

Picture a book

What's  
Left  
of  
Human  
Nature

A philosophy performance visual essay by Maria Kronfeldner, Patrik Nikovitz, Nastassia Stein



We are seed. We are love.  
We are the tentative kind

Der Affe Götter Unwurzeltigkeit

We are madish

Ver  
un  
sein

anim

Tiger Tiger, burning bright,  
In the forests of the night,  
What immortal hand or eye,  
Could so beautiful a form  
Dissover? What long expanse  
Of years, in which our whole  
Species, every generation,  
Should be thus made, like thee,  
And other wooden shapes, of  
Wood, to fill the forests of the night,  
When the flames of the  
Great Consuming Fire, shall  
Burn the woods to cinders,  
And the world be left a  
Desolate and empty  
Place, where only  
The bones of the  
Great Consuming Fire, shall  
Remain, to tell of thee,  
And of the other wooden  
Shapes, that were made,  
In the forests of the night,  
When the flames of the  
Great Consuming Fire, shall  
Burn the woods to cinders,  
And the world be left a  
Desolate and empty  
Place, where only  
The bones of the  
Great Consuming Fire, shall  
Remain, to tell of thee,  
And of the other wooden  
Shapes, that were made,



This is philosophy. Ich denke und schreibe. Das ist mein Format. Philosophie ist eine Schlußkunst. Ein Denken, dass sich selbst trägt. Ohne Geländer. Ohne Materialität. Die abstrakteste Kunst, die ich mir vorstellen kann. Man muss dazu die Sätze pflegen, sonst verdörren sie. Man braucht Raum. I need a room, of my own. Man braucht Zeit. I need some time, in a row. Ich bin ein Mönch, but I am not just receptive, I am also active – fighting with the sword of words. Ich bin eine Reinigungskraft, equipped with a dangerous corrosive – der zwanglose Zwang des besseren Arguments. Ich bin eine Geisha, dedicated to the good, in and around us. This is how I do it. But how does it feel like? The Raven. The raven is the animal I remember when I do philosophy. Hearing the raven, talking to the raven. - It is my animal spirit.



This is  
love.

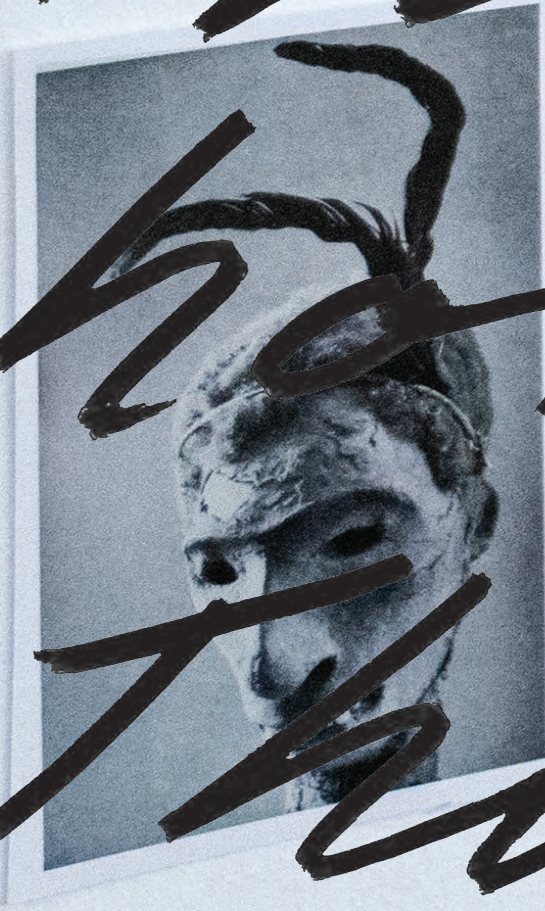


This is

... of Being colla

honor.

This is





about.

Every-  
thing  
North-  
ing.







Gott ist tot. And the great chain of being collapsed. Stürzen wir nicht fortwährend? A crisis of knowledge, indeed.





We need to set things in motion. Nature  $\neq$  Essence. Wir entmenschlichen uns gegenseitig. „L'espèce, c'est moi.“ All others are less human.





