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KIKI SMITH
PROCCESSION

Thank you
For everything
All the best

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HAUS DER KUNST
PRESTEL MUNICH · LONDON · NEW YORK
2018
KIKI SMITH AND THE COUNSEL OF ANIMALS

Julie Bryan-Wilson

The video was taken in Russia I think, but it doesn't really matter. It could have been set in any number of places. It's a somewhat generic street scene, with the camera set at an oblique angle from above, trained on parked cars. Snow is falling. Snow has accumulated on the cars; thick layers of white powder blanket the hoods. And two crows are playing in the snow. They tumble and slide down the windshield, leaving little tracks in their wake. They peck and prance and cavort and roll around. Aside from the hands holding the camera at some distance, there are no people here to disturb them. Then, about two minutes later, the large black birds fly away from the snowy cars and the video cuts out. This interaction of snow, car, bird: hushed, a little spooky, and joyous.

In Kiki Smith's sculpture Head with Bird II (1994), a bird stands on the throat and chin of a severed human head. The head is cocked back, its eyes are shut and its mouth is agape, positioned face-up on the pedestal with a short length of spinal cord still attached. By contrast, the bird (an accipiter? it might be, with its long tail and its hawkish face) is poised, alert, and intact. Using two different bronzes—phosphorescent bronze and white bronze—to draw the contrast between these forms even more sharply, Smith has roughly textured the skin of the human head, and its rusted appearance suggests that this dismemberment might have taken place some time ago. But the bird (though still hand-brown and bearing the evident markings of its making) is mostly sleek, and its smoother surface reflects the light, shining and triumphant. Crows, owls, falcons, peacocks, and eagles have run rampant within Smith's work since the nineties; indeed, her work fairly teems with birds, and they recur in her practice more than any other type of nonhuman animal. This essay attempts to think through how this recurrence of animals, including birds, within Smith's work proposes a feminist rearticulation of gender and race as a complex network of visceral attributions, mirecognition, and disavowals.

Throughout Smith's oeuvre, she has been committed to troubling the constantly porous line between "nature" and "culture," using sculpted figures to dismantle our assumptions about the innate givenness of bodies and their processes, including reproduction and menstruation, digestion and excretion. In other words, she makes these entirely normal, and yet often unseizable or taboo, functions strange. With a skeptical anatomical eye she dissect and probes, peeling back the fleshy envelope from its frame to reveal a complex interchange between what we think we know about our bodies (what we call, colloquially, our "guts" or our "innards"; generalized terms that are nonetheless accurate to our felt sense that these systems are organically interconnected) and the medicalizing discourses that seek to isolate, extract, and classify. In her Digestive System
(1988), ductile iron has been shaped into a long twisting tube, as Smith has turned the gut's sacs and bulges into decorative punctuation marks along the length of the intestine.

"What is it about the gut that provokes so much dissonant feeling?" asks Kyla Warner Tompkins in her introduction to a special issue of GLQ: The Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies on "the visceral." She speculates that the gut is "a metaphor for feeling ... and gut-based affects—most often disgust and hunger—are textual strategies that might produce political motivation." Smith's work provokes a visceral response in viewers, both when she has literally pictured bodily viscera as well as when she works within more oblique or abstract idioms. Fibrous wall pieces swelling with hair (Dewy Cloth, 1990), flayed limbs (Untitled, 1988), nakedly exposed glands (Mammary, 1988), they carry the shock of deep recognition, the frisson of identificatory disgust.

