

Tentacular Aesthetics: Artistic Encounters beyond the Human

Estética tentacular: Encontros artísticos além do Humano

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ABSTRACT

This article explores how the image of animals—specifically the octopus—has shifted in contemporary art from passive symbol or exotic spectacle to creative agent within the framework of the Chthulucene. Drawing on animal studies, ethology, and evolutionary aesthetics, and guided by theorists such as Deleuze, Haraway, and Morton, among others, the paper advocates for animal's expression as a form of art. The octopus, known for its intelligence and unique physiology, is central to artworks that challenge anthropocentric views. Case studies include installations and performances by Pascal Marcel Dreier, Hörner/Antlfinger, Shimabuku, Laitinen, and Madison Bycroft, which engage in interspecies communication and relational aesthetics. These artistic practices invite sensitive, non-linear, and empathetic ways of knowing that destabilize binary and positivist thinking. Recognizing animal creativity is proposed as both a political and ethical act—one that expands the field of art and repositions the human.

KEYWORDS

Tentacular aesthetics, Interspecies art, Animal creativity

RESUMO

Este artigo explora como a imagem dos animais — especificamente do polvo — deslocou-se, na arte contemporânea, de símbolo passivo ou espetáculo exótico para agente criativo, no contexto do Chthuluceno. Com base nos estudos animais, na etologia e na estética evolutiva, e guiado por teóricas e teóricos como Deleuze, Haraway e Morton, dentre outros, o texto defende a expressão dos animais como uma forma de arte. O polvo, conhecido por sua inteligência e fisiologia singular, ocupa um papel central em obras que desafiam visões antropocêntricas. Estudos de caso incluem instalações e performances de Pascal Marcel Dreier, Hörner/Antlfinger, Shimabuku, Laitinen e Madison Bycroft, que promovem comunicação interespecie e estéticas relacionais. Essas práticas artísticas convidam a formas de conhecimento sensíveis, não lineares e empáticas, que desestabilizam o pensamento binário e positivista. Reconhecer a criatividade animal é proposto como um ato político e ético — que expande o campo da arte e reposiciona o humano

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Estética tentacular, Arte interespecíes, Criatividade animal

Art in the Chthulucene

Animals have always inspired artists and were always used in creative productions. In his influential essay “Why Look at Animals”, John Berger claimed that animals were the first subject matter and first metaphors and that animal blood was the first paint (BERGER, 1980). Throughout the centuries animals in art have been consumed as exhibition pieces, manipulated as objects of study or for the pure spectacle, rendered as material or anthropomorphised (ULLRICH, 2019). They functioned as substitutes, stand-ins, specimen representing a particular mental category, the abstract concept of animality, a vague ideal of

“nature” or simply the Other. Hence the use of animals was based on a hierarchy of beings: Creative human artists forced passive animals into images and their agency disappeared behind their symbolic or metaphoric meaning. But in recent years the attitude by which artists approach animals has changed. Influenced by academic animal studies and new insights in ethology and cognition studies, paired with a general strengthening of animal protection and animal rights as well as a growing ecological consciousness, artists increasingly perceive animals as social and historical actors.

Scholars of evolutionary aesthetics like Wolfgang Welsch, Katya Mandoki, or Richard Prum are even looking for the ontology of art in biology (WELSCH, 2004; MANDOKI, 2013; PRUM, 2017). They assume that human art emerged from animal activities. Music is thought to have developed from bird song, architecture from animal dwellings, dance from courtship display. Gilles Deleuze read animal traces or animal signs as expression of artistic agency (DELEUZE, 1988). He compared the marking of a territory with the birth of art itself. Marking can be a certain posture, sitting, standing, singing, or changing of color of an animal. According to Deleuze all these forms of expression are related and prior to the essential features of art like line, color, or song. Also, philosopher Tristan Garcia accepts the notion of art by animals (GARCIA, 2018) and in her recent book Carol Gigliotti gives many fascinating examples of animal creativity (GIGLIOTTI, 2022).

