Perhaps “wilderness” is an adequate name to allude to the being of being. To name the being of being is to allude to that which is common to all existence. It is to name the common being or essence that is supposedly characteristic of all entities and their relations to one another. In this regard, the term “wilderness” is exemplary, for being, existence, is a vast wilderness. Yet what this might mean and how this thesis is to be taken remains to be seen. If I emphasize that the name “wilderness” alludes to the being of being, then this is to emphasize that this name is not the only possible name of being, nor is it a conceptually univocal signification that captures the essence of the being of being once and for all. Rather, in alluding to the being of being, “wilderness” is hopefully a poetically potent metaphor for intuiting or imagining that which is most characteristic of being as such. As such, other names of being are possible.

However, in having proposed this name for the being of being I must proceed with care. In ordinary language our tendency is to contrast wilderness with civilization. Here wilderness is conceived in topological terms. On the one hand, there is the domain of civilization. Civilization is conceived as consisting of social relations, meaning, moral agency, language, norms, signs, and so on. Civilization is thought as a place where people live amongst one another as well as a set of capacities said to be unique to humans (language, moral agency, meaning, etc). On the other hand, wilderness is conceived negatively as that place outside of civilization. Wilderness is here conceived as the world of stones, trees, plants, remote islands and forests, and animals where people do not dwell and where the land has not yet been cultivated or exploited. Where civilization is perhaps governed by norms and meaning, the wilderness is thought to be characterized by brute and mechanical causality. In this regard, the wilderness is a place where one goes, usually in a four-wheel drive vehicle, wearing special clothing and carrying a backpack.
Insofar as humans and cultural entities are themselves beings, it follows that wilderness cannot be something that is other than or that excludes humans. If wilderness names the being of being, then it follows that human beings, civilization, and all that comes with civilization are also of the wilderness. Yet if this is the case, then the topological conception of the wilderness must be abandoned. As that which is common to all beings, wilderness is not a place to which we can go, for wherever we are we already are in the wilderness. Wilderness is not a place that can be reached, it is not the site of dark Lovecraftian dramas, nor is it a place from which we are alienated. Rather, wilderness is all that is and we are immediately within it even when walking in Times Square in New York City. While in being or wilderness there are certainly places where there are no humans, civilization is nonetheless not something outside wilderness. Rather, civilizations are one formation within the wilderness among others. The great storm on Jupiter is another.

Yet if language so ineluctably draws us to think wilderness as something other than and outside of civilization, if it draws us so persistently to think civilization as one domain and the wilderness as another domain, why choose such a misleading term to name the being of being? If we shift from the register of ordinary language to the register of phenomenological experience, an answer to this question begins to emerge. When we do go to those regions outside the city, suburbs, and countryside, when we hike Glacier National Park or camp along the Appalachian Trail or in Yellowstone National Park, we experience our being in the world and relationship to other beings in a very different way. In the city, for example, we might experience ourselves as sovereigns that have arranged the world for our ends. Everything about us is either a tool that we have constructed and that is but a carrier of our intentions, or a screen upon which we project our meanings, or a resource that we draw upon for our aims. Thus, there is nothing about the scalpel that intrinsically makes it a scalpel. Rather, the scalpel gets this function through the use we make of it. Jack the Ripper found a very different function for this instrument. Likewise, there is nothing about gold or the dollar bill that intrinsically gives it this value, rather it is because we value these things that they take on the value they have. In the city non-humans are experienced as passive “stuffs” that we arrange for our own ends and upon which we project meaning. We experience ourselves—unconsciously, of course—as absolute masters or sovereigns of a world that is purely passive before our will. Like a king that is transcendent to his subjects, we experience ourselves as transcendent to non-humans such that we arrange them in terms of our own ends. Within this framework, there is no sense in which other beings are on equal ontological footing with us.

