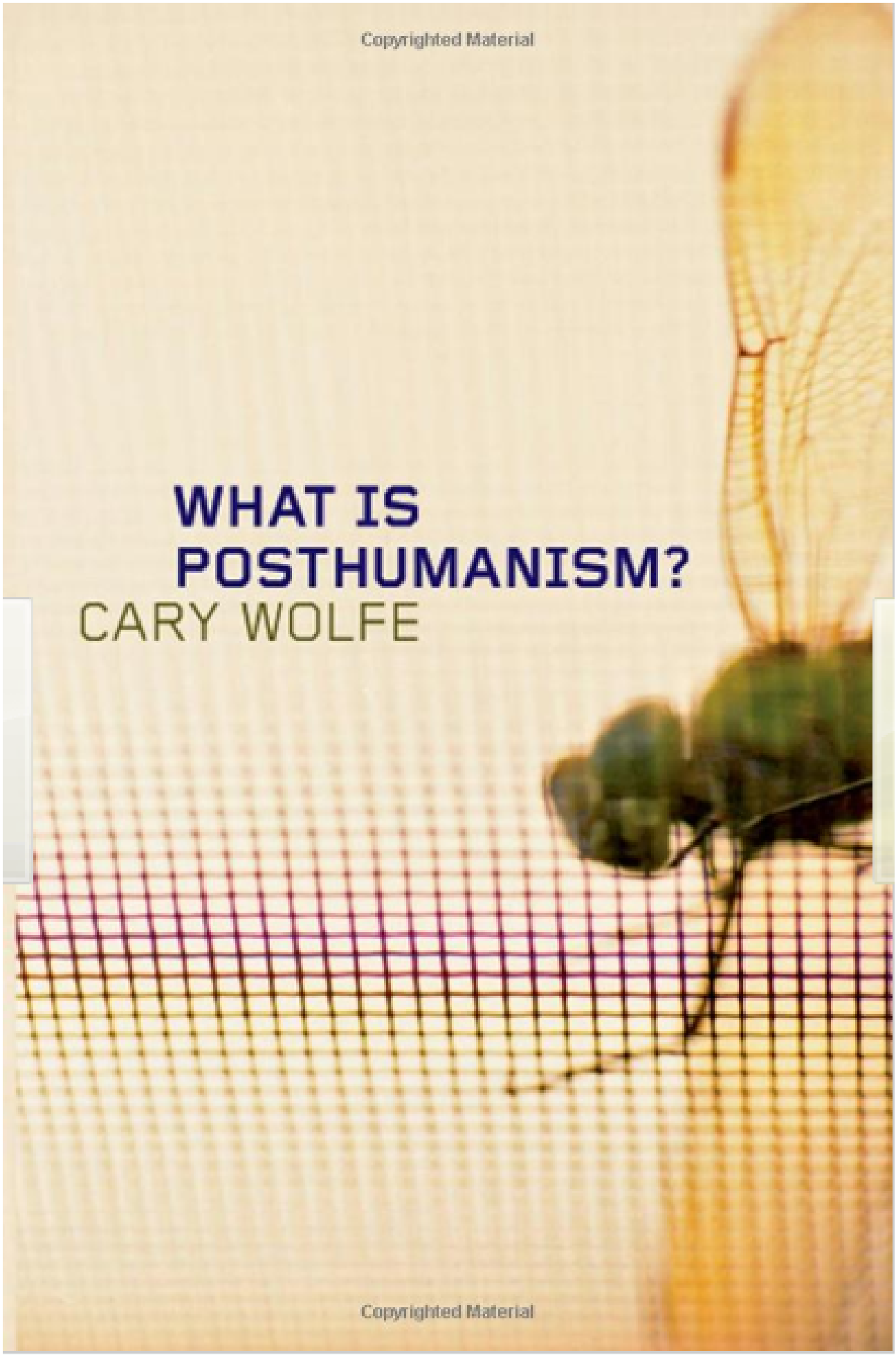
# WHAT IS POSTHUMANISM?

CARY WOLFE



The poems "Metaphors of a Magnifico," "The Idea of Order at Key West," and "Esthétique du Mal" are reprinted from Wallace Stevens, *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens* (New York: Random House, 1982). "Esthétique du Mal" and "The Idea of Order at Key West" copyright 1936 by Wallace Stevens and renewed 1964 by Holly Stevens; "Metaphors of a Magnifico" copyright 1954 by Wallace Stevens and renewed 1982 by Holly Stevens. Reprinted by permission of Alfred A. Knopf, a division of Random House, Inc.

The poem "The World and I" is reprinted from Laura Riding, *Poems of Laura Riding* (New York: Persea Books, 1938). Copyright 1938, 1980; revised copyright 2001 by the Board of Literary Management of the late Laura (Riding) Jackson. Reprinted by permission of Persea Books, Inc., New York.

For more information about previously published material in this book, see pages 347–48.



Published by the University of Minnesota Press
111 Third Avenue South, Suite 290
Minneapolis, MN 55401-2520
http://www.upress.umn.edu

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Wolfe, Cary.
What is posthumanism? / Cary Wolfe.
p. cm. — (Posthumanities series ; v. 8)
Includes bibliographical references (p. ) and index.
ISBN 978-0-8166-6614-0 (hc : alk. paper) — ISBN 978-0-8166-6615-7 (pb : alk. paper)
1. Humanism. 2. Aesthetics—Philosophy. 3. Deconstruction. I. Title.
B821.W65 2010
149—dc22

2009037657

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper

The University of Minnesota is an equal-opportunity educator and employer.

17 16 15 14 13 12 11 10 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

*For my parents*

# 6 From Dead Meat to Glow-in-the-Dark Bunnies

## The Animal Question in Contemporary Art

THIS CHAPTER BEGINS AT THE INTERSECTION of two questions: one, apparently quite complicated; the other, apparently quite simple. The first question—explored in some detail in the first half of the book—concerns the ethical standing of (at least some) nonhuman animals. It is a question with which we are confronted every day in the mass media (indeed, entire cable television networks are now built around the presumption of its possibility), and it has increasingly captivated not just scientific fields like cognitive ethology, ecology, and cognitive science but also areas in the humanities such as philosophy, psychoanalysis, theory, and cultural studies generally. For the purposes of this chapter, I will assume that the ethical standing of at least some nonhuman animals is not just a live issue but one increasingly taken for granted (even if how to formulate that ethical standing remains a complex question). I allow myself this luxury in no small part because the two artists whose work I will be addressing take that standing for granted, as they have affirmed in a variety of contexts.

