This event was framed as part of a series of events, “Justice in a More-Than-Human World,” that aimed to explore various modes of humans working with nonhumans, and to articulate the possibilities for collaboration, rather than exploitation, in these working relationships. The series had four core questions:

1) When it comes to human-nonhuman partnerships, how could we distinguish between collaboration and exploitation?
2) How does thinking of nonhumans as collaborators refigure ethics, empathy, and justice in these relationships?
3) How is nonhuman life valued? What systems of value enable us to manipulate and end nonhuman life?
4) How do we imagine nonhuman values?

For this particular event, a panel of eco- and bio-artists discussed examples of their work that stage interaction between humans and nonhumans, as well as between the disciplines of art and science.

Helen and Newton Harrison, Emeritus Faculty in the UCSC Art Department, presented work from across their careers in which the artists enter into collaboration with living systems in various ways: for instance, with crab populations in Sri Lankan lagoons (“The Lagoon Cycle”), and with the ecosystem of the Tibetan Plateau (“Tibet is the High Ground”). They emphasized the interdisciplinary nature of their eco-art work, which necessarily involves methods, techniques, and theoretical frameworks of experimental science as well as of art. In their presentation, the Harrisons modeled the collaborative nature of their own (working and personal) partnership, which is based on ongoing negotiation and productive interruption.

Amy Youngs, Associate Professor of Art at Ohio State University, presented several projects that involve messy, playful collaborations between humans, animals, plants, and machines. She emphasized that “collaborations are not equal”: although her work is concerned with taking animals’ worlds and interests seriously and making them visible for human viewers, she does not pretend to create egalitarian situations for the animals in her work. She discussed the institutional limits that are placed upon the artistic use of animals: an art project that involves animal death is not considered institutionally acceptable. Her Farm Fountain, an indoor ecosystem that grows edible and ornamental fish and plants through symbiosis, is thus conceived as a private, do-it-yourself project (she provides instructions on her website); she discussed the difficulty but the necessity of killing the fish, and also pleasure of cooking and eating the fish. She also spoke of the particular interest that people take in her work involving live animals in gallery spaces—for example, crickets (“The Museum for Insects”) and a rabbit (“River Construct”). These exhibitions prompt viewers to focus on animals they might normally overlook, and to be concerned about them as living beings.

In the Q&A session, multiple audience members responded with personal stories about their own relationship to animals and to the practice of killing and eating animals. Jenny Reardon asked, how do we bring the context of animal killing, and its ethical implications, into the
artwork itself? There was a sustained dialogue between audience members and speakers about different narratives of (personal and industrial) animal killing: one can view animal killing as a pragmatic necessity, a spiritual task, a way of accepting responsibility for the death one causes, an unavoidable evil that should remain invisible, an avoidable evil that one can choose to reduce, etc.

We also heard from several audience members about the particular relationships of care and love they have entered into with animals, particularly rabbits. Jenny Reardon asked Amy about her shift from rabbit breeding (which involves “culling”) as a child to her interspecies artwork; for Amy, the link is that she loves to be around animals and wants to figure out how to do that well and to engage public conversation on interspecies being. The Harrisons discussed the ways that crabs manifested “personality” and “civil society” in their “Lagoon Cycle” project.

In response to Amy Youngs’s story of the institutional limits placed on her artwork, Donna Haraway noted the bigger implications of the institutional distinction between science and art, which have different status as knowledge-making practices. In the current system, science has the authority to kill, while art does not—a gendered division of “serious” versus “unserious” kinds of work. Collaboration with nonhumans might involve making die as well as making live, as a challenge to the social authority of science and war as the only players allowed to make decisions about animal life and death. Newton Harrison suggested that in his own art practice, he has found that these institutional obstacles of social authority can indeed be overcome. Donna Haraway also noted the differences in scale in the art practices being presented: the Harrisons tend to work on a large, continental scale, while Amy Youngs tends to work on an intimate, miniature scale; the two models present us with micro and macro worlds of the imagination.