

### Vivid New Ecologies

Catherine Chalmers and Eduardo Kac

I have seen these humans in their disarray. . . . Disorder stalks them day and night. They stalk it back.

—Verlyn Klinkenborg, *Timothy; or, Notes of an Abject Reptile*

IN “REGARDING NEW ANIMALS,” an essay on the animals in the artist Allison Hunter’s photographic series *New Animals*, Branka Arsić speculates that “in order to see new animals, photography itself had to change.” The “radical gesture” of Hunter’s large-scale color chromogenic photographs, Arsić suggests, is “the way she turns the moment of ‘taking’ a photograph into an act of freeing” by taking “an already photographed animal out of its photographed context” (usually an outdoor zoo) and relocating it “on the surface of a non-identifiable space” (Figure 3.1). Whether that space is a vast field of ambiguously nuanced light or of dense darkness, Arsić proposes that it “marks a collapse of the anthropocentric symbolic, pointing to a space in which a human finds itself at a loss to read it.” These swathes of colored ground do not, for Arsić, represent environments that humans already “share” with animals, but instead present or constitute “a new intensity humans will have to learn how to inhabit.”<sup>1</sup>

Part of the interest of these observations lies in the assertion that it’s the medium of photography—or at least its innovative deployment—that is able to bring to light these “new animals.” In this chapter, the attitudes and working methods of two artists whose work includes photographic examples of what Arsić calls worlds “utterly new and unknown” to humans are discussed and juxtaposed.<sup>2</sup>



Figure 3.1. Allison Hunter, *Untitled #3*, 2005. Digital chromogenic print from the *New Animals* series.

One of those artists is the Chicago-based Eduardo Kac, whose *GFP Bunny* project, involving the creation of a fluorescent transgenic rabbit named Alba, achieved considerable notoriety in the 2000s. Along with other aspects of his work, something further is said here about Kac’s thinking around that project, but without simply rehearsing the familiar debates on the ethics of his actions. The other artist is the New York-based Catherine Chalmers, and her *American Cockroach* project is one focus of discussion here. Like Kac, her work has an engagement of sorts with the world of science and is directly concerned with imagining alternatives to the ways in which humans habitually think about their relation to other animals, not least cockroaches. The chapter includes an exploration of the conceptual and photographic spaces for “new” animals and new animal thinking in their work—spaces that, in the case of both artists, come to be inhabited by actual living animals.

In the two preceding chapters, Olly and Suzi were seen to be concerned with being in close proximity to wild animals in those animals’ own environments and to embody that immediacy of experience in their image making, while Lucy Kimbell strove to embody through her narrative and her voice the experience of different groups of people’s engagement with