





Humanimal Crossings: Posthumanism and Body Politics in the Work of Cole Swanson

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The entrance to Cole Swanson's exhibition, *Out of the Strong, Something Sweet* (2016), bids us into a graveyard of sorts. Twelve cattle skulls are assembled in two rows, their jaws and nasal cavities sunken beneath mounds of refined white sugar. There is enough sugar to evoke a burial ground (formed by an accumulation of processed granules) but not so much that the empty eye sockets are concealed. Resting strategically at the foot of each mound, the skulls watch us watching them. The sugar is banked by white, hexagonal troughs that resemble, on the one hand, enlarged honeycomb and, on the other, lidless coffins. A thirteenth black trough positioned at the edge of the floor installation reinforces this impression. The thirteenth trough features burnt bone fragments littered over black mulch. Like leftovers from a funeral pyre, there is evidence of horns, molars, and craniums, soot-stained and fractured. As we round the bones and walk between the skulls, our steps zigzag along the troughs' oblique angles

and mimic a bee moving across cells. If this symbolism isn't enough to compel the viewer, Swanson has filled the space with a soundtrack of intermittent buzzes and moos. The drone of an insect swarm is close by — drawing attention to the absence of carrion — punctuated with sudden buzzes from the left, then right, of the kind that might make a person twitch under ordinary circumstances. Finally, and perhaps most effectively, it is the doleful wail of a cow that announces the exhibition's warning: this is a haunting. Dead or alive, the animal here has unfinished business.

A discussion of body politics in a collection of work that depicts no actual, physical body speaks something of itself.¹ In Swanson's representations, the very meat of the matter is missing. Fleshiness — by which I mean the stuff that seeps, spurts, sprays, leaks, dribbles, drips, bulges, and jiggles — is nowhere to be found. Instead, viewers are given glimpses of the (animal) body's vacuous remains, its cultured symbols and trophy-like relics. It is through this tension of corporeal absence — of the missing flesh — that Swanson begins to challenge conceptions of self/Other in the Western canon and offer viewers an experience of critical posthumanism.

Critical posthumanism is a methodology, but before describing it, let me outline its broader context. Concepts and representations concerning posthumanism have grown immensely over the last few decades. Coinciding with an ever-increasing saturation of technology in the West, discourses within popular culture, literature, art, and academia all have had something important to say. In fact, to offer a holistic review of posthumanism is impossible within the scope of this essay.² Bioengineering, cloning, xenotransplantation, and neuro-cognitive interventions in pharmacology are just a few of the ways in which human experiences are being re-imagined through technological processes. And this doesn't even begin to broach the influence of androids, cyborgs, and monsters. In a quick and dirty summary: posthumanism suggests that we “humans” are bodies plugged-in, patched together with inorganic/plant/animal matter; we are simultaneous objects and subjects that are fractured through space/time, digital loops, and uploaded data. In the words of Arthur Kroker: “We are the flesh of the new media ... We are connected. We are distributed. We are circulated. We are wired. We are wireless. We are figured and reconfigured. Technicity is our subjectivity.”³

At its surface, then, posthumanism is a state of existence, a type of being in the world that originates from science fiction (think H.G. Wells⁴) and academic theory (think Donna Haraway⁵) whereby the category of “human” is fused with machines and animals, artificial bits and bobs, digital visions and revisions. Posthumanism is furthermore a direct challenge to humanist notions of a rational, universal being – or Man – that postulates the self as housed inside a fixed material body that is separate from its environment; an environment, I might add, that the “human” has agency over and therefore dominates. Note, however, that a social-political consideration of posthumanism brings us from an ontological condition to a *methodology*; or, put another way, a social-political framework reveals posthumanism less as a state of isolated (albeit mutated) existence and more as a means of interacting within the world.⁶ Posthumanism is a practice; what Donna Haraway might call a “becoming with.”⁷ It is this latter phenomenon that interests me in regards to Swanson’s art. In what follows, I will explore how viewers of *Out of the Strong, Something Sweet* are forced to come to understand their so-called human selves, their bodies

as an interspecies encounter through an oscillating inclusion/exclusion of the Other, animal, insect.