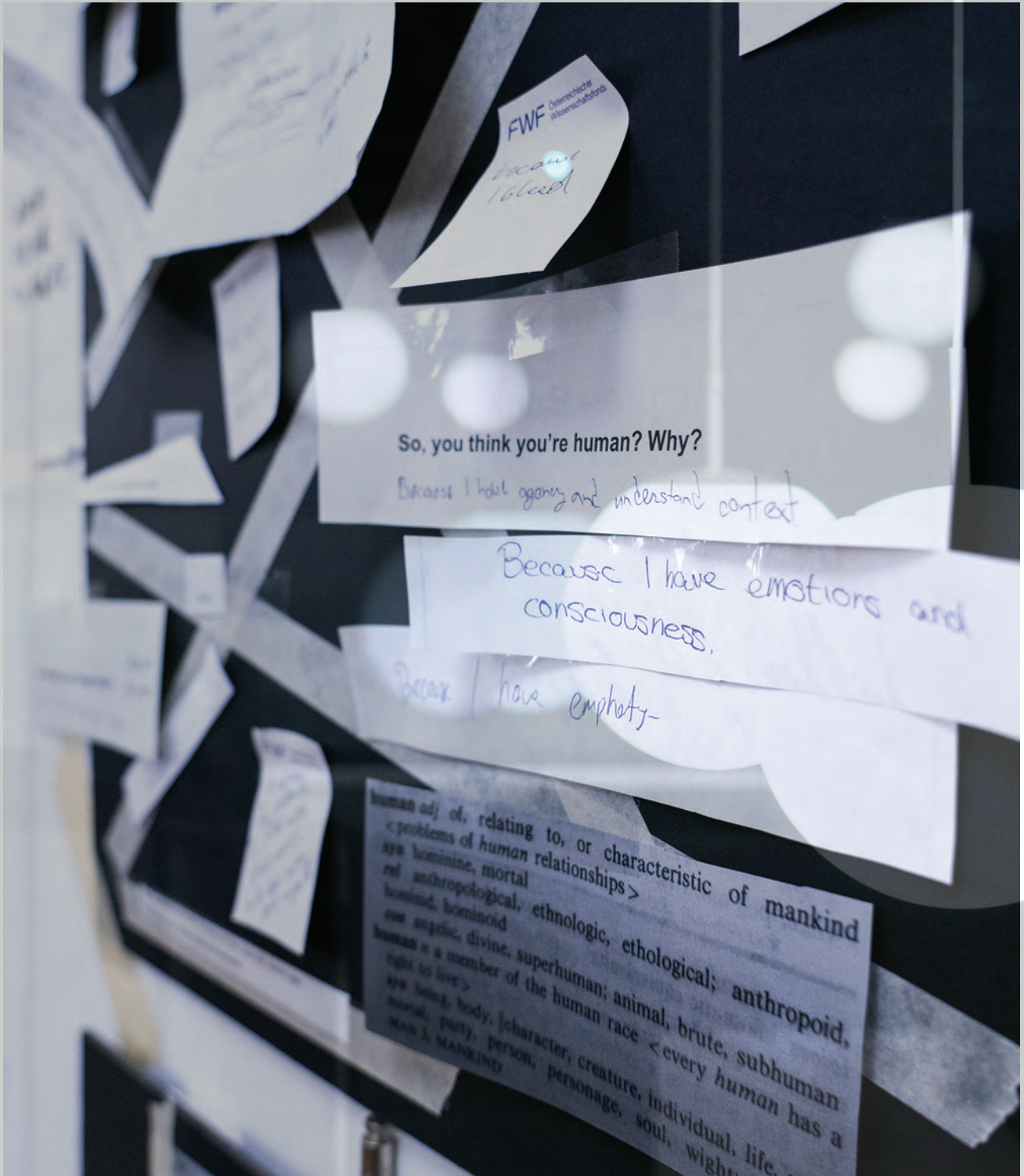
Life is too messy to follow strict identity. Life means death, being more than one. Discounting variation = essentialism.





All life needs: Variation – Heredity – Selection. The Darwinian recipe.





Genes aren't doing anything. We are copycats. Culture can leave nature behind. It is nature and nurture. You don't need to be like others to belong. Genealogy matters.





What's left? Who we are. The way we are. Why we are the way we are. A kaleidoscopic picture is needed. Human nature is not one thing but many.





Let's agree on how we want to be! And always ask "cui bono"! Respect is still possible. The circle expands.





