# On Creaturely Life

**By Pleasure Dome**

"The wilderness and the city are actually inside our bodies, like dreams."

"We're building our own nature, and it's going to be much better than the original."

"I'm a tiny brown seed in the ground; I accidentally sprouted before the springtime came, I almost died, but I'm gonna survive, I'm gonna survive..."

– Emily Vey Duke & Cooper Battersby,
*Songs of Praise for the Heart Beyond Cure*

"God dislikes drawing [because] it embraces both the continuity with animals and, in its deployment of space and time as raw materials, it leaps towards godhead. So drawing risks eliminating the human as a distinct zone between creator and creature. Which in turn may suggest why animators like animals: because in drawing them we pass strangely close to the divine, while at the same time flirting with animality through the kind of identification that you feel when drawing, perhaps some remnant of that identification with prey animals we can imagine among the cave painters. Perhaps God dislikes drawings of his creatures because, in the act of drawing, it is all too easy to be possessed by their spirits."
— Sean Cubitt, Drawing Animals

On Creaturely Life is a title borrowed from literary critic Eric Santner's 2006 study of German novelist W. G. Sebald's work. For Santner, Sebald's writings epitomize important aspects of the biopolitical or ethicopolitical reality of contemporary life. This complex examination, referencing Rainer Maria Rilke, Walter Benjamin, Martin Heidegger and Giorgio Agamben, focuses on the idea of what it is to be an engaged, ethical human being amongst other human beings, in a world where each individual is subjugated to the rule, limit or exception of laws that now, as Michel Foucault might state, are corporeally linked to the former primacy of sovereign power structures. Santner discusses human life as 'creaturely' in its particular intersection with this "threshold of law and nonlaw," noting that an individual's 'nonrelation' to sovereign power is akin to the 'nonrelation' that exists between animal life and human existence. Santner's 'creaturely' is our human relation to the difference

between, as Heidegger posits, human life as "world-forming" and animal life as "poor in world," the difference between "unconcealedness and concealedness" — Santner sees vestiges of an animal's relation to its environment in contemporary human life where 'concealed' and 'poor' animal 'captivation' is reflected by an individual person's biopolitical existence – the relation of one's body, history and pain to other individual's histories under the rule of sovereign law.

Many of the works in this programme incorporate elements that interrogate this notion of the 'creaturely': the "proximity of the human to the animal at the very point of their radical difference"; the biopolitical threshold between individual and law. We have found vestiges of the 'creaturely' in these works, possibly because each work is so totally human; they are not anthropomorphic realisations where the animal or the animal-like is used as a flexible surrogate for human drama. Instead they vigorously examine significant ontological and ethical concerns, vestiges of creaturely anxieties and terror.

On Creaturely Life is only peripherally a collection of Canadian film and video. While many commentators have discussed the centrality of wilderness and the landscape to the Canadian imaginary, we feel that these works reinvigorate this legacy by broadening its horizons. By destabilising the lines between geographic and psychic territories, these works of animation mix and merge animal and human embodiments; natural and synthetic; past, present and future; earnestness and cynicism.

In Stephen Andrews' Cartoon, an American-made SUV rolls towards, and eventually over, the spectator, quickly cutting to the image of a deer caught in headlights and then just as quickly, to a young man. Andrews' painstaking, frame-by-frame crayon drawings from found footage suggest the conquest of land by brutal, fatal force.

Like other cartoons, especially classic Warner Bros. productions, the narrative battle between 'world-forming' humans and animals captive in human-made environments is mediated by the miraculous intertwining of human and animal. Bugs, Sylvester, Wile E. Coyote and company have the looks and traits of their own species – hare, feline, coyote – but also have human reason and the ability to decide between right and wrong.

The clash between deer and boy at the moment of impact here marks the thin, fixed space intersecting them but also suggests that a transfer of traits or vestiges could take place between human creature and animal creature. Andrews' The Quick and the Dead further meditates on the mediation of conflict by drawing and re-animating a piece of footage from the US occupation of Iraq that features a soldier casually extinguishing a flaming corpse. Andrews' practice is about abstracting and reflecting on loaded media images, both official and underground, to uncover other meanings, using the meticulous work of drawing to distance himself from the often politically dubious visceral clout of the indexical footage.