The second question seems, by comparison, much more straightforward and perhaps almost trivial in comparison to the weight of the first, but that is part of the reason I want to take it up here. When contemporary artists take nonhuman animals as their subject—our treatment of them, how we relate to them, and so on—what difference does it make that those artists choose a particular representational strategy (and—a question I can't fully explore here—a particular medium or art form such as painting, sculpture, installation, or performance, to name just a few). To put this more directly: there clearly has been in contemporary art an explosion of interest in what Derrida calls "the question of the animal" as theme and subject matter.[1] When addressing this topic, however, it is all too easy to fall into what Slavoj Žižek,

with characteristic astringency, has in another context called "an undialectical obsession with content."[2] What I am interested in, on the other hand, is how particular artistic strategies themselves depend on or resist a certain humanism that is quite independent of the manifest content of the artwork: the fact that it may be "about" nonhuman animals in some obvious way.

In the contexts of the visual and visuality that I developed in the previous chapter and will continue to excavate in the chapter that follows, we can bring the question I have in mind into even sharper focus along the following lines: If, as many of the most important contemporary thinkers have suggested, certain representational strategies (say, the Renaissance theory of perspective, or Bentham's panoptical rendering of architectural space, or the production of the gaze and spectatorship in film as critiqued by feminist film theory in the 1980s, and so on) can be indexed to certain normative modes of humanist subjectivity that they reproduce *by the very nature of their strategies,* then we are well within our rights to ask—to put it succinctly, for the moment—what the relationship is between philosophical and artistic representationalism.

These are precisely the sorts of questions that practicing artists routinely engage in connection with the specific demands of particular representational media. They bear very directly on not just the artistic challenge but also the larger philosophical and ethical challenge of speaking *for* nonhuman animals, speaking *to* our relations with them, and how taking those relations seriously unavoidably raises the question of who "we" are, of the notion of the "human" that, as we saw in chapter 3, the "autobiographical animal" (to use Derrida's phrase) gives to itself—a question that may be answered quite indirectly not in the manifest content of the artwork or its "message" but in its formal strategies.

### The Ethics of (Dis)figuration: Sue Coe's *Dead Meat*

We find many faces in the paintings and drawings collected in Sue Coe's book *Dead Meat,* a collection of sketches, paintings, and drawings that Coe compiled over a six-year period while traveling to slaughterhouses and feedlots around North America.[3] Hundreds of faces, even





thousands, perhaps. And we don't have to find them. They find us. As in "Cow 13" or "Pigs in a Circle," they stare out at us on nearly every page, by turns fearful, afflicted, or innocent. What is remarkable here, though, is that the faces belong mainly to the animals—"livestock," so called. In fact, it is hard to find a human being with a face at all, and when we do find them, as in "Electrocution" or "There Is No Escape," they are usually misshapen or contorted. How are we to understand this?

One way that suggests itself immediately is by means of the theorization of the ethics of "the face" in contemporary philosophy and theory—a debate that has conspicuously involved Emmanuel Levinas, Jacques Derrida, and Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, among others. Levinas theorizes the ethical call of the face as the site of an unanswerable obligation to which I am held "hostage," to use his term, in an infinite responsibility to the other. As Derrida has observed, however, though the subject is held hostage to the other by the first imperative of the intersubjective relation—"thou shalt not kill"—in Levinas (as in the Judeo-Christian tradition generally), this is not understood as a "thou shalt not put to death the living in general." For Levinas, the subject is "man" whose ethical standing is secured by his access to both *logos* and the Word, and so, as Derrida puts it, in Levinas the subject resides in "a world where sacrifice is possible and where it is not forbidden to make an attempt on life in general, but only on the life of man."[4] As we have seen earlier, however, for Derrida the animal "has its point of view regarding me. The point of view of the absolute other, and nothing will have ever done more to make me think through this absolute alterity of the neighbor than these moments when I see myself naked under the gaze of a cat."[5] And from the vantage of Deleuze and Guattari, Derrida's critique of Levinas here might be viewed as leaving intact a certain humanist schema of the scopic and the visual, which their critique of "faciality" in *A Thousand Plateaus* is calculated to dismantle in its insistence that the face is not a location, still less a body part, but rather a kind of "grid" or "diagram" that configures the space of intersubjective relations and desire itself, making them available only at the expense of "fixity" and "identity."[6] To put it schematically, Deleuze and Guattari might well ask of Derrida how the moment of being looked at by his cat—not just "naked" but *"seeing myself* naked under the gaze

of a cat"—can be divorced from the face. How can the looking-back of the animal—and the ethical call harbored by that look—be disengaged from the humanism for which the face (and faciality generally) is perhaps the fundamental figure?

The art historian and critic Michael Fried gives a rather different account of the face from the Levinasian one in his book *Realism, Writing, Disfiguration: On Thomas Eakins and Stephen Crane,* where he offers an analysis of figuration and representation that will help to shed light on the particularity of Sue Coe's strategies and how we might assess their ethical force.[7] The key point of contact with the motifs we have sounded out thus far, however briefly, is readily voiced in the title of the essay on Crane that makes up the second half of Fried's book, "Stephen Crane's Upturned Faces," where the intense visuality of Crane's prose is also indexed to *the face*—and to the blank page as its double or stand-in—and its ethical call on us. Pertinent here too is the fact that in Crane, in Eakins, and in Coe, we will be dealing with—immersed in, really—scenes of violence and responsibility: primarily war (as in Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage*), the surgical theater of Eakins' great painting *The Gross Clinic,* and, of course, the killing floors of Coe's *Dead Meat.*

What Fried finds in Crane is "a mode of literary representation that involves a major emphasis on acts of *seeing,* both literal and metaphorical."[8] But what is usually called Crane's "impressionistic" style should instead be understood, Fried argues, as a remarkable plumbing of the relationship of "a primitive ontological difference between the allegedly upright or 'erect' space of reality and the horizontal 'space' of writing," which manifests itself in Crane as "an implicit contrast between the respective 'spaces' of reality and literary representation" (99). This difference is related to the extraordinary (and extraordinarily haunting and even uncanny) network of faces in Crane's fiction—primarily, faces of the dead that stare back at us with unseeing eyes—by virtue of the requirement "that a human character, ordinarily upright and so to speak forward-looking, be rendered horizontal and upward-facing so as to match the horizontality and upward-facingness of the blank page" (99). On the one hand (and here the connection to Coe's animal faces is quite clear) the faces of the dead—like the blank page—stare back at us and ask for our conferral of meaning, through





representation, on their abjection or suffering (this is rendered in an especially powerful way in Crane's war fiction). But at the same time, as figures for the "'unnatural' process" of writing itself—when "the upward-facingness of the corpse, hence of the page," is considered "not so much as a brute given [but] as a kind of artifact"—they are *products* of that very process of representation itself (100).

