

# **Is There No One in the World Who Can Fly?**

An Exhibition of Animated Images and Video Installations

by

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## **Author's Declaration**

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. This is a true copy of the thesis, including any required final revisions, as accepted by my examiners.

I understand that my thesis may be made electronically available to the public.

## **Abstract**

The exhibition *Is There No One in the World Who Can Fly?* consists of three connected bodies of works. *Life On Earth* is a series of photo-performances exhibited on digital screens. Some of the images are still others are animated; they all propose that the body is a transmitter that breaths in content and breaths it out as a visual shape in the form of extensions, armatures or expulsions. *Mammal* is a large-scale video projection of a multi-breasted female figure projected on a free-standing wall. The breasts are animated and stretch out to explore and search the surrounding space. *Worknest* is a series of videos about the act of working which are projected onto the floor and appear as a community of guarded openings into tunnels beneath the ground.

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## **Dedication**

Dedicated to my partner Richard Rhodes

and my sons Stephen Marie-Rhodes and Matthew Marie-Rhodes

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## **Is There No One in the World Who Can Fly?**

The concerns that I bring to the images in my work explore life experiences and they do so not by posing discrete questions and answers but by offering a transmission system that trades in forms of acknowledgement. In developing an image I perform the content in a way that unifies or filters information and circumstances via representations that extend from my body. These performances, between the camera and myself and the computer, are vehicles that enable me to explore diverse ideas and concerns and to de-familiarize and depersonalize them in order to explore broader meanings and terms of experience. They are an effort at acknowledging truth and seeking reconciliation<sup>1</sup> in the face of surrounding assumptions from habituated daily routines, media information and in “the innumerable images we absorb as creating an unreliable or simple false sense of reality<sup>2</sup> and “as an assault on the totalizing and homogenizing notions of identity, systems and order.”<sup>3</sup>

The work acknowledges the temporary nature of things: my own attention, the surrounding cultural amnesia, the temporary nature of life itself and the personal and environmental abyss we approach. I am a transmitter but not passive. Everything I engage is ready material for absorbing and propelling: receptivity to the close at hand in social and built physical environments, social networks, news, history, stories, personal memories and discussions, war and peace, institutions, illness and events can all be pushed or pulled into animation. From up-to-the-minute communication systems to evolving DNA over eons, these things are filtered through the body. The corresponding response to this confluence of content is to let things flow in and out, like air moving through lungs, and in the process this work makes the unseen visible by giving it a representational shape and organizational structure. I am still compelled to make things; the effort remains alive with potential for something – something always alive enough to be just beyond control – beyond a resolution. I attempt to mix a sense of fate, with an evolutionary will to struggle, evolve, and regenerate together with a perspective that accepts how best intentions can turn into wayward action.



The works are enacted by photographic performances. The works breathe in cultural content and breathe out a physical shape. I use my body as the model; I am a performer. Transmitted content is expressed as a series of expulsions, attachments, impositions or extensions. In the image *Cancer*, the expulsion is a weave of dripping viscera, in *Mammal*, breasts are attached and extended and *Nightlight* imposes a pregnant grillwork of caged light. In other images, such as *Cloud of Doubt*, *Balance and Pulled Push*, the physical act of kicking, reaching, pushing something away or pulling it in, binding the figure to a cultural or physical reference is included. Each work is a discrete image that represents its own territory of exploration and can be viewed independently as a statement that unfolds in several ways:

*Waterfallhead* is about water appreciation and water issues. *Unborn* explores the potential for life and a reflection on our prehistory and post history and the experience of making or not making another person. Overall the series of work collectively creates an atmosphere that feels familiar and strange, complicated and simple, easy and impossible. The content of the images are from the world around and in us; they are *Life On Earth* as experienced and transmitted via the body. They strive to create an atmosphere where conscious, subconscious and even the pre-consciousness are in play, where habit intersects with instinct, where cross species concede the common ground of being alive and human biology reconnects to the world's living system.

## **Process**

I have performed as an activist in a public way for more than a decade initiating community-based, super-local projects. In part, this exhibition is an evolution encompassing past efforts but constructs a vehicle to open them into a wider context and to link broader concerns back into the work. This flow responds to subject matter that needs to be constantly reassessed, expanded, researched and linked to and transmitted back in a way that is relevant to the contemporary environment. Thus the realization that the body itself is the transmitter. The transmissions begin in either of two ways. I have an idea I

want to explore. It could be about something witnessed walking in my neighbourhood, a reference or link to other projects I've been working on over years, or a reaction to a recent discussion, meeting or family situation. It could be about something read or seen in the media, a vague memory or uneasy feeling from a dream or content that comes to mind while drawing. There are also days of apathy or nihilism where I am reacting to a sense of nothingness and uselessness that I want to crystallize or shake off. I imagine a way that I want to use my body as an armature to perform this. I then set up my studio to make the photographic images. I set my tripod-supported camera on time release and perform an extensive number of related postures for the camera that I think may work. I also make photographic self-portrait archives of the body as resource material and use them as readily available options to attach content.

