

ecologue

KATRINA SCHLUNKE

Ecology was taught as a domestic science. Its domesticity rested upon a high school translation of *oikos* as house and so this was the science of the household. Household was in turn understood as the environment of each particular plant where their exact needs of water and soil were met and where in turn they naturally co-existed with the insects that shifted their pollen and the possums that grazed on their leaves. If one thing was out of the proper order, the ripple produced would tear across the whole environment. There was an almost instant turn to ‘introduced’ species to exemplify what the biology teacher meant—these were always the rabbit or the crown-of-thorns starfish. Both of these examples had once threatened a whole system but had now been bought to heel through the wonder and hard work of scientific discovery and method. No one called sheep or roses an ‘introduced species’ then. The standard definition of ecology was the study of the relation of plants and animals to their environment.

Connection, often direct personal connection, was always at the heart of an appreciation of how ecology differed from other sciences and for the first time the place of ‘man’ was a modest niche that should not be overstepped. But the order of this connection depended upon an order of discreteness—each connection relied upon the players remaining the same. The rabbit had to remain a threat to grazing lands and crops. There was no talk of how micro-economies sprang up around the rabbitoes or that some people never stopped believing rabbits were cute. There was not an appreciation of the ways in which the rabbit, parasite-like, had made an environment that seeped into those who shot and loved it and left the usually stoney ground moled out with economic and emotional warrens. But even within

a rethought, expanded idea of ecology we should keep that central concern that ecology has with connection.

Let me propose a new simple definition of ecology for now: ‘The study of the relations of an environment to plants and animals’. But since the simple divisions between plant and animal, and study and environment no longer hold in any simple way, an adapted definition could be: ‘the writing of relations that are an environment’. This ecology is one suited for a time when our second natures, miming on, lead us to a copy we cannot complete. For Michael Taussig the mimetic faculty was ‘the nature that culture uses to create second nature, the faculty to copy, imitate, make models, explore difference, yield into and become other’.¹ We have an itch to become natural (a tickle at the heels for Taussig) to copy and so connect with what we see but cannot always be. I thank Taussig for this second nature, for a ‘natural’ place for the copy and copying. It re-animates the image and the record and the buying and selling with which we create and are created by, our contemporary environment.

This is an environment where we are making ourselves up as second nature when we can but it is also where we are called to unexpected connections. It is a mixture of mimicry and contingent connection where our relations with first nature, secondary simulacrum, third worlds and fourth estates are no longer contained within any one system of knowing. The task of this new ecology, this ‘writing of relations that are an environment’ is to show an order of natural connection with what was once classified as unnatural, as hidden love, as something we just used or bought. To try to know these relations of sensation is to initiate a very different order of conservation—a conservation not of what something already is but what it might become with someone and/or something else. Think of buying a card with a message. The card is already ripe with its commodity value, it is bought in a particular way on a particular day and it will mean something for a moment to someone. Its material fragility is captured fleetingly as it is bought and sold but its gnomic joke imbeds itself as sensation with the buyer and is reproduced as happiness.

— NATURAL HAPPINESS

She had bought a card. It had a cartoon on the front. A man, a woman. The man was a tramp? Unemployed? A beggar. He held a pan (or was it a cup?) out to the empty street and on it was written ‘Homeless’. The woman was thin, harum-scarum and barely chested. She held her cup to the empty street and on it was written ‘Titless’.

She had known what this card meant. She had not known what this card meant. She felt she had never been titless although there must have been a moment when she had been homeless but she would not think of bobbing, bobbing, bobbing in the world. All her limbs and thoughts flaccid, disconnected—that was not the homelessness they meant.

She re-felt the floor with her feet, forgetting for a moment that she had bought something. She had bought something. She could stay where she was while the young woman at the counter put the card in a brown bag, held out her arm, elegantly angled, hand modestly cupped and able to take cash or card in her supplicant palm. The young woman takes her cash, fingers quickly closing about the clumsy coins and it is as if a small hiss escapes from the machine. There is a slight turn and bend and her change comes into her own palm, slightly warm, minutely tinged with exchange.

She walks across the floor, past the teddy bears, boxers in a box and farting gnomes, to find herself relieved at the door that there is a concrete pavement. She had, for a moment, feared carpet. She carries her purse in one hand and the packeted card in the other. She felt overburdened by its shape and texture, there was nothing to hang onto. She felt her fingers growing hot against the recycled paper packet, a slippery, sweaty shroud. She had blocks to walk. She stopped and folded the larger packet around the card, creasing each fold, making it flatter than it ever could have been before. She slid the bagged card into her back pocket.

