

## “Nature” in American Art Since 1970 Reconceiving the Human-Nonhuman Relationship?



Stephen Shore, *U.S. 97 South of Klamath Falls, Oregon, July 21, 1973, 1973*

A Terra Foundation Symposium – Tuesday, May 19, 2020  
16:30-19:00 (Central European Time)

### ABSTRACTS

#### The Agency of Other Beings

Robin Kelsey

We humans are on lousy terms with most of our fellow creatures. Our rapacious demands on the earth are triggering a cascade of extinctions and lost habitats. We value domestic species for their tastiness or companionship, and wild animals for their physical beauty or symbolism (go Tigers!), but otherwise our fellow creatures mostly suffer our callous disregard or outright hostility. Some artists, however, have explored the possibility of establishing a collaborative relationship across species. My talk focuses on art since 1970 that has engaged or enlisted the agency of wild creatures in its making. Examining the work of artists such as Catherine Chalmers, Daniel Ranalli, and Michael Flomen, I aim to bring out the potentials and paradoxes inhering to different ways of incorporating animal agency. What models for inter-species relationality do they offer? How might we understand their mixtures of ethics and aesthetics?

**Robin Kelsey** has been Dean of Arts and Humanities at Harvard University since 2016, and Shirley Carter Burden Professor of Photography in the Department of History of Art and Architecture (HAA) since 2009. Before becoming Dean, he chaired HAA for three years. He holds a PhD in History of Art from Harvard and a JD from Yale Law School, and he has practiced law in California. Professor Kelsey is the author of *Photography and the Art of Chance* (Harvard, 2015), which was named a *Choice* Outstanding Academic Title, and *Archive Style: Photographs and Illustrations for U.S. Surveys, 1850-1890* (California Press, 2007). With Blake Stimson, he co-edited the anthology *The Meaning of Photography* (Clark Art Institute/Yale, 2008). Professor Kelsey has received various awards for his scholarship and teaching, including the Arthur Kingsley Porter Prize, the Walter Channing Cabot Fellowship, and the Rosalyn Abramson Award

**Activist Abstraction:  
Anita Krajnc, Save Photography, and the Nature of Industrial Meat**  
Alan C. Braddock

COVID-19 and its reported origins at a Wuhan wet market have amplified global debates about the “nature” of industrial meat. As sales of plant-based alternatives soar, a growing scientific chorus implicates corporate livestock agriculture and slaughter as a leading driver of climate change. Meat increasingly looks like an Anthropocene accomplice, eroding its perceived normativity and naturalism. Contemporary artists often engage this question by revealing the hidden infrastructures of industrial animal confinement and slaughter, using various visual strategies—from activist moral outrage (Sue Coe) to emotional/physical detachment (Mishka Henner). Another creative approach appears in photography by Anita Krajnc and the international Save Movement, which she founded in Toronto in 2010. Her most powerful photographs offer only a partial view of a single pig, whose eye appears through an ocular opening in the wall of a transport truck destined for the slaughterhouse. These striking images induce empathy by eliding bodily details and blurring species boundaries through subtle visual abstraction. Such abstraction denaturalizes the meat industry’s reification of nonhumans as commodities divorced from personhood. It also renders the diesel transport vehicle as a synecdoche for an invisible industrial commodity chain that wreaks climate havoc.

**Alan C. Braddock** is the Ralph H. Wark Associate Professor of Art History and American Studies at William & Mary, where he teaches courses on the history of art, ecology, and environmental justice. He is the author of *Thomas Eakins and the Cultures of Modernity* (2009) and co-author/co-editor of three other books, including most recently, with Karl Kusserow, *Nature's Nation: American Art and Environment* (2018), winner of this year's Alfred H. Barr, Jr., Award, among other prizes. Professor Braddock is currently a scholar-in-residence at the Getty Research Institute, where he is developing a new book titled *Implication: An Eco-critical Dictionary for Art History*.

**COVID's Climate and the Materiality of Dematerialization**  
Shannon Jackson

As recounted throughout U.S. art history (and again in this symposium’s abstract), the so-called turn to dematerialization in art coincided with various turns and redefinitions of what qualified as nature, the environment, and climate in artistic practice. Reviewing these turns from our place in 2020—that is, when the neo-liberalizing effects of post-industrial economies meet the epidemiological effects of COVID-19—this brief talk questions the assumptions of the dematerialization frame. At the same time, it suggests that such questioning might allow us to spy in art of the last 50 years a range of proto-COVID environmental practices. To what degree might past practices provide aesthetic and social resources for us now? Perhaps by tracking a range of urgent materialisms in “non-object-producing” practice, we have some alternative ways of framing the status of the cultural sector and the role of artistic making in the COVID era.

**Shannon Jackson** is Associate Vice Chancellor for the Arts and Design, Cyrus and Michelle Hadidi Chair in the Humanities, and Professor of Rhetoric and Performance Studies at the University of California, Berkeley. Her books include *The Builders Association: Performance and Media in Contemporary Theater* (MIT Press, 2015), and *Social Works: Performing Art, Supporting Publics* (Routledge, 2011).