It may well be that creative productions by animals possess aesthetic dimensions that cannot be appreciated by a human audience but only by the animals themselves. Considering that there might be aesthetic aspects to animal art, for example related to hearing in very high or very low frequencies or other sensing abilities like for example chemical communication, that are not even detectable by humans, it becomes clear that humans are not the best art critics for the creative productions of animals.

That is especially true for a species like the octopus which is so different than the ones human beings usually cohabitate with. But nevertheless, octopuses have long occupied human imagination. They have been regarded as monsters, as surreal wonder of nature or creature from outer space. Especially in the last decade the octopus as a species has not only met a lot of scholarly, public, and artistic interest, their popular image has changed quite a bit. Much like their malleable form, the meaning that has been assigned to them has never been fixed. In contemporary discourse the octopus and their queer qualities can thus either function as chance to come to terms with the current crisis of Gaia or they can represent the incomprehensible dangers threatening the world as we know it.

Even their symbolic identity is fluid: Octopuses can stand for self-sacrificing motherhood, global capitalism, multitasking, or queerness. Timothy Morton called on an octopus to explain his concept of hyperobjects (MORTON, 2013) and Donna Haraway has used the octopus as metaphor for a much-needed tentacular thinking and decentralized perception in the Chthulucene (HARAWAY, 2016). Haraway introduces the Chthulucene as an alternative to the anthropocentric term Anthropocene for an “elsewhere an elsewhere that was, still is and might yet be” (HARAWAY, 2016, p.31) that takes into account the agency of other-than-human beings: “Unlike the dominant dramas of Anthropocene and Capitalocene discourse, human beings are not the only important actors in the Chthulucene, with all other beings able simply to react. (HARAWAY, 2016, p. 55).

Nature writing or popular science books like *The soul of an octopus: A surprising exploration into the wonder of consciousness* by Sy Montgomery (MONTGOMERY, 2016) and *Other minds. The octopus and the revolution of intelligent life* by Peter Godfrey-Smith (GODFREY-SMITH, 2018) stress the intelligence and sentience of the species. Even when admired, their strangeness is particularly emphasized and exaggerated. Godfrey-Smith writes: “This is probably the closest we will come to meeting an intelligent alien.” (GODFREY-SMITH, 2018 p. 9)

And they are very different from human beings indeed. They live at the bottom of the sea, have three hearts, blue blood, eight independent arms and a brain distributed throughout the body. They can change skin color and texture. If an arm is cut off, it grows back. But neuroscientist Lori Marino has pointed out how dangerous it can be to only focus on the octopus' alterity and overlooking the fact that they share important features with us (MARINO, 2020). In embryonic development, the generalized structural body plan of octopuses and humans is very similar. We know from recent studies in octopus biology, behavior, emotions, and consciousness that just like mammals, they have individual personalities, good memory and plan for the future. They can unscrew jars, solve mazes, use tools, escape from aquariums, and resist laboratory experiments by refusing to cooperate. And of course, they can suffer. Movies like *Oh brother octopus* (KUNERT, 2017) or *My octopus teacher* (EHRLICH, REED, 2020) stress the kinship and possibility of friendship with octopuses. They develop relationships with human caretakers. They are “like and unlike us”. (BERGER, 1980, p. 13)

And octopuses are closely linked to the notion of art. The aesthetic capacities of octopuses are very sophisticated. They are illusion artists and spectacular performers, they can handle colors like a painter, represent their environment like a photographer, mold their

bodies like a sculptor and with their ink they can make self-portraits, so-called pseudomorphs. They build cities, collect beautiful things to decorate their homes, they pretend, they invent, they dream, they play and express their emotions.

Their nervous system is not centralized but spread between the brain and her eight arms. The arms, besides having a sense of touch and taste, are autonomous and have the capacity to make decisions. Art historian Chus Martínez claims, that art is what allows us to imagine this form of decentralized perception. It enables us to sense the world in ways beyond language. “Art is the octopus in love.” (MARTINEZ, 2014)

Godfrey-Smith compares the octopus to a jazz orchestra, each arm improvising independently yet in unison. Media philosopher Vilém Flusser uses the vampire squid, a close relative of the octopus, as a metaphor for photography (FLUSSER, 2015).

