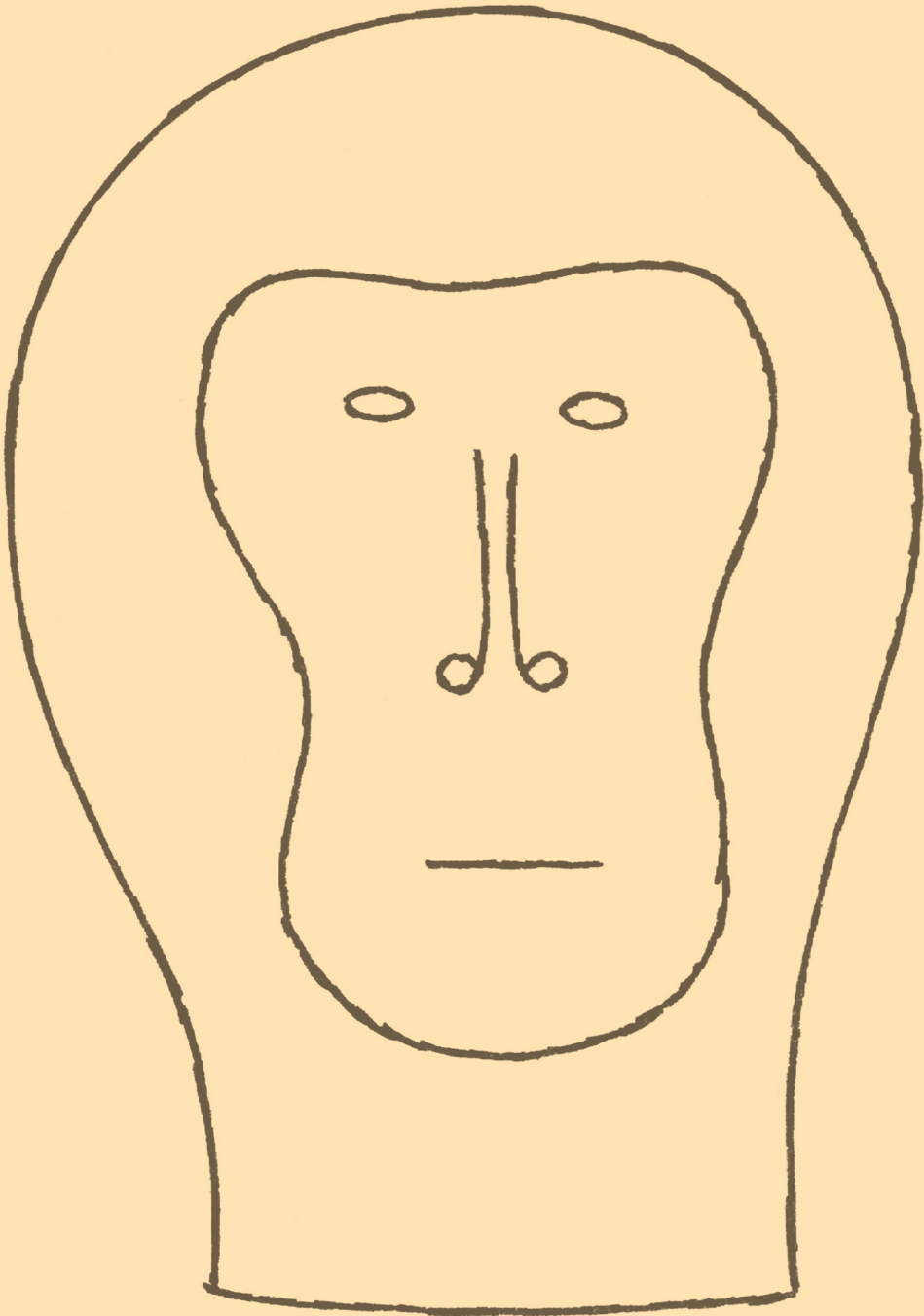
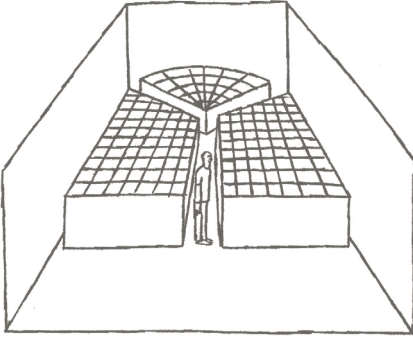


Rodrigo Hernández *with what eyes?*  
December 14, 2023 – February 24, 2024



## EMPHASES AND OMISSIONS



Translation involves creation. For Jorge Luis Borges, the Argentine writer, poet, and translator, it can be a never-ending game of emphases and omissions. In this sense, a translation is closer to a draft or a sketch, where it has the potential to deviate from its previous version, or for Borges, be even more compelling than the original.

