

NATURE

ED. JEFFREY KASTNER, DOCUMENTS OF CONTEMPORARY ART (WHITECHAPEL GALLERY AND MIT PRESS), 2012

BY WENDY VOGEL

Organisms ranging from the mundane to the fantastical—bats, cats, and neon rabbits to GMOs, avatars, and cyborgs—fill the pages of *Nature*, the latest volume in Whitechapel's Documents of Contemporary Art series. Editor Jeffrey Kastner's selections bridge the disciplines of technology, philosophy, anthropology, literature, and aesthetics and mirror the wide-ranging sensibilities of Renaissance-era "cabinets of curiosity." (These proto-museological collections of *objets d'art*, geological and biological specimens are the namesake of *Cabinet* magazine, where Kastner is the senior editor.) Rather than rehash the canonized texts analyzing mid 20th-century Land Art, Kastner selects writing that illuminates the work of contemporary artists who "return the oppositional concepts of *culture* and *nature* to the dialectical balance hinted at in their etymological roots: the former once again understood not as separate from but actively engaged with the latter." Indeed the texts chosen by Kastner grapple with various binaries, from the Cartesian mind-body split to the opposition between nature and technology. Today, Kastner explains, artists act as "potential mediators between the two worlds—cultivators of a natural world full of bursting with material." While exploring how artists and theorists mediate between the spheres of nature and culture, the volume also raises productive questions about how "otherness" is defined between and within natural categories.

Like Kastner's introduction, the first chapter of *Nature* entitled "Material Zones" engages both the Marxist dialectic and physicalist definitions of the term. For French writers such as Gaston Bachelard and Jean-François Lyotard, material is used almost interchangeably with *matière* (matter) in a phenomenological sense. Artists in the 1960s such as Robert Smithson, Walter De Maria, and Hans Haacke began to utilize diverse "natural" materials, from landscapes to data sets, in their conceptual, systems-oriented artworks. David Harvey's and Trevor Paglen's Marxist application of materialism posits critical geography as a means of escaping commodity fetishism. Jane Bennett's important theory of vital materialism (from her 2010 book *Vibrant Matter*) draws from writings by philosophers such as Spinoza, Darwin, Nietzsche, and Bergson to consider how inanimate matter, such as chemicals, waste, and electricity, directly impact organic life.

The two remaining chapters, "Evolutionary Ideas" and "Cognition and Conscience," consider the limits of human consciousness and ethics. Within these sections, Kastner has paired texts that seem to elegantly respond to one another. Deep Ecology founder Arne Naess's discussion of the "three great movements" (peace, social justice, and environmentalism) in 1992 is followed with Félix Guattari's definition of the "three ecologies" designed to resist Integrated World Capitalism in 1989. In 1983, artist Peter Halley argues for a reappraisal of Foucault's ideas of governmentality by the appropriation-era artists engaged with Baudrillard's theory

of simulacra. An *Artforum* panel discussion on critically engaged Land Art in 2005 seems to have heeded Halley's proposition. Thomas Nagel's landmark 1974 essay "What Is It Like to Be a Bat?" that muses on the confines of human sensorial experience is joined by Jacques Derrida's reflections about the "humanness" of certain emotive states and Giorgio Agamben's insistence on the political implications of bare life. The book ends with Bruno Latour's brilliant "ecothological" critique of environmentalism, "Will Non-Humans be Saved?" As part of his larger philosophical project exploring links between the contemporary and pre-modern eras, the text posits religious faith in the transformation of everyday life as a means of uniting extremist positions.

Where *Nature's* theoretical selections often neatly knit together theses and antitheses, the writing exploring artists' practices lends the volume its meaty complexity. Texts spanning 1970 – 2010 by artists such as Joseph Beuys, the Critical Art Ensemble, Mark Dion, Robert Morris, and Mary Mattingly muse on the activist impulse of art engaged with environmental issues while reconsidering the relationship between landscape and spaces of display. Kastner also focuses on artists' projects that critically examine the boundaries of nature and subjectivity through the use of new technology. Some fall within the boundaries of contemporary visual art, like Pierre Huyghe's *No Ghost Just a Shell* (2004). Kastner also includes perspectives from Net artists and media theorists, like Jane Prophet's proposal for *TechnoSphere* (1995), a proto-Sims Internet application for designing your own lifeform; George Gessert's history of DNA art from 1996; and Stelarc's discussion of post-human evolutionary forms (1998). In an age where art history remains largely technophobic, Kastner's thoughtful inclusion of new media discourse with that of Land Art and Conceptualism suggests a productive revisionism.

And yet, if *Nature* leaves any stone unturned, it is its dearth of primary source material that has traditionally been tasked with revisionism: namely, (eco)feminist, queer, post-colonialist, and critical race theory. As Kastner writes in his introduction, "Nature continues to loom as the elusive, originary Other—a system we are fundamentally native to, but unavoidably separate from; one that produces us, even as we (physically, conceptually, discursively) produce it." It is hardly a leap to consider this statement alongside texts that critically deconstruct representations of "otherness," and one could easily imagine an alternative version of *Nature* with more texts by artists and writers that interrogate essentialist assumptions of woman-as-nature, heterosexuality, primitivism, blackness or even outsider art, particularly in light of the volume's dialectic bent.

This is not to say that Kastner reiterates a sexist, racist view of art history—far from it. Throughout the book, writers argue for a more humane relationship with nature, one that is germane to feminist and human-rights discourse. Furthermore, in his historical treatment of Land Art, Kastner

includes key statements by Ana Mendieta, Bonnie Sherk, and Mierle Laderman Ukeles. Though these female artists have become increasingly historicized in the past decade, their works that engaged non-institutional sites were slow to receive widespread recognition. Likewise, Suzaan Boettger's critical review of a group exhibition on feminism and Land Art sympathetically traces the marginalization of female artists' work, though she concludes her text by questioning how "feminist" this work actually is. Elsewhere, writers such as Andrew Ross, Guattari, and Pamela Lee reference the work of ecofeminists and contemporary art writers who critically investigate exoticism (such as Lucy Lippard's *The Lure of the Local*, 1997). It would be illuminating to see these original texts alongside more contemporary musings.

On the other hand, one of *Nature's* most moving selections—a statement that eschews traditional notions of critical distance and dialectical balance—is Donna Haraway's poetic and radically embodied introduction to "A Cyborg Manifesto" (1985). Haraway's text, remarkable for its open-ended promise in the cause of alternative queer, socialist-feminism, argues for a world beyond death drives, binary thinking, and fear of technology. "This [text] is an argument for pleasure in the confusion of boundaries and for responsibility in their construction," she writes. "It is also an effort to contribute to socialist-feminist culture and theory in a postmodernist, non-naturalist mode and in the utopian tradition of imagining a world without gender, which is perhaps a world without genesis, but maybe also a world without end." Haraway's perspective ignites fearless imagination, a hard task for theory, but its iconoclasm necessitates a reading *against* feminisms that engage issues of positive representation.

What I am arguing for is an analysis of the "natural" that engages both Michel Serres's "topologies of thought" (as analyzed by Steven Conner in this volume) along with the topographies of the body. This is a nearly impossible task for an anthology like *Nature* alone, though, which favors short, legible texts over knotty, decontextualized arguments. Indeed Kastner's edited excerpts succeed at clarifying the central argument of difficult texts. In his effort to abstract, however, the perspective of his articles skews toward the utopian. Perhaps future iterations of the Documents of Contemporary Art series could conceive a digital supplement that includes what the paper text leaves behind. Regardless, in the efforts to historicize technofuturist and landscape art, we must not forget that the body itself remains a deeply politicized terrain.

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