What does mounted bullfighting have to do with it?

Identifying a mythology for the anthropocene in the art of Patricia Piccinini

Australian artist Patricia Piccinini is famous for her life-like sculptures of humans, animals and objects that blur fantasy and reality. Her well known ‘Big Mother’ (2005) is a sublime lifelike sculpture of a 1.7m primate inspired ‘mother’ nursing a human infant. The mother is weary, wrinkled, unkempt and sad. The baby suckling at her breast nurses peacefully. As with those who view ‘Big Mother’, the baby is blissfully unaware of the identity of the mother figure, her genetic parentage, the cause of her sadness, the two backpacks at her feet, their contents or the circumstances surrounding this eternally frozen moment in time. As with many other pieces in the exhibition, ‘Big Mother’ challenges many binary dualisms, particularly that of the human and non-human.

According to one media release, Piccinini’s work is concerned with ‘what it means to be human today, and how we interact with the creations of our evolving technologies, which are blurring the boundaries between humans, animals and machines’ (Mackrell 2011). Her work provides a visual anchor for provoking questions about the environmental, moral and ethical implications of the scientific, medical and technological breakthroughs of this current period in the history of our world.

Despite this period increasingly being labeled the anthropocene (Crutzen 2006) – literally an era dominated by human activity – developments such as xenotransplantation and genetic modification have challenged the definition of ‘human’ as that which is purified from animal or technology. Through her artwork, Piccinini visually and sensually exposes the fragility of conceptual boundaries of contemporary creation that constrain us (such as nature and culture), whilst illustrating the interdependence of such categories, as captured in concepts such as ‘natureculture’ (Haraway 2007).

This ironic process of purification that leads to a proliferation of hybridity is at the heart of Bruno Latour’s seminal exploration of what constitutes ‘modernity’ (Latour 1993). In a similar move, Donna Haraway has argued that neither have we ever been ‘human’ (see
Gane 2006). Rather, the distinctions that we make between primitive and modern, or human and animal are culturally constructed. However, lines are continually being drawn. The simple distinction made between past, present and future is a case in point, and one that Piccinini reveals elegantly in her work. As I argue throughout this article, Piccinini presents a mythology for the present, despite the fact that mythology is associated with cultures and religions of the past. At the same time, she presents hybrids of humans, animals and technology that appear to be objects of science fiction or the future, but which already exist or could exist.

From April 16 to June 26, 2011, the Art Gallery of South Australia hosted ‘Once upon a time...’ (curated by Jane Messenger). It was ‘the largest and most comprehensive exhibition of Piccinini’s works ever staged, taking in more than 80 works spanning her 15-year career...’ (Mackrell 2011). It included sculpture, paintings and installations and was accompanied by a series of free public lectures on ‘what it means to be human’. Academics were invited to share their own disciplinary perspective on Piccinini’s work. As an anthropologist specialising in human-animal relations, I was invited to reflect on the exhibition during the first session titled ‘Rude mechanicals or humananimals?’

I joined the other speakers in the programme for a guided tour of the exhibition, led by the curator. I recorded her comments and my reactions in a small note pad and observed the reactions of those around me. Above all, the exhibition reminded me of how I felt when I saw my first bullfight as a doctoral candidate conducting ethnographic research in Spain. I was then - as I still am now - morbidly fascinated by the dance of life and death in the bullring (Thompson 2012) that involves humans, animals and the technology embroiled in their relatings (Thompson 2007; Thompson 2009; Thompson 2011). My particular interest in the mounted bullfight came from its heady mix of the familiar and the strange.

As a horse-rider, I was familiar with the general horse husbandry and equitation underpinning mounted bullfighting. However, the idea of riding an exquisitely bred and highly trained horse (or any horse for that matter) into the path of a charging bull was completely unfamiliar, if not insane. It raised ethical questions about exposing one’s own animals to risk and was counter to biological constructions of the horse as a herbivore hardwired to flee from danger. What was also strange (at least in the early stages of fieldwork) was the fact that a human could form a close partnership with one animal for the purposes of killing another. I reacted to that first bullfight with equal amounts of revulsion and attraction. Watching a bull’s eyes opening and closing after a coup de grâce, I didn’t know if it was alive, dead or dying. Was it blinking or was it just a post-death electrical impulse, and when did the transition occur? Its eyes were familiar; another mammal who experiences the world more or less the way that humans do, but who is sufficiently different that it is acceptable to kill (in a culturally prescribed and choreographed way).

