

## Turning Tables: Kathryn Eddy and *The Problematic Nature of Flatness*

by Mandy-Suzanne Wong, 2014

### 1. Conference Table

When I met Kathryn Eddy she was at a conference table. The table was six feet long, it accommodated three or four presenters. They read from typed papers and the rest of us sat like customers at a restaurant, relaxed and agreeable as the waiter or maître d' recited daily specials. I expected Eddy to offer some tasty thesis with a thick, sweet glaze of evidence that made even the bitter sides of the argument's zestful flavor necessary to the complex whole, which for the strange confusion that it left upon the palate was all the more delectable. Imagine my consternation when she transformed that university-issue folding table into another table in a windowless room, where instead of rehearsed professorial assurances the cries of the dead came at us from all directions. And papers, left to speak in silence for themselves, whispered such accusations that made us squirm with deadened stomachs.

All she really did was discuss her artwork *The Problematic Nature of Flatness*. But this is art with wounding force and incurable discomfiting affects: art as activist critique. This is art as interrogation and confession that brooks no doubt as to the identities of the guilty but leaves the vital mysteries unsolved. This is an art of disturbing and decentering contradiction: with words, pictures, and sounds, Eddy made painfully present a past and distant installation that was also a performance, a twisted performance in which nonhumans summoned and played human beings, turning us into instruments of gut and bone, wresting from us the silences and noises of our complicity in a great conspiracy. This is a performance of radical ecology and a sudden archaeological silencing of the anthropological machine. A table is the axis of it all.

### 2. Cage and Table

*The Problematic Nature of Flatness* is an installation in two parts. Both parts debuted at Vermont's Wood Gallery in 2012. One indoors, one outdoors. The piece is about the farmed animals who live and die for the sake of human consumption. It's about exposing the mechanisms of dissemblance and denial that bring about the absence of living prey from dead meat.

Outdoors is a cage, five feet wide, “human sized.”<sup>1</sup> The inmates are two of Eddy’s paintings, realistic renderings of a cute plastic lamb and a toy piglet. They remain outside day and night, exposed to the elements. The toys seem to smile; the paintings are so adorable that some viewers express concern about them.<sup>2</sup> But their exposure and vulnerability (unheard-of conditions for paintings, which normally reside in temperature-controlled, velvet-roped cloisters) constitute a telling displacement and interchange of status. The “paintings, normally found in the gallery, [were deported] outside to the middle of the field,” Eddy writes, “where you would normally find the animals.”<sup>3</sup> The paintings suffer a deliberate devaluation, put outside like garbage to endure acidic snow and the excrement of passing birds, to sacrifice their colors to sunshine and smog – and what does that tell you about the conditions of animal life, the counterpart to painting in this trading-places? The gesture implies that the misrepresentations of farm animals by grinning toys and serene (flat) imagery were never as valuable as they seemed, but the viewers’ concern about the paintings demonstrates the extent to which we humans cherish convenient dissemblings of the origins of meat. Eddy throws up a barrier to such convenience, knowing full well that human viewers would just as soon not join the animals in the cage, that art connoisseurs would prefer not to watch the fruits of human labor, representatives of beauty and aesthetic practice (which elevated notions are supposed to ground human superiority and thus affirm our sovereignty over other species) given over to the rain and carbon monoxide fumes. She writes, “The idea was that this structure would be forgotten and left outside just as the [food] animals that I am referring to are absent from our everyday lives .... The inconvenienced viewer walked out into the field and into the crowded confined space to view the paintings ... [an] immersive and performative space that mirrored the often forgotten confinement of the animals.”<sup>4</sup>

So the unsettled gallery visitor, who is probably freezing (this is Vermont), feeling put out and perhaps a bit affronted, retreats indoors. But before I follow them I would like to note that the artist does not exempt herself from the discomfort of exposure to which she subjects her audience. The caged paintings are after all her work, born of a great deal of physical and mental effort, not to mention time and expense; all of that is *in* the paintings, and it is easy to see that Eddy put as much into them as she would into any piece that she put up for sale. Yet she banishes these paintings to the outdoors, abandons them to the cage, fully aware of the high probability that no one will venture out to look at them. With them she banishes part of herself, an important aspect of her history and artistic identity; for although she describes her latest work as “non-medium-specific,” and works with collage, photography, sculpture, video, and

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<sup>1</sup> Kathryn Eddy in discussion with the author, November 2013 – March 2014.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> Kathryn Eddy, “*The Problematic Nature of Flatness*” (paper presented at the annual meeting for the Society of Literature, Science, and the Arts, University of Notre Dame, Indiana, October 3-6, 2013).

