



**It doesn't have to be like that: On the critical in Anne Duk Hee Jordan**

by James Voorhies

An essay on *Snailing (Slippy slimy slug slut)* by Anne Duk Hee Jordan at CANAL PROJECTS

# It doesn't have to be like that: On the critical in Anne Duk Hee Jordan

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In a quiet London nook,  
By a brook, where no one looked,  
A tiny miracle took form,  
Jeremiah, left-coiled, born.

And so it begins. This is the introductory verse of a song titled "The Birth of Jeremiah," the first in a series of charming tunes that accompany Anne Duk Hee Jordan's exhibition *Snailing (Slippy slimy slug slut)* at Canal Projects. The protagonist in Jordan's sensory-heightened dreamscape is a snail named Jeremy. It's a true-life, humanistic tale about a nonhuman species, an everyday garden snail who became known to the world for being born with a less-than-everyday condition: its shell coiled to the left instead of the typically right-handed spiral. In most instances, being left- or right-handed, left- or right-brained, would be no cause for alarm. But with Jeremy, a left-coiling shell posed a significant challenge for mating. Snails align their genitals on their right side during reproduction. So, in 2017, when news broke of this rare anomaly in nature, an international search was launched by scientific researchers to find a compatible sexual partner for the hermaphroditic Jeremy. After a global call for help, Jeremy was finally successfully mated, although unfortunately dying shortly thereafter. The tale nevertheless underscores our natural human attraction to stories where difference triumphs over the odds.





SAVING  
THE WORLD'S  
WILDLIFE

In the forest and the field,  
Snails reveal the world concealed,  
Tiny movers, silent, slow,  
In their trails, life starts to grow.

While Jeremy may be the protagonist—and reproductive challenges the subject—*Snailing* looks at much larger questions related to the deeply interconnected and interwoven lives of nonhuman and human species, especially those who don't fit in. This is how Jordan spins their magisterial aesthetic webs: instead of confronting audiences with hardline political data and facts, the artist draws upon the human interest in allegorical tales like Jeremy's, a metaphor for the messy network of entangled and precarious life on planet Earth. The Berlin-based Jordan is known for their immersive installations that merge art and scientific inquiry, with a focus on nonhuman ecologies and interspecies interactions. Their installations often incorporate sound and movement, as seen in earlier works that combine mechanical objects with live plants and flowing water. The environments are designed not just to be observed but to be inhabited, offering fertile ground for reflection and interaction. One of their key fascinations is the complexity of reproduction in the natural world, particularly in species with unconventional sexual strategies. This interest informs much of Jordan's practice, one that has helped spur the entirely new genre of study known as "sex ecologies." In this framework, the artist emphasizes the creativity and adaptability of nonhuman reproductive systems, drawing attention to the way these systems challenge Western, patriarchal assumptions about sexuality and survival. At the forefront of this multivalent practice are artistic and scientific explorations of real-world situations, like Jeremy's, that push against traditional, human-centric binary norms. The aim, seemingly, is to highlight resilience and diversity in interspecies relations, and to emphasize how all biological life intersects with social and environmental issues.

*Snailing* transformed the cavernous gallery at Canal Projects into an enveloping space that invited discovery and motivated wonder. Three cocoon-like habitats were sited within the exhibition, each made of translucent curtains mimicking the spiral of (what else)—a left-coiling shell. These intimate interiors, each creating a soft and glowing ambiance, acted as knowledge production incubators where viewers could watch informative animated videos scored by Jordan's musical collaborator, Sasha Perera. Each habitat was devoted to a song—"The Birth of Jeremiah," "The Adventure Of..." and "Snail's Serenade"—interweaving the creature's story with scientific information drawn from the internet to create lyrics about the reproductive challenges of left-coiling snails. Together, the three songs compose the "Ballad of Jeremiah."

Although the snail's moniker originated with its caretakers—British geneticists who named the gastropod after Jeremy Corbyn, the left-leaning politician—Jordan's songs return the anglicized "Jeremy" to its Hebrew roots, "Jeremiah," the Old Testament's sternly moral prophet (think *jeremiad*). This term could be used to describe Jordan's practice itself. Eschewing the overtly political, the artist balances a razor-edge critique with a seductively playful aesthetics bordering on "edutainment." It works. Jordan has a keen ability to show but not tell, to highlight, for example, how a story about difference, about otherness—essentially about queerness—became a newsworthy, human-interest event. Meanwhile, the global search for a sexual partner for Jeremy showed how something queer—or, as some might say, something "off"—could galvanize the collective imagination towards a positive outcome.







