

MEGAN VOELLER

Marina Zurkow: *Slurb*

From its onset, Marina Zurkow's *Slurb* presents viewers with an array of mesmerizing tensions. Against a melancholy backdrop of unending seawater and rain, brightly colored characters populate the 18-minute animation. Afloat in boats and on piles of debris, the figures—endearing freaks, from human-animal hybrids to carnivalesque personalities—listlessly repeat diminutive gestures. (Perhaps most memorably, one woman—her outline gently quivering like the others'—paddles a boat forward with poignant automatism, occasionally using her foot with unconscious efficiency to guide the oar.) Lending a deceptive sense of progress to this purgatory, a steady scrolling movement leftward brings ever more deluged landscape into view. Meanwhile, in a soundtrack by composer Lem Jay Ignacio, electronic sound and human voice coalesce, alternately piercingly sad and ardently hopeful. Improbably charming despite the pall that hangs over it, this troubled world unfurls a problem. Before viewers know quite what to make of it, the animation begins again.

In contrast with its tremulous sweetness, *Slurb* weaves a dystopian narrative about the real possibility of environmental cataclysm. The cause of this destruction is ambiguous, even overdetermined: rising sea levels triggered by global warming; the inevitable "Category 5" hurricane; pollution and overuse of natural resources; or some combination thereof, unstoppable in its complexity. The results, however, are comparatively clear: the submersion of Tampa Bay's built environment and the apparent dissolution of civilization as we know it. This vision—on the one hand eerily plausible, on the other, unrepentantly surreal—proffers a parable about the uneasy imbalance between nature and human development increasingly evident in everyday life. In *Slurb*, natural forces, exemplified most conspicuously by water, reassert control, evoking a return of the repressed.¹ Having breached the city's boundaries and settled the score for a now-broken paradigm of human dominance, the deluge signals the arrival of a state of affairs where prior normalcy has dissolved and all bets are off.

Yet *Slurb*'s implications ought not be taken merely as bleak since the animation suggests, along with the passing of an established system of relations, the emergence of another (though perhaps unnerving in its unfamiliarity). Equal parts apocalypse and birthing, the winding narrative incorporates characters from real and mythical liminal tribes who embody experiences of transition. These 'freaks'—some social outliers seemingly native

to the region (mermaids, a carnie, a ranting evangelist), others truly hybrid creatures with animal heads and human bodies—become survivors. In a role reversal that upends conventional power structures, they endure. Much like the buzzing dragonfly who pops in and out of the animation frame, viewers enter into this world with the knowledge that they can turn away (from disorientation and disempowerment); *Slurb* offers viewers the safety of detachment even as it invites immersion in a space of ambiguity and multiplicity where an end is also a beginning. This ambiguity, in turn, creates an interstitial space where hope might dwell.

Perhaps most disarming is the visual style with which Zurkow subtly charms viewers, presenting an alluringly sweet surface that entices them to consume a communication with troubling implications.² Deliberately adopting and adapting the kitsch form of cartoon, she strikes a particular balance between building a rapport with viewers based on the familiar seductions of entertainment and the simultaneous pursuit of more subversive operations. For instance, *Slurb* might be seen as relating with straightforward irony to a cultural obsession with natural disaster, exemplified by the omnipresence of ‘disaster porn’ in mass media and its function as a gently anodyne catharsis. This tacitly accepted transformation of disaster—the uncontrollable, unknowable—into mediated spectacle absolves viewers of responsibility, both for the occurrence, when what is at stake might include complicity in global warming, and for the subsequent suffering of their fellow human beings (not to mention non-human beings). (The conditions of mediated representation surrounding Hurricane Katrina are worth noting here as a particular context for *Slurb*—and for viewers in Tampa, a city situated, like New Orleans, on the Gulf of Mexico. E.g., the ‘short attention span’ of television news coverage has failed to convey the purgatorial disorder that persists even today in that disaster’s aftermath. In this context, *Slurb* bubbles to the surface as a persistent memory almost but not quite effaced by the relentless rhythm of the 24-hour news cycle.)

With rather more at stake, however, *Slurb* poses the question: what if a critique of anthropocentric humanism looked like cotton candy? Philosopher Michael Zimmerman, in his interpretation of postmodern thought—including that of structural anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss—in the context of ecological discourse, has called for creative competition among non-objectifying narratives about the relationship between humanity and nature (a dichotomy his endeavor calls into question) to contest the perpetuation of attitudes toward ‘the natural’ as tool or product for use and exploitation.³ (Electronic mediation and its representational modes are often seen as implicated in such attitudes.) In related fashion, *Slurb* presupposes that “the future of planet Earth will be

decided, in part, by the contest among...competing narratives."⁴ In this light, the animation's calculated innocuousness, its relationship to kitsch and the survivorship of liminal characters within its narrative all suggest a strategic confusion of stable categories of identity linked to distinctions between human and non-human, natural and unnatural. This categorical confusion, particularly as evidenced in *Slurb* by the breakdown of species and social group integrity, is reminiscent of critical theorist Donna Haraway's concept of the cyborg. Citing the untenable binary structure of representationalist views of the world as a source of bastard fecundity, Haraway argues that "cyborg unities are monstrous and illegitimate; in our present political circumstances, we could hardly hope for more potent myths for resistance and recoupling."⁵ Critical points of tension between polar oppositions (like 'natural' and 'unnatural' or 'modern' and 'savage') and the unclassifiable identities that transgress them constitute, for Haraway, a 'border war' where and in which new alternatives are born.

In the context of this ideological and ecological border war, *Slurb* takes its site (waterfront Tampa) as a discursive jumping off point. Only tangentially site-specific in the conventional sense of having been conceived for a prescribed physical location—after all, *Slurb*'s online afterlife perpetuates at least as important an opportunity for engagement as its temporary installation does—the animation assumes, in the words of art historian Miwon Kwon, that "the operative definition of the site has been transformed from a physical location—grounded, fixed, actual—to a discursive vector—ungrounded, fluid, virtual."⁶ *Slurb*'s relationship with downtown as a physical site (as in another of Zurkow's projects, which conjured an imagined natural disaster in the context of San Jose, Calif.) takes the form of a visionary simulation that permits viewers broad interpretive latitude. Selected by the organizers of Lights On Tampa 2009 for use in public education programs, the animation claims as its discursive site the values of viewers, particularly local viewers, and their attitudes and actions toward the environment, their eco-systemic awareness. While *Slurb*'s fantasy is, at least on surface, gentle and surreal enough not to induce panic, its nagging implications—a bit like the animation's buzzing dragonfly—have the potential to haunt those who consume it. To the relief (perhaps) and inspiration (hopefully) of viewers, *Slurb*'s playful appeal suggests an ethical imperative that is not merely an urgent challenge but, potentially, a pleasurable one.⁷

¹ This topos is better characterized as a 'return of the real' in the Lacanian sense, which would require a longer introduction for readers of this essay than is possible here. Cf., e.g., Slavoj Žižek, *Looking Awry: an Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture* (Cambridge:

MIT Press, 1991), 34-39, and Slavoj Žižek, ed., *Mapping Ideology* (London: Verso, 1994), 21.

² Comment by the artist during roundtable discussion, Jan. 8, 2009.

³ Michael E. Zimmerman, *Contesting Earth's Future: Radical Ecology and Postmodernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 1-17.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 184.

⁵ Donna J. Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: the Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 154.

⁶ Miwon Kwon, *One Place After Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002), 29-30.

⁷ Cf. Haraway, 150.