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Beyond Human: From Animality to Transhumanism

Edited by Steven Shakespeare

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## What We Can Do: Art Methodologies and Parities in Meeting

### A toe in muddy waters

The equally manifest senses of purpose, enthusiasm and urgency generated within animal studies groups internationally over the last few years have led many to adopt a position of moral virtue and to an acceptance of greater commonality between human and non-human animals, bound up in a broad set of sensibilities kindled by the residual sparks of late 20<sup>th</sup> Century race, gender and sexuality conflicts.

Much has been written and much read and from this basis and a back catalogue of theoretical discourse has provided the framework not only of thought, but also of response and discursive action.

The irony in this seems to be that in sanctioning a dependency on the same learned and developed faculties, (being those of language), the absence of which in other species has been used traditionally to demonstrate our distance from and superiority to non-human animals, we continue to distinguish and distance ourselves from, rather than draw any closer to our subject and by so doing compromise the possibility of the 'otherness' of understanding that might otherwise accrue around alternative approaches. Where such approaches are attempted, the results are often dismissed as being fanciful – impossible to evaluate on the simple grounds of their intrinsic lack of accountability by means of rational analysis.

Whilst it is perfectly possible to imagine a useful analysis of an 'other' understanding through language, such understanding may prove only to be achievable in the first instance by some other means – through for instance the honing and application of intuition and instincts – faculties which although they may vary in degree and mechanics between species, nevertheless are shared tools by which all species may sense and 'read' the world. In relation to anthropocentric perspectives and human superior capacity of self awareness and linguistic expression it is worth noting recent research on the brains of whales particularly humpback and finback as it has revealed a close similarity to the structures of the human brain. Large quantities of spindle cells considered to link us humans to a higher cognitive awareness and allow us to feel love and suffer emotionally have been identified (Patrick R. Hof, 2006). Hof quoted in the New Scientist says: "We must be careful about

anthropomorphic interpretation of intelligence in whales" (Coghlan, 2006). Considering that these faculties have developed in whales for considerably longer time than in humans could thus possibly mean that their skills of communication including the application of intuition and instincts are developed beyond human understanding. These scantily understood faculties within ourselves, despite their sophistication and precision are indeed subjugated and marginalised by our dependence on 'our' language and as a consequence whilst continuing to serve us and our survival in more ways daily than is comprehensible, are all too often considered to be it seems, residual, archaic and primitive.

Art practice, that positions itself between subject and audience, in order to raise questions about routine behaviour and habitual thought, offers a way forward which may fly in the face of acceptable logic but in so doing, asks disturbing and/or constructively disorienting questions. Beyond the strictures of the spoken and written word, its capacity is to deploy image, sound or more generally, the speculative juxtaposition of disparate elements and to gather and compare observations through an encounter. It does not aim to find reductive solutions or conclusions but to instigate the possibility that we, individually or collectively, may practically look again and see with new eyes how things in the world are configured. In our own (Snæbjörnsdóttir/Wilson's<sup>1</sup>) art practice we apply relationality as a keystone of our methodology to encourage within the viewer/audience, a greater sense of connectivity and hopefully as a consequence, a more holistic understanding. In this respect we acknowledge the philosophy of the eco feminist Val Plumwood as exercised in her article *Being Prey* (O'Reilly, 2000). Here she places human animals on a par with non-human animals in that just as other species are prey to us, humans may equally be objectified as prey, from the perspective of the animal. Similarly, Bruno Latour (2004) in his theories on the collective, proposes that we turn the clock back to a time before humans began classifying some beings as belonging to nature and others as belonging to societies or culture. In defining non-humans, amongst other phenomena he includes; species, water currents, machines, documents and so on and proposes in his Actor Network Theory or ANT that human and non-human be treated alike. His theories and writings have also contributed to our keenness to promote relationality as being part of our art practice. The themes we explore in our artwork therefore and indeed which are developed in part in this paper, are intended to clear a space for the conceptualization of a new lens by which such scrutiny and analysis

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<sup>1</sup> Snæbjörnsdóttir/Wilson is the collaborative art practice of the authors, Bryndís Snæbjörnsdóttir and Mark Wilson. Their art practice is research-based and relational.

might be conducted. In fact in contemporary art in general, the presentation of an effective framework by which questions are configured is often the most specific intention, allowing a plurality of responses to occupy the vacuum that is thereby created.

