

Exploring Posthuman Masquerade and Becoming

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In her landmark 1998 text *Body Art: Performing the Subject*, art historian and performance theorist Amelia Jones commented that:

younger artists tend to explore the body/self as technologized, specifically unnatural and fundamentally unfixable in identity or subjective/objective meaning in the world: indeed, they articulate the body/self as what some have called 'posthuman.' ... This mediated, multiply identified, particularized body/self proclaims the utter loss of the 'subject' (in this case the fully intentional artist) as a stable referent (origin of the work's meaning). (1998, 199)

In this chapter I explore several of the implications alluded to by Jones via discussions of a range of recent artworks by Australian artist David Cross and New Zealand artists Catherine Bagnall and Shannon Te Ao. Each of these artists has used masquerade, disguise, and distortion in the context of installations, performances, videos, and photography. This has taken such forms as dressing as animals (Bagnall), evoking/'becoming'/

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addressing animals (Bagnall and Te Ao), and rerouting childlike modes of play and games (Cross and Bagnall). Performing as multiple versions of embodied selves that address 'otherness' in an array of modalities, these artists dissolve fixed normative characterizations of subjectivity, enacting a series of critical reflections on 'the real'. The artists discussed here emphasize through their practices that one body cannot correspondingly adhere to any singular notion of self, selfhood being manifold and elusive, and their performative gestures only serve to reiterate this.

The term 'animism' can be seen to relate closely to multiple themes involving play, ritual, dress, and liveness. Viewed through the notion of posthumanism (which as noted involves multiplicity and particularization), a number of these associations both collide and layer upon one another. I am focusing less on the reading of the 'posthuman' as it concerns explicitly technological extensions of the body; rather, I am particularly interested in investigating how animistic notions might provocatively be considered in tandem with posthuman notions in the following interpretations of artworks by Cross, Bagnall, and Te Ao.

This also recalls another comment by Félix Guattari on the active role of the artist and what he terms a 'quasi-animist' speech effect:

The artist and more generally, aesthetic perception, detaches and de-territorializes a segment of the real in order to make it play the role of a partial enunciator. Art confers meaning and alterity to a subset of the perceived world. The consequence of this quasi-animist speech effect on the part of the artwork redrafts the subjectivity both of the artist and of his 'consumer'. (Guattari 1995, 131)

I am also intrigued by the related terms 'pretend' and 'pretension' in light of the artists/case studies I will be discussing here; in the fact that each of these artists has used modes of 'artifice' and the artificial to enact their performative creative works. To claim to be something else, or assert a visual resemblance that is only partially realized, is to operate on a threshold or perimeter, a boundary that may or may not be fixed, and might be travelled across or tested in multiple ways.

That we have bodies in costumes that both evoke and manifestly *are not* other beings recalls childhood play and the ability to create a vivid bricolage on the playground. Belief in the 'reality' of these actions sustained by the most tenuous of means—bits and pieces of surrounding ephemera, clothing, and landmarks—are transformed via acts of

performing/pretending. And to advance a 'claim' is a synonym of pretension, as are notions of largeness, vulgarity, and unnaturalness.

Theorist Brian Massumi writes of the phenomenon of animals at play in his book-length essay *What Animals Teach Us About Politics*:

The animal in play actively, effectively affirms paradox. This augments its capacities in at least two ways. On the one hand, animals learn through play (to the extent that a play fight is preparation for the real combat engagements that may be necessary in the future). On the other hand, the purview of its mental powers expands. In play, the animal elevates itself to the metacommunicational level, where it gains the capacity to mobilize the possible. Its powers of abstraction rise a notch. Its powers of thought are augmented. Its life capacities more fully deploy, if abstractly. Its forces of vitality are intensified accordingly. The ludic gesture is a vital gesture. Humans may also practice effective paradox, when they permit themselves to abandon themselves to play. In play, the human enters a zone of indiscernibility with the animal. When we humans say "this is play," we are assuming our animality. (2014, 7–8)

Indebted to Deleuze and Guattari, Massumi speaks of animality and humanity overlapping in an inclusion of their difference as a zone of indiscernibility.

Curator Anselm Franke, in his detailed overview of the history of the notion of animism and its corresponding relations with Modern visual culture, argues that: 'The backdrop against which to understand the nineteenth-century conception of animism is ultimately the partition of life from non-life, and its many offsprings and differentiations' (2010, 23). He notes at the same time the very 'instability' of this kind of hierarchical division, which also gives rise to the many imaginative permutations within Modern fiction and psychoanalytical thought via Freud's discussion of the uncanny. From Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* to Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*, curiosity regarding qualities of the animate/inanimate seems almost never-ending.

