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The Duck is the Übermensch

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It has recently been scientifically proved that ducks are capable of abstract thinking.¹ The discovery makes no difference to the ducks, and nor would it surprise them, since they've known it all along. It just reveals that we, non-ducks, are deeply fascinated by sharing with ducks traits we associate with our idea of rationality. If taken seriously, the discovery could spark a revolution, marking in a very nice, duckish way the impossibility of taking the premises of humanism and humanists seriously. And following this argument, only the controlling, man-taming humanists and their followers, with their animalistic and technological representations of the world, will see this as a minor discovery. Those who are unable to let go of the false opposition between culture (often simplified to literacy) and the beast (considered ignorant) will fail to embrace the duck as the true Übermensch.

Don't dare consider ducks' capacity for abstract thinking as less important than our own! On the contrary, this revelation shows that animals, to look at it from Friedrich Nietzsche's (1844–1900) perspective, may be able to perform a maximization of all that is human. Think of animals—and plants—as beings that bring to light the dangers of the humanistic horizons of sitting and reading and breeding and taming and training. The duck is the Übermensch who allows us to take into consideration the intimate constraints of our humanistic hopes and opens up a spacious new arena that, in light of the previous long millennia, offers us a radical suggestion: the encouragement to reflect anew on the need, more than ever, for philosophy. True, this turning-into-others, into animals, this continuous expansion of gender, this impossibility to return to the concept of man as the “rational” animal, at first unleashes a feeling of decline in awareness, as presented by hermeneutic criticism. Fear produces the claim that statements such as “the duck is the Übermensch” may only be a new twist in a premeditated anthropo-technology in disguise. But if one wants to speak anthropologically, one could say that humans of the historical period were animals, while the animals of today suggest possibilities for future humans.

You might think that it's a momentary trend to consider animals in this way, but in fact it's a true evolution, and one that, once and for all, challenges the way we see all existing functioning organs—not just the brain—as producers of a radical mutation of our culturally acquired ideas of experience. There's undeniably an element of kitsch here, since the jump from one form of life to another is so great that even in literature it's a difficult illusion to pull off—only successfully achieved by Greek myths or ambitious minds like Franz Kafka's (1883–1924). How wise it was of Hans Christian Andersen (1805–1875) to propose a Little Mermaid. We all imagine her being half fish, half girl, but instead of her little girl's head, we should see her fish tail first, taking the place of her legs and sexual organs. All kinds of ideas are triggered by this image of a non-sexual virgin fish,

¹ Antone Martinho III And Alex Kacelnik, “*Ducklings Imprint on the Relational Concept of ‘Same or Different’*,” in *Science* 353, 6296 (July 15, 2016): 286–88.

with all the beauty of youth, all the appeal of the female gender, and all the freedom of an animal living in a realm beyond the laws and institutional restraints of the humans' earth. Look more closely at this tail, this fish tail. Having experienced a normal sexuality and corporeal functions all its life, the mermaid body is now under the pressure of a head that aspires to air and language, imposing itself upon the fish tail and its animal sexuality. Why on earth do we think of these two bodies as contradictory? The two creatures together are in fact one, and it is this possibility of merging lives of different kinds that has been announced since ancient times as the very form of future intelligence. We keep reading this story metaphorically, but reading it literally would be a true act of revolution—a revolution that will involve a radical metabolic change with incredible epistemological consequences.

I. Hylomorphism

Apparently the architect Louis Kahn (1901–1974) once asked a brick, “What form do you want to take?” And he used to tell his students:

If you are ever stuck for inspiration, ask your materials for advice. You say to a brick, “What do you want, brick?” And the brick says to you, “I like an arch.” And you say to the brick, “Look, I want one, too, but arches are expensive and I can use a concrete lintel.” And then you say: “What do you think of that, brick?” The brick says, “I like an arch.”²

One might think that Kahn turned his materials into eloquent substances for the sake of pedagogy, and that he performed this animistic, ventriloquist theater with the brick in order to stress the importance of change and transformation. His introduction of the brick's desire into the dialogue between the maker (the architect) and the material, however, also constitutes a critique of the paradigmatic theory of Aristotelian hylomorphism, the theory that describes each body and object as a combination of form and matter. We could enter into numerous digressions about what exactly Aristotle meant by this, but to cut the story short, hylomorphism is the base of our most accepted understanding of unity and our inherited model of individuation. The philosophical problem of how to account for unity and individuation is a rather obscure and complicated one. One might wonder why it's even worth considering. Yet Gilles Deleuze (1925–1995) was captivated by the medieval issue of what makes an individual an individual, and how an individual can be distinguished from other individuals. The aim of the French philosopher was to produce a concept of difference that would no longer be bound to the primacy of identity or representation. For Aristotle, matter was a substance in search of a form, and form was not whatever form but an intrinsic feature that can be inscribed or even re-inscribed in matter. But Deleuze was committed to the thesis that identity is just a product, and representation just an effect. In *Difference and Repetition* he argues that in post-Darwinist biology, the individual precedes the species and that the species are just populations.³ Here, Deleuze stresses that we need a dynamic conception of individuation. In other words, we need a concept of individuation that relies on a continuous process and not on an intrinsic feature of an individual.

