Honorific Ecology
Multispecies Portraiture of Ren Hang

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Deep in the woods, at night: we barely see the dark green shrubbery in the background, having no motion, attracting no attention. Rather, it is this sudden illumination in front which immediately guides our eyes. Excluding the crown, the flash portrays as well as reveals the anonymous textures of a tree trunk with three thick branches. The tints and shades of brown, metallic green and a toned-down scarlet stand out, and we both perceive map-like shapes on the surface and sense the tactility of the bark, created by the rough, irregular, jagged tissues. Yet, this nocturnal representation does not seem classical. Not only because it does not separate the human element from its surroundings, but also on account of the strange yet curious spot where the face looking at us in the eye seamlessly fills the emptiness left by the branches of the tree. Central, peripheral or ornamental to the same extent, the way the human and more-than-human elements relate to one another form a weird sense of belonging, a radical complication of the matter and the bodily in this very moment. Doing away with the conventions of portraiture, Ren Hang's photograph, in short, enables us to share a transformative companionship.[1]

Influenced by the divine, mythological statues of early Greek culture as well as by the consolidation of the individual in the Renaissance period, classical portrait photography has established human beings as the central elements of the viewing experience, particularly employing the aspects of "face, pose, clothing and location" (Bate 2009: 73). As an indexical "representation of a historical personage", it has traditionally aimed at contextualizing and remembering the existence of the sitters in the form of the "honorific" portrait (Keesling 2017: 1). In doing so, photographic portraiture has predominantly depicted people who had "power and status", often maintaining "social hierarchies" (West 2004: 71). However, problematizing the ideological dimensions of portraiture, which reflects predominantly white, high-class, patriarchal values, modern 20th-/21st-century art has given voice to sitters who have been marginalized throughout the history of visual aesthetics. Women, black, queer, low-class, disabled: underrepresented groups, as both photographers and sitters, have started to produce critical counter-narratives in

1 The image may be viewed at https://api.time.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/ren-hang-tashen-photographer-china-05.jpg.

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the process of rewriting the histories of photography.[2] Yet, despite those liberating instances, portraiture still seems to be an anthropocentric practice.

This paper attempts to explore the aesthetics of multispecies portraiture. I analyse Chinese photographer Ren Hang's oeuvre regarding two theoretical concepts: *more-than-human sociality* and *mesh*.[3] The first concept belongs to Anna Tsing (2014), who suggests that nature and society are not exclusive to one another; rather, sociality is an interaction and collaboration, an entangling connection also performed by non-human actors. One of the key conceptions in Timothy Morton's (2010) "ecological thought", *mesh*, on the other hand, accounts for a queer, liquid and fluid conjunction that does away with any strict boundary among worldly matter and fosters new modes of intimacy. My overall argument is that Ren Hang's multispecies photographs build an anti-hierarchical, non-binary space where vital organisms coexist, and radically reform and deform each other. The emergent, ecologically engaged sociality his aesthetics visualizes is not only honorifically more-than-human but also deeply intimate.

While the Sitter's Story Unfolds

The responses of classical photography theory to portraits differ, yet, they have something in common: the aesthetics of portraiture cannot be confined to its literal outlook; there is always more to it. According to Roland Barthes, for example, a portrait photograph would hit us with its *punctum*, an unexpected "accident, a certain shock, a power of expansion" that exceeds the limits of the socio-culturally coded image and throws us into the streams of involuntary memory (1981: 27–45). The past and present tenses of our experience radically merge, constantly transforming one another throughout the journey we make. Whereas, for Susan Sontag (2005), apart from the individualistic, fortuitous experience of remembering, portraiture might also be emblematic of different realities. Sontag writes that particularly in American photographer Diane Arbus's oeuvre, it reverses and complicates the dominant gaze by signifying the presence, "detachment and autonomy" of the marginalized communities that surpass the boundaries of photographic representation (ibid.: 29). The resistance of the other undoes the often one-directional power relationships between the bearer of the look and the subject observed. Portraits are "fascinating" to the famous French photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson, because they allow us "to trace the sameness of" humanity by "[p]roducing a factual testimony", which not only visualizes personal details of the sitters, but also relates them to our biological species (1999: 30).