The contemporary artists I am turning my attention towards here partially inhabit, evoke, and play with features of something they are in some ways definitively *not*, via performative actions. They simultaneously retain their own selfhood, but expand the customary distinctions that might otherwise be respected of their fleshy, embodied edges. These artists might also be seen to consider what their unlikely extensions, costuming, and props might induce in the viewer. What affective turns do we negotiate in light of these works, and how might we reconsider



Fig. 11.1 David Cross, *Bounce*, 2005. Performance/installation. Photo: Steven Rowe. Courtesy of the artist and City Gallery, Wellington, New Zealand

our own human (and potentially posthuman) qualities and agency? (Fig. 11.1).

David Cross has described his artworks, without the express intention of summoning any pejorative connotations, as 'psychically confusing' and involving 'destabilising conditions' (Cross 2006). This is entirely appropriate as his projects frequently link the Freudian uncanny with

an in-between liminal space often made manifest in his outsized, inflatable structures. If play has functioned as a consistent theme throughout Cross's work, he furthermore explores play as labour, work, and ordeal. In his projects, participants are contracted into the schema that unfolds, which in turn usually involves contact with the sculptural installation, the site in which it is located, and with the bodies of others, including at times that of the artist.

Cross's multiple hybridized aesthetic draws upon references across a wide range of the visual culture continuum: minimal, performance, and pop art alongside direct and indirect references to horror films, children's amusements, sporting events, and even sex toys. The eyes of the artist that could only be seen through small holes atop his red-domed installation *Bounce* (2006) recall the threatening type of masquerade used in such genre movies as the *Halloween*, *Friday the 13th*, and *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* franchises. In turn, Cross became vulnerable to the movements of the participants running, sliding, and jumping onto the sculpture, at one point suffering a broken nose from one viewer's especially avid participation.

As curator Tyler Cann writes in his critical response to *Bounce*:

while the artist lay impassively below, children played at scrambling and bouncing, oblivious to their little cruelties. Perhaps this reflection on the soft spots we overlook and the unnoticed injuries we inflict was precisely the point. But of course, for the most part, the abuse simply bounced off the artist's newfound plastic skin. Enduring this anaesthetic condition for a full seven hours, for Cross, the distended red tumulus became part coffin and part cocoon. (see Huddleston 2008, 7)

Cann proceeded to remark upon two of Freud's exemplars of the uncanny: 'when something alive appears dead, and when something inanimate comes alive. In its stripped-down human encounter, mixing performance, sculpture, and carnival, *Bounce* managed to do both' (Huddleston 2008, 7).

I would argue that what Cann describes in his critique as 'managing to do both' is a central aspect of Cross's work and, more broadly configured, a range of performative art practices that straddle, merge and evoke contradictory, but rather eerily aligned, spaces and experiences, where aspects of the human animal and the supposedly inanimate or non-human are intermingled. The second, mediated skin of the inflatable

body/not body becomes integral to Cross's practice throughout numerous discrete projects. Moreover, his projects are strongly informed by notions drawn from the history of body art, correspondingly revised within the newer contexts of temporal exhibitions and site responsive practice. This engagement, while historically situated, is driven by examining aspects of the haptic and the contextual, and with technologically mediated live performance events.

Although Cross in many works has questioned the assumptions around both beauty and the grotesque in a very individuated manner, redolent of his own witty approach to materiality, more recently he has cast his view more toward the social body and its corresponding logistics. It could also be significant to note that the 'skin' evoked by high sheen inflatable materials is not only a conjuring which draws upon all manner of reference points along the arts continuum, from Ellsworth Kelly to Yayoi Kusama, but that Cross himself as a child was subject to a severe allergy to medication, resulting in burns across his own body, necessitating many subsequent surgical procedures. His artworks involve intensely tactile means, the bright coloration of fairground attractions coinciding with atmospheres of potential peril and unease. The titles of sculptural installations exemplify the performative actions taking place: *hold*, *bounce*, *lean*.

