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JELLYFISH BIOPOLITICS

Posthumanist Reflections on Rosana Antolí's *A Golden Age: Pulse, Throb, Drift* Exhibition

ABSTRACT

This essay analyses *A Golden Age: Pulse, Throb, Drift* (CentroCentro, Madrid, 2020), an exhibition by Rosana Antolí, through the lens of posthumanist theory. Drawing on Michel Foucault's concept of biopolitics, Jane Bennett's new materialist 'force of things' notion, and Stacy Alaimo's watery metaphors, it investigates the connections between Antolí's contemporary art installations and human-centric way of thinking. Collectively, these frameworks converge in their critique of human exceptionalism, offering ways to understand how artistic depictions and forms of existence they echo extend one step beyond the human and into the realm of the non-

human (and the inanimate). Both jellyfish as a species and the artworks they inspire present a potential means of challenging and expanding anthropocentric epistemologies and ontologies. Building on the work of Cary Wolfe and Judith Butler on shared vulnerability, the exploration here connects visual art practice with theoretical debates on fluid gelata ontologies, offering a case study for rethinking human/non-human relations.

KEY WORDS: posthumanism, biopolitics, new materialism, jellyfish, Rosana Antolí, art analysis.

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OPENING THOUGHTS

Liquid gold. Pulsating. Phosphorescent. Fascinating. Jewels.

One of many depictions of the jellyfish, phrases like these can only attempt to capture the mixed feeling of awe and fear that has been induced by these mysterious sea creatures for several centuries already. What Haddock coins as “gelata,” meaning the jellyfish and other gelatinous zooplankton,² has drawn the attention of not only scientists, but many posthumanist researchers and artists seeking to expand the anthropocentric epistemology and ontology.

The exhibition of a Spanish-born, London-based artist, Rosana Antolí, entitled *A Golden Age: Pulse, Throb, Drift* (2020), borders on this exact line of fascination with cognition of human versus non-human nature. Focusing on the role of movement-related art in her previous work, Antolí is coming from this perspective to go even further and explore the idea of movement repetition in connection to the figure of a jellyfish, specifically the *Turritopsis Dohrnii*. Called the “immortal jellyfish” because of the way its cells develop, its existence overrides death, making it the only known species on the planet that has an infinite life—an organism that “rebirthed itself over and over and over.”³

Rosana explains that for this work, to come to the non-human centric way of thinking, she imagined herself to be a jellyfish, who was arguing in the form of a “Jellyfish Manifesto” that, “if we get rid of our humanity, we could reach eternal life.”⁴ Shifting away from human exceptionalism becomes increasingly crucial today, as accelerating ecological crises and the growing entanglement of human and non-human worlds call for alternative perspectives that recognize mutual vulnerability and interdependence. Following that, the exhibition invites viewers to imagine the world from a fluid, watery perspective, just like Tempest Williams posits in her essay in *Jellies: Living Art*.⁵ Here, I want to explore these questions further: How do different biopolitical concepts play out regarding jellyfish? What would be the result of utilizing a non-anthropocentric approach while in contact with the Other, i.e., gelata?

² Stacy Alaimo, “Jellyfish Science, Jellyfish Aesthetics: Posthuman Reconfigurations of the Sensible,” in *Thinking with Water*, ed. Cecilia Chen, Janine MacLeod and Astrida Neimanis (McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2013), 139.

³ Rosana Antolí, *Golden Age: Pulse, Throb, Drift*, exhibition catalogue (Madrid: CentroCentro, 2020).

⁴ Antolí, 2020.

⁵ Tempest Williams, Judith L. Connor, and Nora L. Deans, *Jellies: Living Art* (Monterey Bay Aquarium, 2002).

