

Scenes from Paradise



L E N O R E M A L E N

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Cover: Lenore Malen, still (detail) from *Reversal*, 2016

All stills from the videos *Reversal*, *The Reason of the Strongest is Always the Best*, *So we'll no more go a rowing by the light of the moon*, *Four Saints in Three Acts*, and *Scenes from Paradise* are copyright of the artist

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Preface

THAT SCENES FROM PARADISE is overwhelmingly about a complexly shaded eco-catastrophe is an ever-present given on Malen's screen. That a class driven, economics driven, north-south divide driven potlatch has been played out is a given. And a potlatch always has the risk, the catch (its given) built into it. That is, you might just give too much away.

Again, no rabbit from a hat, rather there is a need to reinvent what we mean by and use as nature going forth. That the style of Malen's intervention has a *Planet of the Apes* feel to it (perhaps it is the down-at-the-heels astronaut's suits) is no coincidence. The key lies in knowing, understanding that the nature/culture toggle switch plays out on precisely the cultural terrain where images come to represent lived experience.

And so sitting in Malen's studio, watching *Scenes from Paradise*, we became aware of the reflections of the video images on the studio floor. They conjured up a flickering afterimage of nature, nature not quite lost. But also they brought to mind human optics. The image on the floor was, after all, upside down, like the image on the human retina before the brain does all that heavy lifting to turn it right side up. The suitably confusing question, then, might be, what work needs to be done to turn what which way up?

Fintan Boyle and Jennie Nichols
Romanov Grave 2015

A Loss for Words

Lenore Malen's *Scenes from Paradise*

WORDS FAIL. The human spirit would like to reach across the gulfs that divide individuals and species, the quick and the dead, but it falters—sadly, comically, inevitably. In one of Lenore Malen's three new video installations, the central image is of a woman who speaks unintelligibly but with great urgency, her language foreign and her mouth partially obscured. Another video features mournful, animated cawing issuing from ravens and also from humans who imitate them. A third shows a chain of animal-headed figures in space-agey suits clambering silently across a rock in New York's Central Park. The final work, a film, follows a man and a woman in a meadow bordered by trees; they, too, are dressed in bodysuits, these simulating nudity. And like the others, they struggle to communicate, with each other and the animals around them.

The film and three multi-channel videos were set in motion by an image from an illuminated manuscript that caught Malen's eye four years ago. Painted by the Maître François in the last quarter of the fifteenth century (inauspiciously, the manuscript was commissioned by one Jacques Armagnac, duc de Nemours, who was beheaded by Louis XI), the image depicts Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, and—this is what so struck Malen—they are sunk to their hips in the grassy earth. So are a handful of animals nearby: a goat, dog, horse and lion, plus a few less easily identified beings. The animals look around, alert and eager. By contrast, the original humans, our parents, look only at each other; they've no interest in their living kin. In the distance is a small shining city—

From the medieval illuminated manuscript *La Cité de Dieu* by Saint Augustine. Illustrations by Maître François, c. 1475, Book 6, Chapter 8. Above, humans and animals emerging from the earth. Below, devil with a soul, Apollo on a castle, Saturn devouring his children. Collection Musée Meermano, The Hague.

the city of God, and the future of mankind.

In the manner of medieval imagery, two sequential narrative elements are shown simultaneously. On the left, the naked couple exchange frank looks; Adam points at his ribs, Eve extends an open arm. To the right, Adam again regards Eve searchingly, but she casts her eyes down modestly, and gestures toward the ground; something, on this first day, has already started to go wrong. Inescapably, we note that the underworld in which these beings are sunk is not just the primordial stuff from which all living beings have joyously sprung, but also the primary habitation—literally and mythically—of the dead. Faithful or not, those in grief feel the earth’s implacable pull, the particular (geophysical, emotional) gravity of mourning.

But mostly what this image pictures is the happiness of these first humans. Warm raking light suggests that the day, like creation itself, is young. In fact to contemporary eyes this image is not just charming, but a little funny—these half-buried people, largely oblivious to their predicament, admiring each other, gesturing to each other, acquiring the blessings of God and the responsibilities of men. They are proud, innocent, and doomed: like the dinosaurs in the La Brea tar pits, these small sweet beings are headed for extinction.

