

Queering the Green Man, Reframing the Garden: Marina Zurkow's *Mesocosm* (Northumberland UK) and the Theatre of Species

by Una Chaudhuri

Current attitudes towards climate change are ruefully captured and skewered in the title of an ongoing solo performance series by California-based performance artist Heather Woodbury. Riffing on the title of a long-running, though recently cancelled, daytime soap opera, Woodbury's work is called "As the Globe Warms." The title captures the disturbing way that one of the greatest catastrophes our species has ever faced is transmuted into yet another contentious and indecisive aspect of "the new normal," a vaguely unsettling yet instantly normalized account of social and political reality, produced and sustained by the mass media. Acknowledging the looming crisis while also characterizing it as inevitable, this discourse turns climate change into yet another weapon in the arsenals of biopower, the exercise of the state's control over the biological lives of its increasingly disempowered citizens. Like the programmatically endless "war on terror," the idea of an unavoidable drift towards climatic extremes helps to normalize events like state-mandated evacuations, removal of populations, increased monitoring and surveillance of public spaces, and mass medical interventions—all unfolding in the name of "protection" and "caution."

Within the mechanisms of biopower, the contested and mystified idea of climate change plays out not only on human bodies, but also on the vital links between human bodies and their physical environments, and more specifically on their modes of experiencing, thinking, and feeling those environments. To use a term with new traction in recent animal studies, climate change is played out on the human *umwelt*. A key term in the biosemiotics of Jacob von Uexküll, the *umwelt* consists of those aspects of an organism's environment that the organism responds or reacts to.¹ It is the organism's *experienced* world, and is located neither within the organism nor outside it, but rather streams between the two in a process of perpetual co-creation and mutual generation. Therefore, as a concept, *umwelt* resists the operations of biopower that divide organisms from their environments through binaries such as inside/outside, self/other, and subject/object.

The rejection of binaries also makes the *umwelt* a useful site for the elaboration of a new orientation towards the environment that is unfolding under the banner of "queer ecology." This discourse links queer theory's cultural critique of heteronormativity to recent scientific studies that challenge the ideological fiction of a heteronormative natural order by documenting the vast array of reproductive mechanisms and sexual and gender behaviours found in the natural world.² Queer theory's historic interest in unsettling established categories finds a congenial ally in the taxonomic anti-realism of Michel Foucault's account of the production of scientific knowledge, which throws the very idea of stable systems and fixed categories into question. Transposed into the realms of biology and ecology, queer theory's emphasis on "fluidity, über-inclusivity, indeterminacy, indefinability, unknowability, the preposterous, impossibility, unthinkability, unintelligibility, meaninglessness, and that which is unrepresentable"³ initiates an ecocritical project that stresses the non-deterministic and non-essentialist implications of Darwinian theory. As critic Timothy Morton puts it: "Evolution means that life forms are made of other life forms. Entities are mutually determining: they exist in relation to each other and derive from each other. Nothing exists independently, and nothing comes from nothing."⁴ Adapting queer theory's program of "undo[ing] normative entanglements and fashion[ing] alternative imaginaries,"⁵ queer ecology proposes a post-Romantic view of nature that vigorously deconstructs the nature/culture binary of traditional environmental thought and assumes an interdependency among life-forms, rejecting the view of organisms as bounded, holistic entities. Most importantly, it sets a new goal for the ecological imagination different from the synoptic and sentimental one symbolized by the "blue planet" icon of earlier ecological thought: "Instead of insisting on being part of something bigger," Morton writes, "we should be working with intimacy."⁶

Intimacy and *umwelt* are two key components of an ecological art practice I call "theatre of species," which aspires to unsettle some of the assumptions upon which biopower rests. The practice exists at the intersection of several fields: Ecocriticism, which studies how environmental realities and discourses are reflected in literature, art, and the media; Animal Studies, which explores the vast array of cultural animal practices that human beings are involved in; and Theatre and Performance Studies. While the latter may seem to be the odd one out, the first two have also, until recently, been disconnected. What has finally put them into the conversation is the looming spectre of climate change and the long-overdue recognition that humans are one species among many that are facing unprecedented threats to survival. Climate change transforms familiar sites into landscapes of catastrophe, or at least into landscapes of

risk and uncertainty. Those are the landscapes that the theatre of species wants to acknowledge, create, examine, and inhabit.

