

***Becoming Animal during the Sixth Mass Extinction of the Anthropocene:
The Naturalist-Artist Vivian Van Blerk***

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Amidst this sixth age of mass extinction of the Anthropocene, extreme weather conditions and unnatural disasters have been fuelled continually by climate change. With sea-levels constantly rising, tropical cyclones have increasingly erupted bringing record-breaking rainfalls and the prevalence of catastrophic flooding reaping untold devastation. With the concentration of greenhouse gases increasing, overwhelming fires unleashed by global warming and intense heatwaves have wiped out entire regions. With the worst mammal extinction rates on planet Earth recorded, 126 species of plants and animals having vanished in just over 200 years with 383 species classified as endangered or identified as surviving precariously on offshore islands. Due to deep-ocean trawling even the Blobfish, voted the World's Ugliest Animal and likened to Donald Trump, has become an endangered species. Such places as South Africa and Johannesburg, where Vivian Van Blerk lived until leaving university and where most of his family remain, have proven particularly vulnerable.

"Thousands of species, many occurring only in South Africa", according to Robert Scholes and Francois Engelbrecht, "are at increased risk of premature extinction as a result of human-caused climate change."¹ Vivian's formative experiences with these "thousands of species" amidst the omniscient threat of their "premature extinction" may well have proven a catalyst for his 'becoming animal' as a Naturalist-Artist while living in Paris.² Conterminously the intensity of Vivian's animalism and organicism may relate to the impact of his formative experiences with South African wildlife alongside the long-festering trauma from what he called his "lost" native land with its Transition to Majority Rule from 1994. The analytical dimensions of Vivian's animalism may also relate to the huge growth in animal studies during his lifetime, particularly into animal agencies and interspecies relationships. How Vivian explored animal agencies during the Sixth Mass Extinction of the Anthropocene, through his empathic interrelationship with animals, especially the hippopotamus, is unravelled in the five-parts of this chapter, alongside his bighting irony, incisive parody and piercing flair for absurdity. At the same time, it needs to be acknowledged at the outset that Vivian's *œuvre* was so immense and diverse over some thirty years, that by no means was it focused only upon

animal agencies explored from the multiple perspectives of a naturalist-artist able to empathize by ‘becoming animal’.

Introduction to Five Parts

Living from birth in parts of South Africa surrounded by wildlife, Vivian had directly experienced the largest and longest surviving species over some 60 million years—rhinoceroses, elephants, and the one with which he felt the most affinity, the hippopotamus. Long had Vivian become immersed within South African and other animal cultures from the children’s book, *Hubert the Travelling Hippopotamus* to the popular song, “I want a Hippopotamus for Christmas” and especially, the animated, *Hugo the Hippo*, amongst an efflorescence of other hippo-cultures.³ Instead of appearing as territorially aggressive and reputedly “the most dangerous land animal in the world”, Vivian appears to have absorbed these cultural inscriptions of the hippopotamus as caring, daring, humorous, playful, creative, loyal, extremely intelligent and highly sensitive. In endeavouring to absorb, engage and experience the natural and cultural worlds from their perspective, Vivian seems to have created not just from his empathic experience of ‘becoming animal’ but more specifically, from his imagination of ‘becoming hippo’. While ‘the hippo’ continues throughout Vivian’s *œuvre*, this is illuminated by my scrutiny of his portfolio started in 2000 and completed some ten years later in the first part of this chapter: *L’Hippopotame reveur*.

Initially Vivian seemed to have pursued a model of evolution and extinction identified with the French eighteen-century naturalist, monogenecist and cosmologist *Intendant* at the *Jardin de Roi*: Georges-Louis Leclerc, Comte de Buffon, as illuminated by the second part of this chapter. Often, he mentions *Buffon’s grandchildren*, presumably encompassing Jean-Baptiste Lamarck, Edmond Perrier and Pierre-Paul Grassé. How Buffon posed a challenge to the fixed divisions drawn by Carolus Linnaeus is illuminated initially by Vivian’s painting, *Cornucopia*. As this painting appears as a pastiche of Goya’s *The Sleep of Reason Begets Monster*, the despair of Goya’s artist-scientist is compared to the despair of Vivian’s naturalist-scientist, Linnaeus, on cataloguing obdurate species. Just as Goya’s artist-scientist’s head plummets onto his desk, so Linnaeus’ head plunges onto his cataloguing in Vivian’s *Cornucopia*. This is why I start with Francisco de Goya Y Lucientes before focusing upon Vivian’s portrayal of Linnaeus haunted by the radiating Naturalism of Buffon.

Instead of Charles Darwin and the British Darwinists, the Paris-based, French speaking Vivian seemed to have pursued a trajectory from Buffon and Lamarck’s *Philosophie*

Zoologique to Perrier's Neo-Lamarckian *Transformism*, epitomized by *Les Colonies Animales et la Formation des Organismes*.⁴ Seemingly extending their theses to Lynn Margulis' *Symbiogenesis*, as this third part illuminates, Vivian explored how this could entail prolonged association and cooperation between the most incongruous organisms. Aptly entitled *Gaia's Revenge?*, Vivian seems to endeavour to unravel the ecological pollution of a vengeful planet, the irony of association between the most unlikely species, and the paradox of "waste" acting as a facilitator for crows, snails and even vultures to attain survival as the fittest.⁵

During severe Climate Change and its dire ramifications invoked in the fourth part aptly entitled *The Flood Foretold*, Vivian's exploration of animal autonomy and solidarity during ecological crises is unravelled, particularly the ways in which this could emerge amongst the most unlikely species. During eco-crises, Vivian depicts how butterflies, rats and baby dinosaurs; pigs, parrots, hippos, elephants and giraffes; monkeys, dogs, and foxes seemed to consolidate in whatever environment they could survive, forging micro-ecosystems beyond human intervention. In parodying their scientific exploitation as test subjects and their fetishization as collector's items, Vivian also reveals the human abuse of animals.

This leads into the fifth, culminating part in which Vivian's inscription of animals as innovative mediators is illuminated, especially their facility to adapt to continuous Climate Change catastrophes without human intervention. Focusing upon Vivian's last series, *Archipel*—also called *Archipelago*—his vision of the impact of anthropogenic Climate Change and ecological catastrophe during the 22nd and 23rd centuries is explored, especially their culmination in the extinction of homo sapiens. This final part then concludes with Vivian's projection of "post-human micro-universes" by circa 2300 envisaged by his sculptural series of animal infested islets, made of clay fired porcelain, moulded from the perspective of those species most able to survive: The elephant, rhinoceros and, of course, the hippo.

L'Hippopotame reveur : Hippopotamus and Destiny

In 1953, Columbia Records flew ten-year old Gayla Peevey to New York City to record "I want a Hippopotamus for Christmas". Written by John Rox with accompanying music by the Mitch Miller Orchestra, a "doll", "a dinky Tinkertoy", even "crocodiles" and "rhinoceroses" were all rejected as Christmas presents. Despite such warnings as "Mom says the hippo would eat me up", the lyric continually repeated explains "only a hippopotamus will do". Dripping with saccharine sentiment, this song became such a huge hit that Oklahoma City Zoo started a campaign to raise enough money to purchase a hippo for Gayla. Yet by no means

was this song and its sensationalism an isolated incident. Once a ‘hit’, a spate of ‘*Happy Hippo* songs for kids’ were unleashed on the record market: *Marpo the Hippopotamus* and *Happy Hippopotamus* by the Itty Bitty Beats; *Hippo Harmony* by Claudia Robin Gunn; *Hello Hippopotamus* by Laura Doherty; *Rockin’ Hippos* by Love to Sing; *Harry the Hippo* by Suzie Davies-Splitter; *Happy, Happy Hippo* by Juice Music and *Mon Hippopotame* by Henry Dès, to name but a few of the 36 released during this short period. It was not long before the music became intertwined with a spate of mushy animation epitomized by *The Hippo wants to dance* and the Alman Kids’ *Daisy Dot – Hippo Hippopotamus* with a chorus *Hippo Hippo ay*. However, by the 1970s when Hungarian animators worked on *Hugo the Hippo* with Director, Bill Feigenbaum, this infantilizing mould seemed to become transformed into what Randy Miller called “excellent” visuals, “memorable” characters, a “vintage pop soundtrack” and an “international adventure” narrated by Aban Khan with songs by Jimmy and Marie Osmond, as well as Burl Ives.