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

sound, Kathryn Eddy is a painter by training.<sup>5</sup> Not just metaphorically but also in a way that is authentically material, she puts herself in the cage, under the cold sky.

Indoors: the table. When you enter the dark, windowless room in a corner of the gallery, you see a dining table set for six, complete with printed menus.<sup>6</sup> At the head of the table, projected on the wall in white, is a seemingly random sequence of numbers. The figures appear one above the other against a dark background, reminiscent of daily specials chalked onto a blackboard on the wall of a café. You take a seat and open your menu.

You see black vertical bars (perhaps you recall the cage outside). The bars are made of numbers; they have headings like “Net Income Attributable to ConAgra Foods, Inc., Common Stockholders,” “Cash Dividends Declared Per Common Share of Stock.” The “Columnar Amounts [are] In Millions.” The white men in the photographs are smiling. Above one of their grey-suited, airbrushed torsos, huge green letters appear in a wiggly font designed to recall a child’s unpracticed hand: “*We are aligning our resources to accelerate growth.*” Below, among bullet points addressed to “Fellow shareholders,” a fragment of a sentence minus a subject is enough to drop the jaw: “Generated more than \$1.3 billion in cash flows from operations ....” The menus are disguises for recent annual reports published by leading agribusinesses: Tyson Foods, Pilgrim’s Pride, ConAgra, Cal-Maine ....

You look at your empty plate, look again at the numbers on the wall. You may not make the connection; there’s no caption. But if the artist is at table with you (likely), you may learn that the projection is a “kill counter.”<sup>7</sup> It displays the numbers of animals worldwide who have been farmed, slaughtered, and eaten. These numbers increased drastically over time, but Eddy projects them in random order so that you seem to be in the presence of an abstraction or, worst case, something arcane. They are no threat as long as you don’t know what they represent. I will have more to say on this matter.

You begin to hear birds. There are four speakers in the room, for about fourteen minutes they envelop the table in stereophonic sound. A half-minute of tranquil chirruping, Walden-esque. Then come the chickens, the staccato clucking of the hens. The bray of a sheep sounds almost human. A hen steps into the foreground and insists upon some hennish point. Somewhere off to one side, you hear a lamb cry out, and at the conference a man exclaims, “That lamb’s been separated from its mother!” (Eddy confirms: he’s absolutely right.) Depending on where you sit, some animals will seem distant, others right up in your face, moving around you, their ghosts seeming to explore the room. As the birds and hens maintain a

<sup>5</sup> Kathryn Eddy, accessed March 13, 2014, <http://kathryneddy.com/home.html>.

<sup>6</sup> Later instances of this artwork would use a restaurant-style table for two due to the limited space available in the gallery. Some instances also included silverware, others featured empty plates alone. In every instance, Eddy based her decision on “the overall look of the installation” in the exhibition space in question. Eddy, discussion with the author.

<sup>7</sup> Eddy, “*The Problematic Nature of Flatness.*”

solid, flowing background texture, more animals, bigger, bolder, come into the foreground; you hear, some distance away at first but then right next to you, close enough to create a buzz in the microphone, the full-bellied holler of a rooster. His fellows soon join in, and for the next several minutes they dominate the soundscape, with turkeys adding intermittent counterpoint to the accompaniment of the hens and birds. The volume grows and suddenly, this is the halfway point of the soundtrack, you are startled by a loud, deep, angry moan. Another and another and maybe, as I did, you suffer irrational impressions of men dying on a battlefield. A full minute of this, only for the groaning to be compounded by clanging and banging, battering and the swishing of thick chains. I heard four minutes of pain and desperate struggle. But the sounds are simply those of cows in their metal barracks. Suddenly all is quiet: just the birds, the occasional percussive sound – someone’s muzzle in a bucket? You realize that beyond the birds you can hear breathing. You hear sniffing, a lapping tongue, and then a snuffle: *mezzo forte*, it’s a piglet, a living, fleshy piglet. I thought it was a dog, but then the creature snorted, pure pigness. In the last minute of the piece, you hear his or her smacking lips and chewing, not ravenous but quiet, *diminuendo*. The piggy sounds fade out, the hens are gone. The piece ends softly with the shimmering ever-presence of the birds.