In trying to bring the reader/viewer face to face with the world through writing, however, the writer only succeeds in *de*facing the world or, to use Fried's term, disfiguring it. The dilemma in Crane is that the more he succeeds in this enterprise, the more he, in another sense, fails. This is so, Fried argues, because insofar as those "desemanticizing" aspects of Crane's writing (visuality, sonority, dialect, and manipulation of perceptual scale, just to name a few) do their job, they interpose themselves, in their own materiality, between the reader and the world that that "realist" project was supposedly intended to represent, so that the world (though he doesn't put it this way) almost becomes a "host," if you will, for an essentially "vampiristic" relationship to the writerly or representational project. As Fried asks: "Wouldn't such a development threaten to abort the realization of the 'impressionist' project as classically conceived? In fact would it not call into question the very basis of writing as communication—the tendency of the written word partly to 'efface' itself in favor of its meaning in the acts of writing and reading?" (119–20).

For Fried, this uncanny or vampiristic quality of Crane's style is symptomatic of Crane's need to performatively confront "the scene of writing" through "a mechanism of displacement" and "to do so in a manner that positively obscured the meaning of those representations from both writer and reader." "And this suggests," he continues,

> that the passages that describe the faces and recount responses to them are where Crane's unconscious fixation on the scene of writing not only comes closest to surfacing in a *sustained* and deliberate manner but also, precisely owing to the 'manifestly' dreadful nature of the faces and of the vicissitudes that befall them, is most emphatically *repressed.* In other words, the thematization of writing as violent disfigurement and its association with effects of horror and repugnance but also of intense fascination allowed the writer, and *a fortiori* the reader, to remain unconscious of the very possibility of such a thematization. (120–21)

We are now in a position to glimpse how different things are in Coe's handling of what we could call, after Fried, the scene of representation or figuration, whose index in both cases is a certain rendering—and in Crane's case, *rending*—of the face. We remember Fried's observation "that a human character, ordinarily upright and so to speak forward-looking, be rendered horizontal and upward-facing so as to match the horizontality and upward-facingness of the blank page" (99). In Coe, however, we find a double reversal of this dynamic. First, the violence that in Crane renders the human corpse horizontal and facing upward is in *Dead Meat* associated with a force that takes the "naturally" occurring horizontality of the animals portrayed (living, as they do, on all fours) and renders it strongly vertical—namely, in the endless rows and rows of hoisted, hanging animal corpses in the slaughterhouse and the packing plant that we find in images such as "Horse Slaughterhouse" or "Poultry Plant Fire." It is as if the animals cannot be allowed to assume the vertical, upright posture reserved (as even Freud tells us in *Civilization and Its Discontents*) for the human, without at the same stroke being *defaced*—in many cases, quite literally (i.e., beheaded).

At the same time—a strict corollary by this logic—the slaughterhouse workers remain mired in a strongly horizontal plane, and, not surprisingly, their faces are often "beastly" or "animalistic" in the traditional, speciesist sense of the word, as in "Electrocution" or "Scalding Vat and Scraping Machine." The logic that systematically works its way through most of these pieces, then, is that the concrete, individual animal body (an individuality emphasized in pieces such as "Cow 13" and "Goat outside Slaughterhouse") is, through a process of corporately organized Taylorization, mechanistically born, bred, killed, and dismembered in a process through which it comes to have meaning for the "carnophallogocentric" *socius* (to use Derrida's well-known term) only by being reconstituted as "meat" or "pork"—a semantic transformation and mystification that is itself paralleled by the material manifestation of identical, shrink-wrapped packages of brightly colored meat in the grocery store counter now thoroughly dissociated from the reality of its material production.[9] And this systematic violence against the animals is itself doubled by a less brutal, though no less systematic, violence that attends the workers who are forced by the nature of capitalism itself to do such work—a point graphically captured in Coe's rendering of the meatpacking workers in painting after painting and explicitly thematized in works such as "Capital/Labor."






Sue Coe, *Goat outside Slaughterhouse P.A.*, 1990. Copyright 1990 Sue Coe. Courtesy of Galerie St. Etienne, New York.

Second, however—and this is the point I would like to emphasize—what we find here is not the "excruciated" relationship to representation that Fried emphasizes in Crane and Eakins but rather its apparent displacement onto forces external to the work of representation itself—forces whose effects the artwork registers and then intensifies. The violence we find here is not "artifactual" (associated with the inescapable violence and disfiguration of representation itself) but is instead associated with the external (that is to say, extrarepresentational) forces of capitalism and factory farming. We could say, in other words, that (in contrast to Fried's Crane) Coe's painting aspires to the condition of writing, but writing understood not as representation divided against itself—not as *différance* or iterability, to borrow Derrida's terms, which are invoked by Fried[10]—but as the direct communication

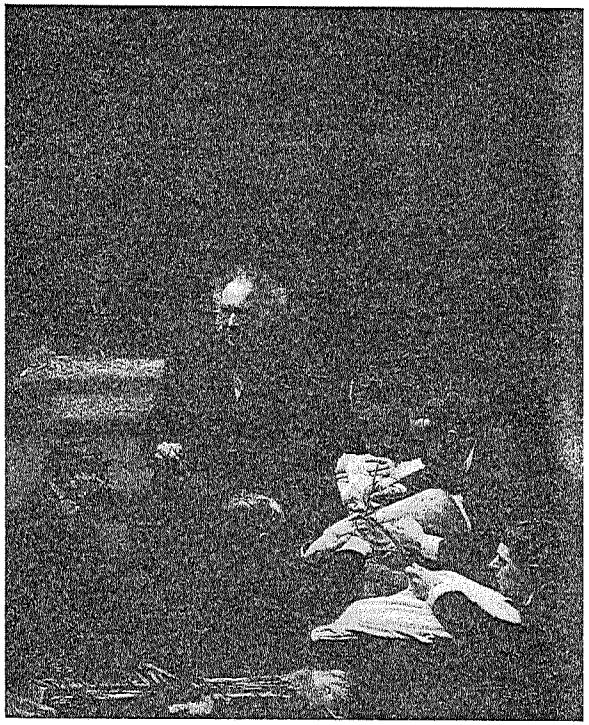
of a semantic and as it were external content, of which the artwork is a faithful (or perhaps "dramatic") enough representation to didactically incite ethical action and change on the part of the viewer.