In *If Not, Winter*, the Canadian poet Anne Carson gathers and translates Sappho's poetry. We have little information on Sappho, also known as the "tenth muse" in Ancient Greece. What we do know is that her poems were lyric, meaning they were sung to the lyre, and that only one complete work of hers survives; the rest exist as barely legible fragments in crumbling papyrus rolls. We'll never be able to experience Sappho's work in its totality, only glimpses of the poet's mind remain. In describing her approach to translating Sappho's words, Carson writes, "When translating texts read from papyri, I have used a single square bracket to give an impression of missing matter, so that ] or [ indicates destroyed papyrus or the presence of letters not quite legible somewhere in the line. (...) Brackets are exciting," she continues, "brackets imply a free space of imaginal adventure."<sup>1</sup> The absence that surrounds Sappho's work can be a productive place for readers to be. Anything can happen on the margins of a blank page. From there one can have a sense of what is present and absent, what is possible.

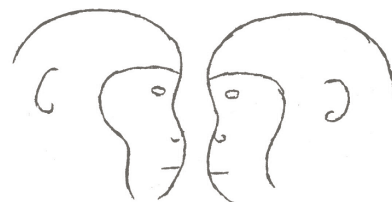
Rodrigo Hernández is most comfortable on the margins and in the conjectural. From that vantage point, the artist has developed a practice that does not seek to clarify, but to muddy the lines of categorization. His thought process begins similar to detective work.<sup>2</sup> Once he finds a subject that interests him, he delves deep. Drifting down a spiral of ideas and individuals, he constructs unexpected connections through real and fictitious references. Developing a material practice that would be at home within the literary genre of speculative history, Hernández's work complicates established origin stories, micro-histories, and even the nature of artmaking itself.

*with what eyes?*

is the title of Hernández's exhibition. And as you probably guessed, it comes from Sappho. We're not sure if "with what eyes?" is a complete poem in itself, a draft, or a fragment from the beginning, middle, or end of a longer work; is Sappho referring to a specific way of seeing, or is she answering a question with another question? Who do those eyes belong to? Are they human or nonhuman? This is an exhibition about perspective.

This exhibition is also about the act of translation: how we process information, what is gained or lost when the unknown becomes known, and most importantly, how we reconcile with or even find joy in the unexplainable, the inaccessible. Decentering the human subject for a moment, Hernández begins the exhibition with a simple question posed by the Mexican philosopher and animal rights activist David M. Peña-Guzmán: *are humans the only dreamers on Earth?*<sup>3</sup>

## ON ANIMALS, INTERPRETATION, AND NOT KNOWING



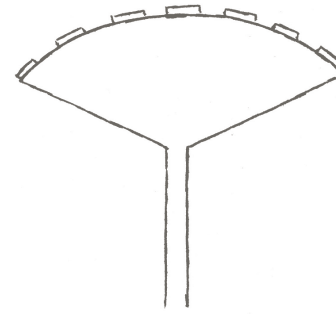
We've been fascinated with the animal world from the start. In his essay "Why Look at Animals," John Berger writes, "The first subject matter for painting was animal. Probably the first paint was animal blood. Prior to that, it is not unreasonable to suppose that the first metaphor was animal."<sup>4</sup>

Animals helped translate our surroundings. In ancient Egypt, animal icons prominently featured in hieroglyphic writing, and in Roman mythology, Romulus and Remus—the founders of Rome—were raised by a wolf. "Everywhere animals offered explanations," writes Berger "or more precisely, lent their name or character to a quality, which like all qualities, was, in its essence, mysterious."<sup>5</sup> We share an existential kinship with our nonhuman animal companions: we are born, and then we eat, sleep, reproduce, and die. "[Animals] were subjected *and* worshipped, bred *and* sacrificed," adds Berger, "This—maybe the first existential dualism—was reflected in [their] treatment."<sup>6</sup> We learned how to be human through animals.

In the West, this horizontal relationship continued until the early days of the Enlightenment when philosophers, such as René Descartes and Immanuel Kant, deemed animals mere "machines" due to their lack of language, reason, and imagination, and thus placed "Man" above nature. Born five years after Kant's death, Charles Darwin would postulate that humans are descendants of primates, therefore animals as well. Darwin reignited scientific and philosophical debates around what it means to be human vs nonhuman. If humans are animals, does this mean that nonhuman animals are capable of having other "human" qualities and are, by extension, entitled to moral status? Are they capable of dreaming and imagining?<sup>7</sup> Scientists, philosophers, and artists continue to grapple with these phenomenological and metaphysical questions.