Eddy made her recordings at small New England farms and sanctuaries. So some of these animals are safe; those in sanctuaries will live out their days with the best care humans can provide. Those in farms are bred for slaughter. By the time their voices reach the gallery, some of them are already dead. Nonetheless, Eddy told me: “The voices of the absent animals float, move, hide, and dance around us. We are hearing fleeting memories of them, an embodiment of their being, a melancholy plea, as some of them have now been slaughtered. However, there is more to it than that; the voices ask something of us.”<sup>8</sup> Part of what they ask, Eddy believes, is that we stop trying to impose structures of human meaning onto their nonhuman voices. This may not be easy, for it might seem intuitive to try to make sense of unfamiliar sounds by comparing them to familiar ones: to human voices, perhaps, to the timbres of musical instruments or noises from action films, as in my errant hearing above. But the apparently instinctive quality of such mistranslations only signifies the extent of my conditioning by anthropocentric ideologies. Eddy summons her viewer-listeners to mount a resistance against that kind of conditioning by embracing the simple fact (the acceptance of which is not at all simple) that some phenomena do not make sense. Resisting the habitual insistence upon making sense. Refusing to translate animal voices into human signifiers, electing not to confine nonhumans to human terms but to instead widen our receptive scope to include the untranslatable, incomprehensible, impenetrable veils of absolute difference, learning to embrace the gulf between ourselves and otherness, are early steps towards revising our

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<sup>8</sup> Eddy, discussion with the author.

opinions of animals so that they appear to us no longer as mere resources but as enchantingly mysterious fellow subjects. Stop translating and listen, Eddy says:

My work forces us to stop and listen, not for the sole purpose of figuring out what [animals] are saying, but instead, to allow the animals the space and time to speak and be heard in their own language, with their own voice .... When humans start listening to the nonhuman and stop trying to translate everything into our own language, perhaps we will reach a more hospitable understanding. Perhaps listening is the first step towards decentering the human and overturning our anthropocentric perspectives.<sup>9</sup>

Not translation. Listening. Not, however, sound “in itself,” sound without any signification whatsoever, as in what Pierre Schaeffer, inventor of *musique concrète*, called *l’objet sonore*.<sup>10</sup> Eddy fully intends her audiences to recognize what they hear at the table as the sounds of the animals destined to appear *on* the table. What she wants to discourage is any additional translation of the animals into signifiers or mere affordances, utilitarian resources or standing-reserve. Translate the sounds, she seems to say, for the sounds signify animals. But there let it end.

What Eddy might be suggesting is that we listen to her soundtrack as we might to a piece of music. Listening to classical orchestral music, for example, Western listeners can usually identify various hootings as the sounds of clarinets or flutes, washes of sound as emanations of a string section. This identification involves a translation of mere sound into *sounds of* something (or as David Cecchetto puts it, of sound as such into individual, “literal sounds”), and such translations become habitual for those who listen to a lot of orchestral music.<sup>11</sup> The next step is to translate the sound of the string section into some emotional impression: the chirruping of the flutes in Beethoven’s Pastoral Symphony invites one to snuggle down in the safe, idyllic tranquility that we’re supposed to feel in nature reserves; the famous oboe theme in Tchaikovsky’s *Swan Lake* spears one with heartbreaking longing, as one watches the onstage lovers yearning for one another. If the translation of Eddy’s dining-room ambience into the cries of animals must usher in a “next step” of some kind (which to my mind should not be required), if it must be the prelude to some further translation or imposition of meaning, she hopes that the latter will be a musical kind of translation, a translation of the cries into sympathetic emotions that in turn encourage the appreciation of the voices’ loveliness and the beauty of their origins.

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Pierre Schaeffer, *Traité des Objets Musicaux* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1966).

<sup>11</sup> David Cecchetto, *Humanesis: Sound and Technological Posthumanism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 153-4.

Although Eddy does not intend *The Problematic Nature of Flatness* to be a work of music, the installation's soundtrack does have musical qualities. It's a structural arc: quiet beginning, crescendoing to forte, diminuendo, fade out. The arc is timbral too, as the animals are foregrounded roughly according to their size: small birds, larger birds, quadrupeds (sheep), larger quadrupeds (cows), smaller ones (piglets), and ending with the birds. The result is a sonata-like establishment of a stable tonal setting (the birds' sonic canvas) that through variation, transposition, and mutation develops a sense of tension (which I heard in the cows) and then gradually resolves it, so that the piece overall feels like a journey from a secure-seeming sonic home into high-perilous otherness and back again. Like a tone poem – think Smetana's *Vltava* – Eddy's soundtrack is episodic: whilst animal voices of different kinds do ring out simultaneously throughout the piece, individual species come to the foreground one by one, so that listeners have a chance to hear each voice distinctly and discern its idiosyncrasies.