Encountering Octopuses in Art

No wonder that artists in the Chthulucene increasingly take interest in octopus’ agency, creativity, sentience, and ethics. Some artists focus on specific octopuses trying to give access to alternate worldviews in imaginary, experimental and storytelling ways.

German artist Pascal Marcel Dreier for example deals with octopuses’ experiences in violent soundscapes in the two-channel video work *Subaquatic Soundscapes* (2019). A compassionate poem by the Korean poet Jeong Ho-seung (*1950) inspired the work. Here is a short passage:

Even if you go to Sinchon - Do not eat octopus with sesame oil anymore
Served on old plastic plates - While their cut off arms are writhing in despair
How full of grief will the sea then be - When we put them into our mouths [...]
They have to be spared - For they miss the sea even as they die. (JEONG, 2016, n.p.)

On one screen we see images of octopuses at fish markets and on the other screen a spectrogram that visualizes sounds (DREIER, 2020). The work consists of three chapters with the images being always the same but a different soundtrack and spectrogram for each chapter. Intermittent titles explain the audio. The first part of the work states: “I went to Seoul to explore the underwater soundscapes of fish tanks on wet market. I found four aquariums already running but with no animals inside. Without disturbing already stressed beings I recorded what you and they are about to hear.” (SUBAQUATIC SOUNDSCAPES, 2019) Scenes of various basins and buckets in which stacked octopuses are offered for sale show individual animals trying in vain to escape the situations, climbing over their conspecifics,

sometimes even out of the containers. Technical equipment like water hoses and filter systems keep the water fresh to ensure at least a short-term survival of the animals. They make bubbling, splashing, whooshing, and gurgling noises. Regardless of being sure whether octopuses can hear at all, one can imagine that the noise under water is even more unbearable and thus puts the animals in great distress.

In the second part of the video, we hear and see sounds that squids, close relatives to octopuses, were exposed to in laboratory experiments to test their reaction to different volumes and frequencies. We are informed that the animals reacted to the sounds with behavior associated with avoiding predators, so by fleeing, splashing ink, or changing color. The noises are not as loud as in the first part. It has to be presumed that the background noise at the fish market is even more unbearable, stressful and frightening to the octopuses. In the third part viewers are confronted with underwater sound caused “by the construction of wind farms, ferry slips, and the operation of oil platforms.”, sounds that travel thousands of miles through the ocean. The work not only addresses the auditory experience of the animals who are caught and eaten, but also the situation of the animals who suffer in laboratories or from anthropogenic noise pollution in the ocean. The montage in a loop underlines the agonizing duration of these situations. In his scientific fable *Vampyroteuthis infernalis*, Vilém Flusser asks human beings in their “vertebrate existence” (FLUSSER, 1987, p. 13) “to overcome anthropocentrism and to look at the world “from the point of view of cephalopods” (FLUSSER, 1987, p. 15). With his work Dreier somehow realized what Flusser promoted: “a new way of philosophizing” as “collaboration between discursive and imaginary reason from which something new emerges”. All three soundscapes can be experienced physically and, in combination with the images of octopuses fleeing in panic, provide a haunting experience of the hostility towards ocean life in the anthropocene. And the video captures the octopuses’ active resistance and their will to survive.

In *Visiting Octopus* (2019), the German artist duo Hörner/Antlfinger portrait captive octopuses in different aquariums. For each individual they show a Google Earth View image of the location, a black and white photo of the building's facade, a black and white photo of the tank with the octopus inside, and wall text describing an empathy exercise and an audio recording with the background noise on site and an oral description of the situation. The media and the perspective change, the more the spatial and psychological distance to the octopus decreases. The Google Earth image as an apparently neutral map view that one would consult when looking for a tourist attraction alludes to a disembodied view from space, a surveillance perspective of Earth and the omnipresence of capitalist global networks. The

photos of the facade of the aquariums present a typology of the different framings to display octopuses. There are for example allusions to scientific laboratory situations, natural history museums, or places of spectacle like cinemas. The photos of the tanks show the various stereotypical staging methods: the miniature of a sunken city, vases, replicas of caves or diving helmets. All these theatrical backdrops are designed for human visitors only. For the animals, the tanks only represent the smallest possible habitat in which they can survive.

