

Editorial

ALEXIS HARLEY and NORIE NEUMARK

We are very pleased to introduce this inaugural issue of *Unlikely*. It's been a long time coming, since the *Feral* event at the end of 2013—some have even suggested the journal's title may have jinxed its chances of ever appearing!—but, no, here we are at last and we're grateful for the patience of our contributors. Our concern with this editorial is not to speak for the authors or the works of creative practice as research; they speak for themselves. Rather, we'd like to present this editorial as part of the ongoing conversations we've been having about feral. The conversation have been enriched by others of course, including the contributors to this issue and particularly the curators of the *Feral* event in Melbourne, Australia where the creative practice works were presented—Jan Brüggemeier, Kim Munro, and Rachael Nolan—whose curatorial expertise and willingness to embrace the unlikely brought us the event and the reflections. As editor of *Unlikely*, finally, I would also like to say what a pleasure it's been to work with Alexis on this issue, to which she has brought her keen and deep and intensely feral sense of the complexities of the biotic.

– Alexis Harley (guest editor, Feral issue) and Norie Neumark (editor, *Unlikely*)

OUTLAWS & FAMILIARS

ALEXIS HARLEY

Brambles and rabbits and cane-toads and goats, burrs in the lawn and dogs on the lam: these are a few of our familiar ferals, disrupters of agriculture, unwelcome volunteers in nipped and tucked gardens, wreckers of havoc in the besieged remnants of pre-colonial or pre-industrial ecosystems. Alongside these flesh and blood and thorn ferals, ferals that thrive both through human activity and outside of the structures of human control, are a series of less tangible ferals: the neologism that turns the hair of an English teacher; the dance move that germinates in Tokyo and within the year rampages across South

America; the outlaw belief that threatens to undo five centuries of apparent certainty. We know ferals best as the biotic hitchhikers that end up owning the highways, but the constituents of practices, cultures, processes and languages can go feral too. We find ferals in the domains both of human culture and the more-than-human world. In either context, the feral is that which exceeds the confines of the law. It is undisciplined, disorderly, and extravagant (and *extra-vagant*, from the Latin for “wandering all over the place”). The feral disrupts and rewrites practices, places, and cultures. It is both above and beneath domestication or law—un-homely, unstable, uncanny. The feral is wilder than the so-called wilderness, which, despite its reputation, is usually the object of legislation, cartography, fencing and signposts, but at the same time it is intricately related to the hegemonic culture it resists. And, crucially, its feralness is relational and contextual. Brambles and rabbits and dance moves and beliefs are only feral because of their interactions with a culture, an ecosystem; and they’re only feral insofar as they are seen to be.

This inaugural edition of *Unlikely* corrals an assortment of essays and performances, texts and unravellings that are both boundary-crossing and fantastically diverse. Some of these works take ferals as their object of analysis, some theorise the feral, and some themselves “do” feral; that is, they misbehave, disregarding rules, boundaries and the conditions of orderly movement. In her discomfiting analysis of a video depicting American servicemen killing a puppy, Rebecca Adelman writes of “feral sentiment, proximal to but ultimately uncontrollable by the various systems and structures designed to organise our feelings”. The diverse works gathered here are unified by their interest in *feral sentiment*: they analyse or feel or enact or elicit forms of feeling that are, as Adelman writes, close to, but ultimately uncontrollable by, the systems and structures designed to organise (and regulate) our feelings. Feralness is a condition of contingency and relationship. A feral in one place or time may be a cherished darling in another; the beloved domestic companion we see in Emily Carr’s short film goes native and devours the indigenous birdlife. The bird, in turn, becomes feral simply by migrating. In Australia, government websites decry the starling as “one of the world’s worst invasive species”, whereas in Britain the starling is listed as a threatened species on a national Biodiversity Action Plan.

