

# PLEASE DON'T FEED THE ANIMALS:

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Museum gift shops are notorious price gougers, but even that couldn't explain the twenty-dollar PowerBars at the last Whitney Biennial. What made these energy bars so special? The answer lay in the nutrition information graphic on the back of the wrapper. "Nutrition Facts for Birds," it read, and recommended a serving size of one pinch. The PowerBars were art.

Well, yes and no. As with most projects by the New York-based Australian artist Natalie Jeremijenko, this one wasn't quite so easily reducible. One of the best-known talents working in the hybrid spaces between art and technology, Jeremijenko creates what she calls "spectacles of participation" – often with her "corporate" arts collective, the Bureau of Inverse Technology – that draw on a dazzling array of disciplines, including engineering and design, environmental science, political economy, sociology, architecture and conceptual art. Jeremijenko has several engineering degrees, and in 2004, when she was on Yale's engineering faculty, a profile in the *Yale Alumni Magazine* archly declared, "It's art, all right. But is it engineering?" The question has dogged her throughout her career. In fact, her work may not be engineering or art, depending on whom you ask, but such rushes to categorize seem to miss the point. Everything is connected, as they say, and Jeremijenko actualizes this bromide in playful, unexpected, often instructive ways.

She calls herself an interactive artist, although she means that in a particular way. "The tradition of interactivity has taken people to computers, and not to collective, cumulative action," she says. "Working in this realm of action is very interesting to me." It's an idea Jeremijenko, 39, returns to repeatedly during several meetings at coffee shops nearby the West Village apartment where she lives with her husband and children, and at the cavernous West 12th Street studio she's in the midst of vacating. Jeremijenko splits her time between New York and San Diego, where she now teaches at UCSD's Department of Visual Arts, and indeed she seems to be forever in motion, flashing a formidable, if often digressive, intellect marked by an ability to casually challenge received wisdom at every turn. Blond and slight, with a sly, crooked smile and a fondness for cowboy hats and Rollerblades, she radiates playfulness. When we met, she told me I wasn't what she'd expected. Likewise, I said.

As an artist, Jeremijenko isn't interested in working in the realm of personal expression, but her intelligence, offbeat wit and sometimes baffling free-associativeness were all on display in her multiple – and, as is common of her work, continuously evolving – contributions to the last Biennial. Created with fellow Bureau member Phil Taylor, these included the on-site *Whitney Biennial for the Birds*, and its companion in the Hudson River, the *Whitney Biennial for the Fish*. Both projects ask us to reconsider our relationships with urban animals, or as Jeremijenko coyly refers to them, "non-humans," by recognizing our interdependency with them. The bird project consisted primarily of translucent perches, first displayed in 2005 at MASS MoCA, on the walls of the Whitney's outdoor courtyard (with images of the artwork indoors mounted nearby – literally, a Biennial for the birds). When birds landed on them (though few did), they triggered human voices that "translated bird concerns into human dialect." These wry, recorded messages made a case for maintaining biodiversity by keeping bird populations healthy, so as to avoid diseases like an avian flu pandemic.

This might seem like an exercise in high-concept anthropomorphism, but that's a word Jeremijenko resists. "It's not a pretense that animals are human," she insists. "It's an understanding that we're solving similar problems, that

we can learn from each other, that we have similar conceptual resources, that our brains are just not that radically different from other brains that exist." The energy bars, designed to be "delicious and nutritious" for birds and humans alike, argued the same point. So why make them prohibitively expensive? The symbolic price point – \$20.06, actually, to match the year of the Biennial – was a way of using the gift shop as a frame, Jeremijenko explains. "It marks it as precious." But while the bars may have been more conceptual than practical, Jeremijenko is very serious about scripting mutually beneficial interactions in which humans actually do feed animals. "It's a very visceral way of demonstrating that we share the same natural resources, we eat the same stuff – they're not inhabiting a different world, but, in fact, the same one. The interaction of sharing food is very much how we define who we're related to, who are your friends."