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2 For the analyses of the photographic depiction of underrepresented groups, see, for example, Bourland 2019; Brown and Phu 2014; Peffer and Cameron 2013; Sheehi 2016; Solomon-Godeau 2017.

3 Exhibited in numerous art galleries as well as reviewed by such popular magazines as *Vault*, *Dazed* and *Frieze*, Ren Hang's oeuvre has often been examined in the context of queer studies. While Maite Luengo Aguirre puts an emphasis on the "genderless aspects of his work" (2021), Hongwei Bao investigates how his "queer representations" reflect the "underground" culture set in China (2021). Underpinning Bao's account, Liangyu Peng also notes that Ren Hang's photographs communicate an "alternative queerness" which is formed collectively "within a subcultural community of 2010's Beijing" as a "countercultural practice" (2023: 2–48).

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However, distinct from the views of Barthes, Sontag and Cartier-Bresson, German thinker Siegfried Kracauer underlines the rather undervalued fact that photography also "brings to the fore the entire natural shell; […] the inert world" manifesting "itself in its independence from human beings, […] alienated from meaning" (1993: 435). Kracauer particularly refers here to the indexical and mechanical essence of the camera, which captures both organic and inorganic things without any form of human intervention. Unlike painting realized through our perception, imagination and creativity, photography's automatism founds a machine vision that complicates the human-centric outlook of the world in which we live. Similar to Kracauer, Walter Benjamin also praises the automatic capabilities of the medium by drawing attention to German artist Karl Blossfeldt's plant photography:

> Structural qualities, cellular tissues, which form the natural business of technology and medicine are all much more closely related to the camera than to the atmospheric landscape or the expressive portrait. At the same time photography uncovers in this material physiognomic aspects of pictorial worlds which live in the smallest things, perceptible yet covert enough to find shelter in daydreams, but which, once enlarged and capable of formulation, show the difference between technology and magic to be entirely a matter of historical variables. Thus Blossfeldt, in his plant photography, revealed the most ancient column forms in pewter-glass, totem-poles in ten times magnified sprigs of chestnut and acorn, gothic tracery in teasel. (1972)

In fact, paralleling Benjamin's curious interest, the Victorians' fascination with photographs in 19th-century Britain was grounded particularly in capturing both plants and other species in those emergent, mostly non-human forms waiting to be exposed to view. Jennifer Tucker notes that photographic observation was key to producing "scientific evidence", because researchers were able to accurately represent natural phenomena, such as "bacteria and star clusters", for the first time (2005: 7–63). Charles Darwin, one of the most influential British naturalists, also "began to use photography in his work and became a prominent voice" regarding the symbiotic relationship between science and photographic medium (Prodger 2009: xxiii). However, rather than intentionally aiming to create faithful portraits of different species, such early photographic attempts (or what we would call *species photography*) were interested in collecting empirical proof to observe how natural phenomena took place at both macroscopic and microscopic scales. Indeed, we had to wait for the subgenre of animal portraiture to witness the full acknowledgment of the agency of species apart from humans.

This type of portraiture has long been debated by thinkers interested in the idea of animal agency and its differing representations created by humans. In certain contexts, evocative of the marginalization and taming of species throughout the industrial revolution, portraying more-than-human beings parallels John Berger's conception of the zoo as "a place where as many species and varieties of animal as possible are collected in order that they can be seen, observed, studied" (1980: 21). Akira Mizuta Lippit underpins Berger's view by emphasizing how animals have been rendered by "technological media", objectified and ultimately become part of a wider human-centric "discourse and discipline" (2000: 2–22). Securing our viewing position, photographic images particu-

