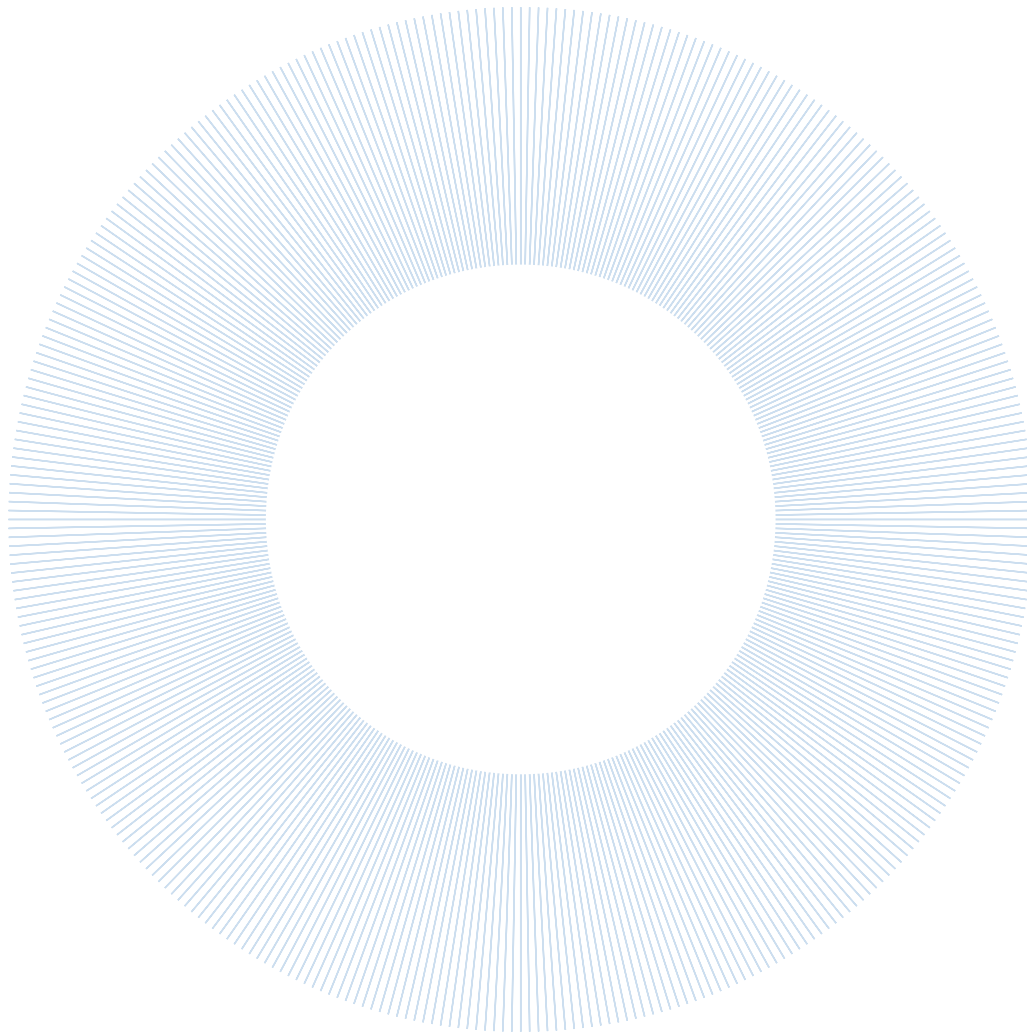


All That is Plastic...
Patricia Piccinini's
Kinship Networks



Frances Bartkowski

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ALL THAT IS PLASTIC...
PATRICIA PICCININI'S KINSHIP NETWORKS

Patricia Piccinini's sculpture was presented at the Australian pavilion of the 2003 Venice Biennale. Piccinini's creatures occupy a space between the disavowed and the desired. I focus on the borders and boundaries that emerge from a wish to remap our connectedness, our relatedness subsequent to our fevered studies of differences, divergences. The identity politics of the late twentieth century focused our attention at the points of difference even while demanding the coalitional, collective work across those differences; this century has us turning from otherness and difference to relationality and sameness, back some distance from the particular, demanding the glance that can take in globality/universality, all the while refusing totality. Piccinini works and thinks against a kind of arrogance that would presume to know what is best; in fact, she points out that often we do the wrong things for the right reasons, and it is in those unintended consequences that her interest and curiosity lie. With her, I would privilege curiosity, even as I wonder whether it is possible to maintain a theoretically ethically neutral perspective on this trait of our animal selves. For out of curiosity can come creation, but often also the urge to control. Technology and kinship both might be deemed what we make of that which we are given – the potential derived from the possible. Here is where Piccinini's imagination stretches ours. The materials of Piccinini's work range from silicone to leather to human hair, and fiberglass, polycarbonate and automotive paint; materials that may be what we cannot dispose of, but which, in their plasticity, as they take familiar familial forms, open us up as spectators. Piccinini says her work comes to her first as ideas, and some of those ideas then 'grow bones and want to walk,' though bones are not the materials of their making.