Yet precisely here an interesting problem manifests itself. While Coe is certainly within her rights to see the ethical function of (her) art, at least in one sense, as drawing our attention, as powerfully as possible, to the untold horrors of the slaughterhouse, on another level—and it is this level that will be handled with considerable sophistication, I think, in Eduardo Kac's work—that ethical function and the representationalism it depends on rely on a certain disavowal of the violence (what Fried calls the "disfiguration") of representation itself, which immediately leads to an obvious question we might ask of Coe: If the ethical function of art is what Coe thinks it is, why not just show people photographs of stockyards, slaughterhouses, and the killing floor to achieve this end? To put it another way, what does art *add?* And what does it mean that her art has to be *more* than real to be real? Isn't the "melodrama of visibility" (to use Fried's phrase) that we find in *Dead Meat,* which is calculated to "give the animal a face," also, in another sense, an *effacement* of the very reality it aims to represent, one that quite conspicuously manifests itself in the hyperbole, disfiguration, and melodrama of Coe's work? The paradoxical result for Coe's work, then, is that it appeals to us to read it as directly (indeed, melodramatically) legible of the content it represents, but the only way it achieves that end is *through* its figural excess, which is precisely *not* of the slaughterhouse but of the interposing materiality of representation itself.

We can unpack the implications of this point by remembering Fried's discussion of "what might be called a drama, some would even say a melodrama, of visibility" in Eakins's *The Gross Clinic,* which may be brought into sharp contrast with the very different "melodrama" we find in Coe's *Dead Meat* project.[11] My point here in calling Coe's work "melodramatic" is not that it exaggerates what really goes on in a slaughterhouse but that in Coe's work, *nothing is hidden* from us. On the contrary, the paintings seem to form a kind of theater calculated to produce a "surefire effect" (to use Fried's characterization of "theatricality") by "playing to the audience," as the figures in the paintings—human and animal—repeatedly look out at us, imploringly, fearfully, or sadistically, as if the entire affair inside the space of the painting is







Thomas Eakins, *The Gross Clinic,* 1875. Philadelphia Museum of Art. Gift of the Alumni Association to Jefferson Medical College in 1878 and purchased by the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts and the Philadelphia Museum of Art in 2007 with the generous support of more than 3,500 donors.

staged *only* for us.[12] Unlike the experience of the viewer in what Fried calls the "absorptive" tradition in painting that culminates in modernist abstraction, the viewer in Coe's work isn't "denied," as Fried puts it, but rather addressed and held responsible, even culpable, for what is being shown inside the frame.

Here—to return to *The Gross Clinic*—two conspicuous features of Eakins's painting noted by Fried are very much to the point: the rendering of the surgical patient's body, and the cringing figure of an older woman, usually taken to be the patient's mother. As for the first, Fried notes that "the portions of the body that can be seen are not readily identifiable, so that our initial and persisting though not quite final impression is of a few scarcely differentiated body parts rather than of a coherent if momentarily indecipherable ensemble."[13] In fact, Fried likens this presentation to something like a dismembering, an act of "deliberate aggression" and even "sadism" that ultimately is an index

of "the attitude toward the viewer that that rendering implies"—an especially intense version of the attitude typical of what Fried elsewhere famously calls the "absorptive" tradition in painting (59). Similarly, the cringing figure dramatizes "the pain of seeing," in both "the emphatic *emptiness* of her clawlike left hand," the "violent contortion" of which is "apprehended by the viewer as a threat—at a minimum, an offense—to vision as such," and "the *sightlessness* that . . . she so feelingly embodies" (62). In these "aggressions," as Fried calls them, these gestures of "disfiguration," Fried finds in the painting "an implied affront to seeing," a "stunning or, worse, a wounding of seeing—that leads me to imagine that the definitive realist painting would be one that the viewer literally could not bear to look at" (64–65).

Here we get a precise sense of the differences between the force of "disfiguration" at work in Eakins's representationalism and in Coe's. In Coe, although there is disfiguration aplenty, it is never a disfiguration that resists vision or interpretation—quite the contrary, it invites a single, univocal reading. The violence of Eakins's "affront to seeing" that manifests itself in *The Gross Clinic* as incision, deformation, and even, in a sense, dismemberment (a violence displaced and contained by being thematized, as Fried notes, in terms of the "necessary" surgery being performed) is matched by the reverse dynamic in Coe. The almost nightmarish, infernal scenes of violence before us *hide nothing*, and for that very reason, the artist, as it were, has no blood on her hands. (*That* is reserved, of course, for the forces of capitalism and Taylorization referenced in the work's semantic content.)

In this light, we can sharpen our sense (if you'll pardon the expression) of the difference between Coe's representationalism and Eakins's by reminding ourselves of the signifying force of the surgeon's scalpel in *The Gross Clinic* as glossed by Fried. If Eakins represents himself allegorically through the figure of Gross, then the scalpel serves to remind us—rather startlingly, even traumatically—that Eakins is "divided or excruciated between competing systems of representation." On the one hand, the scalpel, "being hard and sharp, an instrument for cutting, belongs unmistakably to the system of writing/drawing"; on the other, because the scalpel is marked by an outré, almost three-dimensional drop of blood on its tip, it "refers, by means of an irresistible analogy," to the system of painting—almost as if the drop of blood *were* paint





and the surgeon/painter carefully and dramatically deliberates its violent application (88). In this light, we might well say of Coe's *Dead Meat* that the knives and hooks of the slaughterhouse are *never* associated with the brush of the painter and the violence of representation-as-disfiguration. Thus, if Eakins's putative realism in fact harbors a deeper, more unsettling antirealism or, perhaps better, *irrealism*, Coe's melodramatic renderings themselves harbor a more fundamental (and a more fundamentally comforting) representationalism, a signifying regime whose best name might well be "faciality"—even if that faciality extends across species lines to include, even to privilege (as if somehow to redeem their suffering), the nonhuman animals around which the paintings are built.