Created with English voice-overs, *Hugo the Hippo* was released from Hungary on 25 December 1975, and circulated across the US from 9 January 1976, making its way to Johannesburg and Cape Town by 1978, around the time when Vivian would have turned seven years old. Growing up surrounded by wildlife environments, Vivian would have been aware that the hippo is revered as a sacred animal in parts of Africa, endowed with spiritual powers and able to provide protection to those living near their habitats. Amongst many Ugandans, he was aware how prized they were for improving water quality and contributing to a healthy ecosystem. At the same time, he was aware that in West African folklore, they were inscribed as cunning and mischievous, enjoying playing pranks on other animals, as well as humans. Rarely did he miss an opportunity to visit their terrain where he endeavoured to mingle with them. As Vivian’s mother Barbara vividly recalls:

“We went so many times and saw so much. Let’s say hoping to find giraffes at a waterhole? Then we stayed and stayed. At Lake Eland where we could get out of cars, Vivian walked in the rain up to the top of the hill to photo the hippos and to try to be amongst them. I will try and put it better but it was just mutual love of it all.”⁶

Long exposed to the historical tales of *Huberta the Hippo* who travelled more than 1,600 kilometres from the Umbolozzi River to Cape Agulhas—the southern-most point of Africa—*Hugo the Hippo* would have been one of the first times that Vivian could immerse himself in

vividly creative animation reportedly able to illuminate the narrative of a hippopotamus as, according to the keyword in its poster, “phantasmagorical!” (Figure)

At the start of this animation, Hugo, son of the King of the Hippos, accompanies his family to Zhanzibar in order to fight off sharks in their harbour. Successful and initially lauded by the town, over time the Hippo families become neglected, abandoned and slaughtered to such an annihilating degree that Hugo becomes an orphan. Escaping to Tanzania, Hugo becomes the centre of a conflict between the children who adore him and their parents who feel threatened by him until rescued by the Tanzanian boy, Jorma. “It’s really a story about how people use animals without thinking, and how the animals are always the ones that end up suffering for the actions of the people that have used them”, explains Feigenbaum. It is then with Jorma that *Hugo* experiences a series of phantasmagorical adventures. Escaping from fields of evil vegetables while evading corn canons and pumpkin samurai, Hugo and Jorma ride a giant butterfly together to another planet made of cauliflower. Consistently this phantasmagoria is heightened by the fantastical images and illuminating colours on this planet—strange fruits and mixed berries revolving amongst tomatoes amidst shooting stars.⁷ Long may this phantasmagoria have lingered in Vivian’s imagination, resonating in his unconscious and regurgitating when he was 25 to write his story, *L’Hippopotame reveur*. It seemed to resurface when 27 while resident in 1998 at the Cite Internationale des Arts in Paris where I first knew him. Thereafter, once Paris became his home, Vivian seemed to develop this into his staged photograph series, *Hippopotamus and Destiny*.

Relatively amphibious, the Hippo can remain in water for sixteen hours of their days and underwater regularly for limited periods, particularly in African rivers and waterholes. Long attracting wildlife beholders, more recently their facility has become commercially spectacularized in the Aquarium presented by Shriner’s Children’s Philadelphia to provide, according to its marketing hype, “unparalleled viewing experience above and below the water” where spectators “can come within inches of our 3000 pound hippos”.⁸ By contrast, the hippo in Vivian’s colour photograph of his construction of a touristic set, is located not as the spectacle but as the spectator in the dry, sight-seeing part of an aquarium. From this human perspective, the hippo seems to be watching the human spectacularization of sea-life—the aquarian plants on the sea-bed below the fish, including a shark swimming by. (Figure: *Aquarium*, 2000) Through his creation of a series of other contexts resonating with absurdities, wittily inverting beholders’ expectations, Vivian continued to travesty the incipient spectacularization of the Hippo in this series, *Hippopotamus and Destiny*, alongside their increasing commercialization and exclusion from their wildlife habitats.

In *Ark*, Vivian may seem to be addressing the myth of a global flood able to destroy all life dating back to the Babylonian Empire and popularized as *Noah's Ark*—fossil evidence for this phenomenon being the Black Sea Deluge some 7,500 years ago. (Figure: *Ark*) Given Vivian's experience of the rapidity of climate change from 1994-2000, with warming becoming increasingly faster than the longer term average and floods increasing, long may he have envisaged its dire outcome, as captured by him in *Ark*, and twenty-three years later in *Archi*, addressed in the last part of this catalogue essay. In Vivian's *Ark*, the prospect of *Hippo* being taken away from his habitat for a long period of time until the floods recede may account for its seeming hesitation in following other animals into this vessel. What seems to follow in Vivian's succeeding images are *Hippo*'s encounters once the *Ark* has landed, in order to find its way home, possibly from a place as remote as the Mountains of Ararat. Dialectically contextualizing the period of *Hippo*'s journey and encounters in 'then and now', initially *Hippo* follows a cableway erected amidst Corinthian columned temples and Gothic cathedrals as a means of traversing the earth during the day (Figure: *Cableway*, 2001). During the night, *Hippo* follows the stars and constellations (Figure: *Cableway – Night*, 2000). Given *Hippo*'s love of water, one of the happiest parts of his journey appears to entail finding sustenance and protection in an underground waterproof cavern hewn out of rock to catch and store rainwater in a subterranean reservoir, as illuminated by Vivian's *Cistern*. (Figure: *The Cistern*, 2001) In his journey, this appears the first time that *Hippo* seems able to find his element, as illustrated by his playful immersion in the water of the cistern, with a monkey riding on his back, amidst vibrant ultramarine lights and shimmering reflections.

The *Cistern* seems to signify the start of human habitation in *Hippo*'s journey, particularly collective human habitation in cities. To signify that *Hippo* has finally reached human culture, urbanization and so-called "civilization", Vivian locates *Hippo* within the next colour photograph of his set in this series entitled *Library*. (Figure: *Library*, 2001) An extraordinary conglomeration of antithetical artefacts are pictured by Vivian around this red ten-shelfed bookcase. While an African mask (identifiable with Cubism) appears on one side, a portrait of a Franciscan monk appears on the other; while a statue of a monk riding a donkey appears on one side, a huge bust of Stalin appears on the other. In the centre of this drawing room is *Hippo*. Having overturned a coffee table laden with fruits, *Hippo* seems to parody the conflict between "civilization" and animalism, highlighting the gaps between animals and humans while illuminating the superficiality of human culture. In the next part of the journey, past and present seem to become fused with *Hippo* crossing a desert studded with cactii, amidst decaying Corinthian columns, by riding on a hang-glider (*Desert*, 2000). The second version,

including the photographed head of Vivian (*Desert with Self-Portrait*, 2000) illuminates the artificiality of his staging and its relatively small scale. The next artwork, entitled *The Office*, seems to signify *Hippo*'s final arrival in 'big business'. Yet with *Hippo* located directly under the portrait of a black sun-glasses gangster with gun in hand, this 'big business' seems hardly bona fide. This may explain why *Hippo* is captured snarling at a human that we cannot see in the flesh but only in its sinister shadow projected from behind an overturned chair. (*The Office*, 2000) In proceeding to a huge moon illuminating a mountainous snow-filled environment in which *Hippo* appears to be resting (*The Moon*, 2000) before encountering a palace (*The Palace*, 2001), Vivian seems to create incongruous locations and deploy a series of binaries to illuminate the disjunctions between animals and humans, nature and culture, barbarity and civilization, devolution and evolution.