Frequently turning to handicrafts and materials (including textiles and ceramics) that have been in the recent Euro-American context broadly coded as "women's work," Smith endeavors to recalibrate our corporeal epistemologies, interrupting the clinical gaze with her tactile, vernacular sensibility. In Ur-Genital System (Male + Female) (1986), for instance, she depicts ovaries and bladders in patinated bronze. Far from the sterile, clean-edged diagrams one might spot in a doctor's office, at first glance the wobbling tubes and lumpy blubs look imprecise, weathered, used. They have a folksy feel; but in truth, Smith's work better evoke the messiness and asymmetry of "real" organs than the diagrams. Her knowledge of such systems is rooted in her fascination with and immersion in empirical knowledge. As she stated in an interview from 1992, "In 1979 I started making pictures of the body from Grey's Anatomy—microscopic images, cross-sections, nerve endings, and things like that—very literal, and I am not as literal now. Slowly, I went from these images to organs, then to systems, and then, at one point, I started thinking of skin as a system, and then I moved from outside the body to making figures." Furthering such interest in the workings of bodies from the inside out, in 1985 she trained to be an emergency medical technician. In Zurvie Wahl (Second Choice) (1987), organs are clustered together in a ceramic bowl like so much raw fruit, but they do not convey the feeling that they await transplantation; rather, they gesture towards other narratives and functionalities—maybe as talismans of a village healer from a storybook, gathered with or without violence to help perform some secret, magic rite.

In the early and mid-nineties, Smith was situated amidst other artists who recruited the human figure to explore vulnerability and the charged political valences of feminist polemics and queer sexualities in the era of HIV/AIDS, including David Wojnarowicz (Smith's friend) and Robert Gober. Then as now, bodies were battlegrounds situated at the front lines of wars waged about sin, disease, abortion, and normative desire. Sculptures by Gober such as Untitled (1990), a beewax torso embedded with human hair, activated a distinctly queer corporeality. Here the artist presents a bag-like shape, split down the middle with two different chests represented side-by-side; is it bigendered, hermaphroditic, transgendered, or agendered? Whatever phrase one might use to describe this suturing together of secondary sex characteristics, it raises questions about the legibility gender identities (neither side can be termed definitely "male" or "female"), it is an uncanny but not physically impossible enmeshment.

Smith's work has often deployed the gender binary as a structuring device, from Ur-Genital System to her Untitled (1990), made the same year as Gober's piece and also created out of wax, in which a body presumed to be male and a body presumed to be female dangle from metal stands, the "man" dripping semen and the "woman" leaking milk. Heads hung and shoulders caving forward with deflated body language, the piece proposes that the rigidity of the two-gender system might produce, extend, or catalyze mutual abjection and debasement. In both Smith's piece and in Gober's, the pale skin tones indicate a racialization of or within the boundaries of whiteness, though such a reading is also insecure and based on fallacies around legibility, phenotype, and coloration.

Many authors have noted a transition enacted by Smith around 1995, when she began incorporating nonhuman animals into her repertoire of sculptural forms, a repertoire that had previously focused intensely (but never exclusively) on the human body. Smith makes vivid use of life casting and frequently models her animal figures as accurately as possible after scientific specimens, so some of her representations are tethered directly to the realms of the real. Her sculpture Wolf (2000) was made after extensive observation at Harvard's Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology. In her epic etching Destruction of Birds (1997, 4*), she undertook research using bird specimens from the Carnegie Museum of Natural History, and the resultant images, laid out one after another in a horizontal band, are both identifiable as belonging to our physical world but also feel like notes from an otherworldly musical score. Some of her animal pieces, however, are drawn not from life but are the products of her own imagination, such as Black Bird (1996, 5*). With a gold coin glinting in its metal beak and its profusion of feathers, the bird is arrested mid-flight, stealing its prize away with wings aflutter. Like a prop for the stage, it is exaggerated—crow-like, raven-like—conjuring the intricate inventions of puppetry more than the exacting specificities of taxidermy.

But what, precisely, such figures convey or mean is somewhat open to debate, and her relationship to animals has been narrated according to several overlapping yet distinct rubrics. In the first reading, birds and animals are mostly symbolic, standing in for qualities like spirituality or innocence, but are also allegorical, animated by the afterimages of our collective legends and anthropomorphizing fairy tales. For example, Carsten Ahrens declares that her treatment of the animal kingdom is drawn from "our fables and myths." Marini Warner notes that "the wolves and birds, which she has cast, sculpted, drawn, and etched since the early nineties, form a new mythological bestiary for our time." According to Warner, Smith performs a complicated kind of play with animals (souls, spirits, and death-portents) in which she attempts to control the unknown by manipulating them. A further, more intricately biographical reading sites her
symbolic interest in animals within a fixation that borders on the obsessive. "Smith is fascinated by birds. On a personal level she grew up with birds in the house, and at one later point kept thirty or forty of them in her bedroom; they are also important to her as symbols—of the Holy Spirit, for example, in Catholicism, but also of other qualities in other cultures. 'I dream about birds,' Smith has said."

