

“THE FLUKISHNESS OF BEING RELATED”:
BIOSEMIOTICS, NATURECULTURES, AND IRONY
IN THE ART OF NINA KATCHADOURIAN

by

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THESIS ABSTRACT

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This thesis contends that Nina Katchadourian’s oeuvre can be read as subtly breaking down problematic assumptions about nature in Western thought. The second chapter draws on biosemiotics, which redefines life as semiosis, and trans-corporeality, which reconceptualizes the human body as inseparable from the environment, to show how Katchadourian’s art routinely calls attention to non-human animal and material agencies. The third chapter demonstrates how Katchadourian’s work implicitly reinforces Donna Haraway’s idea of naturecultures, which contends that nature and culture are mutually implicated and inextricably intertwined, through a close reading of two of Katchadourian’s pieces, *Natural Crossdressing* and *Mended Spiderwebs #19 (Laundry Line)*. The fourth chapter compares the use of irony in two pieces that comment on Western animal classification—*Chloe*, by Katchadourian, and *Scala Naturae*, by Mark Dion—contending that Katchadourian’s piece demonstrates what Bronislaw Szerszynski terms an “ironic ecology.”

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter	Page
I. INTRODUCTION	1
II. BIOSEMIOTICS, TRANS-CORPOREALITY, AND THE ART OF NINA KATCHADOURIAN	5
Biosemiotics.....	8
<i>Umwelten</i>	8
Spontaneous Meaning.....	13
Mistakes and Creativity	18
Openness and Attentiveness	23
Play and Imitation: Encountering the Other	28
Trans-corporeality.....	35
Attention to Materiality.....	35
Material Agencies: Thing-power and Creativity	38
Limits of Language and Representation	45
Conclusion	51
III. NATURECULTURES IN <i>NATURAL CROSSDRESSING</i> AND <i>MENDED SPIDERWEBS</i>	54
<i>Natural Crossdressing</i>	56
<i>Mended Spiderwebs #19 (Laundry Line)</i>	67
Conclusion	72

Chapter	Page
IV. IRONY, ANIMAL REPRESENTATION, AND THE FAMILIAR IN	
KATCHADOURIAN'S <i>CHLOE</i> AND DION'S <i>SCALA NATURAE</i>	73
<i>Scala Naturae</i>	73
<i>Chloe</i>	78
The Familiar in Postmodernism.....	82
Animal Representation.....	85
Enmeshedness	87
Corrective Irony and Ironic Ecology	88
V. CONCLUSION	93
REFERENCES CITED.....	99

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure	Page
1. <i>What is Art?</i> (1996/2008) by Nina Katchadourian	2
2. <i>Office Semaphore</i> (2006) by Nina Katchadourian.....	10
3. <i>Hand-held Subway</i> (1996) by Nina Katchadourian	12
4. <i>View of Natural Car Alarms</i> (2002) by Nina Katchadourian	13
5. <i>View of Talking Popcorn</i> (2001) by Nina Katchadourian.....	16
6. <i>View of Monument to the Unelected</i> (2008) by Nina Katchadourian	20
7. <i>Carla and a Friend I</i> (2002) by Nina Katchadourian	21
8. Images from <i>Lavatory Self-Portraits in the Flemish Style</i> by Katchadourian.....	27
9. Still from <i>Mystic Shark</i> (2007) by Nina Katchadourian.....	31
10. <i>Crossdressed Rat</i> and <i>Crossdressed Snake</i> (2002) by Nina Katchadourian.....	34
11. Still from <i>The Recovery Channels</i> (2005) by Nina Katchadourian	37
12. Image displayed with <i>Songs of the Islands</i> (1996/1998) by Katchadourian.....	38
13. Scrapbook pages from <i>The Nightgown Pictures</i> (1996-2004) by Nina Katchadourian	41
14. 1942/1999 pair from <i>The Nightgown Pictures</i> (1996-2004) by Katchadourian....	42
15. 1951/2003 pair from <i>The Nightgown Pictures</i> (1996-2004) by Katchadourian....	44
16. <i>Quit Using Us</i> (2002) by Nina Katchadourian	47
17. Still from <i>GIFT/GIFT</i> (1998) by Nina Katchadourian	48
18. Documentation from <i>Translation Exercise</i> (1993) by Nina Katchadourian.....	50
19. Detail of <i>Barnacle Mixer</i> (2002) by Nina Katchadourian	52

Figure	Page
20. <i>Natural Crossdressing</i> (2002) by Nina Katchadourian	57
21. <i>Self Portrait with Velvet Beret</i> (1634) by Rembrandt.....	58
22. <i>Self Portrait with a Beret</i> (1886) by Claude Monet.....	58
23. <i>Self Portrait with Beret</i> (1898) by Paul Cezanne.....	59
24. <i>Self Portrait with Beret</i> (1946) by Man Ray.....	59
25. Pablo Picasso in a beret in 1962	59
26. <i>Marcel Duchamp as Rose Sélavy</i> (c. 1920-21) by Man Ray.....	60
27. <i>View of Mended Spiderweb #8 (Fish Patch)</i> (1998) by Nina Katchadourian.....	67
28. <i>View of Mended Spiderweb #19 (Laundry Line)</i> (1998) by Katchadourian	68
29. <i>View of Scala Naturae</i> (1994) by Mark Dion	74
30. <i>View of Chloe</i> (1994) by Nina Katchadourian	79
31. <i>View of Chloe</i> (1994) in the natural history museum by Nina Katchadourian	81
32. <i>View of Paranormal Postcards</i> (2001 to present) by Nina Katchadourian	95
33. <i>Detail of Paranormal Postcards</i> (2001 to present) by Nina Katchadourian	96
34. <i>Detail of Paranormal Postcards</i> (2001 to present) by Nina Katchadourian	96
35. <i>Detail of Paranormal Postcards</i> (2001 to present) by Nina Katchadourian	97
36. <i>Detail of Paranormal Postcards</i> (2001 to present) by Nina Katchadourian	97

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Nina Katchadourian is a contemporary conceptual artist who works in a variety of media, including photography, video, sound, and sculpture. She was born in 1968 in Stanford, California, and currently lives in Brooklyn, New York. She is represented by Catherine Clark Gallery in San Francisco, California. She studied at the University of California in San Diego with Allan Kaprow, the performance artist who famously developed “happenings.”

In a photograph entitled *What is Art?* (1996/2008; Figure 1), part of Katchadourian’s *Sorted Books* series in which she organizes various collections of books to create short poems, Katchadourian sums up her approach to making art: by closely observing the everyday world.¹ As one critic writes, Katchadourian’s “processes precede the diverse media in which she has worked”: she often draws directly from her environment to create her pieces, engaging with whatever happens to be at hand, whether it’s someone else’s book collection, caterpillars, or discarded audio tape found on the street (Dillon 70). Katchadourian typically employs a light touch in creating her work, using minimal means to create meaning. Perhaps because the simple interventions she performs are anti-heroic—she does not pretend to be creating art to end all art—Katchadourian’s pieces are generally quite accessible to viewers. In fact, Katchadourian’s strategy of paying close attention to her often mundane surroundings in order to “find” art in what is often overlooked invites viewers to have a similar relationship to the world.

¹ Katchadourian’s process is clearly influenced by her mentor, Kaprow, who advocated for “models for experimental arts [to be] less the preceding arts than modern society itself,” expressing his hope that “this may connect us with natural processes beyond society” (xv). He wrote of experimental artists, “these bold creators show us, as if for the first time, the world we have always had about us but ignored” (9).

Her *Sorted Books* series, for example, has inspired other people to sort their own books into short poems.²

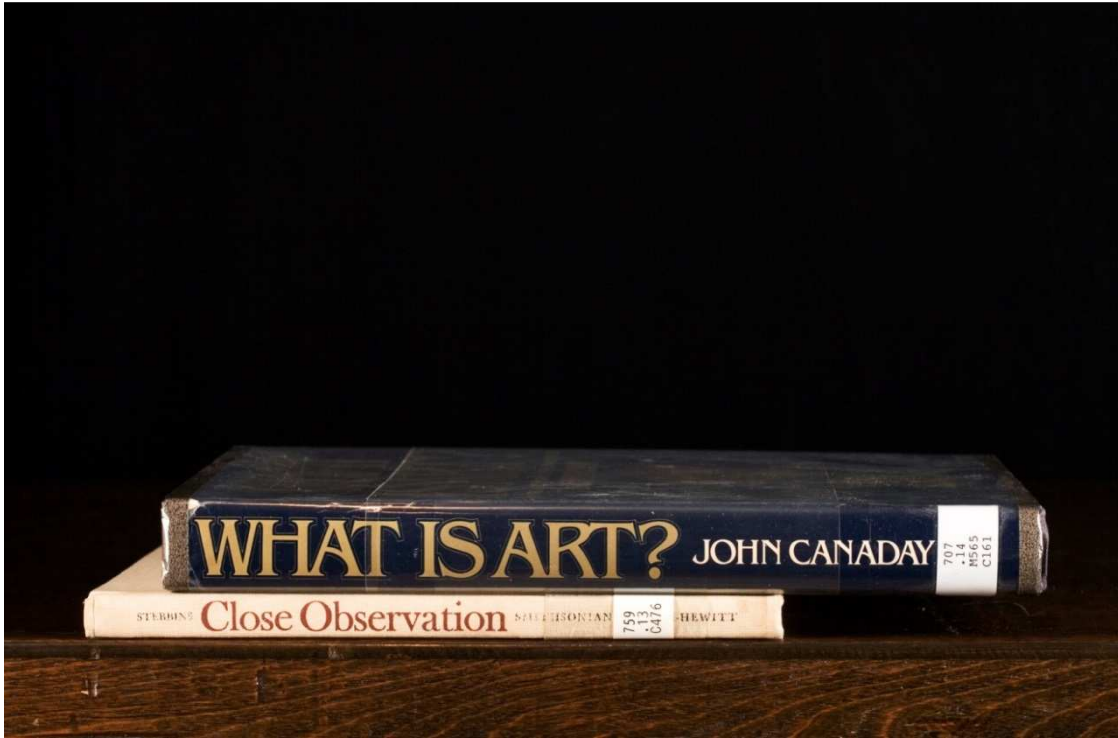


Figure 1: *What is Art?* (1996/2008) by Nina Katchadourian

Katchadourian is not usually categorized as an environmental artist because her work does not explicitly address typical environmental issues³ such as climate change or biodiversity loss, nor does it utilize narratives of environmental crisis and moralism.⁴

² Examples of viewers of Katchadourian’s work sorting their own books are documented on Flickr (<http://www.flickr.com/groups/sortedbooks/pool/tags/books/>) and on blogs such as *Stuck in a Book* and *Read 52 Books in 52 Weeks*.

³ By “typical environmental issues” I mean environmental problems as they are framed in the technoscientific/ capitalist discourse so dominant in Western culture. This is not to dismiss these issues, but to suggest that they are not the only environmental issues, and that the way they are often framed (as having a technological or consumerist solution, for example) is symptomatic of more fundamental issues, such as how Western culture views and represents “nature” in the first place.

⁴ Art critic and curator Jan Avgikos critiques much “green art” for “turning just causes into art and art into a just cause” by “remind[ing] us how sweet and fragile (or how virile and powerful) nature can be [...] and how good it could be. Then terrify[ing] us with how bad it’s gonna be” (108). In an interview, Katchadourian differentiates her art from “didactic art,” stating that she prefers to “traffic in a kind of deliberate ambiguity” (“Seat Assignment-Nina Katchadourian”).

However, Katchadourian's process of close observation, which leads to "collaborations"⁵ with non-human creatures and self-conscious interventions in the naturalcultural world to create art, problematizes mechanistic and dualistic views of nature and living beings. Katchadourian's work routinely calls attention to minute demonstrations of non-human agency, to the compelling inadequacies of human language and systems of representation, and to "unpredictable affinities among people, animals, plants, minerals, manufactured objects, words, and noises" (Richard 46). In this way, Katchadourian's art-making process can be read as practicing ways of viewing the natural world and its inhabitants, including ourselves, that subtly call into question dominant dualistic Western views of nature.

In this thesis, I put Katchadourian's work in conversation with theory that attempts to break down problematic assumptions about nature in Western thought. In Chapter II, I relate Katchadourian's work to biosemiotics, a field of study founded on the idea that all life is constantly involved in the interpretation of signs and meaning, and to trans-corporeality, which reconceptualizes the human body as permeable and thus inseparable from the environment. In Chapter III, I use Donna Haraway's idea of naturecultures, which contends that nature and culture are mutually implicated and inextricably intertwined, to do a close reading of two of Katchadourian's pieces, *Natural Crossdressing* and *Mended Spiderwebs #19 (Laundry Line)*. In Chapter IV, I compare the use of irony in two pieces that comment on Western animal classification—*Chloe*, by Katchadourian, and *Scala Naturae*, by Mark Dion—contending that Katchadourian's piece demonstrates what Bronislaw Szerszynski terms an "ironic ecology." I conclude

⁵ One of the categories of artwork on Katchadourian's website is "Uninvited Collaborations with Nature," while another is "Confusing Animals."

with a brief analysis of Katchadourian's piece *Paranormal Postcards*, which exemplifies how Katchadourian's body of work reminds viewers that "[w]e, like the rest of nature, are not transcendental a priori essences, but are open processes always opening upon what the world affords us" (Wheeler, *Creature* 135).

CHAPTER II

BIOSEMIOTICS, TRANS-CORPOREALITY, AND THE ART OF NINA

KATCHADOURIAN

Nina Katchadourian's work calls attention to non-human animal and material agencies through her "uninvited collaborations" with animate non-human worlds and beings and her explorations of the failures inherent in verbal and visual representation. In this chapter, I examine Katchadourian's body of work through the lenses of two theories that resist dualistic understandings of animals and nature: biosemiotics and trans-corporeality. While Katchadourian's work is, in general, quite accessible to viewers, by teasing out points of correspondence between these two theories and her artwork, this chapter seeks to add to discourse on animality and materiality that is driving a paradigm shift in how Western culture views the natural world.

Biosemiotics is the study of signs, meanings, and communication among living organisms, "based on the recognition that life is fundamentally grounded in semiotic⁶ processes" (Hoffmeyer, *Biosemiotics* 3). Biosemiotics challenges mechanistic understandings of life processes, contending that biochemical explanations of life are incomplete without acknowledging intrinsically related biosemiotic processes (Hoffmeyer, *Biosemiotics* 4). This is to say that life at every level, from the intra-cellular all the way up to the inter-species, is involved in the interpretation of signs and meanings. Biosemiotics, in fact, insists that "life *is* semiosis—'signs, not molecules, are the basic units in the study of life [emphasis added]'" (Wheeler, *Creature* 123). Humans, therefore, are not unique in their status as subjects with the ability to interpret the world around them; rather, life itself is defined by this criterion. Humans, then, are unique only in the

⁶ Semiotic: of or pertaining to (the use of) signs.

degree of their semiotic abilities (Hoffmeyer, *Biosemiotics* 265), or “‘semiotic freedom’—that is to say the increase in richness or ‘depth’ of meaning that can be communicated” (Hoffmeyer, *Signs* 61).

Biologist Jakob von Uexküll’s work on perception is one of the three main sources⁷ out of which biosemiotics developed (Wheeler, *Creature* 120). Von Uexküll theorized that all life forms experience their environment in their own subjective ways, based on both the particular perceptive capacities of their species (for example, hearing, sight, sense of smell, etc.) and on the life form’s own moods, desires, and past experiences. For Uexküll, even human scientists are unable to discern an objective environment “out there”, since they operate within their own particular subjective universes, what Uexkull terms “*Umwelten*.” Rather, there are as many overlapping subjective environments as there are creatures. Biosemiotics borrows from Uexküll the recognition that biological materiality cannot be studied without taking into account living beings’ subjective interpretation of their environments and interactions involving senses, emotions, and memories.

The more recent theory of trans-corporeality, so-named by Stacy Alaimo,⁸ similarly insists “the environment, which is too often imagined as inert, empty space or as a resource for human use, is, in fact, a world of fleshy beings with their own needs, claims, and actions” (Alaimo, *Bodily Natures* 2). Drawing heavily on theory from

⁷ The other two sources are the semiotics of Charles Sanders Peirce and the zoosemiotics of Thomas Sebeok. As these two sources are less relevant to this thesis, they will not be considered except indirectly through their influence on other more recent biosemiotic theory.

⁸ Alaimo is careful to point out that she did not invent the theory of trans-corporeality; her work simply “examine[s] how various models of trans-corporeality are emerging not only in a broad expanse of scholarship and theory, but in popular culture, literary texts, and social practices. [Her] intention is not to conjure up a new theory so much as to work across separate fields, forging connections and suggesting ethical and political perspectives” (*Bodily Natures* 3).

corporeal feminisms, disability studies, science studies, and the environmental humanities, trans-corporeality is based on the recognition that the human body and the environment “can by no means be considered separate” due to the “significant material interchanges” that exist between them (Alaimo, *Bodily Natures* 2-3). Taking aim at the neatly bounded entities upon which human exceptionalism rests, trans-corporeality seeks to “dissolv[e] stable outlines” and reconceptualize the human as “permeable” (Alaimo, *States of Suspension* 477).