The artist has situated his projects within a nexus of manifold factors, as when *Drift* (2011) operated in an urban neighbourhood of Sydney characterized both by its alternative nightlife and a park frequently occupied by homeless citizens. To locate a site-specific project at the crossroads of those often perceived as marginal was important for Cross, whose work involved a gigantic yellow PVC tunnel installed over the Taylor Square fountain. In his earlier *Hold* (2007), participants climbed one at a time into a large, blue structure needing to reach—and have confidence in—the artist's hand extending outwardly from a slit to guide them each across a high, narrow ledge to the exit on the other side.¹ These inflatable works are characterized by their bold visual identity that simultaneously camouflages the complicated scenarios of interrelation, negotiation and fear that can ensue around, on and within their confines.

But the notion of play that can go wrong has haunted Cross's work with a number of participants undergoing minor accidents, and the actions of participants in turn putting the artist under near constant alert, even in the case of comparatively gentle harassment. In an informal

essay, Cross writes about the contextual setting of the *Drift* project in Sydney, in terms of the investive he received from passers-by, and the passage (somewhat ill-advisedly) of intoxicated and mentally troubled participants through the work, which inevitably required a modicum of skill and dexterity to negotiate. According to the artist:

The artwork couches participatory art practice in a package of generosity and civic pleasure, which proves to be a valuable, or more to the point, essential calculation. Yet to be able to investigate risk: the risk of the audience not knowing what happens inside the work, the risk of thunderstorms and wind gusts blowing the object across Darlinghurst, the risk of it being slashed like a Lucio Fontana canvas for the sheer destructive joy, and the risk of an inebriated local throwing up in the work, the artwork has to function as a sort of Hansel and Gretel house of allure. By drawing people in with its juvenile canary yellow colour, inflated form and the potential of something fun, the work managed to hold on. Point and counterpoint, push and pull. (Cross 2017, 27)

What the artist refers to as a 'Hansel and Gretel house of allure' is crucial to the understanding of a practice that recalls and reconfigures childhood fears and attractions simultaneously. The attraction to the viewer often results in something more promising than one's average theme park ride, more unsettling and rich in implications relating to perimeters, exteriority and interiority in flux, at times becoming evident as different spaces, at other times a kind of pulsing, writhing creature again.

But here our human surface qualities clash in mighty confrontation with a constructed, sci-fi carapace, as from Cross's artworks, which could be interpreted as synthetic bodily surrogates of differing shapes and scales: 'real' limbs protrude, eyes peer outwardly, and people test limits of the structures to hold and take on their physical weight. The human confronts the human-like, but in these events a disturbing alterity is revealed, as our human identification seems to dissolve and be ruptured by a fragmenting, distorting experience. We are not mirrored as whole in Cross's works. We are shown to be unlike ourselves, disunified, and potentially ill at ease. But the very fact that such disturbances of our supposed singular identities are enacted by carnivalesque means may also elicit as much pleasure as doubt or disillusionment (Fig. 11.2).

Catherine Bagnall's practice exhibits rather different charms than the outsized, overt manifestations I have spoken of in Cross's works.



Fig. 11.2 Catherine Bagnall, *Feeling the wind with my ears*, 2015. Photo: Julian Bishop. Courtesy of the artist

That is to say, her artwork and attitude evince a disarmingly modest quality that lures one in, should one wish to travel in the circles of those who tread long distances on foot in the wilderness while wearing multi-patterned, hand-sewn animal hats and tails (for example). Bagnall has both led group 'tramps' in this manner and, on other occasions, scaled daunting precipices of Aotearoa New Zealand (NZ) in cumbersome Victorian apparel. Bagnall's art practice enlivens the situations it encounters, similar to how she embraces both the outdoor landscape and the actively performative gesture.

Although most often represented through photography, video and sculptural installation, Bagnall's concern is very much for the experiential and, in a number of varied types of iteration, she has attempted to communicate the very feel and 'liveness' of her wilderness excursions. Although whimsical and childlike at times, it also bears a quality of enormous seriousness, and an almost mystical and neo-Romantic view of how

nature influences and intersects with culture. Her work bespeaks, despite its allegiances to the past, a very contemporary ecological world view.

