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RADIO ANIMAL

As urban dwellers we tend to suppress our awareness of the degree to which we share space with other creatures. If we were to make a physical cut — a cross-section through our house for instance, imagine what multitudes we would find embedded in its fabric — and if we were seriously to extend that awareness to our gardens, our sense of being 'outnumbered' would be profound.

Text by *Snæbjörnsdóttir/Wilson*

Interview questions by *Rikke Hansen and Giovanni Aloï*



Snæbjörnsdóttir/Wilson

Radio Animal Van on Location, September 2009 © Snæbjörnsdóttir/Wilson

A component of the project *Uncertainty In The City*, *Radio Animal* operates from a mobile unit — a specially designed caravan that has allowed the artists to travel to various locations in the UK to gather material from people about their relationship to animals. The artists talk to individuals and communities, particularly in Cumbria, Lancashire and the Morecambe Bay area, to get the opinions and stories from those at the front line.

We've been particularly interested in animals that are considered 'unwelcome' visitors but have, for whatever reason, found their way into our homes or what we may consider our own territories.

For our first excursion we were at *Appleby Horse Fair*. We stayed in the thick of it with the travellers and Romanies on Fair Hill and spoke to a number of people on the matter of the relationship between travelling people and their animals. We were interested to know what differences a more itinerant lifestyle had on attitudes towards personal space and the encroachment of other species. In addition to the horses, several had with them dogs to guard their bow-tops (traditional caravans) and pitches and hens for the morning eggs. We discussed the eating of various wild animals including squirrels and hedgehogs and the taboo subject of rats or, as some would prefer, 'longtails'. We also discussed myth, suspicion and the contentious issue of cruelty including the misrepresentation of travellers by some newspapers, which have in recent years hysterically targeted the fair as being host to the ritual sacrificing of horses.

In June we visited the *Broughton Hall Game Fair*. We met with a number of 'animal oriented' people and conducted some interviews. One man we spoke to runs a green pest control supplies store. He shared with us his ideas on how the implications of short-term chemical pest control have moved him to go down this route. We asked him if there was a particular 'pest' he would like to be 'de-classified'. He told us that despite his own work involving their trapping, his choice would be the mole, because the mole is a hard worker and an animal for which he has both affection and admiration and one that 'just gets on with it'.

Many excerpts from the interviews we conducted at these and other venues are available for playback on the website (address above). *A Lamb Baste* was a *Radio Animal* event by Snæbjörnsdóttir/Wilson held at Grizedale Arts on 13th November 2009 at 7.30pm. The arts organization hosted the meal at which a number of invited people, including artists, curators and arts facilitators, animal studies scholars, and local interested parties discussed the issue of 'animal', other-animal proximity and our mutual borderings.

We want to approach issues of identity in relation to animals, why we are culturally so ambivalent in respect to who we are, and how we should behave in the presence of either the term 'animal' or indeed non-human animals themselves. As human animals, culturally we tend to value those that are not human or otherwise very, very like us, chiefly in relation to their

effectiveness in fulfilling some human function or need, or conversely to eschew them for the threat we believe they might hold to challenge our will or comfort.

Awareness of self, a faculty we (human-animals) believe separates us from other species, has unexpectedly brought us a troubled relationship with non-human animals. Because of this it could be argued, that a strategic psychological distance has been established between ourselves and those species over which we attempt to exercise the most control.

Because so much of what we are in adulthood is inherited or taught, our subscription to this legacy leads us to believe without question in the apparent cultural order of things. Such belief generally is accepting of our dominion over others and the claim of an elevated evolutionary position in relation to other species and thus fails in turn to recognize an intrinsic interdependence between species. An acknowledgement of this might well have helped us avoid many of the more difficult consequences we face today in respect to the environment, and therefore paradoxically our own as well as everyone else's survival.

The bottom line for such considerations is one concerning habitat — all species adapt well or less well, for better or for worse, to different habitats and when those specialist habitats fail, an ability to move or to adapt quickly enough to survive is tested. *Uncertainty In The City* (Snæbjörnsdóttir/Wilson's project commissioned by Storey Gallery, Lancaster, UK) is a speculative artists' exploration into the relationship between humans and the animals that nudge at and breach the borders of our homes. At the heart of this enquiry is the membrane that is breached, whether this is embodied in the material 'skin' of bricks and mortar, fences and land, or in more abstract, linguistic terms.

Radio Animal has been on the road since early summer 2009, asking questions of people regarding their proximity with other species, and discussing their experiences with others in the home, hidden in the fabric of their home, in the garden and otherwise as they go about their daily business.

At a time when environmental peril is discussed as a global issue and overheard in some form by us on a daily basis, leaving us often with a sense of impotence in the face of an apparent inevitability, artists Bryndis Snæbjörnsdóttir and Mark Wilson are examining what 'environment' might mean in a more intimate and domestic sense - where consideration of this term might trigger a more meaningful and evocative recognition for individuals and where the sharing of space between species and its consequences might resonate more powerfully, allowing some chance of new understanding (and even, new behaviour)."

