

SUSAN BALLARD

The Extension of Sympathy: Curating Machinic Evolution in the Art Gallery.

Abstract

This paper examines the process of curating media art in a contemporary art gallery. It suggests that Henri Bergson's considerations of instinct and intelligence in *Creative Evolution* offer some new modes for thinking through the various materialities present within the contemporary art gallery. It focuses on the exhibition *Among the Machines*, curated by the author in 2013, and asks in what ways did the open curatorial brief enable the exhibition objects to behave in unexpected ways. It proposes that the exhibition experience occurs via affective strategies that cross material boundaries, and exists in a relationship of sympathetic kindness between the audience and the art object. This proposition may involve the invocation of vitalism, yet equally it suggests that art objects are their own particular kind of object, neither animate nor inanimate, but able to participate in complex affective relationships with human viewers. In bringing together Henri Bergson and Samuel Butler, with the materialist approaches of Jane Bennett, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari it argues that thinkers in the early twentieth century were already well aware of shifting materialities of machines, technology, animals and humans (relationships that are currently being revisited in new materialist approaches to curation).

In *Fictions of Art History* Mark Ledbury suggests that the “discipline of art history, the writing of fiction, and the making and viewing of art might be comingled.”¹ He goes on to argue for what he terms strategic fiction and knowing pseudo-art history. The following paper is such a beast. It attempts to tell of some fictions that surround an exhibition I curated in 2013 for the Dunedin Public Art Gallery in New Zealand. In the process the paper does not properly describe the exhibition, and I apologise for this. It also does not adequately represent the artists who made extraordinary works for the show, and I must also apologise to them for what I may do to their work in this context. The point, I hope will become apparent – I want to make strange the relationship between three quite distinct things: firstly, what is currently being called ‘new materialism’ in a philosophical approach to humans and the things around them; secondly, the shift in understandings of the relationship between human, machine and animal that occurred in the wake of Darwin's publication of *Origin of the Species*; and thirdly, new kinds of goings on in the art gallery, and curatorial practice. In particular I will suggest that Henri Bergson and Samuel Butler have much to offer a contemporary sympathetic approach to curation.

¹ Ledbury, 2013, p. vii

There is a very strange passage in Bergson's *Creative Evolution*, first published in 1907, where he discusses what he calls the instinctual sympathy of the *Ammophila Hirsuta* wasp. Sympathy, as we understand it today is based in the arguments of the Victorian moral philosophers who emphasised a shared caring, pity, kindness or compassion for another person. Even though today, our understandings of Victorian sympathy have been extended beyond the human, and in some cases across species, this nuance of 'care' still gives the wrong emphasis to the activities of the wasp. Bergson's sense of sympathy, is sympathy built on an intimate and affective knowledge of the other, but it is in no way the extension of kindness. Bergson's sympathy is a well developed instinctual way of knowing another body from the inside out.

Ammophila Hirsuta is a solitary nest-building wasp that hunts caterpillars that it then serves as live food to its larvae. Bergson describes how the wasp paralyses the caterpillar in order to provide its larvae with food both immobile and alive. Bergson writes "the *Ammophila Hirsuta* gives nine successive strokes of its sting upon nine nerve-centres of its caterpillar, and then seizes the head and squeezes it in its mandibles, enough to cause paralysis without death."² Bergson goes on to discuss how the wasp's precision in its understanding of the caterpillar cannot possibly be the result of hereditary 'knowledge' transmission, what according to Darwin is the evolution of a "contracted habit" passed down through the generations. It is instead, sympathy. Bergson proposes that actually what is happening is a

sympathy (in the etymological sense of the word) between the *Ammophila* and its victim, which teaches it from within, so to say, concerning the vulnerability of the caterpillar. This feeling of vulnerability might owe nothing to outward perception, but result from the mere presence together of the *Ammophila* and the caterpillar, considered no longer as two organisms, but as two activities.³

Sympathy, Bergson suggests, is a means for thinking about activities, what things do, rather than the make up of two parties, what they are. As they spend time together the wasp knows the caterpillar from within. Bergson goes on to argue that scientific theories (such as Darwin's) are inadequate for grasping the intensity of sympathy and suggests instead that philosophy is the machine through which we might understand the means through which the *Ammophila* possess a lived, ("lived rather than represented")⁴ intuition of the caterpillar. In particular, he suggests, instinctual sympathy is a way of thinking about the lived relation between all things.

