

A Thousand Leaves, A Thousand Plateaus: an ecology of Henrik Håkansson

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"Our relation to nature is characterised by its having become thoroughly disturbed. There is the threat of total destruction of our fundamental natural basis. We are doing exactly what it takes to destroy the basis by putting into action an economic system which consists in unscrupulous exploitation of this natural basis. It has to be spelled out that in this regard the capitalist economic system of the West is basically no different than that of the state capitalism of the East. The destruction is implemented on a worldwide scale." ¹

In 1981 this was how artist-shaman Joseph Beuys identified the environmental crisis, alongside 'The Military Threat', 'The Economic Crisis' and 'The Crisis of Consciousness and Meaning' as symptomatic of the failures of both Western capitalism and Eastern communism.

Although Beuys invokes the reality of man's exploitation of the planet in terms that still apply, the geopolitical context for an environmental artist practice has now radically mutated. Henrik Håkansson finds himself working in a very different world since the revolutions in eastern Europe and the Soviet Union in 1989, and moreover from an ecological point of view, since the discovery of ozone layer depletion in the arctic and NASA's report on the 'greenhouse effect' in 1988, as well as events such as the Chernobyl reactor explosion in 1986 and the Exxon Valdez oil spillage in 1989. Håkansson's practice is an implicit form of eco-activism that weighs up the possibilities for action in a state of affairs characterised by the emergence of a globalised world. Beuys's hope for a 'general alternative movement' or 'collectivity in unity', predicated on an interminable 'big dialogue'-or a conversation with a dead hare-is a solution that no longer makes any sense.

Håkansson sets up an apparent conflict between the mass consumption and consolidation of media culture-'the "fix" of television' as Félix Guattari puts it in *The Three Ecologies* (1989)-and the stewardship of nature.² He often appropriates rock music in his work-the title of a Håkansson work made near Helsinki, *A Thousand Leaves* (*Armeria maritima*) (2000), for example, is a tribute to a Sonic Youth album-and repurposes video technology and cinematic conventions in his productions. However, instead of seeing his project as a comment on the cultural commodification of nature or the environment, we might understand it better as a both symptom of and possible method for acting in symbiosis, proposing that nature and culture cannot be separated. In this way Håkansson's artistic practice bears out an imperative implored by Guattari among his many writings co-authored with Gilles Deleuze: 'so experiment'.³ Though here the experiments do not fulfil a burden of proof, as a rigorously scientific understanding of the term might suggest, but imply scenarios of amateur endeavour. The seemingly scientific mode of address that Håkansson adopts, his flirtation with laboratory methods, belies the fact that it is never clear what, if anything, is actually being investigated, and to what end.

Though rich in its sympathy for other contemporary art practices-especially the 'Non-Sites' of Robert Rauschenberg, the 'stacks' of Félix González-Torres, Andy Warhol's screen tests and the systems works of Hans Haacke-Håkansson's art also has an instinctive empathy for Deleuze and Guattari's philosophy of naturalism. The notion of 'becoming-animal', introduced in their *Kafka: Towards a Minor Literature* (1975) and elaborated in *A Thousand Plateaus - Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1980) allows the human to imagine life from an inhuman perspective, a determination that has run throughout Håkansson's art from its earliest incarnations, such as his club environment for tree frogs (*Frog For.e.s.t. Eternal Sonic Trance*, 1995), to his recent projects under the title of *The Birds* that are concerned with the world's most "unknown" bird species. Rather than being disengaged from the flow of life, images, experiences and perceptions as a privileged subject who observes-and therefore assumes itself to be the origin of perception-Håkansson's projects permit us to conceive ourselves as an inherent part, one perception amongst many. Deleuze and

Guattari present the artist as a key figure in their philosophy and Håkansson's work illuminates their writings as much as vice-versa. Guattari's 'ecosophical logic' in particular draws on the capacity of the artist to sidestep pseudo-scientific paradigms of fixity:

"An artist may be led to alter his work after the intrusion of some accidental detail, an event-incident that suddenly makes his initial project bifurcate, making it drift far from its previous path, however certain it had once appeared to be."⁴

Becoming-animal is the challenge to abandon the apparently common sense viewpoint by which judgements are made on the basis of partial human perception, morals, and so on, and to merge ourselves with an entire ecology of perceptions. Becomings are a means of escape, of taking flight and unthinking identity and subjectivity. On these terms nature strictly has no organisation, and the naturalist, or the artist, who sees the world as somehow ordered from within has been fooled. Rather than dealing with how nature has been represented, Håkansson, together with Deleuze and Guattari, promotes the enlightening possibility that it might not represent anything at all. Instead the animal is a collection of possibilities, functions or actions: for communication, for occupation, for movement. The human assumes its potential, not by reaffirming its humanity or inscribing the natural world with symbolic meaning, but by forming alliances with the non-human.

