assertion and which do not—a desire for neat and tidy distinctions between different forms of life, different ways of being in the world, that would constitute its own form of fetishistic disavowal, as Jacques Derrida (among others) has pointed out. Indeed, as Derrida argues in what may seem like a counter-intuitive if not outlandish assertion:

Death is nothing less than an end of the world. Not only one end among others, the end of someone or something in the world, the end of a life or a living being... Death marks each time, each time in defiance of arithmetic, the absolute end of the one and only world, of that which each opens as a one and only world, the end of the unique world, the end of the totality of what is or can be presented as the origin of the world for any unique living being, be it human or not.

Now as we shall see in a moment, this seemingly brazen assertion can be re-described in more naturalistic terms that make it seem a lot less counter-intuitive. This will help us, in turn, draw out the fact that what is going on here is not just an excessively Heideggerian hangover on Derrida’s part; rather, he is trying to move us from what he calls the ‘dogma’ of Heidegger’s famous (or infamous) investigations of the differences between humans, animals, and stones to the inescapable necessity of paying attention to the different ways of being in the world, and it is on those differences that the hard and detailed ethical and political questions of thinking about extinction depend. When a being, human or non-human, dies, what goes out of the world? When an entire species becomes extinct, what world leaves the world, the world we are left with? To begin to answer these questions is to realise that extinction, whatever else it may be, is never a generic event.

The California Condor became extinct in the wild in 1987, when the remaining twenty two individuals were captured and an ambitious conservation program was launched. In 1992 their gradual re-introduction into the wild began and in October 2014 the total world population stood at 425 birds either in the wild or captivity, making it still one of the world’s rarest birds. Bryndís Snæbjörnsdóttir and Mark Wilson’s ambitious exhibition, *Trout Fishing in America and Other Stories*, consists of several different elements, but the one I will focus on here is a series of photographs of the frozen, preserved bodies of fourteen dead California Condors, each printed above a transcribed text about the respective bird, taken from conversations with the biologists working in the Peregrine Fund conservation program.

The trail that would lead to these photographs began when the artists visited the Vermilion Cliffs area of the Grand Canyon in November of 2013 and interviewed biologists Chris Parish and Eddie Feltex. During these conversations, the artists were especially struck by the contrast between the scientific protocols driving the project (having to do with body weight, medical regimes, and the like) and the often heartfelt and passionate stories they were told about each bird, mixing anger, frustration, and hope. It was here that they learned about the birds preserved in a freezer at the University of Arizona in Tucson—many of them dead due to lead poisoning from feeding on animals killed by hunters with lead bullets. Later, once the photographs had been executed, they returned to Vermilion Cliffs and engaged in detailed discussions about each bird with Parish and Feltex, and it is from those conversations that the final printed transcriptions are taken.  

When I came to the opening of the exhibition I was, at the same moment, in the middle of reading volume two of Jacques Derrida’s seminars on *The Beast and the Sovereign*, in part in relation to another project I was working on (also about birds), and I mentioned to the artists that I felt a powerful resonance between Derrida’s explorations of death, mourning, responsibility, and the concept of ‘world’ (in the Heideggerian sense of the term) and the Condor photographs—not just the images themselves, but also the complex of emotions that bubble up between the lines (and sometimes not even between the lines) in the scientists’ account of the life and death of each particular animal. To me, these images called forth a line that ends Paul Celan’s poem, ‘Vast, Glowing Vault’ which Derrida returns to again and again in the second volume, Celan’s poem begins:

Vast, glowing vault
with the swarm of black stars pushing themselves out and away:
on to a ram’s sacrificed forehood
I brand this image, between the horns...

And it ends with the memorable line, ‘The world is gone, I must carry you.’ I am sure that my most immediate association between these images and these lines had to do with imagining the handling and placing of the condor bodies themselves, first in their discovery upon their deaths by the scientists, and then later, by the artists carefully placing them on the black cloth on which they were photographed. I thought about the care, perhaps even sadness and the reverence, with which they’d been handled once they’d left this world, and yet here they were, still strangely among us, the subjects of a kind of care whose complexities we’ll explore more in a moment.