Bergson uses his discussion of the wasp to engage directly with an argument that centres on the varying hierarchical importance and difference between intelligence and instinct as they appeared in Darwin's theory of evolution. Darwin's evolutionary model suggests that over time bodies evolve techniques and pass down knowledge (intelligence); a process within a sequential continuum. Bergson counters this, arguing it is the time spent together between the wasp and the caterpillar that

² Bergson, 1998, p. 172.

³ Bergson, 1988, p.174.

⁴ Bergson, 1998, p. 176.

allows the wasp to instinctually know the caterpillar, time spent together is synchronous rather than sequential. His point is that instinct cannot be, and is not, a reflex nor intelligence. Instinctual sympathy reflects time spent together rather than the time sequences of evolving patterned habits. This leads Bergson to suggest that rather than being differences of degree (intelligence is a smarter or learnt form of instinct and vice versa) instinct and intelligence are completely different forms of knowledge. In fact, he says, instinct and intelligence are not a continuum but are different methods for engaging in relationships with the world. As Kerlake explains:

Bergson argues against Darwin that instinct must involve more than a set of motor mechanisms and must be taken as a kind of knowledge, implying a peculiar kind of mentality. Just as the somnambulist is perfectly conscious of what they are doing, but is unconscious of why they are doing it, instinctual activity involves a kind of consciousness which is intellectually unaware of its purpose.⁵

In what would become a leitmotif of later work by Deleuze and Guattari, Bergson argues that instinct and intelligence “differ in kind not degree.”⁶ In the discussion of evolution that continues through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the location and potential deterministic power of instinct remains contentious. To fully understand this conceptual move, there is a series of complex philosophical positions it is necessary to adopt between instinct and intelligence and their relative role in the understanding of evolution. My point in this paper is not to attempt to ‘represent’ the debate within the disciplinary boundaries of philosophy or evolutionary biology, but to take the (ill or undisciplined) mandate offered by my role as a contemporary art curator to address Bergson’s ideas of instinct and sympathy in another discipline, that of art history, and use instinct and sympathy as a way to understand the relationship between machines and organisms in the exhibition and curation of art objects.

The radical and materialist aspects of Darwin’s theory should not be underestimated.⁷ The publication of Darwin’s text on the 24th November 1859 shifted understandings of instinct from something that since the Renaissance had been ascribed only to women and animals (Descartes makes this point most explicitly) to something that had a more central place in the development of all life. In 1859 British author and satirist Samuel Butler had set sail to New Zealand with a presentation copy of Darwin’s text.⁸ Once established on a sheep farm in mid-Canterbury, Butler wrote to Darwin praising his work. However, as he began to think and write independently about evolution, Butler began what became a torturous process of absolute disagreement with Darwin that would haunt him for the rest of his life.⁹ Butler initially published a number of texts in newspapers in both New

⁵ Kerlake, 2006, <http://multitudes.samizdat.net/Insects-and-Incest-From-Bergson> accessed 10 November 2013.

⁶ Deleuze, 1994, p. 38 and, Deleuze, 1988, p. 23.

⁷ Parikka, 2010, p.1.

⁸ Watts, 2013, <http://www.joh.cam.ac.uk/samuel-butler-project>; accessed 10 November 2013.

⁹ Watts, 2013, <http://www.joh.cam.ac.uk/samuel-butler-and-evolution>; accessed 10 November 2013.