The final artwork, *The Raft*, seems to transfer *Hugo* from land to water, which he needs to cross in order to return home. Composed after *The Raft of Médusa*, initially entitled *Scène de Naufrage*, Vivian's *Raft* raises an element that is never cited in analyses of Théodore Géricault's painting: The existence of animals on board the *Médusa*, and what would have happened to them after the shipwreck. In portraying *The Raft* from the perspective of animals, Vivian then represents a variant of the *Médusa* narrative. On Vivian's fragile raft appears a kangaroo, leopard, seal, ostrich, goat, bear, rhinoceros, elephant and *Hippo*—even a starfish. By no means safe and secure, he depicts them at the very moment when they seem about to be overturned by a massive blue whale signified by its monstrous tale and the tidal wave it seems to generate on one side of the raft. Even though the animals are represented hanging on to the other side of the raft, it proves to be no safer. No sooner do they lurch to this side and inspect the seawater there than they find a school of sharks encircling their raft. Hence Vivian's *Raft* appears as the animal variant of *The Raft of Médusa*. Just as Géricault revealed the cannibalism, dehydration and starvation amongst the few human survivors on their raft, so Vivian illuminates the hopeless fate of these animals caught on all fronts with their raft about to be overturned. Their only hope might have been the island flickering like a mirage in the distance, just as the ship on the horizon seemed to appear momentarily for the few human survivors of the *Méduse* portrayed by Géricault. Seeming impossible to reach, the animals, like the shipwrecked humans on the *Méduse*, are then located by Vivian in a dire position of no alternatives. Nevertheless, as Vivian relays in later artwork entitled *The Flood Foretold*, miraculously one seemed able to reach this island and to survive: *Hippo*.

The Sleep of Reason begets monsters and Cornucopia: Goya's Artist-Scientist, Vivien's

Naturist-Scientist, Linnaeus and Buffon

(Figure: Francisco de Goya Y Lucientes, *El sueño de la razón produce monstruos*, etching and aquatint, First edition of 1799).

(Figure: Vivian Van Blerk, *Cornucopia*, 2004; colour photograph after a temporary maquette built by the artist; 124x100cm, 2004; a version owned by Fae Brauer and Justin Fleming, Paris)

In his etching series, *Los caprichos*, Goya captured the exhaustion that an artist-scientist appeared to experience upon grappling with the scientific tools of the Enlightenment to advance humankind by conquering ignorance and oppression.⁹ His head buried in his arms, Goya's artist-scientist appears slumped exhaustedly over a desk on which sheets of drawing paper are strewn amidst geometric tools. Despite the order and control that Goya's Enlightenment artist-scientist seems endeavouring to create, he is surrounded by chaos. Menacing bats, prowling owls and a wide-eyed lynx, identified with Spanish evil and mystery, besiege his collapsed body. One owl even seizes the artist's crayon holder and is about to prod him with its point. Hence, while reason was made to appear as the guide of human consciousness during the Enlightenment Goya, like Vivian, reveals that it has no control over the unconscious, as signified by the monstrous chaos that emanates during sleep encapsulated by Goya's title, *The sleep of reason begets monsters*.¹⁰ Conterminously, the nightmare unleashed by Vivian's rearticulation of Goya's *Sleep of Reason*, in Vivian's photomontage of his creation of an eighteenth-century Swedish naturalist-scientist's study entitled *Cornucopia*, entailed forging an infinite mono-dimensional empirical classification of animals, birds and sea creatures in the early Enlightenment encyclopaedias at the start of the sixth mass extinction of the Anthropocene.

Like Goya's artist-scientist, Vivien's naturalist-scientist in *Cornucopia* appears slumped over his desk, his fair-haired head resting exhaustedly on his interlocked hands. The cartons on his desk containing specimens, together with the white smock covering his torso above his grassy green trousers, seem to signify that this is a naturalist-scientist who has been carefully cataloguing specimens that can be spied in the containers and volumes on the filing shelves behind him. They all seem to conjure the pious Enlightenment systematizer of the natural world, purportedly guided by God, who achieved renown as the 'father of taxonomy': Carolus Linnaeus. While Professor of Medicine and Botany at the University of Sweden, Linnaeus had devised his *System Naturae* for empirically classifying all of nature into three kingdoms,

Animal, Vegetable and Mineral, divided into classes and ranked in a hierarchical order of species, denoted as *genus*, fixed since the time of Biblical creation.¹¹ “Objects are distinguished and known by classifying them methodically and giving them appropriate names”, Linnaeus explained. “Therefore classification and name-giving will be the foundation of our science.”¹²

The antithesis of the *Natural Histories* spawned by the French Naturalist, cosmologist and mathematician, Georges-Louis Leclerc Comte de Buffon, Linnaeus may be pictured by Vivian as one of Buffon’s prime antagonists, if not his *bête noir*. By 1749, the first three volumes of Buffon’s 35 volume *Histoire Naturelle, générale et particulière* had been published, eagerly purchased, and acclaimed as the *De rerum natura* of the eighteenth century.¹³ Despite contentions that “God Himself guided Linnaeus”, he was criticized severely by Buffon not only for his taxonomical approach to natural history in which he imposed “abstract” categories on nature but also for his decontextualization of living creatures from their material conditions of existence and ecological succession. “While all systematic approaches to nature are flawed”, wrote Buffon, “Linnaeus’s method is of all the least sensible and the most monstrous.”¹⁴ Unlike Linnaeus, Buffon comprehended the interconnectedness of species and their ecological entanglement, as well as the prospect of devolution and extinction. “It is possible to descend by almost imperceptible gradations from the most perfect of creatures”, he conjectured, “to the most formless matter.”¹⁵

In *Cornucopia*, the pathologically catalogued specimens of Linnaeus are pictured by Vivian safely, if not anally, tucked away in his filing cabinets. No sooner does this naturalist’s head seem to plummet onto his desk than a panoply of species in his rigid schema of classification appear to spring to life, overflowing any attempt at their containment, let alone their cataloguing. Already Vivian hints at this phenomenon in his choice of title, *Cornucopia*. Signifying the overflowing abundance of nature, *Cornucopia* seems to be signified by the empty corn horn lying across Linnaeus’s desk from which an abundance of flora appears to spew. Once this Linnaean study seems to metamorphosize into a profusion of jungles, oceans and skies, sharks and other sea creatures appear to swim by a Gothic clerestory above the Naturalist while a deep-sea diver descends a stairwell from it. Before reaching the floor, an ostrich struts across it while an elephant framed by the arched window appears to raise its trunk to trumpet at the Naturalist. Just as an eagle spreads its wings and prepares to take flight by the library, a whale surfaces amidst other sea creatures. Jostling one another there and across the ceiling, these fish turn Linnaeus’ study into an aquarium totally disrupting the Naturalist’s tidy architecture and precious cataloguing.

Amidst this chaotic profusion, Vivian seems to imply the uncontainable dimensions of earth, sea and air creatures in this naturalist's rigid schema of classification, let alone in his neuroses and nightmares. The Linnaean dream of containment then appears to spawn a nightmare of chaos exposing the implausibility of imposing a human taxonomy of order upon the natural environment. In imaging the Linnaean taxonomy continually confounded, Vivian, like Goya, then seems to interrogate the effectivity and plausibility of its classificatory taxonomy and objective of order. Yet while Vivian appears to travesty the fixed categories and hierarchies of species spawned by the so-called "modern taxonomy" of Linnaeus, he seems to engage with the *Histoire Naturelle, générale et particulière* of Buffon, particularly his *Théorie de la Terre* and his supplement, *Époques de la Nature*. This is epitomized by Vivian's series, *Buffon's Grandchildren*.

