

creatures

to Help Prevent the End of the United States of America: Facing the Political Other [1]

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Us versus them. Red state versus Blue state. "You're either with us or against us." Political discourse in the contemporary United States is expressed through binary oppositions. Gone is the proverbial grey area of the all-too-recent past, replaced instead by the hard edges, sharp corners that cut those who try and sit on them. To be in the middle is verboten.

Or so we believe.

My contention in this project is that these diametric oppositions are simply a construction. Rather, I see people as much more nuanced in their views, especially when confronted on a face-to-face basis. When you remove someone from the straight-jacket of 24-hour news channels, limited political parties, and other totalizing groups, I believe you will find at least a kernel of reason. Through addressing a person's own beliefs, rather than those of their supposed affiliation, we grab a thread with which we can knit a conversation. And it is this thread of reason, this ability to see shades of grey, that I am addressing with this work.

Current political discourse turns the person holding the opposing view into the Other, a stranger. Thus we are now all strangers in our own land, unable to speak to those with whom we disagree. We migrate to safe groups of friends who do not challenge our views, we read, post, and comment on partisan blogs: in sum, we avoid confronting the stranger. Yet we fail to realize that indeed, in the words of Kristeva, the stranger is within us. "The foreigner is within me, hence we are all foreigners." By recognizing the foreigner, the stranger in us, we gain the ability to be in the place of the Other. [2] The goal is not to overcome, to defeat the stranger (for that would mean defeating ourselves), but rather to confront it, to recognize the strangeness in ourselves and in each other.

Yet such a process of recognition often needs a catalyst, and it is this catalyst I tried to design through the creatures *policrae* and *demochi*. [3] Zoomorphic, the creatures present themselves with only the ability to speak, not the ability to hear. They sit passive on a bench, repeating incendiary commentary from both sides of the political spectrum, pulled from contemporary blog postings on liberal and conservative blogs. [4] As well, the creatures insert their own thoughts about what they "read", highlighting the ways in which each side objectifies the other.

The aim of the creatures is to provoke passers-by into the twin activities of reflection and conversation. They are a transitional object [5], creating a potential space of experience. Unlike conversations between two humans, the observation of creatures talking creates an uncanny experience [6], decontextualizing the words in multiple ways. First, the unavoidable observation of non-human, non-obviously-animal creatures requires special attention and cannot be easily ignored like humans all-too-often are. Second, the speaking of words through mechanical voices, removing them from the comfort of the glowing computer screen, allows us to see the words for what they are: sounds constructing a barrier between ourselves and others. Upon hearing the words, and seeing the responses of those surrounding the creatures, people will be forced into confronting the sounds around them. Through talking to others about the creatures, they will at the same time talk about the content of the creatures' discussion. This indirect discourse will provide a mediating effect, softening otherwise brutal words. Discussion becomes



less about the other person, and more about the creatures. People project onto the creatures psychological issues. Consensus recedes as a goal [7]. The evolution of this process encourages personal discourse with people seen as the Other.

I take these creatures to be cyborgs in the terminology of Donna Haraway: “The main trouble with cyborgs, of course, is that they are the illegitimate offspring of militarism and patriarchal capitalism, not to mention state socialism. But illegitimate offspring are often exceedingly unfaithful to their origins.” [8] The creatures are not placid, subservient to the control of the capitalist system. They provoke the humans around them. Indeed, by creating these creatures, I call upon the playful nature of cyborgs [9], aligning myself with others who see emancipatory possibilities in technology-art combinations, rather than divestment from practices that are admittedly aligned with military, government, and corporate interests.

[1] Earlier iterations of this project were simply called “Monument for the End of the United States of America”. My goal in choosing such a provocative name was to focus people’s attention on the unthinkable future end, in order to highlight what needs to be changed in the present to prevent that end. The new direction, highlighted in the title, focuses on prevention, noting also that the objects presented here are merely the first in a projected series of works to address other aspects of society that might lead to its very end.

[2] “It is not simply—humanistically—a matter of our being able to accept the other, but of being in his place, and this means to imagine and make oneself other for oneself.” J. Kristeva. *Strangers to Ourselves*. Columbia University Press, New York, NY, USA, 1994, p. 13.

[3] *policrae*, from “polis”, and *demochi*, from “democracy”.

[4] From the liberal side: DailyKos (<http://www.dailykos.com/>) and The Huffington Post (<http://www.huffingtonpost.com/>). From the conservative side: Little Green Footballs (<http://www.littlegreenfootballs.com/weblog/weblog.php>), TownHall.com (<http://townhall.com>), and Fox News (<http://foxnews.com>).

[5] Winnicott spoke of transitional objects and phenomena as existing in an “intermediate area of experience”, as the child’s understand of the first “not-me” object. Yet we can also see transitional objects as things that “are not fully recognized as belonging to external reality.” The transitional object thus expresses the ability of an object to bring us to another area of existence, to mediate between internal and external reality. D. W. Winnicott. *Playing and Reality*. Routledge, New York, NY, USA, 1971, pp. 2-3.

[6] For Freud the uncanny is “that species of the frightening that goes back to what was once well

known and had long been familiar”. Freud, S. (2003 [1919]). *The Uncanny*, Chapter The Uncanny, Penguin Books, p. 124.

[7] For Chantal Mouffe, consensus would be the end of pluralism: “To believe that a final resolution of conflicts is eventually possible—even if it is seen as an asymptotic approach to the regulative idea of rational consensus—far from providing the necessary horizon of the democratic project, is something that puts it at risk. Indeed, such an illusion carries implicitly the desire for a reconciled society where pluralism would have been superseded.” C. Mouffe. *The Democratic Paradox*. Verso, 2000, p. 32.

[8] D. J. Haraway. *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*, chapter A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century. Routledge, 1991, p. 151.

[9] “From another perspective, a cyborg world might be about lived social and bodily realities in which people are not afraid of their joint kinship with animals and machines, not afraid of permanently partial identities and contradictory standpoints.” Haraway, p. 154.