An extraordinary example of such a landscape, Marina Zurkow's animated "landscape portrait" *Mesocosm* (Northumberland, UK), exemplifies several strategies of the theatre of species, the two most important being the *relocation* and *mobilization* of artistic experience. In this work, the former occurs through one of the richest of archetypal sites, the garden. The latter occurs through an engagement with the *frame*, a feature of visual art that recently received a powerful new Deleuzian theorization by Elizabeth Grosz. Its emergence, she writes, "is the condition of all the arts" because "the frame is what establishes territory out of the chaos that is the earth."⁷ *Mesocosm* activates its own frame and presents a riposte to a long tradition of alienated and anthropocentric art, thereby participating in the movement of artistic exploration that Grosz characterizes as follows:

If framing creates the very conditions for the plane of composition and thus of any particular arts, art itself is a project that disjars, distends, and transforms frames. [...] In this sense the history of painting, and of art after painting, can be seen as *the action of leaving the frame*, of moving beyond, of pressing against the frame, the frame exploding through the movement it can no longer contain.⁸

Though the temporality of *Mesocosm* is relaxed and capacious, its rendition of the human *umwelt* is founded on a conception of life as volatile, capricious, random, and unpredictable.



Marina Zurkow, still from *Mesocosm* (Northumberland UK), autumn (2011)



Marina Zurkow, still from *Mesocosm* (Northumberland UK), spring (2011)

Mesocosm is a video animation representing the passage of one year on the moors of Northumberland, UK.⁹ One hour of world time elapses in each minute of screen time, so that a complete cycle lasts 146 hours: "Seasons unfold, days pass, moons rise and set, animals come and go," around a centrally located and almost omnipresent human figure. The figures that appear suggest an open, even infinite, set of beings and phenomena, unconstrained by taxonomic limits: there are cows, owls, ravens, squirrels, foxes, men, women, children, humans in animal costumes, butterflies, refugees, caterpillars, swarms of insects, bats, rabbits, dumpsters, trucks, steamrollers, vans, calves, dogs, hares, fairies, dragonflies, inchworms, midges, spiders, hikers, bikes, horses, ponies, sheep, lambs, swallows, clouds, smokestacks, fog, pollen, shadows, garbage, leaves, petals, pollen, snow, rain, sleet, and wind. This is indeed, as the artist says in her notes on the work, "an expanded view of what constitutes 'nature.'" It is also a capacious rendition of *umwelt*, staging the endless communicative events and interactions that shape the experience of human and other animals.

No cycle is identical to the last, as the appearance and behavior of human and non-human characters, as well as changes in the weather, are determined by a code using a simple probability equation. This built-in indeterminacy is one of several features that align the work with queer ecology, which emphasizes the emergent, non-deterministic nature of evolution. In tandem with the work's long duration (to see a whole year unfold takes almost a week), this indeterminacy implies and encourages a special kind of spectatorship: more casual and peripheral than concentrated, more peripatetic and mobile than fixed. It is a spectatorship that accommodates the rhythms of everyday life, and construes the work as a frame and context for those rhythms as much as a repository of images, events, narrative, and ideas. Experienced as a frame for the spectator's ongoing lifeworld rather than as an alternate reality that is set against, intervenes in, or interrupts that lifeworld, *Mesocosm* functions like the landscape it depicts: a garden, that ancient and universal cultural framing of "nature" as a space for pleasurable visitation and temporary habitation.