As are we all—unless, perhaps, we pay close enough attention. Malen writes, “The world is independent of our minds and has an expressivity that is not human and is separate from our experience of it, though human activity might suggest otherwise. We do not live in a human centered world, we only imagine that we do.” We love our anthropocentric world, but it too will soon be extinct, for each of us individually and, it seems more than likely, for all of us as species. It is a good time to reconsider our place among the others with whom we share it. A dividend would be the restoration of a kind of mystery declared solved by enlightened men centuries ago. Malen says her motivation is exploring “something unanswerable” in our relations with animals. Indeed, it is a question central to the puzzle of who we are ourselves.

THE FIRST OF MALEN’S NEW VIDEOS, *Reversal* is a three-channel work. The speaking woman at its center is encumbered by a thick red cord, its silken threads coiled and knotted into a kind of a ceremonial version of a horse’s bridle. More red cord holds a white headdress in place; beneath it is a shiny white wig. She’s young, fair and fresh faced, but her eyes are wide and frightened. If her headdress evokes a caparisoned horse, it also suggests a medieval noblewoman’s attire, or a nun’s wimple, and it frames her face tightly. The camera does, too: she is well and truly trapped, and her eyes confirm it.



Still from *Reversal*, 2016, with Kathryn Alexander

Nonetheless she perseveres, with evident effort, in delivering an urgent message in an unknown and profoundly odd-sounding language. With effort of our own, the help of the work’s title and onscreen subtitles, we figure out that we are hearing English played backwards. It begins familiarly enough, with thanks to the assembled, a denunciation of unnamed perpetrators of unspecified acts, and condolences for the anonymous victims. And then the rhetoric slips a little: “To all of you—to those who have found me, fed me, imagined me—thank you,” the strange woman says. “To those of you who have photographed me, loved me, feared me, tortured me, aped me, theorized me, and depicted me—I thank you as well. To those who have hated me, eaten me, tread upon me, stolen me, chased me, and visited upon me all manner of insults I have yet to imagine—to my real family, The Family of Man—thank you.” She regrets the degrading business of trying to make herself understood in our clumsy, obtuse tongue, complaining of our primitive communications technologies (those “scratchings and keyboard peckings”). Then she gets to her real order of business: an announcement of the end of history. There is no hope, and no apology.

Final credits inform us that the speech is adapted from Dilma Rousseff’s address to the General Assembly of the United Nations in 2013. Trying to make sense of this

Four stills from *So we'll no more go a rowing by the light of the moon*, 2016, with Michael Caines and Rachel Lin along with Patricia Brace, Nathaniel Moore, Nick Shifrin, Laura Von Holt, Ashleigh Awusie.



connection—Rousseff, the recently deposed president of Brazil, had been at one time a guerrilla fighter, imprisoned and tortured by the government—we are led to see the very idea of a General Assembly uniting the world’s nations as a grimly hopeless fantasy, Orwellian, Kafka-esque. In fact among the many texts that Malen drew upon for this body of work is Kafka’s short story “A Report to the Academy.” It concerns an ape shot in Africa, caged, and then cajoled by its jailer into drinking a bottle of schnapps, first with revulsion and then with gusto, which earns the animal a place in “the human community.” By degrees, the ape accommodates itself to the life of a performer on the “variety stage,” and prospers. He retains a “half-trained little chimpanzee,” and at night takes “comfort from her as apes do.” But by day, he explains to the titular Academy, “I cannot bear to see her; for she has the insane look of the bewildered half-broken animal in her eye; no one else sees it, but I do, and I cannot bear it.”

The quasi-human, quasi-equine protagonist of *Reversal* shares this half-broken female chimpanzee’s desperation. Her words’ backward propulsion suggests what might be the trajectory of thought at the lip of sanity, or mortality; it speaks of an urgent need to pull back *all* our human acts of speech—to return to the garden. Watching her, we not only hear words and their inflection in reverse, but see facial movements in reverse, too: smiling pauses precede roused bursts of sound, whence decrescendos that lead to hesitation. Toward the end, there is a passage of animal-like grunts. A man who has appeared at times to the woman’s left—he seems to be her minder; he leads her out and watches her, holding her bridle and occasionally stroking her face, gently and ominously—finally prods her offstage with a riding crop. He’s wearing boots; she’s entirely in white, including her feet, which step on dried leaves.

The screen showing this pre-vanquished, tenaciously defiant half-woman is flanked by two others. They present amusement park rides and horse races, in cataracts of motion. Sometimes seen in slow motion, sometimes not, the neon light a cascading blur, these rides convey the joy that can be found in might and speed, even when they terrify. The rhetoric of power is rife with appeals to such pleasures.