At their core, both biosemiotics and trans-corporeality are attempts to find ways of thinking about the relationship between humans, other beings, and our environments that challenge insidious dualisms between culture and nature, discourse and materiality, mind and body, human and animal, and subject and object. For example, Jesper Hoffmeyer contends that the ecological idea of the biosphere, while meant to be holistic, rests on a dualistic view of materiality and signification in its total disregard for everything but “physico-chemical” processes (*Signs* vii). He proposes the idea of a semiosphere, a “network of communicative relations” (*Signs* 59) or a “world of signification” (*Signs* vii) which acknowledges the interdependency of meaning, matter, and living beings. Similarly, trans-corporeality seeks to establish “a posthuman environmental ethics in which the flows, interchanges, and interrelations between human corporeality and the more-than-human world resist the ideological forces of disconnection” (Alaimo, *Bodily Natures* 142).

By bringing these two theories to my discussion of Nina Katchadourian’s work, I do not wish to imply that Katchadourian’s work is an illustration of the theories, that Katchadourian herself was familiar with them or had them in mind when she created her

pieces, or that these theories are somehow “hidden” in the artwork like a secret code. As both Wendy Wheeler’s book *The Whole Creature* and Stacy Alaimo’s book *Bodily Natures* suggest, ideas that could be called biosemiotic and/or trans-corporeal have been emerging from widely varying sources in the past century of Western culture. In their books, both Wheeler and Alaimo set out to put these ideas into dialogue with each other in order to document and explore what Wheeler calls a “shift in paradigmatic thought in Western modernity” (*Creature* 13).⁹ Similarly, in examining Katchadourian’s work with biosemiotics and trans-corporeality in mind, I seek to place these roughly contemporary artworks and theories into dialogue, teasing out (sometimes strange and perhaps coincidental) affinities between them, and seeing what they have to say to each other.

Biosemiotics

Umwelten

Jakob von Uexküll writes that the mechanistic view of life that “many a zoologist and physiologist” hold ignores the fact that animals are not “mere machines, but [...] subjects whose essential activity consists of perceiving and acting” (*Stroll* 5-6). One of the central and most influential points of von Uexküll’s *A Stroll through the Worlds of Animals and Men* is his assertion that all animals, including humans, perceive their environments differently, both as species and as individual beings; he terms each

⁹ This is not to overstate the similarities between Alaimo’s and Wheeler’s views: Wheeler is mostly interested in shifts in perspective in Western scientific and intellectual communities, whereas Alaimo draws on much more disparate sources, including subaltern perspectives. Perhaps the particular attention Alaimo pays to subaltern views, such as those held by people affected by environmental racism and chemical sensitivity, plays into the absence of talk of any dramatic paradigm shifts in a Western culture that continues to operate, with horrendous (though not often immediately apparent) results, on a day-to-day basis on the assumption that dualisms are an accurate enough model for its purposes.

animal's experience of its surroundings its *Umwelt*¹⁰. He writes “each subject lives in a world composed of subjective realities alone, and [...] even the *Umwelten* themselves represent only subjective realities” (*Stroll* 72). This idea relates to Nina Katchadourian's body of work at a fundamental level: whether exploring language and translation, maps and charts, or human/non-human animal interaction, Katchadourian is concerned with representing and exploring subjective realities.

Katchadourian's piece *Office Semaphore* (2006; Figure 2) highlights the idea that “no two human *Umwelten* are the same” (Uexküll, *Stroll* 50). To create this piece, Katchadourian had a Manhattan corporate lawyer arrange objects on his upper story office windowsill to communicate messages about his experience of his day through a predetermined code; the window was viewable through a telescope mounted in a public area far below (Kennedy). Katchadourian writes on her website,

In *Office Semaphore*, a [visual signaling] system creates a line of communication between an ‘insider’ high up in an office building and an ‘outsider’ in a public space on the ground. [...] *Office Semaphore* bridges across physical space (from ground level to high rise) as well as between public and private space (outdoor to indoor). Over time, the phrases will register shifts in mood within the office. The objects themselves form a portrait of the individual who is communicating from just out of sight.

Katchadourian's use of the terms “insider” and “outsider” to refer to the lawyer and viewer respectively suggests that the two live in different worlds which shape their experiences and views. The piece paradoxically emphasizes the physical and figurative

¹⁰ The German word “*Umwelt*” translates literally to “environment”, but it has taken on von Uexküll's more specific meaning in the fields of biosemiotics and animal studies.

distance between the worker and viewer in its attempt to conflate it: normally used for looking at unreachable things such as stars, the telescope here implies that the office worker is more distant than we normally might think. The crudeness of the code also emphasizes the remoteness of the worker to the viewer, questioning how precisely people with such (presumably) different *Umwelten* can ever communicate.



Figure 2: View of *Office Semaphore* (2006) by Nina Katchadourian

However, due partly to this crudeness, the semaphore system that the piece sets up is incredibly open to interpretation on the viewer's end, as well as on that of the lawyer. Based on the International Maritime Signal Flag system, the phrases to which the pictures correspond have a poetic quality to them: "I am drifting," "I require a tug," "Currently undergoing speed trial," "Directions received but not understood." Because they come from a context other than that of an office, the phrases have no definite meaning, but must be interpreted based on associations and moods they call up for both the office worker and the viewer.

The objects used to denote these phrases—a potted plant, a yellow legal pad, a small framed desk photo, etc.—do come from an office context, however, and yet it becomes clear to viewers that they do not really know what the objects themselves mean to the lawyer. For example, viewers might find themselves wondering, “Who is pictured in the photo and what do they mean to the lawyer?” “Does the lawyer enjoy or feel burdened by caring for the plant?” “When the lawyer looks at a blank legal pad, is he excited? Overwhelmed? Anxious?” In Von Uexküll’s terms, what such viewers are wondering about is the “functional tone”: the meaning an object has to a specific person (or other animal) at a specific time, which “evolve[s] as a result of repeated personal experiences by the subject” (*Stroll* 67).

Another piece that deals with subjective realities is *Hand-Held Subway* (1996; Figure 3). To create this work, Katchadourian dissected a New York City subway map, carefully cutting away the background from the subway lines, then crumpled the resulting strips of paper in her hand and took a photograph. She says, “*Hand-Held Subway* is absolutely useless as a map, but to me [it] accurately describes the experience of trying to deal with a complicated transportation network” (*Attention* 6). A conventional subway map does not correspond well with human experiences of space, so Katchadourian modifies one to be more reflective of her own subjective experience.

In *Natural Car Alarms* (2002; Figure 4), Katchadourian modified the alarms of three cars to sound like bird calls. The idea for the piece came from an experience where she momentarily mistook a bird for a car alarm in the middle of a remote forest. In von Uexküll’s terms, Katchadourian experienced confusion of perceptual cues, which are the



Figure 3: *Hand-held Subway* (1996) by Nina Katchadourian

sensations that allow animals to recognize what is present in their environment (9). This confusion can result when one's receptor image—the mental image (or, in this case, sound) one uses to make sense of things—is too general for the situation (59). *Mended Spiderwebs* also provides a good illustration of this phenomenon. In this piece (which I will discuss later on in greater depth) Katchadourian attempted to “fix” broken spiderwebs with red string. While the “repaired” spider webs look enough like intact webs to Katchadourian (ostensibly—the piece is rather tongue-in-cheek, after all), to spiders they looked even more broken than before, as evidenced by the fact that the spiders immediately set to work removing Katchadourian's repairs. This shows that spiders have more specific receptor images of spider webs than humans do, illustrating von Uexkull's point that spiders' *Umwelten* are very different from those of humans.



Figure 4: View of *Natural Car Alarms* (2002) by Nina Katchadourian

Spontaneous Meaning

The universe, Jesper Hoffmeyer explains at the beginning of his book *Signs of Meaning in the Universe*, was born from “irregularities” in the radiation that emanated from the Big Bang (2). These “irregularities” eventually formed into the lumps of matter that make up the universe. Hoffmeyer shows that we have great difficulty in thinking about the nothingness that existed before these lumps came into existence. He attributes this to the fact that “nothingness” is a mental concept, which thus, by its very existence as a concept, has significance to us, even though it represents the absence of significance. He writes, “only by being conceived of can nothingness exist” (5).

Nina Katchadourian’s piece, *Indecision on the Moon* (2001), echoes this idea. To create the work, Katchadourian edited out most of the recognizable words of the Apollo 11 moon walk’s audio recording. What is left is dominated by verbalized pauses and radio static:

The...uh...like the uh...of my...uh...this is Houston we're copying...the
uh...the uh...the uh...do uh...it's a...we're uh...uh...I can see uh...there
uh...but uh...o.k. we're ready to uh...duh...uh...duh...and
uh...the...uh...the uh...uh...and uh...(From *Indecision on the Moon*, qtd.
in Rosenberg 33).

In the installation of the piece, the sound is played back in a darkened room: the spaces between words returned to a space reminiscent of the original context in which they were uttered: outer space. Thanks to the mysterious, staticky audio and the “gauzy maze” of the installation space, Daniel Rosenberg writes, “[e]ntering the piece is like falling off the edge of the world” (35). To viewers (or more aptly, given the aural nature of the piece, *listeners*) the verbal tics, originally meaningless in that they are generally unattended when in the context of words and in that they were only semi-consciously uttered, take on new meaning, and suggest, as the title indicates, a sense of indecision and hesitation. Rosenberg observes how, even in the absence of the iconic words of Neil Armstrong, the audio is recognizable:

Indecision on the Moon [...] begins with speech fragments: a duel between the definite and the indefinite; stabs at possession; broken attempts at comparison; ditto, repetition, and echo. But even before the first sharp noun pierces this phatic bubble we know exactly what void we're listening to. The static and the staccato are unmistakable: it sounds like 1969 and just exactly like the moon. (Rosenberg 35).

This demonstrates how humans spontaneously interpret, or endow with meaning, everything on which we focus our attention, even “a void” of noises never meant to

signify anything. As Hoffmeyer writes, “we *want* there to be lumps in this nothingness [emphasis added]” (*Signs* 4).

The piece *Talking Popcorn* (2001; Figure 5) exemplifies this desire for finding meaning even where none might have existed before. On her website, Katchadourian describes the piece, which she terms a “sound sculpture”:

A microphone in the cabinet underneath the popcorn machine picks up [the] sound of popping corn, and a laptop hidden in the pedestal runs a custom-written program that translates the popping sounds according to the patterns and dictates of Morse Code. A computer-generated voice provides a simultaneous spoken translation.

To display the piece, Katchadourian includes text quotes from the popcorn, the two kernels, bronzed for preservation, which produced the popcorn’s first word (“we”), and daily logs of the popcorn’s speech, along with the operating customized popcorn machine.

In an interview, Katchadourian discusses *Talking Popcorn*’s “implied question”: “What if everything in the world really meant something? [...] It starts to sound like crazy person territory: everything is telling you something, all the time” (*Attention* 17). As one might expect, much of the speech the popcorn machine has produced is gibberish (for example, “tttayeaeihe hltpwetbcrhg dttet a ki ahei hyvet eqqt i he xvonttpwda” [Qtd. in Dillon 70]). However, as Katchadourian points out later in the interview, it has uttered “mom” numerous times, it once asked “Do you ski?” and the longest word it has said is “silent” (*Attention* 18). Like Katchadourian herself, viewers of the piece likely find it hard *not* to read into what *Talking Popcorn* has said.



Figure 5: View of *Talking Popcorn* (2001) by Nina Katchadourian

Hoffmeyer's point in discussing nothingness is that meaning—i.e. signification, the “counterpoint” to nothingness—can emerge spontaneously from nothing (*Signs* 5). Drawing from Peirce's theorizations on the origin of natural laws, he shows that nature has a “tendency to take habits” but that, to borrow Stuart Kauffman's term, these habits are not “prestateable.” In other words, the habits that did develop are not the only habits that could possibly have developed. In contrast to determinism, which is based on “the belief that every cause can have only one possible effect,” biosemiotics looks beyond mere causality to meaning and relationships (Hoffmeyer, *Signs* 25). According to von Uexküll,

Meaning is the guiding star that biology must follow. The rule of causality is a poor guide: causal relationships deal only with antecedents and

consequences, thereby completely concealing from us broad biological interrelationships and interactions¹¹ (*Meaning* 43).

Hoffmeyer contends that the meaning generated within these complex “interrelationships and interactions” cannot be broken down into deterministic cause and effect because it is spontaneous and unpredictable.

Like [semiotician Charles Sanders] Peirce I prefer a philosophy which enables one to comprehend the world as a place where spontaneity is not rejected out of hand and where one can therefore entertain the thought that something radically new—i.e. essentially unpredictable—might be generated (Hoffmeyer, *Signs* 27).

As such a philosophy, biosemiotics sees nature’s “tendency to take habits” and, in doing so, to create “something radically new,” as central to the evolution of the universe, life, and meaning. Life “exemplifies” this tendency, in that life is a sort of “pattern that [can] be repeated ad infinitum,” and at the same time relies on nature’s tendency to take habits: “[i]n a world where nothing was predictable, Life would be out of a job” (Hoffmeyer, *Signs* 28). Paradoxically, however, when the pattern of life plays out, it is full of surprises: everything from genetic mutations and symbiosis to behavioral and semiotic innovation. In this way, “the predictability of chemical laws facilitated the establishment of unpredictability at a biological level” (Hoffman, *Signs* 29). In other words, from nothingness emerged natural laws, and from natural laws emerged an unpredictable and thus creative process: evolution.

¹¹ While Hoffmeyer, and biosemiotics generally, take this view of biology as relational from von Uexküll, it is important to note that von Uexküll appears to have viewed nature as much more static and harmonious than contemporary biosemiotic theorists do. Thus, the extent to which von Uexküll himself would agree with Hoffmeyer’s ideas about spontaneity and unpredictability remains uncertain.

Mistakes and Creativity

Hoffmeyer also focuses on the “lumps in nothingness” in order to introduce the idea that fallibility is essential to the evolution of the universe, of life, and of meaning. In a sense, “the world itself is the most wonderful mistake of all” (*Signs* 145), since the lumps that developed into the universe came about through “irregularities.” Evolution, he points out, is a “never-ending sequence of ‘mistakes’ and ‘misunderstandings’ that put all life forms into a constant state of flux” (*Signs* 29). As biologist Lynn Margulis’ work shows, without “a failed act of eating” which resulted in symbiogenesis¹², life forms would not have evolved at all (Wheeler, *Figures* 102). Hoffmeyer shows that mistakes prevent stagnation, and that creativity is intimately intertwined with error. “The tendency to make mistakes lies at the root of all true development in this world,” he asserts (*Signs* 144).

Katchadourian is similarly obsessed with mistakes, misinterpretation, and misunderstanding. As poet and art critic Frances Richard puts it, “Katchadourian poses a philosophical proposition about the intimate correlation between error and discovery” (46). Katchadourian often utilizes mistakes as inspiration in her creative process as well as focusing on them in her work. For example, as previously discussed, the idea for *Natural Car Alarms* came about because Katchadourian mistook a bird call for a car alarm. Another piece, *Grnad Opening Banner* (2006), purposely puts a glaring typographical error (which Katchadourian originally witnessed on a sign in front of a Brooklyn deli) on display on a large banner over the entry of an art museum. In the video piece *Accent Elimination* (2005), Katchadourian showcases “mistakes” in pronunciation

¹² Symbiogenesis: “the formation of new organs and new organisms through symbiotic mergers” (Margulis 33).

inherent in having and attempting to mimic a foreign accent, as well as the misunderstandings that arise from them.

Like Hoffmeyer, Katchadourian connects mistakes to creativity. In an interview, she explains why she is inspired by mistakes in general, and mistranslation in particular, in her work:

I think that there is an incredibly creative act inherent in mistranslation. It is a moment when you are expansively and creatively interpreting something. It may all end up completely wrong, but there can be an immense amount of imagination involved when you don't completely understand something (*Attention* 19)

This corresponds very closely to Hoffmeyer's ideas about mistakes and misinterpretation being essential for creativity. Hoffmeyer conceptualizes the act of imagining as the purposeful entertainment of false futures, since there are many possible futures, but only one future that will actually occur. "Imagination," he writes "is the creative exploitation of error" (*Signs* 145). Katchadourian's piece, *Monument to the Unelected* (2008; Figure 6), parallels this idea of false futures while also emphasizing failure. This work consists of fifty-six election signs for every losing U.S. presidential candidate in history. As Katchadourian writes on her website, "the piece presented a view of the country's collective political road not taken." By confronting viewers with the names of those not elected, Katchadourian raises "what if?" questions in viewers' minds, initiating imaginative thinking released from the constraints of reality.



Figure 6: View of *Monument to the Unelected* (2008) by Nina Katchadourian

But Katchadourian does not just pay attention to human failures and mistakes. In *Carla and a Friend* (2002; Figure 7), Katchadourian photographed a snake with a rat who was meant to be her food with whom she had become friends instead. Von Uexküll discusses instances of inappropriate bonding between different species, and while his discussion does not explain exactly how the situation between the snake and rat could have occurred, it does indicate that an animal's mood or "functional tone" can change how the animal identifies other creatures, even from moment to moment: "it is not the perceptual image alone that decides whether one is faced with a jackdaw or non-jackdaw [i.e. a friend or foe] but the functional image of the subject's own attitude" (61). In other words, love sometimes results from a semiotic mistake.