Rikke Hansen and Giovanni Aloï interviewed Mark Wilson at the opening of the Interspecies show in London in October 2009.



Snæbjörnsdóttir/Wilson

Radio Animal/Uncertainty in the City, June 2009 © Snæbjörnsdóttir/Wilson

Giovanni Aloï: We have here Mark Wilson, from the artist duo Snæbjörnsdóttir/Wilson. Where is Bryndis?

Mark Wilson: Bryndis is currently on her way back from Sweden and so unable to be here this evening. But we're here in the *Radio Animal* caravan. It's our itinerant studio for this project and a mobile radio unit that we also use for conducting interviews and for live broadcasting. It is in here that we have spoken with people up and down the UK, mostly about animal encounters.

GA: What is this noise I hear in the van?

M: It is a recording of bats, various species of bat made using a bat detector, which picks up the sound of each animal and simultaneously lowers the frequencies of their sounds so that these become audible to us.

GA: What is the significance of these sounds?

M: We find them very interesting, as these are the sounds of animals perceiving space through sound, something rather difficult for us humans to conceive because it is very different from our own way of navigating the world. Bats have the capacity to

understand and navigate through space in a very sophisticated way by means of eco-location, which is what we are hearing here. They sometimes make very rapid noises, at other times, much slower sequences and single signals. When they hunt, the frequency of the signals will increase. It is a method that is very alien to us (humans) and so allows us the possibility of imagining an altogether different experience of space, transit, hunting and engaging with the world.

Rikke Hansen: Mark, you and Bryndis are travelling around in this caravan inviting people in to speak to you about their animal experiences. How does this effectively work?

M: The caravan has been reworked inside and out by Bryndis and myself. On the outside there are large and striking images of 'pests' (so called), including a wasp and a mole. We have taken the caravan to animal events around the country, including hunting or farming gatherings. Interestingly enough, many of the subjects we have been finding out about through our interviews are what seem to be 'contentious animals' – those that some people love and others seem to hate or be suspicious of and that therefore provide an illustration of ambivalence and contradiction in human response. It's interesting for us to hear about the relationships



Snæbjörnsdóttir/Wilson

Radio Animal Van on Location, September 2009, van/green pest control at Broughton Fair © Snæbjörnsdóttir/Wilson

that people develop with animals. Sometimes these are working relationships, as in the case of pest-control agents with whom we've worked quite a bit in this project and who themselves act as intermediaries between these animals and those people who call on them to intervene when tolerance is thin or non-existent.

RH: When people narrate their stories in this caravan, which is a rather intimate place, does the environment influence their storytelling?

M: It seems that people find the caravan very relaxing and that helps them to drop their guard. Let's not forget of course that most of the time, we are talking to people that we have never met before. They'll talk about both domestic and professional encounters with animals. We've met a few hunters who'll profess to be conservationists, describing their intimate knowledge of the habitat and terrain of their quarry. At the same time, because they have to be quiet for long periods, they become very good observers and listeners. They develop a very specific understanding of an environment and the dynamics involved in it. From one perspective this is a very contradictory relationship and one that we are very interested in understanding.

The caravan itself and Radio Animal has no set agenda, in the way that people are free to talk of different animals and different types of relationship. There is however an overriding theme of contested space, but that too can be manifest in many ways. Many forms of contact or co-habitation between animals and people are very positive and enriching. Largely this process has been about testing or recording people's tolerances, intolerances and affections and gathering disparate responses to a range of encounters with animals.

RH: The project Radio Animal extends beyond the caravan and has an on-line reality too. Could you tell us something about that?

M: Yes, we have a website (<http://www.radioanimal.org/radioanimal/>) where many of the interviews we have recorded are available for streaming, creating the opportunity to share these stories with a wider audience. There also is a 'listen live button', which allows national and international audiences to tune in when we broadcast live from an event. People who go onto the website are also invited to log on and contribute their own reflections and stories, videos, audio content or photographs...



Snæbjörnsdóttir/Wilson

Giovanni Aloï in Radio Animal Van, October 2009 at Interspecies opening © Snæbjörnsdóttir/Wilson

The project Uncertainty in the City will conclude with an exhibition in September 2010 at the recently refurbished and reopened Storey Gallery in Lancaster, UK.

Bryndís Snæbjörnsdóttir & Mark Wilson conduct their collaborative practice from bases in the north of England, Iceland and Gothenburg, Sweden. With a strong research grounding, their socially engaged projects explore contemporary relationships between human and non-human animals in the contexts of history, culture and the environment. The practice sets out to challenge anthropocentric systems and thinking that sanction loss through representation of the other, proposing instead, alternative tropes of 'parities in meeting'. The work is installation based, using objects, text, photography and video. Mark Wilson was interviewed by Rikke Hansen and Giovanni Aloï in October 2009
Antennae