

Why Look at Snail's Sex? Interweaving Bio Art and Gender Perspective

Gallery 1: Snail Pronography

Designer Jonathan Ho and ecological scientist Joris Koene, who collaborated on their bio art project "Sex Shells: Gender fluidity in the Modern Age" (2019), are winners of Dutch BAD Award in 2019. The aquarium in the center of the venue is scattered with living snails encrusted with rhinestones and paintings, while the bottom of the aquarium is covered with a snail patterned home-décor rug. The black-and-white projection on three walls are the sensual writhing of the snails during coitus in slow motion, followed by the snail-shaped leather lovers touching each other. Ho's design has long been focused on fetish aesthetics and the sex industry. This work combines the transgender mating of snails with the intimate practice of the fetish community, perhaps also interweaving the border of human and snail desire. In the artist statements, they describe that they take androgynous freshwater snails as a metaphor for gender fluidity, in order to explore the multiple possibilities of contemporary human gender.

A metaphor? Bio-art is a new cross-disciplinary artistic practices in the 21st century. However, the use of living creatures as a metaphor for human society is an ancient practice, dating back to the animal paintings found on the wall of ancient caves. What disturbs me is not how ancient this practice is, but the fact that the interaction between humans and living creatures is not further developed in the works. Indeed, we can draw an analogy between snails which are hermaphrodite and the gender framework of modern society. The "Sex Shells" installation seems to imply another kind of unequal relationship: between humans and animals. Philosopher John Berger wrote in his "Why Look at Animals?" that since the ancient time, animals have not only served as metaphors in human languages, but the actors in the interaction. Human beings look at animals, and animals look back at humans. Human beings eat and worship animals. The two terms form a subtle and mutual beneficial relationship. With the development of the capitalist industrial industry, the

gaze of the animal has gradually disappeared and been replaced by images of animals, dolls, Disney cartoons, pets, and zoos. Among them, zoos allow people to see nature, but they are a testament to the absence of animals in human society. The animals trapped in the fences have lost their natural survival behaviors, foraging for food and courtship, which are constrained by breeders. Nevertheless, they are treated as precious symbols of nature and lose their agent as object for observation.¹

In “Sex Shells,” when we look at the snails dolled up, we inevitably and unfortunately think of Berger's obituary for animals. Snails in aquariums are objects to be gazed, and the design of aquariums has been predetermined to have humans as the sole subjects of viewing. Whether the artists have decorated living snails with rhinestones, or scientists have used neurosurgery to determine the gender of the snails, the role of the snail in the installation is closer to that of an exotic animal in a zoo. It is a domestication of nature. Although the purpose of “Sex Shells” is to satirize the cultural framework of the male-female binary, what do the snails think if the purpose of bio art is to reflect on the anthropocentric thinking through biology? Can we give voice to snails? If snails could speak, what would they say about the “Sex Shells” installation?

Gallery 2: Bird Watching

Technology

If living snails could not speak, what would the extinct species say? Based on a video featuring the particular voice during courtship of the now-extinct species of small honeyeater circulating on Youtube, in techno-media artist Jakob Kudsk Steensen's “Re-Animated” (2018-2019), he uses video game engineering to construct a sci-fi utopia of the reincarnation of an extinct bird. Seemingly a typical morality tale of ecological catastrophe, using the extinction of species to critique modern society, in fact, the audience should get immersed in this work to appreciate the complex narrative of “Re-Animated”. The works are about the biologist's personal memory of the

¹ John Berger, “Why Look at Animals?” in *About Looking*, 1977.

honeyeaters, the ecological history of the Hawaiian island where they resided. On the last wall, it is a white wall presenting the looping animation of the honeyeaters' courtship voice and specimen of a honeyeater. Starting from the narration of the ecological history of the Hawaiian Islands, Steensen attempts to include different initiators in the life history of the honeyeater species: birds, missionaries, biologists, mosquitoes and insects, diseases, taxidermy, etc. Human and animals interact with each other in the colonial and ecological network, and human beings are neither outside of nature, nor are they omnipotent masters of nature. In the VR installation at the center of the gallery, the audience is guided to a virtual world of nature that the artist has recreated after collecting real scenes, moving through a huge jungle and river, and slowly changing their perspective from ground, water and sky. The audience can only occasionally hear the courtship voice of the honeyeaters, and there is no sign of the honeyeaters regenerating, only the tombstone-like taxidermy of the bird. It was only after watching an interview with the artist that I learned that the recording device in the VR headset is sensitive to the audience's breathing, so the rhythm of the version of "Regeneration" that each person is immersed in is slightly different.² The same part may be the impossibility of the "Re-Animated" of the bird, as the artist did not use video technology to promise a false future, what is needed is the way people perceive nature.