Performing for the camera to create the images is a process, like acting. I prepare for the shot. If I plan the final work as an image that involves lifting, throwing or holding an object I will rehearse the pose using a prop that I can lift, throw, or hold to assist me in discovering how to stand. I dress simply in black jeans and tee shirt to present a neutral figure, which eliminates distraction from the action. I maintain a consistent, neutral facial expression. With each photograph I check the image on the camera, correct my pose and reshoot. I do not want the image to be read personally as a portrait but rather to represent a generic body that lies within the parameters of being mature and female. I am not behind the camera when the image is snapped but use a time-release setting. Therefore many of the images have an awkward or surprising element that I might not have recorded had I seen my posture in the camera's viewfinder. However, being less naturalistically posed helps in removing the image from the familiar. Sometimes I construct the shot as if it were an animation sequence by shooting stop action photographs through a number of movements altered by degrees.

When taking my own picture I am the subject and also the gaze. It is strange to see my own image. This is

my body now. I remember being different, younger and fit. Using my own body makes-a generalized comment on ageing. I am the middle-aged female body that is becoming a container to transmit memory, noting that everything is worth including. But in what order? Not everything can be included. A map is not the same size as what is being mapped and referring to a conversation does not take the same time as having a conversation, and we cannot list everything we know. We spend a lifetime learning and for the most part, die with the experience un-archived. Only traces may last in infinitely small ways, perhaps in art, in a viral idea circulated forward, in a tree planted, in the DNA that is passed on to our offspring. The intention is to select and transmit information through filtered linkages that can spread out in multiple directions.

Other artists have established relationships using the body as a subject in performances that relied on the camera as the audience. Photo documentations and works performed for the camera have become successful artworks in their own right. Marina Abramovic's, performances situate the body as a site to experience emotional and extreme physical sensation to overcome a sense of generalized fear. She discusses that performance works should be transgressive, "for me what was important was to make something really disturbing and dangerous. Some kind of image that would shock the public and create a space in them so that they could receive something new, giving them a different awareness."<sup>4</sup> We are inundated with media imagery of death and destruction, relentless advertising that tries to be provocative and the gruesome formulas from crime scene movies. The yardstick that measures what is shocking continues to move. But this content remains disassociated from one's own body. There is an empathic impasse that is overcome in the face of lived experience. Thus performance creates an opening. Abramovic argues the need for an audience to complete the work. "With performance you need to deal with some kind of reality, and when this reality is removed, it doesn't work."<sup>5</sup> "But there is one possibility if you don't have a public. If you just have the camera, and the camera is this imaginary public. So the product is different; then actually the film or photo becomes the artwork."<sup>6</sup>

I have made still images that are performances and are simultaneously presented both as documentation and as artworks. Further, in several images, I have digitally animated them so that the extensions to the body move in real time and feel interactive. The content explored is about being alive, *Life On Earth*, not as a comprehensive archive but as a response to things as they surface with subject matter that embraces love, pleasure, conflict, anxiety and fear. The transgressive or abject information in my work, reference the body's fear of being afraid and of illness, loss, decay and death, the body as a grasping and desperate vehicle searching out new territory to claim even as it transitions into uselessness. It is the fear of degradation, of age and illness, of corruption or becoming food and dust; fear as a reaction to conditions that are imposed on us or that we grow into.

A number of other artists use the camera as an audience for their performances and use their bodies as the content holder. Cindy Sherman photographs her body in ways to imagine other identities and situations ranging from the banal to the abject. Suzy Lake uses her body in images, portraits and performances to explore ideas of identity, role-playing, feminism and ageing. Regarding her work *Portrait as Issues of Identity*, she states, "The provocation that began the identity series rests in the struggle between true identity, decorum, and role-playing at a time of social and political change"<sup>7</sup> Vito Acconci's performance works used his body as a malleable object for attempting transformation in performances where he milks his breast, prints the body with teeth marks and manipulates his face to become an unrecognizable mask. I identify with these body works that were performed for the camera. My images become a staging ground to be altered digitally in the computer but they all require the lens as the audience.