In this article we hope to unravel the methodologies employed by our collaborative practice in which we propose challenges to the anthropocentric systems of convenience that sanction a daily acceptance of loss-through-representation, suggesting instead as a way of investigation, the alternative idea of 'parities in meeting'. Furthermore we hope to explore what drives our shifting regard for non-human animals (such as it is), the degree to which this too is ultimately self-serving and whether it be a fleeting or a growing phenomenon.

Through the work we ask to what extent any true or 'better' understanding of non-human animals is related to closeness, empathic alignment or indeed immersion with those we have traditionally regarded as the 'other'. And in 'looking' at animals, are we looking towards a closer understanding and engagement with non-human species or are we really only productively able to scrutinize ourselves as detached, rather than participatory observers?

### **The human supremacist: a journey into darkness**

Maehle and Tröhler (1987) recorded that the experiments of one of Vesalius' pupils, Realdo Colombo (1516–59), involving pregnant dogs, were greatly admired by members of the Catholic clergy:

Colombo pulled a foetus out of the dog's womb and, hurting the young in front of the bitch's eyes, he provoked the latter's furious barking. But as soon as he held the puppy to the bitch's mouth, the dog started licking it tenderly, being obviously more concerned about the pain of its offspring than about its own suffering. When something other than the puppy was held in front of its mouth, the bitch snapped at it in a rage. The clergymen expressed their pleasure in observing this striking example of motherly love even in the 'brute creation' (Maehle N.R, 1987,18)

In relation to accounts such as these which in today's terms, for many of us seem unequivocal in their cruelty, we would want to orientate the reader at some distant point on a spectrum of human/non-human animal encounters – to begin in other words with

closeness of kinship rather than with the objectification that is required in order to enact such cruelty and abuse.

When imagining encounters of any kind in respect of other species it may be useful to re-examine definitions in order for us to clarify, the nature of what is going on. We need to look at issues such as contrivance and spontaneity. In terms of the encounter; who if any has arranged the meeting; are both parties equally caught unawares – has it happened by chance?

To answer these questions considerations regarding captivity, domestication, wildness and the parameters of contact might be helpful. Does the meeting take place under conditions where one party does not have the freedom enjoyed by the other? Do the circumstances of the meeting or engagement mean that a degree of familiarity between the parties already exists? Familiarity and indeed the closely related 'trust', suggest a reliance on learning and memory.

In wildness we can presume the least preparation in respect of our encounters to occur. Here we may expect the unexpected. In hunting and shooting expeditions, taking place in the wild and indeed in those concerned with wildlife photography the relationship is once more skewed; the animal has been tracked down, the encounter staged resulting either in a dead animal body on the ground or in the analogue/digital traces of some oblivious animal being stored on film or the camera's memory card (Ryan, 2000).

When we consider the types of communication possible between humans and other vertebrates – including humans, birds, mammals, reptiles, we can be confident that in our encounters and subsequent engagement, there are broadly three shared senses by which communication may be transmitted or received. For us these are; sound, vision and touch.

Sound is carried predominately through vocalizations – we vocalize and for our own purposes might use words, but our intonation is the quality most likely to be effective in any communication, just as we may not understand the specifics of what another may be expressing but through its intonation we communicate with both subtlety and something more akin to parity.

