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New Animals

by

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Submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
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Table of Contents

Acknowledgements	1
All Thoughts are in the Past at All Times	3
What Can a Cow Do?	6
Clearing a Path to Force	10
Cave	11
Bibliography	13
Image list for thesis show images	14
Installation images	15

The pre-Buddhist Bon civilization of Tibet contained very accurate indications of how to treat the psychic force left behind by a dead person, the footprints or temperature, so to speak, which is left behind when he is gone¹

All Thoughts are in the Past at All Times

In the previous century, philosopher Martin Buber managed to formulate an equation of two ways to encounter the world and the things in it. He referred to our contact with the world as “attitude”, and there are two kinds of attitude we can have. For Buber, these two different ways to relate to the world are like two positions we can occupy, as if they were two “basic words”² we can speak to the world. One is “I-You,” and the other is “I- It.”³ These are two different modes of being, both of which we experience in changing capacities.

Basic words are spoken with one’s being. [...]

The basic word I-You can only be spoken with one’s whole being.

The basic word I-It can never be spoken with one’s whole being.⁴

¹ Karma-glin-pa, Fremantle, F. and Trungpa, C., 2019. *The Tibetan book of the dead*. Shambala, p.3.

² Buber, M., 1970. *I And Thou*. Scribners. p.53.

³ Ibid.

⁴ “The basic word I-You can only be spoken with one’s whole being. The basic word I-It can never be spoken with one’s whole being” Buber, M., 1970. *I And Thou*. Scribners. p.54.

Whether we stand in front of a person, an animal, a plant or an object, the I-It relation is one of categorization, rationalization, examination, and definition. All these act as fixed concepts, known to us from the past. The I-It is the relation in which we exist during the absolute majority of the time. I-It allows us to retain distance from the other, apply judgment, analyze, prioritize, ignore some things and focus on others. On the other hand, the I-You relation, which too can be experienced in an encounter with the other, living or still, is one of the impossible-to-translate moments. Within it, prior knowledge has no meaning, and the relation is defined by its totality. “You has no borders”.⁵

The I-You cannot be summoned, nor forced. It is a type of trance or bliss. Buber takes upon himself the challenge to describe a transition from I-It into I-You relation with the example of contemplating a tree. A difficult challenge indeed, since the experience of being in I-You exists only outside of language.⁶ “If will and grace are joined, that as I contemplate the tree I am drawn into a relation, and the tree ceases to be an It. The power of exclusiveness has seized me [...] What I encounter is neither the soul of a tree nor a dryad, but the tree itself.”⁷ The I-You is a space where things are met in their most direct way, where, in Buber’s words, we encounter the thing itself.

The I-You is imagined as a type of trance, one where thought is arrested. In Hindu philosophy, moments like that are described as the goal of meditation, the state of *samādhi*. The teachings of Ramana Maharshi state clearly that stopping the flow of thoughts is crucial to gain access to the present moment. Thoughts are concealing reality and keeping us in a loop of

⁵ Buber, M., 1970. *I And Thou*. Scribners. p.55.

⁶ “The relation vibrates in the dark and remains below language [...] it lacks but creates language”. Ibid. p.57.

⁷ Buber, M., 1970. *I And Thou*. Scribners. p.59.

illusion.⁸ Buber sees thinking similarly: thought is occupied with classification and judgment, which keeps us in the realm of I-It, pulls us further away from the encounter with the thing itself. “O mysteriousness without mystery, O pilgrim of information! It, it, it!” he cries.⁹ In his description of the contemplation on the tree it is clear enough that when one enters I-You relation, thought evaporates.

Such fragments of time when we are absorbed in the totality of experiencing the other as infinite and whole are not simply passing experiences, they have a long term effect on us, as well - experiencing another being in such a way, we are also aware of our own internal vastness. Instead of focusing on classification, so defined by limits, we can allow ourselves to be suspended in a space of abstraction. Once again, “You has no boundaries”. By entering the I-You relation we relate differently to ourselves as well.

