Treacherous Images and Animal Gazes:
Ailbhe Ní Bhriain's Reports to an Academy

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Ailbhe Ní Bhriain's multi-screen installation, Reports to an Academy, 2015, is a sequence of four video works shown across three of a room's four walls. The work was first shown at Dublin's Royal Hibernian Academy (RHA) and was originally projected large-scale onto the walls of the darkened gallery space. The installation is comprised of four scenes – the shelves of an academic library, a stone wall shot on Inis Oírr, vitrines containing stuffed animals from Dublin's natural history museum, and the white walls of a studio space. (Figure 1). These four scenes become cross-sections of a drowned world. In each scene water has risen up to a similar horizon line that reflects the space at the top of the image into the space below. Human life appears to have vacated these visions of a beautiful apocalypse composed of gently rippling water and slow-moving clouds that dreamily float through interior spaces.

Although her work is lens-based, Ailbhe Ní Bhriain's practice has a painterly quality which is untypical of much film/ video work. This observation may be attributed to the fact that Ní Bhriain utilises computer generated imagery and techniques of post-production in order to create hallucinatory spaces that are connected to, but distinct from the real spaces in which the work is shot. This painterly quality is heightened as Ní Bhriain often records stillness in her moving images, as she does in Reports to an Academy, so that the unfolding of time which gives rise to narrative is usurped by a stress on the formal qualities of an image. Ní Bhriain's work also overtly references painterly traditions. Her precise compositions and considered use of colour ensures that attention remains focused on the fact that the videos work, first and foremost, as images. The videos that make up Reports to an Academy announce their status as representations of reality that work against the implied transparency of the medium of film/ video. Considering the traditions and conventions of painting with which Ní Bhriain is engaged, this chapter asks if there is something inherent in the medium of the digital image that influences our reading of the work. Is there something painterly about the specificity of the digital moving image which Ní Bhriain self-reflexively exploits?

Ní Bhriain's work is also curiously populated by mute animals. The birds that we see in Reports to an Academy don't appear to serve any narrative purpose, other than to animate the stillness of the moving image. Is there more to the remarkable presence of these live animals, often in spaces reserved for human frequentation? This chapter will firstly argue that Ní Bhriain's practice allows us to conceive of the digital image in new ways as her medium opens up the possibility of new perceptive spaces. Building on this argument, I will then suggest that the animals in Ní Bhriain's work serve this same project as they also remind us, perhaps somewhat unconsciously, of an

alternate layer of perception that we share with animals, one that we are increasingly estranged from.

A Return to Painting

Reports to an Academy is shot in four different locations. If we move from left to right, clockwise around the installation, the first video shows us a flooded studio space. Visually, this is by far the most painterly of all the scenes. It is also filmed in a white-walled studio typically reserved for painting, or art practice in general. The composition of this scene is precise adhering to the rule of thirds as the white walls of the studio space are punctuated by blocks of colour – a wall painted black, a square of beige MDF, and a soft pink fabric, which appears again in the other videos. (Figure 2). These different coloured surfaces and textures break up the picture plane in a manner similar to collage. Computer generated water has risen roughly a third of the way up from the bottom of the image and it reflects the space above into the space below. The gently rippling water is calming and meditative and this atmosphere is heightened by the clouds that drift through the space.

There is continuity as we move around the installation. The pink fabric reappears, and the clouds move slowly from one screen to the other. Each scene is visited by birds of prey, an owl, a hawk and an eagle. Various bits of studio debris, dust and balloons are also discernible appearing and reappearing in each of the four scenes. As we move around the room, the next video shows us Dublin's natural history museum. Again, the composition is precise, as is the attention to colour. This time petrified animals spring forth from a dense and saturating cadmium yellow (Figure 3). In the next scene we see a stone wall in a quintessentially Irish landscape. This is the only exterior space and it seems at odds with the three interior spaces – the studio, the library, and the museum. The three interior spaces seem intimately connected to the research-based art practice from which they are born. However, perhaps this 'report' is to an art academy – a museal look back to painterly traditions. Stone walls feature heavily in the history of Irish painting from Paul Henry's post-impressionist paintings of the west of Ireland, to the more abstract work of Sean Scully. Ní Bhriain's stone wall also possesses a painterly quality as the cropping of the image and its lack of depth or perspective makes the scene appear quite flat. The last video in the series shows us an academic library, belonging to University College Cork. The gridded library shelves also take on this same painterly flatness, whilst attention is given to blocks of colour comprised of books.