"Resurrecting the Sublime" (2019), which also transforms an extinct species, is the work that mirrors "Re-Animated" in the exhibition. It is a collaborative work of artists Alexandra Daisy Ginsburg, Sissel Tolaas and a biotech Lab. Biologists use the DNA of malva, which became extinct as a result of colonial cattle ranching in the early 20th century, to try to mimic the plant's scent. The artists installed a glass case installation in the gallery, which contained only three volcanic rocks, which was the key for scientists to find the plant's DNA. Suddenly, the scent of the plant is released in the case, but how can we know that this is the scent that extinguishes the plant? "Resurrecting the Sublime" doesn't provide the answer yet. In fact, in the introductory video of this work,

² Artist Interview with Hans Ulrich Obrist. <https://vimeo.com/347042970>

the artists admit that it is impossible to represent the scent, for that current scientific technology can only simulate approximate odor molecules. In *Imagining Extinction: The Cultural Meanings of Endangered Species*, ecological literary scholar Ursula K. Heise points out that since Darwin proposed the theory of evolution in the nineteenth century, the anxiety towards ecological extinction in Euro-American societies often reflects not only the ecological crisis, but also society's self-awareness and value judgment.³ In contrast to “Re-animated”, “Resurrecting the Sublime” does not offer the visual spectacle of the “sublime”, but rather a fleeting sense of smell that points to an extinction from which there is no return. Like the VR installation of “Re-animated”, “Resurrecting the Sublime” does not place the viewer outside of nature. The design of the glass cabinet allows the viewer to walk in, making the viewer's body integrated into the exhibits, subtly reflecting the display culture which frames the specimen of nature. By stepping out of the domination of the visual center through the experience of scent, “Resurrecting the Sublime” allows the audience to explore another kind of interaction between humans and nature more than directly using or displaying the bodies of living creatures.

Gallery 3: Female Semen

Amongst the many bio-art projects using plants and animals, Charlotte Jarvis's “In Posse” (Latin for “potential,” implying “before birth”) returns to the boundaries of the human body. Working with embryologist Susana Chuva de Sousa Lopes of Leiden University Medical Center in the Netherlands, Jarvis uses female serum to create an artificial semen that challenges the masculine image of semen in gender culture. Semen is sometimes used as fertility, mental capacity or blood in patriarchal cultural imaginations, and is often a visual spectacle representing orgasm in the visual culture of pornography. The artist inquires that how would the gender order be disturbed if women also possessed such magical semen? “In Posse” attempts to simultaneously challenge art, science and cultural imagination, embodying them on a triangular table installation in the gallery. The table is filled with clay, plates, candles and experimental design notes, blurring the distinction between science and ritual. There are screens on three sides of the table, and the first screen has a small label called “Paint Like a Genius”. There are one video screen respectively on three sides of the table. On first screen, it was tagged with a caption “Paint Like a Genius.” Jarvis paints with pink paint on a

³ Ursula K. Heise, *Imagining Extinction: The Cultural Meanings of Endangered Species*, 2018.

dildo, playing with masculine symbols in a wild and unpredictable way that mocks the masculine Action painting in post-war Euro-American art history. The second screen summarizes the process of “In Posse,” in which the artist and the female volunteers work together to imagine the ancient Greek celebration of Thesmophoria, a mystical ritual that was restricted to women only, but is therefore rarely documented in the historical memory of a patriarchal culture. “In Posse” imagines this lost festival through female semen and interrogates scientific rationality through ritual. In the third screen, the artist documents the experiment, in which the artist enlists thirteen women to donate blood for the production of serum proteins for artificial semen, and also discusses the experimental procedures and exhibition installation. In this sense, the volunteers function as partners in the artist's collaborative work, rather than as passive donors. In a lecture, Jarvis emphasized that she does not use bovine serum proteins, which are commonly used in the scientific world, in order to resist the unequal relationship between humans and nature. In doing so, the artist is not only using science and technology to make art, but is also rethinking the patriarchal operations of the scientific experimental system (e.g., gender, scientist and donor, human and animal) in an attempt to create a new model of experimental production.⁴

In “In Posse” installation, there is also large projection across the table. In the video, the visitors will see a symmetrical slime organism moves in a slow parabolic motion, reminding me of the snail's wriggle in “Sex Shell”. However, in terms of visual presentation, installation design and engagement, “In Posse” is more sensitive to the power relations between human beings and living creatures, viewership, and gender in the cross-disciplinary of sciences and arts. Jarvis' earlier projects, “New Labour,” imagined a world in which women would become extinct and not have to bear the burden of reproduction in a patriarchal society, but men would be the ones to reproduce the next generation. The expansion of capitalist society always constructs an imagination of a better future for our children and grandchildren, subverting the gender division of labor and fostering a pluralistic vision of family formation. It also reminds me of the “reproductive futurism” critiqued by the queer theorist Lee Edelman, in which the expansion of capitalist society is always based on the imagination of a better future for our children and grandchildren. Perhaps the radical practice of bio art, whether in terms of species extinction or reproductive technology for expanding the boundaries of the body, sensory experience, and the intersection of space and time, attempts to distance itself from this futuristic progressivism.