Encounters with art have the potential to generate situations that allow us to experience moments of I-You relation. Such occurrences point to the most crucial role art can play. Art that is capable of giving rise to such rare happenings is incredibly generous, and ends up functioning as a unique mirror. In its reflection, one can remember their true self as it is, or if I borrow Buber’s language, the self itself.

⁸ “*Samādhi* alone can reveal the Truth. Thoughts can veil over Reality, and so it is not realized as such in states other than *samādhi*. In *samādhi* there is only the feeling “I am” and no thoughts.” Sri Ramanasramam, *The Spiritual Teaching of Ramana Maharshi* (Boulder, Colorado: Shambala, 1998), 88.

⁹ Buber, M., 1970. *I And Thou*. Scribners. p.56.

What Can a Cow Do?

When one enters the realm of the I-You relation it is impossible to look at anything from an analytic point of view. Therefore, upon entering the I-You state we cannot break down what is in front of us, cannot disintegrate the other. In the I-You, there is no room for representation, because as soon as something represents something else in the world, it is already seen through the lens of classification, rationality, and analysis. It is no longer seen as itself.

In their essay *Becoming-Intense, Becoming-Animal, Becoming-Imperceptible*¹⁰ (from the book *A Thousand Plateaus*) philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari present a remarkable example of a statement against representation. Representation, for Deleuze and Guattari is what the I-It is for Buber, and what thought is for Ramana Maharshi: an obstacle, a misleading structure. Deleuze and Guattari are most critical of Freudian psychoanalysts, who are trapped in the illusive world of representations. “They (psychoanalysts) killed becoming-animal, [...] They see the animal as a *representative* of drives, or a *representation* of the parents [...] They do not see the reality of becoming-animal, that it is affect in itself, the drive in person, and represents nothing.”¹¹ Clearly, representation is getting in the way of grasping things as such.

The animal is a central theme in the essay. Deleuze and Guattari rely on the animal as a case for their thesis. When they speak of “becoming”, of the process of coming to experience

¹⁰ Deleuze, Gilles, Félix Guattari, and Brian Massumi. “Becoming-Intense, Becoming-Animal, Becoming-Imperceptible.” Essay. In *A Thousand Plateaus*, 233. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005.

¹¹ Ibid. p.259.

ourselves as we truly are, Deleuze and Guattari mostly speak of the “becoming-animal”. The philosophers teach us to focus on the effect (and affect) of things rather than on categorization, by speaking of the machine and the animal.

We know nothing about a body until we know what it can do, in other words, what its effects are... Little Hans's horse is not representative but affective... it is defined by a list of active and passive affects... The affects circulate and are transformed... what a horse “can do.”¹²

This method of looking at the animal examines the reverberation it creates in the world, its output, what it “can do”. The horse is no coincidental choice here. Its size and strength, deep and heavy breath, the range of motion of the tail and neck are all mesmerizing enough for us to forget, in the moment of coming upon a horse, about the ideas we might have kept about horses, ideas we have from our past. And so, in this brief second, we are experiencing the present. Can a moment like that occur when looking at art?

In my recent film *Touch the Cow*¹³ I worked with footage dealing with animal husbandries shot over the course of two years. I use an action camera which is almost as small as a match box, and its presence doesn't seem to bother the animals. My own presence appears to be agreeable for the cows, the pigs, the goats and the sheep as well. Thanks to that, I can be in close proximity to the living beings whose space I entered, close enough to capture footage from above, the sides, and underneath.

The project began with an unexpected encounter with a young cow. While I was on a family vacation, I wandered around a farm and there, amongst several cows who were resting in a small territory surrounded by a bar, one cow walked freely. The cow came towards me. Not

¹² Deleuze, G., Guattari, F. and Deleuze, G., 1988. *A Thousand Plateaus*. London: Athlone, P. 257.