Many things could be said, of course, about the relation between these lines and the Condors that appear not only in the installation’s photographs but also in its video components. For

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6 Mark Wilson, e-mail message to author December 30, 2014.

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example, we might seize upon the invitation offered by the figure of the "ram" in the poem, which evokes not only the primary reference of the constellation Aries, but also, as Derrida notes, the ram in the story of Abraham and Isaac, the sacrificial substitute of animal for human which—paradigmatically, for Judeo-Western culture—secures the ontological privilege and specificity of the human 'world' over against that of the animal, to whom the Biblical commandment 'thou shalt not kill' evidently does not apply. And yet, as Derrida points elsewhere, 'does killing necessarily mean putting to death?' Isn't it also 'letting die'?"

I'll come back to complexities of that question at the very end of my essay, but for now I want to pursue another invitation suggested by the 'vault' of the poem's title and how it might be linked to the vault from which the Condor bodies themselves have emerged to be placed before us in what strikes me, at least in some of these images, as a burial setting or a scene of exhumation—an invitation to raise a question central to Derrida's seminars, and central to my response to these images: namely, what do we call these bodies before us?

Are they 'corpses', 'remains'? Or just objects, like a rock, a table, or even a leaf? And if not, if they are remains, what are they remains of? To whom or to what do they belong? And what, in turn, is owed to them? Or as Derrida puts it in the dizzying opening of the fifth seminar in volume two, this question of the corpse, that is 'both a thing and something other than a thing' is a 'stumbling block' but at the same time 'an unavoidable touchstone' in our all-too-confident attempts to assume that human beings inhabit an ontologically full and secured world that is barred to animals—an assumption that makes the dead animal body not the remainder of something, or better someone, but rather nothing but an object on the order of a stone.  

(11) Derrida, Bees II 6. Derrida very much incites the play between 'bees' and 'bees'.

To address these questions is perforce to ask, 'what do beasts and men have in common?' As Derrida points out, Heidegger's own answer to this question is one that takes for granted a certain difference in kind between scientific knowledge, philosophical inquiry, and ethical and ontological questions—a difference that this particular art installation seeks to trouble, and nowhere more so than in the texts that emerged from the conversations with the biologists whose dedication to their scientific protocols of observation and quantification could not conceal their intense emotional involvement with these creatures, these worlds, so different from our own—nowhere more so than in the text accompanying 'Condor 119', which begins, 'God she was a beautiful bird':

No one limns this feature of Heidegger's approach to the difference between scientific and philosophical knowledge better than Derrida himself in the seventh seminar, when he notes that Heidegger's 'strange concept' of the animal's 'poverty in worlds... does not consist in a quantitative relation of degree, of more or less': 'About this presupposed essence', he continues, 'the zoologist, the zoologist as such at least, has nothing to say to us'. As Michael Naas has pointed out, Derrida is often quick to note that Heidegger, more than most philosophers, takes 'into account a certain ethological knowledge' with regard to animals. But from Derrida's point of view, that only makes all the more dogmatic Heidegger's 'thesis of essence (the animal is poor in world) independent of zoological knowledge.

(drawn from Heidegger's canonical discussion of the ontological differences between stones, animals, and humans) and 'touchstone' (Beast II 6). For two exemplary literary instances that worry this question in especially powerful ways, see the latter chapters of J.M. Coetzee's novel Dignity (New York: Penguin, 2000) and the behavior of its central character. David Lurie, toward the dead bodies of dogs killed at the animal shelter at which he works and, in non-fiction literature, Barry Lopez's Apologies (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1998).
knowledge, a thesis pertaining, as Derrida puts it, to the animal in general, to every animal as equally poor in world; whereas Derrida’s focus will be not on effacing the limit between human and non-human animals (or indeed between different forms of life, human and non-human), but rather in multiplying its figures, in complicating, thickening, delinearising, folding, and dividing the line precisely by making it increase and multiply.