Ní Bhriain approaches the composition of her videos like a painter approaches a canvas as she deliberately maps out 3D impressions of each scene using photographs, before she returns to shoot the work in moving image. Ní Bhriain's practice asks that we question the video's relationship to reality, as her work is accompanied by a very deliberate emphasis on the formal properties of an image. The believability of the scene is of less important to the artist then finding the composition that is most pleasing to the eye. This approach challenges the general assumption, in

mainstream culture, that the digital photograph/ video has its roots in analogue photography.

The idea that the digital is an updating of older photographic technology infers, at least at some level, that the digital photograph/ video is intrinsically connected to reality. Whilst on the surface analogue and digital photographs may look the same, the connotations of each image are different. The distinction between the two mediums is most strongly attributed to the analogue image's indexicality. Charles Sanders Peirce defines the index as a sign that refers to the object it denotes by being physically affected by that object in the manner of a handprint, bullet hole or medical symptom. In The Ontology of the Photographic Image, 1945, André Bazin celebrates the indexical specificity of the medium of analogue photography, which he argues made the invention of photography the most 'important event in the history of the plastic arts' as ' t]he photograph as such and the object itself share a common being, after the fashion of a fingerprint'. The analogue image presupposes physical contact in a way that the digital image does not. Analogue images are produced when light makes contact with both the referent of the image, and the celluloid surface of film. The digital image, on the other hand, employs a uniform numerical code, which transfers data into vast sequences of 1/0 combinations. This fundamental difference affects the meaning of the image and Ní Bhriain's work engages with this debate and this distinction.

Writing on the analogue photograph in Rhetoric of the Image, 1964, Roland Barthes demonstrates that there is a linguistic message present in every image, however, a photograph's indexicality conveys a particular type of message that differentiates it from all other types of images. The meaning of a painting or drawing relies upon specific readable codes and rules, such as the use of perspective. The analogue photograph is different being 'a message without a code' as its maker does not intervene, or translate the reproduced object in the same way as an artist composing a painting, or drawing does. Barthes writes that 'only the photograph is able to transmit the (literal) information without forming it by discontinuous signs and rules of transformation'. The photograph then has an implied relationship with reality and is perceived as a true recording. This mode of presenting is also accompanied by an inherent time-lapse meaning that the linguistic message that accompanies the photograph is the reality of 'having-been-there'.

As the digital image is not indexical its linguistic message is different, as is its implied relationship with reality. Ní Bhriain's work departs quite drastically from a photographic mode of image-making in that she translates the reproduced object in the same way as an artist composing a painting, or drawing does, mocking up each scene before adding layers that build up toward the final image. Ní Bhriain's videos make us acutely aware that the digital image's implied connection with an existing reality is tenuous and easily subject to manipulation. This is far from a new idea as the relationship between lens-based imagery and reality has been under pressure for decades. In Simulacra and Simulation, 1981, Jean Baudrillard argues that we are surrounded by images that simulate rather than represent reality, so much so that the concept of 'the

real is no longer possible' This is because reality is determined by the signs and symbols we assign to it in order to give it meaning, hence there has been a transition from a concrete notion of reality to a simulated version of reality purely constituted by these signs and symbols. This perceptual shift involves a transition in the way we understand and relate to images as we move from 'signs that dissimulate something to signs that dissimulate that there is nothing'. Baudrillard's theory of the simulacrum is even more relevant in our post-digital age as signs and symbols become increasingly virtual and further detached from material or physical reality as Ní Bhriain's work makes clear.

