

On Poetry as a New Home for Humans

Abecedarium Bestiarium – Portraits of Affinities in Animal Metaphors by
Antonia Baehr & Friends

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Abecedarium Bestiarium – Portraits of Affinities in Animal Metaphors is a performance in which Antonia Baehr invited her friends (musicians, filmmakers and visual artists) to write short personal compositions for her. Antonia's friends wrote scores for an ABC of extinct animals they felt strongly about, like D is for Dodo, T is for Tasmanian Tiger... Each author was asked to find the affinity between themselves and an extinct animal and create a score for a short and personal piece for Antonia about their affinity with this animal, keeping their friendship in mind. The animal would represent the author of the score and the piece would be about the relationship between the author of the score and Antonia (Baehr 7). Their choice was open to all the species of birds and mammals that had died out since the 16th century but had really existed at one time and whose extinction was inseparably intertwined with the history of colonialism. The performance *Abecedarium Bestiarium* consists of individual pieces, each titled as a capital letter. Usually, it consists of a selection of 8+1 letters set in a non-alphabetized order: D, Y, T, C, S, M, F, N and L, the last appearing merely as an installation that invokes the idea of a performance. In addition, there are also G, H, I and W, which have been performed only sporadically.

The missing letters stand for the absent, perhaps the forgotten – those that have disappeared without a trace. On a stage that resembles a cabinet of curiosities, the written scores become words, sounds, images, stories and gestures performed at different stations marked by the letters. The audience is invited into the space and to follow the performance of each singular score by walking from station to station. Through the performance of these extinct animal-based scores, *Abecedarium Bestiarium* unveils the unexpected, perhaps disturbing correspondences between human and animal, male and female, the living and the dead, thereby opening the way for “mad affinities and dis-affinities” between them to become visible.

Antonia Baehr is a Berlin-based choreographer. Her work could be characterized by a non-disciplinary approach and a method of collaboration with different people using game-like structures and a switching of roles: each person takes turns being director, author, host, performer and guest. Antonia Baehr “is many”



Antonia Baehr, *Abecedarium Bestiarium*, ©Anja Weber, score Steffi Weissman

and has “many names”. She is also the creator of the horse whisperer and dancer Werner Hirsch, the musician and choreographer Henri Fleur and the composer Henry Wilt. Generally, in her artistic practice as well as in *Abecedarium Bestiarium*, Antonia’s body serves as a frame for the inscription of a multitude. We witness a proliferation of presences, of names, perhaps identities – albeit these are always ephemeral, cracked open, passing through this frame, each appearing only to disappear as traces of the passing, to be replaced by another presence, another trace of an identity. Sometimes the one who is called “Antonia” is the producer of these presences, and other times it is others who are the “producers”, as her works are indeed often the invitations to others to compose work for Antonia-Werner-Henri-Henry. As the title of the performance by one of the contributors, Whiliam Wheeler, goes: “Without You, I Am Nothing” (Baehr 10). This title could easily hold up as a motto of her-his-their work. The way you see me, the way you name me, has an impact on the Life I am. It defines me, gives me a form. It projects the shape through which the Life I am breathes. To some extent, I become that shape you project upon me by means of a name, through your gaze. The gaze, just like language, is never innocent. It always comes back to us as a question of use. And if “without you, I am not”, then “I am” and “who I am” are always measured and outlined in the interval, the relation between us, between oneself and the other.

B is the first letter of Baehr and my name is pronounced “bear”. I am an extinct bear, but I won’t perform the letter B tonight.

Abecedarium Bestiarium began as a question of names and naming. In the beginning, Antonia asked her friend Dodo Heidenreich: “What is it like to be the namesake of a famous bird, the dodo”, an extinct animal of which only a few bones remain and some fanciful paintings from the 17th century? “What does the name Dodo do to you?” (Baehr 7) “What does a name do to the one it names? Are certain qualities potentially present in one’s self brought about due to one’s name and its inherent attributes? Or are they brought about because one is always associated with the attributes inherent in one’s name, long before one masters language? Would I be different under a different name? Out of this question arose *Abecedarium Bestiarium* as a series of miniatures in heterogeneous styles and moods, modes of expression, artistic genres and tastes. The “extinct animal” became a metaphor, a sort of container for the inscription of the relationship between Antonia and each of her friends who contributed a score, but also a sort of vehicle with which to portray the affinities and dis-affinities between different animal metaphors.

Abecedarium Bestiarium resembles a kind of “abecedarium”, not unlike the ones children use to learn language that displays and perhaps teaches us about the ABC of relationality. It is a space where writing and reading through the body takes place, of the relations and non-relations, of correspondences and non-correspondences between different animal metaphors that only exist through human language, between the animal(s) and human(s), between Antonia and the other queer selves she is (the producer of), between Antonia and her friends, between “the extinct bear” and the audience... What is brought about and unfolded is the whole web of actual and potential, possible and impossible, yet always imaginative and poetic “subjective” and “inter-subjective” relations that arise from the question of naming.

