

Second Nature: FERAL

Veronica Verkley





Anthropocene: Nature surrounds, permeates, effervesces in, and includes us. At the end of our days it deranges and disassembles us like old toys banished to the basement. There, once living beings, we return to our nonliving elements, but we still and forever remain a part of nature.¹

Diane Ackerman

The Proverbial Mole

In 1988 Vilem Flusser suggested that a time lapse of the European landscape over the millennia of history would show the following story:

first, a cold steppe, populated by large ruminant animals migrating northwards in spring and southwards in the autumn followed by the beasts of prey, including humans, that hunted them. Then, an ever denser forest, inhabited by no-longer nomadic peoples living and working in clearings kept open by the use of stone tools and fire. Then, a basically familiar scene of fields of edible grains, and pastures of edible animals, with occasional forests surviving as sources of newsprint. And if you could project your movie camera into the immediate future, you would see a continent-sized Disneyland full of people working very short weeks because of automation, and trying desperately to amuse themselves so as not to die of boredom.²

The time lapse that Veronica Verkley proposes in *Second Nature: FERAL* challenges this apocalypse by realigning nature and the human. A curtain opens to reveal a tidy blue house with white trim. The camera pushes in to a window and then onto the interior landing showing a neat and comfy domesticity set into a landscape. We hear the buzzing of insects, the rustling of an underbrush, and the calls of owls. Close your eyes and you find yourself in an imaginative nighttime landscape, a wide expanse of nature peaceably going about its business. Contrary to Flusser's film, Verkley's does not increasingly manufacture this landscape but rather shows, in a time lapse that suggests many years, the slow reintegration of the domestic back into the environment. We see a snowscape followed by spring, a rainfall, sparking summer light and vegetation, more snow, another spring. Throughout the sounds fill the room with

small cracklings of twigs and rustling, bird calls, high winds, and the crashing of objects as the outside begins to penetrate the inside, blurring boundaries not only between interior and exterior but (also) between the domestic and the wild, the human and nonhuman, nature and culture.

For decades philosophers have pushed against the notion of enlightenment dichotomies and hierarchies that regarded the human as master of the world. This in the face of unprecedented species extinction due to human intervention, and the persistent human drive to systematically de-wild the earth.³ The argument is that if we deconstruct these dichotomies, and understand ourselves as simply one natural being within a larger system, we may slow, albeit not halt, the path to the destruction of the environment which sustains us all. Bruno Latour makes a different argument:

Far from “getting beyond” the dichotomies of man and nature, subject and object, modes of production, and the environment, in order to find remedies for the crisis as quickly as possible, what political ecologists should have done was slow down the movement, take their time, then burrow down beneath the dichotomies like the proverbial old mole.⁴

With *Second Nature* Verkleij undertakes this task of burrowing. More than juxtaposing the human and natural world, she entangles them. The drive to construct and perfect a habitat is reflected in the carefully built model of a house that has studs, insulation, wiring, drywall, joists, ceiling beams, shingles, etc. Seemingly abandoned, the house, while slowly decaying over time, is not deliberately vandalized but simply recedes further and further into its environment until, its beams sagging, its furniture upturned, its bed turned into a feral den, it becomes one with the landscape. A remnant exactly like the dead tree whose branch has crashed into the roof. Against the decay non-

human creatures appear, first furtively scurrying through the house, then coming upon it, curiously, cautiously, but never aggressively. Finally, the two merge when the fox, on her second attempt, makes herself a bed on what was once the human bed, and curls up securely and falls asleep. The narrative is both a



cyclical one (illustrated by the changing and recurring seasons and the 'coming full circle' from death to new life) and an adaptive one, driven by ideas of evolution in which we are all simply small beings with short lifespans who, despite having an enormous capacity for destruction, are nonetheless insignificant in the larger cycle of geologic time. And yet, what of the current crisis we indisputably face? Burrowing beneath suggests re-imagining a world that could be different, but one where necessarily all players are given equal consideration: "I am asking for just a tiny concession," writes Latour, "that the question of democracy be extended to nonhumans."⁵

Verkley's work does more than even this, for within her narratives the elements of wind and weather, the growth and decay of plants and trees, the changing seasons, all become players alongside their biological partners. Through this she illustrates vibrant matter as Jane Bennett argues for it:



Why advocate the vitality of matter? Because my hunch is that the image of dead or thoroughly instrumentalized matter feeds human hubris and our earth-destroying fantasies of conquest and consumption. It does so by preventing us from detecting (seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, feeling) a fuller range of the nonhuman powers circulating around and within human bodies.⁶

While we cannot taste or smell, we are surrounded by sound and image, immersed in the projection of *Second Nature* where the human remains integrated albeit somewhat exhausted, in the image of the house, the viewer, and the artist's hand. Beauty is persistently present in the narrative that illustrates nature's resilience, challenging Flusser's vision, and instead offering the possibility of a different story, one that we can use to advance into the future. Deconstruction, Jacques Derrida insisted, "always proceeds in me from an unconditional affirmation of life."⁷



It means dismantling hardened theories and instead, as Latour proposes, recommencing the process of composition...