I will focus on those encounters in the culturally mediated space of the art gallery or the museum. At these moments which often occur by chance (the aleatory) we are summoned and also freed from the 'real' animal to contemplate and engage the animal as subject of artistic production. We can spend our time passing from surprise to desire to proximity. We can be moved by the gaze to feel unhooked from the voyeuristic that may produce discomfort in the caged space of the zoo, for example, or fear in the wild. And we can investigate the visceral responses to creatures imaginary in their being, yet real in their presence among us. The shift from an encounter 'in life' to an encounter 'behind glass' calls us to discover why it is good to think with animals, as Claude Levi-Strauss suggested, and also why we look at animals, as John Berger explored in his work with art.

When I was working on my book, *Kissing Cousins: A New Kinship Bestiary* (Bartkowski, 2008), I found myself living among pigs and apes. Images of them and metaphors that invoke them had been much on my mind as I was thinking and writing about kinship and the stories we tell, write and read about how we are negotiating relations of care and intimacy in the twenty-first century. Pigs and apes: opposites in the iconic space they occupy. Where we tend to take our

distance from pigs, even as we raid their body parts for drugs and prostheses, apes are instead among what are called the charismatic megafauna, along with elephants, whales and dolphins.

Encountering Patricia Piccinini's bestiary allows us to confront some of these borders in the realm of art which may be able to pose the ethical questions more visibly and visually, imposing on spectators the time for reflection on the interventions and discoveries from the realm of science that hurtle us forward as our visceral responses and intellectual debates attempt to keep pace.

Piccinini's work represented Australia in the 2003 Venice Biennale; I first came to it at a group exhibit at the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art called 'Becoming Animal' in 2005–2006.¹ Piccinini's creatures occupy a space between the disavowed and the desired. I found myself breathless and speechless in the presence of Piccinini's 'The Young Family.'² It was thinking about kinship across species lines that had led me to make the trip to see the exhibit.



'The Young Family.'

Kinship touches deeply on bodily states: the phenomenological, the sensory, and the questions of boundaries; we speak routinely about things and people getting under our skin, of blood being thicker than water. Among kin is where we are called upon to be our best. It is also the sphere where humans fail to answer the call as friend, and where instead kin may be transformed into foe – the outsider, the intruder. My interest is in these borders and boundaries that emerge when we are moved to remap our connectedness, our relatedness in these times that demand the glance that can take in globality/universality, all the while refusing totality.

Piccinini works and thinks against a kind of arrogance; in fact, she points out that often we do the wrong things for the right reasons, and it is in those unintended consequences where her interest and curiosity lie. And with Piccinini, I would privilege curiosity, even as I wonder whether it is possible to maintain a theoretically ethically neutral perspective on this trait of our animal selves. For out of curiosity can come creation, but often also the urge to control and destroy.

Piccinini's work certainly poses the questions about whom and what we may discover we are capable of caring for as we approach our futures together. Transgression and the uses of technologies high and low have produced new stories of intimate connections. Global movements have produced new kinship networks that defy easy categorization. And a central dynamic between what we consider *natural* and what we assume to be *cultural* exemplifies our human need for boundaries, even as we know that at the moment all such sites are under reconstruction, renovation and reinvention.

Now, *technology* and *kinship* both might be deemed what we make of that which we are given – the potential derived from the possible – what we live with and who we live with. Here is where Piccinini's imagination stretches ours. In one of her many interviews she explains that for her the natural is not the realm of the wild, but rather the realm of contemporary suburban life, whether in Australia or the US. She recounts how on a trip from Niagara Falls to New Orleans, as she became less frightened of and more familiar with the many different lines and looks of tractor-trailer trucks she passed along highways in North America, she found herself wondering 'what their children might look like?' From there to 'Truck Babies' or later to 'Cycle Pups' she follows her ideas. In a series of pieces called 'Nest,' Piccinini creates a parent and child couple of Vespa-like scooters posed in an intimate and protective glance.



'Truck Babies.'



'Cycle Pups.'

Changes in our very skins, trade in organs, newer prosthetic and surgical techniques are remaking our very notions of what being alive and being human means. Such practices make it necessary to learn to speak in new languages of those we come to know and love. Piccinini's work asks us to explore some of the cautionary and curious tales of what we know and who we love. Nato Thompson describes our 'monstrous empathy' which channels the ways that 'animal/human relations have been ensconced in the repulsive longing of taboo' (Thompson, 2005, p. 8). I think that some of the power of Piccinini's work is how her biotechnological bestiary moves us from taboo back to longing.