These combinations of life and death, familiarity and strangeness, and similarity and difference in the bullfight arose again as I experienced Piccinini’s work. The sculptures looked so lifelike that their absence of breath...
was unsettling. They were as if frozen between eye blinks. The ways in which human and animal elements were combined in single pieces reminded me instantly of the centaur metaphor that I used to convey the intercorporeal and intercognitive human-horse relationship in mounted bullfighting that the Spanish refer to as compenetración – literally ‘co-penetration’ (Thompson 2011). The centaur is a type of ‘theriomorph’; ‘therion’ meaning wild animal and ‘morph’ meaning shape.

There is something seemingly natural and romantic about the theriomorphs of classical mythology: Satyr, sphinx, minotaur, chimera, Zeus incarnate as a swan to impregnate Leda. In these theriomorphic combinations, different species blend as seamlessly as the centaur symbolising qualities of beauty, brutism, strength and temptation in timeless moral and cautionary tales. Somehow these creatures and stories don't grate against our modern policing of human-animal boundaries or ethical and moral sensibilities. At least, they can be seen to belong to a pre-modern phase of human thought against which it is possible to counter-define the present. However, as noted above, Bruno Latour (1993) tells us that ‘moderns’ are so preoccupied with the policing of boundaries, that their efforts ironically make the existence of hybrids possible, if not probable. The tighter we police arbitrary divisions between categories such as human, animal and technology, the more cracks begin to show. Nowhere are they more evident than in the current era that has been informally referred to as the ‘anthropocene’ epoch (Crutzen 2006). In the anthropocene, human existence is seen by many as reliant upon but at odds with the environment. It is easy to think that the cautionary tales of mythology have been replaced by the warnings of climate change scientists whilst the moral stories illustrated by theriomorphs have been replaced by a public concerned with the ethics of what science could achieve.

It is at the intersection of classical mythology and contemporary science in the anthropocene that artist Piccinini can be considered. Her work bursts through the cracks between the conceptual boundaries that Latour claims ‘moderns’ police, and materially reveals their arbitrariness. For centuries, people have been comfortable looking back into antiquity to borrow the hybrid beings and theriomorphs of classical Greece. They represent old mythology in contrast to current religion and scientific understanding. Based on a temporal distance, we have seemingly not sought to create our own theriomorphs for mythological, symbolic, instructional or cosmological purposes. But this does not mean that they don’t exist, or that artists have not recognised them. In fact, anthropologist Alfred Gell suggests that ‘in so far as such modern souls possess a religion, that religion is the religion of art…’ (1995: 41). This is where I suggest that Piccinini offers our own mythological beings from our own time, that we are yet to recognise as such, precisely because they are familiar, invisible, taken for granted and scientifically legitimated. It is just as easy to look back on the theriomorphs of classical mythology as nothing more than religious theorisations of the human and animal condition as it is to look at ‘modern’ advances such as xenotransplantation and genetic modification as ‘pure’ scientific explanations. However, the distinction – following Latour’s observations of the proliferation of
hybrids resulting from obsessions with purification – between mythology and science is doubtful. This is well illustrated by Piccinini. For example, the piece ‘Aloft’ (2010) \text{[figure 2]} - where children can be thought to appear as squishy pupae from hard shelled eggs in a nest dripping with synthetic hormones - could be understood as a commentary on reproductive technologies. It could even be a modern alternative to the myth of the stork that brings babies to families. It is, after all, more plausible.

Unable to look at ourselves with the same curiosity as if we were looking at bullfighters for the first time, Piccinini has done the backwards looking for us. In a classic anthropological move, she repackages the taken for granted theriomorphs of the present, in abject ways that invoke attraction and revulsion, identification and distinction. Consider ‘Big Mother’ (2005) \text{[figure 1]} where a 1.7m primate nurses a human infant, the series ‘Sandman’ (2002) depicting a girl with vestigial gills (eg ‘Natural selection’) or ‘Eulogy’ (2011) \text{[figure 3]} where a man kneels with a Tasmanian Blobfish cradled in his hands. Part surrogate, part mother? Half amphibian, half girl? Part fish, part gurning old man? Maybe, maybe not, but always something more than the sum of the parts. These creatures look fantastical but they are all within the realm of natural or scientific possibility. The Blobfish is a reminder that even the wholly biological can appear so unusual that it is an assumed creature of fiction.