¹³ <https://vimeo.com/633968176>

knowing what was about to happen, or even what a cow could do when she was loose, I stood still. The cow, no taller than my chest, her udders empty, came close and a strange embrace began. I was touching the cow's back, head and sides over and over while she almost knocked me off my feet, licking my legs, hands and stomach, covering me with saliva ornamented in freshly chewed grass. It went on for a long while. We did the same thing on the next day. That contact seemed to fit Buber's description of an I-You relation.

The film *Touch the Cow* was not an attempt to recreate that pleasant, peculiar moment. Such a work would be occupied with something outside itself, and therefore will not have any value. But what led the process of the work was the effect of astonishment in relation to the cow and her behavior. That cow was not a representation of a cow, she was the cow herself, and her presence was like nothing I could expect if I relied on my past knowledge. Like little Hans' horse, that cow is not to be analyzed. There can be no clear reasoning behind her desire to touch and be touched. Rather, the suitable approach would be, what "can" she do? How did her body move? And how was that in relation to my body? Was there any pleasure for her? While filming the other animals, I stayed loyal to that approach, in an attempt to provide an experience of a raw, unfamiliar awareness that arose in the company of those mammals.

Alongside the animal, Deleuze and Guattari write extensively about the machine as a form that functions similarly to how a work of art does. In the introduction of *A Thousand Plateaus* the writers even state that the "book itself is a little machine".¹⁴ This compelling passage contains several points, which define what the machine that is this book does, and what to me, a work of art as a machine does, too. "There is no difference between what a book talks about and how it is made [...] We will never ask what a book means, as signified or signifier; we will not

¹⁴ Deleuze, Gilles, Félix Guattari, and Brian Massumi. "Rhizome." Introduction. In *A Thousand Plateaus*, 4. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005.

look for anything to understand in it.”¹⁵ If a work can be perceived as such a machine, free from the burden of signifiers and the obsessive attempt to “understand it”, an I-You relation in its presence is more likely to occur.

The most recent incident when a work of art, a painting in this case, presented itself as this kind of machine was when I saw Agnes Martin’s *Friendship*¹⁶ last year. I have seen the painting about a dozen times, but it never had such a profound effect on me beforehand. *Friendship* is one of Martin’s well-known grid paintings, made with gold leaf. Standing in the MoMA collection, I remember wanting to stay in front of the work for a long while, absorbing the gentle golden shine. The affect of the painting was benevolent. Frankly, all other works in the space seemed irritating all of the sudden, and I wanted to turn away from anything that wasn’t Martin’s *Friendship*.

Martin’s work is devoid of representation. There are no symbols or signs that lead to concepts outside the work. In Deleuze and Guattari’s language, the painting does not provoke a need to “understand” it, and there is no difference between what it radiates and what it is made of. It is a machine of generosity. *Friendship* asks not to be investigated, because what is there to investigate in a grid? It spreads its quiet light and charms the viewer into halting her thoughts and stepping into a different kind of relation.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Agnes Martin, *Friendship*, 1963, gold leaf and oil on canvas.

Clearing a Path to Force

A significant shift in my understanding of the energy that drives me in my work occurred upon reading Carl G. Jung's essay "The Transformation of Libido"¹⁷ in my early twenties. Jung is a critical figure in the formation of my world view. Jung stands out in the psychoanalytic community for his positive approach to pathology. "The Transformation of Libido" opens with the case of a woman patient who is suffering from neurosis, expressed mainly by rhythmic movements of intense rubbing of her finger against the temple.¹⁸ Jung then goes on and investigates the need to move our body rhythmically, and makes the case that these are not necessarily pathological regressive masturbatory motions,¹⁹ but something else and not at all pathological:

The libido that is forced into regression by the obstacle always reverts to the possibilities lying dormant in the individual [...] a man unable to find an answer to a problem rubs his nose, pulls his lower lip, scratches his ear, and so on. If he gets impatient, all sorts of other rhythms appear: he starts drumming with his fingers, shuffles his feet [...] rhythm is a classic device for impressing certain ideas or activities of the mind, and what was to be impressed and firmly organized is the canalization of libido into a new form of activity [...] such as music and dancing, and finally to the sphere of work.²⁰

Jung's word choice in "canalisation of libido" is illuminating. The libido is seen here as a material in a condensed form, creating pressure and needing to find an outlet so the tension can be released. In other words, we are looking at channeling energy. Jung brings examples of

¹⁷ Jung, C. G. "The Transformation of Libido." Essay. In *Symbols of Transformation; an Analysis of the Prelude to a Case of Schizophrenia*, 142–70. Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1970.