Now, I've compared Eddy's work to several pieces of Romantic music, all of which happen to be programmatic works about "natural" phenomena. But Kathryn Eddy is not a Romantic; she does not fetishize "nature" as an "untouched" idyll, purely distinct from human realms. She does just the opposite, working the fraught "contact zones" where animals and humans participate in a strange, not entirely conceivable intimacy with one another's bodies and voices; as in the title of her piece, Eddy makes the very concept of "nature" "problematic" (more on this below).<sup>12</sup> Her intention is more in line with that of *musique concrète* composers, who use recordings to defamiliarize the noises of non-musical things by exploring their musical potential. Schaeffer's most famous piece is his etude for railroad noises, for example; Trevor Wishart's *Red Bird* is a celebrated *concrète* meditation on the symbolic potential of bird sounds. Eddy arranges her animal sounds in a quasi-musical structure in order to defamiliarize them; I am used to hearing roosters every morning, for example, but not to hearing them aestheticized as part of a musical buildup that culminates in the bellow of a cow. The contextual shift invites a perspectival one: I hear the roosters' voices differently, no longer as the alarming squawks of the cranky, feral varmints that terrorize the tourists in our national parks, but as the material potential of artistic beauty. The very presence of their voices makes familiar creatures unfamiliar; most of us are accustomed to the silent, plastic sort of lamb that appears in Eddy's painting, not the noisy, irritating creature that screams for its mother over the loudspeakers. As Eddy implies, the cage and the table in her installation "play off of each other" to this defamiliarizing effect: paintings outside, animal voices inside, humans in the cage, beasts at the table, where they do not belong.<sup>13</sup> At Eddy's table I hear the sounds of eating: lapping, lip-smacking; but they're the sounds of the eaten. When she brings the sounds of prey animals into the dining room, she turns that cozy, taken-for-granted place into an estranged site of dissection

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<sup>12</sup> Eddy, "The Problematic Nature of Flatness."

<sup>13</sup> Eddy, discussion with the author.

and consumption. In *The Problematic Nature of Flatness*, spaces and their denizens become problems and questions.

### 3. Dining Table

This artwork is full of flat surfaces: walls, projections, reports, paintings, empty plates, tabletop. Eddy has a “problem with flatness,” she says.<sup>14</sup> Traditional artistic portraits like pictures and sculptures reduce animals to surfaces and “unnerving” silence; in art like Damien Hirst’s, even animals’ insides become outer surfaces.<sup>15</sup> The artists of such works, Eddy believes, tend to rely overmuch on their “human filter,” which represents animals not as they present themselves but as it is convenient for humans to perceive them.<sup>16</sup> In that sense all the flat surfaces in Eddy’s installation are morally compromised because their distortions of the animals affirm the ideological assumption that animals are mere resources. They’re the numbers and the skyrocketing charts in annual reports. They’re the plastic, invulnerable things in the paintings, created only to be stared at, played with, and collected. Eddy’s flat surfaces deliberately accentuate the problems with flatness.

The tabletop and plates, the convenient, sterile surfaces from which humans are accustomed to taking food, are where the reductive qualities of flat representations turn “nature” into a problem. If animals are resources, why not chop them up and eat them? Why not make them in factories? Why not reduce them further to monetary and nutritional “values”? There is nothing at all natural in how humans procure and eat their prey. Pigs no longer have the chance to escape into the forest while human hunters scramble to keep up. We no longer eat corpses, we don’t have to deal with the guts and bones; that happens in the factory, we have citrus-marinated fillets with caviar and confit. The animal is absent from the meat even as it is the meat. The dining table is the threshold where the present-absent corpse of elided prey is absorbed by the chattering, laughing body of the idle predator.

I cannot resist a comparison between *The Problematic Nature of Flatness* and the cave paintings at Lascaux which so fascinated Georges Bataille and the radical ecologist Mick Smith. In one of the paintings a man is prone before a vividly portrayed bison; the latter has been pierced and disemboweled by a spear, but the man is also apparently dead. “[T]his image represents the transitory vitality of human and animal lives and deaths, together with the recognition of human responsibility for the deadly consequences that the fulfillment of their

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<sup>14</sup> Eddy, “*The Problematic Nature of Flatness*.”

