

EXTINCTION AND THE ART OF ERASING: LUCIENNE RICKARD'S *EXTINCTION STUDIES*

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Abstract

When an image is erased, what is lost and what remains? On September 6, 2019, Australian graphic artist Lucienne Rickard started a twelve-month duration performance called *Extinction Studies*. Each day, with pencil on a single piece of paper, she draws a recently extinct species, only to erase it as soon as its image is complete. The performance takes place at the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery (TMAG), a location saturated with histories of local mass extinction events. Two rooms away from Rickard's performance, another exhibition shows the bones, skins and some of the last known images of the Tasmanian tiger (*Thylacinus cynocephalus*). The juxtaposition of these two exhibitions draws out the relationship between extinction and the act of erasing. This paper examines the affective nature of erasure and extinction. Rickard's care for each line she draws and erases, reinforces the physical and emotional investment that twenty-first-century extinction events compel. The difference between the two exhibitions is one of scale and time. Where the permanent thylacine exhibition performs the long durée of erasure and 'extinction afterlives' of a single species thought lost since 1936, *Extinction Studies* simultaneously shows the fast-paced acts of erasure of many species thought lost since the turn of the twenty-first-century.

Keywords: Extinction, Anthropocene, multispecies, contemporary art, performance, museum, affect, mourning

For the duration of five days in October 2019, the image of a small extinct bat appeared and vanished in the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery (TMAG) in Hobart, Tasmania. The last call of the Christmas Island pipistrelle (*Pipistrellus murrayi*), a vesper bat endemic to Christmas Island, Australia, a territory in the Eastern Indian Ocean, was heard a decade earlier on August 26, 2009. Researchers that had predicted their imminent extinction had sought approval for a captive breeding program as they tracked their echolocation. But [r]ather than acting immediately the Australian Government established an Expert

Working Group, and waited for its report [...] before approving this intervention' (Lumsden et al 2017, p. 4). When approval arrived in July 2009 and a team of bat experts and captive breeding specialists tried to take the last individuals into captivity, it was too late. Their bat detectors were only able to detect one last bat and, failing to catch it, in late August 2009 the signal went silent.

Ten years later and more than 5000 km south-east, the Christmas Island pipistrelle's image comes to life and vanishes once again. Australian graphic artist Lucienne Rickard started a twelve-month durational performance at TMAG in September 2019, titled *Extinction Studies*. She draws a recently extinct species with graphite on a large 2x1.5m single sheet of paper each day the museum is open, only to erase them in a matter of minutes as soon as the last line is drawn. Rickard sources the species she features from those declared extinct since 2000 on the International Union for Conservation of Nature's (IUCN) *Red List of Threatened Species*. They include charismatic mammals and birds such as the Christmas Island pipistrelle, the Caribbean monk seal, and the Norfolk kaka, as well as less commonly alluring species such as snakes, fish, insects and plants like the Pensée de Cry (*Viola cryana*), a herb endemic to the French Bourgogne that was last seen in 1927, but added to the *Red List* in 2011. This paper examines the affective nature of erasure and extinction. What happens when extinct species reappear in Rickard's year-long durational performance? And what does it mean that all that remains of their appearance are faint traces on a sheet of paper? The questions 'what is lost?' and 'what remains?' are present in both Rickard's durational performance in itself, as well as in its precise museum location.

TMAG in Hobart is saturated with the histories of local mass extinction events. Two rooms away from Rickard's performance, the permanent exhibition "The Thylacine: Skinned, Stuffed, Pickled and Persecuted" shows the bones, skins and some of the last known moving images of the thylacine (*Thylacinus cynocephalus*), also known as the Tasmanian tiger. The juxtaposition of these two exhibitions draws out the relationship between extinction, loss, mourning, and the act of erasure. The thylacine is an extinct carnivorous marsupial, the last of which called 'Benjamin' died in 1936 in the Beaumaris Zoological Gardens in Hobart, Tasmania (Stark 2018). It was once common in New Guinea and widespread on the Australian mainland but disappeared there at least 2000 years ago. In recent times it was only known to be widespread on Tasmania, hence its common name of 'Tasmanian tiger'. It lived on kangaroos and wallabies until extensive persecution by white settlers lead to their extinction (Burbridge & Woinarski 2016).

