

Unraveling the Myth of Natural History

Nature is itself transitory. Thus it includes the element of history. Whenever an historical element appears it refers back to the natural element that passes away with it. Likewise the reverse: whenever 'second-nature' appears, when the world of convention approaches, it can be deciphered in that its meaning is shown to be precisely in its transience.

--Theodor W. Adorno, "The Idea of Natural History"ⁱ

The term "natural history" is undoubtedly one of the most loaded terms in our cultural consciousness. It has become ever more apparent that our society is at once convinced that it has irrevocably lost its ties to nature and its own past, but remains adamantly determined to keep up appearances to the contrary all the same. The myth of this loss pervades the work and writing of Eleanor Morgan. By taking a position that "encompasses both the artist and the scientist," Morgan delves into both roles via their common legitimizations--ordering, classification, rationalism, historical determinism, binary thinking--in an attempt to blur the lines between sociological inquiry, artistic production and cultural consumption.ⁱⁱ Her approach flirts overtly with recent confluences of "light" and "serious" art in contemporary cultural production; but in so doing, she alerts us to the fact that the seeming inseparability of these categories merely denotes a distraction—primarily from the negativity of culture that lies in the (now veiled) division between the two.ⁱⁱⁱ It is Morgan's desire to visualize the interstitial space of associational searching that drives her project and gives it its playful, yet deeply inquisitive tone:

I am interested in the idea that every ordering structure works on the same principle—that it must deny the existence of the very thing that it depends upon to survive. The mythical loss distracts us from the insufficiency of the order. However, loss is the order's undoing because it compels me to start searching....I move through associational searching, attaching the high to the low, the personal to the theoretical, the private to the public....The question in my work is how to convey this in-between movement visually. ^{iv}

The visual products of this process confound any attempts to follow a path of continuous movement or logical progression through time and space. Instead we are presented with objects of curiosity, excess and disruption. Morgan treats narrative and representation as concepts to be suspended and subjected to critique: a sort of "temporal hovering," as she has termed it, that complicates the display and reception of her objects of investigation.^v The results are complex allegories of culture, fragmented and projected back to us as "second-nature;" while familiar and non-threatening, this nature is unstable in its makeup, and always already in the process of disappearing.^{vi} Morgan's works are populated with delicate shells of nature's former selves, and although the materials and subjects of these pieces appear to represent this transience, they simultaneously contribute to such representations' unraveling. Our viewing enacts the discovery of a "collection that almost coheres, but not quite:" animal movements are manipulated and woven into continuous video loops that betray their very unrepeatability, while ephemeral constructions of

spider webs that could disintegrate with the slightest touch are given sculptural density. The viewer is left questioning what is “natural” in these displays and what is constructed, especially when what is before us appears most recognizable; can we truly believe our eyes and should we trust ourselves when we do?

In *Squirrel Watching* (2004) we find a continuous video loop of a squirrel, intent on protecting a nut it holds: first in its mouth, then in its paws, finally opting to pop it back into its mouth. When viewing the piece it is difficult not to submit to rapt attention and delight; the squirrel’s quick, comical movements, and ultimate paralysis before the camera appears farcical and cute once it resumes its original posture. And yet the nature of our response belies the entangled senses of loss and distraction with which Morgan is concerned; not only do the squirrel’s movements become a source of entertainment and pleasure, but they simultaneously reveal our inability to read these gestures as those of defense and protection in the wake of direct physical and scopic confrontation. Morgan’s work attests to our inability to “see” and interpret the dramaturgy of interaction between so-called natural and cultural realms, in this case one between a “cultural follower” and an artist intervening in the “natural” habitat of a university campus. This in itself is an allegory of the fleeting character of both nature and history, the elements of which “are not fused with each other, rather they break apart and interweave at the same time in such a fashion that the natural appears as a sign for history and history, where it seems to be most historical, appears as a sign for nature.”^{vii}

--Rebecca Lane

ⁱ Theodor W. Adorno, “The Idea of Natural History,” (1932; 1973) translated by Robert Hullot-Kentor, *Telos* 60 (Summer 1984): 120-121.

ⁱⁱ Eleanor Morgan, MFA Roundtable Presentation, February 2004, 2.

ⁱⁱⁱ See Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, translated by John Cumming. London: Allen Lane, 1973, 34, on the division between light and serious art in modernism and its implications for their theory of the culture industry. For further discussion see J.M. Bernstein’s lucid “Introduction” in Theodor W. Adorno, *The Culture Industry. Selected Essays on Mass Culture*, edited by J.M. Bernstein, New York and London: Routledge Classics, 2001.

^{iv} Morgan, 5-6.

^v *Ibid.*, 3.

^{vi} Adorno, “The Idea of Natural History,” 120-121. See also Walter Benjamin’s comparable claim to which Adorno in large part responds in the former essay: “In the process of decay, and in it alone, the events of history shrivel up and become absorbed in the setting. ... [I]t is fallen nature that bears the imprint of the progression of history.” *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, translated by John Osborne, London: NLB, 1977, 179-180.

^{vii} *Ibid.*