This is the main aim of the still-unrealized *Biennial for the Fish* installation, planned for a site on the Hudson River at the end of West 15th Street. Following on past theoretical work with experimental aquatic architecture, Jeremijenko designed a "fish interface" of motion-sensitive buoys at water level; the buoys light up when schools of sturgeon and bass swim past, indicating their presence to humans above. Humans can then feed them seaweed-based fish bars containing PCB-chelating agents that transform the heavy metals in their systems into harmless salts, helping clean up the river, one of the world's largest Superfund sites. What's good for the fish is also good for us.

Jeremijenko groups both projects under the rubric "Hudson River School 2.0," a reference to the original Hudson River School, the group of 19th-century Romantic landscape painters whose pastoral depictions of the Hudson River Valley offered an aestheticized view of nature as a world apart from human beings. It's a perspective she believes informs the conservationist ethos of traditional environmentalism, which she finds problematic. "The idea that we don't interact with natural systems is bogus, a consensual hallucination, that nature is out there and we're in here," she argues. "The way to understand the environment is not as nature out there, but through our political and economic systems." It isn't news that human actions have negative consequences on the environment, but we still often think of those consequences as abstract and remote – in terms of rising sea levels or the vanishing snows of Kilimanjaro. For Jeremijenko, closing the perceptual gap between nature and the city, by recognizing gritty urban wilderness and grubby, unaesthetic urban wildlife as participants in a dynamic and reciprocal natural system with human beings, is a strategy for fostering environmental awareness.

Throughout her career, Jeremijenko has consistently sought to make complex, unseen social phenomena intelligible by rendering them experientially. Early tangible media projects like *Trigger* and *Bull Ride*, mechanical bulls which allowed participants to "ride" the Loma Prieta Earthquake and the 1987 stock market crash, respectively, highlighted this approach. With subsequent public experiments like *One Trees*, in which she planted a thousand genetically identical saplings around San Francisco to see how varied urban conditions affected their development, and her ongoing releases of feral robotic dogs, in which she sets loose toxin-sniffing electronic canines at sites of environmental contamination, Jeremijenko has sought to generate social discourse by confronting scientific claims in mediagenic ways. She knows how to leverage a metaphor for maximum effect.

But it wasn't until 1999, when she moved to New York and experienced life with rodents for the first time, that she became interested in the relationship >>

# Natalie Jeremijenko's Hands-On Environmentalism



between humans and urban wildlife as an area of inquiry. As she observed feral mice, it struck her as incongruous to use endlessly bred lab mice as our animal proxies in scientific testing. "I wanted Manhattan mice, living a Manhattan lifestyle!" she exclaims. As an experiment, later exhibited at Yale (as *Milgram's Mice*, in honor of the famed social psychologist who once occupied her lab there), she built a dollhouse model of her own habitat at mouse scale and placed human substances inside – including jellybeans, muscle relaxants, antihistamines, antidepressants, vodka and gin – curious what the mice would do. She reports that they self-administered the muscle relaxants and antidepressants, and preferred vodka.

As a worker extricates the last sticks of furniture from Jeremijenko's nearly empty studio one afternoon, she ruefully explains that these mice experiments, and subsequent efforts to lure birds which could provide competitive population pressure and keep the mice in check, touched off a years-long battle with her building's co-op board that is finally culminating with her moving out. This conflict by no means deterred her investigations into urban species interdependence, however. In 2003, this interest took her to the Dutch landscape art center De Verbeeding, where she was taken by the way the local geese population had adapted to human technologies by nesting beneath the eaves of De Verbeeding's pavilion. Seeking to learn more about geese, she designed her first fully realized human/animal interface, a robotic, remote-controlled goose that offered users a goose-eye-view of the animals' social life, and came preloaded with speech samples to facilitate interaction with other geese and a video camera to record these interactions. The geese turned out not to respond as well to the robotic interloper as ducks did, so Jeremijenko designed a robotic duck she later released in Dublin (she spends a lot of time explaining herself to airport security). She grouped these and other animal interfaces as Ooz, choosing the backwards spelling of "zoo" to connote an inversion of the usual relationship between humans and animals. In this "zoo without bars," animals come to us in their own habitats, forming mutually beneficial and theoretically educational interactions.