The unavoidability of mistakes figures heavily in philosopher Mary Midgley's discussion of communication between humans as well as between members of different species. In her book *Animals and Why They Matter*, she rails against the notion that in order for a being to warrant moral consideration, that being must be in possession of language. She points out that much human communication is non-verbal—probably far more than we are conscious of—and that "because speech is often used to conceal or

misrepresent feelings,” animals’ lack of speech not only does not prevent us from communicating with them, but “it is often a positive advantage” (54).



Figure 7: *Carla and a Friend I* (2002) by Nina Katchadourian

Much of Katchadourian’s body of work explores the limits of language along similar lines. In *Please, Please, Pleased to Meet'cha* (2006), Katchadourian asked United Nations translators to work from descriptions of birdsongs in order to reproduce them. None of the translators had ever before heard the particular birdsong they were working to mimic, so they were entirely dependent on the written description. In this case, human language conveyed with much difficulty (or failed to convey at all, in some cases) what a direct experience with the bird in question would have conveyed with ease, even though the bird is of another species.

Midgley's argument that animals deserve our moral consideration rests on the idea that, although we cannot know how non-human species experience the world, we also cannot really know how humans other than ourselves subjectively experience the world. That humans can self-report in a way that animals cannot, since they have no complex language (as far as we know), does not change the fact that our understanding of other humans is necessarily based on comparison with our own direct experiences, since we do not have unmediated access to others' experiences. And so using our own experiences to understand and relate to animals is not misguided; in fact, it is the only way we can relate to any other being, human or non-human alike. Katchadourian's piece *Office Semaphore* drives this point home: by providing the anonymous lawyer a very simplified code to communicate with passersby, Katchadourian calls attention to how we must draw on our own experiences in order to interpret other people's statements, whether they are in rudimentary semaphore or richer verbal language.

Midgley does not deny that interpreting other beings' behavior through the lens of our own internal experiences is sometimes inaccurate. But she shows that this is not limited to our attempts to understand animals: we make many mistakes when attempting to understand other humans as well.

“Within human life, someone who makes a friend from an age group or culture not his own will have no choice but to use materials from his own previous experience as a guide to understanding him. As the friendship grows, he will repeatedly see the mistakes which he has made by doing this badly [and will presumably learn from these mistakes]” (Midgley 127).

Katchadourian's obsession with mistakes and mistranslations can seem cynical at times, but she focuses on errors because they are often learning experiences that present opportunities for further creativity. As Midgley suggests, mistakes might very well be necessary for the process of developing understanding; behaviorism shoots itself in the foot attempting to avoid all mistakes of interpretation by simply removing internal experience as a realm of consideration.

Openness and Attentiveness

Similarly, Wendy Wheeler maintains that, although accepted scientific discourse pretends that the scientific method is purely and uniquely linear, rational, and objective, "science, religion, and art (broadly conceived) are not fundamentally different activities" in that they all require intuition, creativity, and openness (*Creature* 33). She writes,

The more we give ourselves over to an apparent serendipity, the closer (paradoxically, according to modern theories of knowledge) we come to real discovery. There is, thus, an apparent (and real) randomness to research and creativity, but, as Polanyi argues, randomness is a feature of emergence (*Creature* 90).

Hunches or intimations derive from what Wheeler refers to as "tacit knowledge [which] is creaturely skillful phenomenological knowledge" (*Creature* 47). Tacit knowledge encompasses what we know through bodily and emotional experience, but what we are unable to express fully in words or to explain *why* we know it. Rather than indicating that tacit knowledge is not legitimate, this subconscious quality of tacit knowledge is, paradoxically, its strength: it is by "dis-attending from the particulars [that we are able] to [...] focus on the gestalt whole" (*Creature* 90).

Katchadourian herself readily acknowledges the randomness and happenstance inherent in her own artistic process. Echoing Wheeler's ideas, she states that, first and foremost, her "job [as an artist] is to pay attention, and to do that with focus and a kind of looseness at the same time" (*Attention* 24). This process contrasts markedly with that of what art critic Jan Verwoert calls "strategic" conceptual art, in which

there is this commonly held assumption that before you do anything you should work out in advance what the rules, legitimations, and references are, so that before you even embark on something, you already feel obliged to provide an entire system of references and legitimations.

Rather than attempting to legitimate her work by claiming to always have a plan or a goal, as many contemporary artists who work in more strategic ways do,¹³ Katchadourian emphasizes (even plays up, in some cases¹⁴) the openness to chance and naïveté that often characterizes her mental state at the inception of her projects.

I don't necessarily do research before I stumble onto something [...]
Research happens as I develop a new project, but doesn't necessarily inspire it. If I get too involved in the research phase before I start something it bogs me down. I am careful to keep a certain balance because it can make it nearly impossible to begin anything. I do believe that there is something to be said for having a slightly naïve mind-set going into something because you think a little more expansively and you have the capability to make a few mistakes that could end up being interesting. I

¹³ or, perhaps, are forced to do by the economic and logistical realities of the art world

¹⁴ For example, Katchadourian website's descriptions of *Moss Maps* (1992), *Songs of the Islands* (1996/8), *Artificial Insemination* (1998), and *Barnacle Mixer* (2002) all follow a similar trajectory: the artist notices something, decides to intervene somehow, and the artwork spontaneously takes form.

don't want to know everything at the outset. I want to risk figuring it out wrong. (Katchadourian, *Attention* 22).

The openness with which Katchadourian approaches her projects aligns with what Stuart Kauffman calls “precisely the biosemiotic point of view”:

Life is a continuous knowing of the world, [...] a continuous meaningful exploration of meaningful relationship. [...] No laws whatsoever entail¹⁵ the becoming of the biosphere[...] Physics and the physics worldview reach an end at the evolution of life. The universe may be described by entailing laws, but life is not. [...] The biosphere is creating its own possibilities of future becoming (Kauffman).

He argues that, since it is impossible to prestate all the possibilities in a given situation, strategic thought is inadequate: “If we do not know what can happen, then reason is an insufficient guide for living our lives.” Because life is fundamentally relational, other ways of knowing and understanding, including intuition and metaphor, are necessary to navigate it.

In a sense, then, Katchadourian's approach to making art is deliberately free from entailment. She structures her art-making process in a way that keeps it radically open to mistakes, chance, and possibility. Her ongoing series, *Seat Assignment* (which began in 2010), is a good example of how Katchadourian's projects are often both created out of and sustained by this openness.

Katchadourian creates the photos and videos that constitute *Seat Assignment* entirely while in transit using only materials she would normally have access to on a commercial flight, including in-flight magazines, snacks, lavatory paper products, and

¹⁵ to entail: to involve as a necessary or inevitable part or consequence

whatever articles of clothing she happens to be wearing. Within this strict set of limitations, Katchadourian challenges herself to remain alert to the possibilities that the prosaic objects around her present as art materials. She says of *Seat Assignment*,

I'm very interested in situations where there are limits and boundaries to what's possible and how you find your way around those obstacles, how you think on your feet. How you make something out of nothing ... much of my subject matter comes from the mundane everyday. I'm always trying to look at the things we are overlooking and underestimating in terms of their interest or value. At the same time, I have a practice where often my life and my activities and all those things kind of cross over into my art-making. So this project brings all those things together. It's a way of integrating art-making into part of the professional necessity in my life to travel and it's a way to try to test my premise that there really is something to be found no matter where you look if you look in a certain way (*Listener*).

This certain way of looking involves a suspension of preexisting ideas of what subject matter and materials make for interesting or valuable art, and a radical attentiveness to and open engagement with the materials and situations at hand, while at the same time allowing for the "looseness" or "dis-attend[ance] from particulars" that enables what Richard terms the "parasympathetic"¹⁶ (45) nature of Katchadourian's work to emerge. Katchadourian's description of the conception of *Lavatory Portraits in the Flemish Style*

¹⁶ "Parasympathetic: productive and relaxed; existing alongside togetherness, or at the same time as a faulty close relation" (Richard 45).

(2010 and ongoing; Figure 8), one series within *Seat Assignment*, exemplifies this way of working.

The very first of the Flemish lavatory portraits started on a flight a few months back. I did that one really quickly. It was completely spontaneous. It's interesting, I have been looking at the pictures from this entire past year [for the exhibition *Seat Assignment*], and I can see that on a few flights previous to the first Flemish portrait I had gone in there and put one of those tissue seat covers on my head as a hat. I think a few flights later I tried it again in a different position and then I suddenly thought, "Oh, it kind of looks like one of those Flemish head coverings." And it kind of clicked into place (*Listener*).

This description of the unattended-to development of Katchadourian's idea, and the spontaneity with which it finally dawned on her what the tissue on her head resembled follows the pattern of discovery based on tacit knowledge that Wheeler describes.



Figure 8: Images from *Lavatory Self Portraits in the Flemish Style* (2010 and ongoing) by Nina Katchadourian

Play and Imitation: Encountering the Other

Process open to the other (which we also call creativity) is the signature of life, evolution and change [...] When we are being creative, whether in the arts or the sciences, what we seem to be alert to are the message-rich intelligences of our *Umwelt* which are participative, and which spring from a deep immersion of self in the otherness of our world (Wheeler, *Creature* 133-4).

In a sense, the openness and attentiveness which characterize Katchadourian's approach to art-making are fundamentally an approach to otherness. Biosemiotically speaking, "the difficult but creative encounter between similarity and difference" undergirds "the patterns of life" itself (Wheeler, *Creature* 133).

On this increasingly widely accepted view of evolutionary biology, the motor of evolution is, thus, the encounter of identity with an otherness which is, nonetheless, sufficiently semiotically recognizable to allow of a productive encounter and negotiation, expanding a semiotic *Umwelt*, out of which new strata of life can emerge (Wheeler, *Creature* 133).

One major way in which Katchadourian negotiates this "encounter of identity with an otherness" is through play. The Oxford English Dictionary defines "play" as "[e]xercise or activity engaged in for enjoyment or recreation rather than for a serious or practical purpose; amusement, entertainment, diversion." This lack of a "practical purpose" corresponds to the open-endedness or lack of entailment which characterizes the encounter with otherness: otherness is by definition at least somewhat unknown and thus unpredictable prior to meeting and engaging in play together. Midgley links this lack of

“practical purpose” to art: without this “tendency to play of all sorts, including such things as imitating, singing, dancing and the making of objects for pleasure” there would be no art (119). These, she says, are “habits on which the arts are based” (119).

Midgley writes that play in other species is a sign of intelligence (119), and that, along with dreams, the presence of play is evidence that animals are conscious beings (141). Furthermore, since “play signals penetrate species barriers with perfect ease” (117), play is a way in which different species can communicate with each other.

Katchadourian’s piece *Natural Car Alarms* (discussed briefly earlier) alludes to commonalities among birds and humans, including the desire to play with sound,¹⁷ to imitate others, and even to create for aesthetic pleasure. As Katchadourian suggests, the piece interrogates “what we mean when we use the word ‘natural’” (qtd. in Karr). As Chapter III of this thesis will discuss in greater detail, what is considered “natural” is generally assumed in Western thought to preclude what is considered “cultural”. Of course, in this line of thought, animals fall into the former category whereas humans fall into the latter, implying that only humans are capable of creating and appreciating art.

However, both non-human animals and humans are widely recognized as being capable of play—young animals play just as human children do.¹⁸ Katchadourian’s art-making, based largely on play, serves to blur the boundaries between the natural and the cultural, and the human and the non-human animal. Drawing on Darwin and Deleuze, Elizabeth Grosz theorizes that art arises in the natural world from the enjoyment and amusement—that is to say, the playfulness—inherent in sexual selection. She writes,

¹⁷ Perhaps tellingly, “play” can also mean “Of a male bird: to strut, dance, or engage in other forms of sexual display.”

¹⁸ The O.E.D. points out that the verb “play” is “Now chiefly used of children or young animals.”

“The haunting beauty of birdsong, the provocative performance of erotic displays in primates, the attraction of insects to the perfume of plants are all in excess of mere survival” (7). By playfully turning the aesthetically-pleasing art of an animal into an item useful to humans in *Natural Car Alarms*, Katchadourian subverts the narrative of human exceptionalism in the realm of artistic production. Although (or perhaps because) Katchadourian did not learn of it until after creating the piece, the fact that at least one species of bird, the Lyrebird, has learned to imitate car alarms (as well as chain saws and camera shutters) allows for this reading of *Natural Car Alarms* to come full circle, underscoring further the animal agency present in play and art-making.

Grosz writes, “The becoming-other that seduction entails [is...] a fundamentally dynamic, awkward, mal-adaptation that enables the production of the frivolous, the unnecessary, the pleasing, the sensory for their own sake.” (Grosz 7). Katchadourian’s short video *Mystic Shark* (2007; Figure 9) exemplifies the awkwardness and dynamism of “becoming-other.” In the video, she attempts to insert six souvenir petrified shark teeth into her mouth and then hold them in place. Her website’s explanation for the enigmatic piece does nothing to dispel potential viewer confusion, suggesting simply that viewers imagine her portraying a “tough guy shark” getting ready to do his job of scaring people. The video exemplifies what Steve Baker, in his essay “Sloughing the Human,” describes as “a halfhearted and haphazard affair” (158) typical of imitations of animals in contemporary art. Even with the teeth in her mouth, Katchadourian in no way resembles a shark, nor does she attempt to look fierce; instead, the way she looks wide-eyed at the camera and smirks with the teeth protruding from her mouth suggests an imp of some

sort. However, the teeth's suggestion of sharkness is all that is needed: "'imitation' of an animal can be just that easy and approximate," Baker writes (158).

In all of these instances [of animal imitation in art], it might be said that the thing imitated or gestured toward is not so much an animal as a version of the imitator or gesturer—"l'animal que donc je suis," as Derrida has it. In a postmodern age marked by "a deeply felt loss of faith in our ability to represent the real," this is perhaps how the animal is now most productively and imaginatively thought in art—as a thing actively to be performed, rather than passively represented (Baker 159).

In *Mystic Shark*, the two immobile wooden tern statues on the window ledge behind the artist provide a marked contrast to both Katchadourian's lively shark and to the sea bird cries that are audible in the background. Katchadourian's performance is not at all a



Figure 9: Still from *Mystic Shark* (2007) by Nina Katchadourian

convincing representation of a shark, yet its playfulness affords sharks a sense of agency that the more representative statues deny to terns. Paradoxically, in failing to convincingly represent a shark, Katchadourian succeeds in calling into question the strict boundaries between humans and sharks while still maintaining their differences.

Katchadourian's *Mended Spiderwebs* series (1998), which will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter III, can be read as another such attempt to blur the boundaries between humans and animals: by "repairing" the spider webs, Katchadourian is, in a sense, playing at being a spider. But she goes beyond actively performing as a spider—she records the spiders' responses, allowing them agency as well.

In both *Mystic Shark* and *Mended Spiderwebs*, Katchadourian's imitations of animals simultaneously call into question and reinforce the divide between humans and non-human animals. On one hand, it is impressive that, as a human, Katchadourian can repair spider webs without destroying them; on the other, her repairs are clearly insufficient in the spiders' eyes. While Katchadourian writes on her website that *Mystic Shark* "tries to elicit sympathy through the awkward and sentimental anthropomorphism of this much-feared and almost mythically vicious creature," the video is hardly convincing of either her ability to imitate a shark or of why exactly we should extend our sympathies to sharks.

These imitations [in contemporary art] generally act out the instability rather than the fixity of the thing nominally initiated. They suggest playful exchanges between the human and the animal, or between one animal and another, which may allude to borders and distinctions, but which are not impeded by them (Baker 158).

This simultaneous allusion to and working through of difference is even more pronounced in another of Katchadourian's pieces, *Animal Crossdressing* (2002; Figure 10), in which she dresses a snake as a rat and vice versa. Again, the costumes are obviously hand-made and unconvincing (although clearly much more work went into making them than went into acquiring the shark teeth in *Mystic Shark*.) However, where *Mystic Shark* seems enigmatic, *Animal Crossdressing* abounds in possible, but potentially contradictory, interpretations. Artist and writer Jordan Essoe connects the imitation occurring in *Animal Crossdressing* to the natural world.

Both types of mimicry [prey-mimicking-predator and predator-mimicking-prey] occur in nature, such as the Caligo butterfly, whose wing design imitates the eyes of an owl, or certain types of spiders who smell, move, and look like ants in order to invade nests and eat their babies.

Katchadourian's snake, however, entertainingly fails to appear legitimately vulnerable at all, due to the sheer size of the rat costume that it must assume.

Seen in light of the abundance of examples of animal mimicry in the natural world, this piece documents an attempt to mimic nature's mimicry. Although the awkwardness of the literal cross-dressing process emphasizes the "borders and distinctions" between the two animals (as well as how problematic it is for Katchadourian to be using them this way,¹⁹) in the end, unexpected transformations do occur. While Essoe sees the

¹⁹ The snake is less resistant than the rat, but neither of them look like they are enjoying being a part of piece's creation. On her website, Katchadourian writes, "I handled the animals together with the pets' owners, and although the video emphasizes the awkwardness of dressing the animals, rest assured that neither snake nor rat were harmed during the making of this project."

transformation of the snake into a rat as “entertainingly fail[ed]” due to issues of scale, Katchadourian observes on her website,

It wasn't until I saw the video footage [of *Animal Crossdressing*] that I realized how many transformations had come into play: the snake's body, lying inside the unzipped rat suit, looked like the intestines [sic] of a giant rat. The predatory snake was suddenly both the prey and the guts ingesting the prey, all visible inside a huge gutted rodent that looked like it had just turned the tables on a snake and swallowed it whole.

