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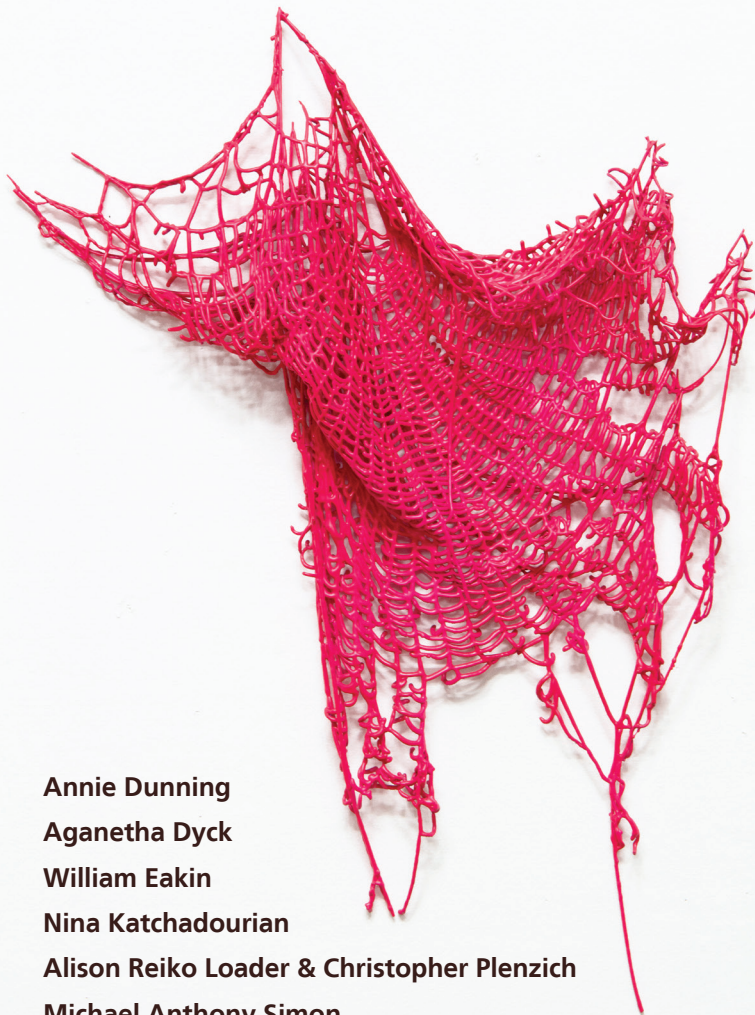
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cover image: **Michael Anthony Simon**, *Untitled*, 2014, Lacquer on *Nephila clavata* spider web, dimensions variable

Animal Intent

Organized by Emily Falvey

January 19 - March 18, 2017



Annie Dunning

Aganetha Dyck

William Eakin

Nina Katchadourian

Alison Reiko Loader & Christopher Plenzich

Michael Anthony Simon

apexart nyc

A well-known humanist truism states that there is no art in the non-human world. Indeed, when it comes to defining art, the notion that it constitutes a uniquely human activity often serves as a reassuring rock in a storm of contestation. Laurie Schneider Adams' classic introductory text, *The Methodologies of Art: An Introduction* (1996), uses this assumption to exclude animal creations such as bird's nests, ant hills, and beaver dams from the category of art.¹ "Spiders, unlike humans, are not inspired by aesthetic or narrative ideas," she writes. "They neither observe the environment nor make a conscious choice to create the abstract geometry of their webs."² More recently, French literary theorist Alain Vaillant has advanced an anthropocentric theory of art and laughter, which ties them both to humanity's ability to liberate itself from the exigencies of "reality" and play with representations.³ At the heart of such theories lies a notion of human superiority strangely at odds with the prevailing tenor of much contemporary art theory and criticism, which typically embraces otherness and encourages subversions of normative categories.

