



Siberian Musk Deer

Appendix II

The Entanglements of an Estranged Internaturalist

As told to Critical Art Ensemble

There was once a time when I believed that my relationships with the nonhuman world were of a simple nature. Admittedly, I was predisposed to such a conclusion, since I was a stranger to the urban landscape and was born two decades before suburbia and its insufferability swallowed any sense of cosmic connectivity. Just enough consensual enchantment remained that I could still entertain sublime visions of the cosmos and fantasies of noble savages. Walden did not seem like a dream from another century, but an attainable experience that had only to be claimed. From these cultural beginnings, I could step into an environment of harmony and beauty that awaited those who only needed the courage to see it. These nebulous origins of a mode of thought explaining my place in the world took deeper root one evening as I paddled my canoe on a wilderness lake. Illuminated by the sunset, the earth and the sky appeared as if they had been prepared for angels to descend. In that moment, I abandoned the world, and became an integral part of an inseparable substantive whole. In that brief passage of time, I had shed every point of social and political identity, and was reduced to the simplicity of being-there. I became the living embodiment of

the Vedic mystic's fundamental statement, "I am that." Of course, with this realization the experience ceased to exist, and I sat in my canoe weighted once again with all the freight of practical life. I was not dismayed by this sudden pivot from epiphany to anxiety, and took this unique occurrence as self-evident knowledge of a pantheistic universe. My conversion had come. I was beyond the fetish of the sublime, and had regrounded myself in individuation without individuation. I became an internaturalist.

Unfortunately, this forced me to confront the meaning of my freshly claimed point of being. My engine of interbeing transference was empathy. By summoning it I could become all things animal, vegetable, or mineral, and from the variant perspectives surrender any desire for dominion over individuated Others. As I soon discovered, the affirmation of equality among the world's inhabitants was easy; it was the negation of dominion that proved difficult. To refuse it was to turn my back on humanism. No longer could humans be the center and measure of the universe. Their welfare was no lesser or greater than any other. The logic was indisputable, but unfortunately more than logic was at work. Aesthetic judgment was also asserting itself under the guise of reason. A human may accept a judgment ("humans are the most elevated of life forms") grounded only in the desire for it to be true, and due to habitual enactment or witnessing of this belief, it falls within the realm of the real. However, the rejection of an arbitrary or self-interested judgment that is reinforced by the power of social consensus will be perceived as criminality of the worst order. Disciplinary reaction, or sometimes simply the threat of it, pulls the rebellious back into the humanistic regime where equality reigns for some, and dominion is insistent for others.

Not all internaturalists have a profound experience of melting into the continuum of life, resulting in their conversion. Many find their way from the most common of surroundings—a simple sharing of space that is not fully human or nonhuman. Pets are a good example of nonhuman relationships that people can invest with tremendous amounts of emotion, thus developing an empathic bond that is resituated in the familial or even experienced as a bonding of souls or natures. However, seeing oneself in the mirror of the nonhuman Other has its consequences. The pet has its environment, its sustenance, and, to some degree, its movement imposed upon it by the aesthetic (and, at times, utilitarian) decisions of its companion. Here is where the internaturalist may have his cake and eat it too, by recognizing difference and sameness in a common gesture. Because humans are assumed to be more sophisticated in making aesthetic judgments

than nonhumans, and have the ability to enact them, it is thought best for them to do so, as long as considerations draped in benevolence are made for the nonhuman. Let us say that the nonhuman in question is a dog. As a protein-seeking creature implicated in the successful satisfaction of its own needs, it will enjoy the bounty of the slaughterhouse, through which it will fulfill a traditional function of cleaning up scraps, only now mediated through the industrialized production of protein. The participation of this dog in the chain of wholesale slaughter of other members of the barnyard is destined by human aesthetic choice. Such choice would be equally aestheticized were the dog given a vegetarian diet, or itself groomed for slaughter. But why stop there? Nonrational aesthetic choice is awash in violence and death. I participate everyday.

For example, I am very fond of various types of alcohol. Every reasonable person, including myself, knows that alcohol abuse is the basis of a major global health crisis, as many cultures of the world have a preponderance of members who quite literally pour a poison into their bodies that attacks every soft tissue in them. The amount of sickness and death caused is nearly incalculable. This, combined with lost public revenue to manage the resulting illnesses and emergencies, not to mention all the alcohol-related violence, would seem to make the production and distribution of alcohol an act of the sociopathic. However, a public consensus exists that alcohol should be affordable, plentiful, readily available, and acceptable to use. Quite honestly, I don't think I have ever lost a wink of sleep due to this demand. To a degree, the same can be said for pets: we want them. Unfortunately, humans are not the ones to be sacrificed for this desire. It is the surplus of pets that bear this burden. Every year millions of pets are killed to ensure that the supply never runs dry, that choices can be made, and that if bonding fails to occur, the animal can be returned or abandoned. What determines a pet's placement in the sacrificial pool are the aesthetic prejudices of the chooser, never the chosen.