To illustrate his theory of ecological succession and geological time while working as *Intendant* of the Jardin de Roi from 1739, Buffon had published 36 quarto volumes of the *Histoire Naturelle* exploring the earth, minerals and nature in relation to humans, animals—particularly quadrupeds—and birds. Immediately proving as popular as Diderot's *Encyclopédie*, Buffon's first three volumes were reprinted six times in three weeks. Even after Buffon's death, just before the 1789 French Revolution, eight additional volumes were drafted and printed from his research. Under particular conditions Buffon, like Jean-Baptiste Lamarck, conceived that life could generate spontaneously. Once the earth's climate had cooled, Buffon envisaged how species had migrated to different regions of the earth where plants and animals were able to mutate in a proto-evolution theory of adaptation. His theory entailing common descent and comparative anatomy, as illustrated by Buffon's analogy of humans and apes, could well have been conceived by Vivian. "All the animals might be regarded as constituting but a single family", Buffon wrote. As he explained:

"One could say... that the ape is of the family of man... that man and ape have a common origin: that, in fact, all the families, among plants as well as animals, have come from a common stock, and that all animals are descended from a single animal, from which have sprung in the course of time... all other races of animals".¹⁶

As Buffon concluded in his *Quadrupèdes*: "L'intérieur, dans les êtres vivants, est le fond du dessin de la nature".¹⁷

Yet as significant as these texts may have proven for Vivian, none seems to have been as valuable as some of the 2,000 illustrations that Buffon commissioned. When Jacques de

Sève was commissioned to illustrate the animal quadrupeds with François-Nicolas Martinet commissioned to illustrate the birds, they were advised to pursue not only anatomical accuracy but also to convey their geological environments alongside their mythological significations in dreamlike settings. As Vivian reveals, he found Buffon's foregrounding of animals against these geological and phantasy environments, "the mainspring for this series". (Figure 3) They also proved "the mainspring" for Vivian's own series significantly entitled *Buffon's Grandchildren*, starting with *The Pest*. (Figure 4) Yet unlike *Cornucopia*, *The Pest* is historically set amidst the sixth mass extinction of the Anthropocene when trash was becoming so humungous that it was reshaping urban ecosystems.

Buffon's Grandchildren and Gaia's Revenge? Ecological Pollution, Symbiogenesis, and The Pest

(Figure: Vivian Van Blerk, *The Pest*, 2014, colour photograph, 120x120 cm, Edition of 9)

Amidst a chaotic profusion of eggs, sea-shells, beads, necklaces, jewellery boxes, wrapping papers, ropes, snakes, lobster encrustations and crows, appears a human hand seemingly waving to beholders in Vivian's photographic collage, *The Pest*. Amongst branches, roots, leaves and plants, on one side, perches a cat. On the other side lies the head and torso of a Graeco-Roman statue. By no means iconographically insignificant, it represents the Ancient Greek Goddess of the living earth, *Gaia*. These fragments of organic and oceanic elements amidst discarded human objects, including the bust of *Gaia*, seem to be synthesized by Vivian into the dichotomous realities of a natural world immersed in environmental pollution on an unprecedented scale during this sixth mass extinction of the Anthropocene. With some 60% of food waste and packaging littering city streets, shopping centres, parks and gardens, schools, colleges and university campuses, Vivian's disjunctions in *The Pest* seem to signify that it is no longer possible to disinter creatures of the earth, sea or sky from environments polluted by homo-sapiens. Their disjunctions seem to conjure "The Revenge of Gaia: Earth's Climate Crisis and the Fate of Humanity".

The apocalyptic title of the book written by James Lovelock in 2006, *Gaia's "revenge"* seems identified with the destructive impact of global warming, the pollution of soils, the disruption of nutrient cycles and the seemingly imminent collapse of Eurocentric cultures alongside survival of the human race.¹⁸ While *Gaia's "revenge"* was oft lamented by Vivian, his focus seems to be more focused upon parodying, rather than bewailing the devolutionary culture of waste that had emanated, particularly its ironic inversions of 'survival of the fittest'.

Hence in this series ironically entitled *Buffon's Grandchildren*, Vivien wittily unravels not only the struggle of fauna and flora in polluted environments but also their uncanny efflorescence. In so doing, he seems to be playing with Lynn Margulis' concept of "life from scum" and "life as scum" within her theory of *Symbiogenesis*. Entailing, in her words, "a form of neo-Lamarckianism", those that seem to lie at the premise of *Buffon's Grandchildren* are Lamarck, and the Neo-Lamarckian Chair of Natural History from 1876 at the Muséum national d'histoire naturelle, Edmond Perrier, appointed its Directeur from 1900 until 1919.¹⁹

In *Philosophie Zoologique*, Lamarck had theorized how "the power of life" was spontaneously generated with the simplest of organisms transmuted into complex species through mutual cooperation and environmental interaction from which new traits could be developed and inherited.²⁰ Fusing Lamarck's theory of *Transformism* on the transmutation of species, with Charles Darwin's reciprocal evolutionism and Ernst Haeckel's organ associationism, Perrier had explored how simple organisms could evolve into complex species through association and cooperation.²¹ The premise of his treatise, *Les Colonies animales et la formation des organismes*, Perrier emphasized that the most enduring forms of evolution arose through association and cooperation exercised not by humans, but by animals.²² It was animals that illuminated how interspecies relationships could evolve symbiotically, as Perrier endeavoured to illuminate in his treatise, *Le Transformisme*, by scrutiny of the associations forged by sponges, polyps, fish, worms, mollusques, Anthropodes, snakes, rhinoceruses, hippopotamuses and others, including those he called "les Singes anthropoids".²³

The profusion of snakes, worms, and mollusques coexisting in *The Pest*, seems to conjure Transformist associations with the same and different species, cooperation without competition, and coordination without conflict, as defined by Perrier. More topically, Vivian seems to capture Margulis' concept of *Symbiogenesis* following her illumination of how it "brings together unlike individuals to make large, more complex entities".²⁴ This was epitomized by one of Margulis' examples: "Algae and worms make a miniature ecosystem swimming in the sun".²⁵ Far from being isolated, Margulis emphasized that "such partnerships abound".²⁶ "Bodies of *Plachobranhus*, snails, harbour green symbionts growing in such even rows they appear to have been planted. Giant clams act as living gardens, in which their bodies hold algae towards the light."²⁷ Like Margulis, Vivien seems to have speculated that even the most destructive dimensions of human intervention might eventually, over time, prove to be catalysts for expanding the possibilities of adaptation, as signified by the *Symbiogenesis* of species. Yet unlike Margulis, Vivian seemed to conceive of future evolution requiring adaptation to environmental pollution through *Symbiogenesis*, as illuminated by the uncanny

adaptation of certain species to infested entanglements within nature in his series, *The Pest* “Species have had time to adapt to man's presence”, Vivian explained. “They find niches to inhabit and even unsuspected opportunities to evolve.”

The adjustments of fauna and flora to the intrusion of human waste polluting natural environments seems to be illuminated in Vivian’s first artwork in this series. This includes the attraction that fields of pollution can exert on such ‘pests’ as crows, their collective noun aptly being a ‘murder’ of crows. (Figure 5 Detail: Vivian Van Blerk, *The Pest*, 2014) Within a chaotic entanglement of fauna, flora and profuse refuse, including an array of discarded objects in urbanized environments, Vivian reveals that it is the crow that has proven to be the most adaptable and opportunistic of species. Readily adapting to the environmental shift from country to city, steadily raiding urban trash cans in lieu of being able to plunder agricultural crops, Vivian’s urbanized crow in his first painting of *The Pest*, seems to have surpassed other ‘pests’, even the snake writhing below, in proving to be the fittest.²⁸

Their genus being originally defined by Linnaeus, crows were long perceived in some cultures as ‘pests’ and ominous symbols of death. Redefined as amongst the earth’s most intelligent animals, crows are currently regarded as capable of adaptation during any displacement, with an extraordinary dexterity facilitating their use of human tools for their own constructions. As early as 1838 during Darwin’s visits to the orangutan, Jenny, at London zoo, he had noted that simians were also capable of doing so, even making tools and sharing them.²⁹ Nevertheless, this was well before pollution became a planetary threat transcending local boundaries, accelerating climate change and affecting health—but not necessarily that of such ‘pests’ as crows. Urban adaptors, if not uncanny exploiters, the more polluted the environment, the more crows seemed to thrive, as Vivian illuminates.

