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"New Ecological Sympathies: Thinking about Contemporary Art in the Age of Extinction"

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At the turn of the previous century Henri Bergson suggested that sympathy offered a way to understand interspecies relationships. Samuel Butler took Bergson's ideas to an absurd extent by mixing them with readings of Charles Darwin and claiming a vital impulse for machines. By interspersing a story of humans and machines with insect life, Butler pointed to a broad imaginative web of interspecies and machinic relationships. Contemporary artists Pierre Huyghe, Ann Lislegaard, and Hayden Fowler use video and installation art to explore interspecies relationships in time and space. In very different ways Huyghe, Lislegaard, and Fowler use the art gallery to demonstrate how humans might sympathetically engage with ecological transformation, and thus the confronting possibility of our own extinction.

In looking back at Bergson and Butler through contemporary art, I suggest that the art gallery gives us a sympathetic space in which we can encounter the knowledges of Bergson and Darwin, temper them with the imaginings of Butler, and ground them with the transformative living machines created by Huyghe, Lislegaard, and Fowler. By entering the spaces of the art gallery and locating ourselves in the place of others, sympathy read alongside machinic evolution suggests a new approach to the ecological disaster of species extinction. (Text from author's abstract)

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