Feralness depends on a relationship to a place, a time, a culture, a law. But more than that: feralness depends on feeling. The feral is made feral at least in part because of the emotions it elicits, emotions most commonly ranging from disgust to annoyance. It takes at least two to make such feelings, a fact that puts pressure on the category of the feral, exposing the contingency of feralness, the intrication of the feral and someone to despise it, or be annoyed by it, or wish it would get back in its box, or go back to where it came from, or retreat into the compact of domestication. Ferals are defined by their being not liked (or not liked by those who get to do the defining). This dislike is what differentiates the feral from the merely familiar. It is what distinguishes the indisputably rambunctious kudzu vine (“the vine that ate the South”) from the far more invasive and infinitely more ecologically disastrous corn (*Zea mays*, which in compact with the US government and the American people covers 39, 000, 000 hectares in the US for half the year). A feral is feral by virtue of the affective ripple that runs through a farmer, or an eco-conservator, or the guardians of culture. This ripple (of horror, or disgust) makes the feral feral: that is, feralness is conferred from without. It is a feeling that prevails in defiance of the fact that many a feral is surprisingly generous to its cohabitants. In *The New Nature*, Tim Low documents many instances of feral generosity, and he does so in language that still carries the traces of his distaste for feral familiars. He introduces *Lantana camara*, a hybrid of various Latin American shrubs, for instance, as a “monster”, a “rampant, poisonous shrub”, “one of the world’s worst weeds” (91). And yet, as he notes, there is a significant mercy in the fact that Australian ecologists have failed to defeat it:

On overcleared farms leafy lantana tangles in gullies furnish much-needed cover for wallabies, bandicoots, fairy wrens, reptiles, and almost everything else. The prickly walls it throws around small bushland remnants keep out trail bikes and dogs. Made to flower continuously and generously, its nectar sates honeyeaters and butterflies, including rare bowerbirds. Its tiny fruits feed possums, silvereyes, bowerbirds and rosellas, and reed bees nest in the stems. (Low 92)

Given how awry the best laid plans of men can go, ferals—or the act of going feral, deviating from the plan, dynamising the static—may

yet be a source of salvation. Indeed, this is the contention of Emma Maris in her *Rambunctious Garden: Saving Nature in a Post-Wild World*. Maris argues that untouched, pristine “nature” cannot exist:

A historically faithful ecosystem is necessarily a heavily managed ecosystem. It is not quite the “pristine wilderness” many nature lovers look to as the ideal. And there’s the paradox that unravels the idea of “pristine wilderness.” If we define *wild* as “unmanaged,” then the ecosystems that look the most pristine are perhaps the least likely to be truly wild. (Maris 12)

Those who, Maris argues, treasure wilderness—spaces that are truly wild, that is, “unmanaged”—must learn to love ferals, the things that thrive outside of the rule of law.

On loving ferals: I have suggested that the feral is made feral by the antipathetic feeling of what I am calling, very amorphously, the law (where the law might be a piece of legislation, or a prevailing view, or a hegemonic practice). Which of course means that feralness does not inhere in a being or an act or an object, but that it emerges from a relationship, a process. This is not to say that what the law calls a feral cannot be loved. There are a whole lot of us who are invested, at least sometimes, in disruption. We see the hints of what could become an acceptable kind of feral-love in Sil Iannello’s culinary encounter with weeds: the way to a feral-hater’s heart is surely through a roadside-foraged spanakopita. Once a feral is loved by the law, though, once ferals go mainstream and acceptable, feralness falls away, because the feralness of one entity is constituted by the dislike of “the law”. There are examples the world over of such once and former ferals (goji berries, once a “fairly common weed of waste ground”, are now a highly prized “superfood” (Rickard 186)). And there are figures the world over that tread the knife-edge of sentiment that divides feral from lawful. The dingo occupies one such knife-edge position: after some 4,000 years in Australia it has become indigenous, and is accordingly treasured, at least in legislation, but in the very recent past it has been regarded as vermin, and as public sentiment ricochets between ideas about nature, purity, indigeneity, farming, sheep and national identity, it risks becoming vermin, and feral, again.

As the case of the dingo suggests, feral status inheres not only because of a particular kind of sentiment, but because of how this sentiment ramifies through law, whether that law be the product of a national legislature or a cultural cannon, the blunt rule of force or the far more slippery manipulations of ideology. In theory, we could think of the European honeybee, *Apis mellifera*, as a feral species: from Europe it has colonised the earth; its “domestication” is doubtful, given that the bee colony will reproduce itself and appropriate new genetic material despite the interventions of the beekeeper. And yet few these days would describe as feral North America’s 2.64 million European honeybee colonies, each containing perhaps 40, 000 stinging insects. All that differentiates the exotic honeybees from some arch-feral – the Asian Varroa mite, for instance, which has more than decimated American bee hives over recent decades – is that for the industrial-scale agriculture on which we depend to work, we need pollinating insects who can be made to live in boxes and be driven from one end of a continent to another. So honeybees that look for all the world like ferals are not ferals, because in going about their business they do something we like, pollinating the majority of our domesticated food species. These non-indigenous, dubiously domesticated, potentially lethal insects are, in the relevant contexts and of course only to a certain extent, protected by law.