Working with the performance photograph imported into the computer I develop numerous layers of drawings on top of the original source photo. The drawings start as a process of representing something

I want to explore in terms of an idea, feeling, image, colour, and form. I develop, shade, colourize, fadeout, filter selected parts and edit out other parts using any computer software tool available that might prove helpful. In some, the image is further animated into moving parts and completed as video. In the most rewarding studio sessions the work itself takes over and opens up in unexpected ways both conceptually and formally. But even on the most inauspicious day the process of working challenges my initial assumptions and expectations. There are also unusual times of extreme elation when the work takes me to a place of clarity, if only for a moment. This temporary euphoric state feels transcendental and can be described as an expanded field of perception. "As soon as I perceive it, as soon as I name it. The sublime triggers – has always triggered – a spree of perceptions and words expand memory boundlessly."<sup>8</sup>

Kristeva, Julia. *Powers of Horror, An Essay On Abjection*.

Once the drawing layers are completed the images appear as extensions, armatures or expulsions transmitted from the body. The intention is to explore ideas, feelings, and concerns that I have been engaged with in a way that gives both close-up daily situations and global changes the same weight and that can incorporate strands of history, instinct, biology, habit, consciousness, unconsciousness, primordial linkages, genetics and circumstances and give them a visual form.

Each image is specific, often very compact with references that link into wide ranging content, and yet the work provides openings so that viewers can meet the image in the realm of a non-verbal engagement that links with their own history and feelings. The references may be ponderous, tragic, sometimes disturbing – with content that addresses frustration, fear and decay – but the images themselves often possess a humorous cartoon-like quality. "Laughing is a way of placing and displacing abjection"<sup>9</sup> states Julia Kristeva in *Powers of Horror An Essay On Abjection*. Using an evolving, but limited, primary colour palette reinforces their comic nature. Using mainly primary colours inserts a consistent atmosphere that is simple and direct and links the works while focusing attention on the activity being performed. The

humorist nature also removes them from being overburdened with an authoritative posturing, there is seldom one or an answer but rather currents of ideas that shift and evolve.

### **Malevich's Black Square**

Individual works contain content that opens up in different directions, or becomes a story, or a chain of events. The work titled *Malevich's Black Square* shows a crawling body with a black square balanced on her raised foot and her back or perhaps it is attached to her back. The image refers to Kasimir Malevich's revolutionary Suprematist work and the related Soviet realities that followed it as well as an earlier historical illustration by Sandro Botticelli. The Botticelli drawing was made to explain Dante's *Divine Comedy* in a commission from Lorenzo di Medici that was developed between 1480 and 1495. Botticelli's purgatory drawing, *Penance of Proud Knights and Artists* shows an assembly of celebrated artists who competed to surpass one another during their lifetime only to be surpassed in turn by other artists. All are stooped low and burdened with massive blocks of stone balanced on their bent backs as they crawl forward in an endless circle in purgatory—punishment for their hubris.

Malevich and other Russian Constructivists believed in a revolutionary art that would foster an egalitarian society. Instead of Utopia, the revolution ushered in a power structure that banned these artists' works as elitist and adopted Socialist Realist propaganda as the only official art form. The work *Malevich's Black Square* suggests an oppressive agenda that relates to this chain of events. Here is a burden that is also a physical part of the body. This pose is taken on with concentrated willful energy but it can be understood as a questionable effort. Sustained balance is unachievable but perhaps it can be appreciated as an awkward test of shifting points of tension put into motion for as long as possible knowing the effort will eventually fail, but the question is when. The balance achieved in the interim may or may not be worthwhile. Attempts to change the world may be like an episode of cartoon character Wylie Coyote whose elaborate plans and resulting chains of events never end in what he intended. He

continues to try, and an audience continues to watch and find comedy in his ever-changing hopeful efforts and resulting tragedy.

Elaborate, persistent efforts to will change are equally comic and tragic. Good-willed intentions can be repeated in different ways with unfathomable results. Artist fostered the atmosphere that helped create the Russian Revolution. The outcome was the subsequent repression of their work. The eventual fall of the Soviet Union interrupted the balancing act that played out in the Cold War that provided a communist model in opposition to capitalism. As a result, corporations were free to claim ideological supremacy and could force a globalized capitalist agenda unopposed. The neo-liberals bottom dollar, wherever it could be secured for production, became a corporate global demand. Governments adopted corporate global leadership and accepted their concept that profit should mediate decision making over quality of life standards and local democratic concerns.