While the spectrum of difference celebrated by contemporary art remains stubbornly anthropocentric,⁴ few would argue that animals have no place in this world. Indeed, traditional art history narratives begin with depictions of animals – usually the iconic horses of Lascaux Caves – as well as objects made from their bodies, such as etched shells, or carved bones and teeth. While our relationship with non-humans may have changed more under capitalism than in all of human history, they continue to play an important role in art, usually as symbols of a social imaginary or as indexes of the real. In the first case, they tend to embody positive and negative attitudes towards shared cultural mores, institutions, and values. In the second, their actual bodies – documented, confined, taxidermied – confront us with the limits of this imaginary and its failure to grasp their otherness. While the goal of such art is usually to shock us, or make us question the status quo, its treatment of animals as media or mere things to be represented is far from innovative.

In his anti-Darwinian theory of biological origins, French philosopher Henri Bergson observed: "It would be as absurd to refuse consciousness to an animal because it has no brain as to declare it incapable of nourishing itself because it has no stomach."⁵ Assuming that the practices of non-humans are not imaginative or artistic simply because they lack human organization seems equally absurd. We know that certain animals decorate themselves and their dwellings, collect and

arrange objects, make symbolic gestures, and fashion tools. Humanism dismisses these activities as genetically programmed instinct, devoid of conscious creativity. But we also know that animals play, and play involves meta-communication, improvisation, and stylistic flourishes belonging to the realms of the aesthetic and the comic.⁶

Although contemporary art continues to be defined by human agency, the notion of animal culture now serves as a point of departure for a range of artistic practices focused on multispecies aesthetics and interspecies communication. The exhibition *Animal Intent* explores this trend through the work of seven artists who partner with non-humans in the creation of unique artistic projects. Rather than merely representing animals, using them as surrogates, or politicizing their bodies as part of a broad social critique, these artists treat animal instinct as a form of stylistic invention in its own right.



Aganetha Dyck and William Eakin, *Squirrel*, 2011, Lamp, lamp shade, beeswax, honeycomb, 17 1/2 x 6 x 6 inches

Sapsucker Sounds, **Annie Dunning's** playful “conflation of woodpecker and human culture,” is a good example of interventions used by artists in this exhibition. At its heart lies a pattern of holes dotting the surface of a log cut from a Manchurian walnut. These are the drill holes of a yellow-bellied sapsucker, a North American woodpecker known both for boring into young deciduous trees and drumming on them and other surfaces as a means of declaring its territory. Dunning borrows these marks, which she treats as the residue of a specific cultural practice, and translates them into a series of quirky, interactive sound sculptures. *Music Box* (2014), for instance, features a negative cast of the pattern of holes that have been reconfigured as cylinder pins for a clunky, yet charming music box. Viewers may play this unusual musical score by turning a rustic ratchet lever, which forces an explosion of pins through a comb of metal tines.

In human-centered hierarchies of intelligence, insects generally figure somewhere near the bottom. And yet they have some of the most complex social formations on earth. **Alison Reiko Loader** and **Christopher Plenzich** explore the aesthetic side of this complexity in their project *Caterpillar Cartography*. Part of a larger, ongoing collaboration with forest tent caterpillars (*Malacosoma disstria*), it consists of a series of drawings made by fourth-stage caterpillar larvae as they crawl across sheets of paper dotted with piles of charcoal dust.⁷ A series of videos shows the choreographic nature of these sketches. Rather than dismissing their marks as the product of blind instinct, Loader and Plenzich treat them as an improvisational form of cartography, one that paradoxically “creates the territory it maps.”⁸

Aganetha Dyck's twenty-year-long collaboration with honeybees takes a similar approach. Working closely with



Alison Reiko Loader and Christopher Plenzich, documentation of *Caterpillar Cartography*, 2015, Charcoal on paper, realized in collaboration with the fourth-stage larvae of forest tent caterpillars (*Malacosoma disstria*) 22 1/2 x 30 inches



Annie Dunning, *Sapsucker Sounds (Music Box)*, 2014, Bronze and steel, 34 x 34 x 12 inches

an apiarist, she places found objects into the bees' hives, where the insects slowly and meticulously transform them into baroque, honeycombed sculptures. In *An Inconvenient Proposal* (2007), a kitsch pastiche of 18th century rococo fashion becomes uncanny beneath the hexagonal “lacework” of the bees. In a tragic twist of fate, Dyck recently developed a life-threatening allergy to bee stings. As part of her efforts to find new ways of working with the insects, she enlisted the help of photographer **William Eakin**. Together they collaborated on *Light* (2010-2011), a sculptural and photographic project focused on human and non-human appropriations of found objects. For this project, Eakin placed a selection of vintage table lamps from his personal collection in the hives. Dyck participated remotely, giving instructions via a cell phone. Eakin then re-appropriated the completed sculptures in a series of distorted photographs that quietly fold collaboration back into estrangement.