REPRESENTATIONS OF JELLYFISH

Understanding how jellyfish have historically been studied can provide insight into human/non-human relations. One of the posthumanist scholars, Stacy Alaimo, points out that the unexplored deep-sea world is still largely a mystery to scientists.⁶ With the technologies evolving rapidly, even outer space has been explored more than the deep sea. Still, one aspect that has significantly progressed and appears to be truly captivating is the much more precise and accurate imagery of the jellyfish, filling in the blanks of human cognition. The early-twentieth-century black-and-white photographs, found in William Beebe's *The Arcturus Adventure* (1926) and *Half Mile Down* (1934), could never fully capture the movement and luminosity that animate gelata (Figure 1). They left scientists with the following descriptions next to those blurry images, trying to convey the experience through words: "One of the most beautiful of the deep-sea jellyfish is *Periphyllum*. When brought up out of the eternal darkness, it is rich turquoise and maroon."^{7,8}

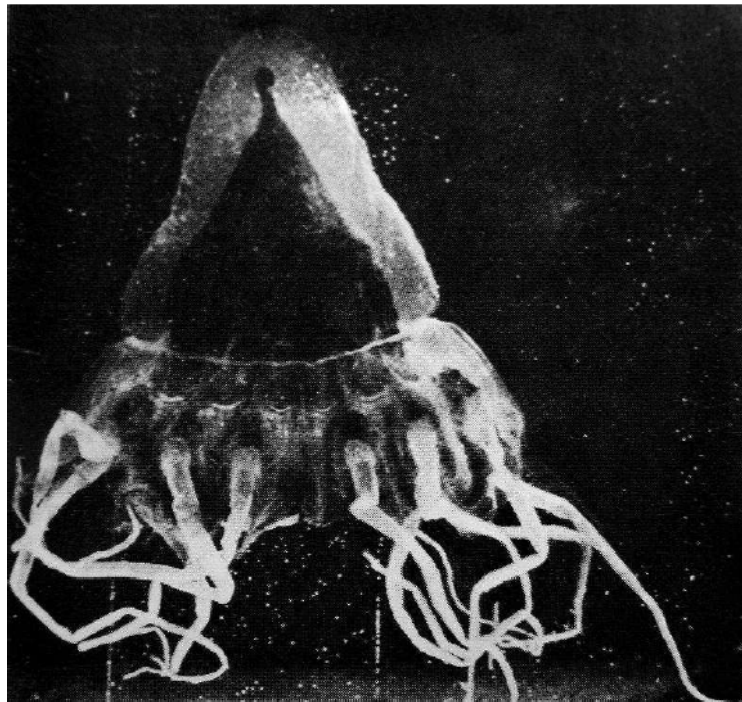


Figure 1. *Periphyllum* Jellyfish captured in William Beebe's *Half Mile Down* (1934).

Progress in modern technology, however, has allowed gelata to be captured on high-quality images and videos, showing their translucent and phosphorescent nature. Images still tend to be made in a detached manner, like some of the ones in the recent online photo catalogue "The World Register of Marine Species" (WoRMS),⁹

⁶ Alaimo, 150.

⁷ Alaimo, 148.

⁸ William Beebe, *Half Mile Down* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1934), 121.

⁹ "World Register of Marine Species," <https://www.marinespecies.org/>.

which do not depict the jellyfish in all its magnificence, with the shots reminiscent of those taken a century ago. Yet paradoxically, some photos are composed almost like a human portrait, as seen in Peter Schuchert's take on the *Turritopsis rubra* medusa, depicting it against a black background, with bright orange insides in the center, capturing the viewer's attention (Figure 2). According to Alaimo, "*its position within frame suggests a human portrait*, even though the absence of face diverts our search for the visage toward a posthuman recognition."¹⁰