Zealand and Britain that engaged directly with and extended Darwin's models.¹⁰ In 1863 he wrote a letter titled "Darwin Among the Machines" to the editor of the Christchurch Press.¹¹ The letter was concerned with the exponential power of evolution, which Butler now perceived to be in the hands of the machines. We were, he suggested, entering a "new phase of mechanical existence." It would be a time when humans would find themselves the inferior race, and witness to extraordinary events like "a fertile union between two steam engines." "Day by day" he wrote, "the machines are gaining ground upon us; day by day we are becoming more subservient to them."¹² His observation was that Darwin had made possible completely new relations between humans and the world around them, and that we had better pay careful attention to the non-human members of our societies.

Butler's evolution of the machine is a potent and fear-filled concept that crosses a mechanistic model of the universe and the body, with emergent ideas in evolution. There is within it a resonance with contemporary reconceptualisations of the machinic and the ecological.

Butler's text formed one stepping-off point for *Among the Machines* an exhibition I curated for the Dunedin Public Art Gallery in 2013. *Among the Machines* aimed to explore the coming together of the ecological with the machinic in materials that are neither organic, nor mechanical, but are art objects.¹³ One approach evident within *Among the Machines* was the examination of how nineteenth century biological and evolutionary models of reproduction have mixed with new kinds of mechanical bodies, and shifted from the realms of fantastical imagination to very real environmental, cultural and social contexts. Butler's fear of both the machine and evolution continues to resound with intensity, especially when considered alongside the hyperobjects of the contemporary world.¹⁴

The exhibition was the result of a number of conversations between the co-curator and myself that began with a sense of the histories of ecology and technology that were central to our location in the South Island of New Zealand (only 4 hours drive from Erehwon station). Time spent together produced new ways of knowing the objects we were approaching. The remains of this paper seek to extend the question of the spatial boundaries and temporal limits of curatorial practice by unpacking some of the thoughts that circulated around and through the exhibition; during its planning, exhibition and afterlife. It is not intended to be an exercise in curatorial narcissism as the curators are merely two of many participants in the assemblage, however it does suggest that it is the curator and the audience who can extend the exhibition beyond the temporal duration of the gallery display. *Among the Machines* was a co-curated exhibition where the critical intent and potential relationships formed were to always lie with the artists and their works. To

¹⁰ In addition to his newspaper articles, Butler wrote four books after his return to London that were focused on evolution: *Life and Habit* (1878) *Evolution, Old and New* (1879) *Unconscious Memory* (1880) and *Luck, or Cunning* (1887). See also: Mazlish, 2002, p. 228-39.

¹¹ Butler, 1923, p. 155.

¹² Butler, 1923, p. 184.

¹³ Jane Bennett notes that the first use of the word ecology comes from Darwin. Bennett, 2004, p. 347.

¹⁴ Morton, 2013, p. 2.

this end all artists in the exhibition were invited to contribute one work chosen by the co-curators and then commissioned to create a second work, either in response to the first, or to the broad curatorial brief. The two works then took on different lives within the exhibition spaces, occasionally cohabiting, and at other times operating at a remove from each other. The critical terrain of Butler, Bergson and Darwin contributed to the formation of my own ideas, and reflections on these ideas amidst the artworks (that did not all necessarily address Butler, Bergson or Darwin), led to a number of new and shifting perspectives. The utopian impulse of an exhibition open to multiple social and political understandings, was to create an experience that was open-ended, non-confrontational and gentle. With the complex of ideas circulating between two curators and thirteen artists there was always the potential for conflicting understandings. The exhibition took on a life of its own; multiple voices and approaches lead the viewer towards uncertainty and difference rather than authority and deterministic readings of objects and things.

The critical issue raised by this approach to thinking the exhibition is that the place of the artwork within an exhibition is not as an illustration of the ideas that circulate around it. The exhibition *Among the Machines* develops from Bergson's model the need to explore the coming together of the ecological with the machinic in objects and beings that are neither organic, nor mechanical, but are art objects. This is underpinned by the understanding that an exhibition is an ecology. An ethical approach to the art object suggests that the curator might establish an opportunity for encounter, but that the real magic happens in the sympathetic and instinctual relationship between the artwork and audience that occurs in the space of the art gallery. *Among the Machines* does not instruct the audience, nor does it explicitly suggest behaviours or relationships for the art objects. Instead it presents a quiet space of encounter. The ecology of the machines in the art gallery suggests that time spent together can allow for a different kind of relationship between art objects and audiences.