Peña-Guzmán engages with the dream realm of animals to explore questions pertaining to animal consciousness. In his book *When Animals Dream*, he notes, "each dream world is *therimorphic* (from the Greek *therio*, meaning 'beast' or 'animal,' and *morph*, meaning 'form' or 'shape'). It takes the 'form' of the specific animal whose world it is."<sup>8</sup> Each animal dream varies according to its species. While dreams of primates might be more visual and closer to a human dream, the dreams of bats, for example, might be more sonorous and therefore more alien from a human-centric perspective. Even though there's been extensive scientific research on animal sleep, an epistemic gap remains.

Our world view, or *umwelt*, is limited to our own experience. To state the obvious, as a human animal I do not know what it means to be a chimpanzee. Peña-Guzmán acknowledges this position, “we need to learn to sit with this discomfort, because it is in this liminal space that new possibilities open between us and other animals, including the possibility of discovering something meaningful about those other spirits who roam the world on their own but by our side. (...) After all, we will never fully capture animals in our conceptual, linguistic and hermeneutic nets.”<sup>9</sup>



IMPOSSIBLE TASK

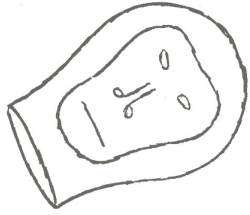
### *STILL NOT KNOWING...*

Art often deals with the indescribable. In one of our many conversations, Hernández introduced me to Yukio Lippit’s book *Japanese Zen Buddhism and the Impossible Painting*, a key reference for him. It reflects on a work by the Zen monk Josetsu titled *The Gourd and the Catfish*.<sup>10</sup> Painted around the 15th century AD, the artwork depicts a man next to a riverbank, in a minimally composed landscape, attempting to catch a fish with a gourd. This scene is doomed from the start, due to the awkwardly shaped vessel and slippery nature of the fish. The tale of this impossible task at hand is known as a koan, a doctrinal riddle that is enigmatic or illogical in nature, used for testing a Zen practitioner’s ability to think beyond normative and dualistic thought. Lippit writes:

Zen Buddhism emphasizes the concept of emptiness, which among other things asserts that form is empty, that all phenomena in the world are illusory. On the other hand, over the centuries, a prodigious amount of artwork has been created in association with Zen thought and practice. (...) Form was used to express the essence of formlessness, and in Japan, over the centuries, this gave rise to a remarkable, highly diverse array of artworks that essentially negated their own affectivity, resulting in a tradition of self-negating art.<sup>11</sup>

*The Gourd and the Catfish* encapsulates Hernández’s artistic ethos. Within the tradition of Zen painting, both the gourd and catfish are understood to be iconic representations of consciousness, and the depicted corollary action as the futility of understanding it through reason. As a practitioner of self-negating art, Hernández is not interested in defining meaning, but in engaging with all of the elements that constitute and inform it. Meaning is something that happens during the process, it’s always in flux.

## ANOTHER THOUGHT EXPERIMENT



POROUS, TRANSPARENT  
BORDERLESS

In his research, Peña-Guzmán cites a study conducted at MIT's Center for Learning and Memory that looked into the ways sleep influences spatial reasoning and memory in rats. In conducting these experiments, a "spatial task" was given for rats to complete while awake and asleep. The test was simple: the rats were placed inside a contained space and, once acclimated to their environment, were trained to follow a specific route from start to finish, with a food reward at the end point of the track. While running this spatial task numerous times, researchers were

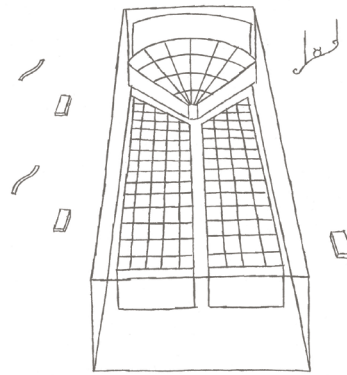
able to exactly pinpoint the location of each rat on the track, based on the specific brain and cell activity being stimulated. After completing the exercise, the rats were allowed to take a nap. The researchers noticed that the same part of the brain that deals with spatial mapping was being stimulated exactly the same way while asleep as while awake and completing the spatial tasks. Because the waking and sleep brain activity mirrored one another perfectly, the researchers concluded that the rats were *replaying* in their sleep what they had just recently experienced. Or, for Peña-Guzmán, the rats were *dreaming* of running the track.<sup>12</sup>