But the question regarding the name in relation to life is in fact the question about the power of language to define the life one lives and shape it into a certain form of life. At the same time, it is the question about fugitive life, about the animal, as that which has its own power(s), its own resilience and can potentially liberate itself and escape from the bonds of and the capture by language. In this emergent relational web, perhaps the pertinent question of *Abecedarium Bestiarium* is who is the “extinct bear” who is also Antonia Baehr (which reads as bear), who is also the extinct Dandy, and still also the drags Werner, Henri, Henry, and also *The Dodo*, *Tasmanian Tiger*, *Martelli’s Cat*, *Yangtze River Dolphin* and so many other extinct animals, perhaps really just reflecting the animal underlying all of existence as extinct. And why does Baehr (bear) call herself extinct?

There seems to be a series of numerous extinctions pointing towards an event, taking place at the heart of what Agamben calls “an anthropological machine”, that machine which produces the human subject. *Abecedarium Bestiarium* addresses us with a riddle not unlike the one the Sphinx posed to Oedipus that we must solve while watching the performance that looks like the ultimate escape act of a great magician with the ability to disappear while everyone is watching. Who or what is this “extinct animal” that appears under so many guises that disappears at the vanishing point of this performance and is resurrected as one “whose name we still don’t know”? How does this riddle in the form of an escape act constitute an ethical event, a rupture or rapture within the existent ethico-political frameworks?

Be what you would seem to be – or, if you’d like it put more simply – never imagine yourself not to be otherwise than what it might appear to



Antonia Baehr, *Abecedarium Bestiarium*, ©Anja Weber

others that what you were or might have been was not otherwise than what you had been would have appeared to them to be otherwise. (The Duchess in Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*)

The Anthropological Machine

Antonia Baehr enters the stage and says, "My name comes from Greece, the Greek goddess' name, Dodo, my name, means 'God's Gift'". (from *The Play about Dodo the Bird* by Dodo Heidenreich)

Large black letters scattered all over the stage floor cover the white surface of the stage of *Abecedarium Bestiarium*. D, Y, T, C, S, M, F and N appear in a diagrammatic constellation and mark the stations in space. Each station resembles a small stage setting. Whatever props will be used are already displayed on stage. Nothing is hidden. Everything is visible and in anticipation of its possible use. It is as if we were in a cabinet of curiosities where the exhibits are brought to life. The entire black box is a container of smaller stages. The disposition of the smaller stages in space, their settings as well as the actions performed on them, resembles the panels of Aby Warburg's *Mnemosyne Atlas*, where the history of European culture is mapped to uncover those moments in which an image emerged as something like a memory trace of the past, and where the method used is placing like images next to each other in order to find both similarities and divergences, to allow different meanings to flicker up as they are gazed upon.

The principle of organization is such that each image on the panel is never considered as an isolated unit but rather as a part of a larger constellation, as a part of a still from the giant film of history, always in relation and correspondence to other images on the panel. What matters is the interval and the movement between the images. Montage, the placing of the fractured images into a specific constellation, is what produces not only their meaning but also draws out the unusual confluences between the alternate voices of the figures in action (Michaud). *Abecedarium Bestiarium* is based on such juxtaposition between the smaller stages and the stage, the different alternate figures that appear on them as well as the actions they perform. What appears on these stages is a series of variations on the "extinct animal", all performed by Antonia Baehr, who offers her body for the enactment of each specific figure in action as defined by the score authored by one of her friends and by which the timeline of the performance is juxtaposed with all the previous figures in motion and all the anticipated ones yet to take place on one of the stages in the space. Indeed, it is as if through each

figure we are looking at a “still” from a “film on the history of animal extinction”. The more the figures as possible versions of the “extinct animal (Animal)” multiply, the more we can see the similarities and divergences between the figures that allow different meanings to appear as we look at them.

The more we gaze, the more the metaphor of the “extinct animal” sprouts possible aspects and layers of its meaning. *Abecedarium Bestiarium* is a montage, a time-based juxtaposition of figures as variations on the “extinct animal” that enact the scores written by friends. The scores work as heterogeneous relational propositions, which, now staged and interpreted by Antonia, open the stage for mad affinities and dis-affinities – from self to other, from human to animal, from dead to alive. The longer we watch, the larger the emergent web of relations and correspondence grows while the affinities and dis-affinities between the staged figures and their actions become clearer and the possible meanings start multiplying while they are drawing the “portraits of affinities between animal metaphors”.