⁴ Charlotte Jarvis - In Posse: Making ‘Female’ Sperm. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o0bcNLzp_y8



Picture 1: Jonathan Ho, *Sex Shells: Gender fluidity in the Modern Age*, 2019.
Photographed by Yu Liang-kai.



Picture 2: Jakob Kudsk Steensen, *Re-Animated*, 2018-2019. Photographed by Yu Liang-kai.



Picture 3: Details of *Re-Animated*. Photographed by Yu Liang-kai.



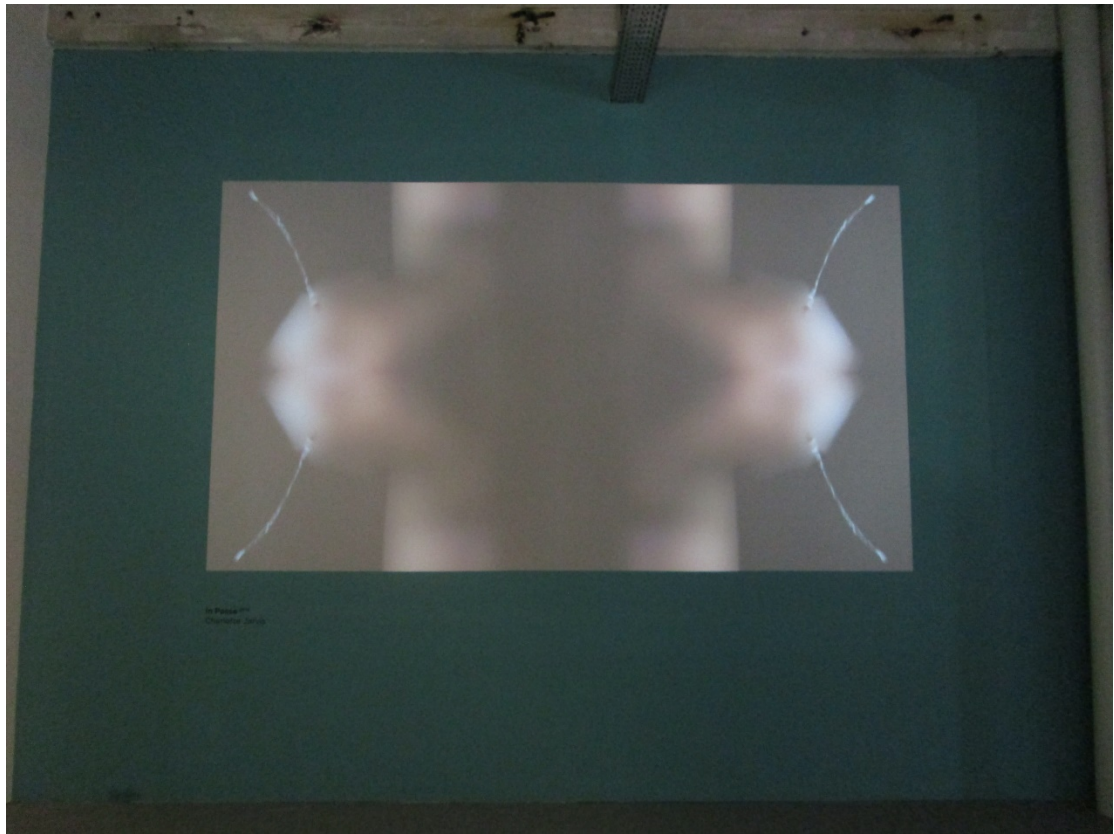
Picture 4: Alexandra Daisy Ginsburg & Sissel Tolaas, *Resurrecting the Sublime*, 2019. Photographed by Yu Liang-kai.



Picture 5: Charlotte Jarvis, *In Posse*, 2019-. Photographed by Yu Liang-kai.



Picture 6: Details of *In Posse*. Photographed by Yu Liang-kai.



Picture 7: Details of *In Posse*. Photographed by Yu Liang-kai.