Take, for instance, Swanson’s sculpture, *Regina Mortem* (2016). Here, two cattle horns are positioned side-by-side, their bases facing one another like they would on a living animal’s head. Once again, however, the flesh is missing. The horns are hollow, scraped of their insides like a pair of primitive, makeshift bugles. As we approach the horns, we hear a noise: a crinkle; a note. We lean closer. Conveniently, steel rods mounted on a plinth support each horn and lift the sculpture approximately five feet from the ground. The horns themselves are about a foot apart. This provides ample space for the viewer to lean his/her head forward and listen in comfort. At this point, many emotions are triggered in tandem; first and foremost, intrigue. We hear movement, animation, and an odd call emitted by a creature. From one horn to the other, Swanson has installed a recording of queen bees conversing inside a hive. Second of all, we feel disturbed. Our own shadow looms ahead and depicts horns protruding from our skull. If we didn’t realize it before, we realize it now: we are positioned as the cow. We occupy the vacant space of the animal. Our head



Regina Mortem, 2016

is the cattle's head as we struggle to interpret the insects' calls emitting from a left speaker, then a right. And third of all, we are disgusted. The texture of the horns, which appear solid and brown from afar (like regal ivory on display), is now revealed as peeling and yellowed. Fungal toenails come to mind.

Together these three affects — intrigue, disturbance, disgust — work to destabilize humanist boundaries that function to separate this from that and, specifically, human from nonhuman.⁸ The viewer's body has trespassed into the artwork, or more accurately, the artwork has trespassed into the viewer's body. The

animal/insect comes to be *with* and *in* the human: our ears fill with an unknown language even as our eyes flicker from our monstrous shadow to a beastly, bodily crust. No longer are we objective observers. We are subjective participants. And all without a trace of the flesh. We hear what we cannot grasp — the queen bees exist only in sound and speak a foreign language. We see what we cannot touch — our shadow is an irresolvable animal; to verify this, we need only turn and view that the cattle's head is missing. In this case, (to repurpose Cary Wolfe's words), "we are returned to a new sense of the materiality and particularity not just of

the animal and its multitude of forms but also of that animal called human.”⁹

This transgression of species' borders is also found in Swanson's *Caulbearers* (2015). As wax preserved cattle stomachs, *Caulbearers* is the closest Swanson comes in the exhibition to a literal representation of the animal's flesh. At the same time, these four sculptures are anything but bloody. The artist has desiccated each stomach, omitting any gelatinous oil or fat, before sealing the remaining tissue inside beeswax. Mounted on stands and akin to commodities on display, the cow guts are like avant-garde headscarves for sale. Similar to Hellenistic drapery that clings to the shape of the sculpture, each stomach sweeps with folds that are suspended in motion. There is something formally pleasing and yet, as objects, the forms are dehydrated-looking and grossly cellular in texture. Within the elegant shapes, there are curds and cauliflower curls. As such, *Caulbearers* references a bodily material that is shriveled, fissured, aged, crusted. It is, in a word, disgusting.

Yet, with potential threat of organic goo sealed-off inside the inorganic (the stomach/body has been fixed in beeswax), there is a kneejerk reaction, a humanist



***Caulbearers*, 2015 (detail)**



Black Bone (pate), 2015

reflex for the viewer to identify the objects. Are they brains? Placentas? Sponges? While we may not recognize or “classify” four stomachs, we will nonetheless detect fleshiness — biological membranes — despite Swanson’s omission of any jiggly, moist matter. As a result, viewers are given a joint pull/push where they are invited to admire each form and be repelled by its bodily reference. Through the perforation of boundaries — with cattle insides brought outside, sucked dry and preserved — we are given yet another view of the missing flesh and its social and political complexities. We become aware of our

“human” history in the West, modernity onwards, as surveyors, processors, and consumers of the animal. In other words, the authoritarian workings of a humanist agenda are unraveled by Swanson and, accordingly, brought into question.