The unconvincing nature of the huge rat costume, which Essoe focuses on, allows the snake to be read as predator, on the one hand. But on the other hand, as Katchadourian points out, the snake can also be read as both having been swallowed by the rat, and as the rat's intestines. By simultaneously occupying the roles of predator and prey in *Animal Crossdressing*, the boundaries between the snake and the rat are not erased so much as rendered permeable.



Figure 10: *Crossdressed Rat* and *Crossdressed Snake* from *Animal Crossdressing* (2002) by Nina Katchadourian

Trans-corporeality

Attention to Materiality

Trans-corporeality reconceptualizes the boundaries between self and other as permeable: present and important, but not absolute. There is thus a paradox embedded in trans-corporeal views of difference: “Val Plumwood has insisted that an ethical human relation to the nonhuman world demands that we ‘recognize both the otherness of nature’ as well as ‘its continuity with the human self’” (Alaimo, *Bodily* 42). In its quest to articulate such a relation, trans-corporeality takes as its starting point a renewed attention to materiality.

While it is still crucial to analyze and critique how “nature” and the “environment” circulate as potent discursive formulations, many of us would like to find ways to complement and complicate that sort of analysis with investigations that account for the ways in which nature, the environment, and the material world itself signify, act upon, or otherwise affect human bodies, knowledges, and practices. Notwithstanding the fact that theories of social construction have performed invaluable work by critiquing the naturalized and oppressive categories of race, class, gender, sexuality, and ability, from an environmentalist perspective, such theories may bracket or minimize the significance, substance, and power of the material world. (Alaimo, *Bodily* 7-8).

As sculptor Jackie Brookner pointed out in 1992, there is an irony in postmodernism’s myopic focus on discourse in a time when Western society “has been insistently placing

its own existence, as well as that of the rest of life on Earth, in dire jeopardy, poisoning water, land, and air” (8). Perhaps anticipating trans-corporeality, Brookner wrote

The heart of the problem lies in our relation to both matter and ourselves. In setting ourselves up over and against matter, apart from it (Cartesian subject-object dualism), and in assuming control over nature, we have become deeply alienated from our own nature. Matter has become mere matter, something for us to use or, better yet, possess. In frantic glut we have lost our senses, and in fury have dissociated from our bodies. The great irony of our materialism is how little matter really matters to us (8).

Brookner contended that art “can be instrumental in the process of revisioning ourselves and our ways of living” due to its ability to create bodily, unconscious, and conscious experiences. She viewed the attention that contemporary artists at the time were paying to materiality—especially particular materialities, such as waste, that Western society tends to disregard—as attempts “to acknowledge our own vulnerability and limitations [...and] to find new ways of seeing ourselves and our identity with Earth” (Brookner 11).

While Nina Katchadourian doesn’t focus on waste in her body of work as a whole, a few of her pieces—*Songs of the Island* (1996/1998), *Surface Spoils* (1997), and *The Recovery Channels* (2005; Figure 11), do make use of urban debris in their emphasis on materiality. As she details on her website, to create these pieces she collected video and audio tape found “tangled in gutters, subway grills and traffic islands” and “hanging in ribbons from trees, wrapped around lampposts, around fire escapes [...] etc.” in New York City (*Songs of the Island* and *The Recovery Channels*) and various European cities (*Surface Spoils*). For the video piece *The Recovery Channels*, after the tape was digitized,

each fragment was played back on a different channel of a video monitor which viewers could control with a remote; for the audio piece *Surface Spoils*, Katchadourian created an “interactive wall installation [in which e]ach original piece of loose tape is displayed under a plastic dome.”



Figure 11: Still from *The Recovery Channels* (2005) by Nina Katchadourian

These pieces are notable from a trans-corporeal point of view in that insist on the lasting materiality of what is “cast off, unwanted, or perhaps shamefully thrown away” in Western civilization despite the fact that they are primarily sound and audio, and thus ephemeral, pieces (Katchadourian). While viewers

listen to the “stylistic variety and linguistic diversity” of *Songs of the Island*, for instance, the accompanying photo of a left hand (presumably the artist’s; Figure 12) holding a ball of tangled cassette tape serves as a reminder of the material impacts of “the astounding mix of people living in New York” (Katchadourian). Similarly, the inclusion of each piece of loose audio tape in the display of *Surface Spoils* gives the sounds a physical presence.

This insistence on the materiality of audio and video art has parallels in many of Katchadourian’s map pieces. As Katchadourian points out on her website, the photograph entitled *Handheld Subway* (discussed earlier), “was made at the same time as [she] was collecting a lot of loose audio tape found on the streets of New York” for *Songs of the Islands*. Visually, the two pieces display a striking similarity: *Handheld Subway*, like the

image displayed with *Songs of the Island*, depicts a left hand holding a ball of material. Rather than the cassette tape of the latter piece, however, in the former it is a “dissected” subway map that lies crumpled in what is again presumably the artist’s hand.

Katchadourian states that *Handheld Subway* “renders the subway network into something that looks like just another piece of tangled trash on the ground.” It is important to note, however, that it is not the subway network itself that is likened to material waste in the piece, but its representation.



Figure 12: Image displayed with *Songs of the Islands* (1996/1998) by Nina Katchadourian

material objects to be studied, and that there are material implications inherent in what representations show and in what they leave out.

Material Agencies: Thing-power and Creativity

In her three cassette tape pieces, Katchadourian allows the found video and audio tapes to, in some sense, have agency in the finished product: in *Surface Spoils*, for instance, she writes that she deliberately chose not to edit the tapes: she didn’t alter the

In *Map Dissection II* (1991),

Katchadourian cut out intersections of major highways from US road map and placed them between microscope slides. She returned to this idea in 2000 when she created *Finland’s Longest Road* by cutting out the representation of highway E75 from a paper map and placing it in a petri dish. In these pieces she reminds viewers that images and representations are

length of the tape fragments and she kept them in the order in which they were found. The act itself of finding and collecting these discarded objects also highlights what Jane Bennett terms their “thing-power,” which is often forgotten in Western materialist culture. She observes

American materialism, which requires ever-increasing numbers of products purchased in ever-shorter cycles, is antimateriality. The sheer volume of commodities, and the hyperconsumptive necessity of junking them to make room for new ones, conceals the vitality of matter (5).

But, as Katchadourian’s pieces suggest, that which is “cast off, unwanted, or perhaps shamefully thrown away,” as she writes on her website, doesn’t just disappear. “[A] vital materiality can never really be thrown ‘away,’ for it continues its activities even as a discarded or unwanted commodity” (Bennett 6).

The roughed-up look of the video footage in *The Recovery Channels* is more evidence of thing-power, caused as it presumably was by the wind blowing the cassette tape fragments around, causing them to rub up against other objects and get scratched, folded, and torn in unpredictable ways. This thing-power corresponds with what Alaimo calls “agency without agents”, which she defines as “a foundational, perpetual becoming that happens without will or intention or delineation” (*Bodily* 145).

Katchadourian’s piece *Talking Popcorn* (which was discussed in relation to biosemiotics above) exemplifies thing-power or agency without agents: while each piece of popcorn pops as predicted, it does so in a unique way and at an unpredictable time. The bronzed pieces of popcorn that comprise *Talking Popcorn's First Words* (2001) draw

attention to the uniqueness of each piece of popcorn. Artist and philosopher Manuel de Landa writes

[F]orms of spontaneous structural generation suggest that inorganic matter is much more variable and creative than we ever imagined. And this insight into matter's inherent creativity needs to be fully incorporated into our new materialist philosophies (qtd. in Bennett 7).

The fact that each piece of popcorn's shape is slightly different, and that the timing of the pops, "translated" through Morse code, creates unique utterances underscores the creativity of the materials which make up the popcorn.

This agentless creativity also shows up in Katchadourian's piece *The Nightgown Pictures* (1996-2004). In this piece, Katchadourian attempted to find and photograph the locations of a series of photos that her grandmother took of her mother, Stina, wearing a handmade nightgown each year as her mother was growing up. Most of the original photos were taken on Pöytä (a small group of islands east of Helsinki) where Katchadourian's family has spent summers since her mother was little; one (or possibly two) photos were taken in the family's backyard in Helsinki; one was taken near the Finnish town of Ylitornio during the year the family was displaced by World War II. Katchadourian's piece includes reprints of the original black-and-white photographs of Stina framed side-by-side with the photos Katchadourian took (with the assistance of her mother) of the same locations roughly fifty years later, with captions written by the artist. These frames are bookended by a frame containing two scrapbook pages—one made by Katchadourian's grandmother and the other by Katchadourian— (Figure 13) and another frame containing a lone photo of Katchadourian herself at age one wearing the nightgown

in her family's backyard in Stanford, California. Nearby hangs a larger frame containing a full-scale photo of the nightgown itself, stained with age.



Figure 13: Scrapbook pages from *The Nightgown Pictures* (1996-2004) by Nina Katchadourian

The series subtly demonstrates the agency of the natural world, and of matter itself. Although in the description on Katchadourian's scrapbook cover, the agency of humans is emphasized ("houses had disappeared, rocks had been moved, windows had been covered by walls") the overgrown bushes, the unrecognizable landscapes, the transformation of Katchadourian's mother from a toddler into a teenager, and the stains on the nightgown complicate that story.

In her captions, Katchadourian records the difficulties she and her mother had figuring out where, exactly, the original photos were taken. For example, of the

1948/1998 photograph pair, she writes, “[t]he rock cluster in the foreground is barely visible anymore, but my mother remembered where it used to be. We thought we could detect its contours underneath all the overgrowth”; of the 1942/1999 pair (Figure 14), after being unable to identify the correct retake spot with certainty, she writes, “[w]e took a guess” (Katchadourian). Even without Katchadourian’s captions to guide the viewer’s reading, it is clear in all of the photographs that the landscape has changed since the original images were taken: due to the major changes in the vegetation, it takes close examination of small landmarks (if they are even present in the photos) such as rocks and islands in the distance to verify that they are indeed of the same place.

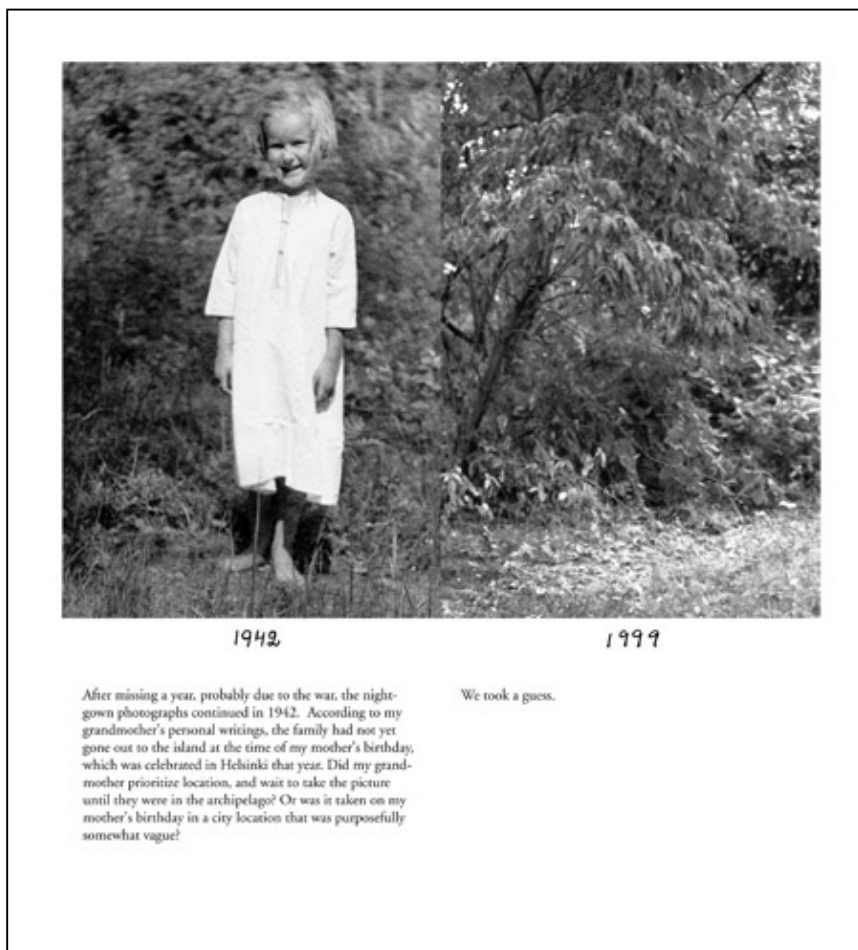


Figure 14: 1942/1999 pair from *The Nightgown Pictures* (1996-2004) by Nina Katchadourian

The landscape is not the only entity that changes throughout the series, however: Stina grows up, eventually becoming too big to wear the nightgown at all. While this seems obvious—of course children grow up—considered in relation to the changing landscape, Stina’s own transformation positions her as a trans-corporeal subject around and in whose very body material agency is at work. In a discussion of feminist philosopher Lorraine Code’s work, Alaimo makes a point of distinction between ecological thinking, in which humans are recognized as occupying a place in the web of life, and trans-corporeality, which “redefines the human as material” (Alaimo, “Naked” 1):

Trans-corporeality, as it insists that the human is never an isolated unit, has affinities with the “ecological thinking” that Code describes. Furthermore, Code, drawing on Barad’s theory, argues that ecological thinking “is capable of seeing nature and human nature as reciprocally engaged, intra-active.” The knowing ecological subject that Code describes is “materially situated.” The trans-corporeal subject, however, is not so much situated, which suggests stability and coherence, but rather caught up in and transformed by myriad, often unpredictable material agencies (Alaimo *Bodily* 146)

Stina’s bare feet and limbs, which protrude from the nightgown more and more each year, until the last year of the series (Figure 15) in which she simply holds the too-small nightgown up in front of her (seemingly naked) body, emphasize her vulnerability to the “myriad material agencies” in which she is “caught up.”



Figure 15: 1951/2003 pair from *The Nightgown Pictures* (1996-2004) by Nina Katchadourian

In an article on naked environmental protest, Alaimo theorizes the display of nude bodies in specific places as a demonstration of political dissent. She writes, “the naked protests considered here extend human corporeality into actual places, enacting nakedness as an ethical performance of vulnerability—the allied, mutual vulnerabilities of human/animal/environment” (*Naked* 18). While Stina is, of course, neither protesting nor nude in *The Nightgown Pictures*, the thin summery nightgown and her lack of shoes do give a sense of exposure to and continuity with the elements, especially in the images, in which her toes grip the rock she is standing on (such as 1944) or in which her tan feet blend in with the grass (such as 1947). The juxtaposition of the original images with the new images adds to this sense of vulnerability, as Stina appears to have vanished into the

landscape. In fact, in the last pair of images in the series, Stina seems to have morphed into a tree angled in the direction of her long-ago gaze. Fittingly, Katchadourian writes of the 2003 image, “Of all the pictures, this one feels like the closest match.”

That the family returns to Pörtö every summer (except when they are prevented from returning by the war) and enacts this photographic ritual implies that the islands are quite literally part of Stina’s, and later, Katchadourian’s development, emotionally but also physically. As they breathe, drink and eat, Pörtö’s air, water, and perhaps even its soil become part of Stina and Nina’s very bodies. Any toxins it harbors have also most likely become part of them. Alaimo locates human vulnerability in this literal union of place and body—this trans-corporeality.

Humans are vulnerable because they are not in fact “human” in some transcendent, contained sense, but are flesh, substance, matter; we are permeable and in fact, require the continual input of other forms of matter—air, water, food. [...The human body] is embedded within and inseparable from the “environment” that it ingests. (Alaimo, *Naked* 24).

Limits of Language and Representation

This inseparability of the human body from nature does not, however, constitute some sort of limitless transcendental oneness with nature, as both Alaimo’s and Katchadourian’s work shows. Alaimo writes,

Even as we attempt to formulate new understandings that do not isolate the human from the flesh or from nonhuman nature, we need to mark the limits of our own ability to render the material world with language. Such a sense of limits does not pose nature as exterior to human language, but

instead acts to ensure awareness that the process of meaning making is an ongoing one, a process that includes nonhuman nature as a participant rather than as an object of inquiry (*Bodily* 42).

Katchadourian problematizes the representation of nature through language throughout her body of work. In her essay on Katchadourian's work, Frances Richard writes "[the artist's projects] read the book of nature upside down" (46). Richard continues,

Th[e] taxonomical noise [in Katchadourian's work] through which we strain to hear becomes a perceptual mirror, reflecting back our longing for pure transmission. [...] Katchadourian translates, through her studio interventions, the thrums, squeaks, stains and blotches made by matter's movement against itself. In this endlessly recombinant ecology [...] [r]emixed code-switching concretizes evanescent thought, transmitting a record that is not authentic, but not ersatz either. The blips that we receive betray their origins as indexical traces of physics and biology, which have passed through the apparatus of language, been deconstructed into babble, and reconstituted in a frame that promises attention to each nuance—i.e., art (Richard 50).