The ramifications of a corporate globalization unopposed by alternative ideas changed the world. Talented people sought corporate work rather than public service, greed became fashionable, anonymous new condominiums blocked sightlines to Lake Ontario, global warming was disputed, plastic islands formed in the oceans, the cod disappeared, people died from contaminated water in Walkerton, Ontario. Toronto the “city that worked”, stopped working. The city became dirty, trees died and were not replaced, teachers went on strike, and recreational facilities became unaffordable for youth, while gangs, crack cocaine and gunplay increased. Artists and individuals looked at their failing neighbourhoods and stepped into the vacuum. Collaborative projects developed that worked to build civility and solve urban problems as demonstrated in collaborative, participatory, relational esthetic and activist projects. In Toronto we saw the publishing of *Spacing Magazine* that documented many of these local efforts including *Walk Here and The Vine People*, both participatory walking project I initiated.

## **Performing as Activist**

I came to activism in response to my city's problems. I organized and designed a new studio building for artists and small businesses that housed my project space, and walked there daily from where I lived a few blocks away. The walking experience was life altering and pressed home the problems of my neighbourhood. It had one of the lowest income and education levels in Ontario, high levels of pollution and was Toronto's inner-city go-to site for selling crack cocaine. I became involved in urban interventions, long-term participation and collaboration projects. The first effort in 1993 was a public art walking project for the underpass at Lansdowne Avenue and Dundas Street. Elements were hidden throughout the walkway and could only be found by walking through the long underpass several times. It was a way to encourage walking as an act of discovery.

Other projects such as *Subject to Change: Armatures for Standing Up* in 1999, proposed buildings for people constructed out of objects that they touched. The work was mostly fictional and theoretical, while the subjects were based in my local neighbourhood. In early 2000 I began developing participatory projects involving other artists, local residents, politicians, schools, developers, and social agencies. I initiated community groups, art embedded walking systems, festivals and urban intervention participation events, often centered on the idea that walking was a key to exploring urban issues. My stated intention was to help build stronger communities that empowered local residents to own and address local issues through community building projects that harnessed public, community and environmental art to its service. These projects were less connected to museum art systems and were presented in alternative ways and places such as websites, parks, sidewalks and festival events. This included the project *Walk Here*, an art embedded walking system that eventually comprised artworks set into a new cement walkway at Wallace Emerson Park in Toronto, 2004. The installation incorporated elements by 120 professional artists and 30 school children with Ontario College of Art and Design and the community group DIG IN facilitating supporting events.



However, there are difficulties in attempting to create a civic Utopia. Several of the works in this exhibition such as *Malevich's Black Square, Cloud of Doubt and Cancer* reference my reflections creating public projects that suggest a prescriptive agenda of change and improvement. My recent research has enabled me to see my work in a context of other participatory projects in local and international arenas and to share evolving ideas regarding the field. I recognize well intentioned projects can change viewers' and participants' mindsets but it is impossible to predict the changes put in motion. Working with groups entails extensive attempts to communicate intentions, navigate discussion and build consensus in meetings, emails, blogs and websites as well as in the production of communication and information materials to keep projects transparent and participants engaged and informed. Aesthetic decisions and content can be expected to be self-censored to ensure general accessibility. Efforts to engage communities can overlap social services in ways that can demand long-term engagement and expectations that are not possible to meet. Administration can be overwhelming. When artists become involved in initiatives to animate communities questions arise. Why are you doing this? Who it is for? Where does responsibility for art begin and end? Misunderstanding, misinformation, disagreements and bureaucracy within groups and between individuals can vie for dominance in a self-defeating equation but conflict and complain can also be viewed as part of the process. Complaint can be community building.

The idea that frustration and complaint are a given part of process is beginning to be discussed in works that involve communities. "The concept of community in contemporary art is laden with complaints—complaints about how artists exploit or marginalize communities as they create community-based projects, complaints about how community is merely a buzzword within arts funding rhetoric, complaints about how the concept of community is too reductive or too utopian, complaints about how community has become useless as a theoretical construct. Complaining is, in fact, a feature of community

– it is a way of identifying with a group, a concept, a way of life.”<sup>10</sup>

### **Cloud Of Doubt**

The image *Cloud Of Doubt*<sup>11</sup> is a statement on issues of miscommunication, complain and misunderstanding. The figure is balancing on one foot, struggling to hold the posture. All attention is focused on the other raised booted foot. The boot is the writing tool, busy recording a matrix of black scribbles. Despite concentrated effort and sincerity the marks are unreadable and thus misunderstood or variously understood, leading to a drifting *Cloud of Doubt*. This is not to say that discussion, complaints, arguments and doubt are not useful. While potentially enervating and not to be avoided, they are part of a process and open holes to be entered. This territory of frustrated communication has been explored in the works of Bruce Nauman. His works confuse and gesture ineffectively. Nauman’s neon light figures and drawings, *Punch and Judy II Birth & Life & Sex & Death* 1985, introduces representations bodies that signal to communicate and yet they fail. They express miss-connections over and over again, with resulting frustration and increasing potential for dissatisfaction, anger and violence.