Reports to an Academy sidesteps the issue of the photographic image's relationship with reality by allowing us to perceive the digital image in new ways. By creating unreal worlds this work affirms that the digital image is not a continuation of the analogue image, but that it is its own medium which rearticulates its reliance, like painting or drawing, upon specific readable codes and rules – such as the use of perspective, layered compositions, and close attention to the formal properties of an image and its aesthetics. Ní Bhriain's digital imagery suspends itself between reality and pictorial code. Ní Bhriain says her practice is motivated by a desire to create 'a perceptual space where things almost make sense, but they don't quite'. This type of dreamlike space allows Ní Bhriain to usurp questions of the real in order to focus on her main concern, which is whether the constructed space/ scene works first and foremost as an image as she privileges composition over what is, or looks real. Ní Bhriain's practice perfectly encapsulates German media theorist, Wolfgang Ernst's belief that the 'technologically neutral code' of photographic technology collapses through digital manipulation which returns 'images to a prephotographic quality of painting: that characterised by the painterly brushstroke.' This idea allows us to move on from the quagmire of the analogue/digital debate as the digital, rather than mimicking the analogue, demonstrates its own strengths and creative capabilities.

Reports to an Academy testifies to the digital image's closeness to painting through its reliance on pictorial code and painterly traditions and concerns. The work also enforces its relationship with painterly conventions through its content and its overt references to surrealist painting. Returning to the library in Reports to an Academy, we find an eagle standing on the shelving trolley and a hawk perched on the edge of a computer desk. All of the four hyper-real compositions with their recurring motifs of clouds, birds of prey, and bodies of water are very reminiscent of the paintings of René Magritte. Birds, and birds of prey specifically, figure prominently in the paintings of Magritte, as in his painting of an eagle, The Present, 1939. He also made many paintings depicting the silhouette of a bird as seen in The Large Family, 1963, which is a painting of a bird whose positive space is filled with white clouds against a blue sky, this bird hovers above a stormy looking sea below. The bird also has significance among other surrealist artists, most notably in the work of Max Ernst whose alter ego was a bird-like character called Loplop. Ernst's feathery alter ego Loplop featured in numerous prints, collages, and paintings. For Ní Bhriain, the bird functions as a

recurring motif and a subtle, yet traceable, link to the enduring legacy of surrealist painting and its influence on her practice.

The surreal quality of Ní Bhriain's practice serves the work's formal concerns as both content and form revolve around the idea of the construct. This is made obvious to the viewer through the use of computer-generated imagery, fake birds, and other props and devices which call attention to the theatrics of each scene. Why is it then that the artificial nature of each scene in Reports to an Academy is subtle enough that we can believe in what we are looking at, even though the reality of clouds floating through interior spaces is never quite plausible? Contrary to the dramatic use of computer generated imagery in mainstream cinema, the subtlety and quietness of Ní Bhriain's employment of the same techniques of post-production, whereby seemingly insignificant details such as flecks of dust are meticulously rendered, ceases to register as 'fake'. Though dream-like, it is the painterly quality of Ní Bhriain's practice that gives the work it's sincerity as the imagery seems comfortably suspended somewhere in between photographic practices and painting, reality and imagined space. As each environment in Reports to an Academy makes visual sense, in relation to the formal qualities of the work, we can more easily accept the truth of what we are looking at without feeling like we are being duped or tricked. We readily accept the works as representations.

Like Magritte, Ní Bhriain consistently challenges the viewer's perception of reality, versus representation. Magritte's infamous painting of a pipe accompanied by the sentence Ceci n'est pas une pipe (This is not a pipe) in The Treachery of Images, 1928-9 succinctly makes this distinction. Ní Bhriain, on the other hand, consistently exploits the malleable capacity of computer-generated imagery always exposing and never repressing the structure of her medium to the point that earlier works such as Departure, 2014, boldly display the green screen itself (Figure 6). Although seamlessly composed, the highly mediated nature of Ní Bhriain's works is never concealed as she reverses the operation of Magritte's Ceci n'est pas une pipe by imbuing things from the real world with the illusory quality of painting. Drawing on art historical lineages and painterly conventions, these captivating works give weight to Ernst's argument that the digital is less a continuation of analogue film/photography, than it is a 'departure' that returns us to painting.