Despite the faculty of sight too often being considered in modern Western European tradition as the most 'objective' sense because in fact it is least involved with the object of observation, visual signals between vertebrates can nevertheless be extremely eloquent also

in shaping our mutual understanding of one another. From appearance both parties may express fear, submission, ease, excitement, agitation, boredom, affection and so on by the way we hold, carry or disport ourselves. What is not intuited may be learned. Berger (1972) has pointed out that “seeing comes before words” meaning that a visually able child recognizes through vision before it speaks. He goes on to propose that later in life there is a tension in the relationship between what we know and what we see and that tension is always active (Berger, 1972, 7).

To us touch seems to be the most compelling means of letting another know our intentions towards the other. By touch, we cross a physical threshold directly and it is through the acceptance of touch by the other that in the same instant, we claim for ourselves his or her acceptance of us and importantly, we render him or her vulnerable. Simultaneously we ourselves must be prepared to be made vulnerable by this process. Perhaps it is for the power we identify in touch as a register of trust, that stories abound which indicate that so many of us seem intent on absolute proximity, if not intimacy with other species, as a means of expressing or exercising an empathetic connection with an other. The desire for an empirical manifestation of this trust will drive people to perform acts which may often be perceived by others to be alternately foolhardy, rash, outrageously intrusive, dangerous and certainly irrational. Ron Broglio<sup>2</sup> has pointed out that ‘traditionally, touch has been considered less ‘objective’, because it is involved/enmeshed with the other. It can be said to embrace intersubjectivity and thus a certain kind of messiness. But an acceptance of some scruffiness may be a necessary consequence of unhitching ourselves from the locomotive of reason’.

When researching for the project *between you and me* (Snæbjörnsdóttir/Wilson, 2009) we interviewed a young farmer, Knútur Óskarsson at *Ósum* in the north west of Iceland. Besides continuing to manage a depleted farm business he also ran a youth hostel and services for tourists. There is a seal colony on the margins of his farm and some years ago it was a valuable resource in terms of its meat and skin. Today the seals have another, more intrinsic value as a tourist resource. Óskarsson has not however capitalized on this resource directly by charging for instance a fee. Instead he sees it as his role to inform visitors about the seal as an animal whose importance is critical to the nature of this area. It can be observed but has to be left to take care of itself. For the tourists he has installed a gate and a

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<sup>2</sup> A conversation between the authors and Ron Broglio in 2009.

fenced off path of about 500 metres leading to the seashore. From there the seals can be observed swimming in the estuary or lying on the sand flats across it. The information that Óskarsson provides is in the form of conversation - no signs or leaflets are available. In our interview with him he described some of the many different approaches people have to this animal.

I mean people are not good some people want to kill them and then I have people who want to make love to them and I am not joking just seriously want to make love to them. I had this discussion I remember [with] this German girl – I said. “ Hey you cannot make love to a seal. If you would get close enough it would bite you and it is a bad bite with infection”. This is how it is. I think people have to be educated in psychology and I am really not interested in why she had this [idea] but I have met quite many people like this and the thing is today people have not the right ideas about nature. Many people have these Disney ideas, unrealistic ideas about nature – that is the main problem. The second problem is [that] people are takers. They don't respect nature. They don't allow the seals to lie there and have their own habits. They just want to take and consume and then they are gone. I remember this German guy who took off all his clothes and this was a warm summer night and he was lucky that he did not kill himself because the streams are quite rough and then he was standing there totally naked and swam over to the other side because he wanted to go and scratch the seals behind the ears or something or I mean what ever he wanted to do. He did that and of course the seals went away but this was on low tide but then he had this problem – he didn't think this through. He had this problem because he was standing on the other side naked his clothes were on this side and the tide came in and there is quite a difference so he actually had to walk. [It] took him the whole night, about 18km and the funny part about the story [was] not in the next farm but the one next to it is living this really nice old farmer Joey, a really nice old man and he was driving on his tractor down on the fields [on an] old Massey Ferguson. Then he saw what seemed to be a naked man walking on the black sand waving. He just thought I am hallucinating I am seeing things that are not real. So he drove home and went into bed again and the man was there [waving] help, help... (Snæbjörnsdóttir/Wilson, 2009)