The tangled triangle of difference between Butler, Bergson and Darwin reflects the way in which multiple authoritative scientific methods developed in the nineteenth and early twentieth century. As Suzanne Guerlac says it was a time when thought shifted "from the certainties of mechanism to the anxieties of indeterminism."¹⁵ Bergson questions the certainty of animal, mineral, vegetable and opens a space where the material relation between things is the focus. And despite their apparent agreement over the problems with Darwin, Bergson is considering something much less literal (and perhaps much more everyday) than Butler. The machinic relationships that Bergson proposes are not opposed to the organic (as they are with Butler); they are differences in degree not kind. This means that instinctual sympathy is a way of thinking about the lived relation between things, whether or not they are formed from organic, or carbon-based matter. The first step is one where bodies or beings are not understood by bounded innate essence, but instead are defined by their extended behaviours, their movements, and the compositions that they form.¹⁶ Furthermore, if mechanical and organic are differences in degree, it is not possible to maintain a mechanistic or automatic model of the world that is opposed to an organic knowing one. This means that evolution of the machine is not something

¹⁵ Guerlac, 2006, p. 14.

¹⁶ Deleuze, 1988, p.23.

that remains in the realm of fiction, but is already apparent in both historical and contemporary spheres.

Deleuze and Guattari's materialist approach to objects, images and things opens up some of the ways that I might develop Bergson's ideas in order to discuss the art objects and installations in *Among the Machines*, outside of the exhibition's duration. The risk is that this becomes a critical application of ideas in retrospect to art works that were created with very different approaches. The advantage is that curation becomes understood as something that exists both before and after the exhibition. All exhibitions have limited durations. Curation is the construction of little durational machines within a broader ecological environment known as the art gallery. In its first iteration *Among the Machines* was open to the public for 127 days, but duration does not map so easily to exact temporal frameworks.

Bergson suggests a separation of machinic behaviours from machines themselves.¹⁷ If this is adopted as a methodology for curatorial practice, our aim should be "to make a machine which should triumph over mechanism."¹⁸ This is what art objects do, they are neither mechanical nor machine, but when curated together they inhabit the spaces and operations of duration. Duration is a way of thinking and experiencing time, which Bergson develops alongside the notion of instinctual sympathy. As he writes: "Duration means invention, the creation of forms, the continual elaboration of the absolutely new ... the organised body ... grows and changes without ceasing."¹⁹ But, duration is a force of time rather than a mapping of time. A curator is a creator of durations, a participant in an assemblage who attempts to use a light touch to create concepts that participate in "the continual elaboration of the absolutely new". This makes it very difficult to discuss an exhibition, or the processes that go into the creation of that exhibition, without imposing certain ideals. Because the exhibition assemblage continually "grows and changes" each audience (including the curators) approaches the exhibition machine differently.

So what kind of machine might *Among the Machines* be? And what kind of relationships does it enable? The specific artworks within the exhibition assemblage begin to suggest that what is at stake in a curatorial practice is the adoption of sympathetic instinct. A sympathetic instinct in this context maps the movement from one machinic body to another. For example, Douglas Bagnall's *Cloud Shape Classifier* (2006) invites viewers to participate in algorithmic decision making processes (known in Facebook parlance as 'liking'); by making aesthetic selections using buttons attached to the wall beside a projected webcam capture of clouds sourced from outside the gallery, and from other cities in which the classifier has been installed. Pushing a button will encourage the neural network operating behind the classifier to search a database of images and suggest further images that match the one on display, meaning that over time the classifier is trained to match the ever changing aesthetic day dreams of the audience. There is a shift in agency from one mechanical body to another, and the generation of a shared space of wonder within which the cloud is re-encountered via the machine. In contrast, Hannah and Aaron Beehre's *Postcard for Garland Briggs* (2008) contains flickering machinic organisms; creatures that respond as if beckoning through a

¹⁷ Deleuze, 1988, p.89.