Athough this chapter argues that the digital image may be closer to painting then analogue photography, with regards the index, Ní Bhriain's digital images still harness that particular photographic magic that Walter Benjamin attributed to the camera's attentiveness to an optical unconscious. Benjamin writes …
[T]he most precise technology can give its products a magical value, such as a painted picture can never again have for us. No matter how artful the photographer, no matter how carefully posed his subject, the beholder feels an irresistible urge to search such a picture for the tiny spark of contingency, of the here and now, with which reality has (so to speak) seared the character of the image, to find the inconspicuous spot where in the thusness of that long forgotten moment the future

nests so eloquently that we, looking back, may rediscover it. For it is another nature which speaks to the camera rather than to the eye: "other" above all in the sense that a space informed by human consciousness gives way to a space informed by the unconscious.

As André Bazin also understood, the connection between the camera and the unconscious was not lost on the surrealists. Bazin writes that, 'photography ranks high in the order of surrealist creativity because it produces an image that is a reality of nature, namely, a hallucination that is also a fact'. Whilst it has been argued that Reports to an Academy is not properly photographic, in the sense that the digital medium is not indexical, the connection with reality remains as we do see real places, real birds and real spaces. Ní Bhriain's practice articulates a new mode of surrealism which fuses the pictorial conventions of both photography and painting into a new visual language wherein photographic hallucinations meet painterly dream worlds.

Animal Presences

Ailbhe Ní Bhriain's particular mode of surrealism draws heavily on surrealist painting, namely that of René Magritte. It appropriates similar motifs such as birds of prey, clouds, and shots of the sea, and uses similar pictorial devices whereby outdoor elements are brought indoors, and interiors and exteriors become confused. However, Ní Bhriain's video works possesses extra qualities that heighten the surreal atmosphere of the work. The lens-based images' connection with the real, in some form, is the most affective of these qualities as the videos read as one of those factual hallucinations that Bazin celebrates with regards to surrealist photography. More than this though, there is another recurring element of Ní Bhriain's practice, so far overlooked, that lends her work a surreal quality. This is the presence of real animals, in the case of Reports to an Academy – birds.

The eagle, hawk and owl that can be seen across the scenes in Reports to an Academy are completely out of place in the space of the library or natural history museum. Despite this, they seem perfectly at ease in these surroundings in a way that they, nor we, would actually be comfortable with. If an eagle was to find its way into an academic library it would likely incite panic, both in ourselves and in the bird. Whilst we may encounter wild animals and birds in captivity, safe spaces designed for our comfortable viewing, seeing these animals in the wild makes for a tense encounter. This is the subject of Jean- Christophe Bailly's book The Animal Side, 2011. He writes, '[c]ontact between humans and wild animals is above all a complex system of avoidance and tension in space, an immense entanglement of uneasy, self-concealing networks in which, once in a while, we have the privilege of pulling a thread.' He adds 'no matter how peaceful we may want to proclaim ourselves, no matter how eagerly we may seek a slow, gentle approach, in our presence they flee and hide'.

While the birds in Reports to an Academy seem completely unaware of the presence of the viewer, this is not the case for some of Ní Bhriain's other works. Birds feature heavily throughout Ní Bhriain's oeuvre and we see a hawk, and fake crows, in the related works, Departure and Window, 2014. These two connected pieces both feature

a bird of prey who commands the space of Cork city's old airport. In a poignant moment in Window the bird looks up from the ground and turns towards the camera cocking its head sideways as if taking in the presence of the viewer (Figure 6). The returned gaze is startling and takes the viewer completely off guard. This mutual gazing between hawk and viewer, even if mediated by the camera, feels extraordinary because, as Bailly writes, circles of fright and aggression usually stop any form of this type of mutual gazing between human and animal. Despite the unfamiliarity of this transaction, it is the gaze, as a point of intensity, that connects us most closely to animals because despite their various biologies all animals have eyes. Bailly writes, 'it is through sight that we recognise that we are not the only ones who see, that we know that others see us, look at us, contemplate us'.