In the opening pages of Agamben’s book *The Open*, we find an image from the Ambrosian manuscript of “a messianic dinner of the righteous on the judgment day”, which curiously depicts the crowned righteous in the shade of Edenic trees with the typical animal heads of the eagle, ox, lion, donkey and panther, on the day of the coming of the Messiah. For Agamben, this image “seems to allude to a different economy of relations between animal and human” (3), similarly as the idea of animal nature transfigured in the messianic kingdom implicit in the messianic prophecy of Isaiah [11:6], where we read:

The wolf shall live with the sheep, / and the leopard lie down with the kid; / the calf and the young lion shall grow up together, / and a little child shall lead them.

The manuscript seems to suggest “that on the last day, the relations between animals and men will take on a new form, and that man himself will be reconciled with his animal nature.” (3) *The Open* is an enquiry into what the current economy of relations between animal and human is, which is generated by what Agamben refers to as the “anthropological machine”, and which needs to be transfigured and take on a new form.

The “anthropological machine” is what continuously produces man through its separation from and exclusion of the animal and the non-human within the human. “Insofar as the production of man through the opposition man/animal,

human/inhuman is at stake here, the machine necessarily functions by means of an exclusion (which is also always already a capturing) and an inclusion (which is also always already an exclusion)” (38-39). It generates a precarious distinction between the animal as world-responsive and human as world-creative life, on the basis of which human, by continuously creating a speaking and world-creative comportment, can define itself as a being dividing him from his own animality. Human becomes the speaking, political, ethical and deciding human being only by constantly creating itself as not merely or not solely animalistic. The machine is able to function only by establishing a zone of indifference at its center, within which the articulation between human and animal, man and non-man, speaking being and living being, must take place. But “like every space of exception, this zone is, in truth, perfectly empty, and the truly human being who should occur there is only the place of a ceaselessly updated decision in which the caesurae and their re-articulation are always dislocated and displaced anew” (38). What is thus obtained, “is neither an animal life nor a human life, but only a life that is separated and excluded from itself – only a bare life” (38) – a life through which we glimpse a new and different paradigm for human life.

This new paradigm of human life is only announced through our recognition of the way the anthropological machine produces bare life. What is needed is to bring to a halt this dialectical machine that governs our conception of man in its distance from the animal and which serves to seize hold of bare life. Only then, at the moment of “messianic Now” as the last day commences, may the righteous crowned with animal heads sit to dine in the *Open*.

The Eclipse of the Subject

“mi? mi NAOWAOW NAOW! Miaaw! Naow! NAOW! NAOW! NAOW!”

Martelli’s Cat speaks like the Cheshire Cat, but Alice isn’t there to respond to him. Martelli’s Cat is also the part of Antonia that she recognizes in me. And you, Werner, you imitate me, you interpret me in the form of a cat, and you interpret yourself so that you can speak and meow right in the audience’s face. Then you disappear into darkness. (from *Oh, you can’t help that. We are all mad here. I’m mad, you’re mad. You must be, or you wouldn’t have come here* by Valérie Castan)

The anthropological machine produces the Homo defined only by his “irremediable lack of *dignitas*”. Homo is without rank. He is marked by the

“absence of a nature proper to him, holding him suspended between a celestial and a terrestrial nature, between animal and human – and, thus, his being always less and more than himself” (29-31). He is created without any definite model, does not have a face of his own and one must shape it at his own discretion in either bestial or divine form. Insofar as he has neither essence nor specific vocation, Homo is constitutively non-human; he can receive all natures and all faces. The features of the human face are unsure and aleatory and are always in the process of being undone and erased like those of a transitory being. A Human is marked by the uncertainty and precariousness of himself, the fragility of his own identity and the lack of his own face.

What Agamben lays out as the negative foundation of the human “without rank”, the void at the heart of the anthropological machine, is the background onto which we can think what Bojana Kunst frames as the current “crisis of subjectivity”. The “crisis of subjectivity” in the post-Fordist phase of neo-liberal capitalism is centered around what Maurizio Lazzarato specifies as “the production of subjectivity” (10), which in fact means the production models of subjectivity together with its growing individualization and homogenization. The contemporary form of capitalism as semio-capitalism produces subjectivity through language, creativity and imagination as tools of knowledge production, but these forces are standardized, which is intertwined with the ever more restrained governmentality of the subject(s). Today, experimentation with subjectivity, changes in the modes of work and internalization of the micro-dynamics of power stand at the center of the production of value. Kunst points out the fact that today the artistic contemporary modes of production of subjectivity that works as a creative, affective, social power merge with other post-Fordist modes of work and creative production and this radically questions art’s emancipatory potential and power to resist, subvert or transform. “What art and capitalism have especially in common is the dangerous and seductive closeness of the appropriation of life” (Kunst 21).