In this view, Smith's recourse to the nonhuman creature is partly an outgrowth of a private passion.

A somewhat different understanding of Smith's animal turn is articulated by Helaine Posner, who writes that the artist's work aims to "restore humanity to a state of grace, envisioned as an ideal realm in which human beings, the animal world, and the landscape exist in harmony." In this version, Smith integrates her wolves, deer, and other animals alongside humans (who sometimes tenderly coexist) as a recuperative move, a way to repair the loss and rupture of civilization and invoke an Edenic, pre-fall coexistence (55, 66). Here, animals present the possibility of a pristine "outside" to the corrupting influences of speciescent ideologies that deem animals to be in a separate, and lower, realm. Within this understanding, Smith is an ecological rather than an oecumenical artist, rooted in a romance with animality as it presents a template for a utopian integrated biology.

Finally, Smith's animals have also been characterized as an invocation of the thrillingly savage and the primal. Here they are surrogates for the dangerous but intoxicating removal of limits, for the narrow precipice that separates the rational from the plunge into chaotic wildness. Smith herself often comments on how her animals are liminal figures that mediate between life and death. She states in an interview about a formative memory: "There was this dead cat lying in a pool of blood, and the cat was perfectly still and kind of quiet looking, but it was in a pool of blood, and I thought this is the most beautiful thing in the whole wide world, in that kind of stillness and blood all over the ground." An army of mice, a parade of forest creatures, a woman bleeding or singing a bird from her mouth: though ubiquitous, animals remain a shifting signifier throughout Smith's practice.

This endless multiplicity of meanings holds true for much art involving animals; in some respects, they become machines for generating metaphors. In his 1974 performance I Like America and America Likes Me, Joseph Beuys cohabitated for several days with a coyote at the René Block Gallery in New York City: it's one of the most well-known artworks on a long list of modern and contemporary art featuring animals. Over the course of their hours together—which began and ended with a theatrical flourish, as Beuys was transported via ambulance directly from the airport wrapped in felt—the coyote became progressively more tolerant of the artist. At first cagier, fearful, and guarded, on the final day Beuys successfully grabbed the beast for the briefest of embraces. This embrace is in truth a moment of profound aggression towards the animal, and raises a series of ethical questions about care and the responsibility of the humans towards the nonhuman (questions that Beuys did not seem especially preoccupied with): from where was this wild coyote procured, and at what cost? To what habitat was it returned? Did Beuys ruin that animal's life in the service of his own self-aggrandizing performance?