Ron Brogio's book *Surface Encounters: Thinking with Animals and Art* has been informative in tangling with and thinking alongside Bagnall's works. Brogio argues for an investigation of animal otherness via the cultural realm, specifically the visual arts, asking the question: 'How are we to understand that which differs from our capacity to comprehend?' (2011, xvii). For Brogio, 'contemporary art has a particular investment with surfaces that is useful in unthining philosophical concepts and moving them in other directions' (2011, xvii). He unpacks initially the relegation of animals to a limited conceptual construct as he writes:

What depth they do have is dismissed as lesser than that of humans, or so foreign as to be untranslatable and not worth pursuing in our human endeavours. This flattening of animals' worlds into a thin layer of animal world as a life on the surface of things has legitimated any number of cruel acts against animals. (Brogio 2011, xvi–xvii)

Thus Brogio seeks to overturn and reorient this notion of 'animal surface' more productively, and he notes that artists' uses of surfaces are integral to a different sort of reading, arguing that: 'Working between these surfaces, folded within them, artists create works that prompt thought in new direction' (Brogio 2011, xvii).

And as Bagnall has commented:

'Becoming' another creature began with the idea of using a 'creature' to develop and understand aspects of myself, specifically my relationship to the environment. The dialectic between human and creature has its basis in the human psychological self and is used accordingly, this idea feels respectful to the creatures as well as allowing for the interior fictive process that goes on in the human imagination. But I don't rule out the actual transformation of humans into animals, shamanistic thinking, or at least trying the potential of that, and we can do it through writing, stories, and art forms. It is also about how we have placed the non-human animal in our culture, the awe about otherness. Otherness can be other characters, people, personae. (Patrick 2015)

This animal–human interface and series of reverberating aspects, doubling and othering of which Bagnall and Brogio are speaking in turn

recall Deleuze and Guattari's section 'Becoming intense, becoming animal' in *A Thousand Plateaus*:

The painter and musician do not imitate the animal, they become-animal at the same time as the animal becomes what they willed, at the deepest level of their concord with Nature. Becoming is always double, that which one becomes becomes no less than the one that becomes—block is formed, essentially mobile, never in equilibrium Becoming is never imitating. When Hitchcock does birds, he does not reproduce bird calls, he produces an electronic sound like a field of intensities or a wave of vibrations, a continuous variation, like a terrible threat welling up inside us. (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 305)

And in a videotaped interview transcribed into a series of observations on the work of Felix Guattari with respect to animism and subjectivity, anthropologist Eduardo Viveiros de Castro states:

the native [Amazonian] myths always begin with a time when every living being was human. But in the end the aim is to explain how certain beings stopped being human. These beings left humanity to become animals or objects. With our myths, it's exactly the opposite. In the beginning we were all animals or pure material. Certain of us then became humanized. So we have the heroic tales of humanity conquering nature, which is an alterity from the point of view of culture: culture as modern soul, something that distinguishes us from the rest of creation. Whereas among the Amazon Indians, it's exactly the opposite. In their view, we are all in the world. Humans merely have a particular materiality. What makes us human as such is our body, not our soul. Our soul is the most common thing in the world. Everything is animated, you see: animism. (Melitopoulos and Lazzarato 2012)

From such a perspective, Bagnall's work asserts an identification with animals via a kind of empathic imaginative event, that demonstrates affinity with the above description of animism. As the artist has remarked: 'I am aware of the problematic nature of using dress to try "becoming" another creature ... If I fully became rabbit I may lose my ability to philosophise about "becoming" rabbit' (Bagnall 2016, 203–204). But this act of pretending, asserting a claim that she can learn by 'becoming' rabbit, is a validation of an undervalued connection: that we are only a few steps removed from such animal behaviour. How are we to understand

it more intensively without a pretension to fail in the very act of getting closer, in the vicinity of animalhood? Being and not-being, balancing atop a philosophical conundrum, while wearing fur and tail.

Bagnall's approach also summons the work of Charles Foster, who in the course of his research for his 2016 book *Being A Beast* attempted, despite the ridiculousness and folly of the conceit involved, to live as various animals: badger, fox, deer, otter, and swift. Foster acknowledges the stretching involved in this endeavour with wit and candour, but still maintains an approach far more idiosyncratic than your average researcher:

I want to have a more articulate talk with the land ... A good way is to go about it is to have a more articulate talk with the furry, feathered, scaly, whooping, swooping, screaming, soaring, grunting, crushing, panting, flapping, farting, wrenching, waddling, dislocating, loping, ripping, springing, exulting lumps of the land we call animals. (Foster 2016, 21)

In the attempt, however tenuous at times, to reconfigure some versioning of 'animalhood', researchers such as Bagnall and Foster question our fixed assumptions around subjectivity, and avowedly desire to redraw our mapping of self. By attuning awareness to other phenomena apart from the rational, upright Enlightenment characterization of the human subject, the latitude of inquiry opens out onto provocative territory. If one takes on a more incorporative view of animism and how ubiquitous and enveloping it might be, as Vivieros de Castro indicates above, perhaps our claims to how specific the human animal is become more and more precarious.

