Frames of Reference

The English words animal and animation both derive from the Latin root animare, which literally means “to give breath to.” But who or what exactly is that giver of breath, and who or what receives it? Animated entities are usually understood to speak and move at the will of their creator. Borrowing from the conventions of vaudeville, circus, and magic shows, certain long traditions in silhouette, papercut, and even the tellings of oral stories, reveal in slapstick and other comedic forms of uncouth manners; figures plot to overturn their station only to be met by a deliciously nasty concomitant, their stories intertwined in some grand plan. These are the films of a bygone era, the films of the Nordic term gaghals, which means to throw one’s neck backward, as if choking or unable to speak—or, for that matter, breathe. The term is first used in the United States as slang to designate a joke in 1863, two years before the end of the Civil War. Before then, an order commonly known as the “Gag Rule” blocked anti-slavery petitions in Congress, dividing the House of Representatives. The gag locates power in the figure’s mouth; a site for speech and utterance, expressing both desire and disgust.

For artist Anna Craycroft, the ways in which identity, agency, and ownership are articulated in animated films are the subject of her creative, archival research. These films act as a kind of case study for her investigations into longstanding yet constantly evolving debates around the moral principles of (human) life. Questions of who or what constitutes life have become increasingly contentious as the agency of all beings—from animals and ecosystems to corporations and artificial intelligence—has fractured legal and theoretical discourse. Craycroft’s residency and exhibition “Motion into Being,” presented as part of the Spring 2018 R&D Season: ANIMATION at the New Museum, creates a platform for the ongoing investigation of the construction of personhood and its political, social, and ethical import. The film that Craycroft will produce plays with both abstraction and figuration, relating to the work of Mary Ellen Bute and Oskar Fischinger, among others. As these pioneering filmmakers recognized, when we watch a shape—whether abstract or not—and respond to it, we cannot help but ascribe sentient properties to it. Forms that even hint at representation appear to have character, instincts, and a story.

The structure of Craycroft’s installation borrows from early stop-motion animation techniques like the twentieth century’s first stop-motion camera, using glass plates to regulate the illusion of movement. Early real space by filming animation cells on a horizontal glass plate placed in front of a miniature forced perspective set (Fig. 1). Within this system, an animated figure, composed of a blend of three-dimensional objects and two-dimensional images. The history of the diorama and the photographic diorama is also related to the images sets that were illuminated by a series of changing colored lights that would flicker on and off as elements within the scene moved and morphed, pulled by a series of invisible strings; a camera similarly produces images through careful control of the device’s exposure to light. Craycroft has transformed the Museum’s Fifth Floor Gallery into an animated diorama set, using an overhead projector and a carousel of colored lights to mount her animation cells and the gallery space as a changing diorama set. When visitors enter the space, they are literally stepped onto the stage of animated debates.

Upon exiting the elevator, viewers enter directly into Craycroft’s set. Her props, upright or hanging from the ceiling, are resolutely still while the exhibition is open to the public, frozen in the places where she last left them; on Mondays, however, when the Museum is closed, they start to stir and shift—much like the cogs and gears of a machine. The world is not looking. Craycroft moves the props, but in the final animated sequence, her role in their motion is erased, so they appear to move of their own will. Perhaps most immediately striking about Craycroft’s set is its starkness: the wall, floors, and objects within them are all painted black, white, and grey. These tones are the most basic of measuring the depth and the light that a camera can capture. Using this fact, a number of scientists have determined how long to expose film to light in order to produce a legible image. On the floor of the exhibition, curvilinear objects are placed so that the eye perceives depth and movement, while stems from how the brain reconceives slightly different inputs from the right and left eyes. Though scientific principles dictate that binocular vision can resolve these differences in visual input, Craycroft’s work demonstrates that the human eye cannot rarefy light, only take in its place. As a result, Craycroft’s work both acknowledges and pushes against these legacies.

In Animacies, an expansive study of the porous and political boundaries between the human and nonhuman, scholar Mel Y. Chen begins by introducing the linguistic concept of the “animacy hierarchy,” a scale of sentience from the animate to the inanimate embedded in semantic constructions, which “conceptually arranges human life, disabled life, animal life, plant life, and forms of nonliving material in orders of value and priority.” While dehumanization and objectification are well-worn tactics of oppression, Chen reveals how these methods of subjugation are even present in the language used to describe technology. Though generally considered scientific, technology is often seen as an absence of meaning; it lacks the ability to hide in plain sight, relying hierarchies through subtle linguistic conventions.