Green man.
Pembroke St.,
Cambridge, UK
photo: Rex
Harris

Nature is made better by no mean
But nature makes that mean: so, over that art
Which you say adds to nature, is an art
That nature makes. You see, sweet maid, we marry
A gentler scion to the wildest stock,
And make conceive a bark of baser kind
By bud of nobler race: this is an art
Which does mend nature, change it rather, but
The art itself is nature.¹⁰

The special kind of enjoyment offered by gardens makes them particularly rich sites for ecologically oriented cultural theory, because the recreation they offer involves contemplating the *re*-creation of the natural world. The garden is the site of a complex—and potentially queer—circuitry that links human creativity to organic growth and, as such, a space and practice that challenges the ideologically influential nature/culture binary. One classic formulation of the debate around this binary (in its “nature vs. art” version) appears in *The Winter’s Tale*, where Shakespeare’s characters argue about whether horticultural practices like grafting are natural or otherwise. Perdita’s characterization of the cross-bred “gillyvors” in her garden as “nature’s bastards,” is challenged by her father Polixenes, who argues that:

The interplay between art and nature that Polixenes asserts is nowhere better seen than in the garden, which also makes it a site for trying out, testing, or simply indulging—briefly and safely—new, non-normative identities. The central figure in Zurkow’s work is, I suggest, engaged in this experiment, and invites spectators to try out—or try on—an unaccustomed ecological role. Presence is a part of that role, but it is a strangely self-displacing, non-assertive presence, open to having the traditional boundaries of the individualistic self challenged and breached. This is a mobilized, aleatory, and queer presence, performing a new mode of species habitation.

One way to apprehend the key elements—as well as the creative potential and affective challenge—of this new role is to read it as a postmodern or queer version of the Green

Man, another archetypal figure for the interdependence of art and nature. A common decorative motif of medieval sculpture, the foliate faces of this human-vegetable adorn the walls, doors, pillars, and windows of hundreds of churches, cathedrals, and secular buildings dating from the Middle Ages. Branches, leaves, and vines surround the faces of these figures, and often sprout from their mouths, noses, and ears. Figures of fertility and unbounded—not to mention boundary-breaching—growth, these species-crossing vegetable men were inherited from pre-Christian and pagan traditions of nature-worship. But they are equally at home in the contemporary, non-deterministic, and anti-essentialist biologies that inspire queer ecology, where boundaries are, as Morton writes, “blurr[ed] and confound[ed] at practically any level: between species, between the living and the nonliving, between organism and environment.”¹¹ The human figure at the (de-centred) centre of *Mesocosm* is a living, moving Green Man for our age, a queer response to the increasing threat of biopower in the Anthropocene. He is the protagonist of a new theatre of species.

Seeing *Mesocosm* as a theatre of species begins with noticing a seemingly simple structural feature of the work: the ever-changing scene depicted in the work is bordered on two sides by an expansive black area. This area functions as a frame, but one that can be entered, crossed, and occupied—though not, it seems, inhabited. When animals walk or run into the black space around the narrow band landscape in the middle of the screen—and also when the human figure himself lumbers or strolls into or out of it—that space transforms into something like the wings of a proscenium theatre, and momentarily turns the landscape into, as Zurkow writes in her description of the work, “a stage.”

Mesocosm’s landscape is haunted by the mode of theatrical representation that has dominated western theatre since Sebastiano Serlio introduced the principles of single-point perspective drawing into scene design in the 16th century. The theatrical aesthetic that developed soon after—illusionism—was greeted with great enthusiasm and launched a centuries-long love affair with realism that flourishes to this day.¹² I have argued elsewhere about the realist theatre’s complicity with anthropocentric and anti-ecological world views,¹³ and recently Adam Sweeting and Thomas C. Crochunis have argued that the conventions of naturalist staging—especially its “rigidly dualistic conceptualization of space”—have shaped our experience of wilderness, and drastically limited the range of our imagination about nature and consequently our relationship to it.¹⁴ This is exactly the limiting structure that *Mesocosm* addresses through a playful engagement with some of the most powerful and entrenched conventions of theatre.

This “gift” of illusionism was actually a costly exchange; with the illusion of depth now available to it, set design could supply astonishing effects of reality, but only—and always—within the confines of the picture frame, the proscenium arch. Pushed outside this frame, banished from the life-art dialectic that is the soul of theatrical process, the theatregoer went from being a participant to being a viewer. This new spatial order recast the spectator as a potential sovereign by suggesting an ideal position from which the perspectival effects are seen to perfection, known as the Duke’s seat. Not merely a spatial site, the Duke’s seat also modeled a new ideal of individuality, centrality, and authority for the ordinary theatregoer. But the bargain was a Faustian one: the average spectator’s chances of actually sitting in the “Duke’s Seat” were just as bleak as his or her chances of actually “mastering” the social world.

