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Affective Realities and Conceptual Contradictions of Patricia Piccinini's Art: Ecofeminist and Disability Studies Perspectives

ABSTRACT

The recent exhibition of Patricia Piccinini's art called *That's Us* (Toruń, CSW) largely represents the Australian artist's visions and fascinations known from earlier exhibitions. Questioning and erasing the borders between species, the affective realities of Piccinini's art are bound to the concepts of care, empathy and fragility, which refigure what is human and non-human and the relations between them by expanding the notion of mothering and fostering to include interspecies relations. Beginning with a discussion of the uncanny, abjection and monstrosity, this article aims to examine the complicated implications of interpreting Piccinini's art within the conceptual framework of ecofeminism, as well as in the context of disability aesthetics. In her explorations of different and alternative corporealities, Piccinini, among many other things, asks questions about ideologies of normativity and able-bodiedness, suggesting the possibility of going beyond them.

Keywords: Patricia Piccinini, ecofeminism, disability aesthetics, the uncanny.

INTRODUCTION

Patricia Piccinini is arguably one of the most controversial and thought-provoking artists today, working in a variety of materials and media. For almost two decades in her hyper- and surrealist sculptures and installations, the Australian artist has addressed many important problems centred around existential questions of "being and belonging" and exploring the narrative "realm where science fiction, environmentalism and feminism intersect" (Antonsen 112). In the 2012 exhibition *Fairy Tales, Monsters and the Genetic Imagination* organized in Frist Art Museum (Nashville, then Manitoba and Calgary), Piccinini's work *The Long Awaited* symptomatically expressed contemporary art's engagement with a new type of scientific imagination. Vacillating between horror and wonder—what the curator of the exhibition, Mark Scala, described as "repulsion and fascination" (Frist Art Museum)—the exhibition addressed the connections between humans, nature and science by exploring both the fears and hopes that people have about the future (Frist Art Museum). The recent exhibition of Piccinini's art called *That's Us* (Centre for Contemporary Art in Toruń, Poland, 29 October 2021–10 April 2022) presents the artist's visions and fascinations known from her earlier exhibitions. Its very title announces a presence, recognition and proclamation of existence combined with self-awareness and pride. The familiarity it expresses in the first person pronoun represents the general approach Piccinini holds to her artistic objects/subjects—close, affectionate and responsive. *That's Us* can also be interpreted as an announcement of an arrival of a guest that is both expected and familiar and strange and surprising—it demands a reaction, recognition and welcome. As such, from the very beginning, Piccinini's art expects from its viewers participation, affective engagement and a responsibility for the kind of encounter one engages in. This affective immediacy is confronted with the complex conceptual and theoretical reflection contained in Piccinini's sculptures and installations. As the artist proclaims: "My real interest is how the conceptual or ethical issues are transformed by emotional realities. I think that all of my work has that emotional dimension that shifts the apparent rational implications" (Interview by Laura Orgaz). While Piccinini's art might be disturbing to some viewers because of its monstrous, uncanny and hyperrealistic representations, it also relies for its effect on the response to vulnerability, intimacy and affection by which affirmative and utopian extensions of inclusiveness are realized.

My aim in this article is to trace the significance of the juxtaposition of the contradictory affective realities[1] of Piccinini's art and the conceptual

[1] In my discussion I rephrase Piccinini's "emotional realities" to "affective realities" to emphasize the importance of affective response to the reality and materiality of bodies in disability art (as discussed by Siebers) and negotiating often contradictory conceptual

and theoretical frameworks to which it refers or which it constructs. Questioning and erasing the borders between species, Piccinini's artistic sensibilities are bound to the concepts of care, empathy and fragility, which refigure the notions of the human and the non-human and the relations between them by expanding the notion of mothering and fostering to include interspecies relations. Beginning with a discussion of the uncanny, abjection and monstrosity, in what follows, I will examine the complicated implications of interpreting Piccinini's art[2] within the conceptual framework of ecofeminism, as well as in the context of disability aesthetics. In her explorations of different and alternative corporealities, Piccinini, among many other things, asks questions about ideologies of normativity and able-bodiedness, suggesting a possibility of going beyond them, but remaining fully aware of the complexities and ambivalences of such transgressions.