Especially the life of subjectivity as humans are confronted with a brutal intensification of the processes of individualization, old forms of life become obsolete before we can absorb them, and the road is open for subjectivity to transform continuously, while sustaining and bearing the constant state of tension of having to make invention grow. What is at work in contemporary apparatuses becomes problematic and disruptive by way of its profanation and constant de-subjectivization of contemporary modes of living.

In live performative events, this crisis of subjectivity becomes manifest as the loss



Antonia Baehr, *Abecedarium Bestiarium*, ©Anja Weber, score Valérie
Castan

of subjectivity's center (subjectivity is no longer the place of truth), as a shift of the source of corporeality to the external and the everyday, as the opening up of subjectivity to experimentation with transformation and negativity, and as autonomy transposed to the exterior of the independent material processes of being, the uniqueness of life flow and the being-ness of things. Kunst conceives the intense power of transformation through which the crisis of subjectivity enters the field of performance art as a "radical consumption".

I see radical consumption as the consumption of the body, presence, human actions and abilities, physical strength, spiritual power and affects; it aims to intervene into the intersubjective and productive nature of subjectivity and, in this way, also open up the relationship between the performers and spectators (Kunst 22).

The live event becomes the experimental field of the effect of radical consumption, a field for practicing inter-subjectivity, the exchange and testing of the live communication situation, and the split between body and its expression. The live event becomes the opportunity for the radical consumption of subjectivity, an event without repetition, an opportunity for the radical use of the body and the phenomenological approximation of the border between the watched and the seen, the body and its edge. Finally, the potential power of a live event is in its liberation from the power of negativity. The split in subjectivity becomes visible through the absence of an equation between presence and representation at the center of every process of subjectivization. The disclosure of negativity is the constitutive moment of subjectivity, a point of transgression and revolt against essentialism and a patriarchal structure of subjectivity. As such, it marks the performative strategies and modes of presence, influences the formation of new relations with the audience and grounds the emancipatory power of the performing arts. It is an act of rebellion against rigid structures of life and of power, a revolt against conventional dispositifs of representation.

What becomes problematic about radical consumption is that it has now moved to the center of contemporary capitalism and has become the generator of its immaterial production. Consumption has now become an affirmative force and the subject is at the center of modes of production through which the destruction of common modes of being and life are taking place. Thus, we can no longer consider radical consumption as a sign of liberation. Instead, we need to rethink the relation between art and mechanisms of subjectivity in order to discover what art's emancipatory potential is today and how the performing art's can (still)

provide the conditions necessary for political and existential rupture at a time when the production of subjectivity represents the primary and perhaps most important work of capitalism. What tools are required to undo the industrial mass production of subjectivity undertaken by business and the state; and what types of organization must we construct for a process of subjectification that would allow us to escape the hold of social subjection and machinic enslavement (Lazzarato)?

Abecedarium Bestiarium is the disclosure of the negativity that is at the heart of subjectivity and that generates the radical consumption at work here. Each of the scored choreographic miniatures revolves around a different figure and an embodied version of the “extinct animal” metaphor and displays a juxtaposition of irreconcilable opposites: of the animal, on the one hand, and language as that which, according to Agamben, defines the human on the other. The episodes are variations of the one and the same gesture of display and staging of the interval, that is, the relation between these two opposites that can never converge. In the space between the animal and language, the question “who am I?” inscribes itself, that is, I as the human being, the subject, an open question, a constant tension, an irreconcilable paradox. We watch Antonia slowly disappear as she transforms through a constant becoming of the different figures in action and a “receiving of all natures and all faces” upon her body that is no one(s), an empty frame for the inscription of the absent other(s); the animal(s) gone extinct, the friends as the absent authors of the choreographic miniatures that compose the piece.

We witness a playful and unending act of veiling and unveiling. “The more she undresses on stage, the more she seems to put on just another mask of another extinct animal, a performance of skins in which eyes become nipples and nipples become eyes” (Bruckstein Çoruh 14). The more she snakeskins, the more the absence (of the subject) grows and the larger the grin of *Martelli’s Cat*, of its disappearance into the void that ultimately swallows the horizon of all forms. The subject disappears through the accumulation of forms that appear in the place of it, or perhaps inflates beyond measure and proportion in a metastatic proliferation of subjectivities gone out of control. A schizophrenic body, a body gone “mad” as the Cat would have it. This is an attempt at an ultimate escape act as a total voiding and as a disappearance of the subject from the horizon of our experiencing and conceiving.