The opposite of this regime—or more precisely, as Derrida would put it, that which remains heterogeneous to it, not its simple other—might well be figured in the network of asignifying forms and their serial iteration that wends its way throughout the works collected in *Dead Meat*.[14] Chief among these are the chains, hooks, tubes, belts, hoses, ducts, and the like that form (in pieces such as "Horse Slaughterhouse," "McWorld," and "Pecking Order") a kind of ongoing cipher in the paintings, often extending beyond the borders of the pictorial space, suggesting their intrication in some larger insidious network—a logic that is also extended to cover the representation of the masses of animal bodies themselves in pieces such as "Lo Cholesterol Buffalo" or "Feedlot."

From Coe's representationalist point of view, this network is directly associated with the force of capitalism, Taylorization, and the disassembly line they put in place. In the sense I am emphasizing here, however, we might see it as figuring instead a kind of displacement or domestication of the Derridean sense of "iterability" that I discussed in the first half of the book—or, as Fried would have it, a kind of visible repression that traces and scores the otherwise representational logic of the paintings. This logic even extends, I would suggest, to the ubiquitous numbered ear tags that mark the animals as fodder in the larger machine of agribusiness and factory farming, with the sheer abstractness and pure seriality of the numerical system signifying nothing *except* this force. Here the painting "Goat outside Slaughterhouse" is all the more striking in the contrast between the almost sculptural modeling of the animal's head and the abstract numbers of the contrasting ear tag, which

Sue Coe, *Ham Scrubber*, 1988. Copyright 1988 Sue Coe. Courtesy of Galerie St. Etienne, New York.

not only are iterations of the same shape but also in their form recall the network of figures I have just noted in pieces like "Ham Scrubber."

Given the conceptual coordinates of Coe's *Dead Meat* project, we can surmise that this force of abstraction, coding, and seriality would eventually find its most extreme logical extension in genetic engineering and, beyond that, in cloning—an eventuality graphically depicted in Coe's painting "Future Genetics Inc." Here again, however, we can interpret this in a second sense rather at odds with the artist's own. While Coe's painting depicts the perverse extension of Taylorized factory farming to the production of misshapen and deformed animal





mutants in a subterranean laboratory, there is another sense in which we may view this logic as endemic to *representation itself.* The clone may be "the image of the perfect servant, the obedient instrument of the master creator's will," as W. J. T. Mitchell puts it, but it also activates "the deepest phobias about mimesis, copying, and the horror of the uncanny double."[15] Or, to put this in Derrida's terms, the dream of pure, Taylorized seriality is repetition *without* difference, but the very meaning of iterability is that repetition—and representation—can take place only in and through the potentially mutating work of difference, the specific material, embodied, pragmatic instance that threatens any dream of purity, always shadowing pure seriality with the uncanny referenced by Mitchell. And this opens up a second ethical register around the question of representation and its logic—one quite different from what Coe has in mind—that harbors real stakes for how we understand the human/animal relation.

As we saw in chapter 2, Derrida has argued that the constitutive fantasy of humanism is that the human separates itself from the rest of the domain of the living by alone escaping subjection to the deconstructive force of iterability and the trace that in fact extends to *all* forms of representation and signification, not just its paradigmatic case, language. And in this second ethical register, the critique of speciesism emerges, in fact, from the critique of representationalism along the lines traced by Derrida in "Eating Well," where he suggests:

> If one reinscribes language in a network of possibilities that do not merely encompass it but mark it irreducibly from the inside, everything changes. I am thinking in particular of the mark in general, of the trace, of iterability, of *différance.* These possibilities or necessities, without which there would be no language, are themselves not only human. . . . And what I am proposing here should allow us to take into account scientific knowledge about the complexity of "animal languages," genetic coding, all forms of marking within which so-called human language, as original as it might be, does not allow us to "cut" once and for all where we would in general like to cut. (116–17)

This may seem to be a very different kind of cut from the ones we witness in *Dead Meat,* but in fact, Derrida suggests, the "sacrificial symbolic economy" of carnophallogocentrism that subordinates woman to man and nonhuman animals to both is directly related to—even

motivates—what we witness in Coe's work. "The subject does not want just to master and possess nature actively," Derrida writes. "In our cultures, he accepts sacrifice and eats flesh. . . . In our countries, who would stand any chance of becoming a *chef d'Etat* (a head of State), of thereby acceding 'to the head,' by publicly, and therefore exemplarily, declaring him- or herself to be a vegetarian?" (114).

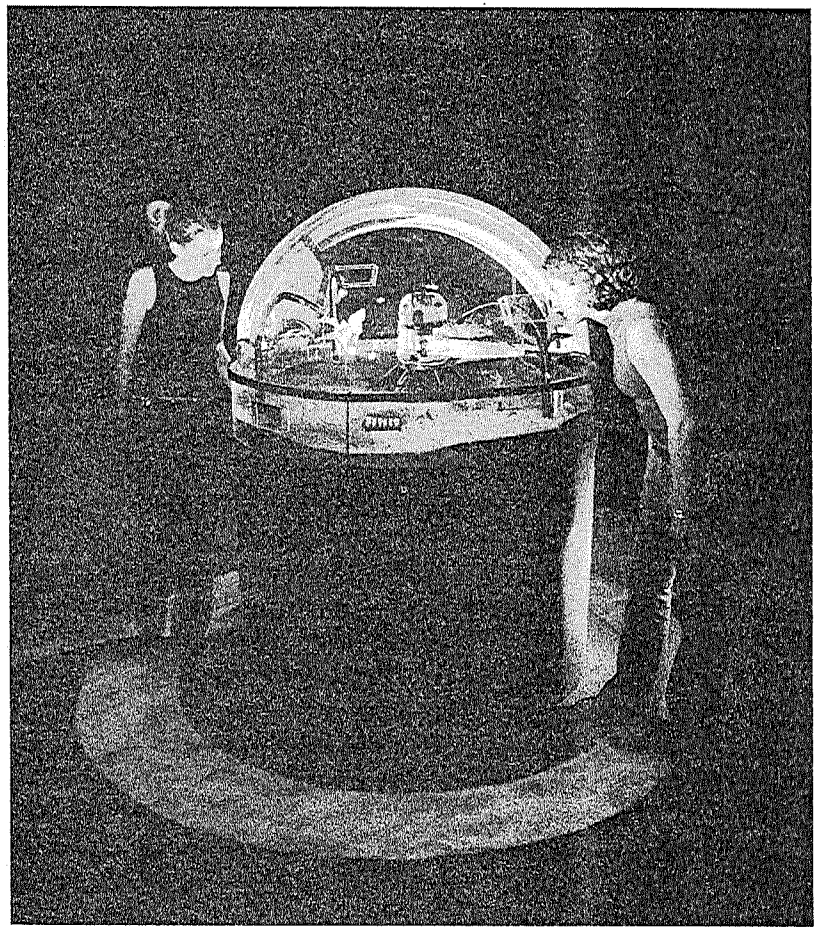
### The More You Look, the Less You See: Eduardo Kac