MONSTROSITY AND THE UNCANNY FAMILIARITY

Patricia Piccinini's art is a futuristic project advocating the inclusion of otherness through maternal acceptance and affection—one that can be conceived of but is as such yet impossible. The simultaneous presence and impossibility of the project results from two contrastive drives that Piccinini's art evokes: one of intimacy and affection, and the other of estrangement and fear. They reflect to some extent what Piccinini calls a fascination with "the unseen or unwanted sides of anatomy" and inspiration drawn from the pathology museums, "where [she] could see the stuff that was so often hidden, the strange [sic] or different or dangerous," which still "underlie[s]" her work today (Interview by Jane Messenger). Looking at Piccinini's creatures through the prism of freak shows or "pickled punks" exhibitions raises multiple ethical questions and mixed affective reactions. What certainly redefines the echoes of objectifying and unethical displays[3] of non-standard anatomies is that Piccinini's figures are presented in full

interpretations across the divide between materialist and idealist aesthetics (Siebers, "The Art of Disability").

[2] I will focus mostly on the exhibits presented in *That's Us* exhibition in Toruń, but I will also make references to works which were not shown there, such as *The Long Awaited* or *Bottom Feeder* and *Doubting Thomas*.

[3] Freak shows seem to combine objectifying gaze with an interested stare, which, according to Garland-Thomson, "is an interrogative gesture that asks what's going on and demands the story" (*Staring* 3). The concept of staring is applied to Piccinini's art in Sara E. S. Orning's chapter on "Staging Humanimality" (98–99), yet some of Garland-Thomson's concepts seem to be only indirectly applicable to the staring dynamics involving Piccinini's hybrid creatures.

light, not in secret and secretive spaces; they are imagined as and presented as alive; they are not real and are produced mostly of artificial materials. Despite these important differences, the cultural memory of freak show exhibits and anatomy museums, combined with hyperrealism and the use of real human and animal hair and, sporadically, skin, produces some mixed responses involving fear and disgust. In psychoanalytic terms, as Rachel Adams argues, "encountering freaks, we contemplate the potential dissolution of our own corporeal and psychic boundaries, the terror and excitement of monstrous fusion with the surrounding world" (7).[4] The refusal to acknowledge the established differences which freaks represent is, according to Adams, paired with a sense of "a horrifying loss" (7), which, however, might "inspire a more capacious understanding of the human" (7). In endowing the creatures with subjectivities and presenting them in affectionate and reciprocal relationships with others, the freak show legacy in Piccinini's art also involves an affirmation of what is different, marginal and thus rebellious (cf. Adams 139–41).

Fear as one of the possible reactions to Piccinini's art objects/subjects could be associated with the emotional response to irregularity and ambiguity described by Georges Canguilhem in his "Monstrosity and the Monstrous": "It takes only a dashing of that trust, a morphological disparity, an appearance of species ambiguity for a radical fear to seize hold of us" (187). This "fear, and even panic terror," as Canguilhem argues, is mixed with "curiosity or even fascination" (188). The feeling is partly interiorized and thus perceived as a threat from within (which Canguilhem contrasts with death):

> Death is the permanent and unconditional threat of the organism's decomposition; it is the limitation from outside, the negation of the living by the non-living. But monstrosity is the accidental and conditional threat of incompletion or distortion in the formation of form; it is the limitation from inside, the negation of the living by the non-viable. (Canguilhem 188)

Part of the reaction to Piccinini's art arises from the fear not so much *of* but *for* the creatures it represents, for their ability to survive and find nurture in another being. This double fear seems to rest upon a wish to withdraw because of the repulsion we might feel and a wish to help and care because of the creature's incompleteness and thus apparent helplessness—a help-needing appearance. This aspect—as well as the death and existential anxiety associated with disabled bodies—will be discussed later on in relation to disability studies and aesthetics.