In what Hannah Stark calls the ‘extinction afterlives’ (2018) of the thylacine, their remnants are on display when ‘after death, they enter a museum collection’ (p. 66). These ‘uncanny’ thylacine remains, so Stark notes, have ‘something to teach us about how extinction happens and [...] reveal complex and interlocking stories about empire, the relationships between collectors, museums and zoos, the public desire to look at animals on display, and the individual lives, death and afterlives of particular animals’ (p. 77). In particular, this permanent exhibition performs what can be called the *longue durée* of their erasure. It shows the loss of a single species as the result of anthropogenic extinction events and the long, enduring history of settler colonialism, capitalism, and Western notions of human exceptionalism. As Thom van Dooren argues in *Flight Ways* (2014), humans are ‘implicated in the lives of disappearing others’ (p. 5) as individuals, as communities and as a species. These human-nonhuman extinction entanglements need to be taken seriously in order to account for the extrapolation of the notions of scale and time that are at stake at the ‘edge of extinction’ (Swanson et al 2017, p. 141). Van Dooren calls this ‘prolonged and ongoing *process* of change and loss that occurs across multiple registers and in multiple forms’ the ‘dull edge of extinction’ (p. 58). Its ‘dullness’ is the result of the ‘slow unraveling [...] of complex ways of life’ (p. 58). Extinction does not happen when the last ‘specimen’ of a species dies. As Stark and van Dooren show in their work on the edges and afterlives of extinction, it is rather a long event of unwinding patterns of multispecies relationships.

Presented alongside TMAG’s permanent thylacine exhibition, Rickard’s *Extinction Studies* then offers an alternative understanding of extinction events of the twentieth and twenty-first century. In Rickard’s drawings, the act of erasing and the durational character of the project draw on important issues at stake in contemporary debates on the scale and time of what has become known as the ‘sixth’ or the ‘Anthropocene mass extinction event’ that has seen a large increase in extinction rates (Ripple et al 2017). Growing awareness of the effects of anthropogenic planetary change mean that hierarchical dualistic ideas such as human/nonhuman, nature/culture, so long at the core of Western thought, have slowly become unsettled. The positioning of the human at the top of the species-iceberg has obscured our ability to observe the devastating losses that have already occurred and are ongoing (van Dooren, p. 18). As Timothy Clark (2015) notes, ‘the Anthropocene enacts the demand to think of human life at much broader scales of space and time, something which alters significantly the way that many once familiar issues appear’ (p. 13). The times and scales of extinction are broadened when species are no longer viewed in isolation but in intimate relation to each other. This opens the door to think of extinction as both ‘long’ and ‘fast-paced’: at once a ‘deep’ and ‘shallow’ process of layered multi-species change.

The thylacine exhibit shows the same remains, day in, day out, in their own room separate from other permanent exhibitions that showcase Tasmania's 'unique geological history and [...] unusual complement of plants and animals' (Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery 2018). Down the hall, however, Rickard's drawings and erasures build up over time. Each consecutive image is drawn on the same piece of paper and superimposed on the traces of the species that were drawn in previous days. This process emphasises both the fast-paced nature of contemporary mass extinction events, as well as the cumulative loss and building of grief that is invoked in the gathering of species that can no longer be 'saved'. It thereby appeals to what Swanson et al. (2017) have critiqued is not the best way to 'see extinction':

'We often tally the plants and animals at risk of extinction one by one on lists of endangered species. But single species are not the best units through which to see extinction—because they are not the units of life. (p. 141)

Life is made up of more complex patterns than these linear extinction lists indicate. Species loss does not just mean the disappearance of a group of individual lives, but at the same time the loss of multispecies worlds. In *Extinction Studies*, Rickard rewrites the *Red List*. By superimposing different species whose extinctions and lives after death take place across time and space, a different way to see extinction appears.