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larly appear to "keep us at an appropriate distance from nature" (Brower 2011: xiii). The very definition of anthropomorphism encapsulates those views: "the attribution of human form to" more-than-human beings (Daston and Mitman 2005: 2). It is not a matter of "the animal itself, [b]ut rather a human subject drawing on animal imagery to make a statement about human identity" (Baker 1993: ix); "repressing the question of nonhuman subjectivity, taking it for granted that the subject is always already human" (Wolfe 2003: 1). In this sense, from the earlier, prominently empirical illustrations to aesthetic presentations, visual depictions of the more-than-human have seemingly been absorbed into an anthropocentric perspective. However, even though such thoughts offer critical insights, they overlook how the central position of animals or other species in photographs disrupts our classical engagement with the art of portraiture. Regarding the concepts of agency, bodily experience and ecologies of connection, what actually happens when we encounter an animal portrait?

Environmental humanities scholar Nicole Merola's (2010) response to this question is twofold. Examining American artist Jill Greenberg's hyperrealistic animal portraiture, Merola suggests that, as viewers, we perform "projection and overidentification (the 'natural' anthropomorphism of an uncritical engagement), on the one hand, and underknowing, on the other" (ibid.).[4] However, while the first stance maintains already established modes of engaging with photographs, because of the highly stylized outlook and the "technonature" of Greenberg's work, we experience a constructive alienation in which a "location for opening up the possibility of non-anthropomorphic relationality" emerges (ibid.). For Merola, "[p]ositionality, not emotion, undergirds all aspects of this model of ethical engagement" (ibid.). Similarly, Linda Kalof, Joe Zammit-Luca and Jennifer Rebecca Kelly have found in their study of the audience reactions to animal portraits exhibited in a museum setting by using the Personal Meaning Map assessment that "after viewing", there is a dramatic "change in visitors' perceptions" in terms of "kinship" and "personality" (2011). Rather than ascribing anthropocentric qualities to photographs, participants in the research both acknowledge the peculiar characteristics of each animal figure and critically reflect on our expanding relationship with and "closeness" to the more-than-human, keeping the critical distance between human and animal agency (ibid.). Animal portraiture as a subgenre, therefore, cannot be confined to scientific, empirical data or the aesthetics of anthropomorphic representation. It also has something to do with the ontological dimensions of being more-than-human. In what follows, I aim to show that Ren Hang's work adds to those productive attempts by exploring the possibilities of multispecies portraiture. Manifesting how closely knit we are with our surroundings, his works invite us to rethink the notions of correspondence and coexistence.

4 Greenberg's animal portraits may be viewed at <https://www.jillgreenberg.com/monkey-portraits> [accessed 14 September 2024].

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Lures of Multispecies Portraiture

"Emergences", Eben Kirksey writes, "can […] figure into collective hopes; [f]alse starts in one direction can become significant beginnings along a new vector" (2015: 1). But he also asks in what ways: "How do certain plants, animals, fungi, move among worlds, navigate shifting circumstances and find emergent opportunities?" (ibid.: 1). Incorporating human beings along with the more-than-human, Ren Hang creates a transformative proposal in his photographic oeuvre regarding such emergences. Exterior, night: red nail polish clouded by the smoke of a cigarette; a human skin surrounded by thin, dark brown branches in bloom, reminding us of ivies clinging to manifold surfaces; a foggy, still water, embodying shades of blue and the deep shadows of the leaves.[5]

(Figure 1:) Untitled. Ren Hang 2016. Image Courtesy of the Artist and the White Rabbit Collection.

In another image, we see a bathtub where a group of coral-coloured fish swims around a human; all organisms are naked (Figure 1). While circular currents liquify the image and deform the figure, we witness a strange moment illuminating the multiplicity

5 The image may be viewed at https://www.instagram.com/p/BDdfp9HLYwu/?igsh=dWNsYjNkajgwYXV3.

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of things: bubbles glowing, eyes half-open, a torso becoming fluid, shared inhales and exhales. Reflecting on how organisms move among worlds, in other words, these photographs speak to what Kirksey calls "*emergent ecologies*" in which "[b]eings are coinvented in relationships of reciprocal capture, forming a shared milieu, an environment" (ibid.: 4). Moreover, with their peculiar encounters, unexpected forms and fruitful togetherness, Ren Hang's works have something to do with multispecies communities that make emergent ecologies possible.