[4] This aspect is closely related to existential anxiety mentioned later in the article in the context of critical disability studies.

The other aspect of the creatures' monstrosity is the uncanny combination of the strange and the familiar. The uncanny is evoked in Piccinini's art on several levels: firstly in the ambiguity and uncertainty as to the status of the presented beings. The creatures—which is the term Piccinini prefers, along with beings, to hybrids, chimeras or mutants which suggest something derogatory or incomplete (Interview by Rosi Braidotti)—possess visibly anthropomorphic features in their appearance or they are arranged in recognizably anthropomorphic relations with creatures identifiable as human or (semi)human. Yet, when viewed from an anthropocentric perspective, they seem either fragmented, immobilized or de/re-formed. The ontological uncertainty as to their status and their familiarity produce the uncanny effect described by Ernst Jentsch and deriving from the "doubts [over] whether an apparently animate being is really alive; or conversely, whether a lifeless object might not be in fact animate" (qtd. in Freud 226). Piccinini's creatures are obviously artificial, yet their hyperrealistic craftsmanship, meticulous imitation of skin and its texture, as well as the use of natural human hair, transgress the boundaries of our certainties, verging on the border of possibility. Like the dolls and wax figures described by Jentsch, they cause both fear and fascination (Freud 226). These reactions are accompanied by other aspects of the uncanny described by Freud—the feeling of recognition of something that has long been repressed (Freud 220, 241), hence a mixture of fear and longing for what is no longer there (for example, the naïve and spontaneous imagination typical of children). This is mostly expressed in the convincing and naturalistic replication of the imaginary that causes both wonder at and recognition of the fantastic and its embodiment. While Freud commented on the ability of literature (and art) to address the potential sphere of the uncanny without causing a disturbing experience if it refers to the sphere of the fantastic (in contrast to real life situations) (249–51), the direct confrontation with Piccinini's art, even though taking place in the gallery space, seems to transgress this "safe" sphere characteristic of fairy tales and fiction in general. The exhibition *Fairy Tales, Monsters and the Genetic Imagination*, for example, explored this liminal space in which the uncanny is partly domesticated through the fairy tale convention and the fantastic, yet as most of the exhibits transgressed the original patterns, they seemed to dangerously loom out of their fictional frames.

The final aspect of the uncanny that features in Piccinini's art is the recognition in her strange creatures of what is supposed to be very familiar to us: this involves the recognition both of the similarity of the creature's physiological features to humans and the intimate relationships that these creatures are arranged into with humans—as partners, children or parental figures. However, as Piccinini says in an interview, her aim is

not to anthropomorphize animals but rather to see human beings as one of the animal species: "It's not about attributing human characteristics to animals as much as recognising our shared 'animalness'"[5] (Interview by Rosi Braidotti). The familiarity of the strange and the strangeness of the familiar are the attributes that lay the foundation for the inclusion of and partnership with the Other. This sense of connectedness and adjacency arising from Piccinini's art opens a possibility for seeing humans and their relation to other creatures as kinship in Donna J. Haraway's meaning of kin with its implication that "all earthlings are kin in the deepest sense. . . . All critters share a common 'flesh,' laterally, semiotically, and genealogically. Ancestors turn out to be very interesting strangers; kin are unfamiliar (outside what we thought was family or gens), uncanny, haunting, active" ("Anthropocene" 162). Piccinini's art "stretches" and "recomposes" (Haraway, "Anthropocene" 162) the meaning of inter- and intra-species relationships, repositioning humans within them.

