Queering the Green Man, Reframing the Garden: Marina Zurkow’s Mesocosm (Northumberland UK) and the Theatre of Species

by Una Chaudhuri

Current attitudes towards climate change are ruthlessly captured and sketched in the title of a solo performance by California-born performance artist Heather Woodbury. Blinking on the title of a long-running, though recently cancelled, daytime soap opera, Woodbury’s work is called “As the Globe Warms.” The title captures in a slogan way that the scale of the climate change whose species has ever faced is transmuted into yet another contentious and invidious aspect of “the new normal,” a self-encapsulating yet instantly normalized account of social and political reality, produced and sustained by the mass media. Acknowledging the looming crisis while also characterizing it as inevitable, this discourse turns climate into yet another neoliberal aspect of “the new normal,” a vaguely unsettling yet instantly normalized artist Heather Woodbury. Riffing on the title of a long-running, though recently biopower, the practice of the state’s control over the biological lives of its increasingly dispossessed citizens. Like the programmatically endless “war on terror,” the idea of an unavoidable drift towards climatic extremes helps to normalize events like state-mandated evacuations, removal of populations, increased monitoring and surveillance of public spaces, and mass medical interventions—all unfolding in the name of “protection” and “caution.”

Within the mechanisms of biopower, the contested and mystified idea of climate change plays out not only on human bodies, but also on the vital links between human bodies and their physical environments, and more specifically on their modes of experiencing, thinking, and feeling those environments. To use a term with traction in recent animal studies, climate change is played out on the human umwelt. A key term in the biosemiotics of Jacques Bertillon, the umwelt consists of those aspects of an organism’s environment that the organism responds or reacts to. It is the organism’s experienced world, and is located neither within the organism nor outside it, but rather streams between the two in a process of perpetual on-creation and mutual generation. Therefore, as a concept, umwelt resists the operations of biopower that divide organisms from their environments through binaries such as inside/outside, self/other, and subject/object.

The rejection of binaries also makes the umwelt a useful site for the elaboration of a new orientation towards the environment that is unfolding under the banner of “ queer ecology.” This discourse links queer theory’s cultural critique of heteronormativity to recent scientific studies that challenge the ideological fiction of a helpful and protective natural order by documenting the vast array of reproductive mechanisms and sexual and gender behaviors found in the natural world. Queer theory’s historic interest in unsettlng established categories finds a congenial ally in the taxonomic anti-realist of Michel Foucault’s account of the production of scientific knowledge, which throws the very idea of stable systems and fixed categories into question. Transposed into the realm of biology and ecology, queer theory’s emphasis on “fluidity, hyper-inclusivity, indeterminacy, indefinability, unknowability, the prepositional, impossibility, unthinkability, unintelligibility, meaninglessness, and that which is unrepresentable” initiates an ecological project that stresses the non-deterministic and non-essential implications of Darwinian theory. As critic Timothy Morton puts it: “ Evolution means that life forms are made of other life forms. Entities are mutually determining: they exist in relation to each other and derive from each other. Nothing exists independently, and nothing comes from nothing.”

Adapting queer theory’s program of undoing normative entailments and fashioning alternative imaginaries, queer ecology proposes a post-Romantic view of nature that vigorously deconstructs the nature/culture binary of traditional environmental thought and assumes an interdependency among life-forms, rejecting the view of organisms as autonomous, holistic entities. Most importantly, it sets a new goal for the ecological imagination different from the synoptic and sentimental one symbolized by the “ blue planet” icon of earlier ecological thought: “Instead of insisting on being part of something bigger,” Morton writes, “ we should be working with intimacies.”

Intimacy and umwelt are two key components of an ecological art practice I call “ the theatre of species,” which aspires to unsettle some of the assumptions upon which biopower rests. The practice exists at the intersection of several fields: Ecocriticism, which studies how environmental realities and discourses are reflected in literature, and, the media; Animal Studies, which explores the vast array of cultural animal practices that human beings are involved in; and Theatre and Performance Studies. While the latter may seem to be the odd one out, the first two have also, until recently, been disconnected. What has finally put them into conversation is the looming spectres of climate change and the long-overdue recognition that humans are one species among many that are facing unprecedented threats to survival. Climate change transforms familiar sites into landscapes of catastrophe, or at least into landscapes of risk and uncertainty. Those are the landscapes that the theatre of species wants to acknowledge, create, examine, and inhabit.

An extraordinary example of such a landscape, Marina Zurkow’s animated landscape portrait, Mesocosm (Northumberland, UK), exemplifies several strategies of the theatre of species, the two most important being the relocation and mobilization of artistic experience. In this work, the former occurs through one of the richest archetypal sites, the garden. The latter occurs through an engagement with the frame, a feature of visual art that recently received a heteronormative natural order by documenting the vast array of reproductive mechanisms and sexual and gender behaviors found in the natural world. Queer theory’s historic interest in unsettling established categories finds a congenial ally in the taxonomic anti-realist of Michel Foucault’s account of the production of scientific knowledge, which throws the very idea of stable systems and fixed categories into question. Transposed into the realm of biology and ecology, queer theory’s emphasis on “ fluidity, hyper-inclusivity, indeterminacy, indefinability, unknowability, the prepositional, impossibility, unthinkability, unintelligibility, meaninglessness, and that which is unrepresentable” initiates an ecological project that stresses the non-deterministic and non-essential implications of Darwinian theory. As critic Timothy Morton puts it: “ Evolution means that life forms are made of other life forms. Entities are mutually determining: they exist in relation to each other and derive from each other. Nothing exists independently, and nothing comes from nothing.”