In October 2001, Eduardo Kac presented his project *The Eighth Day* in a gallery at Arizona State University, on the heels of what is probably his most famous undertaking, *GFP Bunny* (2000). Here again Kac uses transgenic life-forms (in this case, mice, zebra fish, tobacco plants, and a colony of amoebae, instead of a rabbit) modified by introducing into them an enhanced GFP gene (green fluorescent protein, derived from the jellyfish *Aequorea Victoria*) that makes them glow green under certain lighting conditions. As in that earlier work, however, GFP life-forms are only part of the story.[16] In *The Eighth Day,* viewers enter a dark space with a glowing blue-lit Plexiglas semisphere at its center, surrounded by the sounds of waves washing ashore. Inside the terrarium are the life-forms just mentioned, as well as a specially designed "biobot," which contains as its "cerebellum" the GFP amoebae. When the amoebae move toward one of the six legs of the biobot, their movement is tracked by a computer, which makes that particular leg contract. The biobot also serves as an "avatar," as Kac puts it, of Web participants, who can remotely control its "eye" with a pan-and-tilt actuator, so that "the overall perceivable behavior of the biobot is a combination of activity that takes place in the microscopic network of the amoebae and in the macroscopic human network." Meanwhile viewers in the gallery can see the terrarium from both inside and outside the dome, by means of access to a Web interface installed in the gallery space, which includes, in addition to a biobot view, a feed from a bird's-eye-view camera installed above the dome.[17]

When we leave behind the technical and logistical aspects of the piece (which are considerable) to address the work's intellectual, ethical, and social implications, we enter another order of complexity. Arlindo Machado's comments in the collection of essays that accompanied *The Eighth Day* are fairly representative of these discussions:







Eduardo Kac, *The Eighth Day,* 2001 (detail). Transgenic artwork with biological robot (biobot), GFP plants, GFP amoebae, GFP fish, GFP mice, audio, video, Internet. http://sprocket.telab.artic.edu/ekac.

> Transgenic forms of life are often stigmatized for being produced in the laboratory, in part because of the economic (and possibly warlike) interests that motivate their creation. It is almost inevitable that nontechnical discussions involving biotechnologies take on a conservative bias, recalling scenarios of apocalyptic science fiction or even dogmatic interdictions of religious order. . . . The more experimental and much

> less conformist sphere of art—with its emphasis on creation, by means of genetic engineering, of works which are simply beautiful, not utilitarian or potentially profit making; along with the relocation of genetically modified products in "cultural" spaces such as museums and art galleries, or in public spaces, or even in homes . . . all this could help to elevate public discussion of genetics and transgenics to a more sophisticated level.[18]

This is essentially the thrust as well of Kac's own manifesto on transgenic art, but the artist takes the additional step there of insisting that "artists can contribute to increase global diversity by inventing new life forms," and he imagines a day in the not too distant future when "the artist literally becomes a genetic programmer who can create life forms by writing or altering a given (genetic) sequence."[19]

This insistence complicates an already complicated situation considerably, because it invites the sorts of trepidations rightly raised by critics such as Steve Baker, who writes that Kac "engages with the animal through techniques that strike many people as meddlesome, invasive, and profoundly unethical."[20] It's not that any of the animals used in his work are harmed (they aren't, and Kac has repeatedly made it clear how seriously he takes his responsibility for the care and well-being of the animals involved) but rather that "Kac seems to overlook the larger picture," as Baker puts it: namely, that his work depends on and in a fundamental sense reproduces an entire set of institutions and practices of scientific research that subject millions of animals a year to distressing, often painful, and usually fatal experimentation, a subjection of nonhuman beings of "unprecedented proportions," as Derrida puts it, in which "traditional forms of treatment of the animal have been turned upside down" and replaced by "an artificial, infernal, virtually interminable survival, in conditions that previous generations would have judged monstrous."[21]

Such concerns are very important, of course, but I don't want to pursue them further here—in part because they have received ample air time in the discussions of Kac's work, but primarily because certain habitual oversimplifications endemic to addressing those concerns have tended to mask crucial aspects of Kac's work, features that have a less obvious and thematic relation to how his projects ethically intervene in our received views of the human/animal relationship and,





beyond that, in the question of posthumanism generally. Something of the different direction I want to pursue is evoked by Kac early on in the transgenic art manifesto, where he writes, "More than making visible the invisible, art needs to raise our awareness of what firmly remains beyond our visual reach but, nonetheless, affects us directly. Two of the most prominent technologies operating beyond vision are digital implants and genetic engineering."[22] In a recent essay on art and human genomics, the critic Marek Wieczorek extends the point when he asks, "How do we picture a new age of genetic manipulation . . . a literal synergy between computing and biology?" This is not just a question of *representation* in any straightforward sense, because "the digital code of the genome, emblematic of a new mode of consciousness," is "not a spatial blueprint of life, not a two-dimensional plan of what a heart or liver looks like, but a long string of nucleotides written in endless permutations."[23] What this means, in turn, is that the problem of picturing this immense revolution "may not simply be a matter of new *forms* of visuality" but rather demand "reconciling form with principle."[24]