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid

desires has for other living beings,” Smith writes.<sup>17</sup> The image demonstrates prehistoric humans’ awareness of the hunter-prey relationship that obtained between them and their food. They knew what dining and farming industries allow us to forget: the procurement of food as a face-to-face, body-to-body confrontation between two living things, both with their lives at stake; the mysterious ways in which the bodies, lives, and deaths of human and nonhuman animals are “entangled, twisted together.”<sup>18</sup> What a chilling contrast is the dining table with its edible squares, stripes, and circles. The empty table in *The Problematic Nature of Flatness* is both part of the equipment that conceals the hunter-prey relationship to the point of elision and a figure for the absence of that relationship, a materialization of the rift between hunter and prey in consumer societies.

In Eddy’s installation, the table is silent and uninscribed, thus it may masquerade as the least forceful element of the work, when in fact it is the most insidious. Every dining table is a dissection table where the insides of living nonhumans are bared and ripped with knife and fork, consumed. It is the public side of the kitchen table, where the latter resembles the undertaker’s operating table, making damaged dead bodies look good enough to eat. It is the site of consumers’ conspiracy with capitalism to conceal what consumption actually entails. Even as the bodies of consumer and consumed become one and the same entity, the industrial artifices and apparatuses of dining permit us not to know it: the dining table is the stage of an ideological fantasy. As a place for both inclusion and exclusion (I take meat and veggies into my gullet but exclude animals and plants from my consciousness), the dining table is what Giorgio Agamben calls a zone of exception.<sup>19</sup> In such states a sovereign power declares an exception to its own laws against violence and killing, first because the victims in question are considered to be apolitical, subhuman, therefore disposable beings (turkeys, chickens, cabbages), and second because the reasons for the violence are considered to be vitally important (my babies and I are hungry).

Eddy seems to understand the obscure, perhaps empty, perhaps infinite threshold between animals and the people who eat them as both an ideological problem and an existential necessity. The assumption that it’s possible to excise this threshold or rift – in other words that animals can be fully understood and that to translate them from fellow denizens into useful goods is to understand all there is to know about them – follows the assumption that animals are resources. Inspired by the work of Ron Broglio, Eddy therefore strives to maintain the rift while creating a contact zone where animals present themselves in such a way that their bodies touch, stir, and disturb our own. She does it by swarming the table with sounds.

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<sup>17</sup> Mick Smith, *Against Ecological Sovereignty: Ethics, Biopolitics, and Saving the Natural World* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 2.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>19</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *The Open: Man and Animal*, trans. Kevin Attell (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 38.



Animals' voices are vibrations of the animal's insides that are and are not those insides; the timbre of a sound depends on the form of the sounding body, so the animal is materially there, in its voice, and yet it is clearly not reducible to its voice. In an animal's voice is the presence and absence of the animal. Eddy accentuates the latter by including no actual animals or visual representations thereof in her installation. She leaves us to guess which animals we're hearing. And although these animals speak, and their sounds doubtlessly convey emotion, they're not literally translatable into human words. Eddy preserves that gulf, that difference.

Furthermore, in contrast to the barbecue-glazed nugget, the voice of an animal is its selective presentation of itself. Eddy's soundtrack is of course artificial: she selects the animals, digitally isolates their voices from ambient sounds, and arranges them quasi-musically.<sup>20</sup> However, the assumption that grounds her interventions is not that animals are equipment and consumables; rather she assumes, like *musique concrète* composers, that animals are nonhuman individuals with idiosyncratic voices whose potential for beauty is too often overlooked.

What we have here, then, is a simultaneous performance by two clashing ideologies: capitalism and radical ecology.<sup>21</sup> At Eddy's table, the flat stage of dissemblance meets the invisible, echoing void of *différance*. The artist wants her viewer-listeners to physically experience that friction, visually and aurally, because we are also diners with a choice. From the dining table lit by the pale glow of the kill counter, I hear the animals' deaths in their disembodied cries. Their noises are their ghosts; sounds bear the traces of the lives, the sufferings, and the potential whence they issued, though not all traces are audible. Thus I could choose instead not to see beyond the menus, and the fact that agribusiness generates income and jobs for at least some deserving humans. The rifts of willful misunderstanding and inevitable mistranslation are drawn out from behind their veils and thrown into our faces, as Eddy summons the ghosts that animals leave behind in their absence. There are so many layers of rift in this work that absence is an oppressive presence in it. The rift between ourselves and the animals we kill and eat. The rift between consumption and consciousness. The rift between beings.