Language vs. Voice

You are forgetting that when you are sitting in the boat offshore and the

sirens are on their island, the acoustic conditions are much worse than in the concert house. In the open air, you can only hear sounds from ten meters away, maximum. Sure you hear voices, maybe vowels, you hear singing. But you don't hear the things that make language distinguishable: the consonants. (from *The Steller's Sea Cow Sonata for Solo Performer and Endangered Media* by Sabine Ercklentz)

Agamben discloses the origin of the negativity of the subject produced by the anthropological machine and exploited by the current crisis of subjectivity in the idea of human being the site of language. The negative foundation of being is tied to the very capacity for language, to the originary division between language and voice that needs to be deactivated. The negativity of language is the paradox that emerges from the split between language and voice. "Human is a place of negativity itself for it is condemned not to have access to being because of the negative place from which it must speak" (Murray 14). Words essentially fail and language is a poor substitute for some sort of voice. We only ever speak language alone. Language "guards the unspeakable by speaking it, that is, by grasping it in its negativity" (Agamben, *Language* 13). The voice, on the other hand, is not simply sound, but "what has to be removed in order to develop a meaning, for language to make sense. This process places us at a remove from any voice, creating an essential void at the heart of language and speech" (Murray 17).

Agamben refers to this process, embodied in the taking place of language, as the Voice (capitalized as to be distinguished from the voice we cannot have access to). The Voice is the act of language that for Agamben is the basis of both Being and time, and which shows all our investigation of Being and all forms of constructing meaning to be founded on a seemingly inescapable negativity. It is this seemingly irreparable dialectics and discrepancy between language and voice, human and animal, representation and presence, which is always based on the binary criteria of exclusion and inclusion, that for Agamben is the negative foundation of the (always already split) human (subject).

To uncover "another experience of language, one that does not rest on an unspeakable foundation" (Agamben, *Language* 66), Agamben turns to poetry as the vehicle for a return to the point at which the voice re-emerges, the origin of language. Agamben seeks to enter the point at which a negative foundation may have emerged, and in doing so to undo that very foundational void for the present. "The return", in this case, is the "uncovering of a language which is not marked by negativity and death" (95), and which can be only gestured towards, never described. Poetry, or rather the playful profaning act of the "emergence of poetics", is the act of healing the foundational split through language since it

enables us to “return to the place where one has never been and that has never existed” (Murray 19).

Abecedarium Bestiarium resembles an alchemical vessel where the transformation of the matter of language is in question. In *The Play about Dodo the Bird*, the structure of the language crumbles in a frivolous use of syntax and wording; in *Yangtze River Dolphin*, the sounds of a baby make up a rock song in a nightclub; in *Tasmanian Tiger*, a condescending pre-recorded text aimed at the animal is juxtaposed with the broken mumbling and sighing of the rapidly fading wild animal; in *Culebra Island Amazon of Puerto Rico*, the almost nonsensical conversation that arises in the dialogue between The Bearded Man and The Parrot is based on the repetition of a sentence by Gertrude Stein that turns into a river of text and then into a pop song. In *The Steller’s Sea Cow...* we witness a tsunami wave of language through the texts played and re-played from the tape recorders until the mass of language can no longer be distinguished and becomes a soundscape resembling that of the wild and ancient ocean, which is in turn swallowed up by the laughter in *Martelli’s Cat*, where, indeed, the laughter swallows up whatever is left of language.

The language is never coherent. It is striving to be, it is picking up the crumbling fragments of itself while falling apart as it negotiates the space of the Open with the animal(s). The order of language is inverted. Vacated. The letters remain yet the words are erased, present only as resonating remnants in the depository of our memory. The matter of language is liquidized, is itself becoming a sort of vibrant matter, like that of a roaring timeless ocean. What remains is language as something undone, liquidized, in a state of readiness for a beginning. Ready to begin again, just now. Always the now set in the Open, at the opening of language. An order relinquished and playfully reinvented. What remains and waits in expectation of its further (free) use resembles a sort of Comenius’ *abecedarium*, the first occidental alphabet primer known to us that uses the sounds of animals. A is áá, the croaking sound of a crow; B is bééé, the bleating of a sheep; C is like ci ci, the chirping of a grasshopper... to teach us written language by relating the letters of our alphabet to the sounds that non-human animals produce.

In the matter of language, the animal is still inscribed, the two not yet torn apart but rather informing each other in a composite of each of the letters. Here, each letter still is the singular event (the beginning) of an encounter of the animal with language. *Abecedarium Bestiarium* stages the separation, the interval, the relation between the two. It allows us to simply witness it, to stand in it, measure it in

every letter, in every figure as a variation of the “extinct animal” metaphor. The two tectonic plates rub against each other – the voices of the Sirens and the structure of language – gesturing towards the land of language as a place we’ve never yet known, where we have never been, yet which all the same seems uncannily familiar, language, the space of potentiality, the alchemical kitchen for the emergence of the poetics and new vision of a human life.

