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INTERSTICES SPINOZA

Common notions and composite collaborations: Thinking with Spinoza to design urban infrastructures for human and wild cohabitants

“Animals are good to think with.”

—adapted from Claude Levi-Strauss, *Totemism*, 1964: 89

In a 2007 video from BBC World, narrated by David Attenborough,¹ we see a crow adapting to the complex choreography of the modern city, using the rhythms of the city to bring together a food source it could not previously eat with a technology that was invented for other purposes. Viewed 1.7 million times on Youtube at time of writing, shared on sites from the UK to North America, Japan, and Australia, the video invites us to rethink the relationship between nature and culture, blurring the boundary between the urban and the wild, as the crow first learns that it can drop a nut (too hard to break with its beak) into ongoing traffic, using passing cars to crack it open. As the traffic proves too dangerous to navigate in the retrieval of the nut, the crow eventually learns, through a process of unclear duration, to drop the nut from a perch above a crosswalk and wait for the green crossing light to access the nut in safety. This inspiring, if all too infrequent, example of an interweaving of human technology, the rhythms of the city, and the ingenuity of urban wildlife, might provide us with a different way of imagining the city and the relationship between the urban and the wild.

It is also, we might argue, a contemporary expression of Spinoza’s concepts of how the composite body is constituted through a common notion, a common notion that enables very different species—beings who are (to borrow from E2P13S) “of different natures”—to thrive in a collaborative context. Here the common notion exists in the functioning of the crosswalk—crows and cars are in common agreement about the usefulness of the crosswalk for their own different forms of thriving, and so constitute a composite, collaborative body.

Writing in the 1660s, Spinoza was explicit in his project of renaturing the human—“consider[ing] human actions and appetites just as if it were an investigation into lines, planes and bodies” (E3Pref) and with this, dismantling the Cartesian view that the universe was divided into two substances, a divine realm