The foundations are not to be found behind us, beneath us, or above us, but ahead of us: catching up with them is our future, as we place the collective in a state of alert, to register as quickly as possible the appeal of the excluded entities that no morality ever again authorizes us to exclude definitively.⁸

In order to enter the gallery we must push open a curtain, a sign that we are entering a theatrical space. A metaphorical space, wherein the material remnants of the animation are presented like fossils: tiny creatures, a pile of miniature studs and shingles, and the very house that has collapsed under the weight of time and weather, seasons and animal invasion. Damaged but not fully destroyed, standing still as a testament to a kind of human resilience demonstrating the best of the efforts of human technologies of survival in a wild world. A curtain also opens at the beginning

of the time lapse projection signalling again the beginning of a scene, a proposition for a different narrative, one that might lead us towards a different future.

In the face of climate change, polluted oceans, habitat destruction and all the other invasive and threatening realities humans have brought upon themselves, there is still the resilience of the natural world. Within that there is also biology, a biology we are a part of, and one that has the ability to be altered, as Mary Midgley writes:

...to an impressive extent, organisms provide the materials for their own innovations. Epigenetic effects, resulting from different expressions of the same genes, can make a huge difference. And genes themselves are now known...to be...aspects of a most intricate process, sensitive to all sorts of internal factors, which means that in many ways the same genes can result in a different creature.⁹

As we take Verkleij's installation to be a metaphor, so too can we take Midgley's description of organisms as a metaphor for human biology which includes consciousness, and thus the ability to take a different path, to burrow under, and to become a different creature. One who is realigned with other creatures and our own natural habitat, the earth.

Dr. Corinna Ghaznavi





Notes

1. Diane Ackerman. *The Human Age: The World Shaped by Us*. New York and London: W.W. Norton & Co., 2014: 310.
2. Vilem Flusser, 'Curries' Children,' in Jeffrey Kastner, Ed., *Nature: Documents in Contemporary Art*. London and Cambridge: Whitechapel Gallery and The MIT Press, 2012: 58.
3. Paul Wapner. *Living Through the End of Nature: The Future of American Environmentalism*. Cambridge and London: The MIT Press, 2013, 2010: 115.
4. Bruno Latour. *Politics of Nature: How to Bring the Sciences into Democracy*. Trans. Catherine Porter. Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2004: 3.
5. Latour: 223.
6. Jane Bennett. *Vibrant Matter: A Political ecology of Things*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2010: ix.
7. Jacques Derrida. *Learning to Live Finally: An Interview with Jean Birnbaum*. Trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas. Hoboken: Melville House Publishing, 2007: 52.
8. Latour: 198
9. Mary Midgley. *The Solitary Self: Darwin and the Selfish Gene*. Durham: Acumen Publishing Ltd., 2010: 104f.

Photographs

Bruce Barrett: pages 10-11, page 14. All other images by Veronica Verkley.







Veronica Verkley

Veronica Verkley is a sculptor and filmmaker based in Dawson City, Yukon, where she maintains her practice out of a home-built bush cabin.

Her work is focused on ideas of Animal, and with examining animals' experiments in traversing the strange environments in which they find themselves. From the mechanical to the ethereal, employing scavenged industrial and natural materials, and exploring the possible and hopeful beauty of the discarded and overlooked, Veronica's work spans regularly between installation, animation, film, and animatronics.

She is a founding member of the Symbiosis Collective, past chair of Subtle Technologies; founding faculty at Yukon SOVA, recipient of a New Media Research & Production Grant from the Canada Council for the Arts, nominated for a Dora Mavor Moore Award in Costume Design, and featured in a CBC Ideas program on Bioregionalism.

Veronica has a strong exhibition record, from a range of public art commissions: Ecolage (Toronto, ON), Tom Thompson Gallery (Owen Sound, ON), The Natural and The Manufactured (Dawson City, YT); savvy guerilla installations (Mexico, Toronto, NWT); exhibitions: Ottawa Art Gallery (Northern Scene); Yukon Arts Centre (Whitehorse, YT); Video Pool (Winnipeg, MB); Birch Libralato (Toronto, ON); McMaster (Hamilton, ON); Yukon Women in Film (Vancouver, BC); OK Quoi? (Sackville, NB); as well as screenings in Tromsø Norway, Haida Gwaii British Columbia, Iceland, Sydney Australia, and Kyoto Japan.



Thank You

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Animation and Sound Credits

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Post-Production Supervisor: Kwan Ho Tse

Music: Peter Cox

Sound Design: Elma Bello

Re-recording Mixer: Ian Rodness

Foley: Footsteps Post-Production Sound

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Second Nature: FERAL

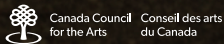
animation / soundscape / installation

Veronica Verkley 2016

Wood, plaster, insulation, sandpaper, wiring, glass, plastic, glue, paper, textiles, fake fur, wool, paint, sound, looped projection (9 min 33 sec)

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