Saved Night

A hartebeest reaches its tongue towards a small honeycomb attached to a stick. When its tongue touches the honeycomb, the stick falls and triggers both a gun and a camera. (from *Recontre* by Andrea Neuman)

In *The Open* Agamben explains the gesture that brings to a halt the dialectical machine of language. This dialectical machine produces the human through the exclusion of the animal and the non-human. Agamben refers to Benjamin’s letter to Rang about the “saved night” to reveal how this dialectical mechanism might be undone.

Rather, according to the Benjaminian model of a ‘dialectic at a standstill’, what is decisive here is only the ‘between’, the interval or, we might say, the play between the two terms, their immediate constellation in a non-coincidence. The anthropological machine no longer articulates nature and man in order to produce the human through the suspension and capture of the inhuman. The machine is, so to speak, stopped; it is ‘at a standstill’, and, in the reciprocal suspension of the two terms, something for which we perhaps have no name and which is neither animal nor man settles in between nature and humanity and holds itself in the mastered relation, in the saved night. (Agamben, *The Open* 82)

The saved night is another name for the *Open*, a place of convergence of two irreconcilable positions: the animal’s unhindered openness, or receptivity, to stimuli in its environment, and man’s openness to the world in all its ungraspable immensity. This openness is a form of inactivity. “The only coherent way to understand inoperativeness is to think of it as a generic mode of potentiality that is not exhausted (like individual action or collective action understood as the sum of individual actions) in *a transitus de potentia ad actum*” (Agamben, *Homo Sacer* 62). *Desoeuvrement* is about potentiality, about that which has not been exhausted nor cannot be exhausted in the passing of the potential to the actual.



Antonia Baehr, *Abecedarium Bestiarium*, ©Anja Weber, score Pauline Boudry

Inoperativity is an operation, “in which formless life and lifeless form coincide in a form of life” (De la Durantaye 331), rich with its own singular potentiality. “Not work, but inoperativity [is] the paradigm of the coming politics” (ibid.). Making the anthropological machine inoperative is to reciprocally suspend as terms the animal and the human, which enables the opening of a space where “something for which we perhaps have no name and which is neither animal nor man settles in between nature and humanity and holds itself in the mastered relation, in the saved night” (Agamben, *The Open* 83).

For Agamben the primary mode of relating of beings is towards this “opening” – not what is simply given as present, but what is offered in terms of potential action, creation and world production. Humans are defined according to the degree to which their world is open, which becomes especially relevant in the time of an increasing contraction of such an opening, as the world is less and less presented as a domain of potentiality and creation, and more and more as a fully actualized life that is simply to be managed.

Abecedarium Bestiarium works as a sort of open negativity, a place where we enter into the split of subjectivity. We witness a proliferation of identities all perfectly intransient and in the passing, leaving their traces on the body as a voided host, an empty frame for the inscription of their traces. Through diverse theatrical means the multiple avatar embodiments of the “extinct (Antonia) Baehr” become present on stage and the interval between human and animal becomes evermore tangible. Through the vicarious play it is reconfiguring the features of the animal and the human and the relation between the two. It is a “messianic act of mending of the world” as the Jewish Kabbalists would have it, through the staging of the extinct animals as metaphors always and only exist in language and through our symbolic relation to them. What takes place on the stage of *Abecedarium Bestiarium* as a place of the Open is a messianic rewriting of history, of the traces of what once was, the undoing of the order of things, a playful reconfiguration and thus the writing of another possible history. Through the juxtaposition of the irreconcilable opposites of the animal and the human on stage *Abecedarium Bestiarium* opens the question of the (human) life still to come, no longer based on the division animal-human and on the exclusion of nature, but rather on what Agamben calls “the relationship with the unsavable” and whose rhythm is beatitude.

The ‘saved night’ is the name of this nature that has been given back to itself, whose character, according to another of Benjamin’s fragments, is

transience and whose rhythm is beatitude. The salvation that is at issue here does not concern something that has been lost and must be found again, something that has been forgotten and must be remembered; it concerns, rather, the lost and the forgotten as such – that is, something unsavable. The saved night is a relationship with something unsavable.
(82)

Man is the sieve in which creatural life and spirit, creation and redemption, nature and history are continually discerned and separated, yet nevertheless continue to conspire toward their own salvation.

The Emergence of Poetics

Make a mistake.
(from *Patriarchal Poetry* by Pauline Boudry)

The logic that operates on the stage of *Abecedarium Bestiarium* is the logic of separations at work: between animal and language, voice and language, body and language, between representation and presence, between each performed score, between Antonia as the “extinct bear” and the figures she performs, between singular figures in action that perform, each on its own separate stage. The fourth wall is torn down and the audience finds itself on stage as a part of the exhibit. All separations are visible. There is no mystification. The audience is made aware of how the apparatus is being built, how the scores have been written and how they are being performed. We see we are here, in *Abecedarium Bestiarium*, and “nothing new can happen under the sun”, or so it seems. It is the fact that all is visible and given from the start that turns our attention to the medium itself.