The pleasures and perils of abstraction need to be balanced. We should stop using the term human nature whenever possible.





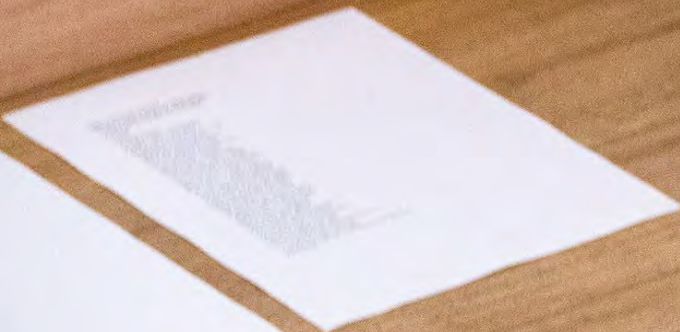
Human nature is dead. We need to renovate our house of being.





Long live 'human natures' in the post-essentialist and interactive plural, and  
long live the tiger in us.











Wenn man nur nicht ewig die Hyperbel al-  
hören müsste, da doch jeder, ehrlicher-  
**M.**; der **M.** geworden, das Erkenntnisvermö-  
aufhören, **M.** zu sein; die liebliche Bestie; jede  
ist: der Schätzende; die Erde hat eine Haut und  
en heißt zum Beispiel: **M.**; aber wer das Land **M.** en-  
nft; wir Umgekehrten, die wir uns ein Auge und ein  
wie bisher die Pflanze **M.** am kräftigsten in die Höhe  
ste und wohlgeratenste Typus **M.**; das ganze Tier **M.**; die  
**M.**; das Tier **M.**; diese wahnsinnige traurige Bestie **M.**; die  
Gesamt-Abirrung der Menschheit von ihren Grundinstinkten  
das Fragezeichen par excellence, das eigentliche Rätsel,  
scheidene Missgeburt von Seele, das tugendhafte Durchs  
Tieres **M.** auf den Kopf zu stehen?; wo bisher die Pflanze  
das Vergangene zum Leben zu gebrauchen und aus dem  
**M.** zum **M.**; ganz und gar notwendige Folge; der **M.** für nicht  
derttausend Jahre lang ein im höchsten Grade der Furcht  
delbar und selbst der einzelne Mensch nichts Festes und  
der **M.** selber in die Hand zu nehmen; in der Reife des Lebens  
dass sein Vater Unrecht hatte, ihn zu zeugen; der **M.** ist  
Freie in der Welt der Unfreiheit, der ewige Wundertäter, die  
Sinn der Schöpfung, der Nichthinwegzudenkende, das Lö  
über die Natur und Verächter derselben, das Wesen, das  
Was überhaupt heute vom Menschen begriffen ist, geht g  
seinen höchsten und edelsten Kräften ist ganz Natur und  
furchtbaren und als unmenschlich geltenden Befähigung  
allein alle Humanität in Regungen, Taten und Werken her  
baren Hang, sich täuschen zu lassen; der **M.** hat, im Ge  
Impulse in sich großgezüchtet: vermöge dieser Synth  
melancholischste Tier ist, wie billig, das heiterste;  
Untier und Übertier; der höhere **M.** ist der Unmensch  
muss lange als einziges Ziel gelten; die Vorbe  
besser und böser werden muss; man kann  
gen auf den **M.**, sofern er wünscht, ist er  
der **M.** verschwände, so würde nichts in  
Gott, als Liebe, als Macht; die Steigerung  
der Art; kannte sich nicht physiologisch,  
lang: er kennt sich auch heute noch nicht;  
dem **M.** seine Eigenschaften gegeben  
noch seine Eltern und Vorfahren, noch er