They also provide texts with transcriptions of their empathy exercises. They learned the technique of guided imagination, which has roots in shamanistic practices, from an animal communicator. It involves a trance or limbic resonance that begins with breathing in sync with an animal and politely asking permission to slip into his or her body and then waiting for sensations, thoughts, and ideas to appear. The practice ends with the expression of gratitude to the octopus for their hospitality. With their approach, Hörner/Antlfinger draw on contemporary scholarship on intuitive interspecies communication that discusses such alternative methodologies as attempts to engaging animals as active partners in knowledge production and as an innovative way to deepen understanding on animal standpoints. Through imaginative shapeshifting, the artists divert the attention from the violent framing of the individual through capture, staging, total control, labeling, etc., back to her own agency, history, and subjectivity. By strategically using anthropomorphism, they introduce the octopuses as active narrator in a shared story. By speculatively reversing the perspective of observer and observed, Hörner/Antlfinger refuse to see octopuses as objects of knowledge or entertainment and insist that they are subjects with their own worldview who are able to reflect their situation.

Tentacular Aesthetics

Japanese artist Shimabuku who has worked with free living octopuses since the 1990s also believes that octopuses have a rich inner life. He is best known for his video *Then, I Decided to Give a Tour of Tokyo to the Octopus from Akashi* from 2000, where he temporarily transferred an octopus in a human space. In a later work Shimabuku made ceramic pots that are traditionally used by fishermen, caught an octopus, interacted with him and released him again. Alfred Gell has shown that animal traps embody complex ideas about the relationship between humans and other animals. He argues that animal traps “[...]provide a model of the hunter himself and his idea of the world of the prey animal [...]”

and that “[...] the trap embodies a scenario, which is the dramatic nexus that binds these two protagonists together, and which aligns them in time and space.” (GELL, 1996, p. 15-27)

With his work Shimabuku reinterprets the traditional traps so that they can become hiding places or playgrounds for free-living octopuses. And he is also interested in the aesthetic preferences of octopuses: *Sculpture for Octopuses: Exploring for Their Favorite Colors* (2010) are colorful glass marbles to be given as gifts to octopuses in an attempt to establish contact across species. The animals can accept or reject the present. Unlike the ceramic pots, the offer is not functional, but entirely aesthetic. The marbles might appeal to the curiosity and sensory interests of the octopus (even though science tells us they might be color-blind). In *Octopus Stone* (2013), Shimabuku displays objects that octopuses themselves have collected, thereby telling human viewers something about their aesthetic agency. He writes:

Octopuses have a habit of picking up stones and shells from the bottom of the sea. When you pull up an octopus pot, sometimes you will find octopuses holding them. Sometimes the pot is full of them. Some octopuses like stones, and others prefer shells. Some are holding pieces of broken glass or holding red colored stones. I collect these things and admire them. (SHIMABUKU, 2013, online resource)

Shimabuku presents the octopus as designer of their own living conditions and as a curator. By cherishing objects chosen by the octopus, he values the animal's aesthetic judgement and acknowledges cephalopods as aesthetic subjects.