#### 4. Interrogation Table

The veneer of comfort. On *The Problematic Nature of Flatness*, Eddy said: "I ... wanted a title that was ambiguous enough to sound interesting but not descriptive of the actual content. I have found that factory farming is not an easy topic to engage the art seeking public so if I could

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<sup>20</sup> Eddy, discussion with the author.

<sup>21</sup> On the defining principle of radical ecology, that no ecology is reducible to a resource, see Smith, xiii.

get them into the room, perhaps they might stay and listen.”<sup>22</sup> So the title is a lure. If you habitually indulge in contemporary art, it will seem familiar to you. It makes you believe that you are here to experience something with white light, geometric shapes, monochromaticism, paper and prostrate perspectives, something meant to show that flatness is never flat but deep, and that means something complimentary about the depths of the human spirit. You enter the little room expecting something safe and affirmative, when in fact Eddy’s title mobilizes the rift between humanistic concepts and the actual, bleeding subject of the piece, drawing you unawares into the chasm.

The dining set: safe enough. Chairs provide somewhere sensible to sit. The table designates a configured area for convivial congregation. Numbers on the wall like a TV ticker tape. A welcome change from the cage and the cold outdoors. The dining room is a convenience and a luxury. Yet did I not say that this installation aims to disable the “filters” through which nonhumans appear to be convenient resources for humans?

The title and the setting lure and summon. The cozy dining room calls you in from the cold. You sit down and the sounds, the screams and moans, hem you in from every corner, follow you if you change your seat. Almost fourteen minutes of this the artist asks you to endure, knowing that “the average time a viewer spends in front of a painting or sculpture is seven seconds.”<sup>23</sup> You are more fixture than visitor, more apparatus than audience. Rooted to your spot – the sounds beseech you to stay – you respond to the summons by listening. You respond with your confusion: the menus, the numbers, the noise and the table, how does it fit together? Then wonderment: what does it mean? And then perhaps, as the alien voices invade the haven of the dining room, a menagerie stampedes the orderly center of nutritious family life, you wonder what one has to do with the other: what does this have to do with me? You look at your plate, at your menu in disguise, and you see that it has everything to do with you because you eat. The installation forces you to admit your complicity in what you see, the numbers; what you hear, the shrieking lamb; and what surrounds you, the dissembling apparatus. This is a summons, interrogation, and confession where the absence of crime-scene images speaks volumes.

You may start to wonder if you were safer in the cage. Now you’re inside but exposed to the forcefulness of sound. You cannot look away from sound. It invades your body with the touch of another, a vibration stirred by the other. Here the sound is recorded, its original producer is absent. That absence invades too: you are exposed to the absent other’s vulnerability. Exposed to the numbers that result from what you eat, as agribusinesses’ vital and mortal statistics are exposed. “The concept of *exposure* here is crucial” – Broglio’s words – “a

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<sup>22</sup> Eddy, discussion with the author.

<sup>23</sup> Eddy, “*The Problematic Nature of Flatness.*”

physical exposure that haunts all that happens to the animal body.”<sup>24</sup> Eddy and her audiences “risk a certain fragility in their opening ... to the spaces of the nonhuman ....”<sup>25</sup> They risk “the social discord” that may attend the undermining of a profitable industry that rides upon the human right to nourishment and life.<sup>26</sup> You risk exposure to the internal discord occasioned by Eddy’s summons, interrogation, and confession.

There are other people who use aestheticized sound to force admissions of complicity, though the truthfulness of those confessions is therefore questionable. Some of those people belong to the US military. The technique is music torture, and one of its venues is the Guantánamo prison. There, as in Eddy’s dining room, artistic sound is deployed as a means to forcefully impact and invade human bodies, with the aim of making “detainees” admit that they’ve done wrong. “As my work often walks a fine line between art and activism,” Eddy says, “I also wanted to detain my audience for long enough to make an impact, which is something that does not always happen when showing visual images of animal abuse.”<sup>27</sup> Yet Kathryn Eddy is no torturer, for while she uses the physical and emotional forcefulness of sound to encourage people to change their minds, no human involved in her installation is at any risk of physical harm; however, she risks association with music torturers’ ilk for the sake of the animals who *do* indeed suffer. Braving the ethical limits of art, she takes her chances with her potential critics.