ABJECTIVE INTIMACIES

The hyperrealistic aesthetics of Piccinini's art makes it both abjective and grotesque. Growing appendices or offshoots, multiplying body parts, magnifying body openings and protuberances, putting things inside out—all of these are the attributes of the grotesque body whose function is both to disturb order and simultaneously celebrate it in the temporary suspension of rules (cf. Bakhtin 26). While this is certainly present in Piccinini's art, its bodily transgressions seem to go beyond/aside the carnivalesque framework by confronting us with an abject or perhaps rather its naturalistic imitation. In an interview, Piccinini lists such materials used for making sculptures as "silicone, fibreglass, human and animal hair, ABS plastic, dental acrylic, traditional and high-tech plasters, stainless steel, automotive paint, plywood, Britannia metal, found objects and taxidermy animals" (Interview by The Condition Report). While most of these materials are artificial, the effect they produce is that of highly realistic human/transhuman flesh, strengthened by the use of natural human and animal hair. Abjection might result from the indefinite and composite nature of Piccinini's creatures, but also from the creature's nudity and similarity to humans. This is increased in sculptures such as *The Young*

[5] This aspect was developed by Sara E. S. Orning in her article on humanimal hybridity in Piccinini's art. Orning's argument that "humanimal bodies offer an opportunity to recognize one's own hidden animality that cannot be otherwise shown" (90) echoes Piccinini's reflection, yet turning recognition into an almost illicit act (which in Piccinini's art is rather open and liberating).

Family (2002) or *Nature's Little Helpers—Surrogate (for the northern hairy nosed wombat)* (2004), *Sphinx* (2012) or *Bottom Feeder* (2009), where, besides the naturalistic imitation of human flesh, one is confronted with fleshing out some of the taboos of the human body, by exposing lower bodily parts, openings, orifices, intimate parts, internal organs. Piccinini's anatomical reversals—such as the one in *Bottom Feeder* or *Sphinx*—in a sense are reminiscent of Hieronimus Bosch's fantastic combinations and grotesque topsy-turvyism. However, because of their hyperrrealism and three-dimensionality, they evoke more extreme reactions that cannot be contained in the carnival spirit and can be mixed with disgust and—at least initially—repulsion. That is the case with Piccinini's sculpture called *Doubting Thomas* (2008), in which the wound inspired by the biblical motif is exposed as the major part of the creature's body. The sculpture presents a very spontaneous and intimate, but at the same time disgusting and arguably inconsiderate, interest expressed by a human boy in a transspecies creature's body/wound, its abjective opening and border-crossing (cf. Kristeva 4). The positive associations that the sculptures ultimately evoke[6] demand from viewers negations and redefinitions of borders and classification, reassessing our prejudice, fear, repression of human and animal flesh. Some of these works explore the relation between mothers and children, presenting affectionate intimacies between them, yet still exposing the horrors of the maternal and incompletely formed bodies. What perhaps makes them different from the carnivalesque excess is, first of all, that they do not represent the temporary suspension of natural order, but rather posit a change that is there to stay: a need and necessity to redefine that order so as to include all those that do not match the norms, whether aesthetic, ethical or discriminatory/ableist.

MOTHERHOOD, EMBODIMENT, ETHICS OF PARTNERSHIP

Many of Piccinini's works comment on reproductive themes and feature mother figures and their young ones. What is particularly interesting about these works is that they present trans-species parenthood in what seems to

[6] As Linda Marie Walker notes in her essay, Piccinini's creatures "are there (arrived, still, mute), come about, not to intensify our dread, but to increase our tolerance for what can come about . . . and touch upon the ordinary, basic, issues (surfaces) of being human, being communal, being loved and being loving and how we might 'feel' if each of these issues becomes at issue with itself" (49). Similarly, Anne M. Harris and Stacy Holman Jones write about Piccinini's art: "painting future (although never dystopic) scenes in which we are called toward empathy and understanding, rather than fear, isolation, and aversion" (49).