Multispecies are of several beings, changing organisms, becomings. As a point of inquiry in different academic disciplines,

> a multispecies approach focuses on the multitudes of lively agents that bring one another into being through entangled relations that include, but always also exceed, dynamics of predator and prey, parasite and host, researcher and researched, symbiotic partner, or indifferent neighbour. (van Dooren et al. 2016: 3)

Celebrating biodiversity, it is a view of life that reconsiders the ways we approach our surroundings and invites us to be more environmentally conscious. However, such an approach is not limited to data produced by life sciences, nor does it particularly foreground the sensibilities of the human species or a form of "human exceptionalism" (Haraway 2008: 244). Multispecies ethnography, for instance, aims to investigate "the host of organisms whose lives and deaths are linked to human social worlds" (Kirksey and Helmreich 2010: 545) with particular attention to "political, economic and cultural forces" (ibid.), shedding light on the "contact zones where lines separating nature from culture have broken down" (ibid.: 546). Sundhya Walther points out that multispecies views "challenge dominant understandings of community, space, nation and narrative" (2021: 3), and Theresa L. Miller remarks that they search for emergent forms of "care, survival and well-being" (2019: 2).[6] From this standpoint, it is a matter of divergent collectivities involved in changing and growing associations, which, ultimately, enable us to (re)constructively respond to the current, uncertain ecological outlook and environmental problems of the planet Earth. Standing out as significant methodological instruments incorporated by ethnographic research, multispecies narratives are key to witnessing and understanding various manifestations performed by beings, as well as imagining possible compositions and assemblages of plurality.

Multispecies storytelling, Michaela Fenske and Martha Norkunas describe, explores how organisms "story their places […] experience the world" and how humans "seek new connections with nonhuman others in this metamorphosed global web", providing "insights into what it means to be human in a posthuman world" (2017: 105–106). In the process of unfolding, while worldly species as "agential subjects" become the narrators of entangled stories, human figures are "orienting to other kinds of creatural life" (Herman 2018: 7–18), approaching the idea of "doing environmental politics differently" (McEwan

6 Recent research in multispecies studies continues to challenge our thinking, experience and orientation with its diverse problems, such as veganism (Oliver 2022), domestication and landscape formation (Swanson et al. 2018), memory and senses (Yates 2017), literary soundscapes (De Bruyn 2020), archaeology and urban space (Birch 2018) and juridical-legal systems (Chao et al. 2022).

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2023).[7] Yet, despite being communicated through different media consisting of textual, visual, aural or other sensory layers, multispecies narratives do not claim an anthropocentric power to express the thoughts or feelings of more-than-humans. On the contrary, Ida Bencke and Jørgen Bruhn write that it is a "generative, open-ended and ongoing […] morphology in which bodies, materials and ontologies are always negotiated" (2022: 10). Ren Hang's photography is a significant case in point. As we have already seen, the genre of classical portraiture predominantly narrates the journey of human beings, creating photographic moments in which questions of identity, subjectivity, body and soul arise and intersect. By contrast, Ren Hang's pluralistic works, I argue, invert those narratives by generating multispecies storytelling. They are an open-ended, ongoing practice of negotiation related to emerging, merging and mutual modes of being. Referring particularly to concepts of *more-than-human sociality* and *mesh*, I suggest that his oeuvre forms what we would call multispecies portraiture.