Things are quite different when we visit the wilderness in the ordinary language sense of the term. When I camp at Yellowstone National Park, I no longer experience myself as a sovereign of nonhuman beings, but rather as amongst nonhuman beings. I experience myself as a being amongst other beings, rather than as a lord of beings. Initially this might sound rather idyllic, as when we speak of “communing with nature,” yet this “amongstness” signifies something that has dark or sinister dimensions as well. In the wilderness of Yellowstone National Park, for example, I find myself in circumstances where it is possible for me to be eaten by wolves or mauled by a bear. Where, in civilization, all other things are things that I eat, in the ‘wild’ I experience the possibility of myself being eaten. In the city I easily escape from the weather by heading indoors, while in the wild the weather becomes a humbling force with which I must contend. In the city everything seems to be posited before my knowing or comprehending gaze and everything seems to be arranged for the sake of my instru-
mental gaze. By contrast, in the wilderness I find myself regarded by beings other than humans—the wolves, bears, birds, and so on—and in a field of languages and signs that I scarcely understand. What does the howl I hear off yonder signify? Should I be alarmed by the hoot of that owl? Why did the forest suddenly grow quiet? What caused that branch to snap? Are those approaching clouds a danger or gift? Was this trail created by humans or deer? What are those birds talking about in their songs? In the wilderness I am no longer a sovereign or master, but a being among other beings. In short, in the wilds we encounter other beings as both agencies and as entities with which we must negotiate.

The experience of the wilderness is still too indebted to the ordinary language sense of the term as something opposed to or other than civilization, yet nonetheless it contains a kernel of ontological truth worth preserving. The experience of the wilderness at least has the virtue of dislodging the ontological sovereignty of humans and bringing us before an experience of beings where we are not lords of a world composed of passive nonhumans, but where we are among a variety of different agencies with ends very different than our own and where beings are not simply an object of our regard or gaze, but where we too are objects of the regard or gaze of others. If we rescue this kernel from the domain of anthropocentric experience and transform it into a general ontological concept,
The concept of wilderness as an ontological concept thus has three components. First, wilderness signifies the absence of ontological hierarchy in the order of existence. While there are indeed assemblages where some entities are more dominant over other entities than others, there are no lords or sovereigns of being. Humans are but one type of being among others. Second, wilderness signifies the refusal of a binary opposition between nature and culture. While there are certainly natural assemblages that are entirely divorced from human social orders (the planet Neptune, for example), there are no cultural assemblages thoroughly divorced from nonhuman entities. Culture is one more formation in the wilderness among others, not an ontologically unique domain outside of nature. Third, the concept of wilderness emphasizes the distinct agency of the many entities that populate the universe, refusing to locate agency only in humans. Rather than seeing the nonhuman objects of the world as screens upon which we project our human meanings such that these nonhumans are conceived as passive patients of our projections, wilderness ontology invites us to encounter the agency of nonhumans, to adopt their point of view, and to encounter these entities not in their identity to our concepts, but rather in their alterity. Compare the way we think about dollar bills and the wolves of Yellowstone National Park. The value of the dollar bill resides not in its paper, not in its ink, but arises from society and the way in which society projects or confers value onto the dollar bill. The dollar bill is a vehicle or carrier of value, but there is nothing intrinsic about the materiality of the bill that has value. Were society to be destroyed the paper and ink would remain but the value would disappear from existence. In this regard, from the standpoint of ontology, what is important about the dollar bill is the manner in which it carries human intentions or meanings, not anything to do with its materiality. It is for this reason that the value of the dollar bill need not be carnally embodied in paper and ink, but can exist virtually in computer data banks or in bank books. The thingliness of the dollar bill’s paper and ink is secondary to the being of its virtual content. Matters are very different with our wolves. Unlike the dollar bill, the features, actions, and behaviors of the wolf cannot be reduced to human intentions, concepts, or meanings. Where there is nothing in the dollar bill that can really surprise us because it already comes from us, we can be and are, by contrast, quite surprised by the wolf as it harbors powers and behaviors that do not issue from us. There is a being here that is irreducible to human intentions and meanings.

Ever since Kant, Hegel, and Feuerbach, the dominant paradigm of critical analysis has consisted in demonstrating that what we take to be features of beings themselves are, in fact, projections of human minds or social constructions as in the case of the value of dollar bills. There are certainly a whole class of beings like dollar bills where this mode of explanation is entirely appropriate. Moreover, this model of critique has been tremendously powerful in fighting racial inequality, gender inequality, and a whole host of other noxious essentialisms by showing how the groundings in “nature” upon which these inequalities are often defended are in fact social constructions capable of being otherwise. These are forms of critique that are both tremendously valuable and that ought not be abandoned. However, this dominant paradigm of analysis has also had the unintended consequence of occluding the thingliness of things, their specific contributions, thereby making it difficult for us to discern what things contribute to the world. The dominant paradigm of critical theory tends to reduce the world to
an alienated image of ourselves in a mirror wherein we do not recognize ourselves. The task thus becomes to show that what seems to issue from the mirror in fact issues from us. The world thus becomes our own text, without the other beings of the world contributing anything beyond their function as carriers or vehicles for our alienated meanings. Yet in an age where climate catastrophe increasingly approaches, where technologies seem to behave in ways that cannot be reduced to our intended use, but rather have a life of their own fraught with all sorts of unintended ecological and social consequences, the limitations of the dominant paradigm of critical theory become increasingly apparent. If we are to think climate change, if we are to think technology, the paradigm of the world as a screen is not enough. Rather, we need to cultivate modes of thinking that help us to become attentive to the alterity of things, the thingliness of things, and the differences that things themselves contribute independent of social construction, human intention, and human meanings.