be a natural biological relationship. In the famous work *The Long Awaited* (2008), mentioned earlier, what is exposed is the affection that the two figures—a young boy and a grandmother-like unidentifiable creature—express for each other in their close embrace. A similar theme, which could be associated with reproductive rights and practices, reappears in *The Young Family* (2002), where a similarly old and wrinkled mother figure takes care of her offspring (which seem to belong to a different species). *The Young Family* and *Surrogate: Nature's Little Helpers* also raise questions of surrogate motherhood and the possibilities of care and affection that go beyond biological or genetic bonds.[7] In all of these sculptures, the mother's body is doubly exposed to abjection—through fleshly representations of biological organs and the aging body that brings birth and death dangerously close to each other. The maternal body that is aged (*The Long Awaited*), exhausted (*The Young Family*) or deformed (*Surrogate*) embraces both the beauty and the horror of sacrifice. The "animalistic" representation of the maternal body emphasizes the biological nature of all motherhood. It brings together the abjective aspects attributed to the mother's body by Kristeva, representing the border between life and death and "horror and beauty" (155), leading to, as Braidotti puts it, a "blend of fascination and horror, which prompts an intense play of the imaginary, of fantasies and often nightmares" (82). Piccinini adds to this another transgression—that of cross-species mother-/parent-hood.

A slightly different example of embodiment and abjection is represented in two video installations spanning twenty years, shown in the *That's Us* exhibition: *The Breathing Room* (2000) and *The Awakening* (2020). Overwhelming in their size and proximity and imposing an uncomfortable intimacy, the projects seem to represent the change of perspective brought about by the biotechnological revolution described, among others, by Braidotti in *Nomadic Subjects*. In a sense both projects incarnate what Braidotti called "the biotechnological gaze," which, according to her, "has penetrated into the very intimate structure of living matter, seeing the invisible, restructuring that which has no shape yet, freezing time out of the picture" (43). In both installations, viewers experience what could be seen as the end result of this type of penetrating biotechnological gaze. However, instead of objectifying the presented content, the projects immerse the viewers in the living and pulsating life that both horrifies and fascinates, but also acquires its own independent

[7] In her essay, Haraway emphasizes that Piccinini's art exposes the difference between parenting and reproduction, with the former meaning care for generations whereas the latter just an act of populating the future with more copies of oneself ("Speculative Fabulations" 258).

existence and a form of agency.[8] Visitors are confronted with a work of art that activates very strong affective responses and envelops them in the space that—due to its size and close distance—can potentially generate a sense of claustrophobia and oppression, on the one hand, and proximity and intimacy, on the other. The transgressive and liminal process involving constant and repetitive transformation, gestation and growth leaves the frame—both literally and metaphorically—of anthropomorphic aesthetics and order. The amplified body fragment or organ exists as a separate entity, yet its borders seem to spill over the screen (as they fill the whole available space in a close-up and as a result we cannot see exactly what we are looking at). Being too close or too large to categorize, the body/process shown in Piccinini's installations epitomizes the new materialist understanding of matter as "indeterminate, constantly forming and reforming in unexpected ways" (Coole and Frost 10). Piccinini's installations—not only the two discussed here but also *Seedling Dance* (2018) and *Metaflora* (2015)—can be interpreted as "choreographies of becoming" (Coole and Frost 10), which can be connected with a "decentered worldview that is no longer anthropocentric, hierarchical and detached, but 'monist' and open to the many interrelations and changes in the world we are part of" (Rosa et al. 5). In order to experience the process of mattering in Piccinini's installations, the initial affective responses by which the viewers try to make sense of what does not yield to interpretation need to be discarded or overcome. Difficult as it is, the process of taking a decision to stay and experience the installations involves to a large extent a decision to go beyond traditional expectations, which lead to confusion, uncertainty, abjection and repugnance, and notice a different layer at which experience is not seen in terms of dichotomies but contiguity and process.