¹⁸ Jung, C. G. "The Transformation of Libido." Essay. In *Symbols of Transformation; an Analysis of the Prelude to a Case of Schizophrenia*. Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1970. P. 142.

¹⁹ Ibid. P. 155.

²⁰ Ibid. PP.153-154

prehistoric tribes who were dancing all night to the sound of rhythmic music.²¹ Performing this activity clears the path for this energy and allows a way out. Jung's essay claims that there is a clear connection between dancing and parties, and psychic health. He describes rituals from all times of human history where movement coordinated with rhythm was key to release energy, and to connect with the present movement. They are events where the I-You relation is likely to happen.

Cave

In reading Jung and thinking of rituals humans held before written history, I realized that a connection with the prehistoric is crucial in my practice. In the introduction for her book *Overlay, Contemporary Art and the Art of Prehistory* Lucy Lippard wrote: "What interests me most about prehistory is what cannot be known about it."²² As much as I believe that humans, our psyche and creative force haven't changed that much since before the invention of the written letter, I also find prehistoric times as a fascinating subject that sparks the imagination and can illuminate contemporary human nature.

Rhythm belongs to a language of frequency, beat, ticking, drumming, volume, boom, humm. It is the kind of sound that can travel through material. It can make things vibrate, cast

²¹ Ibid.

²² Lippard, Lucy R. "Introduction." Essay. In *Overlay Contemporary Art and the Art of Prehistory*, 3. New York, N.Y: The New Press, 2010.

waves on the water, shake our bodies which contain vast amounts of liquid. Unlike the tone/note, rhythm and frequency can be experienced by those who are deaf. Drumming is the most ancient way of making music, and therefore it is the most internalized kind of sound that human bodies remember how to listen to and produce.

*Trepan*²³ is the central piece in my thesis show. In this film, a dead car functions as a cave for men to draw on during the day, and have a ritual in during the night. There is no spoken text in *Trepan*. During the night ritual, the three men are sitting in the car and performing an improvised action, utilizing their bodies and the body of the vehicle to make a rhythm, a musical corpus, without the use of language. *Trepan* is an attempt to access the time before time, the core of the mind that is untouched by thought. The desire to block thinking led me to arrange a happening where, in order to perform the directed action, the individuals must let go of thought and be submerged in listening to one another and responding physically, by using their voice, thrusting their bodies, drumming with their fists.

To transfer the rhythms of the body into the earth, in Lippard's language,²⁴ one has to engage in a non verbal, illogical action. Art is the sphere of this action. Staying engaged with the unpredictable in us, the random, the primal, is the core of art making and encountering art.

²³ Video, 15 minutes. Actors: Joph Cange, Ben Groh, Austin Heye. <https://vimeo.com/712617490>

²⁴ Ibid.

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Image list

Figure 1: Still from *Trepan*, video, 15 minutes.

Figure 2: Still from *Trepan*.

Figure 3: Installation shot of *Trepan*.

Figure 4: Installation shot of *Trepan*.

Figure 5: *Untitled*, pen and marker on found paper, 11x14.5 inch.

Figure 6: *Untitled*, pen on found paper, 14.5x11 inch.

Figure 7: *East Wild West*, mail packaging and photograph by the artist in a found frame.

Image of each piece in the exhibition



Figure 1: Still from *Trepan*, video, 15 minutes.



Figure 2: Still from *Trepan*.