Quit Using Us (2002; Figure 16) renders suspect the use of language to represent the natural world. To create the piece, "with some difficulty," Katchadourian spelled out the title of the piece with live caterpillars on a reddish-orange background, photographed the result, and then printed it at an oversize scale, "reminiscent of a political banner" (Katchadourian). That the caterpillars were not entirely compliant with Katchadourian's intentions is clearly shown in the photograph: the "letters" are misshapen because their

constituent parts are in the process of crawling away. The obvious irony of Katchadourian molding the caterpillars against their will into words that supposedly represent their wishes is so simple that it is profound: the imposition of language onto the natural world without “an awareness that the process of meaning making is an ongoing one [...] that includes nonhuman nature as a participant” is fraught.



Figure 16: *Quit Using Us* (2002) by Nina Katchadourian

The video piece *GIFT/GIFT* (1998; Figure 17) invites a similar interpretation. In this work, Katchadourian literally imposes the word “GIFT” (spelled out in red thread) onto a spider’s web using tweezers. On her website, she describes what happens:

[The] particularly aggressive spider battles [the] pair of persistent tweezers for control of the web. The tweezers manage, with great difficulty and damage to the web, to insert the letters. The spider returns, picks out the letters in order, and makes a few repairs before settling back into the web.

Katchadourian was inspired to do this piece when she learned from a Swedish children’s book that spiders sometimes gift dead prey wrapped in thread to other spiders.

Katchadourian points out that in Swedish²⁰ the word “gift” means “poison”; fittingly for her piece, it also means “venom” in the zoological as well as the figurative sense.²¹

²⁰ which Katchadourian spoke with her mother and grandmother while growing up. While her maternal family is from Finland, they are part of the Swedish-speaking minority.

²¹ The modern English “gift” is actually related etymologically to the Swedish “gift”: they both come from the Old Germanic root “ge□” meaning “to give.” In Old English, “gift” had a narrower sense, meaning “payment for a bride,” or, in the plural, “weddings.” Similarly, in modern Swedish, in addition to meaning “poison” and “venom,” “gift” also means “to marry,” “married” and “spousal.”



Figure 17: Still from *GIFT/GIFT* (1998) by Nina Katchadourian

Katchadourian says of *GIFT/GIFT*, “[t]he experience of making that video was incredible because I had done my part [...] and then I just watched as the spider did its part. I was just a spectator at that point” (*Attention* 12). By actively participating in the creation of the video, the spider contributes to the meaning-making process that the video documents. The word that Katchadourian imposes on the spider is at once open to interpretation (given its multiple meanings in different languages) and limiting, in that even a human understanding of the multiple senses of “gift” does not totally encompass the spider’s interpretation of the (material representation of) the word. Catriona Sandilands cautions that, while “new”²² metaphors for humans’ relationships with nature are necessary, “there needs to be a point in an ethical relationship at which the ill fit [of

²² While Sandilands calls for “new” metaphoric relationships, I think it’s important to think about *who* these relationships would be new to. Certainly to people familiar solely with Western industrial culture, but most likely not to those who belong to indigenous cultures.

metaphors] is explicitly recognized, preventing metaphoric closure and opening the need for ongoing conversation” (qtd. in Alaimo 42-43).

In a very different way, *Translation Exercise* (1993; Figure 18) also comments on the limits of language in describing the natural world. To create this piece, Katchadourian selected a small rock from her parent’s garden in California. Then, she writes on her website, while traveling among the various islands of the Finnish Archipelago (which includes the island of Pörtö), “I searched for a rock that resembled the one I had and switched them, taking the new rock with me and leaving the old one behind. This task was repeated on each of the subsequent islands I went to.”

While *Translation Exercise* involved the translation²³ of rocks, not words, the project alludes to language in many ways, including in the use of the word “translation” in the title, and in Katchadourian’s website’s description of the piece: “The last rock sits on a shelf, like the period at the end of a sentence.” The fact that Katchadourian chose to do the project in the Finnish Archipelago, starting with a rock from her parent’s home in California is also significant linguistically, for the two places both involve translation, given that Katchadourian grew up bilingual in California, and that Finland has two official languages.

²³ Interestingly, while the word “translation” is often used in the context of languages, it comes from the Latin word “lātum” which is an irregular form of the Latin verb “ferō,” meaning to bear, to carry, or to bring. In an etymological sense, then, to translate is to transfer, or to carry across, which is exactly what Katchadourian does with the rocks in *Translation Exercise*.



Figure 18:
Documentation from
Translation Exercise
(1993) by Nina
Katchadourian

Of the project’s design, Katchadourian writes on her website, “The idea of what constituted ‘resemblance’ [between the rocks] was left quite open (color, temperature, shape, texture?)”. She also acknowledges that the act of switching rocks was sometimes hurried or perfunctory due to “circumstantial factors.” Although the last rock purportedly stands for all the other rocks, given the openness and imperfection of Katchadourian’s process, it is quite clear that it fails at this task, as linguistic translation—being an inexact science, an approximation—always fails to some extent. A quick glance at the images of the other rocks (especially when they are shown side by side in pairs) confirms this: the rocks have visible differences in shape, color, and texture. But a rock is a rock is a rock. To describe all the minute differences even between two of Katchadourian’s rather nondescript rocks would take thousands of words and an extensive knowledge of geology, and even then the description would not be exhaustive.

Amanda Boetzkes discusses her view of earth artists’ approach to the impossibility of representing the earth: “In contemporary practice [of earth art], nature is not a site that is subjected to human signification; it is present to the senses and, most importantly, it appears in its resistance to being subsumed into representation” (12). While *Translation Exercise* works on a vastly smaller scale than the earth art Boetzkes analyzes, through its failures Katchadourian’s piece also alludes to this “irreducibility” of

the natural world to human representation, whether through images, concepts, or language.

Conclusion

Alaimo astutely observes that contemporary ecological crises arise from “[t]he evacuation of agency from nature [which] underwrites the transformation of the world into a passive repository of resources for human use” (*Bodily* 143). Both biosemiotics and trans-corporeality attempt to mend this conceptual rupture between Western humans, non-human animals, and the natural world by rethinking who and what should be recognized as having the ability to interpret, to possess agency, and to act creatively. Viewed in the context of these theories, Nina Katchadourian’s body of work, which stems from her “mindset of trying to be alert to things that [one] is passing over all the time,” extends that which is often seen as particularly human to non-human animals and the natural world (*Attention* 8).

Barnacle Mixer (2002; Figure 19) exemplifies how Katchadourian’s work goes about rethinking Western conceptualizations of non-human animals and the natural world. One day while on Pörtö’s rugged coast, Katchadourian noticed that the barnacles resembled little eyes peering out from the sides of the rocks. She then “found some plastic googly eyes in a craft shop and decided to introduce them all to one another, one type of object providing a kind of camouflage for the other. They were arranged to create social situations that resembled both flirting and mugging,” as she notes on her website.



Figure 19: Detail of *Barnacle Mixer* (2002) by Nina Katchadourian

The attention Katchadourian pays to what is often overlooked has a way of enlivening the universe that is reminiscent of Grosz's ideas about how art operates. "Art unleashes and intensifies, through the principles of composition, what science contains and slows down through the plane of reference, precisely the creative and destructive impact of vibratory force on bodies, on collectives, on the earth itself" (Grosz 62). The simple act of adding googly eyes to a seaside rock exemplifies this "unleashing" and "intensifying" of the chaos Grosz sees as structuring the "materiality of the universe" (61). The addition of googly eyes seemingly animates the rock's denizens, and indeed, the whole rock. Instead of appearing to be an inert thing, the rock becomes abuzz with

activity—the barnacles and googly eyes eying each other cautiously, then “socializing” in their own odd ways.

Barnacle Mixer, like a lot of Katchadourian’s work, is playful yet, at the same time, quite serious. What would the world be like if Western thought saw barnacles more as Katchadourian does? They are, in fact, not trivial—Darwin himself devoted eight years of his life to researching the arthropods’ strange habits (Quammen 226). Unlike Darwin, Katchadourian doesn’t provide her viewers with any facts about barnacles, nor does she prove anything about them. But, by merely suggesting that they are tiny subjective beings who have particular ways of experiencing the world, she does something perhaps just as powerful.

CHAPTER III

NATURECULTURES IN *NATURAL CROSSDRESSING* AND *MENDED*

SPIDERWEBS

In Western thought, nature and culture have long been considered entirely distinct from one another. In fact, Western conceptions of nature hinge on the very absence of human culture (Soper 15). The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines *nature* as: “the phenomena of the physical world collectively; esp. plants, animals, and other features and products of the earth itself, as opposed to humans and human creations”; the first use of the term in this manner dates back to the fourteenth century. *Culture*, in contrast, is defined as “the arts and other manifestations of human intellectual achievement regarded collectively.” As their definitions make apparent, the categories of nature and culture are thought of as mutually exclusive in the West. Scholars such as Bernadette Bensaude-Vincent and William R. Newman maintain that while that the specifics of the opposition between nature and culture are constantly changing, the two have nevertheless been recognized as opposing forces throughout Western history (3-4).

Feminist science studies theorist Donna Haraway’s introduction of the concept of *naturecultures* represents a major challenge to the nature/culture dualism so pernicious in Western thought. For Haraway, the term *naturecultures* captures “the impossibility of uncoupling ‘nature’ from ‘culture’” (Bell 134). Far from being distinct, nature and culture are intricately interrelated, Haraway contends, such that ever determining whether something originates solely from nature or culture is not only impossible, but misguided. The concept of *naturecultures* implies that it is vital to recognize that nature and culture are nothing more than Western human constructions that describe our (always imprecise)

perceptions of the world. Nature and culture are not causal forces that shape the world; rather, the words themselves are simply attempts to classify what we see in the world.

Biological and cultural determinism are both instances of misplaced concreteness—i.e. the mistake of first taking provisional and local category abstractions like “nature” and “culture” for the world and, second, mistaking potent consequences to be preexisting foundations. There are no preconstituted subjects and objects, and no single sources, unitary actors, or final ends. In Judith Butler’s terms, there are only “contingent foundations.” (Haraway, *Companion* 6).

The term *naturecultures*, then, highlights the interdependence and mutual constitution of humans, other animals, and the natural world that the separate categories of “nature” and “culture” obscure. “Reality is an active verb,” Haraway writes, “and the nouns all seem to be gerunds with more appendages than an octopus” (*Companion* 6).

Haraway is by no means the first scholar to recognize that the nature/culture dualism is problematic. In essence, both biosemiotics and trans-corporeality are attempts to subvert this Western construct by recognizing the agencies of non-human animals, plants, and even, in the case of trans-corporeality, matter. Contemporary artists such as Nina Katchadourian are also engaged in these issues. In an essay on a 2000 show in which Katchadourian’s work appeared, Lisa Gabrielle Mark, the show’s curator, states

“Nature” is a word in flux. By definition it denotes the entire physical universe [...] The split between nature and artifice is a hangover from the old Cartesian worldview, allowing us to regard nature as “other” [...] The natural phenomena—plants, animals, etc.—that we seek to observe,

exploit, and preserve actually *embody both nature and artifice in a complex and continuous interrelationship* [emphasis added] (11).

In order to understand how Katchadourian's work adds to the current discourse surrounding the problematic nature/culture binarism, this chapter will examine two of her pieces, *Natural Crossdressing* and *Mended Spiderwebs*, in light of Haraway's concept of naturecultures.

By "collaborating" with non-human creatures to create art and intervening in the natural world with self-consciously crude "repairs" and inadequate "improvements," Katchadourian problematizes traditional Western oppositions and hierarchies between nature and culture. In this way, Katchadourian's artwork can be read as questioning the dualistic way that Western industrial societies view human culture and the natural world at a fundamental level, and as proposing a less categorical, more process-based worldview that acknowledges the "contingent foundations" of ever-evolving naturecultures.

Natural Crossdressing

In a photograph entitled *Natural Crossdressing* (2002; Figure 20), Katchadourian appears from the collar bone up in front of a reddish-orange background. Her straight hair is tucked behind her ears and looks somewhat greasy and unkempt. She wears a black tee-shirt, a beret, and, at first glance, a moustache. On closer inspection, the moustache above Katchadourian's upper lip turns out to be made of two greenish, fuzzy caterpillars, heads facing inwards, that are clearly alive and edging their way upwards towards the artist's nose. Katchadourian looks down at the viewer with slightly furrowed brows and a neutral expression that looks like a subtle challenge: "What's it to you?" her narrowed

eyes seem to say. The bold red and black color scheme, the low camera angle, and the imposing size of the piece (30x40 inches) add to this confrontational quality.



Figure 20: *Natural Crossdressing* (2002) by Nina Katchadourian

Like much of Katchadourian's art, *Natural Crossdressing* came into being through happenstance. When she discovered a group of caterpillars on a tree outside her home, the visual similarity between the hairy, arching caterpillars and a moustache (two very different things) struck Katchadourian, and so she created the piece on a whim. "I thought a pair of them would make a perfect mustache," she explains simply in her online statement on the piece (ninakatchadourian.com). However, the meaning of this self-portrait goes way beyond just the quirky visual pun between caterpillars and moustaches that immediately strikes the viewer. Through an outwardly simple manoeuvre, Katchadourian engages with complex issues of gender, nature, and artistry in *Natural Crossdressing*, ultimately implying that art itself is a complex knot of naturecultures.

Firstly, the fact that Katchadourian sports a black beret and moustache in this piece is significant: in the popular imagination, black berets and moustaches are associated with artists, perhaps due to the fact that many canonical artists, including Rembrandt, Cezanne, Monet, and Man Ray, have depicted themselves mustachioed wearing one of these iconic hats in a self-portrait (Figures 21-24) Although his self-portraits don't feature one, Picasso also wears a dark beret in many famous photos (Figure 25). As Katchadourian's cross-dressing underscores, the beret-wearing, mustachioed stereotype of an artist is also typically male. In fact, the prototypical artist is generally imagined as male (Soussloff 4). At a fundamental level, then, Katchadourian's self-portrait is a comment on the association of artistic genius with maleness, and on the male-dominated art world in general. In a larger sense, *Natural Crossdressing* plays with gender dualities, highlighting the role of gendered symbols in conveying ideas of artistry while satirizing associations between these cultural symbols and artistic identity.



Figure 21: *Self Portrait with Velvet Beret* (1634) by Rembrandt



Figure 22: *Self Portrait with a Beret* (1886) by Claude Monet

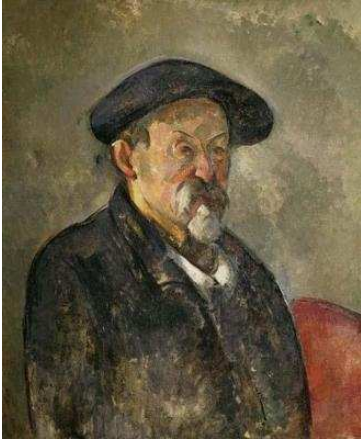


Figure 23: *Self Portrait with Beret* (1898) by Paul Cezanne



Figure 24: *Self Portrait with Beret* (1946) by Man Ray



Figure 25: Pablo Picasso in a beret in 1962

The fact that Katchadourian is cross-dressed in this self-portrait calls to mind Marcel Duchamp's self-portraits (created with Man Ray's help) as Rose Sélavy (pronounced like "*eros, c'est la vie*"), his female and presumably non-artist alter-ego (Figure 26). The reference to Duchamp in *Natural Crossdressing* is fitting, since he was one of the first artists to turn found objects into art: Katchadourian's caterpillars, in this case, are "found" in the most literal sense, in that Katchadourian just happened upon them. In Western thought, human/non-human animal relationships are typically viewed as subject/object relationships, in which humans are the active, thinking, observing subjects and animals are the passive, observed objects. Using caterpillars as found

objects, then, can be read as a comment on how Western artists have traditionally viewed and made use of the natural world, and on the perceived agency in readymade art such as Duchamps'. While readymades could be considered the art form in which naturecultures and material agency are most apparent, since what is to become the art object is created in part or entirely by a complex of natural and cultural processes, the artist takes all the credit for transforming the object into art. Katchadourian's caterpillars are the "potently consequential" beings of a rich evolutionary history, involving natural and cultural forces, yet Katchadourian ironically uses them as objects, turning them into art, and claiming sole authorship of the work.



Figure 26: *Marcel Duchamp as Rose Sélavy* (c. 1920-21)
Photographed by Man Ray

Natural Crossdressing simultaneously plays into and subverts gender expectations of artistic self-representation. On the one hand, by donning a moustache, a beret, and a defiantly neutral expression, Katchadourian presents herself as a

stereotypical, almost macho artist. By cross-dressing for a self-portrait, she aligns herself with Duchamp, the quintessential conceptual artist. On the other hand, her moustache is not a moustache at all (not even a fake one) but, instead, is made of caterpillars, and so it satirizes the assumption that raw artistic talent is necessarily connected to masculinity, and trumps Duchamps' Dadaistic cross-dressing efforts by adding another layer of absurdity.