Christina Battle works with celluloid and with images that are suffused with a ghostly aura of pastness. three hours, fifteen minutes before the hurricane struck stoically subverts the quintessence and motion that animation is known for by presenting static tableaux of found line drawings of flora and fauna of all different sizes on a pitch-black background. These non-human creatures are arranged in strange but suggestive compositions that work in delicate tension with the elliptical fragments of (human) reminiscences of disaster that caption each arrangement: "the lights begin to flicker," "trees started falling," and so on.

Where three hours... is sober and sombre, her nostalgia (april 2001 to present) is a tremulous trip down memory lane as she collages children's book images of joyful, fifties nuclear families into a disturbing, fragmentary object lesson in indoctrination. On an aesthetic level, the images are winsome and appealingly old-fashioned, while the ideological loads each is burdened with – all primers in the proper maintenance of mind, body, family and nation – rupture and agitate, ensuring that these monuments to human mastery never go unhaunted by more bestial forces.

In drastic contradiction to the impact of these ideological forces are the mind-blowingly cute and perverse characters in Amy Lockhart's Walk for Walk who easily surmount any trauma that they encounter, for the walk must go on. The only thing that unites them is their shared determined movement across the screen. Lockhart has created a virtual encyclopedia of bodies of all shapes, sizes, colours, and importantly, sounds, that gleefully parade across the screen for our amusement, taking squash-and-stretch to its most infantile, grotesque and fanciful ends. Lockhart's animated world is a space only slightly attached to human physics.

Perhaps the paragon of nostalgia for an anthropomorphized world is Walt Disney's oeuvre of animated features. By slowing down a courtship scene between Bambi and Faline, Meesoo Lee gently intervenes in the canonical cartoon to focus our attention and foster pleasure through minute, peripheral details such as the sight of grass blowing in the wind or the perfect, harmonious union of found image and sound (a luxurious Donovan song). Lee's intervention foregrounds just how precisely Disney crafted seamless, closed environments that externalized the 'realist' narratives' emotions and delights perhaps too agreeably.

By contrast to the romantic deer, the children in Michèle Stanley's Last Still Life wander a landscape that is decidedly perilous: they are fleeing from something – but we know not what. Trapped in a perpetual loop of flight, they never achieve a safe haven but are never reached by the malevolent force chasing them either; they will repeat their escape until doomsday.

There are many children and childlike states in these works. Rather than jettisoning all of animation's historical attachments to child audiences in favour of austere, grown-up interpretations, we feel that the child is a key figure worthy of attention. Awkwardly poised somewhere between the animal and the grown-up human, the

child, unfixed and entropic before joining society and its strictures, mirrors some of the essential qualities of animation.

His style influenced by the same storybooks as Battle's nostalgia, Daniel Barrow performs a state of perpetual childhood, constantly striving to reimagine sentimentality and sincerity without sacrificing intelligence and irony. Speaking from the position of the sad young man, he delivers a wistful diatribe filled with wry jabs, regret and small humiliations in Artist Statement. Like the emotionally arrested protagonists he chronicles in his live, overhead projector animation performances, Barrow's style is also stuck in time, as he atavistically makes use of a Commodore 64 and defiantly primitive animation techniques to visualise his delicately assumed alienation and ennui.

In several videos here, the digital offers a "chaotic playhouse of signification" (a term coined by Sean Griffin in his Pronoun Trouble: The Queerness of Animation) where networked or computer-enhanced identities can be tried on and just as quickly discarded like so much childhood dress-up (there is no great technotopia here).