The psychology of perspectival spectatorship is as obfuscating as its ideology. In his 1996 book, *The Experience of Landscape*, Jay Appleton famously related various sub-genres of landscape painting to a set of biological needs and urges derived from animal habitat theory.¹⁵ These genres, Appleton argued, are organized around certain strategic locations—prospect, refuge, and hazard—that are available to the predator or prey animal whose survival depends on successfully negotiating the various features of the land and its other inhabitants. Appleton singles out the picturesque genre as being especially pleasing because it places the viewer in a protected position, viewing the scene from a partially hidden and pleasantly shaded spot, the “refuge.” Any framing of a natural scene that confers such a position of safety on the onlooker is an instance of the picturesque, a guarantee that it is “only a picture,” and that the viewer is safely removed: “outside the frame, behind the binoculars, the camera, or the eyeball, in the dark refuge of the skull.”¹⁶ Proscenium staging is a similar instance of constructing the “picturesque spectator,” the threatened or threatening human animal temporarily enjoying a moment of safety.

But as Gordon Rogoff puts it, theatre is not safe—or rather, its special power is squandered in producing illusions of distance, separation, and protected privilege.¹⁷



Charles Atlas.
*The Legend of
Leigh Bowery.*
USA/France, 2002.
88 min.



That spatial configuration supports both a theatre of isolated individualism as well as an anthropocentric theatre, framing the exemplary or heroic human figure and transforming everything non-human into mere scenery. Zurkow's theatre-haunted landscape suggests ways to unseat the secure spectator and plunge him into the unpredictable terrain of life understood ecologically. The keys to this re-visioning, or queering, of stage space are the position and behavior—and the astonishing art-historical lineage (from performance art, to painting, to video animation)—of the large human figure that dominates the foreground.



The main figure in *Mesocosm* is based on the Australian performance artist, designer, and drag queen Leigh Bowery, who helped to catalyze an extraordinarily interdisciplinary experimental art scene in London and New York in the 1980s. In Charles Atlas's documentary film, *The Legend of Leigh Bowery*, a colleague of Bowery's describes him as the "the greatest of the great outrageous Australians of the modern world," a man utterly committed to challenging every assumption, breaching every boundary, and destroying every artistic or social convention he could lay his gigantic hands on.¹⁸



Lucian Freud, *Naked Man, Back View*, 1991-1992. Oil on canvas, 183.5 × 137.5cm. Image copyright © The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Image source: Art Resource, NY

In his lifetime, Bowery's "legend" was keyed to the extraordinary costumes he designed, built, and wore—vast, moulded carapaces of bright fabrics smothered in sequins and feathers. But, in a reversal that he himself would have relished, Bowery's posthumous image is likely to be resolutely *unclothed*. This is thanks to the surprising role that Bowery played toward the end of his short life, as muse and model to one of the greatest of modern painters, Lucian Freud. Atlas's documentary provides a delicious account of the moment this transformation occurred, this metamorphosis of a monstrously over-coded cultural icon into a mountain of flesh: Bowery had been invited to sit for Freud because his over-dressed style posed such a challenge to the renowned painter of disturbing, challenging nudes. But, while they were getting ready to start working, and while Freud's back was turned, Bowery took off all his clothes having assumed Freud would be painting him naked.

The central figure of *Mesocosm*, then, is an incarnation of Bowery who has escaped the "too, too solid flesh" of Freud's canvas to inhabit an eternity of jittery animation in a rural landscape. From his earlier life he has brought along another feature even more subversive here than it was in Freud's painting: he turns his back on us. In a recent article entitled "The Seated Figure on Beckett's Stage," Enoch Brater shows how the absurdist master completes and deconstructs a historical process in which the seated figure on stage went from being an emblem of authority in the public sphere of Renaissance drama to a symbol of inwardness in the private worlds of 19th-century psychological realism.¹⁹ The posterior view of the figure in *Mesocosm* initiates what I read as his challenging dialectic with anthropocentric stage presence, and thus as one strategy—though admittedly borrowed from painting—for the theatre of species he anchors. The strategy involves a kind of insistent embodiment: foregrounding biological presence, "backgrounding" psychological being.