Again, Kathryn Eddy wants nothing to do with sound weaponry and music torture; she courageously risks that association in the interests of animal activism while demonstrating that humans in general are in fact insulated from the violence we inflict on animals. For the most part, Eddy shelters her viewer-listeners from that violence – but not entirely. The cage is a strong hint at the high level of empathy that I think Eddy hopes to cultivate between her human audiences and the animals we eat. The concealment of the animals’ transition from living bodies to abstract cutlets is foremost among the issues that Eddy’s installation aggravates; but so is the exposure of the audience to an interrogation that reveals their role in that concealment.

It therefore seems appropriate that during the installation, the audience’s comfort level is somewhat ambivalent. Eddy manipulates it. We have the lure of the title, the dining room, a quasi-musical soundtrack with a safe, symmetrical structure that begins and ends with the peaceful twittering of birds: all very comfortable, definitely art. The implication is that activism and the voices of animals can conform to traditional notions of beauty and comfort; the appreciation of animals as beautiful living beings, not edible resources, is not such a huge leap from aesthetic appreciation and self-interest. This to me is what Eddy is saying: she’s not asking

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<sup>24</sup> Ron Broglio, *Surface Encounters: Thinking with Animals and Art* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 76.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 80.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 80.

<sup>27</sup> Eddy, discussion with the author.

a lot. At the same time, her installation is embroiled in all sorts of dissemblance, and relies on a reversal of roles that would appall a humanist.

## 5. Conference Table (Reprise)

In *The Problematic Nature of Flatness*, Eddy sees “the potential for transformation and ... discussions.”<sup>28</sup> In the artist’s ideal scenario, then, the artwork and its nonhuman participants (animals, sounds, table, numbers) elicit from their audiences discursive sounds of confession, confusion, and questioning. They are the performers: animals and things. Visitor to the dining room, I am the instrument. But the converse is also true: they remain vulnerable to me. On such vibrant instruments I play the convoluted and fugal dissembling processes of capitalism; in turn they make me sing my own exposure. I am thus – yes – objectified, instrumentalized, commodified, as the installation appropriates me into one of its components, an apparatus. “You are an active part of the work,” Eddy says, comparing the aims of her installation to those of Janet Cardiff’s soundwalks.<sup>29</sup> Active, yes, but *part*, as in gear and cog, mechanism. As an agent of de-anthropocentrism that undermines any claim of human sovereignty over other beings, challenging our right to a state of exception and hurling a rock into the great whirling engine of the anthropological machine, *The Problematic Nature of Flatness* cannot be outdone.

“Anthropological machine” is Agamben’s term for conceptual apparatuses that insist again and again on an abyss of difference between nonhumans and humans.<sup>30</sup> The machine functions ideologically, seeming to excuse the segregation, exploitation, and genocide of those thought to occupy the nonhuman side of the divide by depriving them of any political voice. With *The Problematic Nature of Flatness*, Eddy brings prey animals’ voices to the table. Here the animals instigate discussions about their own fates. Their sounds cause their listeners to resound with questions and critique that will continue after the lapse of fourteen minutes, in other discursive spaces beyond the gallery. *The Problematic Nature of Flatness* throws up the hood on the industrial hardware by means of which anthropo-capitalism generates ideological misconceptions about humans’ relationships with the animals they eat: the dining table, the menu, the absence of the animals from anywhere near the sterile eating room, are revealed as the equipment of dissemblance and denial. But at the same time, Eddy hopes that the ghosts, their lovely alien voices, and the enigmatic traces of their passing which hermetically lie hidden in the numbers scattered over the work, will revitalize the dining table as a site of productive discussion, not merely a place of consumption. The table itself will summon awareness of what goes on around it and why it was made. “Over and over again, people sat down at the table and

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<sup>28</sup> Eddy, “*The Problematic Nature of Flatness*.”

<sup>29</sup> Eddy, discussion with the author.