Agamben talks about a poetics as a form of representation that suspends the relationship between form and content in order to draw attention to and examine the medium that one is attempting to engage. Thus, anything can be a “poetic”. The logic of poetics, for Agamben, has to do with the failure of language. For when the pattern of signification collapses, words stop meaning and start speaking of themselves. Language is able to approach itself when the necessary drive towards meaning is suspended. Thus, the poetics emerges with the medium’s inherent inoperativity is being turned inside out and exposed as such. Once turned visible through its playful “misuse”, language can now be allowed to speak for itself. Only then is something like voice enabled to breathe through the bones of language.

Abecedarium Bestiarium, in its own way, is and does exactly what the image of the messianic dinner of the righteous crowned with animal heads from the opening pages of *The Open* tells us. It is a theatrical machine that reverses the procedures set to work by the anthropological machine as defined by Agamben. It reverses the production of the idea of the human as being based on the difference and separations of the human from the animal, and poses the idea of the human in its relation to the animal and the non-human as an open question again.

In this time-based diagrammatic force field generated out of the metaphor of the “extinct animal”, variations of “the extinct” appear as different figures “in motion” – *D is for Dodo*, *Y is for Yangtze River Dolphin*, *T is for Tasmanian Tiger*, *C is for Culebra Island Amazon of Puerto Rico*, *S is for Steller’s Sea Cow*, *M is for Martelli’s Cat*, *F is for Forest Tarpan*, *N is for Northern Bubal Hartebeest*. The appearance of every figure is a singular precisely scored and choreographed event in the relational landscape of staging the juxtaposition of the animal with the human. *Abecedarium Bestiarium* is not about the “real animal”, but rather an invitation to look at the skin of language, which is the stage. Each event is an encounter between language and the animal. Or, the appearance of each figure is a time of measuring the interval, the relation between the two that never come together but rather remain in “unresolved opposition”, “the saved night”. What takes place on the stage-as-skin-of-language is a sort of “(un-)skinning” of language, the veiling and unveiling of language as we are diving toward the belly of the “extinct animal” metaphor. Yet, there is no Animal to arrive at in the end, for there is no end to the un-skinning of language. Rather, it’s in the skin of language itself something of it perseveres, is always there, at the bottom of the surface. And it is through the surface that one meets the world. It is through the surface of language, the skin that envelops and gives form, that an experience of the animal(s) is possible; the Animal, their voices, its Voice, the Voice and its pertinent silence, the silence of presence, the ephemeral life, its vibrancy, fizz and fugitiveness – the surface of language being the one that does both: unfolding life through, and capturing life in form.

The figures of the “extinct animals” arise before us staged through a precise stage language, to imprint themselves on us, to leave a trace, make a small cut in the surface so that something of their quality resonates within us and is shared with us. One by one, the figures of the “extinct” appear on stage as a trace that makes one remember. The Animal walks this stage. It is as if the inside of the Animal ebbs and flows, penetrates and touches us, not on its own, but always through the surface of language. We spectate, and yet, perhaps more than gazing, what is at work here is some sort of touch. Touching, rubbing against the skin of language,



Antonia Baehr, *Abecedarium Bestiarium*, ©Anja Weber, score Andrea Neumann

something arises here as if from a “shared inside”, the inside I share with the animal, which I can experience only because I can touch it through language. “There is no world without touching” (Derrida 140).

Abecedarium Bestiarium insists in keeping open the space between the animal and language, the human, so that each of the two can persevere in its own power and logic. “An open space where formless life and lifeless form meet in a distinct life-form and form of living that are rich with their own singular potentiality” (Agamben, *The Coming* 93). The beauty of the scores upon which *Abecedarium Bestiarium* is built is perhaps exactly in the way they precisely define the bone structure of the piece yet allow for “something other” to blow through its relational diagrammatic structure and touch us from its inside. The two are reconciled in the touch of the possible.

Each miniature evokes a figure on stage out of the seemingly fragmented remnants of what was once a language of letters, words, sounds, voices, presences and other things. These are rituals of invocation of a perceptible multitude, of evocation of those gone or yet to come. The stage is crowded with ghosts that persist as something that can be remembered, as a memory of the future, as the potentiality of the now – as that which is redeemed by being totally abandoned, for it is in its “pure abandonment” (Agamben, *The Open* 80) that life is “saved precisely in its being unsavable” (92). The stage is a diagram of what can never be actualized, of what can only be remembered. The figures are only facets of it, which we cannot name but which ebbs and flows through and through, becomes perceptible in the spaces between the figures and all they are composed of. The stage as the skin of language, permeable to both the inside and the outside, is the topological landscape of life, of desire, that moves, that is a constant touching, a prolonged intercourse. This is a place of the collective formation of a sphere as a shared inside (Sloterdijk).