Paying attention to the specificity and particularity of other forms of life is central to Derrida’s fundamental strategy in laying out his differences with Heidegger in both The Animal That Therefore I Am and The Beast and the Sovereign seminars. As Naas characterises it, Derrida’s thought undertakes here a triple movement: first, he ‘begins by looking at a philosophical discourse that grants the human and denies the animal some attribute—language, technology, culture, mourning, a relationship to death, and so on’; and then second, contests, ‘sometimes with reference to ethnology, primatology, or zoology, the supposed fact that the animal does not have such and such an ability or attribute’, while at the same time and thirdly he ‘moves very quickly to the other side of the question in order to contest not the fact that animals do not have such and such a capacity or attribute but the principle on the basis of which philosophers have claimed that humans do.’

One such example—to return now, quite literally, to the question of ‘remains’—is Heidegger’s well known assertion that animals perish but only human beings die because human beings, unlike animals, have an understanding of death as such; they grasp their own mortality, and live in the light of it, in a way that eludes the animal, who simply ceases to exist biologically at the end of its life. And yet, as Derrida wonders in many places, do human beings really have this kind of relationship to death as such, one that would allow this apparently radical form of finitude to be reappropriated as a ‘being-able’, a ‘power’ or a ‘potency’? Isn’t it the case, rather, that we can never know the ‘as such’ of death because death is always elsewhere and at a distance from us, even though it is, paradoxically, the thing that most testifies to our concrete and unique existence, our singularity? After all, you can’t experience your own death; you can only experience death in and through the death of the other, and all attempts to imagine or think about death are always, as Derrida points out, ‘phantasmatic’. And this suffices all the less, he continues:

To distinguish clearly between death as such and life as such because all our thoughts of death... are always, structurally, thoughts of survival. To see oneself or to think oneself dead is to seem oneself surviving present at one’s death.

Here, then, we find not the finitude referenced by Heidegger—the confrontation with my mortality in his famous existential ‘being toward Death’—but rather what we might call the finitude of my finitude, its non-appropriability for and by me, its radical alterity, one that sets up a relationship of asymmetrical, unpredictable, and finally unapproachable alterity to the other. For as Derrida writes, ‘without knowing anything of what “dead” means in the syntagma “when I am, etc., dead”, death means above all “to be delivered over, in what remains of me, as in all my remains, to be exposed or delivered over with no possible defence, once totally disarmed, to the other”, and so “the other” names “what always might, one day, do something with me and my remains, make me into a thing” and do so, moreover, “as they wish” or as Derrida sometimes puts it, without “calculation.” To put it this way is to realise this: this relationship

16 Naas, 26-7.
17 Derrida, Beast II 122.
19 Derrida, Beast II 147.
of alterity and unpredictability to the other is, without let up and without assurances—indeed, because without assurances—a scene of ethical responsibility. And that is precisely the situation into which we are thrown. I would suggest, by these images. What shall we do with these remains that are ‘delivered over’ to us? What will we make of them? And what will that make of us?

Here, I think, it’s useful to augment Derrida’s insistence on the alterity of other forms of life by redescribing it in terms of biological systems theory, but before we do, we need to follow the penultimate turn in Derrida’s argument—to come back now to the last line of Celan’s poem—which is made up of a movement through three possible theses, finished off with a meditation on the last:

1. Incontestably, animals and humans inhabit the same world, the same objective world even if they do not have the same experience of the objectivity of the object.
2. Incontestably, animals and humans do not inhabit the same world, for the human world will never be purely and simply identical to the world of animals.
3. In spite of this identity and this difference, neither animals of different species, nor humans of different cultures, nor any animal or human individual inhabit the same world as another, however close and similar these living individuals may be (be they humans or animals), and the difference between one world and another will remain always unbridgeable, because the community of the world is always constructed, simulated by a set of stabilising apparatuses...never natural, language in the broad sense, codes of traces being designed, among all living beings, to construct a unity of the world that is always deconstructible, nowhere and never given in nature. Between my world, and any other world there is first the space and time of an infinite difference, an interruption that is incommensurable with all attempts to make a passage, a bridge, an isle, all attempts at communication, translation, trope, and transfer that the desire for a world will try to pass, impose, propose, stabilise. There is no world, there are only islands.\(^{22}\)