Piccinini brings new stories from science to our imaginations; and as Victoria Lynn pointed out (in the preface to the Venice Biennale catalogue edited by Linda Michael), she neither 'shuns nor celebrates' the stories emerging from the scientific realm. Instead she offers up her sublime interrogation of *ethics and empathy*. It is this deeply dialectical spin on the transgenic and the postmodern that makes Piccinini an artist worth knowing and watching. Our transgenic creatures – donkey/zebra hybrids, goat/sheep chimeras – embody something akin to the gargoyles of our millennial turn.

Who counts? And who cares? Who is cared for by whom? What are these caring obligations? In first being cared for by our kin we become fluent in the ways of caring. And fluency is always acquired through trial and error. Who decides, for example, when the infant we hold must be let go so that she/he may learn to walk? Piccinini asks us to take steps into this new language of ethics and empathy when we come face to face with her young and their families. She hopes only that as we move into our shared futures our offspring will be 'smarter and kinder.' She refuses the 'natural/artificial distinctions,' saying instead that in her world 'the primary differentiation is caring/indifferent' (Fernandez Orgaz and Piccinini, 2007, pp. 4 and 7). Kissing/killing, in my scheme of things.

If the currency of kinship is no longer blood, nor simply a matter of genes, then the medium in and by which we figure our familiars is in flux. It is perhaps a question of plasticity – the ability to shift and change in our approach to Piccinini’s ‘unfamiliar’ who nevertheless draw our gaze toward theirs. Plasticity and permeability.

Permeability allows us to cross borders. To cross identities. To cross species. Permeability raises questions of intimacy. Piccinini’s families stop us in our tracks in order to contemplate who deserves our care and whom we exclude from the regime of the familiar, the familial. Her creatures cross age: they are infants and children; they are tired and seem to be aging – especially the ones whose forms are fleshly. When she crosses from human to machine her creatures seem ageless except for their size differences which suggest who is parent and who is child – mind you, all without evidence of reproductive strategies; it would seem that all her parents are single parents.

The materials of Piccinini’s work range from silicone to leather to human hair, and fiberglass, polycarbonate and automotive paint; now those may be materials we cannot dispose of, but in their plasticity as they take familiar familial forms they open us up as spectators. Piccinini says her work comes to her first as ideas, and some of those ideas, she says, then ‘grow bones and want to walk,’ though bones, as you see, are not the materials of their making (Fernandez Orgaz and Piccinini, 2007, p. 1). Look closely at the weariness of those mother’s eyes and their appeal to her viewers, her voyeurs. These are ‘the meeting eyes of love [...]’ to quote George Eliot (*Middlemarch*, 1872, Book II, Chapter 20). Piccinini engages and tests her spectators as to their readiness to meet the needs of her beings with the eyes of love. Who are we likely to consider our own, and who is kept outside the ‘circle of empathy?’

In contrast to ‘the meeting eyes of love,’ and in a move begging to be made, let me quote from Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1831, Chapter 5) when Victor first looks upon the offspring of his single fatherhood; his autochthonous wish so deeply held, so diligently pursued:

How can I describe my emotions at this catastrophe, or how delineate the wretch whom with such infinite pains and care I had endeavoured to form? His limbs were in proportion, and I had selected his features as beautiful. Beautiful! Great God! His yellow skin scarcely covered the work of muscles and arteries beneath; his hair was of a lustrous black, and flowing; his teeth of a pearly whiteness; but these luxuriances only formed a more horrid contrast with his watery eyes, that seemed almost of the same colour as the dun-white sockets in which they were set, his shrivelled complexion and straight black lips. [...] I had worked hard for nearly two years, for the sole purpose of infusing life into an inanimate body. For this I had deprived myself of rest and health. I had desired it with an ardour that far exceeded moderation; but now that I had finished, the beauty of the dream vanished, and breathless horror and disgust filled my heart.

All parenting begets letting go, but first must come the fluency in love; here is where Shelley’s text has been a model for some two centuries now as it interrogates its readers in the demands of our creations, the control we exert in their making, the control they require we cede to them once made – not in our image but with all we can passingly know of what they need to thrive among us.