Piccinini invites everyone in her audience to be amateur anthropologists. She makes the strange familiar and the familiar strange. More
than an anthropologist, she creates an easiness whereby the familiar and the strange peacefully co-exist, inviting curiosity despite any initial reaction of attraction or repulsion. Consider, for example, ‘The strength of one arm’ (with Canadian Mountain goat) (2009) [figure 4], and ‘The long awaited’ (2008) [figure 5]. A mountain goat unusually at ease on flat, solid ground whilst a mono-pedal humanoid creature balances precariously, but equally comfortably, on its back via the support of one arm. A young boy sleeping on a park bench with a walrus like grandpa guardian, their heads arranged in a yin-yang shaped harmony.

Through her practice, Piccinini is able to provide tangible evidence as well as conceptual steps towards a post-classical mythology of ‘natureculture’ that characterises the anthropocene. She does this in two ways. First, with materials made flesh, she has used silicone, human hair and clothing to create three-dimensional works of art that look, sometimes in part and sometimes in whole, like us. Piccinini has not only sketched, painted and photographed mythological theriomorphs of her own creation and inspired by reality. She has brought them to life with all of their fleshy markers of human sameness and difference: scales, hair, wrinkles, freckles, insides and outsides. Second, Piccinini has broadened the category of non-human to embrace machines and technology. She gives us ‘technomorphs’ in the form of kissing and cuddling motorbikes with handlebars rising to the sky in the form of antlers (for example, ‘The stags’, 2008) [figure 6]. The role of technology in human-animal relations is particularly under acknowledged. Even where Piccinini’s sculptures do not represent technology in explicit ways, technology is present in their physical and conceptual provenance. Take, for example, the photograph ‘Protein lattice: Subset red’ (1997) [figure 7], showing the transgenic creature popularly referred to as ‘oncomouse’ sitting on the shoulder of a naked woman (discussed by Toffoletti 2003, in relation to feminism and technoscience). The mouse is born of technological innovation but invokes the mythological status given to science. These images of ‘oncomouse’ depict the magic that, according to Alfred Gell (1995), causes art to replace religion in ‘modern’ cultures.

More than ‘rude mechanicals’, Piccinini’s technomorphs have qualities immediately recognisable as human. They have feelings and expressions. They remind us that machines are not
lonely automatons. They talk and relate to one another and they are deeply enmeshed in social lives (theirs and ours). They not only fail, reboot and update, they also play, flirt and love (‘The stags’, 2008) [figure 6]. Piccinini animates her - and our - machines, suggesting that humanity might not just be for humans after all (as is animality or technomality solely for animals and technology). If movement is that which indicates life, then machines such as scooters which are designed for motion are surely capable of living. Following Latour and other science and technology studies scholars (STS) such as Haraway, Callon, Whatmore and Law, agency and intentionality is neither exclusive to - nor definitive of - what makes us human (see, for example Whatmore 2007 [1999]). Rather, in the same way that Gell suggests that ‘religion becomes an emergent property of the relations between the various elements in the social system’ (1995: 41), STS scholars see agency as an emergent property of a network of socio-technical relations. That is, agency is not unique to individual human beings (critiqued as ‘an analogy gone too far’ by Morphy 2009: 6). In addition, Piccinini reminds us that neither is technology beyond the realm of the human. Her works demonstrate that some humans are a little bit mechanical and others quite a lot technological.

Like the theriomorphic creatures of classical mythology, Piccinini’s human, animal and technological creatures provide moral stories, ethical dilemmas and cautionary tales. Pieces like ‘surrogate’ (2005), for example, raise such questions as whether genetic modification should be used to save a species, if one species should be used to support another, and what if the existence of one species was at stake. However, unlike Classical mythology, Piccinini’s theriomorphs and technomorphs are not fantasy. They derive from the markers of progress related to this and the last century and are drawn from the facts of a world where humans, animals and machines are routinely used and abused. Animals play central roles in medical breakthroughs, medications and transplantations, as do machines in the same spheres of health, not to mention the embeddedness of both in the leisure and work. They cannot be avoided. As with unavoidable interspecies engagements (Birke 2002), there are machines in everyone’s everyday, even if they aren’t seen or recognised.