Finnish artist Tuomas A. Laitinen on the other hand shows an octopus as an active recipient of art. Since 2016 he has created glass objects in the shape of organs with multiple chambers, exits, and entrances as *A Proposal for an Octopus* (LAITINEN, 2019). In 2019, he put one of them in the tank of the lab octopus Napoleon resulting in the mesmerizing video *Haemocyanin* that draws its appeal from the visual contrast and the material parallel of the hard glass and the soft body. Watching the octopus exploring the object gets viewers a glimpse of his multi-sensory “tentacular thinking” and makes them realize the importance of the sense of touch in understanding the world. Laitinen is very aware of the problems of recordings in a panopticon-like aquarium. Both the conditions in a laboratory and the very filming process involve violent and objectifying appropriation. By adding visual and acoustic disruptive effects, Laitinen points to the artificiality of the framing, emphasizing his own artistic intervention and the role of the technical equipment. He works with computer-generated CGI elements in order to alienate the scenes. For example, the octopus is superimposed by computer-generated water droplets and glass bubbles, which move over the image like additional lenses, zoom in and out and constantly generate new distortions, refractions, or

magnifications, but make the octopus himself partly invisible. In a text about Jean Painlevé's iconic film *Love Life of the Octopus* (1967), Eva Hayward pointed out that techniques like magnification emphasize the optical apparatus that guides our perception, making it clear that we can never have a direct view of things (HAYWARD, 2005). The idea of being able to get insight through close observation is rejected in Laitinen's film as well. The octopus is hiding behind a technical apparatus that partly simulates the properties of glass. The camera movement is accompanied by technical sounds, suggesting a camera or scanner focusing or zooming. Thus, the active act of seeing and observing is focused on its constant medialization. Dramatic sound effects with high synthetic tones and dull sonar are reminiscent of science fiction films and underline the otherworldliness of the scene. The electronic soundscape is specifically aimed at the octopuses whose optimal frequency starts at around 600 HZ. A superimposed narration informs about physiological facts in a poetic ethogram. It says, among other things: Back to the shell. The one you shed millions of years ago. Multi-core alien brain. Haemocyanin hallucination. Deep adaptation. Your blood is blue. Infused by copper. hemocyanin. Your independent appendages. deep water minds (HAEMOCYANIN, 2019).

We learn that the title of the work refers to the protein that transports oxygen into the bodies of octopods and that contains copper, which makes the animals' blood blue.

The film is an exploration of how technology and materiality can change appearance and experience. By his use of real and computer-generated glass, Laitinen invokes the concept of diffraction as introduced by Karen Barad. In fact, a passage in the video directly addressing the animal also alludes to Barad. In reference to Barad's book *Meeting the Universe Halfway* (BARAD, 2007) it says: "you have sent your minds out into / the environment to meet it halfway". Barad uses the physical phenomenon of diffraction to characterize a form of attention and knowledge production that takes into account interactions, superimpositions and differences. In a diffractive reading everything is intertwined in a confusing, complex way, and distanced from the idea of separate and fixed entities. Rather, identities interfere and co-establish one another, so that differences are allowed to exist and flourish.

Other recurring elements are snake-like cords dancing over the screen which become more and more obscure until they finally become undulating ornamental blue lines that again appear like diffractive waves of light or sound. They are easily recognizable as abstractions of the movements of the arm of the octopus, traced graphically and depicted as CGI glyphs. The artist suggests that the octopus, with his gestural language, has his own script, a fluid and

preliminary system of signs in which language is not yet separated from the body. The forms have been picked up by Laitinen in other works as well. In interviews he refers to them as asemic writing, so to a form of writing that has no decipherable meaning.

Octopus writing is also a topic that Vinciane Despret has beautifully elaborated in her recent science fiction story *Autobiographie d'un poulpe* (DESPRET, 2021). It is a research report on the efforts to decipher an ink writing left by an octopus on a potsherd on the sea floor. The main protagonists are a young researcher from the "Association de thérolinguiste" alluding to Ursula LeGuin invention of therolinguistics as the art of reading the traces of animals (LEGUIN, 1974), and the symentant Ulysee, a child in symbiosis with an octopus which is of course an allusion to Donna Haraway's *Camille Stories* (HARAWAY, 2016), tales about children of the compost who are able to enter into symbiosis with other animals. Just like Laitinen, Despret not only builds on literary and philosophical references, but also on scientific findings and theories. Citing sources from different fields of knowledge, the protagonist expresses her belief that the ink clouds of octopuses have a complex expressiveness and contain a comment, a message or a signature like in a speech bubble. The ink is not simply a protective screen to escape behind but also forms a lure. It is not just about hiding, it's also about showing something, not just about not being seen, but about making something visible. The same can be said about Laitinen's video. But other than in Despret's book, the meaning stays enigmatic.¹