<sup>30</sup> Agamben, 75.

stayed,” Eddy writes. “Some started discussions with friends and strangers across the table.”<sup>31</sup> Several viewer-listeners took home their thoughts on what they’d heard and felt while they sat there, chained by wonder, guilt, or ghosts, and attempted to describe them, perhaps in other dining rooms. Eddy’s table summons others to self-reflexive awareness, calling them to account. In the words of Alphonso Lingis: “The dining room silently calls for respect for the shared sustenance of the earth.”<sup>32</sup>

It is tempting to suggest that the critical gesture summoned by Eddy’s work has a sort of archaeological form: the unconcealing of things like the dining table, the deciphering of their ideological functions. The threshold of absence that is the tabletop, the cries of the absent: these things do not appear in written histories, documents like annual reports. If archaeology is a quest, via exposure to too much light and dirt, to expose nonhuman things whose strangeness summons those who seek them to wonder what they really are, which ideologies led to their being as they are, and in comparison what our own ideologies are really about, then perhaps Eddy’s installation invites archaeological gestures and may itself be one such excavation. If to excavate something means to reveal it, examine it, and try to make sense of it ethically, aesthetically, economically, or politically, then Eddy thoroughly excavates the voices of prey animals from the dust of their dissembled absence. In that way she brings her audiences into contact with the animals, a physical kind of contact that nonetheless occurs across the infinite thresholds of time and death.

But archaeology is at heart a humanistic discipline. Its critical potential is significant, but archaeological gestures could run the risk of being nothing more than exercises in typology, translation, and some kind of evaluation. It is doubtlessly worthwhile to critically excavate the ideologies that physically inscribe, impact, and even determine human and nonhuman forms: the cow transformed into a steak, the four-legged plank that masks a dissecting and dissembling machine. But even critique of this invaluable kind amounts to humanistic translation – and there is more at stake than that. There is more to nonhumans than anthropology. Negative ideological critiques are surely at the heart of Eddy’s work, but so are affirmations of the inexplicable material beauty of animal voices, the contradictory potential of the dining table as a space for discourse and interrogation as well as comfort and consumption, and the wonderful inexorability of the rift between consciousness and the untranslatable.

So while it is an excavation, *The Problematic Nature of Flatness* is also what Broglio calls a “surface encounter” with nonhumans. Surface encounters are those that happen out of reach of the anthropological machine by “returning thought to the site where bodies meet”: bringing

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<sup>31</sup> Eddy, “*The Problematic Nature of Flatness*.”

<sup>32</sup> Alphonso Lingis, *The Imperative* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), 77.

thought into the dining room in this case.<sup>33</sup> “[S]urfaces offer no retreat to an Archimedean point within the human that is removed from exterior events and used to leverage (in thought) the rest of the world. Without such a distance or remove, there is nowhere else to go,” Broglio writes, “no chance to remove ourselves in ways that rationalize our superiority ‘over’ or ‘above’ other animals.”<sup>34</sup> In such proximity there is sensation, there is the impact of the cow’s deep voice upon my small ears and skittish heart – but there is no time, not enough space, no depth for “making sense.” “Some things are untranslatable and I am okay with that,” says Eddy.<sup>35</sup> And her installation engages points of contact with the animals, via sound and the devices and figures of industry, which offer opportunities for a kind of “surface” understanding, preferably of the kind that constitutes an emotional connection and the seeds of sympathy, but not for any “deeper” kind of deciphering that could ever masquerade as knowledge. It’s as if, in the following passage, Broglio were thinking of Kathryn Eddy’s work:

the wonder of such art is found in the play of surfaces; it is here in the contact zones, between the outer edge of a human world and the animal world, where exchanges take place. Art brings something back from this limit and horizon of the unknowable; it bears witness to encounters without falling into a language that assimilates or trivializes the world of the animal ... instead provid[ing] an infectious wonder at the animal world on the other side of human knowing.<sup>36</sup>

Thus the contact zone is also an unbridgeable ravine. Eddy’s table, dining table, interrogation table, conference table, is a material site of the rift. Despite its critical potential as the openness of questioning, the rift is simultaneously a terminus. It is the last stop for slaughtered animals, as it is a dead end for thought. On the far side of the ravine, Agamben says, nonhumans exist in “a zone of nonknowledge” for humans; beyond the rift each nonhuman “stands serenely in relation with its own concealedness.”<sup>37</sup> In *The Problematic Nature of Flatness*, viewer-listeners make contact with animals while preserving the inexorable distance that makes them irreducibly other. Eddy’s installation is an attempt to perform this unassuming sort of preserving, this touching for the sake of letting be; and such a gesture amounts to a radical ecological thought, in the sense of an incomplete understanding of nonhumans that is guiltily aware of their irreducibility to resources.

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<sup>33</sup> Broglio, 85.

<sup>34</sup> Broglio, 85.

<sup>35</sup> Eddy, discussion with the author.

<sup>36</sup> Broglio, xxiii.

<sup>37</sup> Agamben, 91.

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