Natural Crossdressing, then, emphasizes the cultural-constructedness of the artist's image, and by the same token, the cultural-constructedness of gender presentation. In Western thought, there is a long history of tension between the concepts of art and nature (Bensaude-Vincent and Newman 3-4), with art being placed within the realm of culture, not nature. Paradoxically, however, while skills such as drawing and painting can be taught to some extent (making them cultural), artistic talent is often thought of as innate, and even instinctual—in other words, deriving from nature or genetics. *Natural Crossdressing* calls into question the idea that talent and the drive to create derive simply from an artist's own (male) nature, insisting that the artist him/herself is a cultural construction. By pointing out that artists consciously represent themselves as such, and, in so doing, reinforce their own identity, Katchadourian interrogates the naturalness of artistic genius. The presence of caterpillars in Katchadourian's photograph, however, simultaneously situates art-making squarely within the natural world: in a sense, she implies that the caterpillars, representations of non-human nature, make the artist.

In situated histories, situated naturecultures [...] all the actors become who they are in the dance of relating, not from scratch, not ex nihilo, but

full of the patterns of their sometimes joined, sometimes separate heritages both before and lateral to this encounter (Haraway, *Companion* 25).

By doing something considered unnatural—cross-dressing—using animals, Katchadourian locates herself within a complex tangle of naturecultures, while undermining dualistic notions of innate, individualistic, masculinist artistic genius.

Having a moustache is not natural for Katchadourian; however, it could be argued that her moustache of caterpillars is *more* natural than a real moustache, in that the caterpillars come from nature, as defined by the absence of humans. On her website, Katchadourian says of her self-portrait, “Crossdressing, an act that is generally thought of as [a] highly unnatural act, transpires here using entirely natural materials.” No matter how one looks at it, *Natural Crossdressing* breaks down the clear dichotomy between nature and culture, and skewers the gendered, natured expectations of the prototypical artist.

As Katchadourian’s above quote suggests, *Natural Crossdressing* is also a comment on the naturalness of gender play itself. Much of the stigma surrounding cross dressing, transexuality, and homosexuality in Western culture stems from (or is explained by) the notion that these behaviors and identities somehow violate the natural order: that (only) conventional gender roles and heterosexuality are natural²⁴ (Mortimer-Sandilands and Erickson 31). Paradoxically, as Karen Barad points out, homosexual sex acts and nonnormative gender expression are condemned because those who participate in them are seen to be giving in to “beastial” desires—desires that only a proper adherence to morality (a purely human domain—humans being the sole moral agents) can prevent.

²⁴ The legal term, “crimes against nature,” which refers to sodomy and (other) homosexual sex acts, and which, in the U.S., not that long ago also referred to cross dressing, exemplifies this.

Barad contends that, whether nature is seen as the innocent wronged party or the perverse negative influence, the policing of deviant gender and sexual behavior is fundamentally an attempt at “securing the nature/culture divide,” precisely because morality itself is assumed to be what divides humans from animals (28).

Evolutionary theory, with its emphasis on sexual selection, is often used to justify the notion that homosexuality is not natural, since if homosexual sex is not reproductive, evolution would weed out homosexual genetics within a generation or two if they were naturally occurring in a population. Of course, scientists are learning that evolution is not nearly as simplistic as ideas like this purport it to be; feminist science studies theorists have also shown that cultural biases (such as heteronormativity, transphobia, and homophobia) have significantly influenced scientific research (Alaimo 54). For decades, scientists have been explaining away observed homosexual behavior in the animal kingdom by asserting that it serves non-sexual functions, or by simply misidentifying the sex of the animals involved (Bagemihl 122). As Barad says, “Values and facts are cooked together as part of the same brew” (“Entanglements” 16).

Thus, Katchadourian’s use of caterpillars as a prop for cross-dressing combined with the assumption that caterpillars are “natural” provokes this question of the naturalness of transvestitism. Generally thought of as a behavior only humans engage in, transvestitism has now been documented in many other animal species. In his extensive (but by no means exhaustive) account of diverse sexual behavior in the animal kingdom, biologist Bruce Bagemihl explains that there are two types of animal transvestitism: physical, in which an animal physically resembles the other sex, and behavioral, in which an animal behaves as one of the other sex does. Physical transvestitism has been

observed in butterflies, squid, birds, deer, and snakes (Bagemihl 38). Bighorn sheep are one example of a species in which behavioral transvestitism is relatively common (Bagemihl 39).

Haraway explicitly links the nature/culture dualism with issues of sex and gender, contending that even Western feminism's important distinction between sex and gender (meant to dissociate "cultural" gender from "natural" sex and thus allow for nonnormative gender expression) hinges on the nature/culture binarism.

Nature is only the raw material of culture, appropriated, preserved, enslaved, exalted, or otherwise made flexible for disposal by culture in the logic of capitalist colonialism. Similarly, [in this logic] sex is only the matter to the act of gender [...] It has seemed all but impossible to avoid the trap of an appropriationist logic of domination built into the nature/culture binarism and its generative lineage, including the sex/gender distinction. (Haraway, *Primate* 13).

Judith Butler argues that physical sex can never be viewed outside of cultural gender norms: that sex is "always already gender" (21). In light of this, Katchadourian's use of caterpillars specifically is also symbolically significant, for caterpillars, long and phallic, metamorphose into butterflies, which have a more vaginal shape. Thus, the caterpillars in this piece neatly underscore the message that gender is fluid, and that this fluidity is naturalcultural.

The caterpillars in this piece are, however, still used as a symbol, which seems like a very human thing to do. In fact, the distinction between humans and non-human animals is often framed as humanity's ability to think symbolically and creatively. As

discussed in Chapter II of this thesis, biosemiotics questions the assumption that nature is fundamentally instinctual, preprogrammed, and non-creative. The importance of this paradigm shift in how we think about nature cannot be overstated, for biosemiotic theory implies that evolution is fundamentally a creative process: non-human (as well as human) beings' survival hinges on their ability to use what is at their disposal (in terms of both their own genetically-inherited body parts, and what they come across in their environment) in novel ways that fit their particular niche in space and time.

So, in light of biosemiotic theory, Katchadourian's use of natural creatures as a symbol does not, in fact, support the idea that humans are differentiated from the natural world by symbolic thought. The caterpillars in *Natural Crossdressing*, while appearing inanimate at first, actually subtly assert their own agency. About the making of the piece, Katchadourian states on her website, "[i]t was a difficult photo shoot, since they [the caterpillars] kept trying to crawl up my nose." This indicates that the caterpillars themselves were engaged in a biosemiotic process when the photo was taken. When placed on Katchadourian's upper lip, the caterpillars began interpreting a new, strange situation, one to which their genetics could not have preprogrammed them to respond. In an interesting way, the caterpillars are shown making a connection between two unrelated, but visually similar things, just as Katchadourian did when she decided to use them as a moustache: the looming dark nostrils that the caterpillars encountered on Katchadourian's face perhaps looked to them like something familiar—maybe a crevice in a tree or hole in the ground in which to hide. Just as Katchadourian is completely mistaken about caterpillars making a good moustache (she ended up having to use honey to get the caterpillars to stick to her face for even the few seconds it took to snap a

picture), so too are the caterpillars mistaken in thinking that a human nose is a good place to hide. However, all three organisms (the two caterpillars as well as Katchadourian) are creatively engaging with their surroundings in novel ways.

Furthermore, the caterpillars, through their creative agency, actually add meaning to the piece by arcing upward in their attempt to reach Katchadourian's nostrils. Her eyebrows, eyes, nose, and mouth all arc downwards, as does her beret. Her chin curves upward, but at the sides, rather than the center as the caterpillars do. So, in addition to their simply being green and fuzzy and therefore out of place on Katchadourian's smooth, light-beige skin, the caterpillars visually emphasize their own foreignness—their otherness—on her face by the direction of the line that they create. Thus the caterpillars collaborate in Katchadourian's creative process. Although this collaboration is likely intentional only in the sense that the caterpillars are trying to get to a place of perceived safety, Katchadourian's creative process similarly relies on spontaneity and often results in unintended, but meaningful consequences.²⁵

At many levels, then, *Natural Crossdressing* is about the gap between who is perceived to be engaged in art-making, and who is actually involved in creative processes. Through a spontaneously generated visual pun, *Natural Crossdressing* calls into question dualistically gendered expectations of artists, ideas of what types of behavior are considered natural versus unnatural, and views of the natural world that preclude creativity. In all of these ways, *Natural Crossdressing* hints at the nexus of naturecultures involved in the creation of art, problematizing ideas of solitary human authorship of art and of art's opposition to nature.

²⁵ While Katchadourian did presumably choose this particular photo from a number of slightly different shots, thus perhaps emphasizing the caterpillars' agency and collaboration, the caterpillars were still active participants in her creative process.

Mended Spiderwebs #19 (Laundry Line)

Arguably Katchadourian's most famous series, and one that provides more insight into the way interactions with the natural world address the idea of naturecultures in her work, is *Mended Spiderwebs*. To create these pieces, she writes on her website, she meticulously "repaired" broken spider webs by patching them with tiny segments of bright red thread: "[t]he short threads were held in place by the stickiness of the spider web itself; longer threads were reinforced by dipping the tips into white glue." When she was done, she documented her work through photography. Unsure whether the spiders would notice or care, she waited to see what they would do. In all cases, even on webs that appeared to be abandoned, the spiders reacted by removing her repairs and fixing their webs by the next morning (Katchadourian, "Attention" 12). Katchadourian then collected the discarded red-thread patches and displayed them in shadowboxes alongside the photos (Figure 27).



Figure 27: View of *Mended Spiderweb #8 (Fish Patch)* (1998) by Nina Katchadourian

In one piece in the series, *Mended Spiderweb #19 (Laundry Line)* (1998; Figure 28), two roughly half-circle spider webs are attached to a rough-barked, mossy tree on the right side of the image. A few of the webs' long strands are also attached to the

clothesline anchored on one side by the tree. The clothesline cuts across the image horizontally, delineating the top third of the picture frame. Clipped to the left side of the clothesline are two brightly colored clothespins, one right-side up and the other upside-down. Somewhat out of focus in the background is a dark house, which contrasts with the light spider webs in the foreground. The light on the roof of the house is dappled, suggesting, along with the patch of trees in the distant background, that the house is surrounded by forest. Each of the spider webs has multiple red-thread patches created by Katchadourian: the top web has two patches, and the bottom one has three. The lines of the patches, which were clearly inserted very carefully, are nevertheless uneven and messy compared to the more ordered lines of the spider webs; Katchadourian's thread is also thicker in diameter than the spider silk, augmenting the patches' clumsy, hack-job appearance.



Figure 28: *Mended Spiderweb #19 (Laundry Line)* (1998) by Nina Katchadourian

This piece plays with and subverts the dichotomy between nature and culture in a number of ways, including its composition, its references to weaving and spiders, and its representation of interaction between artist and animal. Firstly, the photograph's visual

layout introduces both juxtapositions and amalgamations of nature and culture. Thinking dualistically for a moment, we can read the mossy tree on the right side and the spider webs attached to it as symbolic of nature. The clothesline, clothespins, and house are all, of course, reminders of human culture. Katchadourian's patches, which have been introduced into the spider webs, are obviously human-made, although they are attempting to mimic nature, and are, in fact, enveloped by nature. The strong verticality of the tree juxtaposed with the horizontality of the clothesline creates a literal intersection between nature and culture.

Perhaps more interestingly, the theme of the intersection or interconnectedness of culture and nature is echoed in the conceptual significance of the spiderwebs. Spiders have long been associated with weaving, as Katchadourian herself attests in an interview.

“I initially reacted to the fact that the spider webs looked broken, and I deliberately picked a method of fixing them that was very human: darning, stitching, or sewing—but these methods also connected to a spider's act of spinning or weaving.” (Katchadourian, “Attention” 12).

As this quote shows, spinning and weaving are not exclusively human acts: spiders also engage in creating through these methods, and rather more skillfully than humans. In describing how spider webs function, Peter Rice, a structural engineer, explains the intricacies of their design.

The key to the structure of the spider's web lies in its shape and stress distribution. By allowing large elongation of the threads, the maximum proportion of kinetic energy from a flying insect is absorbed as strain energy. The multiple redundancy of the radial threads ensures that the web

will function even if many radials break. The spider is using the techniques of the late twentieth century engineer, but with much more elegance and precision” (“A Spider's Way”).

Katchadourian emphasizes the superiority of the spider’s spinning skill through the relatively crude look of her patches; the spider’s rejection of them drives this point home.

Weaving itself is also indicative of naturecultures: “For every civilization, textiles have marked the intersection of nature, culture, and technology” (Mark 12). Often made from natural materials by human hands, weavings are both natural and cultural.

Katchadourian’s weaving of human-made thread into a natural spider web emphasizes this idea. Furthermore, that spider acts of web-making are described as weaving suggests that spider behavior, like human behavior, has developed through their own intricate history of naturecultures.

In her analysis of *Mended Spiderwebs*, Lisa Gabrielle Mark points out that spiders belong to the class of animals called *arachnids*, whose name relates directly to the Greek myth of Arachne.²⁶ Arachne was a great weaver who refused to give the goddess Athena credit for the skill that she (Arachne) possessed, although it was obvious that her talent was derived from the goddess: “Pallas [Athena] her mistress shone in every line [of Arachne’s weaving]./This the proud maid with scornful air denies” (Ovid). Arachne’s pride angered Athena so much that she eventually turned Arachne into a spider.

The Arachne myth allows a reading of the (implied) spiders in *Mended Spiderwebs* as indicative of transformation, and of blurring the lines between constructed categories such as human and non-human animal, as well as between nature and culture, drawing parallels to the caterpillars in *Natural Crossdressing*. Ovid’s *Metamorphosis*, the

²⁶ *Arachne* also means spider in Greek.

narrative poem in which the myth of Arachne is preserved, is, in fact, a collection of tales of many different human/animal transfigurations describing the creation of the world.

Interestingly, this suggests a lost tradition in Western culture that recognized the permeability of boundaries between human and non-human, nature and culture—in other words, a tradition that may have had some sort of conception of naturecultures.

The human hubris exhibited by Arachne relates to Katchadourian's act of trying to repair the spider webs: just as Arachne assumes that her skill is superior to, and separate from, that of the goddess Athena, Katchadourian's act of patching spider webs satirically suggests that humans are more capable than nature (embodied by the spiders) of repairing a spider web, and that human skill or artifice is something unique among living creatures, and distinct from the natural world.

The interaction between the spiders and artist in *Mended Spiderwebs* is also indicative of the concept of naturecultures. The artist's web repairs disturb the spiders' senses of order, pointing out that spiders have different, and, in this case, perhaps more exacting aesthetics than humans do. The rejection of Katchadourian's clumsy patches attests to the idea that spiders are "the perfectionists among nature's tailors" (Spaid). This underscores a sense of the spider's agency, and thus its specific (and nature's more general) role in Katchadourian's art-making. The spider's patch rejection also implies the existence of spider culture. In intervening in the natural world and allowing the spider time to respond, Katchadourian allows the naturecultures inherent in the creation of art to surface.

Conclusion

In *Natural Crossdressing* and *Mended Spiderwebs #19*, Nina Katchadourian plays with conceptions of nature and culture in numerous ways, interrogating the traditional Western opposition between the two categories while revealing both their constructedness and the relationships they obscure. Donna Haraway's term *naturecultures*, which emphasizes the inseparability of nature and culture, provides a basis for understanding the complex webs of naturalcultural strands that Katchadourian's work attempts to make more apparent. In *Natural Crossdressing*, Katchadourian raises questions about the naturalness of artmaking and transvestitism, challenging viewers to think beyond dualisms such as male/female, human/non-human animal, and nature/culture and to acknowledge the complex legacies of naturecultures involved in the creation of art. *Mended Spiderwebs #19* brings up the interconnectedness of nature and culture through allusions to weaving, human/spider transfiguration, and artist/spider interaction. Both pieces illustrate the many overlooked ways in which naturecultures are inherent in art, and in human existence as a whole, and gesture towards the complex semiotic fabric of the biosphere.

CHAPTER IV

IRONY, ANIMAL REPRESENTATION, AND THE FAMILIAR IN KATCHADOURIAN'S *CHLOE* AND DION'S *SCALA NATURAE*

[E]ven if scientists are good at what they do, they're not necessarily adept in the field of representation. They don't have access to the rich set of tools, like irony [...] and humour, which are the meat and potatoes of art and literature.

—Mark Dion, “Miwon Kwon in conversation with Mark Dion”

This chapter compares the use of irony in Nina Katchadourian's piece *Chloe* (1994) with that of a piece first exhibited in the same year, Mark Dion's *Scala Naturae* (1994). Both pieces use taxidermied animals to make an ironic comment on Western classification of animals. I demonstrate that, while *Scala Naturae*'s ironic view of animal classification becomes uncertain upon analysis, *Chloe*'s interrogation of the familiar undergirds an ironic world relation akin to what Bronislaw Szerszynski terms “ironic ecology.”

Scala Naturae

Various earth-toned objects rest on a pure white staircase that rises ten feet off the floor, yet leads nowhere, and couldn't be climbed without difficulty anyway, due to the clutter. The structure seems to dwarf the small gallery space, although it is actually contained quite comfortably. Two thin, unfinished wooden posts support the staircase's back. The stairs diminish in size as they recede upwards, making the top look farther away than it is. On the bottom step are antique, human-made objects, including a small wagon wheel, a cracked clay pot, a clock, and a pair of calipers; on the second, rocks, minerals and fungi; the third, dried gourds, fruits, a cactus, a pinecone, and other plant

matter; the fourth, dried sea sponges, corals, and starfish; the fifth, bivalve and gastropod shells; the sixth, pinned butterflies, other insects, and crustaceans; the seventh, a taxidermied octopus and jars containing other cephalopods in alcohol; the eighth, a taxidermied frog and fish, and a snake in a jar. A taxidermied duck and tabby cat sit on the ninth step. On the tenth and top step, in the empty space between the two animals, rests a small white bust of Aristotle (Corrin 74). This piece, *Scala Naturae* (Figure 29) by Mark Dion, is named after Aristotle's hierarchy of matter and life of the same name, which translates to "the ladder or stairway of nature", and is generally referred to in English as "the great chain of being."