Sometime in 2011, **Michael Anthony Simon** began bringing *Nephila clavata* spiders into his studio, where he devised a method of working with them to produce a

variety of webs. Once completed, he fixed these delicate constructions with spray paint and other materials, and then returned the spiders to their natural habitat. While one might dismiss this as a form of appropriation art, such an assessment would reduce the insects to mere web-making machines. But as Brian Massumi observes in his book *What Animals Teach Us About Politics*, “Instinctive action plays its own natural creativity against the limitative conditions of the external milieu... It plays itself, as it plays upon. It is always the playing out of a true act, never just a stereotype of action.”⁹

Nina Katchadourian's work with spiders also supports the notion that they are motivated by more than pure instinct. Her video *GIFT/GIFT* (1998) shows the artist attempting to insert the word “GIFT” into a spider's web. The insect actively resists this intervention, and a battle ensues. This project was inspired by a 1950s Swedish nature book describing certain cultural practices particular to spiders, which sometimes wrap dead flies in silk and then offer them as gifts to potential mates.¹⁰ In Swedish, the word “gift” means poison, a double-entendre underscoring the ambivalence inherent to any collaboration. Katchadourian's photographic series *Carla and a Friend* (2002), on the other hand, casts this ambivalence in a more positive light, focusing instead on an unusual friendship between a pet snake and a rat she was originally given as food.



Nina Katchadourian, *Carla and a Friend II*, 2002, C-print, 24 x 24 inches

Although the curatorial impetus for *Animal Intent* is rooted in the growing field of interspecies collaboration, it is also part of a personal quest to “unlearn the animal,” to borrow a phrase from Giovanni Alois's influential text *Art & Animals* (2012). Such an approach inevitably raises more questions than it answers, but this space of uncertainty feels more comfortable to me than either post-humanist utopias or humanist anthropocene. If we are to reimagine human/non-human relationships in ways that will ensure the survival of the planet, it seems vital to me that we attend as much to the lines that separate us as to the inherent porousness of these lines. This exhibition represents one small attempt to do so.

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Unsolicited Exhibition Program

1. For an excellent critique of this aspect of Adams' book, see Giovanni Alois, *Art & Animals* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2012) and “Animal Studies and Art: Elephants in the Room,” a special editorial published in March 2015 as part of the “Beyond Animal Studies” *Antennae* publishing project 2015-2016, <http://www.antennae.org.uk/back-issues-2015/4589877799>.
2. Laurie Schneider Adams, *The Methodologies of Art: An Introduction* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2010), 14.
3. Alain Vaillant, “Le rire de l'artiste,” paper given at *No Joke/Sans blague*, Max Stern Symposium, organized by the Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal, April 2, 2016.
4. Kay Peggs refers to such anthropocentrism as “human primacy identity politics.” See Kay Peggs, “Human Primacy Identity Politics, Nonhuman Animal Experiments and the Oppression of Nonhuman Animals,” in *Human and Other Animals: Critical Perspectives*, Bob Carter and Nickie Charles eds. (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011), 133.
5. Henri Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, trans. Arthur Mitchell (New York: Dover Publications Inc., 1998), 110.
6. Brian Massumi, *What Animals Teach Us About Politics* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2014), 1-54.
7. Loader and Plenzich limited the amount of time each caterpillar spent drawing to one hour. They used insects from local colonies, and ensured they were fed and cared for throughout their lifecycle. They also selected charcoal dust as a medium because it is non-toxic. In North America, there are no protocols for working ethically with insects.
8. *Op. cit.*, 23.
9. *Ibid.*, 19.
10. Felicity Muth, “Fake Jewels: Male Spiders Give Worthless Gifts to Entice Females,” *Scientific American*, May 5, 2014, blogs.scientificamerican.com/not-bad-science/fake-jewels-male-spiders-give-worthless-gifts-to-entice-females.