¹⁸ Bergson in *Creative Evolution* cited in Deleuze, 1988, p.107.

¹⁹ Bergson in *Creative Evolution* cited in Osborne, 2013, p.187-188.

portal from another world. Viewers approach the image (apparently a velvet painting of a forest clearing) and the creatures within it scatter. If viewers control their movements by staying very still, gradually small creatures will rearrange themselves within the glade. Both of these works are more than illustrations of the curatorial idea, both works existed long before the curatorial idea was formed, in hindsight, both works directly speak to the emergent machines of Butler and the sympathetic instincts of Bergson.

In 'The Book of the Machine' Butler details the complex relationships between nature and culture and the environment that surrounds the city of Erehwon.

Does any one say that the red clover has no reproductive system because the bumble bee (and the bumble bee only) must aid and abet it before it can reproduce? No one. The bumble bee is a part of the reproductive system of the clover.²⁰

Deleuze and Guattari, in their description of the machinic assemblage, translate Butler's bees and clover into the wasp and orchid of a warmer climate.²¹ They describe how the wasp and orchid are bound together, "the wasp becomes part of the reproductive apparatus of the orchid, at the same time that the orchid becomes a sexual organ for the wasp."²² It is an instinctual sympathy across two of the three kingdoms of the Linnaean taxonomy.²³ The creatures in the Beehre's installation share this intimate relationship; a relationship that is conducted across species, genetic codes, and mechanical bodies.²⁴ It is an assemblage of different and differing forces: animal, mineral and vegetable threaded together through desire.²⁵

Butler's machine is not Bergson's organism that "behaves more and more like a machine for action, which reconstructs itself entirely for every new act, as if it were made of India rubber and could at any moment, change the shape of all its parts."²⁶ In Butler's hands the organism is not *like* a machine it *is* a machine. Again an art work within the exhibition suggests a different way of thinking the sympathy between the organism, the machine, and the audience. Hayden Fowler's *New World Order* (2013) is populated by machinic organisms that appear to be exotic chickens. Feathery creatures that have adapted to some kind of post-technological catastrophe inhabit a desolate diorama. Emerging alone or in groups they communicate across the distances of their world, their calls entering the farthest reaches of the gallery space. One world within another. One machine within another. Jane Bennett would call it "thing-power materialism."²⁷ Bennett suggests that "a thing-power only exists with some kind of assemblage or other, and its thing-

²⁰ Butler "Book of the Machines" quoted in Deleuze, and Guattari, 1983, p.285.

²¹ Deleuze and Guattari, 1983, p. 285.

²² Deleuze and Guattari, 1996, p.10.

²³ Although biological classification since the 1950s no longer follows the animal, mineral vegetable division, the concept is still dominant in popular understandings of difference.

²⁴ Deleuze and Guattari, 1996, p.234-236.

²⁵ Deleuze and Guattari, 1983, p. 285. See also Grosz, 2000, p.214-34.

²⁶ Bergson, 1998, p.252.

²⁷ Bennett, 2004, p.354.

power is a function of that grouping."²⁸ For Bennett this means that thing-power is "the property of an assemblage."²⁹ Except *New World Order* is not just an encounter formed from things, or objects; they are chickens as well as machines, as well as a screen in a gallery. *New World Order* is nature as matter and as flow. Bennett cites Deleuze invoking Bergson "Just as there is 'a halo of instinct in intelligence, a nebula of intelligence in instinct' there is 'a hint of the animate in plants, and of the vegetable in animals'".³⁰ *New World Order* does more than hint towards the animate in plants and the vegetable in animals. There is a crossing of behaviours where the thing – that is the screen – operates as a temporal space within which new kinds of beings are witnessed. In thinking about the thing-power of exhibition objects, instinctual sympathy offers a method for human as well as animal relations.