Jeremy Bailey's videos plug him into supposedly high-tech computer graphics applications that are really no more powerful than his own gangly body, forced to clownishly perform for the camera. During his demonstration of the development of his software Video Paint 2.0, Bailey spastically gesticulates in order to control the digital paintbrushes; however, he seems ignorant of the affective punch of the found footage playing behind him – the canvases for his messy, expressionist digital paintings – for example treating The Cosby Show and an Iraq hostage beheading video with the same degree of respect.

Ryan Trecartin's digital body similarly has no distance from the archive of cultural detritus and the space of the screen: he lives, breathes, eats and pukes data, dramatizing a world where all meaningful distinctions between things are blurred into one constant stream of information. He and his cyborg collaborator comrades in (Tommy Chat Just E-mailed Me) perform a mad burlesque of being young, dumb and plugged into their Macs at all times. Trapped in loops and in claustrophobic, chaotically choreographed spaces, they parrot back clichés until they are unplugged. Trecartin also uses digital animation as a prosthetic to the trashy performing bodies on display, manifesting through painted artefacts and invasive editing tricks their warped analog/digital hybrid states.

The figures found in Barry Doupé's At the Heart of a Sparrow are also beings in fractured states – polymorphous creatures that are at once one animal and another and another – simultaneously cobra, sparrow and bat. These are figures whose familiarity gives way to ambiguity – a child becomes a demon but remains a child; a rabbit is a rabbit but also a vaudevillian cop wielding a carrot as its baton. It is as though the root structure ordering the programming of the video games that Doupé's work mimics has become corrupt, has suffered a psychic split, and now

orders images atop one another – opaque memory atop opaque memory. Coyly imitating tropes of adventure narratives like The Legend of Zelda or Final Fantasy, Doupé's characters navigate 'levels' with only hints of narrative. There are no 'points' earned – literal or symbolic – for entry into an understanding of the next stage of the work. Again and again, references are given and quickly taken away – there is no way to defeat the 'boss' and 'finish' the game.

Transcendence and redemption from Doupé's hollow world of shifting digital membranes and avatars gone adrift comes in the shape of Duke & Battersby's Songs of Praise for the Heart Beyond Cure, a treatise on hope and despair, magic and reason, nature and civilization. It features the duo performing various crudely animated figures – two witches, a little girl named Petra, and, most poignantly, "a tiny brown seed in the ground" – interspersed among fragments of manipulated indexical footage of the natural world. Here flora, fauna, child, adult, wizard and all-too-powerless human all come together to marvel at and sing the praises of the simultaneous beauty and abjection of the world.

Such 'coming-together' of individuals characterized by Songs of Praise is what Santner suggests as a way of "uncoupling from the mode of subjectivity" of individual 'creatures.' That is, that rather than merely sustaining our own "unconcealed," singular and boring lives, becoming neighbours engaged in the contemplation and love of each others' singular lives – our individual glee, our individual sadness – is a miraculous option: "the domain of neighbour-love does not represent a space apart from that delimited by the sovereign and the creature but serves as a mode of intervening into that space, of opening up the possibility of new possibilities foreclosed within the agitated immobility of that fateful entwinement."

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### About Pleasure Dome
Pleasure Dome is a Toronto-based film and video exhibition group dedicated to the presentation of experimental film and video.

Since 1989, the Pleasure Dome programming collective has been presenting some of the most innovative and challenging work produced by media artists from Canada and abroad. In the course of over two hundred screenings (including feature-length works, solo screenings, mid-career retrospectives, open screenings and thematic programs), the collective has emerged as the conduit whereby Toronto audiences can see experimental media that may otherwise have fallen between the cracks of other institutions' mandates.

www.pdome.org

## three hours, fifteen minutes before the hurricane struck
Christina Battle Canada 2006 5'

Inspired by the diorama-like boxes of Joseph Cornell, and with text taken from victims of hurricane Katrina, "three hours, fifteen minutes before the hurricane struck" imagines moments just before a violent weather storm. (Distributor's synopsis)