Here—and this is rather a different understanding from what we find in Fried—Wieczorek finds a precursor to this new work of Kac's that thinks the parallels between art and scientific theory in minimalism, with its "potentially endless sequence of repeated shapes." Just as "digitally encoded information has no intrinsic relationship to the form in which it is decoded"—"it is not tied to a singular, inherently meaningful form"—so in minimalism "repetition replaces singularity." Moreover, in minimalism "art acknowledges the viewer, whose physical interaction with the work produces ever-shifting viewpoints over time, through a kind of feedback loop," which parallels a similar emphasis in systems theory, as we have seen in chapter 1, on the autopoiesis (Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela) or the self-reference (Niklas Luhmann) of the observing system—a fact we will find Kac's work insisting on again and again, most obviously in his inclusion in the work itself of remote, Internet-based observer-participants. Here, however, the point is not (as Wieczorek puts it) that "reflexivity is regressive," much like the "obsessively pointless variations of LeWitt's incomplete open cubes or Judd's boxes."[25] Rather, it is that reflexivity is *recursive* in the sense discussed in chapter 1; it uses its

own outputs as inputs, as Luhmann defines it.[26] It is only on the basis of that recursivity—a dynamic process that takes *time*—that reflexivity becomes *productive* and not an endlessly repeating, proverbial hall of mirrors associated with the most clichéd aspects of postmodernity.

I will explore in greater detail in chapters 8 and 9 the dynamics of recursivity and how they are related to the questions of meaning and form for other kinds of art (poetry, architecture), but for now I want to note that for our current purposes there are two points here, one logical and one biological. As for the first, Wieczorek captures something of how Kac's work thematizes the central fact—a logical and cognitive fact—about recursive self-reference as Luhmann has theorized it: namely, that observation (precisely because it is contingent and self-referential) will always "maintain the world as severed by distinctions, frames, and forms," and this "partiality precludes any possibility of representation of mimesis and any 'holistic' theory." Thus, Luhmann writes, "the world is observable *because* it is unobservable"[27]—a point whose larger resonance and thematics I will explore in chapters 8 and 10.

Of more immediate relevance for Kac's work, however, is the second point, the biological one: that recursive self-reference is crucial to how different kinds of autopoietic beings establish their *difference* from everything else in the world, which is to say their specific ways of *being* in the world—a "being" that is now thoroughly subordinated to an autopoietic *becoming*. For Kac—and here is where Wieczorek is right that it is not simply a matter of new *forms* of visuality—this calls for the kind of recalibration, redistribution, and displacement of the relationship between meaning and the entire sensorium of living beings that I discussed in the previous chapter, in which visuality itself—as the human sensory apparatus par excellence—is now thoroughly decentered and subjected to a rather different kind of logic (a point I return to in some detail in chapter 7).

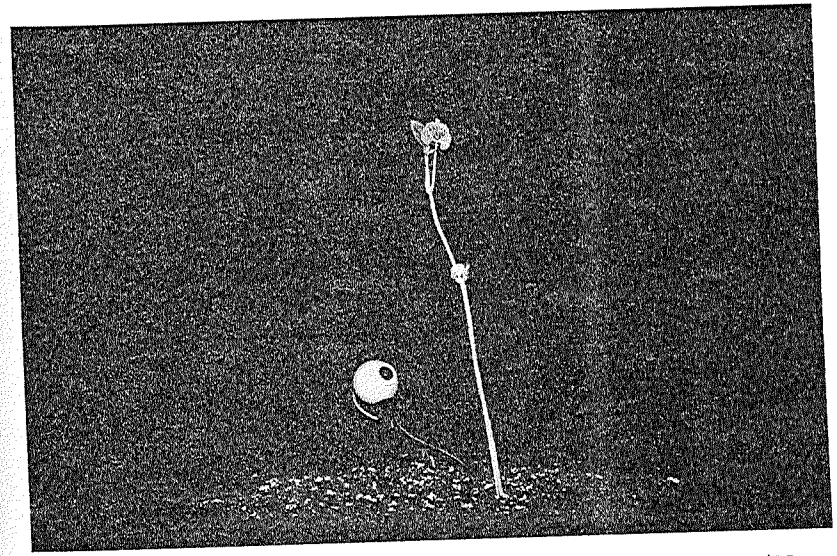
To put it another way, Kac subverts the centrality of the human and of anthropocentric modes of knowing and experiencing the world by displacing the centrality of its metonymic stand-in, human (and humanist) visuality. He does this in several different ways, some of which are comparatively straightforward, such as *Darker than Night* (1999) and *Rara Avis* (1996). In the former, the viewer is linked in a communicational loop to roughly three hundred fruit bats via a "batbot"





implanted in their cave, which enables the viewer to "hear" the converted echolocation sonar signals of the living bats, while the viewer wears a VR headset that converts the batbot's sonar emissions into an abstract visual display.[28] In *Rara Avis*, viewers don a headset linked to a camera in the head of a large robotic bird in an enclosure, surrounded by living birds, which enables the viewer to look out from the robotic bird's point of view. In both works, sounds *(Rara Avis)* and sonar signals *(Darker than Night)* originating from human participants are reintroduced into the animals' environment, allowing them to experience the presence of an absent, human other (162–66).

More interesting still is how Kac's work also exploits what we might call our lust for the visual and its (humanist) centrality by trading on it repeatedly (the glow-in-the-dark creatures, the outré coloring of the bird in *Rara Avis*, or even the playful visual pun on the human eyeball in *Teleporting an Unknown State* [1996], to name a few). This is not just, as one critic puts it, a matter of the "scopic reversal" that is a "recurring theme" in Kac's work (particularly the works on telepresence), nor is it just about a "dialogical interchange" that serves "to multiply



Eduardo Kac, "Teleporting an Unknown State," telepresence work, 1994/96. http://sprocket.telab.artic.edu/ekac.

the 'points of view' available," as in *The Eighth Day*. Nor is it exactly that "to the extent that something living—particularly a mammal—glows green, we have an index of alterity" (an interpretation resisted by Kac, by the way).[29]

In fact, I would argue that the use of GFP in Kac's work, particularly with the rabbit Alba in *GFP Bunny*, operates as a kind of feint or lure that trades on the very humanist centrality of vision that Kac's work ends up subverting (and in this, it has more than a little in common with Diller + Scofidio's cagey relationship to spectacle in their *Blur* project, as we'll see in chapter 8). On display here, in other words, are the humanist ways in which we produce and mark the other (including the animal other), our carnophallogocentric visual appetite, displayed here in the form of spectacle, which is fed in this instance by GFP. From this vantage, the point is perhaps not so much, as W. J. T. Mitchell puts it in his widely read essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Biocybernetic Reproduction," that "Kac's work dramatizes the difficulty biocybernetic art has in making its object or model visible" because "the object of mimesis here is really the invisibility of the genetic revolution, its inaccessibility to representation."[30] Rather, it is that Kac's work—with its glow-in-the-dark creatures and its black lights, drawn as much from the storehouse of cheesy mass culture as anywhere—makes all of this all too visible by eliciting and manipulating familiar forms and conventions of contemporary visual appetite. In doing so, it may be understood against the backdrop of Mitchell's larger point about the work of art in an age of biocybernetic reproduction: that the "curious twist" of our moment is that "the digital is declared to be triumphant at the very same moment that a frenzy of the image and spectacle is announced" (315).