ler Hyperbeln, das Wort: Welt, Welt, Welt  
weise, nur von **M.**, **M.**, **M.** reden sollte; der  
gen geworden; das blutlose Abstraktum **M.**;  
Verstärkung und Erhöhung des Typus **M.**; das  
diese Haut hat Krankheiten, eine dieser Krankheit-  
tdeckte, entdeckte auch das Land Menschen-Zuku-  
Gewissen für die Frage aufgemacht haben, wo und  
gewachsen ist; die Erhöhung der Spezies **M.**; der höch-  
e Erhöhung des Typus **M.**; das Raubtier **M.**; das Gewürm  
der Ausnahme **M.**; die Urwaldvegetation **M.**; eine solche  
kten, eine solche Gesamt-Décadence des Werturteils ist  
das das Tier **M.** dem Philosophen aufgibt; die kleine bes-  
chnittstier und Herdenschaf; .... wie kam der Instinkt des  
**M.** am prachtvollsten gewachsen ist; erst durch die Kraft,  
m Geschehenen wieder Geschichte zu machen, wird der  
chts verantwortlich; die Idee des **M.**; der **M.** manche hun-  
zugängliches Tier; der **M.** im ganzen geworden und wan-  
d Beharrendes; die Erdregierung des **M.**en im großen hat  
bens und des Versandes überkommt den **M.** das Gefühl,  
zu schön für den betrachtenden Menschen; der **M.** der  
e erstaunliche Ausnahme, das Übertier, der Fast-Gott, der  
ösungswort des kosmischen Rätsels, der große Herrscher  
seine Geschichte Weltgeschichte nennt; der Affe Gottes.  
genauso weit, als er machinal begriffen ist; der Mensch in  
trägt ihren unheimlichen Doppelcharakter an sich; seine  
gen sind vielleicht sogar der fruchtbare Boden, aus dem  
vorwachsen kann; der **M.**selbst aber hat einen unbesieg-  
egensatz zum Tier, eine Fülle gegensätzlicher Triebe und  
esis ist er der Herr der Erde; das unglücklichste und  
der Ver- klärer des Daseins in der Natur; ist das  
ch und Übermensch; die Verkleinerung des **M.**  
edin- gung für die Größe des **M.**; dass der **M.**  
h t genug Achtung vor dem **M.** haben, sobald  
durchzuschlagen versteht; sieht man dage-  
die absurdeste Bestie; gesetzt, dass auch  
der Welt fehlen; als Dichter, als Denker, als  
des Typus verhängnisvoll für die Erhaltung  
die ganze Kette der Jahrtausende ent-  
ein mittelmäßiger Egoist; dass niemand  
hat, weder Gott, noch die Gesellschaft,  
selbst, - dass niemand schuld an ihm ist.

Text selected from the index of Friedrich Nietzsche's Werke (ed. by K. Schlechta, 1984)



# Love, Sex, and Hatred: Is that all there is to human nature?

The topic of human nature has long haunted popular culture and music has become a favoured medium of exploration. The cult classic “Human Nature” released in 1982 by Michael Jackson and its countless covers and samples are a testament to this. Though there have been many forays into discussions on human nature through song, none have been as popular as this single. Featured on the *Thriller* album, this song draws listeners in with its catchy yet melancholic chorus and instrumentals featuring layered keyboards and synths. Lyrically, the song describes a man longing for a relationship with a woman, depicting the push and pull of relationships, consistently coming back to this dance being ‘human nature.’ In comparison, Madonna’s “Human Nature,” released in 1994 centres the singer’s freedom of expression and unwillingness to yield to others’ expectations, using sex as one example. Relationships are a central focus in many songs featuring ‘human nature’ in their lyrics, commonly about sex. While this is a fairly typical comparison in RnB and pop songs, as can be seen with Madonna and Michael Jackson’s approach to ‘human nature,’ the topic of human nature can be divided roughly into three sections namely: comparisons to animal behaviour, explorations into the negative aspects of human nature including violence and hatred, and sex/romance-based interpretations. These interpretations can be linked to different anthropological and biological interpretations of human nature and human behaviour, which becomes especially intriguing when considering humanity’s interest in primatology.

Marcus Latief Scott’s 2020 “Animal Behaviour” is a perfect example of the overlap between human nature and animalistic behaviours. Scott’s breakbeat-inspired song makes reference to the similarities between humans and animals in the way that both feel emotions, want attention and share similar biological features and needs. Lyrics such as “the world is a jungle, survival of the fittest” and “you’re just an animal... human nature, animal behaviour” allow for comparisons to debates within the anthropological field to be made, as similarities to the Darwinian “survival of the fittest” argumentation can be seen. This debate has sparked controversy, leading to arguments over human nature being violent, as this has according to some been the leading cause for human innovation and progress. While these debates naturally manifest in popular culture, the medium of songwriting is especially useful in determining the popular understanding of, and sentiment regarding this argument, as it synthesizes and breaks these arguments down into often easily digestible and short content that is able to reach millions.