The acts, which sit outside the 'norms' of behaviour will often by definition invite criticism. Before rushing to condemn, we should remember that in seeking to examine the nature of



communication with other species in any terms other than those of a one-way street of human interest and power, (obedience, subordination etc), we expose ourselves to accusations of a kind of idiocy – simply because in so doing, we too buck the established consensus that animals are either provided for us and must therefore serve our needs, or alternatively are to be observed at a distance, (often for human reasons of science, taxonomy, surveying, tourism etc) for their intrinsic value – or finally, to be ignored entirely.

Timothy Treadwell (1957–2003) was an environmentalist who over a long period conducted his own studies on the grizzly bears in the *Katmai National Park* in Alaska. The study involved living with the grizzlies for 13 seasons before finally, with his girlfriend Amie Huguenard he was killed and devoured by the bear(s). Treadwell, made famous in a film by Werner Herzog entitled *Grizzly Man*, was not scientifically trained, but saw himself as a protector of these animals (Treadwell, 1999).

In Werner Herzog's film *Grizzly Man* (2005), Timothy Treadwell is portrayed as weak. This fragility or weakness, placed in parallel to an exercise of power and control in the guise of the director, opens up a different way of looking; one in which the gaze is turned in on itself. The idiosyncratic voice-over, and the consistent transparency of the opinions in Herzog's narration, contribute to the exposure of a clutch of binaries; sane versus insane, conventional versus unconventional, circumspect versus rash. Similarly these binaries also reveal the inconsistencies and gaps in a human being's authoritative rationality, on one hand declaring the deceased to have been a trespasser in the space of the other, but on the other exercising a punishment on the 'non-human animal', who is not allowed to exercise power on or over human animal beings who knowingly encroach on its world. In the film, Larry Van Daele, a bear biologist, explains Treadwell's mistake and what distinguishes him from those scientifically trained, in that he tried to understand the bears through attempting to 'be a bear'. To empathize is seen to be tantamount to anthropomorphization, the projection of human emotion or behaviour onto the animal, a trait often associated disreputably with pet keeping and the domestication of animals. Due to its 'wildness', from this perspective, a bear is seen to be beyond subjection to such frivolous associations. But in order to empathize, to 'get under the skin of another', one has to try to imagine how the other feels, whether the other is human or animal, and this strategy might instead be seen as a first step towards carving a transitional space in which human and non-human species meet on renewed terms to the benefit of both.

In Thomas Nagel's essay *What is it Like to Be a Bat?* (1974) he points out that we know a lot about bats, that they perceive the world around them through sonar or echolocation, sending high frequency shrieks in order to detect objects and prey within their range and to determine from the consequent echoes, precise information concerning distance, shape, substance and motion. Nagel goes on to say:

But bat sonar, though clearly a form of perception, is not similar in its operation to any sense that we possess, and there is no reason to suppose that it is subjectively like anything we can experience or imagine. This appears to create difficulties for the notion of what it is like to be a bat. We must consider whether any method will permit us to extrapolate to the inner life of the bat from our own case, and if not, what alternative methods there may be for understanding the notion. (Nagel, 1974, 83-84)

The essay goes some way towards expressing the impossibility of imagining the experience of others with any degree of success, particularly when such awareness is based on the acknowledgement of profound difference. But if we are to move at all, we must use what tools we can and navigate between the recognition of differences on the one hand and the identification of similarities, to the heart of what has become a cultural nexus of contradiction. It is not only Treadwell who displays anthropomorphic tendencies when it comes to the grizzlies. The pilot (Sam Egli) who over the years flew Treadwell out to the Grizzly Maze, goes a step further in suggesting that the bears accepted Treadwell for so long because of his perceived slight insanity. Interestingly and paradoxically, Sam Egli seems to believe that the bears are able to detect whether people are sane or not, and act accordingly. He even goes so far as trying to imagine what the bear that killed Treadwell and his girlfriend Amy Hugenard was thinking. Similarly, Herzog makes reference to the 'blank stare' of the bear, signifying dispassionate boredom that can 'also be seen in strangers that we meet in the street in cities' (Herzog, 2005).