Seeming to proliferate at the same rapid growth rate as pollution, crows’ large communal roosts have invariably become located near garbage dumps. This may be why Vivian reveals crows as the species that succeeded in surviving as “the fittest” amidst the most tawdry rubbish. In *The Pest*, this seems to be captured by Vivian’s centralization of the pumped-up male crow, engaged in mid-air jousting to show off his superiority in wielding a hammer and in warding off any rivals. Reputedly attracted to shiny objects, the male crow’s female mate appears below him with jewellery twinkling around her neck while he appears to be strutting his stuff upon a glowing bell-shaped glass *cloche*. This French invention dating back to 1623, designed to protect the growth of plants, can be glimpsed glinting in rows on the field beyond. In seeming to stage the crow as a star act within the polluted landscapes of Vivian’s first and last versions of *The Pest* (2014), he indicates that ironically ‘the fittest’ most

able to endure the Anthropocene's sixth mass extinction could be the crow. The other species singled out by Vivian as ecological survivors were the snail and the vulture.

Despite pollution becoming obstructionary for many animals and most humans, particularly in negotiating overwhelming accretions of garbage, when viewed from a snail's perspective and their adaptability to polluted gardens, Vivian reveals how waste could act as a facilitator, not obstructor, of their pace. In *Snail's Morning* (2014) (Figure 6), Vivien suggests how the snail's mucus-covered foot along the bottom of three land snails' gastropod bodies, once secured by the sticky waste oozing from discarded aluminium beer and carbonated drink cans littering a household garden, could facilitate their manoeuvring. Not only does Vivian illuminate how this effluence could enable two snails to negotiate weeds and plants in order to traverse the garden, one after the other. He also shows how it facilitates a third snail to reach, slowly but surely, the top tip of a stone stepped sculpture. Consistent with the ways in which these inversions illuminate the concept of *symbiogenesis*, Vivian concludes this series with the parodic metamorphosis of cabbage trees into Anthropocentric Christmas trees, decked with glowing baubles and shiny beads amidst broken glass, crushed cans and discarded bottle tops, one with a vulture perched at its helm. Some eight years later, Vivian posits the vulture as calling all of the food shots in his ceramic sculpture significantly entitled *Vulture Restaurant*. Yet integral to Vivian's representation of these species is his conception of animal agency, particularly during ecological crises and the looming danger of their extinction.

The Flood Foretold: Animal Autonomy, Solidarity, Climate Change and Micro-Ecosystems

Due to the constant transmutation of species within his environment, Lamarck had been initially sceptical of widespread extinction in the earth's history.³⁰ Nevertheless his growing awareness of the increasingly deleterious impact of humans upon nature enabled him to foresee mass extinction. "One would say that man is destined to exterminate himself after having rendered the globe uninhabitable", Lamarck had predicted.³¹ A proponent of directional gradualism, like Buffon, opposed to Cuvier's catastrophism, Lamarck's theories and their development through Perrier's *Transformism* may be regarded as eventually evolving into *Endosymbiotic* theory, epigenetic inheritance and the *Gaia* hypothesis. Nevertheless by 1990, with record-breaking floods accompanied by frequent catastrophes and "untold devastation", according to Derek Anger, these theories seemed to become superfluous. With floods increasingly prevailing across Europe, 60 billion euros per month was allocated by the EC

before 2016 to Climate Change damage. Hence in January 2016, when £40 million was budgeted by David Cameron's government on flood defences, it was dismissed as "merely sticking plaster".³² "It's time to seriously address how to find the countless millions needed to effectively mitigate this inevitable consequence of climate change", declared Professor Richard Murphy.³³

Opening the United Nations Climate Change Conference COP21 in Paris, some 20,000 pairs of shoes from Parisians were installed at the Place de la République entitled "Paris en marche pour le climat". Thirty artists were selected for *Artists 4 Climate Change*, to exhibit in Paris from October to December 2015. In their eco-aesthetic installations, invariably the environmental sublime in all of its wild and overwhelming natural beauty was dialectically juxtaposed with eco-violence, environmental loss and ecological melancholy.³⁴ This was followed on 12 December 2015 by the signing of the Paris Agreement by all members—194 states plus the European Union—to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and "significantly reduce the risks and impact of climate change." Within months, Leonardo DiCaprio's documentary, *Before the Flood*, was released, illuminating the devastating effects of Climate Change on five continents. It culminated in the resigning of the Paris Climate Agreement in April 2016 for a net-zero emissions world.³⁵ With climate change increasingly perceived as driving a new era of natural disasters, financial, technical and building support was provided for nations unable to cope by the COP Agreement. This prospect seemed to have been anticipated by Vivian, although not uncritically.

In Vivian's parodic pastiche of the Ark in his series of staged photographs during 2016 entitled *The Flood Foretold*, he explored comparable support-systems operating within the contexts of environmental catastrophism, conceived not from the perspective of humans but animals. Invoking the autonomy, agency and adaptability of animal, Vivian also endeavoured to capture species empathy, facility, solidarity and tenacity, especially in their ingenuity to survive catastrophes, salvage fertile environments and adapt to new ecologies. In highlighting their different survival initiatives and strategies from humans, Vivian's artwork seemed to dovetail with animal rights movements and the immense support galvanized for animal liberation.

In 1972, *Animal, Men and Morals: An Inquiry into the Maltreatment of Non-Humans* had been published. Three years later, it was followed by publication of Peter Singer's book, *Animal Liberation: A New Ethics for our Treatment of Animals*, highlighting the suffering of animals and their exploitative treatment that he and others called "speciesism".³⁶ "It forever changed the conversation about our treatment of animals", reported Ingrid Newkirk. "It made

people—myself included—change what we ate, what we wore, and how we perceived animals.”³⁷ With Animal Rights Movements spreading transnationally, animal rights laws were passed continually with animal law courses regularly taught. Consistent with this animal activism and the quest for animal rights, Vivian depicts animals in *The Flood Foretold* as autonomous, adapting to whatever environment they find themselves in during eco-crises, except in circumstances entailing human intervention. Parodying their scientific exploitation as test subjects and their fetishization as collector’s items within this series, Vivian also seems implicitly to criticize the human exploitation of animals in agriculture, as well as in food and clothing industries. In so doing, he illuminates the astute processes of animal adaptation to crises and their extraordinary facility in meeting their basic needs and spontaneous desires, without falling subject to the will of human subjects. This is epitomized by the erection of their own Ark.

