives/5825> ¹² From "Espèces des éléphants," 1796, in Martin J. S. Rudwick, Georges Cuvier, Fossil Bones, and Geological Catastrophes: New Translations and Interpretations of the Primary Texts, Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2008, p. 24 ¹³ See <http://www.fernandocampo.com/painter-of-landscapes-for-an-introduced-species> ¹⁴ Flannery, op. cit.



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