In Treadwell's own video footage from which the film was largely constituted, he can be seen to 'encounter' the bears in a spirit of equality, landing him simultaneously in what Donna Haraway has referred to as "concatenated worlds" (Gane, 2006, 145). The fact that he met his death at the claws of this species is not a desired end and is not intended here to act as an exemplar for the post-humanist interspecies perspective pursued in this text but it was an end which in the film Treadwell was realistic enough to envisage for himself. In

*Grizzly Man* Treadwell's 'idiocy' is suggested and played on by Herzog to marginalize Treadwell himself and in so doing, to reinforce the old established line between preconceptions of 'nature' and 'culture'. It is exactly the inevitability of this cultural perception that Val Plumwood took on and challenged when writing of being subjected to three death rolls during her near fatal encounter with a crocodile (O'Reilly, 2000). Treadwell's death is used as a demonstration of the consequences that await those who cross the 'invisible line'. It is in fact this modernist inclination to such polarities that sustains and activates anew the fear of the other and thus lends a particular and dubious purpose to the Herzog film. Had another perspective been drawn it might have acknowledged the achievement of Treadwell and the role that his particular, scientifically transgressive, 'amateur' approach played in reappraising boundaries between species.

What is rarely acknowledged in most stories of human and animal encounters is the imposition that such proximity constitutes for the animals in question. In the case of the wild animal, the model is already there in respect of our extirpating of species, because historically we have taken insufficient care to anticipate the consequences of our proximity and interaction. Perhaps just as pertinently, in the case of other human cultures and civilizations, where the terms of engagement were unequal (i.e not based on consensus exchange and trade) our impact has all too often been devastating. The term 'consenting adults' springs to mind as an equivalence, not in anyway to infantilize the other but as a means of identifying the disparity that can exist in encounters between cultures and species where the integrity of one party is unequivocally compromised – in short where there is a profound imbalance of power.

### **Limina: meetings on the shore**

When we (Snæbjörnsdóttir/Wilson) propose the concept 'parities in meeting', paradoxical in its human conceptualization as this may sound, it is with such considerations of history and trepidation in mind. And if it is not too fanciful therefore, we propose also an approach that imagines a relationship that is uncompromising, between consenting species.

**Comment:** Image here: *Three Attempts*, from the installation *between you and me*, Snæbjörnsdóttir/Wilson, video, 2009

In 2009 we exhibited the installation work *between you and me* at the Kalmar Konstmuseum, in Kalmar, Sweden. A smaller version of the project had previously been