While the erection of an Ark seems conjured by Vivian in *The Flood Foretold*, it is without the patriach, Noah. Nevertheless, it is not without signs of a worldwide flood comparable to the catastrophic Great Flood some 4,500 years ago in which, according to Biblical records, the sea-water covered the entire earth and killed its animals. Already this had been addressed by Vivian in his earlier series in 2000, *Hippopotamus and Destiny*, as illuminated by the first part of this chapter entitled *L'Hippopotame reveur : Hippopotamus and Destiny*. In Vivian’s first panel for *The Flood Foretold*, entitled *Household Goods*, a conical Mount Ararat seems conveyed in the background while a building foundation with chimney hearth and funnel within a fenced enclosure appears in the foreground. (Figure: *The Flood Foretold: Household Goods*) Amidst a chaotic profusion of carriage wheels, wooden planks and a classical sculptured head in marble, appear leaping cats and un-constrainable monkeys. Below an array of butterflies carefully pinned to a board in Vivian’s next panel lie precious dinosaur eggs that have been astutely collected, carefully preserved, and anally catalogued by an Antiquarian. Vivian’s title, *Worldly Goods*, seem to have been extracted from Lisa Jardine’s *Worldly Goods: New History of the Renaissance* in which she ties the patronage of culture during the Renaissance inextricably to the creation of wealth and power.³⁸ Looking suspiciously like Vivian, the Antiquarian may be glimpsed in a catatonic state within the dark hallway as his collection seems too implode. Suddenly his carefully preserved, antediluvian eggs burst open and baby dinosaurs are seen strutting across the Persian carpets and clay-tiled floor, just as rare species of butterflies become unpinned from their boards and take flight. (Figure: *The Flood Foretold: Worldly Goods*; a version owned by the author)

In the next painting in this sequence entitled *Flight* (Figure), white geese are pictured fluttering across a drawing room floor amidst dogs, a donkey, an owl and a goat while the artist pictures himself playing with his cat in front of a fire soaring in the hearth. (Figure) Its profusion seems comparable to Vivian's photomontage, *I and My Chimney*, in which a mound of fauna and flora piled up by a chimney hearth signify, in Vivian's words, "the generations that come and go, playing out their passing passions". Nevertheless the gravitational grounding of the drawing-room environment in *Flight* seems overturned by sharks swimming around its balustrade while a white eagle soars through the open oval ceiling. These inversions occur in a different way in *Act of God*. There, a porpoise depicted lying on a surgical operating table, possibly in a frozen state, seems about to be reanimated by the laser surgery of Cyronics manipulated by a medicalized human-animal supposedly, following Vivian's ironic title, "playing God". (Figure) Amidst a profusion of discarded human objects in *The Golden Age*, pigs seems to congregate under a blossoming tree by a ladder leading up its trunk to their tree-house. (Figure) Hence in these wondrous scenarios punctuated with absurdities, Vivian invokes the diverse adaptability and ingenuity of animals, alongside their solidarity with one another. In so doing, he relays their tenacity in surviving catastrophes and salvaging fertile environments while adapting to new ecologies—unlike homo sapiens. In other series, Vivian invoked the feasibility of intensive animal memory, including ancestral recollection, alongside extensive animal autonomy.

In Vivian's earlier series, *Hippopotamus and Destiny*, examined in the first part of this chapter, he does not foreclose the possibility that some of the animals during the floods may have been able to manage their own "raft". Long before the floodwaters subside, he indicates that some may have even been able to survive the attacks by whales and sharks, in order to work out how to land. Yet once the floodwater recede on their land, Vivian tells how, to their surprise, "the animals find themselves trapped on the tallest mountain in the world where they must survive as best they can". The aftermath is captured by *Sphinx*. (Figure) Depicting the mountain as a vertiginous barren red rock cliff, surrounded by burnt-sienna sand and red rock, without water or foliage, but with the skeletal remains of animals scattered across it, including a goat's head, Vivian postulates a jump in time, "hundreds of years later". Only then, Vivian points out, does a young female *hippo* with ancestral memories of mud and sinewy rivers, "decide it's time to find her way home".

That Vivien conceived of ancestral memory as inherent among certain animals, with epigenetic mechanisms enduring across infinite generations of species, is captured by the ceramics that he began in Beirut in 2017. These were continued in his studio at La Courneuve

in the form of skulls in light of the skeletons excavated from the burial grounds there. Entitled *Vanities I*, exhibited at the Brussels *Wunderkammer* in 2017, Vivian regarded these skulls as consisting of “an outside and inside on which stories can be told” while containing “the memories and feelings of life that clings to our remains”. (Figure) Even his sculpture capturing a “fleet of turtles”, entitled *On the Beach*, was envisaged by Vivian as a species that were able to “carry life and memory across oceans to populate a long abandoned city”. These survival mechanisms entailing the preservation of life with memory seem to be extended from *The Flood Foretold* by Vivian to the contemporary prevalence of thunderstorms, tornadoes, low pressure systems, and cyclones inducing floods during Climate Change in the 21st century. The Anthropogenic crises to ensue in the next century or centuries and the “post-human micro-universes” that would eventually eventuate were captured by Vivian—but not without his parodic humour and infectious sense of absurdity.

Anthropogenic Crises and “post-human micro-universes” : Hurricanes, Tornadoes, Ocean Acidification, and Archipel

“Climate change is already affecting every region on Earth, in multiple ways”, reported IPCC Working Group I Co-Chair Panmao Zhai. “Unless there are immediate, rapid and large-scale reductions in green-house gas emissions”, warned the IPCC Working Group Report, *Climate Change 2021: The Physical Science Basis*, “limited warming too close to 1.5°C or even 2°C will be beyond reach.” Throughout the remainder of the 21st century, increasing heat waves and more intense droughts have been predicted alongside increasing rainfall, flooding, hurricanes, tornadoes, with changes to monsoon precipitation and permafrost thawing, coastal erosion and ocean acidification, continuous sea level rises, and reduced oxygen levels. “Extreme sea level events that previously occurred once in 100 years”, predicted Panmao Zhai, “could happen every year by the end of this century”. “We will see temperatures higher than any known during human civilisation—temperatures that we are simply not adapted to,” predicts Heidi Cullen, chief scientist for the NPO Climate Central in Princeton, and author of *The Weather of the Future*. “With each passing year, our “new normal” is being locked in with the full impacts arriving towards the latter part of this century,” she says. “It’s hard for us to imagine that large parts of the planet would be unliveable outdoors.”³⁹ Yet once we move into the 22nd century, Cullen anticipates that tropical rain forests—the lungs of the planet—could be enveloped by desertification with alpine forests ravaged by fires. Amidst the

accelerating pace of ecological extinction, animals and plants would become increasingly vulnerable as corroborated by the rapidly expanding Endangered Species Lists.

In a 2014 paper on ‘defaunation’, the biologist Rodolfo Dirzo at Stanford University had predicted that as much as 90 per cent of the species on Earth could be wiped out in the planet’s sixth mass extinction.⁴⁰ The late Australian scientist, Frank Fenner, predicted that after the evolution of *Homo sapiens* out of Africa during climate change some 300,000 years ago, within a century the human race would extinguish itself due to environmental degradation, overpopulation and climate change.⁴¹ Nevertheless contemporaneously, University of Cape Town Professor of Philosophy, David Benatar, known to Vivian, conceived how the planet could actually benefit from human extinction. “Although there are many non-human species – especially carnivores—that also cause a lot of suffering,” he maintained, “humans have the unfortunate distinction of being the most destructive and harmful species on earth. The amount of suffering in the world could be radically reduced if there were no more humans.”⁴² Support for humans to refrain from reproduction and voluntarily become extinct has been endorsed not only by the Voluntary Youth Extinction Movement but also by Patricia MacCormack’s *The Ahuman Manifesto: Activism for the End of the Anthropocene*.⁴³

Increasingly inscribing animals as mediators, more adaptable than humans to contend with continuous Climate Change catastrophes, Vivian created his *On the Beach* series in clay while in Brussels during 2020. (Figure) “As an artist coming late to clay,” he confessed, “I do not aspire to replicate the patiently acquired craft of a potter, yet neither can I let myself settle into one narrow groove when there are so many potential languages available.” Vivian’s reconception of pottery as sculpture incorporating species and human junk was epitomized by his extraordinarily witty, ironic, parodic and scrupulously crafted and coloured clay series, which was subsequently fired and glazed. *On the Beach* was designed, as Vivian explained, to capture “a fleet of turtle arks carrying life and memory”, in the form of animals, isolated humans, and bits of civilization, “across oceans” to a sandy shore “to populate the long abandoned city”. Yet in his next series in 2023, *homo sapiens* were conspicuously absent. Entitled *Archipel*, also referred to as *Archipelago*, Vivian envisioned that the impact of anthropogenic Climate Change and ecological catastrophe during the 22nd century, especially by 2300, would result in the loss of *homo sapiens* as a species. What post-human life would become after enduring the most extreme forms of extinction was what Vivian called “post-human micro-universes”. In these “post-human micro-universes” that Vivian created, he focused upon the few isolated land masses remaining and those species most able to survive.