Here, through the playful exhibition of the logic of separations made inoperative, a different sort of economy can take place – an economy of proximity, perhaps even the economy of touch, of touching through the gaze, through hearing, through presence, through memory of the unsavable. As guardians, we find ourselves “in relationship with the unsavable” and those “whose rhythm is beatitude”. In a memory of the future, we recall the voice(s) of the absent that forever remain hovering in the space of the possible as an open invitation for further adventures into the land we never knew, where we have never been yet which seems uncannily familiar. This is the salvation. The fugitive passing of a life as “the unsavable”, as “something for which we perhaps have no name and which

is neither animal nor man and settles in between nature and humanity and holds itself in the mastered relation, in the saved night". "Man is the sieve in which creatural life and spirit, creation and redemption, nature and history are continually discerned and separated, yet nevertheless continue to conspire toward their own salvation" (Agamben, *The Open* 82).

The Righteous on the Day of the Messiah

Invocation with a Magic Mirror remains an imaginary piece. It was never performed due to the strange fact that both the performer and the author broke their right arms almost simultaneously shortly prior to the opening night. Hence the hint had to be taken and the piece was left in its elusive state. C'est la vie. (from *Invocation with a Magic Mirror* by Lucile Desamory)

Abecedarium Bestiarium is a "universe of mirrored, deflected, postponed, and queerly dragged affinities in (animal) metaphors, a potentially unbound cosmos ruled by erotic bindings that traverse bodies, texts, scores, space, and time, acted out by her own male-and-female-body in a language created by the relationships that come across her way, a language involving voice, sound, body, movement, text, and architecture. Antonia Baehr's *Bestiarium* is an Ursprungstheater of a language and an epistemic architecture yet to come" (Bruckstein Çoruh 16). This architecture yet to come has to do with portraying affinities and allowing the stage to become the Open between the animal and the human, female and male, the living and the dead, the old and the new, where dichotomies and divisions are reconciled. The relations between animals and men take on a new form, and man is reconciled with his animal nature.

In the hall of mirrors, the subject vanishes or is perhaps inflated to a size beyond measure and proportion. *Abecedarium Bestiarium* stages an attempt at the ultimate escape from capture by the apparatuses of biopower, which continuously construct and also de-subjectivize, perhaps the escape through or beyond subjectivity altogether. The universe of mirrored, deflected, postponed, and queerly dragged affinities in (animal) metaphors swallows the subject. The situation resembles laughing *Martelli's Cat*, who does not stop to grin as it disappears into the black. Void on void. A total eclipse of the subject. Playfully, the "extinct bear" dances and sings and sounds calls for us, its audience. It is all and nothing, simply a frame for the inscription of affinities, of relations. If *Abecedarium Bestiarium* conjures up on stage the anthropological machine, the display of the central void of the subjectivity gone extinct here brings it to a

standstill.

To render inoperative the machine that governs our conception of man will therefore mean no longer to seek new – more effective or more authentic – articulations, but rather to show the central emptiness, the hiatus that – within man – separates man and animal, and to risk ourselves in this emptiness: the suspension of the suspension, Shabbat of both animal and man. (Agamben, *The Open* 91)

The day of Shabbat is a new beginning. For “without you, I am nothing.” The eclipsed subject now reemerges through the relational web, as a community of the righteous crowned with the animal heads gathered at the messianic dinner. “I” now appears only through relation, through touch, as a singular plural, as an event of “radical individualization” (Kunst 19), or perhaps radical singularization, as an ongoing process of the formation of a Sphere of a “shared inside” that emerges out of the interval between at least two epicenters in relation. But the invocation of the “extinct animal” with a magic mirror remains a delicate matter, as the animal might resist being evoked and cause a riot among the living. Yet the hope remains for a rupture in the tissue of the captured life – and for the one whose name we do not know yet but who is not without the other to rise in “great ignorance” saved in its being unsavable – forever a subject of mystery of separation.

The righteous with animal heads in the miniature in the Ambrosian do not represent a new declension of the man-animal relation so much as a figure of the ‘great ignorance’ which lets both of them be outside of being, saved precisely in their being unsavable. Perhaps there is still a way in which living beings can sit at the messianic banquet of the righteous without taking on a historical task and without setting the anthropological machine into action. Once again, the solution of the *mysterium coniunctionis* by which the human has been produced passes through an unprecedented inquiry into the practico-political mystery of separation. (Agamben, *The Open* 92)

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