SO WE’LL NO MORE GO A ROWING *by the light of the moon*, the second installation in the trio, was prompted by a YouTube video Malen came across, shot in Sydney, of ravens mourning one of their own, dead on a sidewalk. Malen’s work opens with a short clip of the Australian video, and then shifts to a restaging she did in New York, with birds cawing, loudly. Ravens are big and noisy, and their glistening black plumage inescapably summons sorrow; Poe was exploiting well-established



Still from *The Reason of the Strongest is Always the Best*, 2016, with Richard Saudek, Davi Cohen, Nanda Abella, and Jessica Weinstein.

associations when he wrote *The Raven*. After a few moments, a flock of men and women appear on a rooftop, imitating the birds' cries. Watching them, we sometimes hear birds, sometimes cawing people. If there is mourning in *So we'll no more go a rowing*, there is physical comedy, too, enacted by characters finding their voices, strutting a little, accepting silliness. The buildings of Brooklyn, some glossy and others not, form the backdrop; we see expensive high-rises and public housing. Nothing if not unsettled, this video also, inevitably, has a menacing, Hitchcock-ian tinge, most strongly in repeated shots of birds gathering on street lamps and rooftop antennae. Apocalypse threatens; it may not be too late to avert it. Humor helps, but so does caution. The video ends with a shot of a raven dead in the gutter, followed by a shot of its fellows, in flight.

This work's title plays on the last couplet of a wistful two-stanza poem by Lord Byron that admits mortality but not the finitude of love; it calls, instead, for a rest, a pause, though "the heart be still as loving and the moon as bright." Margaret Atwood's *MaddAddam*, the final book in a post-apocalyptic trilogy, was another reference point for Malen. *MaddAddam* finds God's Gardeners, the novel's bio-engineered protagonists, struggling to advance a restoration of the planet's ecology. They move in two directions

at once, from animal to human and back, like the book's palindromic title, and like the part-avian, part-human players in this video.

Birds are among the most sophisticated tool and language users of the non-human animal kingdom; the language skills of parrots, for instance, are legendary. It has also recently been found that a group of humans who live close to nature have developed extraordinary forms of communication with a species of birds that is nutritionally dependent on beeswax. In an arrangement that seems millennia old, the Yao people of Mozambique speak to these honeyguides with a distinctive trilled brrr and grunted hmm; the birds in turn announce their readiness to scout bees by flying close to the humans while emitting a loud chattering cry. After following the honeyguides to their hives, the Yao smoke the bees out, and both birds and humans feast. The teams have no competition: African bees are particularly vigilant and aggressive and swarm intruders ruthlessly; even chimps haven't figured out how to get at their honey.¹ Cooperation across species is a very good answer to hunger, as well as other animal drives and social needs. Indeed, in a previous body of work Malen cultivated honeybees as part of an exploration of hive behavior and its human relevance. The first step in cross-species communication is an effort at empathy, and the acknowledgment of shared purpose.

BIRDSONG ALSO FORMS the initial soundtrack for the third video in Malen's trio, *The Reason of the Strongest is Always the Best*, in which four people whose heads are concealed by animal masks and who sport puffy yellow or pink bodysuits scramble across a rocky outcropping in Central Park—half-human characters toiling in a faux-natural landscape. The hump of glacial schist that they climb— called Umpire Rock—is a



Left, still from Ingmar Bergman's *The Seventh Seal*, 1957, picturing a 14th century Swedish village experiencing the effects of the plague. Right, Pieter Bruegel, *The Blind Leading the Blind*, 1568. National Museum of Capodimonte, Naples.

feature in an environment famously crafted by Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux and carefully tended by local patrons, especially in recent years. Likewise, the looming apartment towers that frame the park have also lately been polished or replaced with even bigger, shinier examples, one of them clearly visible in this video. It might be called “the triumph of wealth”; its actual title is taken from a fable by La Fontaine, which ends with a wolf devouring a lamb, having dismissed its altogether reasonable pleas for mercy. A title frame in Malen’s video quotes the fable’s summary moral, which ends, “The strongest reasons always yield/to the reason of the strongest.”