The language of animacy, and the normative priorities it betrays, demonstrate the many ways we entertain the human and nonhuman. Of course, animals make these distinctions messy. Clocks often literally speak—look at Cogsworth, the pendulum clock in Disney’s Beauty and the Beast (1991). Animals are often (if temporarily) placed on the same plane as humans. In the 1936 animated short film Be Human, released by Fleischer Studios, Betty Boop sings, “Be human, animals can cry / Be human, it’s easy if you try / Don’t think you’re wonderful just because / You weren’t born with a tail and claws.” In her residency and exhibition, Craycroft attempts to take on these entangled narratives of personhood, moving beyond the purely linguistic to investigate the power structures that surface in the stories we tell: now we imagine the agency of technological and nonhuman animals and resources, and the rise of corporate power. The recognition of nontraditional personhood has been newly tested in an international trend of giving nonhuman subjects as plaintiffs in lawsuits. In the United States, for instance, animal rights groups like PETA and the Nonhuman Rights Project have filed copyright and habeas corpus suits on behalf of monkeys, who are listed as the plaintiffs in the cases. This past September, a suit was filed in Federal District Court in Colorado “by” the Colorado River Ecosystem, for its “right to exist, flourish, regulate, and reproduce.” Of course, comes amid the drastic expansion of corporate personhood in this country—the claim that corporations hold the same legal status and protections as individuals. The right to free speech, as human beings. Attempts to expand the legal status of humans to cover animal, environmental, and corporate subjects lie at a murky intersection between anthropocentric and post-humanist discourse; they project human status onto nonhuman subjects by anthropomorphizing them and, at the same time, radicalize the ways in which we may come to be a rights-bearing subject beyond the human.

At stake in Craycroft’s project is perhaps one of the most fundamental, even existential inquiries. What is it to be human? Yet in our moment of heightened ecological, political, and representational crisis, a second question now haunts this first one. Why is “human” still an essential order of identity, if indeed it ever was? In our lifetimes, the very concept of the human as evolved—as “top of the food chain”—is crumbling. Craycroft’s inquiry into animal and human personhood, if it points to anything, is that of a new framework for reconsidering our assumptions and looking frame by frame.

—Johanna Burton, Sara O’Keefe, and Kate Wiener

3. The monkey, human, and caged man: an animated feature film. The film provides an animated tour through the life and career of the great chimp, Tarzan, as well as the challenges faced by chimpanzees in the wild. The film is not only an exciting adventure, but it also serves as an educational tool for children and adults alike. (15-24 min. 45 sec. 1965)
Legal persons possess inherent value; 'legal things,' possessing merely instrumental value, exist for the sake of legal persons.  

Corporations have no consciences, no beliefs, no feelings, no thoughts, no desires. Corporations help structure and facilitate the activities of human beings, to be sure, and their 'personhood' often serves as a useful legal fiction. But they are not themselves members of 'We the People' by whom and for whom our Constitution was established.

'The word 'person,' as used in the Fourteenth Amendment, does not include the unborn.'

... unlike human beings, chimpanzees cannot bear any legal duties, submit to societal responsibilities or be held legally accountable for their actions. In our view, it is this incapacity to bear any legal responsibilities and societal duties that renders it inappropriate to confer upon chimpanzees the legal rights—such as the fundamental right to liberty protected by the writ of habeas corpus—that have been afforded to human beings.

As humans bereft of consciousness are entitled to personhood, courts must either recognize an elephant's just equality claim to bodily liberty or reject the principle of equality.

Robots' autonomy raises the question of their nature in the light of the existing legal categories—of whether they should be regarded as natural persons, legal persons, animals, or objects—or whether a new category should be created, with its own specific features and implications as regards the attribution of rights and duties, including liability for damage.
Public Programs

Beyond Human: Frameworks for Fundamental Rights
Thursday March 29, 7 PM

Bringing together leading scholars and cultural critics, this panel discussion will consider the legal and ethical implications of expanded definitions of personhood. Panelists include Adrian Chen, Karla F.C. Holloway, Kelly Oliver, and Sunaura Taylor, with Megan Hicks serving as moderator.

Persona Non Granted by Will Rawls
Saturday April 14, 5 PM

Artist Will Rawls will respond to Craycroft’s anthropomorphic animation project with three episodes exploring her objects as props and bodies, while investigating his own limited potential to fake animation. Interacting with the objects and media in Craycroft’s exhibition, Rawls will scrutinize surface, storytelling, space, and texture to choreograph this series of unfortunate “persons.”

Toward an Ethics of Animation:
Screening and Conversation with Anna Craycroft and Gloria Sutton
Thursday May 10, 7 PM

Following the premiere of Craycroft’s stop-motion animation film, a lively conversation with art historian Gloria Sutton will unpack Craycroft’s project and examine the ways that animation—the movement of images and bodies—articulates new questions about sense and meaning within contemporary digital culture.

List of Works

Storyboards and Setboards, 2018
Paper, ink, and metal hooks
20 x 30 in (50.8 x 76.2 cm) each

Set, Theater, and Library, 2018
Wood, casters, hanging hardware, fabric, plaster, paper, latex paint, acetate, Plexiglas, projection screen, books, binders, viewfinder, and camera
Dimensions variable

Animation, 2018
Single-channel video, color; duration variable

All works courtesy the artist
Textile props designed in collaboration with and fabricated by Kelsey Knight Mohr
Wooden props constructed with John Ralston
Seating Library fabricated by Jillian Clark

Special thanks to the New Museum exhibitions team: Walsh Hansen, Jillian Clark, Kevin Kelly, and Christine Navin

Anna Craycroft, Template for Storyboards, 2018. Courtesy the artist