## Last Still Life
Michèle Stanley Canada 2003 3'

A looped memory fragment. Reality, dream and hallucination intermingle when a single, disturbing moment is drawn out. Last Still Life was made using the traditional animation technique of rotosoping. Each frame of a piece of found footage was projected and drawn out by hand using the projection as a guide, resulting in 250 charcoal drawings. As opposed to traditional animation, Stanley chose to emphasize the uniqueness of each of the individual drawings rather than striving for realism or graphic unity. The crudeness of the result combined with the peculiar anonymity of the footage captures the surreal, haunting quality of childhood memories. (Distributor's synopsis)

## Cartoon
Stephen Andrews Canada 2007 0'50 (looped to 2'30)

A car commercial send up in which Bambi meets Nissan. The question is: who's who? (Distributor's synopsis) Meticulously rendered from found footage, intricate wax-crayon drawings are used as the frame-by-frame cels of Andrews' video work.

## bambi/donovan
Meessoo Lee Canada 2003 4'42

The courtship scene between Bambi and the doe Faline is reimagined with a soundtrack borrowed from Donovan.

## nostalgia (april 2001 to present)
Christina Battle Canada 2005 4'

Once idealized, mythological representations of Western consumer culture and its ethics are altered and revised through Battle's renowned, visceral hand-processing.

## Artist Statement
Daniel Barrow Canada 2007 5'20

Barrow uses a Commodore computer and mouse to illustrate and animate his "gratuitously honest" personal manifesto. (Distributor's synopsis)

## Walk for Walk
Amy Lockhart Canada 2005 10'

Lockhart's unparalleled understanding of the fantastic and grotesque combined with her completely original aesthetic sensibilities create and inhabit an animated landscape where a seemingly endless parade of kooky little creatures walk themselves straight into trouble, but always find a way out. Enter the surreal, ever-changing world of "Walk for Walk", a colourful, tripped-out animated landscape filled with catchy

songs, eyeball kicks, goofball characters, and a great variety of babies: Warm Baby! Mister Baby! Rich Baby! And more! Created using over 1000 hand-painted paper cutouts, puppets and backgrounds. (Distributor's synopsis)

## (Tommy-Chat Just E-mailed Me)
Ryan Trecartin Canada 2006 7'15

Trecartin describes (Tommy-Chat Just E-mailed Me) as a "narrative video short that takes place inside and outside of an e-mail."

Trecartin's intense visualization of electronic communication is inhabited by a cast of stylized characters [...] Totally self-absorbed and equipped with vestigial attention spans, the characters are constantly communicating with one another on the phone or online. Their e-mail exchanges and Internet searches are channeled into bright animations that intersect with the "real world" locations.

The story moves from person to person like a browser surfing through Web pages. Engrossed in manic electronic interactions, the characters become increasingly isolated and solipsistic. (Distributor's synopsis)

## Video Paint 2.0
Jeremy Bailey Canada 2005 10'20

Video Paint 2.0 is a program designed by Jeremy Bailey that allows you to paint anywhere anytime. This video consists of exciting performative journals documenting the development of VideoPaint 2.0, the second version of the now hugely successful performance software environment. (Distributor's synopsis)

## The Quick and the Dead
Stephen Andrews Canada 2004 1'14

Animation based on a videoclip from the Iraq war. (Distributor's synopsis)

Meticulously rendered from found footage, intricate wax-crayon drawings are used as the frame-by-frame cels of Andrews' video work.

## At the Heart of a Sparrow
Barry Doupé Canada 2006 29'

An episodic adventure highlighting the rift between mind and body. Through a series of animated narratives, role reversals and associations images are driven out and stacked one on top another. (Distributor's synopsis)

## Songs of Praise for the Heart Beyond Cure
Emily Vey Duke and Cooper Battersby Canada 2006 14'40

Songs of Praise takes on difficult, often painful subject matter. Themes of addiction, violence, the destruction of the natural world and the agonies of adolescence are woven through the work, but the tape is "anything but depressing... [it is founded in] a sense of wonder at the endearing weirdness of life and all the vulnerable, furry little creatures immersed in it (especially us)."
—Duke and Battersby; Sarah Milroy, The Globe and Mail