A quite different human/animal encounter is envisioned by Smith's sculpture Bones (2002), in which a fully mature woman slides out of the vagina of a deer; one of the woman's feet is still embedded there up to her ankle. Is this a fantasy about the generativity of animal life, fecundity, and the resonance between nature and femininity? Or is Smith rather staging a different argument about the potentially painful interdependences between humans and animals? Is this a nod to sexual nonnormativity (if read, alternatively and against its title, as a scene of erotic penetration rather than birth)? As with many of Smith's works, the interpretations proliferate around the shared instability of the two major operative terms here, "human" and "animal." It is a queer conjuncting, to be sure, and as Tompkins reminds us, the "visceral" has a kind of queer resonance. She writes: "the electric critical energy of the 'visceral' or 'gut' metaphors seems worth marking, not least because its diffuseness means remaking our expectations of what 'queer' is or how 'queer' works . . . Perhaps because they are interior to the body and therefore not easily named or described, these terms produce a rich and centrifugal metaphorical life that is somehow consonant across multiple images." In Smith's work, the queer gut—her Digestive System and the bowl of organs in Second Choice have no evident gender—is connected to the base urges of the animalistic, but those urges are also politically motivated. Tompkins continues: "To aim for the visceral, we have found, is to come at feeling, at sex, at sensation, at theory itself, from a queer place. The gut, it seems, has a mind of its own." A persistent question raised by Smith's visceral work around animals regards the conjunction of race and gender. Posner writes that Smith became interested in animals exactly at the moment that she became exhausted by the issues of identity that necessarily attend to conversations around the human body: "Issues of identity, such as gender, race, and sexual preference, had become dominant topics, notably in the works of her peers such as Janine Antoni, Glenn Ligon, Lorna Simpson, and Sue Williams, and Smith felt she had little to contribute to an understanding of these concerns, since they were not matters she was dealing with in her personal life. She also felt that the focus on the body had reached such a level of intensity that it left very little room for artistic experimentation. Smith decided that it was time to move beyond her longtime subject and expand her interests to include the animal world and the landscape." One might probe the assumptions here about how "personal life" is characterized—Smith, as a white woman, is as much implicated in structures of racism and sexism as are these other artists. But maybe what this quote reveals is that Smith retooled her interest in difference, in inequality, in power and violence, away from the human and towards the animal. In other words, race got sublimated into the category of "nature." Another quote, this one by the artist herself about making drawings of bird cadavers, helps illuminate how she understands the resonance between animal objectification and racial subjugation: "For storage purposes, they are laid in drawers, thousands of them in drawer after drawer. I think about them in relation to the layouts depicted in etchings of slave ships, a tight containment."
In a study on the intelligence of crows, researchers discovered that the birds quickly learned the difference between humans who might be threats to them versus humans that were benevolent.14 Crow recognize their own dead; they are said to never forget a human face. Crows hold a pivotal place within the oeuvre of Smith, as one of her most ambitious and most arresting pieces using animals was her _Untitled (Crows)_ (1995), an installation of dozens of silicon bronze crows lying on the ground as if stricken from the sky by a plague. The grim inverse of the Alfred Hitchcock's classic horror film _The Birds_ (1963), in which birds fell humans in a sudden, coordinated attack from above, Smith's sculpture displays the fragility of this flock. She recounts that the origin story for this work came from a news report of birds dropping dead after flying through "a cloud of pesticide, or some kind of poison." As she further explains, "That's when I had the vision that I was supposed to make a Noah's ark as a death barge of singular animals."15 _Untitled (Crows)_ is not a Noah's ark, if by that phrase we mean a vessel of protection and refuge, but instead is a graveyard of corpses littered across the gallery floor and impeding foot traffic. It is a scene of suffering that seems to still be in motion, for the birds are not lying limp; some have wings stuck up at odd angles or their bodies contorted, as if the toxin were still pulsing through their veins.

It could be said that the crow is one of the queerest birds, in the sense that it is flexible, adaptable, attuned to be resilient within difficult circumstances. Since they have a reputation for being scavengers and aggressive thieves, it seems fitting that the collective noun for a grouping of crows is a "murder," signaling an outlaw stance. (A well-known misapprehension about crows is that they have a special affinity for shiny objects, that they steal and hoard glittery things.) Crows know about survival; a recent article in the _New York Times_ discussed their incredible resurgence in the city over the past few years after being almost devastated by an outbreak of the West Nile virus.16 What is more, the crow is a ubiquitous urban animal; like the ones playing on the snowy car windshields, they are intimately familiar to the city dweller. They thus live at the threshold of wilderness and civilization; they thrive in these margins. Crows falling from the sky—the image has a Biblical feeling to it, as well as an art-historical lineage if we place it within the context of a long legacy of artists, from Kasimir Malevich's cry "follow me fellow aviators" to Petah Coyne's monumental tower of winged creatures, who have pounced birds and flight as a horizon of freedom as well as of transformation and remembrance. Yet the crows in Smith's installation present a paradox, as they embody both statism and animation, mobility and immobility. They are portents of threats we can detect and those we cannot; birds have famously functioned as "sentinel animals" or early warning signals for their human companions (think of the archetypical "canary in the coalmine.")

Some birds have remarkably different plumage—or shape and size—based on sex, but the sexual dimorphism in many crows and other corvids (including jays, ravens, and magpies) can be very subtle, with distinctions that can only be detected by ornithological experts. To the lay birdwatcher, a male American crow is, to the naked eye, virtually identical to a female crow; more to the point, Smith is not invested in