Bagnall's ways of using dress also echo mimetic rituals of 'becoming animal' conducted in a more ceremonial, indigenous setting, as in anthropologist Rane Willerslev's description of the Siberian Yukaghirs:

Watching Old Spiridon rocking his body back and forth, I was puzzled whether the figure I saw before me was man or elk. The elk-hide coat worn with its hair outward, the headgear with its characteristic protruding ears, and the skis covered with an elk's smooth leg skins, so as to sound like the animal when moving in snow, made him an elk; yet the lower part of his face below the hat, with its human eyes, nose, and mouth, along with the loaded rifle in his hands, made him a man. Thus, it was not that Spiridon had stopped being human. Rather, he had a liminal quality: he was not an elk, and yet he was also not *not* an elk. He was occupying a

strange place in between human and nonhuman identities. (Willerslev 2007, 1)

Moreover, although I would argue that Bagnall's work operates within the crux of some vital questions regarding the role of the posthuman, she herself is more sceptical of blurring boundaries between human/animal considering that a view of human consciousness and potential as exceptional allows for an agency, responsibility, and activism towards improving the current ecological situation.

Bagnall states: 'I am interested in how one can be a voice *with* the other creatures, *with* the forest' (Patrick 2015). But arguably again this is a creative situation that gains its particular energy from initiating a generative, playful, relational dialogue for such issues to be brought out simultaneously with a curious tension: being and not being animal; partially becoming, animistically evocative. And it is also democratizing: as participants don the artifice of 'silly animal hats and tails' it is difficult to distinguish some sort of hierarchy, which facilitates an ensuing dialogue more quickly. Bagnall's repeated openings towards play again recall my citation from Massumi earlier in the chapter, acknowledging the vital significance of the ludic gesture and that acts of play summon our animality.

In philosopher Rosi Braidotti's wide-ranging study *The Posthuman*, she writes:

In my view, the point about posthuman relations, however, is to see the *inter-relation* human/animal as constitutive of the identity of *each*. It is a transformative or symbiotic relation that hybridizes and alters the 'nature' of each one and foregrounds the middle grounds of their interaction. This is the 'milieu' of the human/non-human continuum and it needs to be explored as an open experiment, not as a foregone moral conclusion about allegedly universal values or qualities. (2013, 79–80)

I would follow this by stating that Bagnall's work in its invitation to join and 'play along with' its presentation of animality is an open-ended, thoughtful art experiment, instead of rushing to a conclusion, moving along the paths of Aotearoa NZ to better formulate new understandings of human–animal interconnections.

How might an artist creatively contend with multiple entanglements of past and present, Pākehā and Māori, bicultural nation-state and indigenous traditions, belief systems, and protocols? Shannon Te Ao's



Fig. 11.3 Shannon Te Ao, *two shoots that stretch far out*, 2013–2014. Single channel video, colour and sound, 13:22 min. Cinematography Iain Frengley. Courtesy of the artist and Robert Heald Gallery

artworks incorporate locales, traditions, and narratives of Aotearoa NZ characterized by a precarious balance between ambiguity and specificity. Te Ao is often the protagonist of his videos, but acts as a kind of interpretative agent of signals wrought by charged cultural sites, involving contemporary performance interwoven with a poeticism of the everyday (Fig. 11.3).

Te Ao's works often contend with darkness, both in terms of that which needs uncovering and revising in historical terms, and in terms of actual atmospheric darkness in the compositional registers of video. Furthermore, such a dark space which, on one level could be read as 'empty', might also be considered a void space containing a different kind of plenitude, as the artist has noted:

Within Maori ideology, Te Kore may describe a point of nothingness—a void. Similarly Te Kore may propose a primary point of departure, a social paradox—without reference or resource—of fundamental autonomy and interminable potentiality. Te Kore and its variant 'Te Korekore' suggest that *what we see is not all there is*. This state, or state of being, exists beyond the realm of everyday experience and is commonly linked to narratives of

creation, exploration and uncertainty, and through these mana, tapu and mauri. (Te Ao 2015, 13)

Such a darkness can be viewed as manifesting presence, as well as a present indeterminacy and fundamental point of departure or potential. Te Ao's practice is also influenced by notions of cultural identity viewed as 'a restless system of flows' to cite Australian artist and writer Ross Gibson (Gibson 2013). He also draws upon Pacific social anthropologist Epeli Hau'ofa's notion that: 'Just as the sea is an open and ever-flowing reality, so should our oceanic identity transcend all forms of insularity, to become one that is openly searching, inventive, and welcoming' (Hau'ofa 2008, 55).