But legitimacy is itself a perilous condition. The cane toads, *Bufo marinus*, that are making their way across Australia’s Kakadu National Park are deeply loathed, categorically outlawed, and the objects of a probably futile extermination attempt. People kill them with complete impunity and no one is much exercised if the toads suffer in the process. And yet no creature could have been more lawful, more authorised, than one of the 102 cane toads caged inside the packing cases of the Queensland Bureau of Sugar Experiment Stations and freighted to Australia in 1935. The toads were companion animals by conscription, deployed to eat the indigenous Australian cane beetles that ate the exotic sugar cane so that the (mostly colonising) humans could eat the sugar instead. The toads of course broke a pact they’d never agreed to, exceeded the limits of their domestication, went feral, and are now rhetorically militarised in every conservation report that alludes to them – though it seems unfair to construe a species that makes the most of a forced migration as an invader.

Perhaps the moral of the cane toad tale is that human intentionality ain't all it's cracked up to be. Western history is flooded with instances of people trying to manipulate life, and life going its own way. In this and all sorts of ways, the idea of the feral puts pressure on the idea of nature. The word feral derives from the Latin, *fera*, meaning wild animal, but when we talk of wildness or wilderness today, we mean to suggest something entirely disconnected from the human. Our ferals are far from that; indeed, they are defined by their former domestication. Ferals are humanity's co-travellers. They fall somewhere between nature and culture, and so expose the imperfection of that binary. They prise wide open the question of what nature is, what wildness or wilderness is. And they prise wide open the ways in which either term in the culture/nature binary is characterised. When "culture", the domain of human activity, is conventionally figured as rational and intentional, while nature, on the other hand, is inert, passive, and acted upon by culture, where does the feral—as archetypal a figure for natureculture (to borrow Donna Haraway's coinage) as we could imagine—fit in? For ferals are, as we have seen, affiliated to humans, to culture, in ways that exceed or fail human intention. But they are also affiliated to the other side of the binary—to wildness— and yet they too seem to exercise intention. Or so suggests the metaphor of the *invasive* species: few migrations are so agential, so intentional, as an invasion. In confounding perhaps the defining binary of Western post-enlightenment humanist thought, the feral is the quintessential force of disruption.

FERAL AESTHETICS: ANOTHER SORT OF HAVOC

NORIE NEUMARK

Feral feelings ripple (through) the works in this issue as feeling itself goes feral, disrupting aesthetically and disrupting aesthetics. What happens when aesthetics go feral in creative practices, disrupting and wreaking havoc with all sorts of assumptions as they go? What do feral aesthetics look like, sound like, feel like? These are questions that the works in this issue help us to think about. To help engage with these

works, let's take a feral spoon to the already vigorously bubbling pot of aesthetics, ethics, perception, and affect and see what feral thinking might bubble up.

Of course the thinking about aesthetics has long been bubbling away (e.g., Buck-Morss). And recently, from new materialism, to “new aesthetics”, to “ugly feelings”, a number of critical writers have been giving a particularly feral stir to that bubbling pot—by focusing on perceptions, affect, politics and ethics, they have taken aesthetics well beyond the beautiful or sublime, beyond judgments of taste. While it is new materialism that resonates most closely with the approach to feral that we are taking in this issue, and we'll focus on that shortly, it is important to note some other non-canonical approaches to aesthetics which help us engage with the feral aesthetics of works in this issue—especially the aesthetics of the non-canonical—such as Gernot Böhme's “new aesthetics” and Sianne Ngai's “minor” aesthetics. These are both exemplary, from different discourses, of a foregrounding of the affective and perceptive aspect of aesthetics.