II. The Cloud

² Louis Kahn, *Quoted From My Architect: A Son's Journey*, ed. by Nathaniel Kahn (Louis Kahn Project Inc., 2003).

³ See Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition* (1968), transl. Paul Patton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), chapter 5.

Federico Manuel Peralta Ramos (1939–1992) was an Argentinian artist of the 1960s generation who captured attention with the large egg—titled *Nosotros afuera* (We, the Outsiders)—that he produced in 1965 for an exhibition at the Torcuato Di Tella Institute in Buenos Aires. Peralta Ramos was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1968 and he became famous for using the scholarship funds to organize a splendid dinner with friends at the Alvear Palace Hotel—still an emblem of luxury in Buenos Aires—and to acquire works by the most successful artists in the society of his time (to please his family, he claimed, who could relate to the new artistic languages emerging at Di Tella). I recall this anecdote here because one might think of it as a performance, or as Peralta Ramos’s very personal take, as he stated, on merging art and life; but in fact, this recollection marks an interesting division. On the one hand, it embodies the fact that there was awareness of Peralta Ramos and his art far beyond his local context: the Guggenheim Fellowship marks the coming-into-the-present of the artist not only in his country, but his “synchronization” with the art of the day; his identity as an Argentinian artist became equal to “an artist.” However, that dinner at Alvear—that incredibly bold gesture of generosity and disregard for money as potential matter that could have served him well in the process of becoming even more of “an artist” and producing more artworks—put into reverse Peralta Ramos’s very synchronicity with the art world, sending him back to the “past.” His expectations did not match those of the American institution, and so he was to remain an “Argentinian artist.”

It is interesting to think about the desire for recognition and visibility as similar to a process of transubstantiation between a local time and place—the here and now—and another time and place that is “bigger,” or “larger,” or just more universal, to use modern terms. Peralta Ramos, however, found a way to escape. In 1969, he started to sing and perform on TV shows and, in 1970, he recorded what he calls his “non-figurative songs”: *Soy un pedazo de atmósfera* (“I am a little piece of atmosphere”) and *Tengo algo adentro que se llama el coso* (“I have something in my innermost called the thingamajig”). He once said that he wanted to become a cloud, “a little piece of atmosphere.” Becoming atmosphere is even better than becoming a recognized artist; it is far more complex, literally far more universal, and far more defiant of any theory of difference and individuation. One might say that the cloud, or atmosphere, has long been both an image to express a sentiment and, at the same time, part of the painterly effort to address space, mass, and mood. Indeed, Peralta Ramos was trained as a painter, but wanting to become a cloud is wanting to abandon any idea of a solid body, of sharp visibility, of clear distinction. Becoming atmosphere—and not even the whole but “a little piece of atmosphere” —challenges us with a mysterious volume without surface and embraces indeterminacy as the one and only possible identity.

III. Indeterminacy

For decades, artists have understood that the only way to regain an understanding about form is to lose it completely. The renewed interest in becoming a cloud or a rock or a plant or a turtle is an interest in separating identity from identification. I still remember my surprise when, ten years ago, I met two artists in two different latitudes both proposing to get into somebody else’s body: Eduardo Navarro (1979) in Buenos Aires and Roberto Cuoghi (1973) in Milan. During one of my first conversations with Navarro in 2005, he told me about how he once dressed up as a “fat” young person on a group tour to spot UFOs in the north of Argentina. I remember meeting him in his studio, where he told me about his decision to join the already established group that met regularly and organized trips to experience extra-sensory life and spot UFOs. In a quiet voice, he explained how he couldn’t go on the trip as “himself,” so he decided to create a costume, an inflatable dress, which made him look very overweight. It was a radically naive attempt to become another person, but what I liked about it was his total absence of ambition to make it look “realistic.” But why

become “fat”? One simple answer: fat was the way to win more space between the artist and the others. He told me that despite the long sessions of invoking spirits and looking for signals and his openness to the extra-sensory, the group found him too weird, too awkward. They thought he didn’t belong, and yet he was far from an impostor or a spy. Had infiltration been his goal, he could have done it better. Instead, pretending to mutate into somebody else created a radicalized and parodic performance.