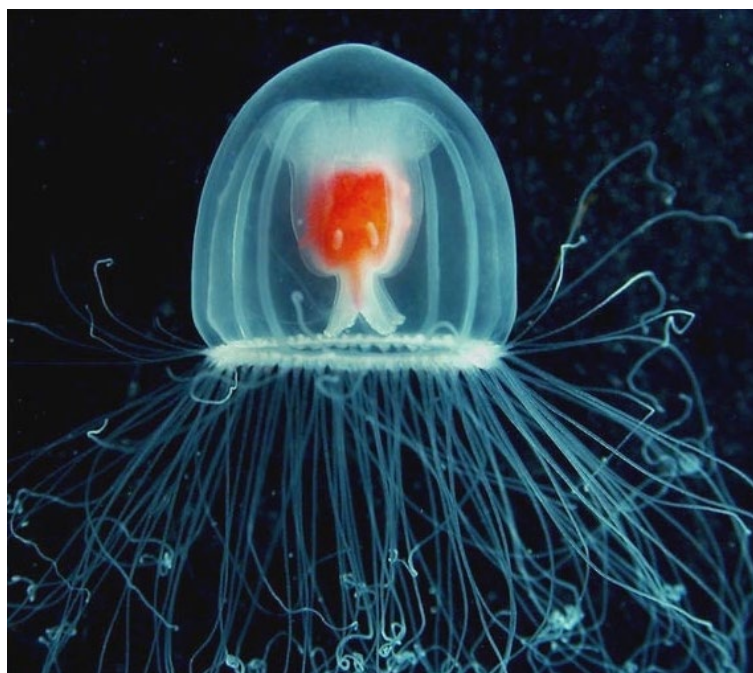


Figure 2. *Turritopsis rubra* medusa by Peter Schuchert.¹¹

SEARCHING FOR A FACE: VULNERABILITY OF HUMAN AND NON-HUMAN LIVES

Similarly, humanity's omnipresent search for a face is tied to the notions of shared vulnerability. From their presumed position of superiority, people filter the Others through looking and deeming them as beings either worthy or unworthy of empathy. The creatures having a recognizable Face naturally would fall into this empathy jurisdiction, while other non-material and non-facial entities, or creatures like gelata, just slip beyond the anthropocentric impulse to ground coexistence in empathy. As Cary Wolfe asserts, following the conceptualization by Emmanuel Levinas, the Face functions as an ethical means of extending moral consideration to beings who display some awareness of their mortality,¹² with jellyfish remaining outside of this logic. For

¹⁰ Alaimo, 148.

¹¹ Peter Schuchert, *Turritopsis rubra* medusa, photograph, accessed November 28, 2025, <https://www.marinespecies.org/photogallery.php?album=674&pic=22558>.

¹² Cary Wolfe "Humans and Other Animals in a Biopolitical Context," *Law, Culture, and the Humanities* 6, no. 1 (2010): 15.

Judith Butler, on the other hand, *vulnerability* emerges “with life itself” and is something every living thing shares *a priori*, appearing before any sense of “I” is formed.¹³ If we apply this understanding of vulnerability within a posthumanist framework, then posthumanist vulnerability could automatically be extended to non-humans, or, in this case, jellyfish.

Butler uses this idea and the interconnectedness it evokes to critique the moral frameworks underpinning contemporary politics, which are often shaped by systemic violence.¹⁴ She proposes that recognition of this universal vulnerability could, in turn, reduce the amount of cruelty. When applied to jellyfish, this ethical potential is expanded further, and we are transported deeper into a posthumanist vision of ecological consciousness, beyond the boundaries of the human. Wolfe is similarly trying to go past the anthropocentric framing of Butler’s vulnerability concept, arguing that humans feel deeply for the loss of animals.¹⁵ Likewise, Diamond determines that our shared vulnerability and awareness of our own mortality serve as the foundation for compassion and drive the impulse for justice toward animals: “the awareness we each have of being a living body, carries with it exposure to the bodily sense of vulnerability to death, sheer animal vulnerability, the vulnerability we share with them.”¹⁶ Both Wolfe and Diamond build on Butler’s notion of vulnerability to ask why the compassion should only be limited to a “common human vulnerability.”¹⁷

The topic of non-human life awareness can be opened up further to stimulate a more philosophical and ontological discussion that challenges the human’s central position in the world and the chain of life in general. Specifically, when looking at Rosana Antolí’s work, a certain fusion of life can be seen that forces us to consider the assemblage of both human/non-human life and living/non-living things, as seen in Figure 3, capturing *La Mitochondria* installation. Represented by a blue thing resembling a multi-limbed body, a tentacular creature of sorts hangs on the wall, suspended in space, in which a certain weirdness intrinsic to the jellyfish is evoked. Even though the installation is clearly made from fabric, its depiction invokes a feeling of a living organism in the viewer, allotting the power of life to something that seems like a simple material thing.