She was imagining the woman she would give this card to. The woman who would 'get' this joke for her. She felt her body in a state of genesis, roseate. Each corpuscle rolling itself into a warm petal waiting to flower, wanting to spill over into hot bloom. She put her hand to her pocket again to remember the card, to reassure herself she was whole and going toward someone who would get the joke. The card would be taken and this woman would say 'ha' or maybe 'huh' and put the card down. She might roll her eyes. Her lips might curl. They would be in irony. They would be in relationship. It would be understood as a gesture. They would have to be friends.

For a moment she would share the woman's world that knew the place of homelessness and titlessness. The woman would know what they were doing on a card, begging. The woman would know the joke before she saw it. And she would become, in that moment, someone who knew. Someone who knew too. This tiny handing-over would cause a rippling across the worlds she had not lived in and now did. And as the card was correctly, ordinarily dismissed, she would sit in that world of a million small connections. Each thing bought and sold, each mote of pleasure in the satellite systems, in the passing crowds, would stretch her back and she would feel herself cascading into the world. An avalanche of sensation. She would be at home with titless and homeless and begging. She might suggest she actually saw someone, somewhere, in New York, on cable, in the paper, demanding the right to breasts of a certain size. But at this thought she felt a tiny shakiness. That was someone else. She would be this card. She would have become titful. Her titfulness would carry her through. The woman will say to her 'Well you had nothing to worry about there' and she would have

her past before her. She would have become a woman who would have been a girl who 'had nothing to worry about there'. Her in-the-world breasts would spill out to the talk shows, the plastic surgeons and women's magazines. She would move through this woman to credit cards and lingerie. Nothing was impossible. She would be wholly there.

She walked on. She no longer had any intimation that her feet would leave the pavement. She had no need of air. She wondered not why the breeze was cooler or if leaves had fallen. She put her hand to her pocket again. It was there. All of it was there. She had it yet.²

— FINDING NATURE

The path with this card is one of impossible mimicry. Which of its messages will grow where? Which can be copied to become something more? Which is soft enough to fall into? As Frederic Jameson says, culture is

consumed throughout daily life itself, in shopping, in professional activities, in the various often televisual forms of leisure, in production for the market and in the consumption of those market products, indeed in the most secret folds and corners of the quotidian. Social space is now completely saturated with the culture of the image.³

We once knew culture because it was not nature. Culture was produced, nature occurred, culture was civilisation, nature was uncontrollable; wild, culture was not. But nature was always exceeding itself. Nature never remained in its historical/cultural container. It was innocence, dangerous, degraded; it was trees and nakedness. Now the world is no longer split (if it ever quite was) into separate spheres of culture and nature. Nature cannot be represented only in its appropriate vocabularies of suspicious knowing and enduring innocence for, with culture, it has become an environment of sensation.

This environment reproduces itself, mutates, orders itself and connects through sensation. If culture proliferated itself in a world of images until it became all second nature, copies of copies, then the ecological is the relation that arises through unexpected connection when the material is captured in its sensation. It is the affective force of objects, the imbrication of the bodily in the material and the emergence of capital in trees and it is always something more. This is connected to Jean-Francois Lyotard's take on ecology. For Lyotard:

ecology ... is impossible to describe in terms of function. So we can call it entropy but probably the most interesting thing is to try and touch it, not approach it, because it is not an object available for a cognitive touch.⁴

I agree with Lyotard about touch, in the sense of both physical encounter and being transformed, as in 'touched in the head' or simply being 'touched' as in passingly moved by an

event or something that has caught at your heart. This is not a way of knowing the ecological; this is the ecological for me.

Lyotard's version of ecology emphasises its *oikeion* or household or feminine foundations. *Oikeion* was that which was opposed to the *politikon*. *Oikeion* was the private opposed to the public. But Lyotard doesn't like that word private. I suspect it is too overdetermined for him and I suspect he has not been moved by or perhaps he hadn't read the exciting transformative feminist work that has been done with what was once called the public-private divide. He prefers the word secluded. That which escapes the light of speech, that which could be the unconscious, that which might be writing. He also says it is that darkness where tragedy occurs.

His ecology is also entropy: the measure of the degree of disorder of a system. Or we might think of it as a measure of an energy that cannot be used in expected or known ways. This idea of an energy that cannot be known in advance gives ecology its order of unexpectedness. It lets us see, feel, taste, the surprising leakiness of the materially imaged world as it spills into us, who have already been seen and made by that complex materiality.