Moulding clay and firing it into porcelain, Vivian created a post-human series of micro-universe islets. With the prospect of continual rainfall, massive flooding, coastal erosion, ocean acidification and sea rises overwhelming land masses predicted throughout 2200, Vivian envisioned what survival strategies would become for those few remaining species that may have become marooned on islets. Confined to these tiny pieces of land, initially these islets were conceived by him as having been formed from architectural fragments, abandoned vehicles, ruins and other remnants of human presences on earth. These islets were also conceived by him as having become overrun with remnants of waste while colonized by a diverse array of aquatic and terrestrial fauna and flora.

Wittily stretching their colonization into the desperate realms of absurdity, Vivian illuminated the uncanny ways in which these islets could be enabled to function not just as “micro-universes” but as micro-ecosystems able to nourish survivors. This is illuminated by the signifiers of agriculture encircling the upper mound of Vivian’s islet in *Archipel*, featuring a goat-drawn cart above which flowers, trees, plants and vegetables appear to be sprouting fertile. (Figure) To survive the precarious rise and fall of seawater levels, this cart appears to be mounted on the remnants of a wooden ship with a prow. Seemingly designed to function as a variant of Noah’s Ark, a monkey lies on its stern while a lion seems to be basking on its deck in the sun, just above a hippopotamus and a rhinoceros. Despite the dichotomy of elephants surviving on such tiny atolls, Vivian posits two of them wandering around the knoll.

Reputedly the most enduring species, alongside hippopotamuses and rhinoceruses, known as *proboscideans* that evolved in Africa some 60 million years ago, elephants and their diverse species had become drastically reduced in their battle against shrinking habitats during the Anthropocene. To survive on atolls, during “post-human micro-universes”, Vivian was aware that their tusks and teeth would need to adapt to this habitat. Their body scale might need to devolve to their earliest known forms as *Eritherium*, as possibly signified by Vivian’s relatively diminutive scaling of these two elephants.⁴⁴ By contrast, other variants may have evolved into bigger species, as suggested by Vivian’s prominent, large-scale elephant, dancing and prancing around the atoll. (Figure: Detail) With trunk and tusks upturned, it appears to be trumpeting the agricultural mound while cooling it with his spray. Even though the upper part of its elephantine body appears land-orientated, Vivian situates its lower half within the sea, which explains its blue colouring. In locating it amongst other blue coloured sea-creatures encircling the island, Vivian seems to suggest that it has become semi-aquatic, like its early ancestors, the *Moeritherium* and *Barytherium*.⁴⁵

While a bird can be glimpsed perched in a tree on the rocky mound of another of Vivian's atolls entitled *Castaway*, a hippopotamus can be seen sliding down it just as a porpoise seems to swim around it, if not through it. (Figure) Air, land and sea creatures seem to become fused, just as they seem to do in Vivian's *La Tour des Belles*. (Figure) However, the animals on two levels of this three-tiered islet are interspersed amongst abandoned cars and other human ruins testifying to, in Pascal Odille poignant words, "derniers témoins de la présence de l'homme sur terre".⁴⁶ Even though seemingly "envahis par les restes de nos déchets"⁴⁷, Odille points out that these creatures are newly colonized by fauna and vegetation, "aussi bien terrestres qu'acquatiques".⁴⁸ With the lowest tier of this *Tour des Belles* being filled with sea creatures, it seems to signify the fusion of fauna and flora, animal and vegetable, earth and sea. Yet since these islets would become linked by banks of medusas, this could generate, as Odille perceptively predicts, "une nouvelle solidarité animale".⁴⁹ In these "post-human micro-universes", Odille concludes "la notion de temps n'a plus aucune importance", while "le notion de bien ou de mal non plus".⁵⁰ Hence after envisioning the naturalist explorations of Buffon, before environmental pollution, and his illumination of humans and animals as multiple species within a single family; the adaptation of such 'pests' as crows, snails and vultures to human pollution of the environment; the autonomy of animals to 'take flight' from human habitation and its pollution leading to 'floods foretold'—currently being regularly experienced by many parts of the earth—Vivian's vision as a Natalist-Artist during the sixth mass extinction of the Anthropocene, seems to embrace the concept of "becoming animal". It culminates in an earth reduced to islets with diverse animal colonies, but totally devoid of homo sapiens.

Endnotes

¹ Robert Scholes and Francois Engelbrecht, "Climate Impacts in southern Africa during the 21st Century", *Report for the Centre for Environmental Rights*, 2021, p. 2.

² Jacques Derrida, "The Animal that Therefore I Am," *Critical Inquiry* (2002); this address was reprinted along with an essay entitled "And Say The Animal Responded", and two previously unpublished essays. All of the essays were taken from Derrida's various addresses at the 1997 Cerisy conference on animal relations, and subsequently published in the book, *L'animal que donc je suis* (Édition Galilée, 2006); *The Animal that Therefore I Am*, ed. Marie-Louise Mallet; trans. David Wills (Fordham University Press, 2008).

³ Edmund Lindop with illustrations by Jane Carlson, *The Travelling Hippopotamus* (Little Brown and Company, 1961).

⁴ Edmond Perrier, *Les Colonies Animales et la formation des organismes* (Paris: Masson, 1881).

⁵ Allan Shearer and P. H. Liotta, *Gaia's Revenge and Humanity's Loss* (Bloomsbury, 2006).

⁶ This comment was relayed to the author by Diego Guyierrez-Trimino on 10 April 2025, after long discussion with Vivian's mother, Barbara Ban Blerk.

⁷ This is the way an early admirer of *Hugo the Hippo* recalled his experience: "I grew up with this movie. I remember watching it as a child and only understanding the basics of the story, and I also remembering enjoying it for the heartbreaking familial love and friendship that are the themes of the show."

⁸ "Hippo Haven", Adventure Aquarium, Association of Zoo Aquariums, New Jersey.

⁹ While working in the Court of King Carlos III, Francisco de Goya Y Lucientes had ingested his Enlightenment principles pertaining to secular states, social reform and the advancement of knowledge through science. Bitterly disillusioned with the shift in Spanish imperial power to Charles IV and the dissolution of Enlightenment ideology, by 1799 Goya confessed to choosing subjects "suitable for his work, from the multitude of follies and mistakes common in every civil society and from the vulgar prejudices and lies authorised by custom, ignorance or self-interest, those that he has thought most fit to furnish material for ridicule, and at the same time to exercise the artist's imagination".

¹⁰ Subsequently Goya added a counterpoint: "Imagination abandoned by reason produces impossible monsters; united with her, she is the mother of the arts and source of their wonders."

¹¹ Caroli Linnaei, *Systema Naturae: Regna Tria Naturae, Systematice Proposita per Classes, Ordines, Genera, & Species* (Leiden: Johannes Wilhelm de Groot, 1735).

¹² Linnaei, *Systema Naturae*, 1735.

¹³ John Lyon, "The 'Initial Discourse' to Buffon's *Histoire Naturelle*: The First Complete English Translation", *Journal of the History of Biology* (vol. 9, no. 1, Spring 1976): 133.

¹⁴ Georges-Louis Leclerc de Buffon, *Histoire Naturelle, générale et particulière, avec la description du Cabinet du Roi*, 1765; Buffon continued: "We think that we know more because we have increased the number of symbolic expressions and learned phrases. We pay hardly any attention to the fact that these skills are only the scaffolding of science, and not science itself." Refer Charles Foster, "Linnaeus, Buffon, and the Battle For Biology", *The Freethinker: Science & Technology* (28 June 2024); for another perspective on their differences, refer, Phillip R. Sloan, "The Buffon-Linnaeus Controversy", *Isis: A Journal of the History of Science Society* (vol. 67, no. 3, September 1976) pp. 356-375.