Michael Jackson’s “Human Nature,” is the best example of this, with his song depicting the push and pull of relationships as ‘human nature’ reaching millions. While lyrical analyses focusing on the verses interpret the meaning of the song to be the eternal struggle of connecting with others and oneself, shown through the opening line of “looking out across the nighttime” and “I’m dreaming on the street,” the majority of the song is focused on the chorus which questions human nature concerning the budding relationship.

The chorus focuses on the woman’s feelings, asking why the man is acting “that way,” while emphasizing that she is interested in him “she’s keeping him by, keeping him around.” The verses focus more on the man’s perspective claiming that he is watching the girl and that “she likes the way” he stares, further emphasizing that both parties seemingly ‘know’ their role in this ritual. The song’s composition further supports this ‘instinctive’ understanding, as the second half is entirely composed of repetitions of the chorus. There is no conclusion or answer as to why each of them act this way, with the song fading out still questioning “why.” Therefore, one might argue that we may never logically know why we act a certain way, however, there is something in our human nature that encourages us to do so.

While Michael Jackson’s interpretation of human nature is fairly positive, the same cannot be said for the songs that it has inspired. Big Sean’s 2020 release “Don Life” being the best example of this, with its lyrics concerning greed and hatred. Against an instrumental sample of Jackson’s hit, Big Sean and Lil Wayne rap about wealth inequality, racism and hard work. The chorus includes the line “getting to the paper like it’s human nature,” which refers both to the greed of the wealthy and to the necessity of hard work and financial success to survive, especially as an underprivileged person. Throughout the song, the theme of ownership is prevalent, especially in the intro and outro speeches. The song begins with a spoken paragraph in which the earnings of athletes are discussed, stating that some earn “ten or fifteen million a year,” following this up with the statement that “that athlete must be worth to his owners billions of dollars.” The outro critiques the music industry and the inequality of wealth distribution stating that “Black music sells about sixty percent of the music sold in the world,” but still Black performers are “willing to sing for pennies a record.” These two segments paired with the chorus refer to the exploitation of Black people in the entertainment industry and point out the hypocrisy that no matter how much money is earned, the majority of the profits continue to go to the ruling class.



# An exploration into human nature through music

Economic disparities are a common feature in critiques of human nature, as this marks one of the key departures from comparisons to animal behaviour. Intosky makes reference to this in their 2021 release “Light incubator: rise”:

“The wealthy still prosper off our backs and thighs  
...  
Human nature is greed  
Human nature is overflowing with the prejudiced”

While aggression and violence might not be explicitly mentioned, both “Don Life” and “Light Incubator: rise” focus on greed and mention the violence it causes through the exploitation and subjugation of others. While the anthropological discussions of human nature in the 1970s focused on physical dominance and supposed differences in brain function and capacity as a cause of violence, these songs redirect our attention to issues such as greed and selfishness as the key factors in causing violence. Intosky questions why we punish each other when we are all made of the “same components,” similarly to Scott’s comparison between the callous nature of humans and animals even though “we all bleed red.” Regardless of the approach taken, none of these interpretations can provide an answer as to why we behave in these ways, settling on it being human nature.

The majority of the songs that delve into issues of violence as part of human nature have a distinct pessimistic outlook, one that is not present in songs such as Madonna’s “Human Nature.” Madonna’s approach is more individualistic, focusing on her right to express herself regardless of whether others agree with her. With lyrics such as “express yourself, don’t repress yourself” and “I’m not your bitch, don’t hang your shit on me,” she clearly expresses her need to maintain her independence and freedom of expression. While the other songs primarily discuss human behaviour on a larger scale, either in reference to greed and violence or by showcasing human interactions, the switch to an individual focus in Madonna’s interpretation of human nature marks a clear departure both from the discussions surrounding human nature within the academic fields and within popular culture. In the prechorus Madonna asks:

“Did I have a point of view?  
Oops, I didn’t know I couldn’t talk about you  
And I’m not sorry”