Artists are often active in communities where they live because they are so responsive to their surroundings. They are interested in making things and they can. They have a wide range of ideas, skills, networks and working history available that are all enabling but are not transparent and thus confusing. Artists make work according to their own criteria, initially for themselves, born out of their enthusiasms and frustrations. Christo was asked when discussing the public installation of *The Gates* in Central Park with the participation of hundreds of volunteers and thousands of viewers, why are you doing this and whom it is for, famously answered that he was doing *The Gates* for himself. That artists resist structuring can be at odds with the community organizations that can be helpful to root their efforts. Organized groups can calcify into bureaucratic and hierarchical authority structures manned at board level by a professional class with expectations of do-good deliverables rather than fluid egalitarian structures of

collaboration that can ebb and flow out as unmanageable currents.

In the 1990's participation and collaborative works were brought into the mainstream of artistic practice by Nicholas Bourriaud, who coined the term relational aesthetics. In his book *Relation Aesthetics*, published in 1998, he writes that with these shifting approaches and opportunities, "change can be summed up in a few words: learning to inhabit the world in a better way instead of trying to construct it based on preconceived ideas of historical evolution – artwork is no longer to form imaginary and utopian realities, but to actually be ways of living and models of action with the existing real"<sup>12</sup>. Various models of working have advanced this discussion and theorized that long-term ambitious efforts can be unsustainable and short-term efforts can be exploitive. Sculptor Antony Gormley has come under criticism for his projects that depend on people coming forward to participate and complete his work without any lasting conversation. Theorists like Clair Bishop have found fault in the Bourriaud dependence on institutional frameworks and lack of attachment to the larger world. The Viennese-based Radical Culture Research Collective states, "It's not that experiments in forms and models of sociability are not needed today – they certainly are. But to be politically relevant and effective, such experiments need to be grounded in (or at least actively linked to) social movements and struggles. (And there is no social progress without contestation and struggle: this for us is a basic materialist truth that makes any blanket refusal of "conflict" problematic.)"<sup>13</sup>

During Jeremy Deller's exhibition *It Is What It Is* at the New Museum in 2008, New York, I had a conversation with Gil Anidjar, a controversial author and Assistant Professor of Comparative Literature in Columbia University's Department of Middle East and Asian Languages and Cultures. He was one of several professionals hired to participate in the exhibition's discussion program. We discussed the nature of destructive forces and I asked him what, to his mind, was the biggest overall problem regarding the ability to make positive change. He answered, "Good intentions - First World countries good

intentions in imposing national borders, interfering with emerging countries, creating The World Bank and sponsoring efforts at regime change have been disastrous. History shows that you cannot have good intentions for other people, that best-laid plans go wrong. Instead of having interfering good intentions for other people, governments, countries one should have good intentions for themselves.”

Urban cultural projects in troubled and emerging neighbourhoods that I have been involved with can foster gentrification, which may eventually displace the poor, including the artists. Community-based efforts can be enervating and well-meaning individuals, groups and organizations can fail at communicating and being constructive. It is also apparent that art projects have the potential to build a positive identity even in an atmosphere of misunderstanding and complaint. That effort can make for more livable cities where walking becomes desirable, neighbours become friends and public places become green and vital.

### **Grand River Waterfallhead**

I have been interested in water as a universal substance; its way of carving marks into the landscape, of wetlands and mysterious underground streams that feed creeks, brooks, streams, rivers, lakes, oceans and its recirculation as dew, rain, mist, fog, sleet and snow. I feel water is an integral part of the Canadian identity, with our vast network of fresh water lakes and rivers. I follow reports in the newspapers and books that demonstrate that water is or will become the major issue of our time. I have researched information about ground water depletion, pollution, urban contaminated run-off of salt, oil chemicals and rural contaminated run-off from livestock fertilizers and pesticide. I know about drought linked to global warming, changing water temperatures and related aquatic fish and plant depletion, rising sea levels that destabilize coastal communities and nations.