Viewers will likely note the climbers’ resemblance, as they hold hands to form a silhouetted chain of linked figures, to the Dance of Death scene in Ingmar Bergman’s film *The Seventh Seal*, and, in turn, to the famous sixteenth-century painting by Pieter Bruegel, *The Blind Leading the Blind*—a homespun allegory of folly, madness and fatality. The references are grim, but mordantly so; even here, there is humor, supported by the jaunty strains of Shostakovich. The four animal masks, of a lion, a horse, a Dalmatian and a goat, lend the human bodies a childlike charm—they gain an innocent appeal that wouldn’t work if the hybrid were reversed (consider the difference between the similarly appealing animal-headed human figures by the sculptor Stephan Balkenhol, and the profoundly unnerving cast-metal works by Rona Pondick, which meld a self-portrait head to a distorted animal body). Malen’s chimeras have soft, bright bodies, a little like stuffed animals, which confirms the association to childhood, but they move with effort, and the atmosphere is of late fall or early winter: the leaves in the park are mostly down, although a few brown ones cling to the branches of trees. Autumn in the garden, then, and the time for mutually beneficial interspecies communication is growing short.

SCENES FROM PARADISE, the film that shares the title of the whole body of work, is the piece most explicitly drawn from the manuscript illumination that impelled the series. It is also the one with the most overt humor, which begins with the tight-fitting bodysuits worn by the two protagonists, Adam and Eve. Shiny and beige, the suits feature gaily flapping breasts (for her) and male genitals (for him) and furry tufts of black underarm and pubic hair: in Eden, everything is externalized. Adam and Eve re-enact the gestures made in the Maître François manuscript image, dance amorously, and engage in efforts at language—we hear Eve struggling to read a script written in Akkadian, an ancient and extinct Afroasiatic language. Both try to make sense of various primitive versions of modern technology, including clumpy, twig-skewered earphones.

And there is gluttonous consumption of small hard candies, an orgy that begins as childishly shameless, becomes more than a little repellent, and yet remains, somehow, disturbingly sensual.

In other words, there is pathos, too, in paradise, ironic and otherwise. In one passage, Eve repeatedly asks, plaintively and with growing anxiety, “Why do you not speak to me of your happiness, but only stand and gaze at me?” She is addressing the question to a group of sheep. The quote is from Nietzsche; Malen redirects it toward a new consideration of the relations between humans and other animals. Sheep appear in this video before Adam and Eve; the animals are first shown in moonlight, then trotting across a field, and gamboling around a tree. We also hear the alarmingly loud ring of cicadas, an army of unseen insects that sounds eerily industrial—a gathering insurrection. Enormous flies land and rest on Adam’s and Eve’s faces, in a reference to traditional *vanitas* still lifes, where a fly or an over-ripe fruit, or a skull, reminds us of the presence of mortality amid scenes of plenty. It is there even in arcadia, and even amid the comic posturing of our graceful, bumbling human parents.

SCENES FROM PARADISE, both the film and the trilogy of videos, is in large part about communicative misfires and the consequences of failed contact. Of all the predicaments, comic and tragic, that this work addresses, involuntary solitude is perhaps the most basic. In a passage to which Malen directed me, Jacques Derrida writes that in his view, the Biblical God grants animals primacy, but accords man the privilege of giving them names, which He is eager to learn. Derrida admits that “God’s exposure to surprise . . . has always made me dizzy.” The philosopher wonders if it’s the same dizziness that he feels in front of a cat: how will the animal address him? The question betrays man’s quandary. The “freedom to name the animals . . . represents at the same time [man’s] sovereignty and his loneliness.” It also sets him in pursuit of the future that this isolation creates. As Derrida sees it, “man is in both senses of the word after the animal. He follows him. This ‘after’ . . . is the very genesis of time.”²

Of course, the question of our relations with other living beings is urgently practical as well, and as such concerns Malen greatly. As Derrida frames it, “The moment that [the animal] has a name, its name survives it,” he writes. “It signs its potential disappearance,” a disappearance which can be laid at the feet of humans. The historical dimensions of the relationship bring Malen back to the Greeks; she points to Aristotle’s belief that “people had to get rid of the animals in themselves in order to form a society.” She also notes that during the Middle Ages (whence the manuscript image), cultural



Stills from the film
Scenes from Paradise,
2015, staged on a sheep
farm in Ghent, New York
(courtesy Dan Devine).
With Jessica Weinstein
as Eve and Tim Lueke
as Adam.



understandings of human bodies—and minds—as well as those of animals were wildly different from ours, ruled by theocratic notions of innocence, corruption and salvation.