This is not the ecology that turns us to street planting programs, composting, living simply and wondering whether we have been too long in the shower—it is not a program. It is a processual, animate ecology—the radical domesticity of the unseen that needs to touch us and be touched, to be known. What I like about this definition is its break with a simple sociality. Sometimes ecology can work as an immodest call to be 'simply' good, to create unspecified community, to become spiritual and to remain suspicious about the worlds of deep urbanised consumption because somewhere there is always a retreat to a nature of ecological invention. For me social ecology seems to have missed the cultural turn. But the ecological via Lyotard offers a way in which the 'darkness' can be found, animated and written in this particular historical space of now where images can be the momentary capture of an environment of sensation. And some of those sensations have leaves and a bureaucratic order—they are not a simple set of taste, touch and hearing.

— NATURAL TEARS

We live on an uncleared block of woodland. We live with everything as it kind of was. We love this bush unnaturally. We receive a letter.

Dear Ms Brock and Ms Schlunke, Ms Schlunke (I don't know why there are two of me—some bid for attention? some bureaucratic recognition that I am here more than one? some mimetic effort to make the sound of an echidna in dry scrub—mschloonka, mschloonka?)

Notice of bush fire hazard reduction work to be undertaken -s. 66(1) of the Rural Fires Act 1997

Requirement to take the following action to prevent the occurrence of bush fires on, and to minimise the danger of the spread of bush fires on or from that land:

Point 1.

Nature of Fire Hazard: Excessive level of vegetation/combustible material on the property. Posing a threat to asset.

Point 2

Work to be carried out: establish an asset protection zone by the following method. Understorey vegetation from ground level to three metres high is to be thinned, removed or mulched. Combustible material to be disposed of. No ground cover greater than 50 mm to be left after processing. Trees must be lopped or removed to provide a non-continuous canopy with a distance of two metres between specimens.

Failure to comply with any requirement of this notice may result in a fine and council will proceed to have the work required by the notice carried out and recover the costs from you. Should council be required to take further action in this matter, an administration fee of \$407 will be charged. If you have any enquiries about this notice or the work required, please contact Council's Fire Protection Officer.

Yours sincerely

We have to cut down the bush to save the house that we built to be in the bush. The only asset in this logic is the house. We see the only asset as the bush. We tell them. We get one visit. The polite young man calls me maaam. We get another visit. We write letters. We argue. We tell people. We go on the Net. We unite as a street. We go to work. We get another visit. Someone special writes a poem. It's daggy as all get up. She calls it 'Bush Owed—O-W-E-D'. She has a simple refrain, it's corny. It's like a mother comforting a child: good bush, she says, good bush. And we cry.

And there, right there, Lynndie England steps towards us with an Iraqi prisoner on a leash, posing for us and our bush, her Bush. Our bush is already haunted with another. Those photos that we now know were a part of a set of ordinary photos of trips to bazaars, of laughing groups, of tourist attractions, are in our ears and before our eyes. Banksia, leash, kangaroo grass, torture, fire, order, fine. Bush fire. Our fire. Us.

Thirty years ago Susan Sontag asked for an ecology of images:

Images are more real than anyone could have supposed. And just because they are an unlimited resource, one that cannot be exhausted by consumerist waste, there is all the more

reason to apply the conservationist remedy. If there can be a better way for the real world to include the one of images, it will require an ecology not only of real things but of images as well.⁵

Sontag may have the order wrong here. Now it is a matter of the real world of images understanding that it is also an environment of relations. It is true that an image is not exhausted by its consumption but neither is almost anything else as we see the dolphins dying of bubble wrap and human bodies cut and cut again to become a photo of someone, sometimes a photo of themselves at a different moment. In this way even our efforts at mimicry are cut across by the refusal of the original to stabilise as even the photograph ages through new eyes. I guess that what Sontag envisaged as the 'conservationist remedy' was an ecology of limit and system—that images needed to be always understood in relation to their environment and perhaps that certain 'introduced' images would need to be weeded out, censored perhaps. Now we need the constant effort to copy, to capture everything we do as an energy that is moving us toward a display of an environment of relations that we can recognise and react to. The banality of those photos of torture—just clowning around for folks back home—their leftover force asking us what our ordinary world is: Who are we here? With our Bush?

— NATURAL LOVE

The Virgin record store was calling. 'Fuck all those kisses it didn't mean jack, Fuck you, you ho, I don't want you back. Oh oh ...' Smitten by this boy siren I followed. I was in the airport, too early as always and so I moved towards fuck but was distracted by Rip Curl and a shiny watch so that when I entered the shop proper the fuck was over. This was beyond zip-less. But I asked anyway and the woman laughed and gave me the whole disc to listen to. It turned out to be a song by Eamon called 'Fuck It (I Don't Want You Back)'. These are almost the entire lyrics except for the exceptional addition of 'Ya put me through pain, You even gave him head and It hurt real bad'. It is totally bad. It must be the most pathetic song I have ever heard and I start to half groan, half laugh listening to it. The woman hears me and joins me and when I hand back the earphones says 'You have gotta hear his girlfriend's response. It is sooo funny. We don't have it here. But you will hear it anywhere. It is sooo good.' She writes down the artist for me. I look down. Her name is Frankee and the name of her song is 'Fuck you right back'. Like another kind of virgin, I am touched for the very first time by this couple's willingness to fuck off for me. I touch them back through my ears that reached out and brought me toward them to learn very quietly about loss. To stand very silently until I heard their sounds properly and those sounds, that music, drew up a laugh of regret for this natural love.