*Grand River Waterfallhead* is an image of a person crouched forward, hands on hips to stabilize the

posture. The head is extended out and looking down as if examining something carefully but as if transformed into a vessel. The vessel is the source of a cascading waterfall pouring out water that is the colour spectrum. The image links water to the body as a source that is connected everywhere as explored in *We Are A Grand River*. This is an on-going project of mine based on water issues related to the Grand River that flows through one third of Southern Ontario and then on into the globalized water system. The waterfall is coloured to reflect the prisms refracted in mist, rainbows and oil slicks. The water falls and pools into a darkening mass that spills off the image plane. The colour bands are animated and move at a rate the eye can follow so that the waterfall appears both as individual bands of colour but also as a cohesive form that flows.

### **Technology, Fire and Other Advances Slouching Towards Bethlehem**

The yellow-headed image in *Technology, Fire and Other Advances Slouching Towards Bethlehem* makes reference to the W.B. Yeats poem, *The Second Coming*<sup>14</sup>. The poem is a prescient warning of 20<sup>th</sup> century apocalypse. Millions have died brutally in the fall-out of utopian goals to build perfect societies or the perfect race in countries such as Germany, Russia, Japan, China, Cambodia, Rwanda, former Yugoslavia, and the Sudan. At the same time we have witnessed the annihilation of thousands of other living species. The image in this work has the fire-headed figure as a strutting force of change. Fire is the great divider that separates people from other animals and is at the root of human dominance. It creates a warm and comfortable social space that reinforces group identity and relationships, fostering empathy and co-operation within the group. Western culture is rooted in ideas that man (and woman) have dominion over all creatures. Humanist values hold that individual human rights and freedoms take precedent over all others. Together, these ideas foster a lack of cross-species empathy that results in the mass destruction of other species through callousness, environmental degradation or loss and now global warming. The molten red weapons in the hand of *Technology, Fire and Other Advances Slouching Towards Bethlehem* embodies the disregard for life of the *other* that results in destruction.



*Life On Earth: Reptile*, 2010. 15 inch digital frame

### **Reptile**

*Reptile* is an animated image featuring two blank circles as eyes that sit emotionless in a crude elongated reptile head attached to a silhouetted human body. Like other works in the series *Life On Earth* the images appear as part comic and yet these cartoon eyes stare out from the contrasting darkened space to radiate something primordial. The eyes change colour in time with the inhalation and exhalation of breathing. The work references the Egyptian god Sobek, with a head of a crocodile and the body of a person, that was worshiped in a time when animals were not the lesser of people nor subjected to the disregard that has resulted in extensive species annihilation and an increasing global monoculture.

“For much of History and all of prehistory, humans did not see themselves as being any different from

the other animals among which they lived. Hunter-gatherers saw their prey as equals, if not superior, and animals were worshipped as divinities in many traditional cultures. The humanist sense of gulf between us and other animals is an aberration. It is the animist feeling of belonging with the rest of nature that is normal.”<sup>15</sup>

Crocodiles predate the existence of mammals and survived the extinction of dinosaurs. Their life expectancy is similar to that of humans, with some reaching over 100 years old. They remain feared and unknowable as cold, patient predators that attack with speed and force and their image is still able to arouse terror. The prehistoric eyes in *Reptile* reach into a history before humans existed. Reptiles are a reminder that we once did not exist and may not exist in the future. They represent the fear of the violent, unknown other walking in our midst, the fear of the terrorist, terror of death. However, terror is also exciting, a stimulating rush of adrenaline that we seek to experience through horror movies, roller coasters, fast cars and most of all, war. These are rushes of fear volunteered for, that bring clarity to the experience of being alive.

### **Mammal**

The work *Mammal* makes references to animal and plant biology, motherhood and fertility goddesses. The rhizomatic structures of its multi-breast tentacles stretch out as feelers endowed with independent cognition. The figure is the female as fecund monster with endless offspring that have over populated the world. Simultaneously she is the generous, selfless, nurturer aggressively offering sustenance and the female burdened by the female body of blood and milk and the source of life. The breasts stretch forward in an animated process, throbbing, breathing, and searching out the surrounding territory in different ways. One of the breasts feels its way along the edge of the projection wall like a snake slithering forward in expanding and contracting motions, another shape-shifts in a evolutionary pull to become new, another is an insect's antennas feeling the surroundings or a head furiously turning in all directions. All