In the combination of affective structures based on care and devotion, Piccinini confronts us with the questions of ethics of care and the type of relationship it suggests between human beings and the environment, as well as other species. What seems to dominate in the fostering projects mentioned earlier in this article is an ecofeminist implication of the affinity of women and nature, suggesting "a connection between the exploitation and degradation of the natural world and the subordination and oppression of women" (Mellor 1), and the extension of women's caring abilities also to the environment, by emphasizing "human

[8] Piccinini's video installations *The Breathing Room* and *The Awakening* epitomize and enact Karen Barad's concept of posthumanist performativity (826–27) by erasing the limits of identity, confronting the visitor with enormous materiality, which possesses agency of its own, affecting and embracing whoever comes into contact with its continuous process of becoming.

embodiedness and ecological embeddedness" (Rigby 58). Although not all parenting figures in Piccinini's art are female by implication (see, for example, the *Eagle Egg Man* series with male-like creatures incubating eagle eggs), the majority could be interpreted according to early trends within ecofeminism, equating women's role in relation to nature with their nurturing abilities and defining it through the concept of care. Among its limitations, ethics of care, as Merchant suggests, "falls prey to an essentialist critique that women's nature is to nurture" (8). Kate Rigby argues, referring to Val Plumwood's observation, that ethics of care "also creates a distorted understanding of our relationship with non-human others, failing as it does to acknowledge their independent agency and the fact that their interests will not necessarily coincide with ours" (69). However, it seems that Piccinini critically explores these "care and nurture" implications to extend them to what Merchant calls the ethics of partnership, which refracts some of the early connections established by ecofeminism. Merchant proposes to use the concept of the ethics of partnership in order to recognize the importance of the relation, connection and interdependence between human and non-human communities and respect for cultural and bio-diversity (217). As Merchant explains, "[a] partnership ethic calls for a new balance in which both humans and nonhuman nature are equal partners, neither having the upper hand, yet cooperating with each other. Both humans and nature are active agents" (218). Partnership ethics includes both intimacy and care, as well as compassion and recognition of difference and variety: "[c]onstructing nature as a partner allows for the possibility of a personal or intimate (but not necessarily spiritual) relationship with nature and for feelings of compassion for nonhumans as well as for people who are sexually, racially, or culturally different" (8). All of these elements surface in Piccinini's art, even where it depicts mother and child relations and affections. A more recent example of Piccinini's art using the mother-carer motif but simultaneously presenting partnership messages is the video *We Travel Together* (2021) shown at the *That's Us* exhibition. The video relies on the mother and care association for its effect, yet it also emphasizes affinity and togetherness, as well as agency. The title already implies a form of companionship and sharing of space and direction, which are closely related to the notion of partnership. The film presents an aboriginal woman, who encounters a small hybrid animal in a city and decides to return it to the wild. She attracts the animal by offering it some food and after catching it, carries it under her clothes away from the city. When she arrives in the forest, she lets the creature out to join other animals of the strange species. What is worth noting is that the act of releasing the animal resembles an act of giving birth. It represents

a symbolic union between the woman and the animal, in which the animal's rescue is connected with the pain of parting. Leaving the animal in the forest seems to demand from the woman an effort to suppress her wish of owning or being close to the animal. It demands the recognition of togetherness but also separateness and independence—coexistence but freedom, as if symbolically representing a transition between the concept of care and partnership, resulting in the possibility of a new conceptualization of nature as agentive, independent and equal.

VULNERABILITY, INCLUSIVENESS, ECO-ABILITY

As already mentioned, one of the important components of Piccinini's art is how it challenges viewers to re-consider the ways in which various norms operate in us as individuals and in social systems. In a conversation with Rosi Braidotti, Patricia Piccinini emphasizes the confrontation with the idea of normality we are supposed to experience when we see her works:

> In many ways, I think that the figures in my work are metaphors for the disenfranchised or the excluded. The "beauty" or "ugliness" of these creatures depends very much on what notion of normality you believe in. The challenge to accept them, is the same challenge we feel to accept any thing—or anyone—who is different. Hopefully, in thinking about the world I present, the viewer will be able to think about the real world around them, and where that world draws the line between normal and strange, or desirable and unacceptable. (Interview by Rosi Braidotti)