But Victor Frankenstein’s disgust is never what Piccinini’s little creatures – whether ‘Truck Babies’ or ‘Cycle Pups’ inspire in me. Suffice it to say that always and everywhere Piccinini warns us and warms us with her two- and mostly three-dimensional visions made not flesh, but sometimes resembling it. In winter 2008 there was on exhibit at the Yvon Lambert Gallery in New York new work by Piccinini,³ and I was again both stopped in my tracks by the shininess of the metal, the smoothness of the leather and plastic, and then delighted and touched by the

angles of the figures in their affective movements toward each other. Here is Piccinini in her ethical cautions and admonitions: 'There is no question as to whether there will be undesired outcomes [such as Victor Frankenstein's]; my interest is in whether we will be able to love them.' For all her insistence on and immersion in the making – the techno-logical – a remark such as this reminds us of how we may often overlook the co-presence of opposites. When Piccinini says, 'My work is not dry, cool and rational,' we are right there with her, perhaps even cheering on all that her work is not. However, when she continues the sentence saying, 'it is wet, warm and emotional,' we may find ourselves in the discomfiting, provocative space of her work as it compels us toward that which is alien yet familiar, solicitous of our glance and demanding our care. Piccinini is an artist whose work is strung along a plainly visible and legible dialectical double helix of address. She continues, 'Ideally these things will disturb you even as you warm to them, or vice versa. They are probably the wrong answer, but perhaps there is something special in their incorrectness' (Piccinini, 2006).

Here are social tales of recipes for making families in the arena of art, where science and desire take rather stranger forms than the very familiar wish to know one's origins, or reshape and share them. Perhaps her best known work, 'The Young Family' is a hybrid animal mother suckling her young – they appear to be part human and part animal in their bodily attributes; what is represented, however, is the fact of her birthing and rearing young who are clearly her own offspring – we may wonder which opposites attracted each other in the lab where she might have been produced and now reproduced. There can be no doubt of her maternal devotion, nor of her weariness in her immobility – her young at her teats and belly. The catalogue editor writes, '[w]hile her babies feverishly suckle, her tired and weathered eyes provide an all-too-human window to her soul' (Thompson, 2005, p. 10). Piccinini is well aware that this particular work of hers has been used to make both sides of the argument for and against the implications and ethics of genetic and genomic engineering; she would not have it any other way.

When I look at 'The Young Family' I move from the mother's eyes to her pores. I wonder if she is cold in her hairlessness. I wonder what it would mean to know her as an object of sacrifice? As one who has been bred so her organs might help others to live longer lives, as some have suggested. Others who are human and therefore more needy? Piccinini says bluntly that she does not share the animal liberationist paradigm – if someone she loved needed the products of science as processed through a new notion of animal husbandry, she says she would be right there in line waiting. At the same time I think it becomes clear that Piccinini's work takes us toward the site of disability discourse and critique that puts into question our fetishization of norms when it comes to those whom we love and who live among us. What is this sofa, seat, ottoman, throne, nest where the mother-being rests? Can she get up and walk? Has she been bred for her immobility? If she is 'warm and wet' should this white leather not be showing some wear and tear? Or is her immobility simply her frozen gaze? And in my wish to touch – that curious drive – that brings one eye-to-eye, face-to-face, what do I make of my own childlike wonder?

In an interview Piccinini talks about the gaze of her hybrid subjects, about flesh becoming plastic and the irony of working in silicone: 'a kind of plastic – to create flesh in works that talk of the plasticity of flesh' (Thompson, 2005, p. 10). She also acknowledges the introspective nature of her subject's gaze, and says that animals 'are less interested in us than we are in them.' Piccinini further notes that she is 'using them to tell stories about the world we live in or to try to explain or explore ethical issues that are important to our times' (Thompson, 2005, p. 10).

Reinscribing Marshall Berman's reading of Marx and modernity where 'all that was solid melted into air,' I would suggest that 'all' has been reformed and transformed into the plasticity of the now, which I would rather not curse with the name of the postmodern.

Let me conclude by citing Anitra Goriss-Hunter who has written one of the still few sustained articles on Piccinini's work (as opposed to the many curatorial essays and interviews accompanying some exhibits). She proposes Piccinini's work as embodying what she calls an aesthetic of the 'monstrous cute.' What such a reading offers, she says, is a 'three-part movement: the shock of recognition, an exhalation, and comment that seals off discussion' (Goriss-Hunter, 2004). I would like to echo the shock of recognition and recast the exhalation as an inhalation – breathtaking, I said earlier – and keep the third part – comment – from becoming the sort that seals off discussion, but instead invites it.



Acknowledgement

I wish gratefully to acknowledge the support and the patience of the Institute for Advanced Study at Durham University during the early and late stages of producing this manuscript, and I also wish to thank all the people at St Mary's College for making my 2009 stay in Durham so pleasurable and memorable.

Notes

- ¹ 'Becoming Animal.' (2005) North Adams, Massachusetts: Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art.
- ² 'The Young Family.' (2003) Australia Pavilion. Venice Biennale, Italy.
- ³ 'The place where it actually happens.' (2008) New York: Yvon Lambert Gallery.

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Interviews and brief articles may be found at Patricia Piccinini's website: <http://www.patriciapiccinini.net/>

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Insights

Insights is edited by Michael O'Neill, IAS Director and Professor of English. Correspondence should be directed to Audrey Bowron (a.e.bowron@durham.ac.uk).