This experiment leaves us in an uncertain position. In an attempt to avoid anthropomorphizing the nonhuman animal's experience, the researchers describe the rats' repetition in sleep of their waking activities as a form of replay rather than a dream. This approach is within the mainstream in nonhuman animal research cognition. However, some critics, including Peña-Guzmán, believe that finding cognitive similarities between humans and nonhuman animals and refusing to apply a term that acknowledges said commonality can result in a form of *anthropodenial*,<sup>13</sup> further driving a wedge between how we morally and ethically relate to the nonhuman animal world.

It is not surprising that both Peña-Guzmán and the scientific researchers agree on the facts, yet differ in their conclusions—this is reminiscent of Josetsu's painting. Because nonhuman animals can't articulate in a legible manner, from our perspective, their subjective phenomenological experience, a leap needs to be made in order to arrive at a conclusion.

Hernández is interested in this divide. The acts of interpretation and representation, and their limitations are fundamental concerns that every artist, on some level, confronts. How does one represent an idea, an attitude, a form, and simultaneously contend with the gap between the artwork and its receiving audience?

## UNTITLED



Hernández's studio process always begins with drawing. For him, drawing is closer to memory, or more precisely, the sensation one has before remembering. It's a nebulous practice that doesn't completely belong in a world where things are settled or defined. Because of this ambiguity, drawing functions as an important springboard for Hernández to venture into other artistic media. This act of translation tints his works with a lucid quality, where materials and forms feel familiar yet strange. Here, the process of artmaking gets closer to the act of dreaming.

Dreams are hermetic experiences informed by the waking world and our subjective encounter with it. The dream world evolves around the dream body or dream ego. It is aware that it occupies a place and time, and within this subjective axis, a sequence of events unfolds and narratives are created.<sup>14</sup> In this sense, for Hernández, exhibition making and dreaming share a lot in common, as both deal with subjective representations of a reality that is presented to a specific audience.

## A WORLD UNKNOWN TO US



Rodrigo Hernández is at the Wattis.

He contracts and expands the exhibition space through temporary walls and apertures, making us aware of how we occupy space.

Akin to a scientific experiment on animal cognition or the fragmented spatial temporality of a dreamscape, Hernández's spatial configurations are an exercise in perspective and perception, a hallucinatory *mise en scène*.

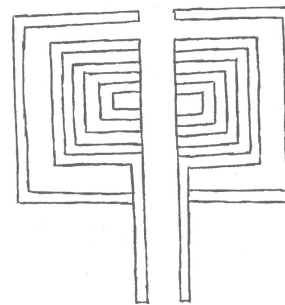
Upon entering the first room, a drawing made onsite expands horizontally and divides the space vertically. Drawn on two platforms, the minimalist composition delineates space as it pulls you in and out of its surface. In its vicinity is a papier-mâché sculpture with a strong painterly basis. Assembled through various distinctly shaped pieces around a head, the form is a negotiation between the familiar and the abstract, a manifestation of an idea in process.

Nestled in-between the walls, in the second room of Hernández's installation, are a series of hand-hammered reliefs made on stainless steel panels depicting primates in states of rest, introspection, and distress. Created through an elaborate process, he begins by tracing a drawing onto a metal sheet's surface; once fully traced, these are cut, finely hammered, reshaped, and reassembled again through welding.

Outside of Hernández's installation, the final work in the exhibition is a discrete bronze sculpture of a monkey head titled *I would not think to touch the sky with two arms*, another line borrowed from Sappho. Gently resting on its side on the floor, the work evokes Constantin Brancusi's *Sleeping Muse*.

Throughout his oeuvre, Hernández has several times turned towards the animal figure as a means to pause, suspend common sense, and reframe ordinary yet existential questions in extraordinary ways: *with what eyes* could we observe the dreams of nonhuman animals? How would we translate them? What would be revealed? In the silence surrounding Hernández's works is a world unknown to us.

## FINDING THE ECHO



We find meaning outside of ourselves. Just as for Berger the animal was the first metaphor for understanding the larger world, a mediator for us to mold an identity in relation to or in opposition to something, for Hernández, perhaps, the final metaphor is the cognitive experiments on animal sleep, the attempt at accessing their interior worlds, which brings him to a place of wondering about the possibility of representation beyond the confines of a human-centered framework.