Piccinini's art confronts us with transgressions or envisages them not so much to propose a solution to problems but to rethink the ethical positions that we may hold, by provoking certain affective reactions that impact the ideological or conceptual frames. For example, with the series entitled *Nature's Little Helpers*, Piccinini presents what she calls "'assistant species' designed to help preserve a number of Australian endangered species" (Interview by Laura Orgaz). While imbued with ethically desirable attitudes—of caring and being capable of sacrifice for the sake of extinct species, the sculpture provokes many questions concerning the responsibility for ecological catastrophes, the involvement of other species in preserving nature destroyed by humans, the subjectivity of the assistant species, the ethics of their mission or servitude. Therefore, it seems that the series juxtaposes our wish to repair and save with the reservations about the strategies of preserving endangered species and the use of biotechnologies

to achieve these ends.[9] In this case the "emotional realities" redefine our assessments and beliefs. In other trans-species works, one can trace the elements of what Rosi Braidotti describes in her interview with Patricia Piccinini as "a veiled and non-violent critique of anthropocentrism." The intimate, spontaneous and sincere relations between species: human or almost human and ostensibly non-anthropomorphic—redefine negative or mixed reactions, expanding the utopian connectedness between species. In such works as *The Comforter*, *The Welcome Guest* or *Still Life with Stem Cells*, stem cells and what from the anthropocentric perspective seems to be awkward, underdeveloped or faulty life forms are viewed and approached with warmth and affection, whereby they acquire subjectivity and validity, reiterating the premises of new materialism discussed in the previous section.

Representations of trans-species can be received as disturbing in implying the creatures' vulnerability, inability to survive, incompleteness or disability. These affective responses are largely informed by the notion of pathology and aberrance around which the concept of normality is socially and culturally constructed. However, as in other artworks by Piccinini, they are situated in an affective context that questions prejudices and inhibitions, creating space for the inclusion of what goes beyond norms and expectations. In addition to the effects of the uncanny and the abject, many of Piccinini's works featuring seemingly incomplete or genetically diverse beings rely for their transgressive effect on the aspects of what is called disability aesthetics. Tobin Siebers places disability aesthetics in the context of the materialist tendency that underlines the importance of "originary subject matter [of art]: the body and its affective sphere" (*Disability Aesthetics* 2). It derives from the assumption that, as Siebers explains, aesthetics relies on "the human body and its affective relation to other bodies as foundational to the appearance of the beautiful—and to such a powerful extent that aesthetics suppresses its underlying corporeality only with difficulty" (*Disability Aesthetics* 1). Siebers argues that "the disabled body and mind" have played "significant roles in the evolution of modern aesthetics" (*Disability Aesthetics* 2), because they have disrupted and questioned idealized and non-materialist aesthetic rules and conventions. In this sense, "disability represents the outer boundary

[9] In her reading of Piccinini's art through Deborah Bird Rose's concept of ethics of decolonization, Donna J. Haraway exposes the problematic nature of surrogacy and help, naming Piccinini's creatures "sf humanoids with dubious naturalcultural genealogies" ("Speculative Fabulations" 250). Haraway sees Piccinini's art as aware of various forms of intervention and protection and their multiple consequences. In this perspective, nature's little helpers are not seen as reassuring, as they may protect and also need protection, or can potentially threaten other creatures ("Speculative Fabulations" 250).

of the body diversely conceived, throwing off associations with defect, degeneration, and deviancy" (Siebers, *Disability Aesthetics* 135). Piccinini's materialist affective aesthetics operates in a similar manner by exploring alternative corporealities and confronting us with counter-idealist images. The way Piccinini activates feelings of care and protectiveness in her art also impacts the affective attitudes to non-normative or disabled-like creatures. When read from the perspective of critical disability studies, *The Comforter* or *Still Life with Stem Cells*, as well as many other hybrid creatures, such as *The Builder* or *Loafers* (2018), firstly rely for their effect on corporeal materialism and its affective implications. They might be disturbing in how they bring about what Paul K. Longmore and David Goldenberg call "existential anxiety" (889), which can be associated with affective reactions to disabled bodies, linking death anxiety with implications of corporeal vulnerability and exposure to pain or harm (Dunn 61). However, Piccinini's non-normative bodies invite explorations beyond these affective anxieties, by redefining aesthetic concepts.