Derrida’s assertion might seem counter-intuitive, but it will seem less so if we remember that in the terms of biological systems theory, ‘there is no world’ precisely for the reasons we may trace back to the work of Jakob von Uexküll on human and animal umwelt and forward to those who work on the biology of consciousness and cognition, such as Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela, who demonstrate that what counts as ‘nature’ or ‘world’ or (better still) ‘environment’ is always a product of the contingent and selective practices deployed in the embodied enactment of a particular autopoietic living system. As philosopher of mind Alva Noë argues, ‘the locus of consciousness is the dynamic life of the whole, environmentally plugged-in person or animal,’\(^{19}\) and as his work shows, recent research in the biology of consciousness makes it clear that these questions do not neatly break along lines of human versus animal, inside versus outside, brain versus world, or even, for that matter, organic versus inorganic.\(^{24}\) As Noë puts it, ‘it is not the case

\(^{22}\) My colleague Timothy Morton has made his own version of this argument, that ecological thinking begins with what he calls ‘the end of the world’. See, for example, Timothy Morton, The Ecological Thought (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2012), and Timothy Morton, Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology After the End of the World (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013).


\(^{24}\) For more on how these questions cross-pollinate with Derrida’s work, see my book Animal Rites: American Culture, the Discourse of Species, and Posthuman Theory (Chicago University of Chicago Press, 1998), 75-94 and, more recently, before the Law: Humans and Other Animals in a Biopolitical Frame (Chicago University of Chicago Press, 2013), 60-86.
that all animals have a common external environment; because 'to
each different form of animal life there is a distinct, corresponding,
ecological domain or habitat,' which means, in short, that 'all
animals live in structured worlds'.

Now, I think, we are in a better position to follow Derrida as
he moves rapidly in the next moment of the seminar from an equally
bracing phrase taken from Daniel Defoe's Robinson Crusoe—the
phrase, 'I am alone'—to Celan's memorable line which we have
already quoted, 'the world is gone, I must carry you.' As Derrida puts
it in a later session that year, picking up the thread:

"We could move for a long time, in thought and reading, between Fort and
Derrida..." both... these two themes, between Heidegger and
Celan, between on the one hand the Da of Dasein... and on the other hand
Celan's fort in 'Die Welt is fort'... the world has gone, in the absence or
distance of the world, I must, I owe it you, I owe it to myself to carry you,
without world, without the foundation or grounding of anything in the
world, without any foundational or fundamental mediation, one on one, like
wearing mourning or bearing a child, basically where ethics begin.

Though I cannot pursue the point in detail here, it is worth noting
that this scene of responsibility, generated by the absence of 'world',
is also a scene of what is sometimes called spectrality or 'hauntology',
a scene of responsibility to those already gone ('wearing mourning') or
those not yet here ('carrying a child'). Hauntology, as Colin
Davis characterises it, 'supplants its near-homonym ontology, and
marks a wholly irrecoverable intrusion in our world, which is
not comprehensible within our available intellectual frameworks,
but whose otherwise we are responsible for preserving'. In this
domain, the question of what the other asks or requires of us, a
question secreted by its alterity, 'is not a puzzle to be solved' but is
rather 'the structural openness or address directed toward the

28 Stuart Kaufman, 'The Re-Enchantment of Humanity: Implications of "No
Eating Laws", unpublished manuscript. Another reason for the 'no eating laws'
principle—even before we reach the level of what Kaufman calls "Kantian
wholes"—such as California Condors—is exemplified in the following: 'Has the
universe in 13.7 billion years of existence created all the possible fundamental
particles and stable atoms? Yes. Now consider proteins. These are linear
sequences of twenty kinds of amino acids that typically fold into some shape and
catalyse a reaction or perform some structural or other function. A biological
protein can range from perhaps 50 amino acids long to several thousands.
A typical length is 200 amino acids long. Then let's consider all possible proteins
length 200 amino acids long. How many are possible? Each position in the 200 has
20 possible choices of amino acids, so there are \(30 \times 20 \times 20 \times 20\) times or 20 to
the 200th power which is roughly 10 to the 260th power possible proteins length
200. Now let's ask if the universe can have created all these proteins since its
inception 13.7 billion years ago. There are roughly 10 to the 80th particles in the
known universe. If there were doing nothing, ignoring space time separation,
From this vantage, what we confront in the bodies of these dead Condors is, precisely, a materialised ‘trace’, or even better, Derrida suggests, a ‘cinder’ that he associates with a kind of ‘crypt’ that prevents the completion of the work of mourning and psychic incorporation—one whose inscrutability haunts the present with retentions from an evolutionary past and pretensions of an evolutionary future.\(^\text{29}\) That is to say, as with any trace, this ‘cinder’ confronts us with the presence of that which is not itself present—in this case, with the reality of the concatenative material processes that resulted in this form of life we call ‘Condor’ and with the evolutionary preadaptations present in the body before us that would, in time, take other, unpredictable forms, precisely as Kaufman notes, because all possible organism/environment relationships in the future cannot be predicted or ergodically extrapolated from that which is present before us, try as we might to control or direct them.