At the heart of Gernot Böhme's *new aesthetics* is perception—“basically the manner in which one is bodily present for something or someone or one's bodily state in an environment.” Böhme has used the term, the new aesthetics, to move beyond a “normative” aesthetics of judgement in which sensuousness and nature have “disappeared” and in which art is wrongly, he argues, treated as a form of communication of meaning (Böhme 115). For Böhme:

The new aesthetics is thus as regards the producers a general theory of aesthetic work, understood as the production of atmospheres. As regards reception it is a theory of perception in the full sense of the term in which perception is understood as the experience of the presence of persons, objects and environments. (116)

“Atmospheres” is the key figure here for Böhme: it is an intermediate phenomenon, between the subject and object (3). Atmospheres are spatial, they are spaces “tinctured” through the presences of persons, who sense through their bodily presence, and things which articulate their presence through various qualities which Böhme calls “ecstasies”

(122). In other words, an atmosphere is the common reality, which is in the same space of the perceiver and the perceived. In terms of makers, the question becomes how they “make” atmospheres through their work on objects. From our point of view, Böhme takes the understanding of atmosphere in a feral direction, beyond the traditional and limited beauty or sublime, to all sorts of things such as melancholic, serene, heroic, peaceful, etc. To the various makers of atmospheres that Böhme mentions, including set designers, garden makers and town planners, we would add event curators and installation makers. This is particularly relevant for the *Feral* event that preceded and kicked off this issue, where the creative practice works documented here took place. Both the *ecstasies* of the event itself, from its staging to the weed soup that nourished it, were tintured feral. In short, bringing Böhme together with the feelingness of feral, we sense how feralness emerges with or in atmosphere -- atmosphere being the combination of feeling and place, a feral being a feral both because of the place it is in (the “wrong” or unexpected place) and a feeling that emerges about it.

If Böhme’s “new aesthetics” provides one way to think about feral aesthetics, another comes from Sianne Ngai’s “minor aesthetics” – encompassing strange categories and feelings like the ugly, the zany, the cute, and the interesting (Jasper and Ngai, 2011, Ngai, 2007, Ngai, 2012). Like Böhme, Ngai takes a feral spoon to aesthetics and affect, to go beyond the realm of high art into culture in general, asking how ordinary and taken for granted works and practices move us in our ordinary lives. How can we think aesthetics not just in relation to styles, say, but thinking about how we make “subjective, feeling-based judgments” (Ngai, 2012: 29). Even *cuteness*. Cuteness, Ngai suggests, following Hannah Arendt, is “the modern enchantment with ‘small things’” (Arendt qtd. in Ngai, 2012: 3), related to the desire for intimate and sensuous relations to things. At first response, cuteness is an unlikely sort of feral, yet, beyond the appeal for us of anything *unlikely!*, we would note the possibility even in the cute for a feral moment – for cute to go feral and feral to go cute—which was palpable during the Feral event with the cute food labels, little cups of weed soups speaking to an audience desire not just to look at and listen to feral works but to intimately engage through touching food and tasting it—*anew*, in an enchanted way.

Intimate relations to things, and enchantment, segue us now to new materialism—an umbrella term, like posthumanism, for a range of approaches where human-nonhuman relations disturb traditional human-centred approaches, including to aesthetics. Enchantment is a figure that political philosopher and feminist new materialist Jane Bennett has worked with in developing a politics and ethics of aesthetics or an aesthetics and ethics of politics. But first, let us briefly introduce post humanism.

Without entering the debates in this field, I would note the crucial work of Bruno Latour and others involved in ANT (Actor Network Theory) which developed a way to talk about animate-inanimate relations as part of their disrupting of an absolute, essential, human-centric otherness. With ANT all can be actors in a network, can have “intentions”—disturbing the very concept of intentions, which ferals, as we’ve seen, do in such an exemplary way (Latour 107). Intentionality has long been overripe for disassembling (morphing?) in aesthetics, especially where it’s been soured by the “creative artist as genius” discourse; but, by suggesting that it’s not just humans that have intentions, but also things, Bruno Latour, and ANT work well to unsettle intentionality from its previous problematic understandings. For ANT, as the name says, rather than human-centred intentions, the focus is on dynamic and contextually determined and determining networks and relations across categories—including between animate beings, inanimate objects, concepts or ideas or ideologies, institutions or organizations, and spaces. In short, ANT approaches social networks as contingent and performative. Hmmm, sounding a lot like feral—itself also contingent and performative, not pre-existent but co-constituted, enmeshed, entangled, made by and maker of a network. Hmmm, sounding a lot like ANT.

Latour’s ideas of networks of intentionalities go even more feral under the wayfaring feet of anthropologist Tim Ingold who prefers the figure of meshwork to network, so as not to turn things into objects and not to distinguish between things and their relations. For Ingold, “things are their relations.” And, we can hear here, his sense of the inseparability of the subject from their environment resonates with Böhme’s atmospheres.