In *The Open: Man and Animal*, philosopher Giorgio Agamben claims that the Enlightenment is the turning point in Western beliefs about non-human communicative skills. He writes, “Up until the eighteenth century, language—which would become man’s identifying characteristic par excellence—jumps across order and classes.” That is, before language was established as a uniquely human prerogative, it was believed, for instance, that birds could talk (parrots were the evidence), “And even the physical demarcation between man and the other species entailed zones of indifference in which it was not possible to assign certain identities.”³ The nineteenth century, notoriously rapacious, was another watershed in our relationship to the rest of the animate world. But as John Berger suggests in “Why Look At Animals?,” “To suppose that animals first entered the human imagination as meat or leather or horn is to project a 19th century attitude backwards across the millennia. Animals first entered the imagination as messengers and promise.” Going back to the first humans, he notes, “The first subject matter for painting was animal. Probably the first paint was animal blood.” And so were the first symbols based on animals: the zodiac, the Greek hours of the day. “If the first metaphor was animal, it was because the essential relation between man and animal was metaphoric.” Indeed “What distinguished man from animal was the human capacity for symbolic thought.”

Berger, too, had remarked the crucial changes that came with the Enlightenment, before which “anthropomorphism was integral to the relation between man and animal and was an expression of their proximity.” Then came Descartes, who “internalized, within man, the dualism implicit in the human relation to animals.”⁴ From that point, Berger argues, actual animals began to seem part of a receding past, objects of nostalgia. They have come to be associated, over the last century and more, with children, and now dominate the imagery of childhood’s toys, books, and entertainments. They are firmly associated with its innocence.

Yet like Derrida after him, Berger notes, “The animal scrutinizes [the human] across a narrow abyss of non-comprehension. This is why the man can surprise the animal. Yet the animal—even if domesticated—can also surprise the man.” That is so because “The animal has secrets which, unlike the secrets of caves, mountains, seas, are specifically addressed to man.” Even when people don’t share a language, they are nonetheless joined by the existence of language. By contrast, “No animal confirms man.”⁵ Berger concludes, “That look between animal and man, which may have played a crucial role in

the development of human society, and with which, in any case, all men had always lived until less than a century ago, has been extinguished.”

Berger’s judgment is harsh; Malen’s less so. *Scenes from Paradise* is not a jeremiad; it suggests we humans could do better, but accepts our complexities, and our limits. “Humanity is not an animal species: it is a historical reality,” Simone de Beauvoir wrote in 1949.⁶ So it is, and won’t be denied. Our best hope is to reckon with it, with humility and a sense of humor, and with compassion for those species that see things otherwise.

1. Natalie Angier, “African Tribesmen Can Talk Birds Into Helping Them Find Honey,” *New York Times*, July 22, 2016 (<http://nyti.ms/2a38EHY>)
2. Jacques Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am* (Fordham University Press, 2008), p. 17
3. Giorgio Agamben, *The Open: Man and Animal*, translated by Kevin Attell (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2004), p. 24
4. John Berger, “Why Look at Animals?,” in *About Looking* (New York, Pantheon, 1980), pp. 5, 7, 9, 10
5. Berger, p. 3
6. Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (New York, Vintage Books, 2011), p. 62

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Scenes from Paradise

Installation views



Installation view of the three-channel video *So we'll no more go a rowing by the light of the moon*, 2015.



Installation view of the three-channel video *The Reason of the Strongest is Always the Best*, 2015.



Installation view of the three-channel
video *Reversal*, 2015.



Installation view of the three-channel
video *Aquarium*, 2015.

Disanthropocene

for Lenore Malen

NUCLEAR ISOTOPES AND CARBON EMBEDDED in geological strata offer our latest mode of autobiography, our newest genre for fashioning an enduring ode to our having dwelt upon this ruined Earth. We have crafted the term “Anthropocene” (the Age of the Regnant Human) to name the epoch of our domination over time and matter, to demarcate an era altered through our bustle. But the term also conveys the human love of making things: with rocks, with words. We imbue stone and language with meaning, and imagine both to be secondary characters in the grandiloquent stories we tell about ourselves. Yet what if neither word nor world is so passive? What if language is an ecological interface, resounding with nonhuman activity? What if objects like rocks refuse the stillness of being rendered a recording device, and the nonhuman world makes its own impress, exerts its own force? In their manifesto for a material ecocriticism, Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann write that all matter is storied, offering a “mesh of meanings, properties, and processes, in which human and nonhuman players are interlocked in networks that produce undeniable signifying forces. “Matter — all matter, from fire and wind to dust mites and supernovae — is rich in inhuman agency and ceaselessly productive of narrative. Let’s push Iovino and Oppermann’s insight farther and wonder: might ecomateriality enter word as well as plot? Might “storied matter” pulse in fundamental units — nouns, verbs, morphemes, the fundamental materials from which story is built? What if the nonhuman implants lingering presences deep

Still from *The Reason of the Strongest is Always the Best*, 2016, showing Umpire Rock, Central Park, NY, looking south.