What are the animals doing in Reports to an Academy? Are they contemplating us, or are we contemplating them? It is important that aside from the exterior space, the stone wall, all the other spaces in Reports to an Academy are normally reserved for human thought and study – the museum, the studio, and the library. So is there an alternate mode of thinking/ perception that these animals represent? In The Animal Side Bailly suggestively argues that an alternate mode of thinking, beyond language which defines human thought, does exist and it is a mode of thought to which the animal is still attuned. He writes …

What is at stake here is not animal imitation of human mental processes but rather a stable resemblance of which gazes are precisely the echo – somewhat as though underneath the particularities developed by species and individuals there existed a sort of phreatic layer of the perceptible, a kind of remote, undivided, uncertain reservoir on which all creatures may draw but from which most humans have learned to cut themselves off from completely.

Ní Bhriain's work contains residues of this uncertain reservoir. It opens out onto this phreatic layer of perception which we share with animals. In his eight Duino Elegy Rainer Maria Rilke distinguishes human life from what he calls, die Kreatur. The Kreatur (creature) may access a borderless realm that Rilke calls the Open. The Open is an expansive space which exists beyond the constraints of human thought and measurement. Rilke suggests that the animal's way of being in the world is different to the way humans occupy the world as human life is essentially reflective and informed or mediated through consciousness and self-consciousness. Distracted by the dichotomy of subject/object the human subject is not part of the world, in the way that animals are, but seeks to master it by naming and conquering things using language. The human subject, who thinks in words, then lives in a world mediated by a matrix of representations that veil the Open. Rilke writes …

We know what is really out there only from
the animal's gaze: for we take the very young
child and force it around, so that it sees

objects – not the Open, which is so
deep in animals' faces.

The animal gaze exists beyond language and when it falls on us it arises in us the 'feeling of being in the presence of an unknown force, at once supplicating and calm'. The animal gaze is quiet and reserved. It neither asks questions, nor anticipates responses. In Reports to an Academy, the presence of the animal gaze, the birds, brings a sense of silence and quietness to the installation's already meditative atmosphere with its subtle atmospheric soundtrack. This influences the way we look at the work in the sense that we are less concerned with narrative, with what the work is saying and what it means, and more captivated by the way it looks. The animal presence in Reports to an Academy anticipates a more pensive and open viewer, perhaps because these works offer us an alternate way of perceiving the world. It would seem that these birds both represent, and evoke an alternate mode of thought. This is interesting in that, for Bailly, it is the bird that most succinctly encapsulates the type of borderless thought associated with the Open. He writes …

'[t]he open! Flying was, would be, its principle: if at the beginning of life we were offered the choice between flying and thinking, what would we choose? What must be understood well is that there is no lyricism here, becoming-a-bird exists only in thought. Birds do not have this movement of thought, they embody it'.