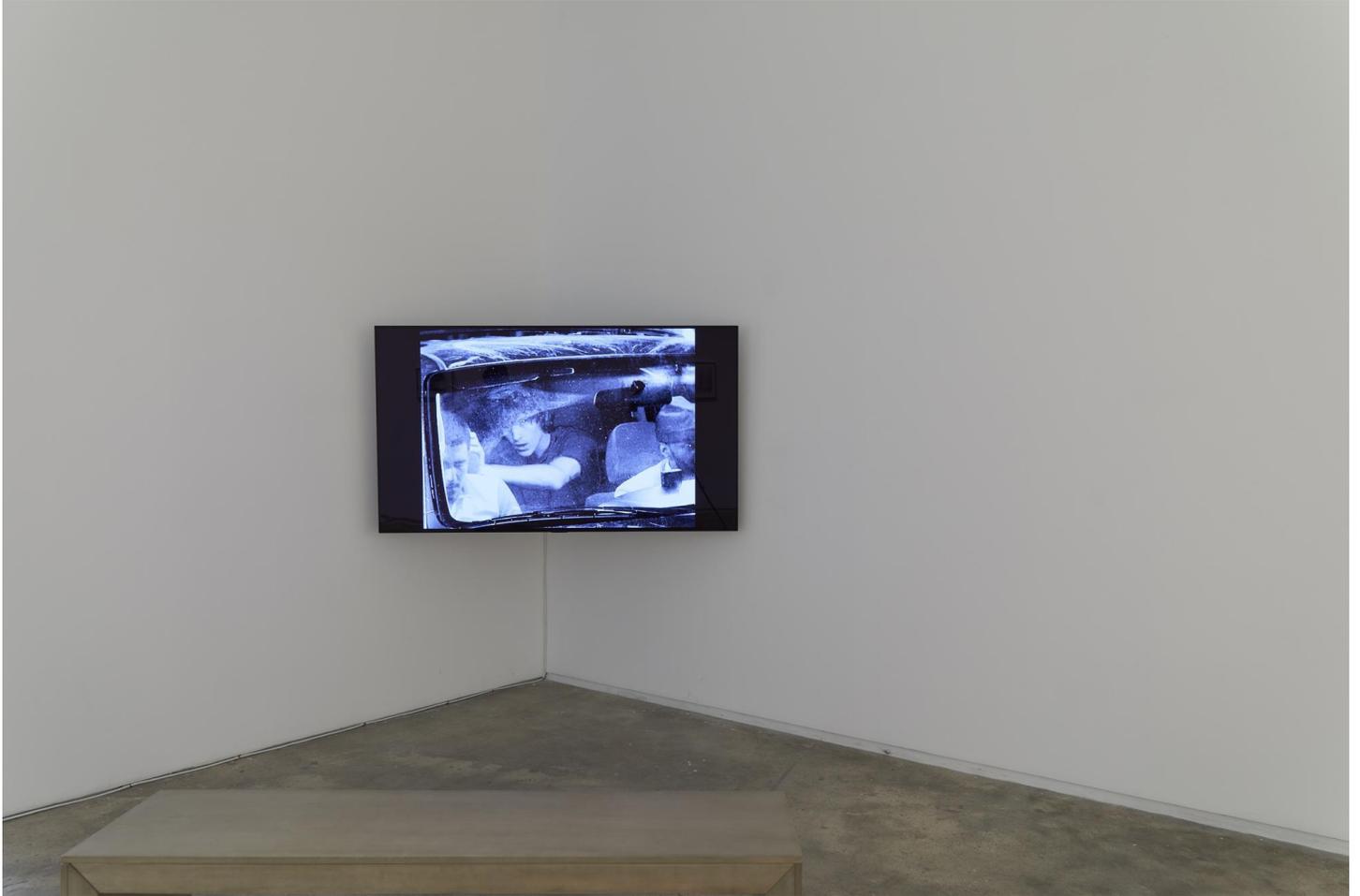


Figure 3: Installation shot of *Trepan*.



Figure 5: *Untitled*, pen and marker on found paper, 11x14.5 inch.



Figure 6: *Untitled*, pen on found paper, 14.5x11 inch.



Figure 7: *East Wild West*, mail packaging and photograph by the artist in a found frame.