It is a question, then, of what we might call the "place" of the visual—but, eventually, for that very reason, of everything else too (as we will see in the next chapter). And this involves in Kac's work a circular and indeed recursive procedure, where the artist uses or otherwise appeals to specifically human visual habits and conventions for the purposes of making the point that the visual as we traditionally think of it can precisely no longer be indexed to those conventions and habits at all. In this light, one way to underscore the difference between productive recursivity in Kac's work and a mere hall-of-mirrors





reflexivity is to say that the whole point of the glow-in-the-dark rabbit of *GFP Bunny* and how it seizes on certain spectacularizing modes of human visuality is that the harder you look, the less you see. Alba's "meaning," if we want to put it that way, is not to be found in the brute fact of the glow of her coat; in fact, one might well say the meaning of the work is everywhere *but* there.[31]

From this vantage, we might well think of the strategy Kac deploys in the work *Time Capsule* (1997) as framed by this same logic. In that piece, Kac was televised and simultaneously webcast injecting into his leg a microchip with a unique identification number that reveals itself when scanned—a device commonly used for registering and recovering companion animals. As part of the work, Kac registered himself in an Identichip database as both "animal" and "owner." In addition, the work included seven sepia-toned photographs of members of Kac's family from previous generations and a telerobotic Web scanning and x-ray display of the implant in Kac's leg. Here again Kac's deployment of spectacle and the visual generally makes the point, I think, that the significance of the work is everywhere *except* in its elements—vehicles, really—of visuality and spectacle. It begins to dawn on us just how true this is when we understand, as Edward Lucie-Smith points out, that Kac is of Jewish origin, that a number of his family members (some of them pictured in the photographs) were Polish Jews who died in the Nazi Holocaust, and how "the microchip incorporating a number alludes to the numbers tattooed on the arms of those who were herded into concentration camps"—but here, of course, the identifying numbers cannot be read (22). "Herded" is indeed a word to be insisted on here, as this piece also focuses our attention not on livestock animals but the *domestic* animals—mainly cats and dogs—for whom the chip is designed, animals that a vast majority of owners describe as family members. Are they less "animals" than those other living beings we call "meat"? Than the Jews in the eyes of the Nazis who forced them into cattle cars at gunpoint? Moreover, this welter of complicated associations and category crossings can be amplified one last time when we remind ourselves of the questions addressed in chapter 3 around Derrida's characterization of contemporary forms of animal exploitation in biomedical research and factory farming as a "holocaust" (a characterization shared by Coetzee's Elizabeth Costello).

All of this completely changes the understanding of "theatricality" as criticized by Fried. The point is not just, as Fried would have it, that Kac's work is "theater" (which in his terms it would surely be) but that "theater" is not doing the work Fried thinks it does. In Kac, the artwork does indeed "play up" to the viewer, but only, as Derrida would put it, to lead the viewer to the realization that the only place the meaning of the work may be found is no place, not where the viewer irresistibly looks (e.g., at the spectacle of the glow-in-the-dark creatures) but rather, as we saw in chapter 5, precisely where the viewer does not see—not "refuses to look," or even "is prevented from seeing," but rather *cannot* see. If we keep in mind that theatricality depends first and foremost on spatial distribution, we can appreciate the resonance of Derrida's comment, invoked in my earlier discussions, for Kac's attempt—and the ethics of that attempt—to *situate* the visual in ways that fundamentally trouble how we have typically indexed the (human) animal sensorium to the human/animal ontological divide: that "space isn't only the visible, and moreover the invisible"—an invisible that is itself "not simply the opposite of vision."[32] In this light, we can see more clearly—or perhaps I should say more "obliquely"—how Kac's theatricalization of visuality doesn't evade the viewer's "finitude" and "humanness" (as Fried would have it) but rather *underscores* it, in the specifically posthumanist sense that the field of meaning and experience is no longer thought to be exhausted by the self-reference of a particularly, even acutely, human visuality.[33]

In the end, then, the contrast between Sue Coe and Eduardo Kac helps us to see, in the realm of art, the difference between two different kinds of posthumanism that correspond to the distinction drawn at the end of chapter 4: a humanist posthumanism and a posthumanist one. Coe may be viewed as a posthumanist in the obvious and thematic sense that she takes seriously the ethical and even political challenges of the existence of nonhuman animals (this latter, in her cross-mapping of the exploitation of animals and of workers in factory farming within a Marxist frame). But as I demonstrated in some detail in chapters 3 and 4 (and I'll return to the question late in the next chapter), you can well be committed to this posthumanist question in a humanist way—that is to say, in a way that reinstalls a familiar figure of the human at the center of the universe of experience (in animal rights philosophy)





or representation (in Coe's work). And it is such a subject who then, on the basis of that sovereignty, extends ethical or artistic consideration outward toward the nonhuman other. In this light, Coe's work is humanist in a crucial sense, indeed, in the only sense that turns out to be fundamental to her work *as art:* it relies on a subject from whom *nothing, in principle, is hidden.* A subject who if blind is blind not constitutively (as I think Kac's work dramatizes in multiple ways) but only because he—and I would insist on the male pronoun in this instance, for reasons that Derrida's analysis of carnophallogocentrism makes clear—has *not yet seen* what Coe's art is calculated to reveal so powerfully, indeed melodramatically. This complicates considerably—one might even say fatefully—Coe's conception of art as a form of "witnessing."[34] For what must be witnessed is not just what we can see but also what we cannot see—indeed, *that* we cannot see. That too must be witnessed. But by whom if not by the other?