Referring to the part of the cell, the word *mitochondrion* itself originally is found in the Greek language, *μίτο* or *mitos* meaning “thread,” and *χονδρίον* or *chondrion* meaning a “granule,” “grain-like.”¹⁸ The thread or connection between the human and non-human (in this case, tentacular) world is reinscribed in this creature or thing that is unlike any other living being, simultaneously invoking a feeling of fear and the interest of cognition within the viewer. Without possessing a Face and being

¹³ Judith Butler, “Violence, Mourning, Politics; Precarious Life,” in *Precarious Life* (New York: Verso, 2006), 29.

¹⁴ Butler, 29-31, 47-48.

¹⁵ Wolfe, “Humans and Other Animals in a Biopolitical Context,” 8-23.

¹⁶ Wolfe, 13.

¹⁷ Wolfe, 14.

¹⁸ Online Etymology Dictionary, s.v. “Mitochondria,” last modified October 14, 2025, <https://www.etymonline.com/word/mitochondria>.

non-human, it still calls on the audience to question their own relation to it.



Figure 3. *La Mitochondria* installation at Rosana Antolí's *Golden Age: Pulse, Throb, Drift* exhibition in CentroCentro, Madrid, February 23, 2020.¹⁹

LINKING CONTRADICTIONARY AFFECTS TOWARD THE NON-HUMAN TO BIOPOLITICS

A genealogy of such human/non-human empathy can be traced back even further, namely to the nineteenth-century natural-history art. The paintings of that time are straightforward in their naive but striking empathy and care for the jellyfish: both detailed, colorful and ornamented drawings by the artist and biologist Ernst Haeckel

¹⁹ All photographs taken by the author during the exhibition visit.

(Figure 4), as well as black and white prints by Elizabeth and Alexander Agassiz (Figure 5), depict jellies as elegant and graceful.