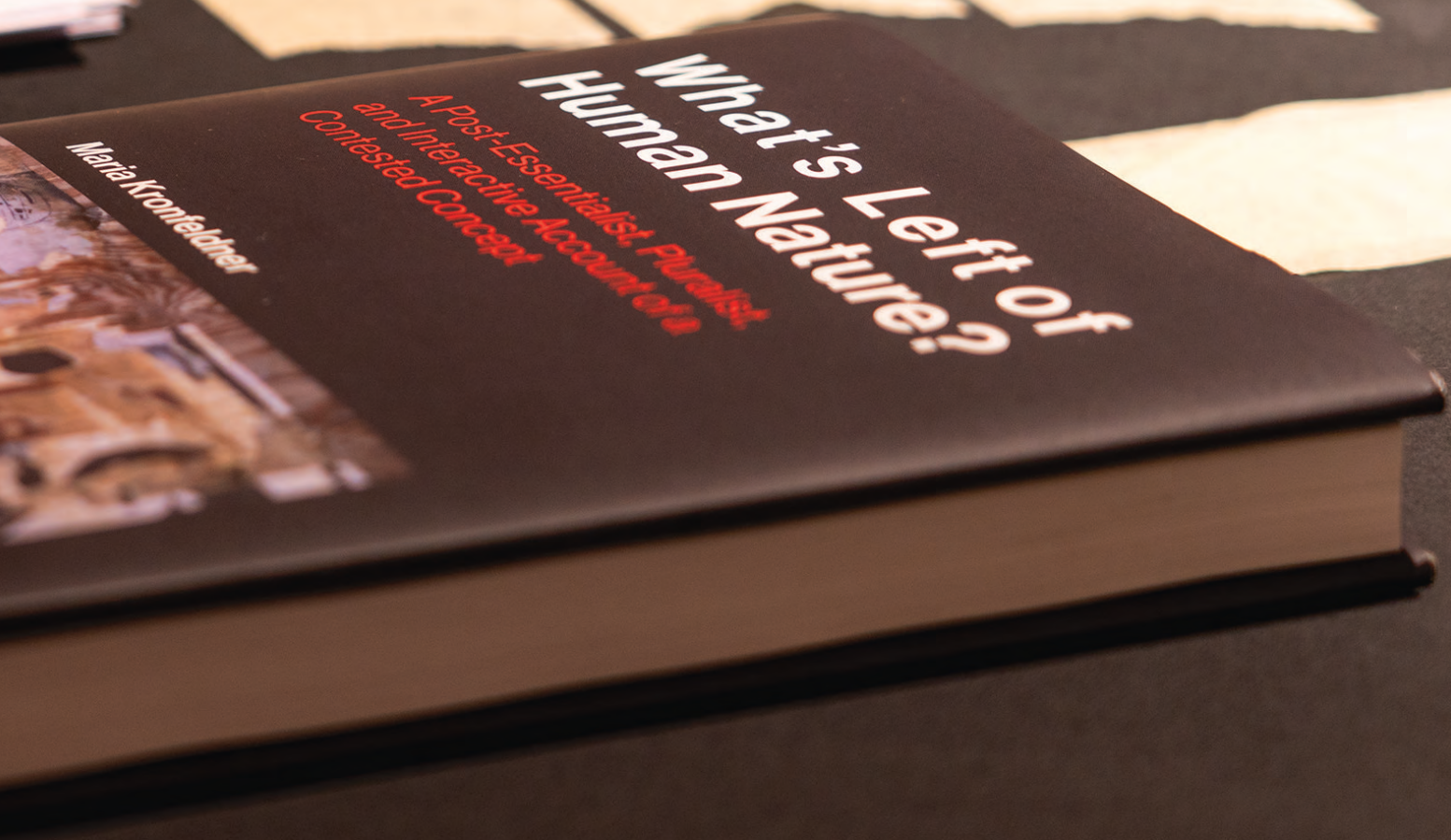
While human nature tends to be discussed as all-encompassing behaviours, Madonna approaches this concept along the lines of individual personalities and ways of expression. She argues that it is in our human nature to have our own opinions, splitting from the violence and aggression based argumentation. Here the argument can be raised that art and expression are part of human nature because we have an instinctual need to communicate our feelings. Additionally, Madonna appeals to the issue of imagination, stating “You punished me for telling you my fantasies. I’m breaking all the rules I didn’t make.” Imagination and the ability to create are invaluable assets which greatly influence human nature, which is something that is often ignored when approaching the topic from a more evolutionary point of view. While still sticking to the common theme of sex, Madonna branched further out and brought in a less-discussed aspect of human nature, one that is especially self-evident in the arts.