seem to be searching, then contracting and searching again. The life size projection is installed on a freestanding wall that encourages circulation around it. When the viewer stands flush to the edge of the wall the breast tentacles appear to stretch out to contact them, then stop and wait inches away at eye level. The viewer's eye becomes the opening and a place for the feminized phallus to enter. The work recognizes Nancy Spero and Louise Bourgeois as precedents. Nancy Spero searched history for iconic female imagery which she layered, overlapped and combined into scrolls, and long drawings that circled exhibition spaces in the manner of Greek and Roman reliefs. She used a simplified colour selection of red and black. Louise Bourgeois's sculptures reference the shape and drives of mammals. Her uncanny multi-breast sculptures focused recognition of the body as a site that signals primal emotional connections. "My work has always been a recording of my emotions. It's not a concept that I'm after, but an emotion that I want to keep or destroy."<sup>16</sup> The idea of emotion being dominant over concept is mirrored as the reverse in my work. I am using related multi-breast imagery but the image is developed to introduce a concept. The concepts are emotionally acknowledged in the body and that is part of what I'm offering to transmit.





*Mammal*, 2010. 9 feet x 16 feet, projected animation

## **Worknest**

We are part of the world of animals, insects and bacteria, moved by powerful instinctual drives. Our cities have much in common with an ant colony's structure, with its division of labour, architecture and constant activity. The American artist Allan Sonfist compared an animal burrow to the New York subway and has commented, "We feel we are above the environment but in reality we are in relationship with it. Like every other thing, living or dead, we are a part of the ecosystem. Cities are but one type of landscape. The similarities between the New York subway, the burrowing of a foxhole, and an anthill are, I think, more profound than their differences. Once I exhibited the cast of a labyrinth animal burrow within a grid of city streets. It is through my art that I can create an awareness of the archaeology of these natural systems."<sup>17</sup>

*Worknest* is a series of videos projected onto the floor that relate to Sonfist's exploration of underground foxholes, subways and the sense of connectedness between them. *Worknest* projections appear as a community of tunnel-like openings resembling animal burrows or insect nests that may be connected via underground passageways. The image links the activities of the body to that of other living creatures such as wasps building a paper nest or the busy-ness of an ant colony or beehive. In the video I perform as a worker insect and fanatically endeavor to build a structure out of mud. It is a demonstration of the act of working and the driving passion for work in general.

Up until the mid 1960s, in the developed world, most women worked in the home. In the 1960s women came together in a move toward a world where men and woman had the same rights and opportunities, which then brought women into the paid workforce. We imagined that an influx of women into the work force would be balanced with men contributing equally in the home. The extra women in the work force would bring down the hours of the work week and long holidays would further help keep this extended work force employed while improving the quality of life. Imagine a 24-hour work-week with parents

sharing child-raising responsibilities and having time for a rich professional, family and private life. The reality of a much-extended work force, combined with the replacement of many jobs by technology, automation and prosthetics as well as the shift of major sectors of industrial work to developing countries, might have been expected to result in extensive leisure time. This has not happened. *Worknest* incorporates questions about the act of working. Is the need to work an instinctual drive? Are cultures now organized to create make-work models of questionable importance? Is war just another form of employment to keep people at work? Is the re-structuring of work a feminist issue that needs further attention and re-examination? Is work an essential need to make life relevant? What progress is being made by all this work?

“For nearly all of history and prehistory, work was an indignity....Progress condemns idleness. The work needed to deliver humanity is vast. Indeed it is limitless, since as one plateau of achievement is reached another looms up. Of course this is only a mirage; but the worst of progress is not that it is an illusion. It is that it is endless.”<sup>18</sup>



*Worknest*, 2010. video projections

*Worknest* is exhibited in the gallery as a series of video projections installed to appear as openings in the gallery floor. Layers of mud are worried into place to cover the entrance to the underground space. In other tunnels the opposite happens: a hole in the surface is being scratched open. In another projection an eye looks out to survey the exhibition space and take notice of viewers who wander through the exhibition and sometimes step on the projected surface, blocking out the light as if destroying an ant colony. The mud construction functions as an animated wall between the viewer and the obscured worker implied by the glimpses of hands and eye. This is a separation of above from below and also creates an *other* space of inside and outside. Yet the dividing surface remains in motion, as planes of mud shift and open and reseal. The wall is solid, but not solid. It might open up and one could fall in or be swallowed. What is going on down there? Is it hell as experienced in a mud and body filled bomb crater, an Alice in Wonderland-like entrance, a sewer, or a labyrinth as complicated as that of an ant colony? Is it the vaginal slit of mother as earth or death with the surface movement made by a thousand insects transforming matter into dust?