Håkansson has often orchestrated such coalitions as scenarios in which birds and insects allows themselves to be filmed or photographed, giving up their images in an exchange of gifts. In the exhibition *Sweet Leaf* (2000), for example, footage of the wasps and flies attracted to a sugar mixture apparatus was relayed into the gallery⁵. The *Untitled (Production Set)* produced images without choosing them. The cameras did not discriminate: wasps or no wasps, they simply produced images. To characterise Håkansson's position as the author of such images or nature as their subject would not make sense. As Deleuze says of Jean-Luc Godard's film making:

"Compare Godard's formula; not a correct image, just an image. It is the same in philosophy as in a film or a song: no correct ideas, just ideas ... When Godard says he would like to be a production studio, he is obviously not trying to say that he wants to produce his own films or he wants to edit his own books. He is trying to say just ideas, because, when it comes down to it, you are all alone, and yet you are like a conspiracy of criminals. You are no longer an author, you are a production studio, you have never been more populated." 6

For Deleuze and Guattari, we must allow a capacity for transversal action, conceiving of an individual animal as a population, in relation to its pack modes, its capacity for inhabiting a territory and for interacting with other organisms-including man-in many possible formations.

Håkansson's acts of territorial evaluation function within an inversion of the prevailing discourses of surveillance, and serve as 'direct action' within a hybridised arena. The idea of surveillance is commonly associated with the operation of 'state power' or the exercise of a 'disciplinary gaze'. The ubiquitous presence of digital video images and telemetry in the artists interventions in the gallery, the capacity to view material that has been rewound and reviewed, combined with the possibility of looking at the same scenario from more than one angle, enables the emergence of a process of reflexivity and transparency. In works such as his butterfly-rearing installation for the 1997 Venice Biennale *Out of the Black into the Blue* (1997) or *18 Hour Bali Mynah* (2002) shown at Secession, Vienna, in 2002, footage becomes a resource, facilitating an appreciation of both Håkansson's interaction with natural reality and the viewers' position as witnesses. Viewed as dialogic, real-time media-as well as reedited highlights-broadcast technology breaches dependence on official sources to provide a means of recording, reflecting, affirming, refining and communicating long term.⁷ Technology is light on its feet, it is modest, supple and adaptable.

Deleuze and Guattari often describe becoming-animal in terms of an escape, and this is extended in their employment of the term 'line of flight'. 'The causal line, creative

line, or line of flight' traces the heterogeneous path of escape, a liberation from a fixed point; human identity, macropolitical consensus, and so on.⁸ The line invokes the possibility of eluding 'state' homogenisation; it is the 'style' of becoming, a zigzagging away. Håkansson's concern for the poetic mechanics of flight can be traced back as far as his Hummingbird Highway (1996) project, a work that orchestrated a literal manifestation of lines of flight and acts as a conceptual archetype for his exploration of avian aviation. Many Americans put sugar-water feeders out in their back yards for the benefit of migratory hummingbird species; Håkansson adopted this tradition for the interior of the gallery of the Headland Center for the Arts in California. Colourful feeders were distributed around the space and 'hummers' could fly in through large open windows to drink from these ersatz flowers. In the process of becoming-animal the animal effects the human as well as vice-versa; this symbiosis was conjugated in Hummingbird Highway in the gift of nourishment on the one hand and the gift of images on the other. Håkansson was able to photograph the birds with the use of a tripod-mounted camera placed near a feeder and a long cable release; microphones and a video camera were also used to document their comings and goings. Territories overlapped, with the gallery no longer operating as an exclusive space for 'culture' delimited from the 'nature' of the exterior. The open windows function as a rupture that allows inhuman occupancy. As Håkansson perceives perfectly, for Deleuze and Guattari art is not a question of imitation, but of becoming:

"suppose a painter 'represents' a bird, this is in fact a becoming-bird that can occur only to the extent that the bird itself is in the process of becoming something else, a pure line and pure colour. ... The painter and musician do not imitate the animal, they become-animal at the same time as the animal becomes what they willed, at the deepest level of their concord with Nature." ⁹

It is well known that the wing beats of hummingbirds are too rapid to perceive unaided. Håkansson's photographs of the birds made the beating wings visible, although they could not properly represent them. Again describing painting-though undoubtedly in a way that could also describe the 'becoming-humming' of

photography-Deleuze and Guattari declare 'for all time, painting has had the project of rendering visible, instead of reproducing the visible, and of rendering sonorous, instead of reproducing the sonorous'.¹⁰ The fact that hummingbirds get their name from the sound produced by the speed of their movements-the very musicality of their line of flight-would surely have delighted Deleuze and Guattari. The task that Håkansson's photographs and films of birds in flight undertake is never about scientific reproduction or aesthetic mimesis, but is a wilfully musical enterprise.