Carson recognizes a similar boundary in the missing music and words of Sappho, and sees how generative it can be to be a reader that operates from the edges of not knowing.

The more you try to expose or fill in the information gaps, the more you insert yourself into those cavities and position yourself farther away from the original material. For Hernández, the more we know, the more we close ourselves to other potentialities. In addressing the subject of animal dreams and consciousness, he chooses to render the figure, and positions us at a distance. This reminds me of a quote on translation by Walter Benjamin that Carson uses in her text:

“[T]ranslation does not find itself in the center of the language forest but on the outside; it calls into it without entering, aiming at that single spot where the echo is able to give, in its own language, the reverberation of the work in the alien one.”<sup>15</sup>

As I finish this text, I'm sitting outside of Rodrigo Hernández's installation in the making. The walls are half finished, as the spackle dries, nails exposed. He and his artworks will arrive next week. I take Carson's evocation of Benjamin's translator as a guide on how to experience the exhibition. As I look into Hernández's installation, I patiently wait for the echo to come.

NOTES

1

Anne Carson. *If Not, Winter: Fragments of Sappho* (New York: Vintage Books, 2002), xi

2

Hernández actually titled an exhibition from 2016 “I Am Nothing” after the opening line in Patrick Modiano’s novel *Missing Person*, where an amnesiac detective is in search of his lost identity. Modiano remains a constant reference and a source of inspiration for Hernández.

3

David M. Peña-Guzmán. *When Animals Dream: The Hidden World of Animal Consciousness* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2022), 56

4

John Berger. “Why Look at Animals?” in *About Looking* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), 5

5

Berger, 6-7

6

Berger, 5

7

As these questions and conversations were unfolding, the scientific community and general public would then become captivated by Sigmund Freud’s ideas of exploring the mind by way of psychoanalysis. This practice relied on the study of an individual’s past encounters, their suppressed memories and “deviating” behavior(s). The id, superego, and ego were Freud’s categories of conscious and

unconscious impulses: the id raw and unpredictable, uncontained and unaware; the superego aspirational and “moral”; and the ego a self-aware voice of reason between the id and superego.

8

Peña-Guzmán, 58

9

Peña-Guzmán, 58

10

Hernández presented an exhibition at SALTS, Basel, in 2018 named after Josetsu’s painting.

11

Yukio Lippit. *Japanese Zen Buddhism and the Impossible Painting* (Los Angeles: Getty Publications, 2014), 1

12

Peña-Guzmán, 26-28

13

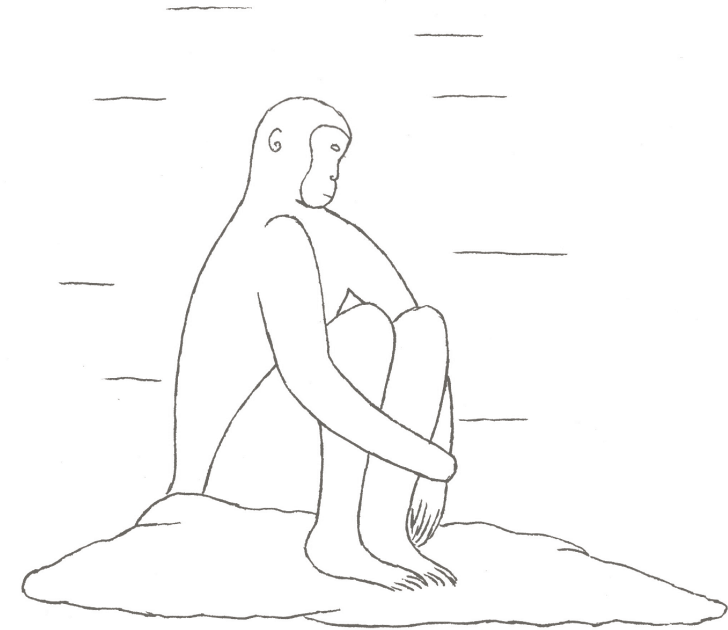
Anthropodenial refers to the dismissal of human-like qualities in other nonhuman animals.

14

Peña-Guzmán, 74-75

15

Carson, xii



WITH WHAT EYES ?

Rodrigo Hernández *with what eyes?*  
CCA Wattis Institute  
December 14, 2023 – February 24, 2024

Program: A lecture by David M. Peña-Guzmán on his book *When Animals Dream*  
January 11, 2024  
6:00pm, Free

Rodrigo Hernández (b. 1983, Mexico City) lives and works in Mexico City, Mexico.

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