

Reviews

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Extinction Stories

Bryndis Snaebjornsdottir and Mark Wilson. *You must carry me now — The cultural lives of endangered species*. Göteborg: Förlaget 284, 2015. 264 pp. £25.00 (hb).



What are the premises of extinction in the age that some would call the Anthropocene? Through the tropes of the California condor and the Colorado humpback chub this question is explored in *You Must Carry Me Now — The Cultural Lives of Endangered Species* by the artist duo Bryndis Snaebjörnsdóttir and Mark Wilson. In the Grand Canyon and its national park these two species have different histories, but their fates converge in that they are both near extinction, threatened by humanism and, now, being saved by humans. Conservation is a costly and time-consuming life-support system that is often controversial. Who should be saved, for how long, and who should be sacrificed? The humpback chub is a fish whose existence in the Colorado River has been threatened and exhausted by the construction of a large dam and the introduction

of trout, a non-native sport-fish, resulting in a disturbed eco-system and a inhospitable environment for the chub. In the case of the California condor the situation is somewhat different. It is almost extinct due to lead-poisoning, the lead coming from human over-hunting with poisonous bullets, leaving carcasses for the condors to feed on. These examples point to a troublesome knot of actors and potential action. In order to make space for the humpback chubs, conservationists now remove the trout through “electro-fishing.” The condors are individually monitored, and when they fall ill, they are taken to clinics and treated until they are strong enough to be released again. How are we to understand and make visible the lives of these species, their protagonists, and supporters? How can the actors’ voices be heard? What is the potential role of art in this context?

You Must Carry Me Now is an extension of the artistic research project and exhibition “Trout Fishing in America and Other Stories,” recently performed at the Arizona State University Art Museum. It consists of a foreword, an introduction, and a handful of discursive reflections by a range of initiated authors, including the artists themselves. In addition to the texts, the book includes three different photographic sections: research photographs (in situ), documentation of the exhibition in Arizona, and art works displayed in the book. These photographic sections, individually and together, introduce the reader to the visual methodologies and forms of representation that the artists have chosen for contextualizing the concerns and inquiries that emerge from their research. Thus, the book provides an excellent mapping of the project as a whole, providing different layers of interpretation. As with other well-known artistic research projects from the Snaebjörnsdóttir and Wilson duo (such as *nanoq: flat out and bluesome* [2004], and *Uncertainty in the City: Pets, Pests and Prey* [2010]), *You Must Carry Me Now* unfolds, connects, and displays stories not otherwise told, by engaging diverse actors in unexpected ways. The project lies at the intersection of fine art research, animal studies, action research, post-humanism, and conceptual art.

The book’s title, *You Must Carry Me Now*, is thought provoking. It is an intertextual reference to Paul Celan’s poem “Vast, Glowing Vault,” which ends with the sentence: “The world is gone, I must carry you” (155). Snaebjörnsdóttir’s and Wilson’s title reminds us of the urgency of the end of the world as we have known it, and that the response can only be anthropocentric and technological. The identity of the “you” and the “me” is ambiguous, and the message is perhaps that we must carry each other.

Furthermore, the title alludes to the temporality of conservation practices. The “now” stands in relation to the past and the future, making visible the complexity of striving to

understand the complications of extinction of other animals (and ultimately ourselves). Fröydi Laszlo, in his indispensable chapter of the book, takes on the ambiguous relationship among conservation practices, ethics, and emotions, asking:

Are we willing to mourn the loss of the Panda world, the Condor world, the world of the Humpback Chub? Or will we be content as long as there are just enough of them left to reproduce and stand as symbols for a managed wildlife? (144)

Animals haunt the valleys of the Colorado River, which used to be a haven for condors, humpback chubs, and humans. As Ron Broglio wittily notes in the volume, “endangered species are the idiots to the civilised world” (101). But instead of stopping at the apparent impossibilities of these and other questions, the book “stays with the trouble,” in Donna Haraway’s phrase, and moves upstream. The thick descriptions of the national park, the science laboratories, and their inhabitants, place the analysis concretely at the heart of the problem, without ever pretending to solve it.