The analytic philosopher Thomas Nagel infamously asked “what is it like to be a bat?” He concluded that this question cannot be answered because no matter how hard we try, we will still be humans imagining what it’s like to be a bat, rather than getting at true and genuine bat experiences. While this may indeed be the case, we can certainly cultivate sensibilities that deterritorialize our own way of experiencing and comprehending the world so as to catch a glimpse of the alterity of bats and of bat ways of being. Beyond human conceptual content and meaning, there is an entire other world of rocks, quarks, wolves, buildings, cities, technologies and
aardvarks. Even money, as Marx taught us, behaves in ways that far exceed the intentions of individual humans and has a strange life of its own in which human beings become entangled in all sorts of miserable ways. Wilderness ontology is an invitation to explore the world of alterity, to adopt the point of view of these other entities, and to explore the intentionality and agency of these entities rather than merely comprehending them in terms of our intentions. It is a profoundly ecological way of approaching being that sees existence as populated by a variety of different agencies rather than something merely posited before one particular type of agency: human beings.

Yet how can we cultivate a sensibility and form of vision that allows us to allude to this alterity and agency independent of human conceptuality and meaning? Are we not condemned, as Adorno suggested in Negative Dialectics, to reside in the narcissism of “identity thinking” that only finds its own concepts, its own self, as Hegel suggested, in the things of the world? It would seem that art might provide one avenue for an encounter with both the wilderness and the thingliness of things. This might come as a surprise, for in the “folk theoretical” concept of art, the artwork is the carrier of human meaning par excellence. Within this paradigm, the work of art is treated as a mere vehicle or carrier that encrypts the intention of the artist, and the task of the art critic and viewer of art is to decode the work so as to discover that meaning. In this regard, just as the paper dollar bill is a sort of unnecessary detour such that we can dispense with paper money altogether and just use a debit card that allows exchanges between computer databases, the work of art, the thingliness of a piece of art, is a sort of extraneous detour stranding us between the meaning intended by the artist and our apprehension of that meaning. It seems to follow that once we get at that meaning we can dispense with the work of art.

Yet if you talk to artists themselves, often a very different understanding of art arises. As Melanie Doherty once suggested to me in conversation with respect to her practice of drawing, there is a way in which the subject of the drawing begins to look strange and alien as you draw it. To really see the subject is to see it not as conceptually comprehended, but to see the voids between things in the subject, the spatial organization, and so on. As you draw, what might be called the “object” —where object is here taken as synonymous with a being conceptualized in terms of human meaning and intentions—begins to dissolve and the thing appears in its stead. The meaning of the object for us begins to drop away in the activity of drawing and painting and the thing appears like a phantom in all its alienness. Similarly, in the activity of drawing, painting, and photography, the context or of the thing is bracketed, subtracted, and the thing makes its appearance in a decontextualized way.

In Being and Time Heidegger famously argued that all entities belong to networks of meaningful relations. For example, hammers refer to nails and boards, and hammers, nails, and boards all refer to the project of building a house to provide shelter. Building on this thesis, in “The Origin of the Work of Art” Heidegger argues that the work of art shows or brings forth a world or this set of meaningful relations. Here he draws on the example of Van Gogh’s painting depicting peasant shoes—it’s notable that the title of the painting is “A Pair of Shoes,” and Van Gogh doesn’t mention peasants—arguing that this pair of shoes alludes to or indicates the entire world of the peasant. Yet it seems like something quite different is going on with art. Far from bringing us before the world of meaningful relations, art seems to carry the capacity to break with meaning, to bring the alterity and thingliness of things to the fore, to allow us to see them both from their point of view and independent of our own mean-
ings and intentions. Art does not confirm or reinforce our own system of meanings and intentions, but rather interrupts the closure of these meanings and intentions, opening us up to the alterity of beings. Here we need only think of the strange, beautiful, and disturbing cinema of Stan Brakhage that is able to bring us before the alterity of even our own bodies as he guides us through an autopsy. Art defamiliarizes the world and allows us to move beyond our human condition and narcissism. The artist is that being that, through their practice and discipline, is able to break with the narcissistic closure of human meaning and concepts.