However, the birds in Reports to an Academy are not flying, they are contained by the spaces of human thought. The installation's juxtaposition of human thought with animal nature is suggested by the works title. The title is taken from Franz Kafka's short story A Report to an Academy, 1917. Kafka's story concerns an ape, called Red Peter, who escapes from captivity by learning to behave like a human. The catalyst for this transformation, from animal to human, is the ape's mastering of language. In the story, Red Peter presents the tale of his transition to an academy using words. The silent birds in Reports to an Academy affect the reversal of this transformation inviting us to enter a thought-space that we share with animals, one that is before, or perhaps beyond language. Drawing on the writings of Rilke, Eric L. Santner has termed this mode of perception the 'creaturely'. Santner describes creaturely expressivity as belonging to the domain of the unconscious, in that it is a form of excitation or agitation which is part of our life, but which cannot be absorbed into the space of meaning because it is beyond language. The creaturely is a paradoxical mixture of stuckness and agitation, deadness and excitation which Santner goes on to define as a state of 'undeadness'. This stress on a state of petrified unrest is given visual form in Reports to an Academy by the haunting presence of petrified animals in Dublin's natural history museum, or 'dead zoo'. The signifying stress characteristic of the creaturely can be found in objects that have survived the form of life in which they had their meaning. This idea is given visual form in Reports to an Academy by the live animals now frozen in glass cases. Santner himself gives the example of the natural history museum, as a creaturely space, and the museum which offers up artefacts of past civilisations. He writes that these types of spaces open onto the creaturely as they offer us 'hieroglyphs of a past life to which full access [is] no longer possible.'

Despite its stillness, Reports to an Academy was filmed in real time. The scene inside the natural history museum could have been constructed using still images, as some of Ní Bhriain's other works are, yet there is something compelling about this desire to push the moving image almost to the point of absolute stillness. This is especially poignant in relation to the space of the museum as the process becomes reflective of the content of the work, mimicking the animals' arrested gazes. Recalling the filming of the shots inside the natural history museum, Ní Bhriain describes the inert petrification she herself felt during takes as she would fall still and silent, like the dead animals being filmed, while the camera was rolling. Ní Bhriain also describes experiencing a heightened awareness of her own mortality during this process and such an experience, which is beyond a state of norrmalcy, is an experience of the creaturely as Santner defines it. Rilke also aligned death with the void of the Open, writing, 'one doesn't see death; but stares beyond, perhaps with an animal's vast gaze'. Death is perhaps the ultimate experience of the creaturely because it falls beyond the symbolic order. It cannot be assimilated into thought, or thought as it is informed by language.

Creaturely expressivity does not only refer to those states of exception that we cannot process in thought/language, but can also be observed in animals. This creaturely mode of being is noticeable in animals who are also subject to states of exception, such as animals who have been deterritorialised by being taken out of their natural habitat as the birds in Reports to an Academy are. The birds in the installation were filmed against a green screen at a bird of prey centre. Although the birds seem comfortable and calm in front of the camera, and in the spaces onto which they have been superimposed, this would not be natural for these birds in the wild. The birds have found home in the spaces from which they are normally excluded and there is a closeness or comfortableness between human and animal that feels surreal.

Santner writes that there is actually 'a zone of "uncanny proximity" between animal and human life, one that takes shape at the point where both are in some fashion abandoned to a state of exception'. Santner goes on to say that creaturely life 'does indeed mark our resemblance to animals, but precisely to animals who have themselves been thrown off the rails of their nature'. The birds in Reports to an Academy have been thrown off course in that they comfortably occupy spaces into which they are not permitted. The fact that we read the presence of the birds in Reports to an Academy as surreal, as the thing that should not be there, testifies to our everyday disconnection from the natural world in favour of shutting ourselves inside spaces we have constructed, spaces that keep the animal gaze out. By bringing the animal into these spaces Reports to an Academy reminds us that this layer of perception from which we are increasingly distanced, is always there. As Kafka's ape, Red Peter puts it when addressing the academy …

much as I like expressing myself in images, to put it plainly: your lifes as apes, gentlemen, insofar as something of that kind lies behind you, cannot be further removed from you than mine is from me. Yet everyone on earth feels a tickling at the heels; the small chimpanzee and the great Achilles alike.

The illusory quality of Reports to an Academy is the product of tricks and manipulations. However, these constructed semi-artificial environments are so convincing because they quietly remind us that human thought is itself a hall of mirrors, a gallery of treacherous images, ‘an inner theatre of representations and mediations’ that screen us from a fundamental layer of perception that we share with animals. It is our estrangement from our own nature that makes this encounter between human thought and animal presence feel so surreal.