Human nature remains an interesting topic of discussion within popular culture, especially within music, as demonstrated by the increase in releases including the terms ‘human nature’ in the past five years. The songs discussed were found through a lyric search via lyrics.com, and are therefore either entirely or primarily in English. With most of the songs discussed having been released in the United States, it is interesting to note that the increase in songs released titled, or mentioning human nature has coincided with the increasing awareness of social issues, particularly stemming from Donald Trump’s election, the Black Lives Matter movement and the Covid-19 crisis. Interest in human nature appears to be cyclical, as the decade-long gaps between major song releases show. Moving forward, it will be interesting to see the direction in which artists will take the discussion, and how they will continue to refer to past attempts at understanding and interpreting our true nature. Furthermore, expanding this research to include more languages would reveal how different regions and cultures approach the topics based on their contexts as well as their interpretations of other regional contexts. This is especially interesting when looking at sampling culture, considering there were several songs that sampled Michael Jackson’s “Human Nature,” across genres and in different languages. Music serves as a means of bridging communication gaps, and songs as influential as Michael Jackson’s “Human Nature” have the potential to become pillars of discussion and culture, guiding new generations and encouraging discussions.









# What's Left of Human Nature.?

*A Post-Essentialist, Pluralist,  
and Interactive Account of a  
Contested Concept*

Maria Kronfeldner







This visual essay depicts an experiment in doing philosophy performatively. We staged an exhibition, a concert, an experiential exploration, a conversation – in the form of a performance, in the Library Café’s gallery at CEU, transformed into a construction site, with ladders, painter’s tape to fix lots of materials to the wall, and with rubbish.

The performance started with Jason Means welcoming the guests. Maria Kronfeldner then played a recording about what doing philosophy means to her, how it feels like to do it, and why she does it. She quoted E. A. Poe’s poem “The Raven,” with the raven acting as her animal spirit in doing philosophy, with its wisdom and perseverance. The sound of the poem filled the room with the humiliating openness and insecurity one feels when doing philosophy.

Nastassia Stein continued with playing songs on human nature, while Kronfeldner displayed the slogan for the evening – “We are renovating our House of Being” – on the plastic-covered book-

shelves behind the desks. Kronfeldner continued with cutting pieces of paper, with pictures or text on them, that she put on the wall, while people started walking around in the room, interacting naturally with the opportunities created. They filled out handouts to be put into a box, and added sticky notes to a board, in both cases reacting to the prompt that was set for the evening: “So, you think you are human? Why?”

In the middle of the room was a strange pile of papers (leftovers from a parcel with pens, stickers, and paper that we received from our funder, the FWF). It became the magic center of the room, the spirit of the place, a heap of being, with the thread of Ariadne enmeshed with little pictures of living and non-living beings, adding sparks of color ... as if burning.

Once the music stopped, Kronfeldner continued with a recording. “Long live human natures in the post-essentialist and interactive plural, and long live the tiger in us,” taking up the epigraph of her book





“What’s Left of Human Nature,” which stems from William Blake’s famous poem “Tyger.”

The book’s content was depicted on the wall in the form of little grey plates, with one or two sentences per chapter, combined with pictures that related to the respective content. The book itself was also on display. While a recording of Blake’s poem occupied the room, Kronfeldner picked up a metal chain that was lying in front of the wall. The rings of the chain were covered with ‘little humans’, both imagined and real. The Great Chain of Being had collapsed. To create something new, the order in the House of Being had to be further subverted. Kronfeldner gently picked up the chain and walked with it towards the magic pile. Once the poem stopped, the sound continued with a simple beat to which Kronfeldner started dancing—swinging the chain—to set things in motion.

After this, Kronfeldner went back to the desk, reading the entry for ‘Mensch’ in the index of Schlechta’s edition of Nietzsche’s Works. After a while she walked to the wall and sat down to

read, stood up again, went to the table, took notes, and added these to the wall, e.g. that Nietzsche states that “M” (der Mensch, the human being) is simply der Affe Gottes.

This continued for a while. People started going to the wall again, reading and interacting. After the text from Nietzsche stopped, Kronfeldner announced that this was the first round of the performance. The second cycle started immediately, with Stein playing the music she selected for the evening once again. After a while, the recording on ‘doing philosophy’ was played again and at a certain point it all stopped, unexpectedly. Just so.