Figure 29: View of *Scala Naturae* (1994) by Mark Dion

It seems clear that *Scala Naturae* is meant to be read ironically. Art historian and curator Dieter Buchhart writes, “[t]he arrangement of objects [in *Scala Naturae*] is obviously deliberately ironized, in that Dion places human interventions on the lowest step [...] in a way that temporalizes natural history” (24). Buchhart argues that although these human-made objects invite comparisons with the vanitas genre of still life, bringing up a sense of time (some quite obviously, like the half-burnt candle and the clock, and others more obliquely, such as the broken jug, the weathered book, and the old-fashioned wagon wheel), the piece’s middle steps “present unchanging pieces of the natural world in much the same way as a natural history museum,” and the work’s overall structure is static (24).

Curator Lisa Graziose Corrin identifies a more basic irony in *Scala Naturae*: she writes that the piece is a “straightfaced subversion” of Aristotle’s highly influential concept, which the piece represents literally, if not quite accurately²⁷ (71). This “straightfaced-ness” implies what poet and scholar D.C. Meucke calls “impersonal irony.”²⁸ This type of irony is “characterised by a dryness of tone, in which the ironist absents themselves, simply presenting their words, and not indicating overtly to the listener that the communication is meant as ironic or sarcastic” (Szerszynski 345). Dion not only structures *Scala Naturae* roughly according to Aristotle’s concept, he also

²⁷ For example, in Aristotle’s original conception of the *scala naturae*, birds are just below “viviparous quadrupeds” (i.e. mammals), and fish are just below “oviparous quadrupeds” (i.e. amphibians and reptiles). Aristotle also did not include fungi, plants, or human-made objects in his classification, although they were often included in medieval conceptions of the great chain of being, as were rocks, minerals, and dirt. (Waggoner).

²⁸ Impersonal irony is a form of what Muecke calls “communicative irony,” which “whether verbal, visual or musical, involve[s] a communication in which the overt, surface meaning of the communication is in tension with the actual meaning intended to be communicated” (Szerszynski 341).

employs the quaint aesthetics of historical *wunderkammers*, or cabinets of curiosities²⁹, juxtaposing specimens preserved in various ways with human-made objects. Although even the piece's title doesn't betray any sarcasm, it seems clear to modern-day viewers, especially given the art museum context of the piece, that Dion does not actually think that this is an accurate classification of life. Anything this hierarchical, this proto-scientific, and this dusty is clearly outmoded—there is no need for further modification to get the point across. Viewers might think, “How misguided were the naturalists of the past, thinking mushrooms and minerals belonged on the same shelf (though not intermingled—they must have known there was a difference)! How quirky and unexpectedly shrewd they were to differentiate between starfish and mollusks, allotting them two separate stairs!” Despite the elaborateness and minutia of the work's physical presence, the point seems very simple: Dion's barren irony functions like an invisible but glaringly red circle-backslash symbol (*i.e.* ): Aristotle was wrong, we cannot hierarchize life, at least not the way he did. A contemporary viewer may wonder if the work is suggesting that all life is equal or that there is a more accurate way to decide which life forms are higher and which lower, but she/he is not likely to question or complicate the basic irony of *Scala Naturae*'s message.

However, a quote from Dion himself that, like an artist's statement of sorts, appears beneath the image of *Scala Naturae* on PBS's Art21 Website, calls this seemingly obvious impersonal irony into question.

It's a very complex relationship between the natural and the cultural.

Certainly, we are of nature. But if you begin to blur that to a certain point and believe that all artificial culture—the noosphere, the sphere of human

²⁹ Dion often recreates *wunderkammer* in his work.

activity—is natural, that seems to cause a lot of problems. Then we don't need the terms “natural” and “cultural”; we can just say everything's natural. But I don't really think that's the case. We come from the natural world but, clearly, we are distinctively different in our relationship to every other animal on the planet because of our language capabilities, because we have a sense of history, because we are able to store information and knowledge in a way that other animals can't. Of course, we've evolved that way naturally. (Dion, qtd. in Art21)

In other words, while the details of Aristotle's classification are perhaps not quite accurate, by *the very fact* of categorizing and cataloging life, Aristotle (and others) prove humankind to be “different,” (and, by implication, superior) to other animals and other life forms. The simple existence of the concept of *scala naturae* (which relies on language and the knowledge transmission it permits) seemingly justifies, for Dion, the placement of humans on the top step.³⁰ This, of course, is circular reasoning,³¹ a logical fallacy of which Aristotle would surely be ashamed. Read in relation to Dion's statement, then, *Scala Naturae*'s irony shifts from impersonal irony to what Muercke terms “irony of self-betrayal,” in which “characters unconsciously ironize[s] themselves” by using “self-contradictory arguments” (59): while Dion's piece seems to be meant ironically, his statement contradicts that intention. However, this perhaps unintended³² irony does not

³⁰ Whether or not, in Dion's view, there are multiple steps below humans, or just one, remains unclear.

³¹ Humans can classify ourselves as superior to non-human beings, therefore humans are superior to non-human beings.

³² Arguing about what artists intended or did not intend is not only extremely sticky territory, but is often beside the point, especially in an era where “the author is dead,” and art, like texts, is therefore presumed to speak for itself. So, in a sense, it doesn't matter if Dion is aware or not that his public persona's argument relies on circular logic; his utterance, whether or not it was a performance or an accurate representation of

invalidate *Scala Naturae* as a meaningful piece of art; on the contrary, it adds new levels of meaning, which I will discuss in relation to *Chloe*. As English and comparative literature scholar Linda Hutcheon writes, “irony rarely involves a simple decoding of a single inverted message; [...] it is more often a semantically complex process of relating, differentiating, and combining said and unsaid meanings—and doing so with some evaluative edge” (89).

Chloe

Chloe perches in the exact center of an overstuffed decorative pillow, fluffy ears perked and pigtail-like, glassy eyes raised to human eye-level, the hint of a smile playing about her tiny snout. Eternally rapt by the promise of an unseen treat, toy, or warm lap, she radiates alertness, obedience, and attention. The striped silk pillow’s tassel is an extension of her posture; a peach-colored towel tucked beneath her luxurious fur is her environment’s only concession to dogness.

Chloe, a Papillion spaniel, is dead and stuffed. Chloe, the beloved pet of an older female Palm Springs resident, is on loan and on display, in a plexiglass case, as art in Katchadourian’s piece by the same name (Figure 30).

The artist team Olly and Suzi, who create artwork in collaboration with dangerously wild carnivores, has said, “A woman walking down the road with a Chihuahua is not really as fascinating as a shark...because a pet like that seems to have become a bit human” (Qtd. in Baker 177). Similarly, Deleuze and Guattari, quite (in)famously, write “*Anyone who likes dogs or cats is a fool* [emphasis in original]”

his “true” intentions, whatever that might mean, is therefore open to interpretation in relation to his artwork. Hutcheon situates the intentionality inherent in irony (which distinguishes irony from lying) with the interpreter, not the piece’s creator: “it is not a matter of the interpreter ‘reconstructing’ the exact meaning the ironist intended” rather it is “the complexity of the potential interaction of interpreter, ironist and text [that] make[s] irony happen”(123).

(240). The philosophers pointedly contrast a literary example of their sacrosanct concept of “becoming-animal” with “the little cat or dog owned by an elderly woman who honors and cherishes it” (244). “Becoming-animal” does not, apparently, apply to domestic animals—only wild animals, and even then, only those who live in packs.



Figure 30: View of *Chloe* (1994) by Nina Katchadourian

At first glance, *Chloe* seems to be another example of impersonal irony: a visual translation of Olly and Suzi’s disinterest in and Deleuze and Guattari’s postmodern disdain for the familiar, the feminine (both quotes mention women, after all), the domestic, the trite, the cutesy, the sentimental, and the anthropomorphic. Contemporary viewers, at least those who would never consider preserving their pets’ dead bodies,

immediately feel as if we're in on the joke, as if we, like Katchadourian, appreciate the ridiculousness of the case's mundane contents.

To love a pet, let alone an almost decorative lap dog, so much that one literally cannot bear to part with her after she is dead appears, to viewers who consider themselves more “with it” than well-to-do old ladies, to be the height of sentimentality and excess. (Will the old woman do the same thing when her next dog dies? Will she end up with taxidermied pooches adorning every room of her already [but professionally] over-decorated house?)

It is only when one realizes that Katchadourian intended for *Chloe* to be displayed in a natural history museum, amidst its collection of taxidermic wildlife, rather than in this homey, white-walled, and otherwise empty gallery space, that the irony of the work's message becomes less certain, or at least more nuanced and contradictory. For, although Katchadourian was commissioned by the natural history museum for which *Chloe* was created, the museum ultimately refused to allow the taxidermied dog to be displayed (only the plexiglass case, pillow, towel, and a framed photograph of Chloe were included in the exhibit—see Figure 31). Katchadourian writes on her website that the museum claimed the inclusion of the actual taxidermied dog would be “offensive, and that people would find the situation confusing and that children might get upset.”

It's undeniable that, in a low-light museum setting, between identical cases bearing plaques with Latinate names, one containing an enormous stuffed vulture perched on a rock, and the other some stuffed song birds on a dead tree branch, *Chloe* would have operated on one level as a punch line—“ha ha, a diorama of *Canis lupus familiaris* in its ‘natural’ habitat.” This reading of *Chloe* as a pet displayed among wild animals would



Figure 31: View of *Chloe* (1994) by Nina Katchadourian displayed in the natural history museum

classify the piece as what Muecke calls “irony of simple incongruity,” which is “an ironical technique to juxtapose without comment two contradictory statements or incongruous images” (61). Katchadourian’s website description of the piece also brings in an element of “self-disparaging irony,” in which “the ironist brings himself [*sic*] onstage, so to speak, in the character of an ignorant, credulous, earnest or over-enthusiastic person” (Muecke 56). Katchadourian writes that in creating Chloe,

I interviewed Chloe's owner on the phone about Chloe's natural habitat: a house with a cream-colored carpet, a special pillow, and a peach-colored towel that Chloe slept on. I proposed setting up Chloe in the same manner as the other animals in the Natural History Museum: presented in a vitrine, with signage indicating Latin name, habitat, etc. The museum, however,

refused to exhibit the piece [...even though] I pointed out that Chloe was genetically very much like the Coyote who lived in a nearby diorama, and that the Coyote didn't seem to upset or confuse anyone too much, but to no avail.

Although Katchadourian, by her own admission, sets out to bring up “interesting questions around the natural and the unnatural” by displaying a stuffed lap dog in a natural history museum, she feigns ignorance at the museum’s issue with her piece. What is clear is that *Chloe* is meant to be humorous; however, given *Chloe*’s use of multiple kinds of irony, it becomes unclear at whose expense the joke is directed: Chloe’s owner, postmodernists who disdain pets, the museum, and Katchadourian herself all seem to be possibilities. In this way, *Chloe* (the artwork, and undoubtedly the dog as well, albeit quite sincerely) begs the viewer for more than just the cursory attention required to get the joke.

The Familiar in Postmodernism

Steve Baker, in his book *The Postmodern Animal*, identifies a “fear of the familiar” inherent in much postmodern art and theory about animals: an odd “postmodern orthodoxy” (166) that, despite the iconoclastic dualism-shattering that defines the era, upholds Western culture’s traditional “rhetoric of the wild and the tame, the admirable wolf and the contemptible dog” (169). He attributes the fear of the familiar animal in postmodern art and philosophy to two factors, the first being the idea that what is familiar is safe and non-challenging. Postmodern art, with its roots in the avant-garde and its imperative to question authority and traditional values and to continually push boundaries, is inclined towards shocking its viewers and thus “has no stomach for the

safe, the tame” (Baker 170). Secondly, postmodernism in general is characterized by what Donald Griffin has termed “‘anthropomorphophobia’—a fear of being ‘accused of uncritical sentimentality’ in the depiction or discussion of animals. They [postmodernists] seem almost unanimous in regarding sentimentality as a bad thing” (qtd. in Baker, *Postmodern* 175).

Since Baker’s book was published in 2000, animal studies scholars have been quick to call for corrections for this blind spot in postmodernist thought, as well as attempt to correct it themselves. In his article, “Deconstructing the Animal in Search of the Real,” Giovanni Aloï calls for “[t]he familiarity of the commonplace, that normative quality which allows communication to take place, [to] now come to be seen as a productive starting point in the discussion of the animal, rather than a barrier or obstacle”(s85). In her book, *When Species Meet*, which attempts to take seriously the relations between companion animals such as humans and dogs, Donna Haraway writes “I think we learn to be worldly from grappling with, rather than generalizing from, the ordinary” (4). Of her choice to focus theoretical attention on domestic dogs, she says, “*Canis lupus familiaris* indeed; the familiar is always where the uncanny lurks”(45).

In a 1993 essay, David Foster Wallace, a contemporary American novelist and essayist, addresses what he sees as a sea change in the goals of art (primarily literary, but also visual) in relation to the familiar.

[R]ealistic fiction’s big job used to be to afford easements across borders, to help readers leap over the walls of self and locale and show us unseen or -dreamed-of people and cultures and ways to be. Realism made the strange familiar. Today, when we can eat Tex-Mex with chopsticks while

listening to reggae and watching a Soviet-satellite newscast of the Berlin Wall's fall—i.e., when darn near everything presents itself as familiar—it's not a surprise that some of today's most ambitious realistic fiction is going about trying to make the familiar strange (172).

Viewed in light of Wallace's observation, Olly and Suzi's work with wild animals is not necessarily diametrically opposed to what Katchadourian is up to in *Chloe*; both, in fact, can be seen as responses to the fact that viewers are accustomed to the sight of all kinds of animals—sharks and leopards on TV and in zoos, as well as dogs everywhere—and, in albeit very different ways, as attempting to destabilize viewers' unquestioning familiarity with the animals in question.

As touched on in Chapter II of this thesis, Katchadourian's body of work as a whole represents nothing if not sustained engagements with the familiar, and not just as subject matter, but as her art materials themselves. These engagements often render what seems unremarkable and banal suddenly strange, as in the case of *Chloe*. Katchadourian not only takes inspiration from her immediate surroundings, no matter how mundane, but also sometimes purposely limits herself to working with what is at hand and nothing more. This she does at the risk of seeming dull, unserious, even trite, that most cardinal sin in postmodernism. In fact, her *Seat Assignment* series, in which she limited herself most strictly to whatever materials were at hand, documenting her work with just a cell phone camera, has been accused of lacking gravity: Gilbert May, for instance, finds these pieces “terminally stuck in the oxygen-light atmosphere of 80s ‘PoMo’ irony”(80).

Why, then, this engagement with the commonplace? The animal studies theorists who call for attention to the familiar do so for various reasons: some, like Baker and

Haraway, are concerned with breaking down residual dualisms, such as those between wild and tame, and animal and human; others, like Aloï, seem more concerned with making the question of the animal accessible to audiences wider than just the animal studies community. But, although in retrospect Katchadourian seems to have anticipated the challenge that these theorists put forth, it does not necessarily follow that Katchadourian shared the scholars' motivations

Like *Chloe*, *Scala Naturae* includes a “mundane” domestic animal—the taxidermied tabby cat— but with no visual distinction made between the wild and the domestic. The cat is higher up on the staircase than most of the other animals, but as her/his companion on the step is the wild duck, it appears that the cat is there simply as a representative of non-human mammals, just as the duck is a representative of birds. By virtue of their size and dark colors, the cat and duck dominate the scene, while the white philosopher's bust behind blends into the background. Baker calls this juxtaposition “at once homely and uncanny” (*Postmodern* 183); Corrin sees “the stunning physicality of the natural objects [as] contrast[ing] sharply with the metaphysical realm of ideas implied by the blank space left above the philosopher's head” (74). Dion's piece thus emphasizes the impotence of philosophical schemas to deal with animals' “stunning” materiality, even that of familiar animals like housecats.

Animal Representation

Scala Naturae and *Chloe* are not unique among contemporary artworks for their utilization of taxidermied animals—in fact Aloï points out that it has become (problematically) trendy to use real, preserved animals in recent installations. This is, in one respect, one response to “a postmodern age ‘marked by a deeply felt loss of faith in

our ability to represent the real” (Baker, “Sloughing” 159). A taxidermied animal is not only dead (either having died from natural causes or, more sinisterly, having been killed purposely for “preservation”), it is literally skinned or hollowed out in order to create its own representation. In this sense, the stuffed and mounted animal is itself an apt, if unsettling, representation of the very crisis of representation in postmodernism, for it implies both the violence and the ultimate inadequacy of attempts to speak for the other: to attempt to represent an animal is, at worst, to kill it, or at best, to preserve in an entirely artificial way just a small part of it for the sole purpose of human visibility. Baker writes, “non-manipulation of the animal can perhaps be seen as one postmodern ambition or ideal” (*Postmodern* 82); seen in this light, taxidermy is a sort of manipulated semblance of non-manipulation, interesting because it walks the line between the real and the utterly fake. Moreover, the use of taxidermy to represent familiar animals such as lapdogs and housecats underscores the difficulty of representing even commonplace fauna.