Notes

1. See Jacob von Uexküll, "An Introduction to Umwelt," *Semiotica* 134 (2001): 107-110.
2. See Bruce Bagemihl, *Biological Exuberance: Animal Homosexuality and Natural Diversity* (New York: Stonewall Inn Editions, 2000) and Joan Roughgarden, *Evolution's Rainbow: Diversity, Gender, and Sexuality in Nature and People*, 2nd ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009).
3. Noreen Giffney and Myra Hird, eds., *Queering the Non/Human* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008), 4.
4. Timothy Morton, "Guest Column: Queer Ecology," *PMLA* 125, No. 2 (March 2010): 273-282.
5. Giffney and Hird, *Queering the Non/Human*, 4.
6. Morton, "Guest Column: Queer Ecology," 278.
7. Elizabeth A. Grosz, *Chaos, Territory, Art: Deleuze and the Framing of the Earth* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 11.
8. *Ibid.*, 17.
9. Marina Zurkow, *Mesocosm* (Northumberland, UK), 2011, accessed on 10/18/2011, <http://www.o-matic.com/play/friend/mesocosm>.
10. William Shakespeare, *The Winter's Tale*, in *The Norton Shakespeare*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt (New York and London: W.W. Norton, 1997) Act 4, Scene 4, lines 89-97.
11. Morton, "Guest Column: Queer Ecology," 275-276.
12. Notwithstanding the fact that Brechtian and other avant-gardes spent the last century exposing its complicity with essentially conservative (though ostensibly progressive) humanist ideologies and individualist psychologies.
13. Una Chaudhuri, "Land/Scape/Theory," in *Land/Scape/Theater*, eds. Elinor Fuchs and Una Chaudhuri (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 2002).



Marina Zurkow, still from *Mesocosm* (Northumberland UK), summer (2011)

However, the two things that most surprise us about Zurkow's Bowery are also those that distinguish him from Freud's: First, as already mentioned, he gets up and walks out of the frame. Second, he allows various small creatures not only to climb on him and sit on him but also to feed on him, producing the only specks of color—blood red—in the work. This scandalous symbiosis, based on a novel intimacy, suggests a queered updating of the ancient motif of the Green Man in the context of an anti-essentialist, relational ecology. The queer Green Man of *Mesocosm* contributes a personal and artistic history that is deeply relevant to his role in this "expanded apprehension of what constitutes nature," a history that makes him the ideal protagonist for a post-anthropocentric, post-picturesque theatre of species. His travels between genders and genres have prepared him for the more challenging transit ahead, the journey between species.

The confidence with which Zurkow's Bowery occupies this rural landscape represents the defeat of a long and contradictory cultural construction of the relationship between homosexuality and nature. As Andil Gosine writes in a recent article,

"Homosexual sex has been represented in dominant renderings of ecology and environmentalism as incompatible and threatening to nature. [The construction of this prejudice is related to the fact that] In its early incarnations, North American environmentalism was conceived as a response to industrial urbanization. As homosexuality was associated with the degeneracy of the city, the creation of remote recreational wild space and the demarcation of 'healthy' green spaces inside cities was understood partly as a therapeutic antidote to the social ravages of effeminate homosexuality."²⁰

Ironically, these very spaces began to be used by gay men looking for sex. When the gay practice of "cruising" forged an uncomfortable connection between homosexuality and public parks, it incited a new punitive discourse that sought to re-exclude homosexuals from nature, this time by equating their presence there with pollution, contamination, and danger to the community and its "family values."²¹

Seated centre-stage yet unconcerned with the anthropocentric voyeurism, self-consciousness, and self-display of traditional stage presence, the Green Man of *Mesocosm* dwells in a theatre of species—all species—and nonchalantly performs a scandalous form of species companionship and ecological intimacy. The transgressive ethos and outrageous aesthetics of Leigh Bowery's performance art and the extravagant physicality of Lucian Freud's figures come together to queer the fragile landscape of the Anthropocene.

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