In front of a white background, a green shrubbery is embraced by the long hair of a human being, dressed in red, seen in profile.[8] It is a highly intimate coupling as well as a strange twist. Parts of the black hair function as a climbing plant clinging on and aiming to swathe the leaves. However, such a moment of drawing near is not exclusive to this photograph. The inextricable fusion of the tree and the head, the blooming branches around the body and the shared breaths of fishes and the being in Figure 1 also exemplify this metamorphosed global web in which new correspondences between agential subjects, both more-than-human and human, arise. All those figures, in this sense, resonate with Tsing's suggestion that "if social means 'made in entangling relations with significant others', clearly living beings other than humans are fully social – with or without humans" (2014). Amalgamating earthly matter and bodily forces, sociality is a vast, interconnected, constantly evolving network that cannot be confined merely to a human-centric view. It is of multispecies. As Tsing remarks:

> It is dynamic relations among these species, not their individual enrollment as human tools, that create the […] web of social relations. Many histories, human and otherwise, come together in sites of more-than-human sociality. One is not enough. Changes in the species mix have social consequences for both humans and non-humans. Species change is not just about metaphors. Social worlds pulse with multiple rhythms. (2014)

Ren Hang's multispecies portraiture, with its entanglement of the diverse elements of ecology, manifests the idea of more-than-human sociality, proposing further modes of exchange, accordance and coexistence. Each vital organism makes unexpected interactions that produce "a mosaic of open-ended assemblages" (Tsing 2015: 4). Moreover, his photographs, parallel to their collective outlook. pertain to what Timothy Morton calls "*mesh*", which, at the heart of his ecological thought, accounts for "the interconnected-

7 For mind-opening forms of storytelling embedded in multispecies studies, see Höckert 2020; Höhti and Tammi 2023; Miller 2020; Rantala and Höckert 2024; Russell 2020.

8 The image may be viewed at https://www.instagram.com/p/0r_2TTLYy1/?igsh=emNudWZuaWtpZ2Z5.

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ness of all living and non-living things" (2010: 28). Echoing Tsing's line of thought, for Morton,

> [E]xistence is always coexistence. The ecological thought is a practice and process of becoming fully aware of how human beings are connected with other beings – animal, vegetable, or mineral. The mesh of interconnected things is vast, […][e]ach entity in the mesh looks strange. Nothing exists all by itself and so nothing is fully "itself". (2010: 4–15)

Mesh offers habitual possibilities; it is a composite, a blend, a mixture in which organisms are present and interacting. However, different from the concept of more-than-human sociality, it embodies a "radical intimacy" freed from the dominating discourses of patriarchy (ibid.: 37). *Mesh* also has something to do with the joy of being together, with "care and concern for beings" (ibid.: 19). Ren Hang's portraits, as visual forms of *mesh*, open up an anti-hierarchical, non-binary space where different species meet and socialize. Their multispecies storytelling is more "about making, rather than representing, worlds" (McCormack 2019). It is not just a matter of coexistence, though. While navigating through this interconnected *mesh* and becoming intimate, beings overlap, reshape one another and, ultimately, gain strange, unfamiliar forms in Ren Hang's visual world. His portraiture presents a social and intimate point of departure for multispecies stories to unfold.

Conclusion

Concerning the aesthetic ways they are depicted, one of the persistent questions is whether more-than-human beings remain ornamental in artistic works. No matter how visible the elements of the organisms are, they seem secondary, because the representation itself is still the very product of a human agent. However, as we have already seen, set free from underlying hierarchies, the process of creating multispecies narratives, first and foremost, defies any dominant gaze. Rather than aiming to clearly define a being or establish precise boundaries in between, it is an exploration of the plurality of agencies that is in continuous action. Sunflowers, bushes, fishes, branches, trees, birds, peacocks, butterflies, water lilies, green grass, human bodies are forming and deforming in a *mesh*; this is also what we experience in Ren Hang's works. Odd but attractive, unfamiliar but welcoming, not only human but also more-than-human, social but intimate: His photographs are in search of being.

It is a journey 'we' multispecies make, not only the modern human subject 'I'. Artists created narratives of historical human figures in the form of honorific portraits in early Greek culture. In Ren Hang's multispecies portraiture, it is the other way around. Adding to one another, those photographic images celebrate the contingent, surprising and diverse entanglements to which we belong. Their multispecies storytelling honour ecology, they offer a base for honorific ecology of which the human being is only a small part.

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