In *Follow the Party of the Whale* (2013), the artist performs before a video camera, pacing around a small outdoor area repetitively drinking from a case of bottled water and spewing sprays of water high into the air like a whale. Collaborator and cinematographer Iain Frengley's handheld camera hovers not far away, putting us in the place of both uneasy bystander and intimate spectator. A barefoot Te Ao is wrapped in a woolen blanket, placed shawl-like around his shoulders but later abandoned. In the artist's words:

Ambling across the cold, wet tarmac I am occupied with intaking fifty litres of soda water. I intermittently expel each mouthful and, in turn, take in more. I am invested in the singular, bodily experience; one's 'personal' relationship to a multitude of conflated influences. (Te Ao 2015, 15)

Te Ao's project references a significant, and highly traumatic event in Aotearoa's history: the invasion on 5 November 1881 of Parihaka (a pan-tribal indigenous community), in the Taranaki region of the North Island, by over 1500 colonial soldiers and militia. The settlement was a thriving and self-sufficient collaborative entity. The government's intention was to subvert the influence of Māori prophets Te Whiti and Tohu Kākahi, who were among the arrested, and had been promoting notions of non-violent and passive resistance in the face of land confiscations. The settlement had come together in part owing to the increasing force and oppressive tactics used against other smaller regional communities. The 2000 residents of Parihaka did not resist arrest, greeting Native Minister John Bryce in a peaceful manner. Nevertheless, the invading

soldiers completely destroyed the Parihaka settlement and brutally victimized its residents.

The material, physical and spiritual devastation extended to suspending any due rule of law, as the Maori Prisoners' Trials Act was introduced to enable the prisoners to be incarcerated without legal recourse. The men of the community were imprisoned in different locations on the South Island. Those transported to Dunedin were conscripted as labourers to construct the harbour wall and other parts of its civic infrastructure, and the extreme conditions under which they were held captive led to half of them perishing from tuberculosis (Hohaia et al. 2001; Keenan 2015). Such a devastating illness involves a kind of internal drowning, connecting with Te Ao's evocative, spare scene in the video, shot in a vacant area once used as a bowling green near Dunedin centre, but more disturbingly a site which witnessed some of the historical events described above.

In his own ruminative statement discussing *Follow the Party of the Whale*, Te Ao writes:

As you attempt to engage with a place or an event—deepen your understanding through some activity—over time the things that you might want to account for, or be responsible to, start to add up. A simple enough proposition is short-lived. We try to set tasks or propose actions that re-activate our presence within that process—a different kind of remembering. As it happens, the handling of dark material, complexity, history, and the insertion of our own agency within that, can be a murky business. There is no 'one way' and so you can never get it 'right'. If and when the dust settles it doesn't stay that way for long (Te Ao 2013, 18).

If our selves are potentially mutable, transitory, and hybridized, this does not necessarily sit well in relation to traditional protocols and understandings that long precede my argument and which I continue to learn much from. And much contemporary art by Māori artists including that of Te Ao simultaneously contends with richly inscribed cultural traditions, and attempts to create intricate responses to those traditions and more, including the effects of how one's particular hybridized life experiences intersect with existing systems of belief. Te Ao's work connects into a larger continuum of past and present, particularly if one acknowledges indigenous notions of time, and the Māori proverb ka mua, ka muri (one walks backwards into the future).

Te Ao's 2016 Walters Prize winning work *Two Shoots that Stretch Far Out* is a video which depicts the artist reading an English translation of a Māori waiata (song poem) iteratively to a number of animals: a donkey, a wallaby, a swan, chickens, and a few ducks. The conceit is a novel one and so ingeniously threaded into the project that one is quickly engaged with a work addressing themes of translation, transformation, and empathy across time, space, and species. The waiata is written from the point of view of a woman who has been wronged by her husband and who has taken on another partner; yet it is Te Ao who recites the text, which confronts our ability to precisely distinguish his role.