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Mesocosm is a video animation representing the passage of one year on the moors of Northumberland, UK. One hour of world-time elapses in each minute of screen time, so that a complete cycle lasts 144 hours: “Seasons unfold, days pass, moons rise and set, animals come and go,” and “a centrally located and almost omnipresent human figure. The figures that appear suggest an open, even infinite, set of beings and phenomena, unconstrained by taxonomic limits; there are cows, owls, ravens, squires, lines, men, women, children, humans in animal costumes, butterflies, refugees, caterpillars, swarms of insects, bats, rabbits, dumpsters, trucks, steamrollers, vans, calves, dogs, hares, fairies, dragonflies, inchworms, midges, spiders, fikers, bikes, horses, ponies, sheep, lambs, swallows, clouds, smokestacks, fog, pollen, shadows, garbage, leaves, petals, pollen, snow, rain, sleek, and wind.” This is, indeed, as the artist says in her notes on the work, “an expanded view of what constitutes ‘nature.’” It is also a capacious rendezvous of intimacies, stagign the endless communicative events and interactions that shape the experience of human and other animals.

No cycle is identical to the last, as the appearance and behavior of human and non-human characters, as well as changes in the weather, are determined by a code using a simple probability equation. This built-in indeterminacy is one of several features that align the work with queer ecology, which emphasizes the emergent, non-deterministic nature of evolution. In tandem with the work’s long duration (to see a whole year unfold takes almost a week), this indeterminacy implies and encourages a special kind of spectatorship: more casual and peripheral than concentrated, more peripatetic and mobile than fixed. It is a spectatorship that accommodates the rhythms of everyday life, and construes the work as a frame and context for those rhythms as much as a repository of images, events, narrative, and ideas. Experienced as a frame for the spectator’s ongoing and experiencing the frame, the frame exploding through the movement it can no longer contain.

Though the temporality of Mesocosm is relaxed and capacious, its rendition of the human umwelt is founded on a conception of life as volatile, capricious, random, and unpredictable.
The special kind of enjoyment offered by gardens makes them particularly rich sites for ecologically oriented cultural theory, because the recreation they offer involves contemplating the re-creation of the natural world. The garden is the site of a complex—and potentially queer—circuitry that links human creativity to organic growth and, as such, a space and practice that challenges the ideologically influential nature/culture binary. One classic formulation of the debate around this binary (in the “nature vs. art” version) appears in The Winter’s Tale, where Shakespeare’s characters argue about whether horticultural practices like grafting are natural or otherwise. Perdita’s characterization of the cross-bred “gillyvors” in her garden as “nature’s bastards,” is challenged by her father Polixenes, who argues that:

Nature is made better by no mean
But nature makes that mean: so, over that art
Which nature makes, that mean: so, over that art
Which you say adds to nature, is an art
Which does mend nature, change it rather, but
That art itself is nature.

The interplay between art and nature that Polixenes asserts is nowhere better seen than in the garden, which also makes it a site for trying out, testing, or simply indulging—the creative potential and affective challenge—of this new role on—an unaccustomed ecological role. Presence is a part of this experiment, and invites spectators to try out—or try

Seeing Moscovum as a theatre of species begins with noticing a seemingly simple structural feature of the work: the ever-changing scene depicted in the work is bordered on one side by an expansive black area. This area functions as a frame, but one that can be entered, crossed, and occupied—though not, it seems, inhabited. When animals walk or run into the black space around the narrow band landscape in the middle of the screen—and also when the human figure himself

Man, another archetypal figure for the interdependence of art and nature. A common decorative motif of medieval sculpture, the foliate faces of this human-vegetable adorn churches, cathedrals, and secular buildings dating from the Middle Ages. Branches, leaves, and vines surround the faces of these figures, and often sprout from their mouths, noses, and ears. Figures of fertility and abundance—not to mention boundary-breaching—growth, these species-crossing vegetable men were inherited from pre-Christian and pagan traditions of nature-worship. But they are equally at home in the contemporary, non-deterministic, and anti-essentialist biologies that dominate current ecological discourse; where boundaries are, as Morton writes, “blur[ed] and confound[ed] at practically any level: between species, between the living and the non-living, between organisms and environment.”

The human figure at the (de-centred) centre of Moscovum is a living, recasting Green Man for our age, a queer response to the increasing threat of biopower in the Anthropocene. He is the protagonist of a new theatre of species.
That spatial configuration supports both a theatre of isolated individualism as well as an anthropocentric theatre, framing the exemplary or heroic human figure and transforming everything non-human into mere scenery. Zurins’s theatre-buried landscape suggests ways to unseat the secure spectator and plunge him into the unpredictable terrain of life understood ecologically. The keys to this re-visioning, or queering, of stage space are the position and behavior—and the astonishing art-historical lineage (from performance art, to painting, to video animation)—of the large human figures that dominate the foreground.