With her likewise enigmatic performance *Entitled/Untitled* from 2014, Australian artist Madison Bycroft created a touching artwork involving the body of a dead octopus (BYCROFT, 2014). The cephalopod may represent one of the many victims of man-made pollution and exploitation of the ocean. In harsh contrast to a human feeling entitled to abuse other animals, Boyd treats the dead body with respect and tenderness. In a Pietà-like manner, she cradles the individual in her arms and performs a mourning ritual, sacrificing something of herself by cutting her hair and shaving her head and momentarily attempting to become one with the octopus by putting her on top of her head so that her arms become her hair. This might be an allusion to Hélène Cixous' proposal for a Medusa-like *écriture féminine*. In *Le Rire de la Méduse* Cixous (CIXOUS, 1975) asks women to get rid of the restrictions of logocentric

¹ In the translation of the octopus' writing in Despret's book, it turns out that octopuses practice reincarnation. This also explains why they are so intelligent, even though they don't learn socially. In Despret's future, due to poisoning of the seas and overfishing, octopuses have become rare, leaving many disembodied souls of deceased octopuses in a kind of queue. That is why with her writing the octopus makes calls out to her future self as well as to a future reader: "Don't forget yourself. Do not forget me". Things that are remembered are not entirely lost. And to store memories is also a function of art, another lesson from Vilem Flussers *Vampyrotheusis*.

language and express themselves by using their body to communicate in order to move out of the patriarchal system that prioritizes reason and rhetoric. By completing her body with the octopus and temporarily reviving the octopus through her body, Bycroft creates an image of a possible mutual healing and practices a form of empathic non-understanding. In her book *Touch. Sensuous theory and Multisensory Media* (2002), Laura Marks describes the notion of “empathic non-understanding” as a “relationship that gives up the self 's need for constant affirmation” and pulls us instead into a “material understanding of our connection with other animals” (MARKS, 2002, p. 39). Bycroft recalls the responsibility humans have for the world they co-create with a powerful image of tentacular thinking. Following Donna Haraway tentacular thinking can be understood as a “[...]committed, exploratory, entangled attempt at becoming involved in each other's lives. It promotes an approach that involves both standing for something and remaining open-ended and can thereby continuously create new possibilities. (WESTERLAKEN, 2021, n.p.).

In the discussed artworks, animals lose their traditional status as mere consumable exhibition objects.

Even if the imbalance of power between humans and animals stays intact, animals in art are not incapable of acting. [...] Hence an engagement with interspecies art can open up possibilities for a relational art in which the encounter of and exchange between individuals of different species can be recognized as a productive and creative value. [...] An increasing visibility of animal artistic agency might, then, emerge as a political instrument towards further undermining a hierarchical human exceptionalism. (ULLRICH, 2019, p. 81)

If animals are no longer perceived as instinct-driven beings but as creative, social beings with whom it is possible to interact, then such a paradigm shift could contribute to their ethical recognition. On the one hand, artists instrumentalize the animals they collaborate with, yet on the other hand, they recognize that the animal's cognitive, communicative and creative abilities have a world-making, aesthetic dimension.

In any event, interspecies collaboration is possible even without fully mutual understanding. Some kind of attunement or resonance might be enough to challenge species hierarchies and to point to the possibility of another, more empathic way of relating to the world.

All discussed artworks challenge a positivistic, anthropocentric image and understanding of animals. The emotions, perceptions, cognition, and aesthetics of animals are taken seriously while allowing the involved individuals to exist in their significant otherness. They all emphasize that animals are not resources, ornaments, or symbols, but individuals with their own worldview and agency who live in multiple relations and

entanglements with humans. They tell stories of multispecies worlds and sympoetic co-existence.

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About

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