The little humans were scattered everywhere around the room. While visitors lingered—some reading, some talking, some adding things to the boards—somebody gave the old Great Chain of Being its new form. The form of a heart. The form of the anti-hierarchy. This is love. This is horror. This is about. About everything. About nothing. This is philosophy.



## Credits

This visual essay is the result of a collaboration between the three artists involved in the performance: Maria Kronfeldner and Nastassia Stein were both performing, while Patrik Nikovitz took pictures. Following the event, Nikovitz edited the pictures while Kronfeldner and Stein worked on the ideas and texts for the visual essay. Stein adapted the pictures from Nikovitz to create the collages that you see in the essay. She also did the graphic design of this visual essay.

Concept and Planning

Maria Kronfeldner and Jason Means

Philosophical Content

Maria Kronfeldner

Exhibition Setup

Maria Kronfeldner, Nastassia Stein

Philosophy Performance

Maria Kronfeldner

Music Curation and Performance

Nastassia Stein

Photography

Patrik Nikovitz

Front of House

Jason Means

Poster Design

Patrik Nikovitz

Visual Essay Design

Nastassia Stein

Poster Image

Bjørn Christian Tørrissen, licensed under the CC BY-SA 3.0.

Facilities

Gyorgy Finta, Gerald Mahlberg, Cosmin Mihai Ciul and Martin Schimandl

Directed by

Maria Kronfeldner

Special thanks to Vineta Kastrati-Hagelkruys, Dima Cvetkovic and the Library Café.

The performance and this visual essay have been funded by the Austrian Science Fund (FWF) [10.55776/COE3].

© The authors. All content is licensed under the CC BY 4.0 license.







Als Teil der Langen Nacht der Forschung 2024 porträtierte Maria Kronfeldner den Inhalt ihres Buches „What’s Left of Human Nature: A Post-Essentialist, Pluralist and Interactive Account of a Contested Concept“ (2018, MIT Press), indem sie die Galeriewand des Library Cafés der CEU mit Bildern und Texten füllte. Sie las aus dem Buch und präsentierte verwandte Texte (auch Gedichte und Songs) um so den Prozess der philosophischen Forschung - die Ordnung des gefundenen Materials, die Schaffung eines kohärenten und komplex strukturierten Ganzen - performativ zu vermitteln, um philosophische Arbeit über den geschriebenen Text hinaus sichtbar und verständlich zu machen. Gäste waren eingeladen, ihre Ansichten zum Thema zu teilen. Weitere interaktive Elemente entstanden spontan aus der Situation heraus.

Die Philosophie Performance bezieht sich auf Kronfeldner’s Forschung im Rahmen des Schwerpunkts *The Epistemology of the In/Human*, der zum Teil im Rahmen des FWF Cluster’s of Excellence *Knowledge in Crisis* Projekts realisiert und gefördert wird. *Knowledge in Crisis* setzt sich kritisch mit den Beziehungen zwischen Wissen, Wahrheit, Wissenschaft, Ethik und Politik auseinander und erforscht unser Verhältnis zur Realität selbst.

As part of the 2024 Long Night of Research, Maria Kronfeldner depicted the content of her book “What’s left of Human Nature: A Post-Essentialist, Pluralist and Interactive Account of a Contested Concept,” (2018, MIT Press) by filling the wall in the gallery of CEU’s Library Café with pictures and text. She read from the book, along with presenting related texts (incl. poems and songs), performatively communicating the process of philosophical inquiry – the ordering of the material that one has found, the creation of a coherent and complexly structured whole – to make philosophical work visible and graspable beyond the written text. Visitors were invited to share their thoughts. Further interactive elements spontaneously emerged from the situation.

The Philosophy Performance relates to Kronfeldner’s research regarding *The Epistemology of the In/human*, which is in part realized and funded under the frame of the FWF Cluster of Excellence *Knowledge in Crisis* Project. *Knowledge in Crisis* critically investigates problems about the relationship between knowledge, truth, science, ethics and politics; and ultimately, our relationship to reality itself.

*The Epistemology  
of the In/Human*

**KNOWLEDGE  
in** An FWF Cluster  
of Excellence **Crisis**

**CEU** CENTRAL  
EUROPEAN  
UNIVERSITY

**FWF** Austrian  
Science Fund