Above and opposite, stills from *Four Saints In Three Acts*, 2015, with Catherine LaSota.

within “our” linguistic archives, traces that never become inert? What if language, supposedly the most human of tools, pulses with environmentality, conveying the force of the more-than-human even as we incise our stories into substances like stone? Might matter be inscribing us, rendering humans the record of a Disanthropocene that unfolds regardless of what epochs we declare?

The Anthropocene is not, as far as stories go, all that well plotted. Perilous assumptions attend its formulation. Our melancholic exultation in having become geological derives from imagining the Human as unified and solitary, an incorporeal force powerful enough to imprint foundational matter. To universalize and abstract the human is to reinscribe a historically specific vision that declares itself un beholden to time and place, to the misery of those who find themselves on the margins of this white, European, masculine entity that will not speak its originary exclusions. Not all humans have ever been allowed to be equally human. As Stacy Alaimo has shown, the Anthropocene narrative of men and rocks neglects the creatures and things obliterated as we herald this epoch of our own production, an era in which the seas are acidifying and becoming desolate. To figure humanity as a disembodied force is to forget the lessons of feminism, posthumanism, environmental justice, activism and art — and

thereby perhaps to fail to consider the heterogeneous, unevenly distributed violence (swift and slow) that climate change engenders. To suppose all things a resource for use, abuse, and transformation we blind ourselves to matter’s vibrancy. Yet we remain corporeal beings within a shared world that at every level exceeds us. Offering a counter-narrative to our lonely tales, stories that arrive from posthuman environs disperse without disembodiment, a change of climate for thinking ecological terms.

Catastrophe’s archive brims with narratives that unfold along timescales far exceeding the familiar, long arcs of impress and translation, generation and grapple. These tales are often glimpsed through etymology, the geology of language. We inherit in the strata of our words histories of composition and companionship that exceed the human, an epochal *poesis*. Although it will become in English the word “poetry,” *poesis* in classical Greek is quite simply a making, as when humans build a boat and climb aboard with animal companions to weather a flood. Or when a rock or pig enters water and the sound ripples into a word: swash, slosh, splash. Literally a “name-making,” onomatopoeia is a movement into language of acoustical vibrations from alien realms, an intensely environmental form of poesis with disanthropocentric force. The material world has always imprinted itself upon us, with us, despite us. If we tarry for a moment over longer histories we might recognize they already inhabit us, sometimes as narratives, sometimes in strangely communicative sounds that intermix matter and



meaning. Language sometimes carries within its sonority nonhuman presence and force. Onomatopoeia and its allied modes of wordsmithing, poesis and performance thrum with an impulse to mimesis, intensification and alliance; desires for capture and companionship; creative acts of environmental apprehension; communication with sound more than signification; an impress from a nonhuman elsewhere, the transport of ecological phenomena through a veering of language into posthuman environs.

Trouble the boundaries and enmesh the cosmos, but every ecology remains housebound. The walls shift but all things, even gendered human bodies, are likely still to be rendered commodities for equivalency and exchange, for the forced transport of messages not theirs. Humans differentiate themselves from the world, from other animals, from other humans through ceaseless overpowering. You may think that a posthuman environs promises material intimacy and peaceful community, but then you are turning your eyes from what enduringly supports a fleeting equanimity. Utopian and full of futurity, posthuman environs also carry a heavy atmosphere, violences that cannot be disowned. In onomatopoeic terms may be discerned inhuman resonance, posthuman environs. Stories of race, culture, colony, climate, taxonomy,



Still from *The Reason of the Strongest is Always the Best*, 2016, with Richard Saudek.



Still from *The Reason of the Strongest is Always the Best*, 2016, with Richard Saudek, Davi Cohen, Nanda Abella, Jessica Weinstein.

and environment continue to resound. Violence and suffering are unevenly distributed. Within posthuman environs gender still matters. So do class and race. The human body is a machine of sonority, as ecological in its signaling as animals and stones. Human bodies are also plural phenomena, specific and universalized at peril. Drawing boundaries and declaring epochs may be necessary, but such systems are fragile, insufficient. They inevitably exclude. The Anthropocene is no doubt real, but so is the Disanthropocene, the impress of posthuman environs upon our very flesh, the resounding of environmental impress within our stories and our words.