In honor of the Biennial, Jeremijenko is incorporating Ooz this year, an effort to extend the legal personhood enjoyed by corporations to animals. She's selling fish buoys as shares. There was also another, secret component to her Biennial project, a wild garden she has been cultivating on the overhang above the Whitney's entrance, comprised of plants that have adapted to Manhattan's unique ecosystem. She intends it as an additional stage for the city's bird population, and as another way of asserting that humans' built environment is part of the natural system. "If art museums are part of nature," she jokes, "then we're really getting somewhere!"

In fact, this September, the roof of the Chelsea gallery Postmasters will become the site of a more ambitious, ongoing experiment in interaction with urban wilderness, titled *There Is No Out There, Out There*. Jeremijenko is presently soliciting architects to design a high-density infrastructure for urban bird living, including a miniature Levittown, a supermarket and a concert hall (several architects, including Laura Kurgan and Elizabeth Diller, have committed). It's the mouse house on a larger scale, an ongoing creative laboratory meant to study the way birds adapt to human-engineered technologies.

When I ask how these human/animal interfaces relate to past projects, she hesitates. "In retrospect," she says, "I can recognize this strategy of public experiments that don't pretend there is an authority, that don't set someone



A BIRD PERCH IN THE HAND: JEREMIJENKO TENDS TO HER WHITNEY ROOF GARDEN. (BOTTOM LEFT) POWERBAR LABEL FROM WHITNEY BIENNIAL FOR THE BIRDS, 2006

up as a scientific genius, that don't claim to know the results, and admit the results may be unknowable."

"What's interesting about Natalie's work is that she will throw herself into projects that fail, and they are almost designed to fail," observes Tomas Banovich, one of Postmasters' curators. "But the idea and the concept and the underlying thought structure is viable." Jeremijenko's work is informed by scientific inquiry, but she's not especially interested in getting good data, since she believes that information alone has proven insufficient to change behavior. "Truth is not a centralized authority, she insists. "It's shared meaning." She often references the Slovenian cultural critic Slavoj Žižek's idea that ideology persists more in our actions than in our beliefs. "I think we need to interact with natural systems," she says. "Instead of this thesis, 'do not touch, do not interact,' it's like, act, and make it good. It's a shift in environmental thinking, which I think is the new environmentalism."

Tell that to an environmentalist, you might say. In fact, Jeremijenko works with many environmental organizations, from Friends of the Urban Forest to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. And in a world where governments ignore overwhelming scientific evidence that the planet is getting warmer, and people who know better keep buying SUVs, it does seem wise to consider new approaches.

"Environmentalism has been more about hand-wringing – drive less, use less electricity, less packaging – and less about the engagement of wonder," Jeremijenko says. "Understanding, through the spectacle of adaptation, that animals and natural systems are dynamic, not static images to be conserved and preserved, gives us a responsibility, or opportunity, to change." ■

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Nutrition Facts for Birds		Amount/Serving	%DV*	Amount/Serving	%DV*
Total Fat 280mg		280mg	14%	Total Carb. 840mg	7%
Sat. Fat 160mg		160mg	23%	Dietary Fiber <4mg	0%
Trans Fat 0g		0g		Insoluble Fiber 0g	0
Cholest. <5mg		<5mg	2%	Sugars 520mg	0
Sodium 13.2mg		13.2mg	14%	Other Carb. 0g	0
Potassium 4.4mg		4.4mg	5%	Protein 640mg	0

\* Percentage Daily Values (%DV) are calculated based on the caloric requirement of Columbidae family and the value of services provided by urban birds, including seed dispersal, melodic material (ring tones and other musical resources), ambient sound, temporal information, biomonitoring, competitive population pressure on urban rats and mice, plant pollination, and nitrogen(N), phosphorus(P) and other nutrient cycling in terrestrial ecosystems.

\* Vit. A 35% • Vit. C 100% • Calcium 10% • Iron 10% • Vit. E 100% • Thiamin (B1) 25% • Riboflavin (B2) 50% • Niacin (B3) 50% • Vit. B6 50% • Folate 20% • Vit. B12 35% • Biotin 25% • Pantothenic Acid 25% • Phosphorus 15% • Magnesium 10% • Zinc 25% • Selenium 35% • Chromium 25% • Molybdenum 25%