Ingold proposes the figure of meshwork to suggest a web of becoming, where things are the lines of force, immersed in their medium (Ingold 63, 70, 72, 92-93):

the ground we walk, the ever-changing skies, mountains and rivers, rocks and trees, the houses we inhabit and the tools we use, not to mention the innumerable companions, both non-human animals and fellow humans, with which and with whom we share our lives.... are constantly inspiring us, challenging us, telling us things. (Ingold xii)

This feral disruption of subjects and objects by posthumanists directly impacts on aesthetics in the work of Jane Bennett. The feral spoon that feminist Bennett takes to the bubbling pot is animated particularly by ethical and political concerns. Bennett proposes “an energetics of ethics,” where affect, aesthetics, and sensibility disturb and intensify, energizing and inspiring ethical engagements with the world.

When Bennett argues for an aesthetic, affective, and ethical understanding of enchantment, she stirs up all these terms, putting feral fingers into the enchanted pie, or should we say weed soup. And it is this ethical and feral turn in enchantment, which turns away from other, escapist, approaches to enchantment that makes Bennett’s take on enchantment so important and relevant here. As she says:

Without modes of enchantment, we might not have the energy and inspiration to enact ecological projects, or to contest ugly and unjust modes of commercialization, or to respond generously to humans and nonhumans that challenge our settled identities. These enchantments are already in and around us. (174)

So what’s at stake in Bennett’s feral approach to aesthetics is the need to provoke and nourish ethical behaviour—in a way that bypasses recuperation and exhaustion.

We would suggest that the feral practices presented here travel along the same sort of path that Ingold and Bennett tread—uncanny and affective, alluring and disturbing, with the potential to make the

enchantment of the modern world audible and visible and sensible—and non-sensical.

[T]o be enchanted is to be both charmed and disturbed: charmed by a fascinating repetition of sounds or images, disturbed to find that, although your sense-perception has become intensified, your background sense of order has flown out the door. (Bennett, 2001: 34)

It is with her attention to affect, ethics, and aesthetics that Bennett revitalises the figure of enchantment, ferally letting it loose, and opening up ways to look and listen and sense that disturb and intensify. It is, after all, affect that makes us feel investments and attachments, and, more than that, and in ways that are culturally and politically important to understand, affect actually performs those very investments and attachments between individuals and things, communities, and assemblages. We hope that as you engage with the feral aesthetics of the works in this Feral issue of *Unlikely* (sensing in them the memory of the atmospheres of the Feral event where they were ‘staged’), you can sense how a feral aesthetics affectively *perform*, performatively bringing to the fore the very affect at the heart of aesthetics—and feralness itself.

WORKS CITED

- Aldhous, Peter. “Invasive species: The toads are coming!” *Nature* 432 (2004): 796-798.
- Bennett, Jane. *The Enchantment of Modern Life: Attachments, Crossings and Ethics*, Princeton: Princeton University, 2001.
- Böhme, Gernot. “Atmosphere as the Fundamental Concept of a New Aesthetics”. *Thesis Eleven* 36 (1993): 113-126.
- Böhme, Gernot. “The art of the stage set as a paradigm for an aesthetics of atmospheres”. *Ambiances* (2013).
<http://ambiances.revues.org/315> (accessed February 2014).
- Buck-Morss, Susan. (1993) “Aesthetics and Anaesthetics: Walter Benjamin’s Artwork Essay Reconsidered”, *new formations* 20 (1993).
- Ingold, Tim. *Being Alive: Essays on Movement, Knowledge, and Description*. London and New York: Routledge, 2011.
- Jasper Adam and Ngai, Sianne (2011) “Our Aesthetics Categories: An Interview with Sianne Ngai. *Cabinet* 43 (2011).

http://www.cabinetmagazine.org/issues/43/jasper_ngai.php
(accessed November 2014).

Latour, Bruno. *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network –Theory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005.

Low, Tim. *The New Nature: Winners and Losers in Wild Australia*. Melbourne and London: Penguin, 2002.

Maris, Emma. *Rambunctious Garden: Saving Nature in a Post-Wild World*. New York: Bloomsbury, 2011.

Ngai, Sianne. *Ugly Feelings*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007.

Ngai, Sianne. *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012.

Peretti, Jonnah H. "Nativism and Nature: Rethinking Biological Invasion", *Environmental Values* 7 (1998): 183-192.

Rickard, Simon. *Heirloom Vegetables: A Guide to their History and Varieties*. Melbourne: Penguin, 2014.