In his lifetime, Bowery’s “legend” was keyed to the extraordinary costumes he designed, built, and wore—vast, mauled carapaces of bright fabrics smothered in sequins and feathers. But, in a reversal that he himself would have relished, Bowery’s pencil-drawn image is likely to be resolutely ancholthed. This is thanks to the surprising role that Bowery played toward the end of his short life, as muse and model to one of the greatest of modern painters, Lucian Freud. Freud’s documentary provides a delicious account of the moment this transformation occurred, this metamorphosis of a monstrously over-coded cultural icon into a mountain of flesh: Bowery had been invited to sit for Freud because his over-dressed style posed such a challenge to the renowned painter of disturbing, challenging nudes. But, while they were getting ready to start working, and while Freud’s back was turned, Bowery took off all his clothes and assumed Freud would be painting him naked.

The central figure of Mesocosm, then, is an incarna-
tion of Bowery who has escaped the “too solid flesh” of Freud’s canvas to inhabit an eternity of jittery animation in a rural landscape. From his earliest life he has brought along another feature even more subversive here than it was in Freud’s painting: he turns his back on us. In a recent article entitled “The Seated Figure on Beckett’s Stage,” Enoch Brater shows how the absurdist master complete and deconstructs a historical process in which the seated figure on stage went from being an emblem of authority in the public sphere of Renaissance drama to a symbol of inanimus in the private worlds of 19th-century psychological realism.10 The posterior view of the figure in Mesocosm initiates what I read as his challenging dialectic with anthropocentric stage presence, and thus as one strategy—though admittedly borrowed from painting—for the theatre of spaces he anchors. The strategy involves a kind of insistent embodiment: foregrounding biological presence, “backgrounding” psychological being.

However, the two things that most surprise us about Zurins’s Bowery are also those that distinguish him from Freud’s: First, as already mentioned, he gets up and walks out of the frame. Second, he allows various small creatures not only to climb on him and sit on him but also to feed on him, producing the only specks of color—blood red—in the work. This scandalous symbiosis, based on a novel intimacy, suggests a queer updating of the ancient motif of the Green Man in the context of an anti-essentialist, relational ecology. The queer Green Man of Mesocosm contributes a personal and artistic history that is deeply relevant to his role in this “expanded apprehension of what constitutes nature,” a history that makes him the ideal protagonist for a post-anthropocentric, post-picturesque stage of species. His travels between genres and games have prepared him for the more challenging transit ahead, the journey between species.

The confidence with which Zurins’s Bowery occupies this rural landscape represents the defeat of a long and contradictory cultural construction of the relationship between homosexuality and nature. As Andil Gosine writes in a recent article, “Homosexual sex has been represented in dominant renderings of ecology and environmentalism as in-compatable and threatening to nature. [The con-
struction of this prejudice is related to the fact that] in its early incarnations, North American environmentalism was conceived as a response to industrial urbanization. As homosexuality was associated with the degeneracy of the city, the creation of remote recreational wild space and the denigration of ‘healthy’ green spaces inside cities was understood partly as a ‘therapeutic’ route to the social rumours of effeminate homosexuality.”11

Ironically, these very spaces began to be used by gay men looking for sex. When the gay practice of “cruising” forged an uncomfortable connection between homosexuality and public parks, it incurred a new punitive discourse that sought to re-establish homosexuals from nature, this time by equat-
ing their presence there with pollution, contamination, and danger to the community and its “family values.”12

So, the greenness of the Mesocosm of Bowery’s death performance art, the extravagant physicality of Lucian Freud’s figures come together to queer the fragile land-
scape of the Anthropocene.

The main figure in Mesocosm is based on the Australian performance artist, designer, and drag queen Leigh Bowery, who helped to catalyze an extraordinarily interdisciplinary experimental art scene in London and New York in the 1980s. In Charles Atlas’s documentary film, The Legend of Leigh Bowery, a colleague of Bowery’s describes him as the “the greatest of the great outrageous Australians of the modern world,” a man utterly committed to challenging every assumption, breaching every boundary, and deconstructing every artistic or social convention he could lay his gigantic hands on.13

Notes
1. See Jacob van Tilburg, “An Intro-
duction to Beckett,” in Jonathan 11
2. See Bruce Bagemihl, Biological 8
3. Noreen Giffney and Myra Hird, 6
4. Timothy Morton, “Guest Column: 4
5. Stanislav Grof, “The Shaman’s 12
7. Marina Zurkow, still from Mesocosm
8. Ibid., 17.
20. Andil Gosine, “Non-White Repro-
duction and Same-Sex Eroticism: 16
21. Gordon Nugent, Theatre in Art Jour-
22. Gordon Nugent, Theatre Criti-
cism, 2nd ed. (Berkeley: University of 17
23. Gordon Nugent, Theatre Criti-
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