This fine balance between the political and the playful is Jordan's sweet spot—the “magisterial aesthetic web” noted above—that induces viewers to come along for the ride. It's a difficult aesthetics to achieve, one where idiosyncratic biological conditions become metaphors for humanity's relative willingness to accept difference. In fact, the “other” need not be met with aversion. *It doesn't have to be like that.* As Jeremy/Jeremiah foretells, there can be a different story, or many stories. On this point, Michel Foucault's 1978 lecture “What Is Critique?” offers an important context for understanding Jordan's work. In his theory of critique, Foucault refers to Kant's use of the term *Aufklärung*, meaning “enlightenment.”<sup>1</sup> In his 1784 essay “What Is Enlightenment?,” Kant traced the formation of a critical attitude that emerged as people began to question the existing authority, namely monarchy, in the late eighteenth century. People began to think for themselves. They began to share a hunger for freedom bound up with the Enlightenment, questioning oppressive regimes of power and the instruments associated with control.<sup>2</sup>

Power governs through appearances: words, photographs, sounds, and infrastructures. And the appearance of power has an aesthetics associated with instrumental forms of governing. People respond to power. In his lecture nearly two hundred years later, Foucault referred to Kant's concept of *Aufklärung* to argue for the need to critique the aesthetics of power—be it language, image, sound, or the built environment. Today, the need to reassess and challenge authority, to be critical of power, is ever more urgent amid the globally widening authoritarian turn. Foucault, writing in 1978, foretells our own need to be always looking out for how people are governed, and to perpetually ask “how not to be governed *like that*, by that, in the name of those principles, with such and such an objective in mind.”<sup>3</sup> In other words: **it doesn't have to be like that.**

It may seem odd to bring in weighty figures like Kant and Foucault and their theories of critique. For the critical in Anne Duk Hee Jordan's work is a world of snails, sea slugs, octopuses, sea cucumbers, and even a hurricane named Fiona. Yet all of these nature-based fabulations serve as metaphors to appeal to "human interest"—visually, intellectually, acoustically, warmly, seductively, and don't forget humorously. And so, in the interest of humans, Jordan wields an aesthetics of cuteness (and the lite-ness often associated with something loveable) against itself. In this way, the artist pitches a message to wider audiences—including a stratum of art-goers who may see only Jeremy, or the cute little robotic snails roaming the floor, or the cozy little incubators where visitors lie across pillows while listening to catchy tunes accompanying spritely video animations. That audience is completely satisfied by this installation. They love it. And Jordan has, in that sense, given them what they want. But don't let that cuteness get in the way of seeing what else—or what more—Jordan's *Snailing* can be and say. Calling upon *Aufklärung*, that urge for enlightenment, art-goers who take time to look and think about what they have before them will start to see stand-ins for something much sharper. For the willing and receptive, Jordan (the artist-prophet) poses larger questions and offers incisive critiques of power on any number of structural issues, including the environment, AI, social equity, and the art world itself. Jordan satisfies those art-goers too, transforming Jeremy's story into something surprisingly universal.

Like all living things, Jeremy ultimately met his end, yet not without experiencing some kind of bond. No matter the difference—whether it is sex, love, or simply being held in common—all organisms that spin and twirl, dig and burrow, soar and glide, laugh and love have a right to life, as Jordan reminds us in the project's third and final song, a "Snail's Serenade":

In the forest and the field,  
Snails reveal the world concealed,  
Tiny movers, silent, slow,  
In their trails, life starts to grow.

# SNAILING (SLIPPY SLIMY SLUG SLUTT)

November 27 - December 2, 2024

During *Slipping Slimy Slugg Slutt*, the artist's investigation into the effects of climate change on the planet's most resilient creature, the snail, is explored through a series of installations and performances. The artist's work is a journey into a world where the boundaries between the physical and the digital are blurred, and the lines between the real and the virtual are constantly shifting.

Artists use a garden soil with a low salinity condition which they found to be the best. Other than the light, all a snail needs is a shell and a path. An artist's work is a journey into a world where the boundaries between the physical and the digital are blurred, and the lines between the real and the virtual are constantly shifting.