This touching ecological, this *oikeion*, has both the force of the domestic and the not-always sympathetic magic of connection. In this real world of images, it is the ecological that reshapes and re-imagines. This domestic is the unseen often unsayable use we make with things and the unseen and often unsayable sensual, everyday relationships we have with the world. Think of your hand every day pushing down the toaster handle. Feel the spring feel you back, answering into a settled descent. Remember the smell of toast burning and the hesitation you have to enter its belly without invitation. You don't know the language of appeasement to its other connections to the electricity supply, to its inner circuitry. And yet you do slide in sideways, clutching a fork or the nearest utensil to hand and you bring forth a singed bratling. And what of the way you 'automatically', naturally, reach for the phone and your hand becomes voice? What of the built-up grey of those keys on the keyboard where we move to computer? Think too of the way the back of your hand brushes the car window, the mint bush, the photocopier lid, the metal train wall and the dog's hair on a cushion. And the way you can smell a lift coming, follow corridors and taste air-conditioned breath. It's these material sensations that disappear every time we are asked to say what we are doing. When we glimpse them we are ecological.

This ecological is the moment, the body, the image, the act and the sense that exceeds its historical cum cultural containment. It could be both the enchantment and the crossing creatures of Jane Bennett, it might be Ruth Barcan's nude or Marcus's wonder in a museum.⁶ It might be divinity or secular modesty⁷ or soul. There is an imagined expansiveness in this natural cum cultural. We do not already know what we will become here, there, as this or that. It carries with it the remnant of romantically imagined wild: wilful violent or peaceful and rustic—the ecological cannot be decided upon. You will know it though when you see, when you connect with, a photo of a hooded Iraqi man holding his terrified child in a POW camp and your worlds of ancient hooded knights and Ku Klux Klan and Nazis and fatherhood and fear are seen in a post-discursive moment. You might feel the ecological when you see the heavy feet of an eastern grey kangaroo balanced on the edge of an ordinary bath in your backyard as it leans forward to drink. The drought and the bathroom producing a weight of weirdness that smells of too-dry grass. The ecological reveals our imaged nature to us but not for long.

So what do we do with this expanded ecology? This ecology of the acutely everyday, this ecology of the inexplicable experience? We write about what it produces. We write environmental emotions. We have to touch that, be touched by it. We write naturally.

KATRINA SCHLUNKE is a senior lecturer in cultural studies at the University of Technology, Sydney.
<katrina.schlunke@uts.edu.au>

1. Michael Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity: A Particular History of the Senses*, Routledge, New York, 1993, p. xiii.
2. The rhythm of this piece is set by Virginia Woolf's short story 'Happiness' which is to be found in Woolf, *The Complete Shorter Fiction of Virginia Woolf*, ed. Susan Dick, Hogarth Press, London, 1989. Claire Colebrook uses Woolf's story as a partial explanation of Deleuze's concept of becoming and for an argument for the importance of art as a way in which different temporalities can be presented to let us 'see' the actual. Her reading of Woolf is very evocative. See Colebrook, *Understanding Deleuze*, Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 2002.
3. Frederic Jameson, *The Cultural Turn: Selected Writings on the Postmodern 1983–1998*, Verso, London, 1998, p. 110.
4. Jean-Francois Lyotard, 'Oikos' in *Political Writings*, trans. B Readings and K Paul, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, pp. 74–81.
5. Susan Sontag, *On Photography*, Delta Book, New York, 1973, p. 180.
6. Jane Bennett, *The Enchantment of Modern Life: Attachments, Crossings and Ethics*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2001; Ruth Barcan, *Nudity: A Cultural Anatomy*, Berg, Oxford, 2004.
7. I am thinking of William Connolly here; both in his argument for a new kind of politics and in his careful, modest exposure of how politics works in multiple registers that will always include the visceral and emotional and something more. See W Connolly, *Why I am not a Secularist*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1999, and W Connolly, 'Refashioning the Secular', in J Butler, J Guillory and K Thomas (eds), *What's Left of Theory? New Work on the Politics of Literary Theory*, Routledge, New York, 2000.