Not long before this meeting with Navarro, I met Italian artist Roberto Cuoghi in Milan, who told me about a similar pursuit. In 1998, at the age of 25, he attempted to take on the appearance of his father, who was becoming seriously ill. Within the space of a few weeks, Cuoghi transformed himself into an old man. In an attempt to accelerate biological time, he gained forty kilograms, dyed his hair white, grew a long beard, and began to dress and behave like his father. Neither enacting a performance nor wearing a disguise, yet existing somewhere between fiction and reality, Cuoghi maintained this new persona for years. And although he created no artworks about it, news of his attempt to “life-share,” to duplicate and consequently prolong his father’s existence, spread by word of mouth until it passed into art-world lore. Cuoghi’s imitation survived the original, but his body paid a high inheritance tax: when his father passed away, the artist began to reverse the premature aging, but the stress he had subjected himself to over the years rendered the process extremely slow and painful, even necessitating surgical operations.

IV. Qui fuit rana, nunc est rex

All these projects reveal a move away from essentialist ideas of what we are, which can only be contested by a radical expansion of what we can feel or sense, since it is in the senses that thinking breathes. But they also represent a powerful attempt to contest and overcome solitude, a state that I associate with being tied to a particular idea of identity that cannot mutate. Even more so, I pair solitude with modernity; it is a projection, of course, but in my imagination the modern condition implies isolation, autonomy, absorption, and solitude. The modern spirit says that the “good” thing is a separate thing, a particular body, a fortress, a nation/state. It is this logic that we need to contest: the logic of an undisturbed solitude. Our solitude cannot but be disturbed and must start a radical process of *mixtio*, allowing forms and bodies and formats and languages and genders and nations to blend. Solitude needs to learn how the “entering” of one another is possible. We fear that in this process of fading individuality there will be no becoming, there will be no future. Indeed, we will need a totally new concept of the social in order to understand a notion of life in which we recognize that what we share with others is not our individuality but our singularity. In other words, we need a concept in which the social does not rest on a contract, but on an experiment with what precedes both the individual and collective forms of life.

To play with the idea that a duck or an octopus or any non-human form of intelligence is what Nietzsche meant by the *Übermensch* is to reject anthropodicy and to negate the humanist paradigm aimed at establishing a distance between the human and all that is dehumanized. Art is our chance of imagining this form of a de-centered system of perception; it enables us to sense the world in ways beyond language. Art is the thinking duck. It transforms our way of conceiving the social, its institutions, and the hope we all have for perceptive inventiveness and a more complex notion of experience. Traditionally, we are the ones who perceive art, and art is the provider of that particular experience that surpasses all other experiences without resembling any of them. Yet we can still think and judge when perceiving art. Separation and difference are key to a centralized way of sensing that still allows for distinction and the valuation of everything that touches our skin.

The history of aesthetic experience is the history of solidification, of a materialistic idea of the production and possession of a certain determinate feeling that we can both isolate and

communicate socially. Aesthetic experience is like a rock, and its enemy is liquid, fluidity. It is said that all began in water, and indeed, it took us centuries to control our relationship with fluids. The history of hygiene is not only the history of epidemiology but also that of a strong—and necessary—boundary-making between the body and fluids. The history of these norms that prohibited us from being “fluid” is the history of governance: it is illegal to urinate or defecate in public, or to throw unclear water on the streets; condoms are used to prevent semen from entering the body of another. These are ways to draw boundaries, to understand the body as a container that is separated from what is outside of it, from others. But this does not only include the toilet or the condom or the hygienic pad or systems of sanitation; aesthetic experiences are also part of this economy of cleanliness and separation, of objects and bodies that evoke a more pristine and unpolluted kind of experience.

I used to love the writing of Zygmunt Bauman (1925–2017) until he started to elaborate on liquid as a problem. He portrays liquid as a trait of our post-capitalist condition, but not as the necessary opening of boundaries of identity and the body. Instead, he explains it as a new return to a Sisyphean condition; just that now, instead of attempting to shift a solid rock, we spend unending hours digitally tasking with smartphones and computers. Bauman’s hero is condemned to texting and internet dating. In his words, the liquid modern is forever at work, eternally replacing the quality of relationships with quantity. It’s a pity that Bauman sees the problem in the streams of water and fluid and the indistinctiveness between us and machines. His perspective is similar to complaining about new generations being “absorbed” by screens or not being able to read linearly. But things are only this way because we invest so much in a technology that allows us to break the straight line. To navigate today is to move and flow in a complex stream of text, to engage with a collage of words, phrases, and images that make some people believe we are losing our focus.