The subtitle “The Cultural Lives of Endangered Species” speaks to the void of knowledge about animals that are about to go extinct. The “microhistory” (Bertås) of the humpback chub is one in which global capitalism, water and food supply, energy production, and the vulnerability of the eco-system are interlinked and made visible. The paradoxical conditions are revealed: if the dam were removed, the chub would thrive, but the money from sports fishing would dry up, and the water supply for inhabitants of Phoenix would be affected by water scarcity.

In following the lead-sensitive California condors and their microhistories, the amount of time the individual birds spend in detox clinics — sometimes months and even years of one condor’s life — seem absurd. In order to prevent the condors from being poisoned in the first place, and to spare them the experience of going in and out of clinics, could not the problems of lead exposure be dealt with in other ways? Could hunting be prohibited, or laws adjusted to minimize the risks of spreading lead bullets? What is the problem? This is not revealed in the book, but the California condor stories, as well as those of the humpback chub, involve the economic interest of actors such as conservation trusts and hunters.

As one prominent example of how the book operates, a strong narrative is told about California condors and their relationships by documenting the personal histories of

individual dead birds. In a series of photographs of dead condors arranged against a black background, the birds tell stories of struggling lives and the care-labor of the scientists who work passionately with them. These relationships are represented in detail in paragraphs juxtaposed with each of the portraits of frozen condors. The effect is powerful, strikingly sad, and moving, as in this caption for condor number 133: “133 and I share the same birthday — it’s the little things that make you connect” (133). The displacement of the birds’ bodies, arranged in ways that prevent their immediate identification as condors, together with biographically detailed and emotion-laden testimonies by unidentified scientists, creates a space that poses questions about the entangled life and death of humans and other animals.

These individualized stories stand in stark contrast to the seemingly collective approach to the chubs and their stories. The fishes live anonymous lives in an element and space that are difficult to represent. Photographs from the river display a cloudy environment in which the fishes can only be vaguely perceived. Some photographs document fishes in buckets, caught or on the way to being transferred to or from the river. Human scientists and conservationists move the humpback chubs and the California condors around, with the good intentions of restoring an eco-system lost. This labor becomes a sort of troubling Sisyphusian endeavor, and is thus problematized through the artists’ project. It is, in this context, somewhat striking that the book’s commentators chose not to acknowledge the interesting contrast of the different life worlds of the condor and the chub: the grandiose, emblematic, individualized and elevated (air), versus the blurry, collective mass, and low (water). What can analysis and reflections on the different scientific methods, conservation approaches, and surveillance practices, in relation to these two specific species, tell us about the premises of their diverse lives, negotiations for survival, and eventual extinction?

In the field of animal studies, researchers have analyzed art as an ethical catalyst, its purpose being to illuminate and problematize animal subjectivity and human exceptionalism. Pedersen and Snæbjörnsdóttir have, for example, shown how art can be an effective tool for posing new questions and positions for humans and animals. The authors propose that “art can create counter-hegemonic spheres where objectifying practices and institutions are challenged and the animal’s visibility is in some way restored” (115). Making visible “un-charismatic” species such as the humpback chub can contribute to widening the scope of the cultural imaginary, with the potential of worlding otherwise.

Further, as art provides tools for thinking differently, it is also about sensing. This is clearly and beautifully expressed by the artists: “to embrace ‘not-knowing’ and give consideration to the apparently absurd is to render oneself vulnerable; it is a vulnerability which precedes not power itself but a heightened sensitivity to unexpected connections, and thus new ways of thought” (23). *You Must Carry Me Now* is an apt example of a counter-hegemonic sphere, one that convincingly unfolds transdisciplinary artistic methods, and makes a relevant contribution to the field. As such it could well be used in education programs in the arts and related fields, and beyond. *You must carry me now* shows how artistic practices and methods can make visible how connections may be knotted together in order to problematize present orders, and potentially to point at different futures. However, as the artists themselves point out, “art at last may allow us the gift to understand nothing” (243). The book leaves the reader with a feeling of knowing a little bit, the wish to learn more, and the insight that one has not understood much at all.

Works Cited

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