A challenge to human agency over the Other/animal/nature reverberates throughout the exhibition and contributes to an experience of critical posthumanism. For instance, in his *Bone Black* series (2015), Swanson confronts viewers with the animal-object as an aesthetic encounter. The artist has used charred cattle bones as his pigment, restricting his palette to a deep, matted black on white handmade paper. (This reflects the monochromatic scheme of the entire exhibition, which is limited to tones of black, white, and brown.) Twelve images inspired by beef offcuts reveal geometric forms with clean lines. In some cases, we may recognize the wave of a tail; the cleft of a hoof; the ridge of a jaw. But in most cases, the representation seems completely abstracted, stripped of all detail and reference to flesh. Each (animal) object is rendered almost ritualistically with painstaking precision and careful strokes, reduced to pure line/shape. We may mistake the udders for a chalice, the tongue for a tunnel, while

other bovine abstractions resemble paned windows, passages, and frames. We stare at them until our eyes start to play tricks. The black pigment is endless, swallowing all light. Gone are the sharp edges, the division of this space from that. Our retinas flicker with negative and positive impressions. The black is the unknown, an abyss that beckons us to enter into its depths. These are the unwanted bits. Thus the butchered cow's discarded offcuts, which the artist notes are "unsuitable for mainstream consumption,"¹⁰ are here reclaimed through an immaculacy of form and material.

Similarly, Swanson continues to play with humanist assumptions of the animal-object in *Specimen Hides* (2015), wherein, ten miniature paintings of cowhides are secured with entomology pins onto a shelf lined with linen. Each painting measures three by two inches and is rendered so lifelike in texture, colour, and pattern that it is easily mistaken for real fur. The painted curl and bristle of each hair is visible, fanning in swirls across the animal's flattened skin. But the hides are too tiny, too pristine, to the point of evoking a sense of satire. We are giants (or monsters) by comparison, gazing down at the precious hides with a godlike perspective. Accordingly, *Specimen Hides*



Specimen Hides, 2015 (detail)

exposes the anthropocentric history of the natural sciences to position (some) humans as the centre of the universe. It mocks traditions of modernist discourse to literally pin down nonhuman organisms — Other, animal, insect — and, as a result, reveals deeper complexities in our knowledges of the world and between so-called human and nonhuman relations.

These complexities are further emphasized as we turn from *Specimen Hides* and experience *Swarms* (2015). *Swarms* features two cured cattle hides, one black, one white, nailed to the wall like tapestries. The switch in scale from miniature to life-size is destabilizing. The

hides are massive. As viewers experiencing the work, we become participants in a shared space and are again forced to reconsider our topographies and physical bodies — the size of “ourselves” — in relation to these real animal skins that are close to seven feet square.

Facing the white cattle hide, we see a swarm of black pins collecting at the centre. The artist has painted the pins black, providing maximum contrast against the animal’s white fur. The pins puncture the skin again and again, denoting a repeated act that borders on violence. With each prick, a blemish forms on the otherwise pure fur, creating a sense of pain and disgust. The skin’s borders are spoiled, violated. A congestion of pins converges and cripples the (missing) body at the spine. Staring at the pins, we see patterns of swarms found in nature — stars, bees, bacteria — and, consequently, we are confronted with the intricacy and complexities of living networks.

Experienced as a whole, Swanson’s collection depicts a carefully controlled, cleaned, and processed representation of the Other/insect/animal that is indicative of modernist ideologies, right down to the application of colour and form. But rather than reinforce these ideologies of an absolute categorical division and

supremacy of Man over his environment, the exhibition *Out of the Strong, Something Sweet* transgresses them.