During the performance, the artist's investigation into the effects of climate change on the planet's most resilient creature, the snail, is explored through a series of installations and performances. The artist's work is a journey into a world where the boundaries between the physical and the digital are blurred, and the lines between the real and the virtual are constantly shifting.

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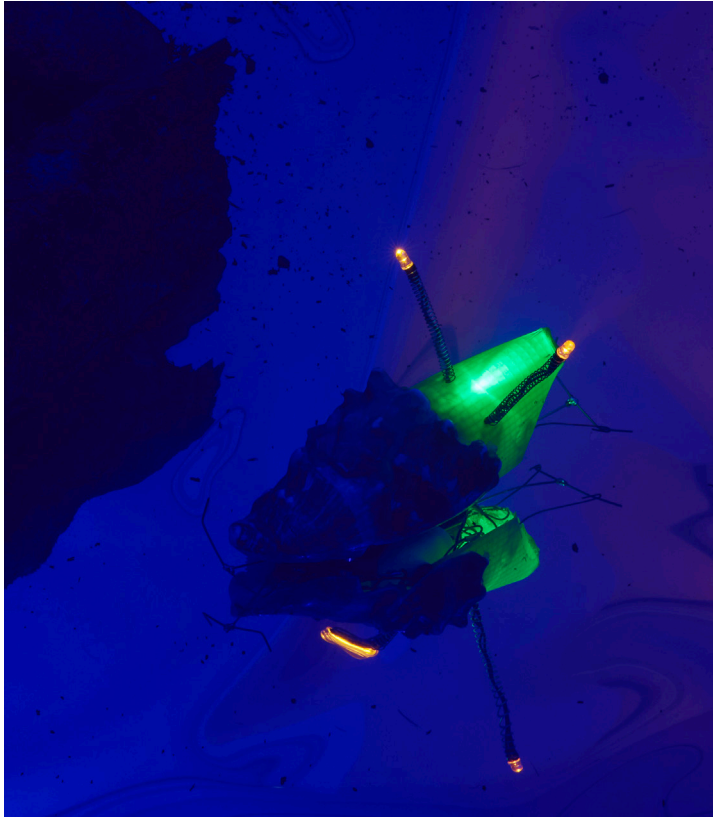
Special thanks to Sarah Alexander and James Hartley.



## Endnotes

1. On May 27, 1978, Michel Foucault gave a lecture to the French Society of Philosophy in Paris. The transcript of that lecture, including commentary and questions from attendees, is reproduced in Michel Foucault, "What Is Critique?," in *The Politics of Truth*, ed. Sylvère Lotringer (Semiotext(e), 1997), 41–81.
2. Foucault reminds us that Kant's 1784 text was a response to a question posed to readers by a German newspaper of the era: "Was ist Aufklärung?" [What is Enlightenment?]. See Foucault, "What Is Critique?," 47–48.
3. Referring to Kant's "Was ist Aufklärung?," Foucault, "What Is Critique?," 44.

## Bios



## Anne Duk Hee Jordan

Transience and transformation are the central themes in the work of Anne Duk Hee Jordan. Through movement and performance, Duk Hee gives materiality another dimension—building motorized sculptures and creating edible landscapes. The artist's sculptures are intended to draw the viewer into the present and open a dialogue between natural phenomena, philosophy and art. The work is like an interactive fantasy that plays with the knowledge and theories about the world and our souls. In the absence of concrete knowledge, fantasy runs riot. The artist opens up doors to a universe of humorous and romantic machines that juxtapose robotic consciousness with organic cyclic decay and life. Duk Hee asks questions about "agency" and encourages a change of perspective, shifting the focus away from humans towards ecology.

## James Voorhies

James Voorhies is a curator and historian of modern and contemporary art based in New York. He has authored several books including *Postsensual Aesthetics: On the Logic of the Curatorial* (The MIT Press, 2023) and *Beyond Objecthood: The Exhibition as a Critical Form since 1968* (The MIT Press, 2017), and he is editor of the four-volume catalogue raisonné on American artist Tony Smith (The MIT Press, 2024). He has taught at Bennington College and Harvard University, and holds a PhD in modern and contemporary art history from the Ohio State University.

In 2023, Voorhies curated Anne Duk Hee Jordan: *I will always weather with you* at the Bass Museum of Art, Miami Beach; the artist's first solo exhibition in the United States



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