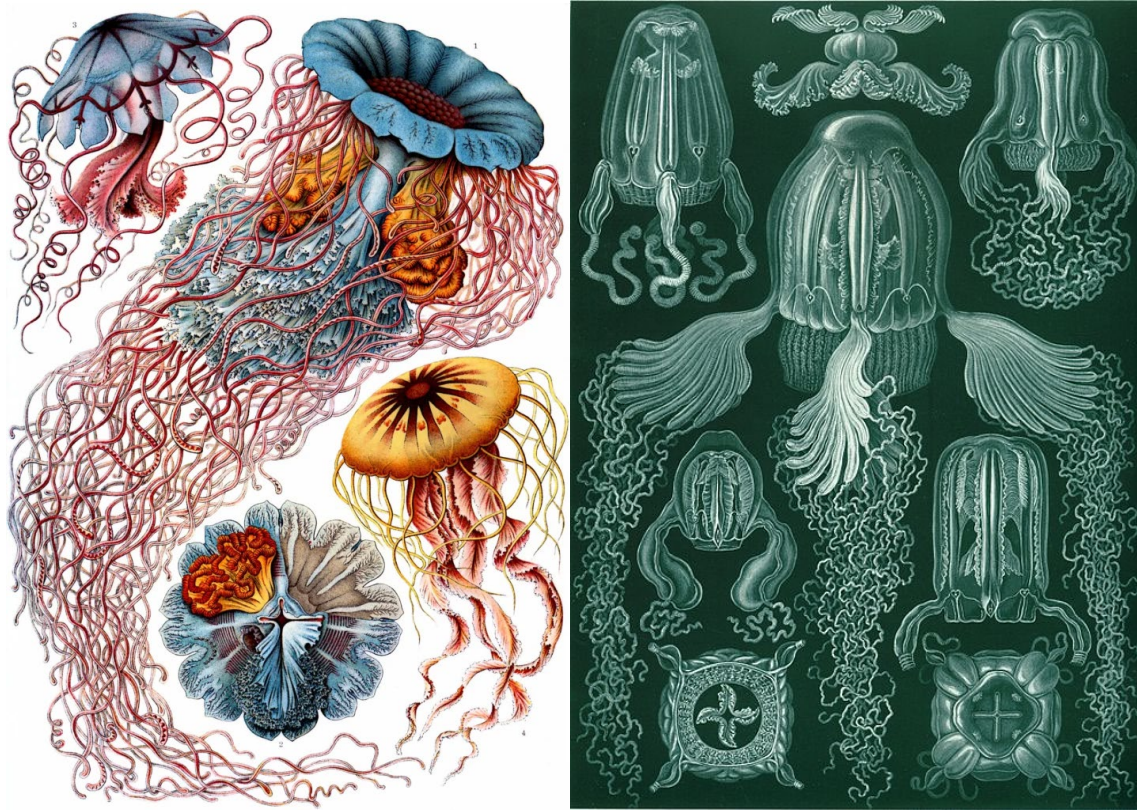


Figure 4. *Discomedusae* and Box Jellyfish, *Cubomedusae*, by Ernst Haeckel in *Art Forms in Nature*, 1904.

Elizabeth Agassiz calls gelata delicate, being in awe of how they can be transparent but resemble “heavy rills of molten metal” when seen in their phosphorescent glory at night.²⁰ As mentioned earlier, the descriptions in Beebe’s photographs (dated 1920-1930s) also convey a sense of care, with Alaimo referring to them as evoking tenderness. Looking at the contemporary artworks like those in Antolfi’s exhibition, we can experience a more nuanced affective response, one where curiosity is combined with fear, where we are both drawn towards the unknown and feel resistant to it.

²⁰ Alaimo, 144.