At the time of writing, Rickard has used the same sheet of paper each day for almost three consecutive months. The paper has so-far endured the layering of the graphite pencil marks and the rubbing of the eraser. In accordance with the idea of 'extinction afterlives', the images of previously drawn species do not disappear with the vigorous rubbing of an eraser. They rather linger and appear to 'haunt' the paper in a ghost-like manner. To the left of the Norfolk kaka on October 1st, the eyes of the Caribbean monk seal drawn and erased on September 17th regard the viewer. While these two species inhabited different oceanic areas — Norfolk and Phillip Island and the Caribbean islands and Americas respectively — they come together in the multispecies world of *Extinction Studies*. The human audience at TMAG is witness to their joint (dis)appearance.

Witnessing the appearance and disappearance of species is confronting for a variety of reasons. From the perspective of the affect of grief and mourning, it offers a way into an alternative space and time of 'acknowledgement and respect for the dead' (van Dooren, p. 126). This respect is complicated by the nature of these deaths. As the deaths of animals

and plants, they do not tend to offer the same impact to human viewers as do the deaths of those within our own species. The logic of human exceptionalism as well as capitalist progress narratives prevent the flourishing of mourning for nonhuman species even when lost as a result of anthropogenic environmental impact. In short, nonhuman life is often regarded as ‘worth less’ than human life. Yet as van Dooren notes in his discussion of the mourning and grief of the Hawaiian crow (*Corvus hawaiiensis*): ‘the ability to live in a way that references and interacts with the dead is not uniquely human *as such*, but rather is a way of life that we are increasingly denying to a host of other animals’ (p. 133). Animals mourn and grieve, and the layered nature of *Extinction Studies* pays homage to the impact extinction has *beyond the human*. The extinction of nonhuman life has repercussions for the lives and deaths of other nonhuman life; biodiversity loss and ecosystem degradation casts a wide net. The remnants on the page of the recently extinct species that Rickard draws do not only haunt the humans that view her work, they haunt and mourn each other as well.

The aesthetic nature of drawing and erasing extinction in *Extinction Studies* reveals the complex implications of grief and care in relation to the human-centric and colonial space of the museum. Kerstin Weich argues that in relation to the practice of euthanasia on domestic animals in veterinary practice, a ‘good death’ of the animal in the veterinary setting is performative and staged: it is technologically conditioned and aesthetically pleasing (Weich, p. 195). The power imbalance between human and animal is reproduced in the paradoxical practice of veterinary euthanasia that both reinscribes the inherent killability of the domestic animal but also unsettles these boundaries through elements of care and support. This performativity returns in the staging of *Extinction Studies* at TMAG. Rickard’s drawings are intricate and show her dedication and care for the stories of the species she draws. Initially her aim was to draw and erase an animal within the space of a single day. But because conversations with the public are part of her performance, this means it sometimes takes multiple days to finish drawing and erasing each distinct species. The performance of *Extinction Studies* then includes the (dis)appearance of extinct species on the page, as well as in conversation with a witnessing public. The public grieves over the loss of these species, triggered by the beauty and technical skill evident in Rickard’s drawings: the golden toad (*Incilius periglenes*) took over two weeks to draw and even mid-drawing appeared to leap off the paper, before it disappeared in a matter of minutes on November 20, 2019.

Museums are historically colonial institutions that ‘drove the growth of European empires’ and ‘emerged as active tools of empire’ throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Giblin et al 2019, p. 1). As museums have tended to produce only ‘narrow official

histories' that included many instances of cultural erasure (p. 5), a narrow idea of conservation became enforced within Western museum discourse. In relation to the afterlives of the thylacine, Stark notes that 'it is through intensive breeding programs', including an attempt at resurrecting the thylacine via a DNA sample of Specimen P762, a female thylacine pup held by the Australian Museum in Sydney, 'that humans can work to counteract, and therefore be redeemed from, their culpability in, anthropogenic species extinction' (p. 75). The human-centric history of the museum passes on an idea of care and involvement with extinct species that tends to halt at a static notion of remembrance or conservation that celebrates singular species.

Extinction Studies, ultimately, goes beyond an immobile idea of erasure and performs the multivocal nature of Anthropocene mass extinction events. As the duration performance progresses, the eraser shavings have accumulated and piled up on the floor beneath Rickard's sheet of paper. They move as the air around the platform circulates. Even in their erasure, the extinct species featured in *Extinction Studies* show their inherent entanglement. In the pile of shavings, the boundaries between extinct species vanish. What becomes visible is an alternative way to see extinction that rubs off on you.

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