¹⁵ Lyon, "The 'Initial Discourse' to Buffon's 'Histoire Naturelle'", 133-181.

¹⁶ Arthur O. Lovejoy, "Buffon and the Problem of Species II", *Popular Science Monthly* (vol. 79, December, 1911): 554-567.

¹⁷ Buffon, "L'Unau et l'Aï", in *Histoire Naturelle, générale et particulière, avec la description du Cabinet du Roi*, Tome Treizième ("Histoire Naturelle des Quadrupèdes" X), Imprimerie royale, Paris, 1765.

¹⁸ James Lovelock, *The Revenge of Gaia* (Basic Books, 2006); refer also James Lovelock, *The Vanishing Face of Gaia*, Basic Books, 2009, in which Lovelock suggested that the apocalypse he predicted might be averted by reducing carbon emissions. Once he seized upon nuclear power as the only panacea to global warming, Lovelock alienated many environmentalists and peace activists.

¹⁹ Edmond Perrier, *Les Colonies animales et la formation des organismes* (Paris: Masson, 1881); *Le transformisme* (Paris: J.-B. Baillière, 1888); Fae Brauer, "Becoming Simian: Devolution as Evolution in Transformist Modernism", Chapter Seven, *Picturing Evolution and Extinction: Degeneration and Regeneration in Modern*

Visual Culture, eds. Fae Brauer and Serena Keshavjee (Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2015) 127-156.

²⁰ Jean-Baptiste Lamarck, *Philosophie Zoologique ou exposition des considerations relatives à l'histoire naturelle des animaux* (Paris: Muséum de l'histoire naturelle, 1809).

²¹ Perrier, *Les Colonies Animales* (1881) p. 62, refers to Ernst Haeckel, *Natürliche Schöpfungsgeschichte* (Berlin, Verlag von Georg Reimer, 1868).

²² Perrier, *Les Colonies Animales*, 1881, Préface, p. viii: *Tous les organismes supérieurs ne sont autre chose que des associations, ou, pour me servir du terme scientifique, des COLONIES d'organismes plus simples diversement groupés.*

²³ Edmond Perrier, *Le Transformisme* (Paris: Librairie J.-B. Baillière et Fils, 1888).

²⁴ Lynn Margulis, *Symbiotic Planet: A New Look at Evolution* (Amherst, Massachusetts: *The Science Masters Series*, Basic Books, A Member of the Perseus Books Group, 1998) p. 9.

²⁵ Lynn Margulis, *Symbiotic Planet: A New Look at Evolution* (Amherst, Massachusetts: *The Science Masters Series*, Basic Books, A Member of the Perseus Books Group, 1998) pp. 9-10.

²⁶ Lynn Margulis, *Symbiotic Planet: A New Look at Evolution* (Amherst, Massachusetts: *The Science Masters Series*, Basic Books, A Member of the Perseus Books Group, 1998) p. 10.

²⁷ Margulis, *Symbiotic Planet*, 10.

²⁸ Isma Benmazouz et al, "Covids in Urban Environments: A Systematic Global Literature Review", *Animals*, PMC PubMedCentral, 11 November 2021. From 92 articles addressing the topic of the breeding abundance of corvid species in urban areas, 81 articles (88%) indicated that the abundance or density of corvid species increased with urbanization.

²⁹ Charles Darwin, *The Notebooks of Man, Mind and Materialism*, p. 129: *I saw the ourang take up a stone & pound the earth.*

³⁰ Lamarck, *Philosophie Zoologique*, vol. I (London: 1914) *If there really are lost species, it can doubtless only be among the large animals that live on the dry parts of the earth; where man exercises absolute sway, and has compassed the destruction of all the individuals of some species which he has not wished to preserve or domesticate. Hence arises the possibility that animals of the genera Palaeotherium, Anoplotherium, Megalonix, Megatherium, Mastodon, of M. Cuvier, and some other species of genera previously known.*

³¹ Jean Baptiste Lamarck, *Histoire naturelle des animaux sans vertèbres* (Paris: 1817) p. xxxiii; as quoted by Jan Sapp, *Genesis: The Evolution of Biology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003) p. 274.

³² Professor Richard Murphy, City University, and Colin Hines, Convenor, Green New Deal Group, "A woeful response to flooding as the climate crisis hits home", *The Guardian* (6 January 2016): *Letters*.

³³ *Ibid.*, Murphy, 2016.

³⁴ Refer Fae Brauer, "Eco-Aesthetics and Eco-Violence: The Environmental Sublime and Ecological Melancholy", *Thought Salon on Environmental Aesthetics: Beauty and Decision Making*, Convenor, Dr. Megan Bowman and Dr. Emily Barritt, King's College, The Dickson Poon School of Law, 28 November 2017.

³⁵ "Before the Flood" was screened at the Economic and Social Council Chamber of UN headquarters in October 2016. Amongst others, the special event was attended by former UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, former US Secretary of State John Kerry, and actress Shailene Woodley. The screening was followed by a panel discussion

with Mr. DiCaprio, Mr. Kerry, Academy Award-winning director Fisher Stevens and Piers John Sellers, Deputy Director of Sciences and Exploration at the NASA Goddard Space Flight Center.

³⁶ Peter Singer, *Animal Liberation: A New Ethics for Our Treatment of Animals* (HarperCollins, 1975); five editions have been published; in 2023 it was republished,

³⁷ "What Is Animal Liberation? Philosopher Peter Singer's Groundbreaking Work Turns 40 | A Message From PETA's President | All About PETA | About". *PETA*. 14 April 2015.

³⁸ Lisa Jardine, *Worldly Goods: A New History of the Renaissance* (New York: Doubleday, 1996).

³⁹ Heidi Cullen, *The Weather of the Future: Heat Waves, Extreme Storms, and Other Scenes from a Climate-Changed Planet* (New York: HarperCollins, 2010). Cullen also predicts that scorching heat waves and cataclysmic fires will spark food riots, famine and mass migrations of millions. An explosion in insects will trigger widespread outbreaks of typhus, cholera, yellow fever, dengue, malaria and a host of long-dormant or even novel pathogens, unleashing epidemics reminiscent of the Black Death which killed as many as 200 million people in the 14th century. Once-teeming metropolises would become watery ghost towns. "We have only felt a fraction of the climate change from the gases already in the atmosphere," estimates the climatologist, James Hansen, Director of the Earth Institute at Columbia University. "The planet will continue to heat up, triggering feedback loops of runaway climate change, until we can kiss most of civilisation goodbye."

⁴⁰ Rodolfo Dirzo et al, "Defaunation in the Anthropocene", *Science*, 345 (July 2014): 401-406.

⁴¹ Lin Edwards, [*"Humans will be extinct in 100 years says eminent scientist"*](#), *The Australian*, June 23, 2010; [Phys.org](#), retrieved January 10, 2021.

⁴² David Benatar, *Better to have never been: The Harm of Coming into Existence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006; 2009) p. 224.

⁴³ Patricia MacCormack, *The Ahuman Manifesto: Activism for the End of the Anthropocene* (London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020) p. 166.

⁴⁴ "Climate Change drove Elephant Evolution", *Natural History Museum, London, Press Release*, with reference to "Fluctuating Climate and Dietary Innovation drove Ratcheted Evolution of Proboscidean Dental Traits, *Nature, Ecology and Evolution*, 24 August 2023.

⁴⁵ Molecular data from modern elephants share a common ancestry with sirenians (aquatic sea cows and dugongs), which further supports the idea that elephants may have an ancestor that was amphibious.

⁴⁶ Pascal Odille, "Archipel", Expert CNES, Paris: April 2022: "the last signs of the presence of humans on earth".

⁴⁷ Pascal Odille: "invaded by all the rest of our rubbish".

⁴⁸ Pascal Odille: "as terrestrial as it is aquatic".

⁴⁹ Pascal Odille: "a new animal solidarity".

⁵⁰ Pascale Odille: no longer has the notion of time any importance"; "the notion of good or bad is no more".