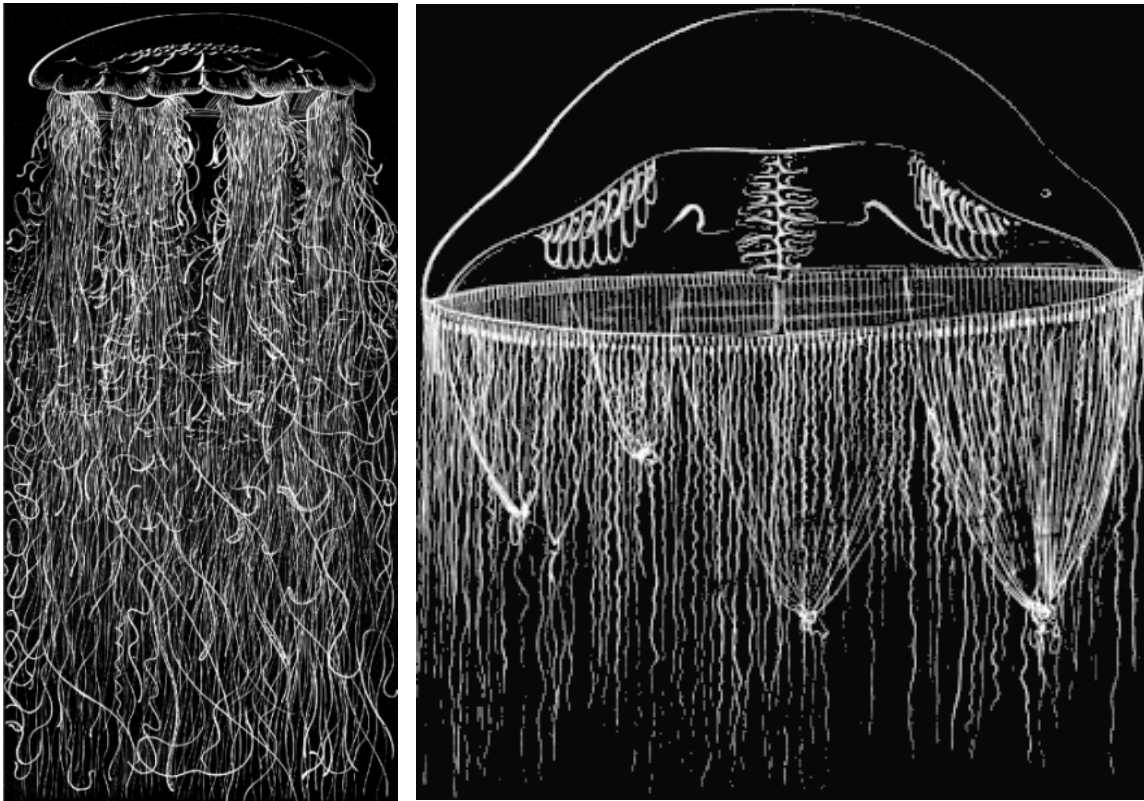


Figure 5. *Cyanea arctica*, now commonly referred to as The Lion's Mane Jellyfish or *Cyanea capillata*, and *Ptychogena*, in *Seaside Studies in Natural History*, 1865.

This response can be investigated further through several notions within the biopolitical thought. In *The History of Sexuality, Volume I*, Michel Foucault provides the understanding of biopolitics as a political rationality whose subject is administering life and populations: “to ensure, sustain, and multiply life, to put this life in order.”²¹ He further elaborates on this in the *Society Must Be Defended* lectures, stating that the logic of managing life involves drawing lines between lives worth protecting and those deemed disposable. Racism, in this context, becomes a crucial mechanism of modern state power: “a racism that society will direct against itself, against its own elements and its own products [...] the internal racism of permanent purification, and it will become one of the basic dimensions of social normalization.”²²

As Wolfe argues in connection with this, humanity's ethical relationship to animals is deeply hypocritical: it grants rights and protection to anthropocentrically viewed species, as can be seen in the case of the Spanish Parliament granting rights to apes, while deeming others as expendable and subject to killing when deemed necessary.²³ Following this, Foucault's idea about racism inherent to biopolitics can be extended one step further, from internal divisions among human populations to the

²¹ Michel Foucault, *The Will to Knowledge: The History of Sexuality: Volume I*, trans. David Macey (London: Penguin Books, 1998), 138.

²² Michel Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975-76*, trans. David Macey (London: Penguin Books, 2004), 62.

²³ Wolfe, 15.

line drawn between human and non-human life, as perfectly illustrated by the apes case. Furthermore, the legitimization of killing certain lives for the sake of others is continuously reinforced by the current economic system. I would argue that the disregard and the refusal to change the consumerist side of capitalism that depletes both human and non-human (especially animal) forms of life can be equated to the logic of racism posited by Foucault in biopolitics.

Going back to the concept of humanity's vulnerability by Butler, it would also indicate an ethical question that is raised upon an encounter with gelata or gelata-like entity. If the jellyfish acts as the one "with a Face," this presents a certain dichotomy. Just as the scientists of the nineteenth century were fascinated by its glowing nature, our contemporaries also are intrigued, but at the same time continue to (either unknowingly or unwillingly) exploit the capitalist machine that slowly kills all living things. These two dimensions of behavior, therefore, illustrate the paradox of the Face. This happens when confronted with jellyfish as the Other, resulting in a sense of compassion that echoes with the understanding of our own vulnerability, and an instinct to reject or distance ourselves from the unfamiliar, especially if it feels threatening. As explained by Wolfe, this model of ethics is not based on reciprocity, but rather on being a hostage to the Other, "in an ethical debt that one can never meet."²⁴



Figure 6. *Chaos Dancing Cosmos* installation at Rosana Antolí's *Golden Age: Pulse, Throb, Drift* exhibition in CentroCentro, Madrid. February 23, 2020.

²⁴ Wolfe, 14.

LIVING ORGANISMS ECHOING IN INANIMATE OBJECTS

Such ethical debt is reinscribed yet again when the nature of the relationship between the jellyfish and the viewer follows a posthumanist model. With interconnectedness of all things animate/inanimate, human/non-human at the core of this thought, it has presented different perceptions and understandings, ranging from the need to reshape the human-centric system to its complete renouncement. The interconnectedness can be visually illustrated through Rosana Antolí's *Chaos Dancing Cosmos* installation. As seen in Figure 6, the cables that occupy almost all the space of the hall induce a feeling of a shared connection. The cables made of plastic act as the connection between the living and the non-living world, as they are reminiscent of the jelly's tentacles. Since the installation inadvertently brings forth feelings of a living organism—also following a human's search for a Face, mentioned earlier—the lines between living/non-living things blur. This is characteristic of art dimensions especially, where metaphors are frequently used.