The nonhuman world does not need us. Its varied actors relate to each other on their own, outside of human terms. As Graham Harman writes, when “the gap between humans and the world” is privileged over the gaps between tree and wind, or fire and cotton,” we end up reinscribing a tiresome anthropocentricity that measures all things solipsistically, as if humans were the apex of the universe rather than one creative and productive agent among many. Time neither culminates nor ends in the cataclysm of the

Anthropocene, and even though we are irremediably human it does not follow that the measure of all things should be our limited senses. Yet this realization does not allow us to wave good-bye to an Earth we've devastated, departing for realms that aren't so postlapsarian, for Edens that remain unspoilt, because it is impossible to dwell in them. Posthuman environs remind us that humans, their words and their art, exist at an ecological interface. Even our language is not ours alone. This knowledge assists in avoiding the pratfalls of scientism and theology, encourages us to roam a world with no answers in advance, with no outside to what we are intractably within; a co-inhabited realm of humans and nonhumans, neither the measure of the other; a stormy fiery watery earthy expanse that is not anthropocentric, but also is not wholly indifferent or distinct. The ground beneath us roils, and we have inadequately constructed our shelters, with and against the elements. "Ecology" and "environment" and even "art" name households and cannot help but to exclude. Expand your home and unbolt its doors. Welcome the intimate stranger, already at your threshold.

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This short essay pulls from some work in progress and attempts some resonance with the disanthropocentric art of Lenore Malen.

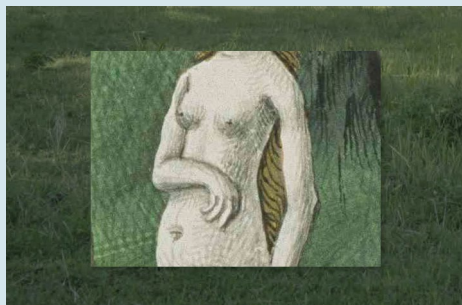
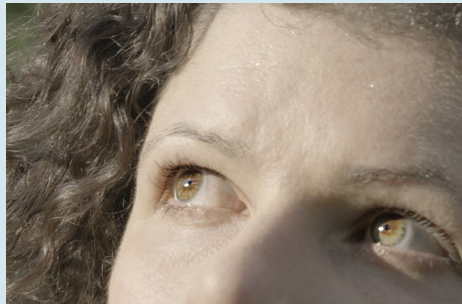
1. Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann, "Stories Come to Matter," in *Material Ecocriticism*, ed. Iovino and Oppermann (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 2014),
2. See also by the same authors "Material Ecocriticism: Materiality, Agency, and Models of Narrativity," *Ecozon@3* (2012): 75-91.
3. Stacy Alaimo, "Your Shell on Acid: Material Immersion, Anthropocene Dissolves," in *Anthropocene Feminism*, ed. Richard Grusin and John Blum (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, forthcoming).
4. Graham Harman, *Prince of Networks: Bruno Latour and Metaphysics* (Melbourne: re.press, 2009) 67.

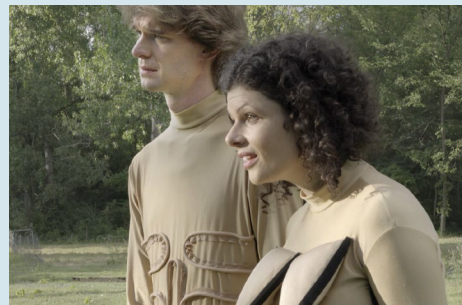
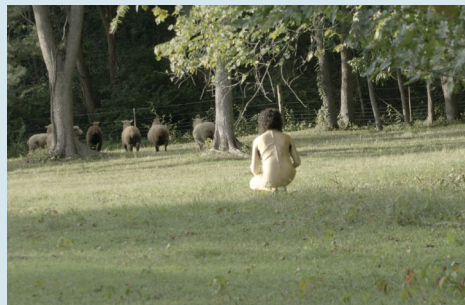
JEFFREY JEROME COHEN is Professor of English at the George Washington University in Washington, D.C. His research examines strange things that challenge the imagination, phenomena that seem alien and intimate at the same time. He is especially interested in what monsters, foreigners, queers, inhuman forces, objects and matter that won't stay put reveal about the cultures that dream, fear and desire them. Cohen is widely published in the fields of medieval studies, monster theory, and ecocriticism.