Time and again, we are confronted with an absence of flesh made overt. Be it through a beastly shadow or a black so dense that it threatens to eclipse all life, the (animal) body fascinates and haunts us. In this case, despite being stripped, scraped, dried, and extracted of all its messy, dirty bits, the body reappropriates space by the very exposure of its missing meat. Through this reclaiming act, the artist leads viewers to a critical posthumanist experience. With nuanced encounters of supposedly fixed categories like human/animal, organic/inorganic, viewer/art, Swanson exposes the slippages between these discourses and their inter-reliant language. In moments of slippage, viewers experience a “becoming-with,” an ontological practice where spatial and corporeal boundaries blur. Simply put, this is critical posthumanism.

As the author of *Posthumanism*, Pramod Nayar, states: “Posthumanism is not simply about a human with prosthetic implants/additions that enhance human qualities and abilities (this is the popular sense of posthumanism...). Rather, critical

Swarms, 2015 (detail)



posthumanism sees the uniquely human abilities, qualities, consciousness and features as evolving in conjunction with other life forms, technology and ecosystems... [it] focuses on interspecies identity... the humanimal.””

Indeed, the humanimal is a focus found in Swanson’s exhibition. We are given an opportunity to encounter our collective history of only coming to matter as a species by the very act of integrating with/in the Other. Therein lies the irony. We rely on interspecies networks, circuits, and rituals inasmuch as we participate in “becoming with” life and yet only by this participation can we mark the lines that delineate This from That, or more aptly, Us from Them.¹² Hearing the cattle cry forces us to know ourselves. And so we do what any creature would do. We turn to the skulls and listen.

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Notes

1. A discussion of body politics concerns hegemonic structures that regulate the human body both publically and privately and, moreover, that regulate the body in terms of class, physical, racial, and sexual difference. While I will reference body politics in this essay in regards to humanist notions of *homo sapiens*, more lengthy considerations of who and what counts as a body in Swanson’s collection are worth having. While feminist theory provides insight into the human/less-than-human divide, the recent rise of animal studies offers further focus on the human/animal divide. For example, see Cary Wolfe, *Animal Rites: American Culture, the Discourse of Species, and Posthumanist Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).
2. For recent reviews, see instead: Pramod K. Nayar, *Posthumanism* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2014) or Cary Wolfe, *What is Posthumanism?* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010).
3. Arthur Kroker, *The Will to Technology & The Culture of Nihilism* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), 36-37.
4. H.G. Wells, *The Time Machine* (1898, reprint New York: Penguin Books, 2005).
5. Donna Haraway, “A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century” in *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 149–181, 243–248.
6. Nayar 3.

7. Donna Haraway, *When Species Meet* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008).
8. As feminist theorists have pointed out, such boundaries are further entangled with issues of racial and sexual difference and are rooted in the “philosophical and historical development of the natural sciences, particularly biology and medicine.” Marsha Meskimmon, “The Monstrous and the Grotesque” in *Make: The Magazine of Women’s Art*, no. 72 (Oct–Nov. 1996), 7. See also Rosi Braidotti, “Signs of Wonder and Traces of Doubt: On Teratology and Embodied Differences” in *Feminist Theory and the Body*, ed. Janet Price and Margrit Shildrick (New York: Routledge, 1999), 290–301.
9. Cary Wolfe, “Human, All Too Human: ‘Animal Studies’ and the Humanities” in *PMLA*, vol. 124, no. 2 (March 2009), 572.
10. Cole Swanson, artist’s official website: coleswanson.org/#/bone-black
11. Nayar 4–5, original emphasis.
12. As Cary Wolfe argues in *What is Posthumanism?*, we are “always radically other, already in- or ahuman in our very being — not just in the evolutionary, biological, and zoological fact of our physical vulnerability and mortality, our mammalian existence but also in our subjection to and constitution in the materiality and technicity of a language that is always on the scene before we are, as a precondition of our subjectivity.” (2010), 89.

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