In short, the work of art does not so much reinforce human meaning, the closure of human meaning in which all entities reflect us, as it interrupts human meaning. The frame decontextualizes entities from their horizon of meaning and familiarity. In What is Philosophy? Deleuze and Guattari remark that art preserves and is the only thing that preserves. Through paint, stone, metal, and the inscription of words, the work of art creates affects and percepts, ways of sensing and things to be sensed, that are divorced from a context of signification and that can now circulate about the world as their own distinct entities. Through this interruption of the relations of signification or meaning, we become capable of seeing color, hearing sound, seeing form, hearing language, and seeing things for, perhaps, the first time. For the first time, perhaps, we encounter the alterity of things, their alterity, and move beyond encountering things as merely vehicles or carriers of our own use and meaning. We encounter ourselves as aliens in an alien world or as those that dwell in the wilderness. And in this way we cultivate a greater sensibility and regard for the things of the world, for the rights of these things.

In her introduction to this catalogue, Celina Jeffery writes, “[t]he concept of preternature is more than nature as science, or nature as art — it exceeds the boundaries of these classificatory systems and opens up a space where the species of things conjure wonder and curiosity, as well as fear of the unknowable.” Would it be going too far to say that genuine art is of the order of the preternatural and that it is the preternatural that brings us before the wilderness? This is a hypothesis that would have to be carefully tested, yet it does seem that there is a deep internal link between art, the preternatural, and the wilderness. Neither science nor art, but also science and art, it is the preternatural that exposes us to the alterity of things. As art, the preternatural is that special form of sensibility, that aïesthesis, that allows us to discern the thinglleness of things, their being for-themselves, rather than their being as sign, omen, meaning, or use for humans. Here we might think of Andy Warhol’s famous Campbell’s Soup cans where suddenly, in a flash, we encounter these cans not as commodities, but as strange and foreign entities in their own right. Or again we might think of the realism of Enlightenment art where we suddenly see the beings of nature divorced from human intentions, but as entities in their own right capable of being regarded for their own sake and not for the sake of any meaning or significance they might contain with respect to human projects. Or again we might think of Miro’s art that brings us before intensities of color, shape, and lines. In all these cases there’s a sense in which our quest for meaning and the sense of the familiar is halted so that we’re opened on to another mysterious world of things that fills us with curiosity and wonder, but also fear. Is it any wonder that in all ages art has often been the target of the powers that be? For what is revealed in this aïesthesis, this sensibility, is the wilderness and the failure of human meaning to accomplish closure and totalization. Art preserves the preternatural and therefore functions as a perpetual challenge to systems of meaning. Thus, on the other hand, this aïesthesis is a condition for any science, whether that science be
comprehend nature or that science of existing, that ethics, that seeks to cultivate respect and love for the nonhuman. For in order to discern being it is necessary to halt the system of meaning that discerns nonhuman beings as but symbols, signs, meanings, omens, and uses for humans. Indeed, if we are to encounter humans and civilizations as dwelling in the wilderness alongside other beings, it is necessary to cultivate a sense of human alterity to humans themselves, or the strangeness of both ourselves and civilizations. It is precisely this that preternatural art seeks, it seems to me, to accomplish.

In this regard, art—in both its practice and works—is one avenue opening the way towards an encounter with the wilderness of being. In the work of art a technology, for example, can become de-sutured from its status as a mere tool for a human purpose, but can be encountered in its strange alterity as an animal unleashed on the world that traces its own path and produces its own effects. The work of art allows us to encounter even the familiar things of our everyday life in their independent thingliness, seeing them, perhaps, for the very first time. And it seems that this is what the works collected here in *Preternatural* aspire to. Through the subtraction that takes place in the frame of a photograph, painting, or installation piece, through the variation of perspectives from which these things are encountered, we are brought before the wilderness that is all about us and, to use Jane Bennett’s language, the mysterious thing-power that resides in those things that seem so familiar to us.