Speak to Me

Scenes from Paradise
August 15–17, 2015
Ghent, New York

with Jessica Weinstein as Eve and Tim Lueke as Adam





The Best of All Possible Worlds

Scenes from Paradise: Live Performance

July 16, 2016

The Fields Sculpture Park at OMI International Art Center, Ghent, New York
with Jessica Weinstein as Eve and Blake Habermann as Adam





Acknowledgments

A BRIEF HISTORY. In summer 2012 a picture on the Internet caught my eye. It was a scene of an earthy utopic Eden from a fifteenth-century manuscript illumination posted on the blog *The Medieval Middle*. I shared the picture with the actress Kathryn Alexander. She was intrigued and our joint interest led to workshops with actors, animal trainers and choreographers, and later to some research on medieval theater. Meanwhile art historian and medievalist Liz Monti offered her insights concerning the manuscript image. A study group on animality at The New School with Radhika Subramaniam, Alice Crary and others, in 2013, and the conference “Approaching Posthumanism and The Posthuman” in Geneva, in 2015, helped deepen my understanding of the ways we humans behave toward animals that are not human. *But we do not live in a human-centered world; we only imagine that we do.*

Out of these events grew *Scenes from Paradise*, the film and three multi-channel videos that are the subject of this book.

My deepest gratitude to Todd Erickson, Kathryn Alexander, Ilana Rein, Ruppert Bohle, fellow travelers who have been working with me for nearly two decades.

Thanks to Fintan Boyle and Jennie Nichols for their essay on this project published in the blog *Romanov Grave* in September 2015. Thanks also to actress Jessica Weinstein, who so graciously co-directed and performed in *The Reason of the Strongest is Always the Best*, 2014, in the film shoot *Scenes from Paradise*, 2015 and in the live performance at Art OMI's sculpture park, 2016. Thanks to Jessie Sara English and Eric Feigenbaum for their amazing spirit and meticulous technical and artistic assistance. Thanks to Catharine Dill for her early participation and her potent script. Thanks to Lawre Stone and Dan Devine for their generosity in hosting our crew on their sheep meadow for three days and three nights, and at Art OMI, where the sheep nearly bolted and fled.

Thanks to Jordan Lord for helping me edit the footage. Thanks to Nancy Princenthal and Jeffrey Jerome Cohen for their critical essays. Thanks to Diane Bertolo for her beautiful design of the catalogue and to Cathy Liebowitz for editing the text. Thanks to my husband Mark Nelkin for his total confidence in this unwieldy and complex film and video project.

Grateful acknowledgements to Larry Greenberg, Director of Studio10, for his support and encouragement in producing this January 2017 exhibition.

Thanks to the performers, choreographers, prop makers, and camera crews: Ashleigh Awusie, Milcah Bassel, Nick Bixby, Patricia Brace, Michael Caines, Davi Cohen, Fernando Do Campo, Eamonn Farrell, John Gasper, Oscar Gracida, Blake Habermann, Ryan Holsapple, Karl Jacob, Gabe Judet-Weinshel, Lance Lankford, Catherine LaSota, Jamie Law, Zach Levy, Rachel Lin, Paula Rosine Long, Tim Lueke, Natalie Mack, Catherine McTague,

Nathaniel Moore, Peter Moses, Joel Olzak, Luciana Pinchiero, Kyle Porter, Brittany Prater, Rujuta Rao, Jay Riedl, Richard Saudek, JoAnna Mendl Shaw, Nick Shifrin, Phil Shipman, Mark Smith, Lawre Stone, Chaney Trotter, Laura von Holt, Alona Weiss, Matt Whitman, Alejandro Yoshii, Jade Yumang, and Ingrid Zhuang.



On location, Ghent, New York, August 16, 2015.
Photograph by Ilana Rein.

LENORE MALEN. In 1999 Lenore Malen invented The New Society for Universal Harmony (thenewsociety.org) and ever since she has used the lens of history—and humor—to explore utopian longings, dystopic aftermaths, and the sciences and technologies that inform them. She works with diverse media in all of her projects, incorporating performance, photography, film/video, multi-screen projection, installation and fiction writing. She creates narratives in these various media. Recently her explorations have focused on ecology, on cultural myths, and on the unstable boundaries between humans and animals.

"Because a thing is going strong now, it need not go strong for ever," {Margaret} said. "This craze for motion has only set in during the last hundred years. It may be followed by a civilization that won't be a movement, because it will rest upon the earth."

— E. M. Forster
Howards End (1910)