As it did for Bergson, instinctual sympathy, then, offers a way of thinking the experience of relations between and across differing bodies and environments. In the introduction to his study of *Insect Media* Jussi Parikka writes:

Plants and animals constitute their being through various modes of transmission and coupling with their environment. They contract the forces of the cosmos into environmental relations, couplings, which is perhaps not a reflective (human) relation but is still a lived one of relations actual and virtual (potential).³¹

In working with any exhibition, curators imagine modes of transmission and coupling. They picture in their minds passages through space as well as sequences of encounter. This, this, and then this. The exhibition plan is durational and temporary. It is specific to the location and the mood of the gallery. This rhythm of relations could equally be described as a vital force: Bergson's elusive and problematic *élan vital*. In *Creative Evolution* Bergson did not define *élan vital* as a vital energy but an "image that invites us to think outside of the mechanistic framework of the physical sciences and of static metaphysical categories. The *élan vital* is an image for the process of time as duration, that is for time as force."³²

The ill disciplined slipping between fictions and modes of thinking and writing that pervades this paper reaches its zenith here. If galleries are inhabited by *élan vital*, or time as a force, assemblages that suggest new ways of thinking instinctual sympathy as an affective or aesthetic response equally inhabit them. Together Bergson and Butler have anticipated a way of being and a method for making that is both vital and machinic. As a curator the concepts that their work offers direct me towards thinking the life of an exhibition beyond the moment that it is visible in a gallery space.

The works within the exhibition come together as a body organised differently.³³ They then enter into other assemblages (including an afterlife imagined by the curator, or taken away by individual audience members). The machinic evolution feared by

²⁸ Bennett, 2004, p.354.

²⁹ Bennett, 2004, p.354.

³⁰ Bennett, 2004, p.353, n.18.

³¹ Parikka, 2010, p.xiv.

³² Guerlac, 2006, p. 7.

³³ Deleuze and Guattari, 1983, p. 287.

Butler has opened up a new understanding of carbon-based and non-organic being, because the definition of machinic was already organic. And the organic already machinic. Across the floors of the gallery, the materiality of the wasp and caterpillar are constantly reinvented. A sympathetic approach privileges this affective state of shared experience that is durational rather than temporal.

Finally, in this paper I have extended some thoughts on curatorial practice by crossing the conceptual fields of the machinic and the assemblage with notions of vitalism. An exhibition contains a rhythm, a flickering between the *elan vital*, or "the creative power of life as radical becoming"³⁴ and duration, the continual process of beginning again.³⁵ In this sense any exhibition is an evolutionary machine. The gallery is the hapless caterpillar, temporally paralysed by the curator and the exhibition; the audience larvae feed on the gallery until they are ready to enter into another world. Curation is at its simplest the notification of difference and similarity and the placing of things beside each other in space and time. In a discussion of a few of the art objects contained within the exhibition *Among the Machines*, I have suggested that the exhibition is a curatorial moment that extends beyond itself. When reconnected to a sympathetic history found in Bergson and Butler, Deleuze and Guattari's assemblage offers a strong counter to current mechanistic or deterministic models of the world (and the art objects inside it). Our everyday habits think between and across the organic and the inorganic. Machines do not possess the only clockwork, and animals do not possess the only organic means of reproduction. The coupling of steam engines is no more perverse than the zombifying husbandry skills of the *Ammophila Hirsuta*. Both are real evolutionary feats that make us reconsider our relations with each other, artworks, and the environment around us.

Biographical Statement

Dr. Susan (Su) Ballard is an art historian and curator from New Zealand and senior lecturer in Art History, Visual and Media Art and the University of Wollongong, Australia. Su's research examines materiality and machines in contemporary art and the art gallery. Su co-edited The Aotearoa Digital Arts Reader in 2008. In July 2013 she was appointed editor of Fibreculture Journal, and in 2013 she curated the major exhibition AMONG THE MACHINES for the Dunedin Public Art Gallery, NZ.

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³⁴ Marrati, 2010, p.15.

³⁵ Osborne, 2013, p.188.

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