Although these installations are made of ordinary materials such as plastic or fabric, they nonetheless evoke the forms of marine creatures like jellyfish. This tendency highlights how artistic metaphors operate, where viewers are able to intuitively perceive beyond the literal materiality of the work. Our visual cognition is predisposed to search for familiar patterns in general, through projecting recognizable (and often living) forms onto abstract and non-living structures. Acknowledging this mechanism, which is usually referred to as pattern recognition, is crucial, as it allows the analysis of such artworks to illuminate the blurred boundaries between human and non-human, and between living and non-living entities.

In *Chaos Dancing Cosmos*, the multi-colored lighting of bright blue and red affect the viewer by turning the whole space into an other-worldly scene, or perhaps the one happening deep in the ocean, since this kind of lighting does not reflect normal daylight or night light our eyes are used to. This work produces implications such as the kinship rooted in vulnerability. The blurred boundaries allow us to get immersed in the surroundings of jellyfish, which can be a bridge to imagining ourselves as related to it in some way, evoking feelings of curiosity and empathy.

FROM EMPATHY TO ANXIETY:
AFFECTIVE INTERPRETATIONS OF ANTOLÍ'S INSTALLATIONS

An emphatic connection, framed through a posthumanist lens, is also shaped by the process of *interpellation*.²⁵ Taking place in the Face-Other "debt," in the act of humans looking at the jellyfish, the process of interpellation is simultaneously occurring. The

²⁵ Oxford Reference, s.v. "Interpellation," last modified October 14, 2025, <https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803100008265>.

interpellation concept, as coined by Louis Althusser, describes the moment when an ideological structure ‘calls’ or ‘hails’ the subject into recognition. Recognition by the viewer of their humanity is established exactly because the vulnerability is perceived, as Butler illustrates in the example with the infant, which is truly vulnerable upon us saying so, in the act of utterance.²⁶ However, this is also exactly what Wolfe was calling to rethink in Butler’s approach, by incorporating non-human into the concept of vulnerability. The human recognizing themselves within the non-human should be a default setting, which would lead not only to a decrease of violence in politics regarding humans, like Butler was suggesting, but also in the spheres of thoughtless consumption and production that directly influence all non-human life, within the current capitalist realism model of society.

The interpellation force, if looked at in a posthumanist manner, calls upon another approach developed by posthumanist scholar Jane Bennett. The example she was drawing on comes to mind, about *the force of things* that captures and holds our attention, calling to its recognition. Unfolding her argument, she recalled a literary character called “Odradek” described in one of Franz Kafka’s short stories, “Cares of a Family Man.”²⁷ The protagonist is neither a thing nor a living being, made of a spool of thread, able to run and laugh. According to Bennett, this creature-thing belongs where the line between animate and inanimate is blurred, and all things live on both sides. Kafka writes:

Many a time when you go out of the door and he happens just to be leaning directly beneath you against the banisters you feel inclined to speak to him. Of course, you put no difficult questions to him, you treat him—he is so diminutive that you cannot help it—rather like a child.²⁸

This inclination to speak to Odradek is similar to the way Bennett was drawn to consider the pieces of trash she saw next to her home, in a pull that she could not resist. Developing a concept of *assemblage* throughout her texts, she puts forth the implication that 1) things never act alone, but rather together in an assemblage, by which she means a loose, shifting constellation of human and non-human elements whose capacities emerge through their relation; and 2) things have power. This concept that comes out of the new materialist line of thinking leads me to assert that the cables in Antolí’s *Chaos Dancing Cosmos* and the tentacles in *La Mitochondria* seem to possess a thing-power that is much alike the one described by Bennett, similarly calling out to the viewer, evoking feelings of empathy and curiosity.