As Megan Dunn has pointed out, Te Ao's performative actions relate to his Māori background where, for some Māori tribes, 'animals are believed to be guardian spirits left behind by deceased ancestors' (Dunn 2015). In this respect, and with reference back to Guattari's 'quasi-animalist' speech effect, Te Ao's art reinvests meaning and alterity to a de-territorialized part of Māori history and redrafts his own subjecthood in relation to animality. Furthermore, for the Walters prize installation at the Auckland Art Gallery, Te Ao included a plethora of potted houseplants clustered on one's route to the screening area.

Te Ao had previously experimented with using plants in his *I stretch everything in the end* (2013), in which weeds—cultivated for this purpose in his sister's garden in large plastic paintbuckets—were transported from the basement to the rooftop of the gallery on a Sunday afternoon while the artist recited poetry to the plants. In so doing, the artist enacted acts of pretending and pretension along the thresholds and perimeters of our everyday experiences. Te Ao advances a 'claim' in the recital of waiata but does so in the process of talking to animals and plants. Recalling Massumi's notions regarding what animals teach us about politics, Te Ao helps us learn via playful experience, and performs a 'ludic gesture', abandoning himself to play (assuming his own animality) and thus, through such play, indicates the vitality and importance of his political action (see Massumi 2014, 7–8).

Not dissimilar from this thread of inquiry, critic Anthony Byrt has characterized Te Ao's role as a disruptive 'shapeshifter,' noting that:

Two shoots is about a waiata. But it is also about crossing oceans, crossing genders, crossing between times, between the dead and the living, between the animal and the human, and between the earth and the stars. Te Ao,

fixed in human form, nonetheless embodies mercurial energy throughout. (Byrt 2016)

In reference to Jones's comments that opened this chapter, Te Ao's political agility has something to do with his 'unnatural and fundamentally unfixable' identity that comes close to what might be called 'post-human'. His mediated and multiple identities performed through his body/self might suggest a loss of the subject (see Jones 1998, 199) but there is clearly something else gained. If Te Korekore means that *what we see is not all there is*, Te Ao deliberately inserts his own murky agency as a way of creatively exploring mauri (life force), likely never a single anthropocentric embodiment or positioning.

In this chapter, I am using the generative possibilities of contemporary art practice to think through some interrelated aspects of performance and play, animism and the posthuman. As performance theorist Anthony Kubiak writes:

Newer considerations of animism pull together our recognition of the 'interbeing' (to use Thich Nhat Hanh's terminology) of the world—that even in an empirical sense the world must increasingly be thought of as interconnected systems and not discrete individuals. This parallels the increasing sense of the epistemological falsity of essentialized identities and the fundamental truth of the fluid and porous nature of the world in general. (Kubiak 2012, 58)

I am arguing that a notion of selfhood in flux—incorporating simultaneously immaterial, not readily quantifiable aspects, and an extravagant, often vivid rendering of surfaces—is what emerges most distinctly in the artworks I discuss. These artists' performative acts that initially appear to drastically distort, disguise, and mask everyday appearances can be seen more subtly to serve as conduits toward revised understandings of our humanness/animality and to heighten awareness of the deep structures that connect states of beings, which could be read through various comparative lenses. In this manner, some highly intriguing reverberations and synchronicities emerge between anthropological research, philosophical discourse, indigenous cosmologies, and art criticism.²

Recalling my introductory citation, the works discussed here could be read as eluding certain of the explicit authorial intentions of the artists into a more indeterminate and unfixed realm. Whether via Cross's

performance installations, Bagnall's animal personae, or Te Ao's evocative videos, these creative practices relinquish unitary, discrete selves in favour of a pronounced liminality, and in encountering these acts of becoming other, we in turn are invited as viewers into a different state of reception, heightening our recognition of the expanded and elusive boundaries of both our animated surroundings and dispersed selves.

NOTES

1. For more images and writings on David Cross's practice, please see www.davidcrossartist.com.
2. Some of my thoughts on artists Shannon Te Ao and David Cross draw upon my previous writings on their work in the books *Unstuck in Time* (Auckland: Te Tuhi Gallery, 2014) and *Air Supplied: David Cross* (New York: Punctum Books, 2017), and are also related to the arguments presented in chaps. 1 and 5 of my forthcoming book *Across the Art/Life Divide: Performance, Subjectivity, and Social Practice in Contemporary Art* (Bristol: Intellect, 2017).

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