Nevertheless—and I’ve explored this question in some detail elsewhere\(^\text{30}\)—we do make decisions all the time, even in the face of this impossibility, without ‘foundational or fundamental mediation’, about the ‘letting die’ and the killing of various forms of life (human and non-human). And this leads to the final and far from trivial point about these animals foregrounded by this installation: that these bodies before us are part of an archive, one enmeshed in a complex landscape of legal, political, and scientific forms of knowledge and force, what Derrida calls those ‘stabilising apparatuses’ that simulate the sure and steady existence of a world in the face of the complexities we have just outlined. As Derrida points out, ‘there are no archives without political power’ and, indeed, these Condor bodies are in fact evidence of a potentially very charged political type, autopsied to reveal (more often than not) poisoning by a hunter’s lead bullet. The archive is thus, as Derrida puts it, a kind of mise en scène of:

\begin{quote}

two principles in one: the principle according to nature or history, there where things commence—physical, historical, or ontological principle—but also the principle according to the law, there where men and gods command, where authority, social order are exercised, in this place from which order is given.\(^\text{31}\)
\end{quote}

What better way to mark this fact, in these images, than the strange co-habitation, within the same frame, the same ‘place’, of these singular dead animal bodies, subject to the laws of chemistry, decay, rigor mortis, and the like—‘ultra-natural’ objects, in that sense, whose decay we try to control through technological means—and what Derrida has called the ‘machinalit’ of any semiotic code whose epitome is, of course, mathematics, here represented by the ‘anonymous’ numbers that mark each bird’s wing tag but only to become, in time, a kind of emotionally charged ‘proper name’ for this particular creature—all of which redoubles and accumulates in the seriality of the photographic series itself.

What this means is that as it is with the archive, so it is with extinction. On the one hand, there is nothing more ‘natural’ than extinction—it is an event that happens ‘there’, in nature, and has happened with the vast majority of species that have ever existed; but at the same time, extinction is and can never be a ‘natural’ event because it always takes place within a horizon of ‘world’ and its governing principles—including, of course, the principle of ‘biodiversity’—that we create through ‘stabilising apparatuses’.


\(^\text{30}\) Namely, in the last two chapters of Before the Law.

\(^\text{31}\) Naas, 129.
But that stabilisation is always marked by something else that is preserved—maybe even mainly preserved—in the archive: what Derrida calls the ‘destination’ or ‘destinerrance’ that attends any attempt to make good on our commitments, to materialise our ‘world’, to address the other to whom we feel responsible: an adestination that stems from the fact that the same sign or trace or mark can function variably, even oppositely, in very different contexts.¹² The constraints of scientific method and protocol constitute, of course, a canonical attempt to control, even eliminate, this destinerrance, but its most compelling manifestation in this installation is the lead bullet that leaves its trace, sometimes in the discolouration of the animal’s body by lead poisoning, but sometimes invisible, in these bodies and these images but not of them, you might say. That destinerrance quite literally attends such tidy distinctions as we like to make between the polar opposites of ‘game’ or ‘trash’ animals who are deemed ‘killable but not murderable’ and those who, like the condor, are ‘rare’, ‘threatened’, and ‘protected’, with the full backing of scientific and political apparatuses. The archive may record the ‘official story’ of body weight, reproductive rate, legal status, and so on, but it also actualises something more, and in that other space, that other scene, we discover that the world is not given but made. Or, as one scientist says of ‘Bird 133’, ‘133 and I shared the same birthday—it’s the little things that make you connect.’