From a Gellian perspective, animals, motor scooters, scientific techniques and medical breakthroughs collide around skill and magic. They comprise what Gell (1995) refers to as ‘the enchantment of technology’ and the ‘technology of enchantment’. Looking at Piccinini’s works, one is likely to be in awe of the process of their creation. Even if one knows exactly how her theriomorphic sculptures are made – or even understands the scientific
theories and technologies that make their realm one of possibility – a viewer can still be in awe of the time, energy and attention to detail required of their coming into being. And this enchantment with technology or artistic/scientific process is inseparable from the artefact before them: the technology of enchantment. As artistic/scientific products, Piccinini’s works often leave one in awe of the thing itself. They stand, sit, swim, fly and crawl as technologies of enchantment.

Like the ornate carvings on the prow boards of Kula canoes in the Trobriand Islands (Gell 1995: 44-46), Piccinini’s theriomorphs and technomorphs dazzle viewers into a generous exchange. But that which is exchanged is not goods, it is emotional, mental and sensual participation in those techniques of enchantment. As art consumers, we recognise and confirm magic to her work, thereby constituting the enchantment of technology. Artist, viewer, consumer, technology, science, religion, animal and machine all become inseparable in the encounter between artist, art and consumer. It is through this enmeshment of process and product, science and art, human and animal that I interpret Piccinini’s work as an example of Latourian hybridisation reified in enchanted technologies of art that provide an anthropocenic religion in the form of a contemporary mythology.

We are all part human, part animal and part technology, but we are irreducible. As Latourian chains of associations, this is clearest when we can’t tell where one part ends and another begins. If there is anything essential about being human, it is that we are always in relation with other nonhumans, wherever we decide to erect the human-animal or human-technological boundary. Piccinini elegantly puts this postmodern theory into practice by creating relational work with which we are invited to relate. For example, ‘Big Mother’ (2005) [figure 1] is clearly not recognisable as human, but the absence of human does not imply ‘animal’. Standing with a human infant at her breast, we can sympathise with her whilst recognising that she is different – something other than human and something more than human-animal hybrid. We might also wonder how she came into being – be it via the unimaginably technology of enchantment that Piccinini has so awesomely mastered, or an unknown scientific methodology that Big Mother expresses (and which the human infant so blindly consumes). Whilst ‘Surrogate (for the Northern Hairy-nosed Wombat)’ (2005) [figure 8] sits happily as six wombat joeys emerge from pouches on her back, one might also wonder about the technology that brought her and her babies into being? Does she exist only to perpetuate the existence of another species, to save it from one of many animal extinctions that is symptomatic of the anthropocene?

Finally, how does the value of that reproductive technology and flesh in
perpetuating a species differ from the argument that the breed of Spanish fighting bull would not exist if it not were the continued practice of bullfighting? It seems that we have, are and always will be embroiled in meaningful – and controversial – effective, affective and defective relations with animals and technology. In recognition of these messy physical, moral and ethical relations, Piccinini provides a mythology for the anthropocene. Two schools of thought about the ‘modern’ human condition provide insight into how her anthropocenic mythology is achieved: Latour’s identification of the proliferation of hybrids as a result of obsessions with categorical purification, and Gell’s theory of art as religion. Whereas theriomorphs like the centaur of Classical Greece were conceptually possible, the thero-technomorphs of the anthropocene are scientifically possible. Both were and are probable. Both represent the technology of enchantment, resulting from the enchantment of technology. Both are mythologies that warn us to approach boundaries with suspicion and proceed with caution.

In the bullfight, human, animal and technology come together in culturally prescribed, rigorously controlled and choreographed ways that are subject to ongoing moral and ethical consideration. As a consequence, some lives are ended, some are saved, some are celebrated and others are mourned. Whether the payoffs outweigh the risks depends on what side of the bullring you are on – or the laboratory, for that matter. By compelling us to look critically at such practices of contemporary society, Piccinini the artist performs the task of the anthropologist – the culturally curious scientist. Thinking about the pieces in the 2011 Patricia Piccinini exhibition, I don’t see much difference between her world, the realm of bullfighting and the gaze of the anthropologist.

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