Thinking of a hummingbird-or a bumblebee, a Skylark, a bat, a Blackbird, a Bali Mynah, a Nightingale, a tree frog, a butterfly or a Gurney's Pitta-as a fixed entity that is copied in Håkansson's stills and films mistakes the dynamic character of both nature and art. Moreover the images and sounds are not his in any simple way, for the cameras are often simply left to run by themselves, or are controlled remotely. Håkansson makes apparent the various speeds and slownesses of birds, bats and insects whether they are flying or at rest, disclosing the various temporal and spatial modes of their existence. In his *A Tale From A Forest Without A Name* (Pitta gurneyi) (2002/2003) project, for example, the artist presented the past and present territories of the critically endangered bird Gurney's Pitta cartographically and photographically, its gait and colour as cinematic time and movement, and its song as freely distributable vinyl records-sounds of apparent seduction and distress-warning.¹¹ As in the film starring a much more prosperous species, *Skylark - The Optimal Flight to Nowhere and Somewhere* (2002), song and behaviour are shown establishing a territory. The creation of a territory is a form of art, and by taking on particular colours, songs and actions the animal maintains a domain of ownership. The artist charts the virtual territories of the Internet as well, as his installations deploy pin boards covered with accumulations of print outs from websites related to the dwindling populations of the "lonely" birds.

Håkansson's art of ethology entails an evaluation of the means by which the human and the non-human interact, that does not apply universalising abstractions or attempt global change, but operates at the level of a local framing. On an aesthetic scale art renders visible and renders sonorous, summoning lines of flight and

offering, through becoming, the hope of avoiding metaphors. For Deleuze and Guattari, and for Håkansson, we do not need to account for nature by postulating fundamentals that explain it. What they offer is a capacity for symbiotic interconnection without the need for such human/non-human dualism.

Håkansson's works function as ecological acts of micropolitical dissent, flexible alliances with broadcast techniques as means of direct communication that poetically answer when Guattari muses, 'it seems to me essential to organise new micropolitical and microsocal practices ... a new gentleness, together with new aesthetic and new analytic practices'.¹² He makes art in which the animal is an animal, not a servant to humans nor a metaphor for their values, that bear out the fact that neither surveillance techniques nor the apparatus of science need bring with them the associations of a repressive gaze or teleological discovery. By operating in association with (and in affirmation of) diversity, Håkansson acts in alliance with the multiplicities and fluctuations of natural reality.

1 Joseph Beuys, 'An Appeal for an Alternative', 1981, *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art: A Sourcebook of Artists' Writings*, ed. Kristine Stiles and Peter Selz, University of California Press, 1996, p. 636. This text was printed in the catalogue for Documenta 7 in 1982.

2 Félix Guattari, *The Three Ecologies* (1989), trans. Ian Pindar and Paul Sutton, The Athlone Press, 2002, p. 41-42

3 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus - Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1980), trans. Brian Massumi, The Athlone Press, 1987, p. 251

4 Guattari, (1989/2002), p. 52

5 Galerie für Zeitgenössische Kunst, Leipzig, 2000

6 Gilles Deleuze and Claire Parnet, *Dialogues II* (1977), trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam, The Athlone Press, 2002, p.9

7 The possibility of the camera offering itself as another 'perceiver' of the world, an alternative to human eyes, and particularly the capability, through editing, of rendering manifold angles of the same event, is also crucial to Deleuze's philosophy of cinema expounded in his *Cinema 1: The Movement Image* (1983/1986) and

Cinema 2: The Time Image (1985/1989).

8 Deleuze and Guattari, (1980/1987), p. 285

9 *ibid.* p. 304-305

10 *ibid.*, cited in Michael Hardt, 'Michael Hardt on Mille Plateaux: 10, 11', undated,
<http://www.duke.edu/~hardt/mp4.htm>

11 A Tale From A Forest Without A Name (Pitta gurneyi) (2002/2003) has been shown at venues including Galleria Franco Noero, Turin (2002) and The Modern Institute, Glasgow (2003)

12 Guattari, (1989/2002), p. 51. *Italics mine.*