Another interpretation of *Chaos Dancing Cosmos* is that it can play out the scenario of omnipresence of jellies, since they are invading more and more space. The invasion of space, which is shown through cables, can be explained by the present-day ecological situation. Despite the aesthetically pleasing appearance of gelata and their

²⁶ Butler, 42.

²⁷ Jane Bennett, “The Force of Things: Steps toward an Ecology of Matter,” *Political Theory* 32, no. 3 (2010): 352.

²⁸ Bennett, 352.

intriguing appeal as seen from the caring comments of photographers, artists, and scientists, there is an underside to their existence. According to the current information, jellyfish seem to be thriving while the whole ocean ecosystems are collapsing due to climate change. The dead zones now empty of other marine life become the place for jellies to conquer, with the possibility of “taking us back to a Paleozoic future of rudimentary flagellate and jellyfish-dominated ocean ecosystems.”²⁹ The predominant scientific conclusion, therefore, is that environmental degradation leads to a paradoxical increase in the gelata population.

Coming back to some of the different perceptions inside posthumanism, the implication of “post” here can be perceived as quite ominous, referring to the precognition that soon the age of humanity may come to its end, at least in its traditional understanding. Interestingly enough, in media and published works referring to the aforementioned thriving of jellies, there is also a mix of fear and awe connected to this possibility. Like in *The World Ocean Census*,³⁰ a catalogue of photographs, one of the authors’ descriptions includes both the reference to jellyfish as the cockroaches of the sea, as well as the designation of these adaptable creatures as beautiful.³¹ Alaimo lists other similar conflicting examples, with one of the books concluding with the interpellation directed at the reader, and the call to reverse the pollution in order to stop the explosion in the jellies’ numbers.

CLOSING REFLECTIONS

To build on top of that contradiction, what is also presented with inherent duality is the name of Antolí’s exhibition itself, a fascinating starting point of this discussion, *A Golden Age*. This duality is reflected through two sides of the coin, the one representing the utopian scenario of a new era of ecological and ethical thinking exercised in a truly posthumanist fashion. The implication here is quite similar to Bennett’s conclusion in *The Force of Things*, with her hoping that posthumanist work can help to invoke a certain awakening of eco-consciousness in humanity. The other side of the coin could mean a “golden age” not for humanity, but for jellyfish, or gelata. This is also relevant in connection with global crises such as COVID-19, which made the prospect of human extinction feel more imaginable than ever. If a potential catastrophe happens that wipes out human civilization, the wheel of life would keep on turning (much like in the repetitively moving loop that Antolí explores), even if one piece of a puzzle goes missing. I guess the question is, which side of the coin will the future land on?

All in all, the jellyfish can pose as both a practical metaphor for going outside the human-centric way of thinking and acting to help mitigate the impact of climate

²⁹ Alaimo, 141.

³⁰ Crist et al., *World Ocean Census: A Global Survey of Marine Life* (Ontario: Firefly Books, 2009).

³¹ Alaimo, 159.

change on the planet, as well as a more metaphysical tool for imagining life beyond humans, in line with posthumanist thinking. Looking at the literary pieces like Kafka's *Odradek* (1917) and works of art like Antolí's *La Mitochondria* (2020), they both have neither things nor living beings at their core, indicating a similar feeling of awe from animate/inanimate and human/non-human relations explorations, that is shared within various time periods and disciplines.

Much like the scientists from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries who sought to convey their fascination with gelata through textual descriptions and visual materials, posthumanist authors and artists today are capturing a similar sense of interconnectedness among living and non-living things in their written works and immersive artworks. By engaging with 1) the biopolitical concepts such as vulnerability and the ethical debt of a Face, which are revised and expanded, alongside 2) the posthumanist ideas like assemblage, the force of things, and watery thinking, we can open up space for a more nuanced discussion of moving outside anthropocentric ways of thinking. Works like Rosana Antolí's *A Golden Age: Pulse, Throb, Drift* exhibition indicate that there has been an even further blurring of disciplines. Forming an example of new ways to combine theory and practice, works like these are unavoidably connected with the increasing environmental worries and uncertainty, and can serve as a link between scholarly exploration and concrete political or ecological practice. ▣

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