Of course, anything can be rationalized away, whether it is pets or animals bred for food. We may bemoan the millions of potential pets sacrificed or the number of animals killed to meet the protein needs of an expanding human population; however, there is an upside to this circumstance, at least when framed by evolutionary biology. While pets and creatures designated as food suffer as a consequence of having thrown their evolutionary lot in with humans, as species they are all doing well. Dogs, cats, cows, goats, sheep, pigs, chickens, and other domesticated species have spread all over the planet and exist in record numbers because of their designations as pets

and food. They are genetic success stories in a time of mass extinction. Yet while we may celebrate the evolutionary apex of domestic creatures, we know that the aesthetic categories imposed on the organic realm such as pet/not pet and food/not food are contributing to this same mass extinction and creating very troubling internatural relations.

Bacteria have always fascinated me. If ever a discipline of internatural studies were to emerge, the study of relations between bacteria and the-rest-of-life would be its cornerstone. Unfortunately, the relation of the-rest-of-life to bacteria is a subject that is lost on the general population. Since the emergence of the fantasy of the disinfected body in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, an ever-growing set of fearmongers have been motivated by profit and political power to create beliefs and visions of bacteria that are misdirected, exaggerated, and warped, and that rest outside of the practices of modern medicine and proper hygiene. They would have the public believe that bacteria exist only to create dysfunctional impurity, and thus all relations with them should be severed. The truth of the matter is that the disinfected body (a germ-free organic body) is not possible. For example, humans have a symbiotic relationship with gut *E. coli*; without it, we would die. Some bacteria simply like to live on us, and an infinite variety live all around us. Humans are bacterial hosts no matter how hard we may try not to be, and the environment is always filled with this most differentiated domain of life on the planet (except perhaps under the strictest of “clean room” conditions). The grand majority of bacteria are not a danger to bodily health under normative conditions. Like all creatures great and small, humans have evolved to live with them. Moreover, bacteria are the foundation of every ecosystem. No ecosystem could sustain itself without decay, and bacteria provide this essential function. Unfortunately, advertisers have kept the public focused on bacterial infectants, so the germ hysteria that began in the Victorian era has never really subsided. Even after the invention of antibiotics, the fear of bacteria persists. To my dismay, the personal experience of pain, nausea, and the uncontrolled eruption of a variety of bodily fluids during illness only confirms the exaggerated warnings of various authorities.

The internatural relations between humans and bacteria should be as simple as humans being food and/or reproductive environmental resources for bacteria, while bacteria do the job of systems degeneration and maintenance. However, due to a will for longevity on the part of conscious, intelligent humans, intervention becomes a desired relation. When bacteria break bodily defenses and are free to feed and reproduce anywhere in our

bodies, humans strike back with antibiotics, and now do so with such regularity that our actions are working as an evolutionary accelerator, allowing the organisms to become better adapted to the pirated environment beneath the flesh. Bacteria cannot be defeated, and as human relations to them become increasingly conflicted, the only final cause can be human destruction by way of Bacteria Rex (assuming humans do not kill ourselves first).

A second model does exist, in which humans try to productively assist bacteria to adapt to their human environment. Those with intestinal trouble know that the consumption of particular gut bacteria may help alleviate distressing symptoms—the greater the functionality of bacteria in a given environment, the greater the functionality of the environment itself. Symbiosis, rather than a struggle unto death, will commonly lead to an evolutionary path of mutual adaptability. The unfortunate problem is that adopting this model on a social scale would require humans to put their species ahead of their individual egos.

The question of how harmonious relations between creatures can ever exist when some have evolved beyond the mechanical and some have not is as troubling as it is difficult. I find it self-evident that the very nature of consciousness twists existence into unnecessary moral complexities coupled with mortal anxiety. To be free of these concerns would make nature a mechanical wonder in which interdependence and interrelations create a greater whole. Perhaps I am going too far in placing blame on something as poorly understood as consciousness; perhaps the real culprit is intelligence. As evolution has groped blindly along, it has produced many maladapted creatures doomed to be little more than brief stains on the temporal arc of life—but it has created none so dysfunctional in regard to species longevity than this life form that specializes in intelligence. All humanoids are extinct except for one, and while that one appears to be the most intelligent, it couldn't be more maladapted. In a brief one hundred thousand years, *Homo sapiens* are poised not only to eliminate themselves, but to take the higher end of the food chain down the same path into permanent night. Depending on one's disposition toward humankind and the absurdity of existence, this is either one of nature's most comic or most tragic ongoing events.

How is it possible for a beast to exist that does not consider itself a beast? How can a species exist that can simultaneously be, collectively and individually, both on the inside and the outside of ecological relations? But most amus-

ing of all is that a species capable of producing the conditions of its own elimination has evolved, and in its awareness of this possibility seeks to bring its end into ever-greater probability. The engine that drives this grim yet comical occurrence is intelligence, coupled with the cultural ability to accumulate the knowledge produced by it over time. Perhaps Dostoyevsky was pondering the evolution of intelligence when he stumbled upon the inseparability of idiocy and saintliness. Intelligence is an unhappy accident. Consciousness is disruptive.