When combined with elements of disability aesthetics, many ideas emerging from Piccinini's art can be seen as analogous to the main premises of eco-ability, such as the preservation of bio-diversity, environmental responsibility, inclusiveness and care. These aspects surface mostly in the works commenting on preservation of endangered species or inter-species partnership (e.g., *We Travel Together*, *The Bond*, *Surrogate*, *Offspring*, *Progenitor* or *Eagle Egg Man* series). What is also reflected in Piccinini's art, eco-ability makes two important points, arguing for "acknowledging and respecting interdependency among people, beings, and nature" (Schatz et al. xxii) and approaching the concept of normalcy as "a social construction that invites us to understand that we must value diversity, difference, and multiplicity" (Pellow xiii). It also comments on various positions into which people can enter in relation to nature and other creatures, which need to be negotiated and diversified by thinking in terms of relational communities rather than predefined ideological stances (Schatz et al. xxii-xxiii). In this broader intersectional context, some of the affective realities of Piccinini's art representing mothering and anthropomorphic parental care might raise questions about the danger of seeing non-human nature as needing help and dependent on human "charitable gesture" and pity (cf. Lewis xiv–xv; Shapiro 14; Linton 11). However, Piccinini's art needs to be considered in the multiplicity of complex affective realities that interact with each other to produce a variety of effects that do not yield to uniform reading. Each of these affective responses is negotiated with other reactions that often lead in different directions. Cognitive or existential anxiety, for instance, prepares the ground for rethinking our notions of normalcy and attitudes to what transgresses those notions. Likewise, without negotiating

the feeling of pity or charity, the awareness of one's role in relation to others would be incomplete. This is particularly important, and at the same time problematic, in relation to what Haraway, after Deborah Bird Rose, calls "decolonizing responsive attentiveness" ("Speculative Fabulations" 247), a practice Haraway attributes to Piccinini's art and her attempt to negotiate through art her "settler heritage" ("Speculative Fabulations" 247). "A duty to care" quoted from Piccinini in this context has both positive and negative implications, complicated by the positions which one occupies in this relationship.

CONCLUSION

Although densely conceptualized and theorized both by critics and the artist herself, Patricia Piccinini's art evades coherent and totalizing readings. Its effect is based on the confrontation with, and negotiations of, both traditional and more radical conceptual frameworks, which are additionally refracted by the affective realities it generates. "Shift[ing] the apparent rational implications" (Piccinini, Interview by Laura Orgaz), these affective aspects engage the viewers in active responses and reactions, in which they need to confront cultural and natural expectations, inhibitions, fears or indifference.

The dynamic interaction between ethics and aesthetics elicits more questions than answers, about the nature of the co-existence, care and commitment that is needed to preserve the natural environment or to better create conditions in which nature will be able to sustain itself. The fragile difference between taking care and making other creatures/beings dependent on help points to many questions about the place of humans in relation to other creatures—both animate and non-animate. By expanding and training our imagination, Piccinini's art prepares a ground for more considerate and inclusive understanding of Others and redefinition of aesthetic expectations.

Like disability aesthetics, Piccinini's works argue for a different, more inclusive, innovative and positive sense of the beautiful. Piccinini's art, similarly to other "exceptional bod[ies]," "betokens something else, becomes revelatory, sustains narrative, exists socially in a realm of hyper-representation" (Garland-Thomson, "Introduction" 3). Rather than objectification, in whatever remains in Piccinini's art from the tradition of the freak show or anatomy museum, one discovers a multiplicity of perspectives, identities, forms and stories revealing complex connections between emotional responses and conceptualizations, inviting fascination and spontaneous curiosity.

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