Both *Chloe* and *Scala Naturae*’s use of familiar but taxidermied animals raises questions about animal representation, particularly representation by classification. In the latter artwork, an ancient attempt to classify life is shown to be all the more problematic by the fact that the life represented is, in fact, dead. In spite of Dion’s professed views to the contrary, Aristotle is revealed as having set up an impossible task for himself: to put life, characterized by dynamism and interrelatedness, into static, disparate, lifeless categories. It is not simply that the quirky and, to modern eyes, somewhat arbitrary categories Aristotle settled on were wrong; to attempt to categorize life at all seems

inherently problematic, since categorization, *Scala Naturae* implies, somehow misses or misleads about what is most essential about life: its liveliness and interconnectedness.

Enmeshedness

In contrast to *Scala Naturae*, *Chloe* pokes fun at conventional systems of classification, but also comments on the implications of taxidermy itself and on the seeming familiarity of pets. Katchadourian writes that when the museum objected to her piece, “[she] pointed out that Chloe was genetically very much like the Coyote who lived in a nearby diorama, and that the Coyote didn't seem to upset or confuse anyone too much, but to no avail” (ninakatchadourian.com). In other words, if a dog is, according to genetics, similar to a coyote, why doesn't she belong in a natural history museum? What systems of classification, other than taxonomy, are at play here? One answer is that Chloe, as the aforementioned Olly and Suzi quote indicates, is too close to human, or too infected with contemporary industrial humanness, to be put in a natural history museum. For it is not just that Chloe is a dog that is problematic; unfortunately, one could very well imagine a natural history museum including in an exhibit the dogs traditionally used by an indigenous tribe without a second thought. No, Chloe the purebred lapdog is objectionable to the museum because she is not “natural” enough. Her very familiar (to present-day Western viewers), very “unnatural” accoutrements (while perhaps unnecessary to give this impression, due to viewers' already strong associations about lapdogs) only underscore Chloe's inseparability from her human companion.

Furthermore, it is precisely this enmeshedness between dog and human that seems inappropriate to not only the museum context but also in general. Although a dog as a pet dog does not belong in a museum, neither does a dog as a dog, so the logic goes, belong

on what looks to be an expensive, pristine decorative pillow (leaving aside, for a moment, that the dog in question is dead.) *Chloe* not only questions the feasibility of neatly categorizing life (into museum-appropriate and museum-inappropriate), but points to the existence of complex chiasmic relationships between humans and non-humans.

Of course, the relationship that *Chloe* illustrates is troublesome for reasons other than just the closeness between human and animal that it implies, and this is where *Chloe*'s critique of taxidermy comes in. For one, the human/animal closeness the piece reveals seems a very consumerist relationship: Chloe is not just a companion, but an expensive decoration, and thus an object, especially but not exclusively now that she's dead. To want to keep one's dog after she dies, and to be satisfied with her stuffed skin as a replacement for a living, breathing dog, reveals a desire to overcome death with money. (In reality, of course, all money overcomes are the more disgusting aspects of death, such as putrescence.)

This critique of a little old lady whose only comfort is to have her dead dog stuffed and preserved is quite obvious in and of itself; viewers didn't really need Katchadourian to point this out because, although taxidermy is one logical conclusion of the conjunction of consumerism and pet-keeping, most viewers are probably already of the opinion that there is something ridiculous about preserving a dead dog for sentimental reasons. For scientific purposes, on the other hand, they might consider it quite reasonable, and this is where *Chloe* unsettles.

Corrective Irony and Ironic Ecology

Katchadourian's piece, I argue, offers a more productive interrogation of animal representation than Dion's does. *Scala Naturae* decries the possibility of representation

by categorization while simultaneously upholding its truth, but is ultimately a dead end. Metaphorically, once viewers have climbed the staircase, there is nowhere to go but back down to where they started. Okay, got it, the great chain of being as a system of classification is flawed (though, of course, Dion's comments imply, by even attempting such a thing, humans are superior). Perhaps even the entire project of classification is wrongheaded, and we should throw it out. But where do we go with that? Dion, in this piece at least, offers no suggestions.

In his 1993 essay referenced earlier, Wallace theorizes about the rampant use of irony in (post-) postmodern fiction; I think his ideas are applicable to art of this period as well. Wallace discusses the "shift in U.S. perceptions of how art was supposed to work, a transition from art's being a creative instantiation of real values to art's being a creative instantiation of deviance from bogus values" (178). Irony and irreverence often have idealist motives (for example, in satires such as *Tartuffe*, or even in 1960's art and culture), but, since they "serve an exclusively negative function" Wallace contends, their constant use or overuse becomes "destructive" because they are "singularly unuseful when it comes to constructing anything to replace the hypocrisies [they] debunk" (183). It seems to me that Dion's *Scala Naturae* falls into this trap: it mocks a long-discredited system of classification that is perhaps still subtly at work in the way we (and Dion himself) think about animals, but it does not allow space for new ways of thinking. Furthermore, while Dion's piece makes extensive use of taxidermied animals, both as literal representations of animals and as figurative representations of the stiff lifelessness of categorizing life, *Scala Naturae* remains mute on the practice of taxidermy itself as well as on the perceived domesticity of the housecat it employs.

Environmental sociologist Bronislaw Szerszynski similarly argues that the rampant use of irony of the postmodern era has become destructive, leading to a “crisis in political meaning” that, he contends, undergirds the “persistence of [environmental] unsustainability” (338). However,

the solution to this crisis is not to be found in a simple restoration of political language’s reference to a reality outside language, as if language is a flapping sail that can simply be re-secured to its mast. It was the cul-de-sac of modernity’s ‘correspondence’ theory of truth – the idea that language and the world are separate, and that language can be judged by how it more or less accurately corresponds to the world – that led to the crisis of representation in the first place (338).

Szerszynski proposes that it is the overuse of what he calls “corrective irony” that is destructive. This type of irony has two components: first, “it operates by setting up the tension between two levels of meaning, only in order to more resolutely effect a resolution onto one of them”; second, “it positions the ironist as an outside observer of the irony, on the moral high ground looking down, rather than implicated in it” (347). For Szerszynski, corrective irony is not ironic enough, since it does not allow for the coexistence of multiple levels of conflicting meaning (such as those that might arise from different perspectives or epistemologies) in which the ironist necessarily plays a part. Paradoxically then, Szerszynski argues that the solution to the postmodern crisis of meaning and representation is a “generalized ironic stance toward the world and oneself” (337) that “involve[s] a reflexive awareness of the limited and provisional nature of human understanding, while at the same time not lapsing into cynicism or quietism”

(350). Szerszynski advocates for a new environmentalism, which he calls “ironic ecology,” that takes as its foundation this “generalized ironic stance.”

Chloe displays the major components of Szerszynski’s ironic ecology. Through the simple act of attempting to place a taxidermied pet into a natural history museum’s collection of faunal specimens, Katchadourian highlights Western thought’s “over-estimation of the epistemic power of science” by hinting that “meanings and values of nature are [...] shot through with ironies and aporias” (Szerszynski 352). However, *Chloe* is not an attack on science; rather, the piece encourages greater reflection on the limits of not just scientific ways of knowing and representing “reality,” but “about the provisional character of normative claims” in general (Szerszynski 352). Does a lap dog belong in a natural history museum? After the contemplation *Chloe* inspires, viewers’ initial, knee-jerk responses to this question (whether “yes” or “no”) become less self-assured, and more aware of the ironies they entail. In this way, *Chloe* subtly embraces “a less moralistic and self-satisfied political style, one which acknowledges that no one can know political truths perfectly or live blamelessly” (Szerszynski 352). *Chloe* creates a space in which several incompatible meanings perch, playfully entangling the viewer’s own perspective in the ironies the piece holds.

Chloe, in the end, wavers between obvious and profound, between overly sentimental and creepily disturbing, between ironic and sincere, between human and nonhuman, between familiar and strange, resisting an unambiguous reading while posing thought-provoking questions. As Baker observes “taxidermy animals do not seem to know what they are doing, what beliefs or attitudes they stand for, let alone what categories they do or do not fit” (*Postmodern* 182). When looked at individually, *Scala*

Naturae's animals, too, seem to falter in their meaning, as their out-of-placeness on the stairs confers on them an attitude of resigned confusion, despite the hammering message of the piece's overt structure.

In an interview, Katchadourian emphasizes the importance of a "mindset of trying to be alert to things that you are passing over all the time" to her creative process (8). Thus, she says, "My research and my exploration happen on a daily basis out in the world" (24). Haraway writes at the end of her book, "I have tried to ask how taking such [mundane] things seriously draws us into the world" (300). *Chloe*, and, to a lesser extent, *Scala Naturae* "draw us into the world" in all its complexity, irony, and familiarity.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

In this thesis, I have endeavored to show how Nina Katchadourian's oeuvre can be read as subtly asserting the "lively, active, emergent, agential aspects of nature" that biosemiotics, trans-corporeality, and the concept of naturecultures all strive to theorize (Alaimo, *Bodily*, 143). Katchadourian's work, like biosemiotics, calls attention to human and non-human animals' subjective ways of seeing and interpreting the world, emphasizing the spontaneous emergence of meaning and the creativity inherent in mistakes. By maintaining a radical openness to happenstance and an attentiveness to relationships that are often overlooked or seen as unimportant, Katchadourian employs what I characterize as a biosemiotic process to create her artwork. This process affirms the importance of playful, open-ended encounters with agential others.

For Katchadourian, this otherness does not stop at animality; her work also attends to the otherness of materiality, which, as trans-corporeality insists, paradoxically permeates human bodies. In her work, Katchadourian gestures toward the creativity of the material and living agencies that constitute the natural world while simultaneously acknowledging the limits of linguistic and artistic representations of nature. For Katchadourian, representation and meaning-making are ongoing processes which involve not just humans, but other living beings and the material world. As we saw in pieces such as *Natural Crossdressing* and *Mended Spiderwebs #19 (Laundry Line)*, Katchadourian refuses dualistic separations between nature and culture, instead recognizing that natural and cultural processes are always inextricably intertwined.

In attending to the complex and unpredictable interconnections between culture and nature, and humans and non-human animals, pieces such as *Chloe* evince what Bronislaw Szerszynski terms an “ironic ecology”: at a fundamental level, Katchadourian’s pieces “encourage critical reflection about the limits and assumptions” of linguistic and artistic representations of nature (Szerszynski 352). Furthermore, by highlighting that human understandings of the natural world are “not just socially situated and partial, but also shot through with ironies and aporias,” Katchadourian’s oeuvre demonstrates the creative potential in unavoidable error and failure while celebrating “a living, evolving plurality of shared forms of life” (Szerszynski 351-352).

Katchadourian’s ever-evolving piece, *Paranormal Postcards* (2001 to present; Figure 32) illustrates this plurality, or what Frances Richard refers to as a “vibrating network of sympathies” (46). The piece consists of an expansive collection of postcards, each of which Katchadourian has altered with red thread sewn through the images. The postcards—all from places Katchadourian herself has traveled—are displayed on a gallery wall in “loosely thematic” groupings with dashed lines of red graphic tape connecting them into a large network (“*Paranormal Postcards*” 382).

The thread in *Paranormal Postcards* is reminiscent of the red thread Katchadourian used in her *Mended Spiderwebs Series*, in which she “collaborated” with spiders to create art. Thus, the allusion to *Mended Spiderwebs*, as well as the word “paranormal” in the piece’s title, playfully suggest that Katchadourian’s is not the only agency at work in this piece—that other, more obscure agencies are also at work, agencies that are not attended to in “normal” taxonomical systems. As Richard writes, in

Paranormal Postcards “[t]he logic of categorization breaks down, while the logic of relationship effloresces into new possibility” (50).



Figure 32: View of *Paranormal Postcards* (2001-present) by Nina Katchadourian

The piece’s red connecting threads delineate several types of relationships and agencies at work in and across the images. In some, the threads suggest fleeting visual connection, such as in the image of the Staten Island Ferry’s many windows connected to the Statue of Liberty³³ (Figure 33). In others, the threads give objects such as buildings a sense of agency, as in the image of the Empire State Building “overlooking” a crowd of ice skaters (also in Figure 33). In many, threads connecting human and statue hands and non-human animals’ paws suggest playful relationships by visually alluding to the game

³³ Which is, ironically, nearly obscured by the dense red “sightlines”.

Cat's Cradle³⁴ (Figure 34). Many threads also suggest communicative relationships, such as in the postcard of Sigmund Freud connected to his therapy dog, Jofi (Figure 35).³⁵ Finally, the juxtaposition of seemingly unrelated images, such as the postcard of a skydiver and another of three cherubs (Figure 36), suggest flukish affinities.

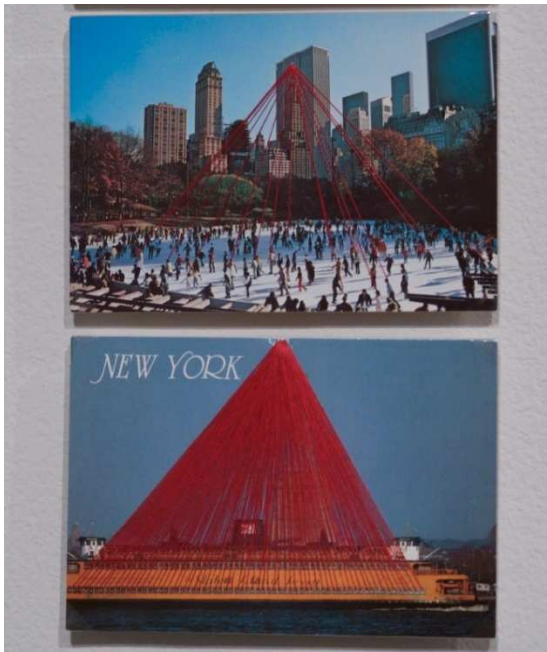


Figure 33: Detail of *Paranormal Postcards* (2001-present) by Nina Katchadourian



Figure 34: Detail of *Paranormal Postcards* (2001-present) by Nina Katchadourian

³⁴ The allusion to Cat's Cradle also emphasizes interconnectedness and perpetual evolution in that it consists of a piece of string being almost endlessly transformed from one "figure" to another.

³⁵ Freud wrote that Jofi helped him evaluate and calm his patients, as well as keep track of time during therapy sessions (Beck).

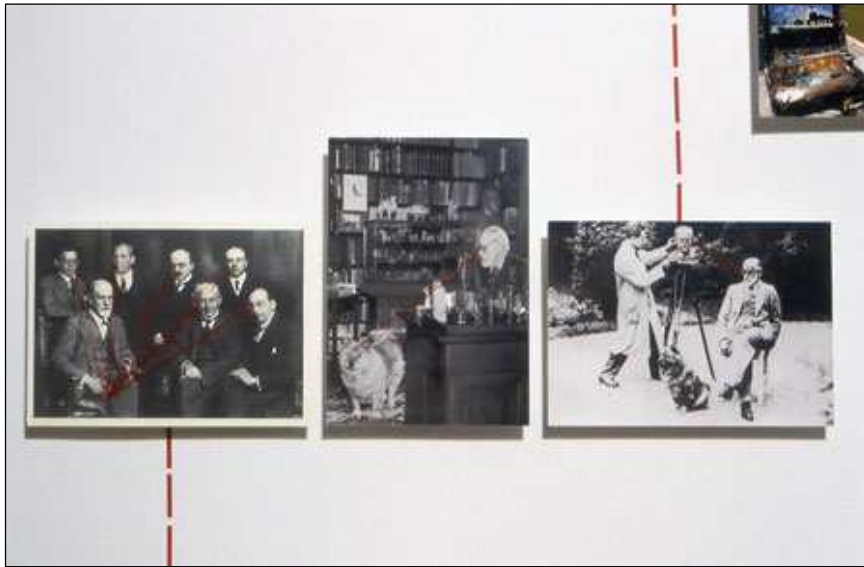


Figure 35: Detail of *Paranormal Postcards* (2001-present) by Nina Katchadourian



Figure 36: Detail of *Paranormal Postcards* (2001-present) by Nina Katchadourian

Paranormal Postcards exemplifies the worldview inherent in Katchadourian's work, a "'world view' of extreme and almost paranoid interconnectedness", as Katchadourian describes it on her website. In this way, *Paranormal Postcards*, and Katchadourian's work in general, embody Wendy Wheeler's definition of responsibility:

In our common usage, to be a responsible person is often thought about in terms of being practically sensible, or realistic, in a way that generally excludes related terms such as "sensitive." [...] But "responsibility," as the word suggests, actually refers us to semiosis and to an ethos of responsiveness in which *all signs matter*, i.e. are material and real, and are properly acknowledged as such—and are *read*. Acknowledging signs sent [...] is of course, not straightforward. [...] Meaning is not transparent [...] But no matter how heavily our culture lies upon us, we should not forget that we are animals too, amongst other animals, and are not entirely without the capacity for responding to the natural world in which we also have our archaic being (Wheeler, *Creature* 156-7).

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