The current that links and blankets everything as a rhizoidal transmission under the “principles of connection and heterogeneity: any point of a rhizome can be connected to anything other, and must be”<sup>19</sup> and propels the will to struggle, evolve, expand, contract and regenerate, is presented in this exhibition as a given. The information explored in the body of work reaches into our primordial roots, connecting to the present and forward into the future, until existence ends. This body of work is an awareness of where we stand, not an understanding of it. It is a comment that accepts that living things are driven to work, regenerate, engage with the present and try to effect change without knowing the outcome. We are blinded by time on both sides of being alive. We do not get to see how things end or understand how they began. We are alive for the moment. The work tries to visualize what sometimes crystallizes in a temporary sense of knowing. It engages a vital drift that we all experience, vibrate with the flow of, and transmit onward.

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## Footnotes

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<sup>1</sup> President Nelson Mandela established a *truth and reconciliation commission*, as a way to listen, understand and own the thousands of conflicting stories of brutal wrong doing after the fall of apartheid. The process has become a model repeated in various countries.

<sup>2</sup> Schwartz, Stanford. *Gray Magic*, Luc Tuymans. The New York Review of Books. Luc Tuymans who has spelled out his aims over the years in statements and interviews, sees the innumerable images we absorb as creating an unreliable or simple false sense of reality. February 11, 2010, pg 20

<sup>3</sup> *The Phobic Object: Abjection In Contemporary Art*. Catalogue of an exhibition Abject Art. Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, Jun.23-Aug.29, 1993, pg 59

<sup>4</sup> Stiles, Kristine. Biesenbach, Klaus. Iles, Chrissie. *Marina Abramovic*. Phaidon, 2008, pg 19

<sup>5</sup> Madoff, Stephen Henry. *Art School*. Chapter 13, *Conversation, Marina Abramovic and Tania Bruguera*. MIT Press, 2009, pg 180

<sup>6</sup> Madoff, Stephen Henry. *Art School*. Chapter 13, *Conversation, Marina Abramovic and Tania Bruguera*. MIT Press, 2009, pg 185

<sup>7</sup> Lake, Suzy. *Portrait as Issues of Identity*. [[www.suzylake.ca](http://www.suzylake.ca)]

<sup>8</sup> Kristeva, Julia. *Powers of Horror, An Essay On Abjection*. pg 12

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<sup>9</sup> Kristeva, Julia. *Powers of Horror, An Essay On Abjection*. pg 8

<sup>10</sup> Liinamaa, Saara. *Complaining Communities: Complaints Choirs Worldwide*. Public 39, 2009, pg 129

<sup>11</sup> *The Cloud Of Doubt* title is appropriated from an artwork by Stephen Marie-Rhodes and JP King and refers to a large-scale installation of found items strapped to a streetlight pole with the surface crawling with lights. Nuit Blanch, Toronto, 2007

<sup>12</sup> Bourriaud, Nicolas. *Relational Aesthetics*. City: Presses du R el, 1998

<sup>13</sup> Radical Culture Research Collective. *A Very Short Critique of Relational Aesthetics*, Radical Culture Research Collective [<http://transform.eipcp.net/correspondence/1196340894#redir>] 2007

<sup>14</sup> Yeats, William Butler. *The Second Coming*. 1919

Turning and turning in the widening gyre

The falcon cannot hear the falconer;

Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;

Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,

The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere

The ceremony of innocence is drowned;

The best lack all conviction, while the worst

Are full of passionate intensity.

Surely some revelation is at hand;

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Surely the Second Coming is at hand.

The Second Coming! Hardly are those words out

When a vast image out of *Spiritus Mundi*

Troubles my sight: somewhere in the sands of the desert

A shape with lion body and the head of a man,

A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun,

Is moving its slow thighs, while all about it

Reel shadows of the indignant desert birds.

The darkness drops again; but now I know

That twenty centuries of stony sleep

were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle,

And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,

Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?

<sup>15</sup> Gray, John. *Straw Dogs, Thoughts On Humans And Other Animals*. Granta, 2002, pg 17

<sup>16</sup> Ayers, Robert. *Louise Bourgeois*. ArtInfo, [www.artinfo.com], July 28, 2006

<sup>17</sup> Rosenblum, Robert. *Interview with the Artist (Alan Sonfist)* Alan Sonfists website

[www.alansonfist.com/Rosenbrginterview.html], 2008

<sup>18</sup> Gray, John. *Straw Dogs, Thoughts On Humans And Other Animals*. Granta, 2002, pg 195

<sup>19</sup> Deleuze, Gilles. Guattari, Felix. Translation Massumi, Brian. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. University of Minnesota Press. 1987, pg. 7-13



Images please see: [www.dyanmarie.com](http://www.dyanmarie.com)