Philosopher Vilém Flusser (1920–1991) is one of the few who think positively about this abandonment of the line, of definitive forms. In 1988 he visited the Ars Electronica festival in Osnabrück, Germany, where he gave an interesting interview in which he told how words can simply no longer describe the world. He explained how we are at the end of a single code: the alphabet. The alphabet was not only a radical invention that, more than 3,500 years ago, provided a unique code to form words and describe reality, but it was also at the core of the genesis of our notion of “historical time.” The end of the alphabet’s hegemony implies the possibility of finally embracing a “broader” stream. Here, knowledge gets its form not from a single argumentative and critical logic but from a dance of a million entanglements and ideas and materials that compose a convoluted new ocean of knowledge. We are not ready to take this as it is now; we first need a different notion of the sensual and the senses, as well as different hypotheses to link biological organs with material and technological ones.

There is nothing metaphysical or magical or esoteric or even irrational in a potential return to a defense of liquidity. It merely designates the happy difficulty we have with amorphous life and our fear of being gobbled up by it. Culture has expressed this fear many times, and it was probably the sixteenth-century French humanist François Rabelais (1494–1553) who articulated it best. In his literature, Rabelais stressed two key notions for the time to come: extravagance and the importance of unintelligibility. It does not work to take Navarro’s artistic attempts to morph into other beings too seriously. There is a brutal lightness in the way he transforms into a turtle (*Timeless Alex*, 2015), and even more so when he becomes an octopus (*Octopia*, 2016, a work with 80 dancers), because it is something bigger—it requires other humans to volunteer to become one with him; it is Pantagruelian and beautifully extravagant. His imagination and invitation to others to participate are motivated by an out-of-proportion kind of humor; otherwise he would be just another power-seeker leading a group into a conversion that will transform nothing but life into its eventual destruction. It

is a radical gesture to invite others to become an octopus, and even if it is conceived as a fiction, a temporary metamorphosis, its effects and the power of the transformation will never be known until the participants actually do it.

Navarro's octopus is not the same as that incredible animal living under the sea, but imagine the thoughts of each and every individual when attaching to each other. Imagine being hungry but unable to stop and eat or even claim hunger because, once attached to that enormous body that exercises synchronicity, it is not empathetic to draw attention to just one small stomach. There are at least 80 stomachs in this octopus, 160 ears that hear differently, 80 noses that smell differently, another 160 eyes that see the body, the structure, space, light, forms, textures differently. Think about how many square meters of skin and millions of nerve endings this "dry" octopus has. The complex intermingling in becoming-mollusk is a sort of simultaneous self-discovery and discovery of the animal. I quote Michel de Montaigne (1533–1592) on the "life" of the male sexual member in order to explicate and defend this thesis:

How often do the involuntary movements of our features reveal what we are secretly thinking and betray us to those about us! The same cause that governs this member, without our knowing it governs the heart, the lungs, and the pulse, the sight of a charming object imperceptibly spreading within us the flame of a feverish emotion. Are these the only muscles and veins that swell and subside without the consent, not only of our will, but even of our thoughts? . . . How much more justifiably can we brand [our will] with rebellion and sedition, on account of its constant irregularities and disobedience! Does it not often desire, to our obvious disadvantage, what we forbid it to? Does it let itself be guided, either, by the conclusions of our reason? In short, I ask you on behalf of my noble client kindly to reflect that, although his case in this matter is inseparably and indistinguishably joined with that of an accomplice, nevertheless he alone is attacked, and with such arguments and accusations as, seeing the condition of the parties, cannot possibly appertain to or concern the said accomplice. Wherefore the malice and manifest injustice of his accusers is apparent.⁴

Let me appeal to your sense of humor to pair this movement below that Montaigne so well describes with the intention to transform into an octopus. "Metamorphosis" implies fluidity, liminality, and processes of change. As a scientific term, it characterizes the abrupt biological development of a species after hatching or birth. This idea of an in-between space or state of growth, transition, and transformation has captured the imagination of philosophers, poets, and writers throughout history. In rejecting essentialist-fixed identity categories, feminist scholars too have sought to understand how gender intersects with other identities, paying attention to how these are performed in and through gendered bodies.

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⁴ Michel De Montaigne, *Essays* (1580), transl. John M. Cohen (London: Penguin Books, 1993), pp. 42–44.