shown in Australia as part of the international conference *Minding Animals* in the same year. The research focus for this had been the relationships between seals and humans around the coast of Iceland and one component was a performative video work entitled *Three Attempts*, (2009). We had been made aware of the curiosity of seals and their apparent preference for bright colors, and in the video we observe Snæbjörnsdóttir, dressed in an orange anorak, approach the seashore overlooking an estuary and kneel down facing towards the sea with her back to the camera. Our preliminary research had revealed that it was common for hunters to imitate seal sounds when trying to entice the seal pups away from the cow, suggesting that seals were sensitive to certain types of sound or sound frequencies at least. In the initial video performance, a variety of vocal sounds were used, from singing to the imitation of ring tones from mobile phones. Initial attempts prompted little in the way of 'reciprocation' on the part of the seals and nothing very much altered at all in their behaviour. The technical reasons why the work was remade are not, in themselves, important for this text but rather, the fact that they necessitated another visit, which resulted in giving us more than the remake we planned, to the extent that it became a completely new work. We are very much aware of the difficulties in attempting to remake works and it is something we generally try to avoid. Nevertheless, for the reshoot the location was the same, as was the time of year – the same clothing was worn and we even began at the same time of day. Even the weather was similar. The only thing it seemed, beyond our control that day, was the behaviour of the non-human animals in the water, and sure enough, their response confounded our expectations. From the moment we arrived on the shore, to set up the equipment, the seals made an appearance, popping up from the water, looking, playing, diving and reappearing. The 'control' had shifted from us to them – it was their game now. Our initial reaction was a sense of despair but slowly and convincingly it dawned on us that the only appropriate response was to be 'with' the seals in this moment. The performer soon relaxed into the role of the one being looked at, whilst visualizing the image being recorded in the rolling video camera behind – the back of a seated human being on black sand at the shore, the rippling, bright water revealing numerous dark heads popping in and out of view, against a backdrop of distant snow-topped mountains. The process of making this work is described here in order to draw attention to the requisite states of vulnerability and surrender necessary for its execution. This vulnerability is manifest in an image taken in a natural environment, of a lone figure with his/her back to 'the watching world'. A sense of apprehension experienced by the artist is conveyed in the tentative approach of her performance. The unpredictable behaviour of

the participant animals required an acceptance of the relinquishment of human control in this instance, and indeed its desirability. *Three Attempts* is the embodiment of a number of principles underpinning our work and its functionality. From one perspective the work seems a novelty – its charm we’ve observed to be infectious and disarming. From another it touches on the absurd – it echoes with pathos and even melancholy. It’s difficult to see the work without acknowledging a degree of sentimentality but in common with absurdity and vulnerability our rejection of sentiment is a cultured, negative response based on the desirability of strength through the application of intellect.

A current discourse has emerged (most recently and notably in the Arts Catalyst exhibition *Interspecies* 2008/9, Manchester/London) surrounding the potentiality of human, non-human ‘collaboration’. It was suggested during the *Interspecies* seminar in London in which we took part that the work *Three Attempts* falls into a category of human/animal art collaboration – occupying as it does a space in which human and non-human animals meet and interact. In this work Snæbjörnsdóttir chose not to enter the space of the seal (namely the sea) but sat instead on the shore, as close to the sea level as possible. Notwithstanding this acknowledgement of ‘threshold’, we allow that there was, to a certain degree a division of power as it was clearly ‘our’ work; we directed the camera and the scene was framed for a project in which the seals had no editorial say.

When talking about collaboration with animals we have to begin by defining what we mean by collaboration. For us it is understood to be an act agreed to by all parties concerned. An attempt is made to establish some form of framework where individual powers are respectively channelled constructively for the overall benefit of the collaborative project. That said, any implicit equality of roles or contribution tends to be compromised when one party alone draws up the parameters at the outset, and this compromise may only be partly assuaged by responsiveness to unpredictable developments arising from the behaviour of the other party. In short, if a way cannot be found in which to negotiate equal terms for the collaboration – it’s not collaboration. In attempting to understand the possibilities of human, non-human animal collaboration we human animals still seem reluctant to let go of the reins or to find ways of working with what is there rather than what we would like or can contrive to be there. In this respect we may all too easily be seen to be treating others as circus animals. An animal might do unusual tricks for example, or be instrumentalised to become the mechanism by which something of ourselves is revealed, but we need to be able to see that behind that use is an implicit loss of freedom for the animal, a loss of identity,

and a likely physical, psychological or ethical abuse. In short, through representation the animal itself is lost. The dichotomy is one born out of our own dependence on power and intentionality and revolves forever around issues of integrity and relationality. If we accept the integrity of dynamic relationships we can go forward in this, but with caution and respect for matters we cannot presume fully to understand.

### **The politics of play**

What may not ultimately be easily explained or justified is the purpose of our interest in this suggested parity, beyond its being generally a good or tantalisingly desirable thing. It seems good because it bucks an accepted behavioural trope in relation to the other. Good because in doing so we may discover something which may for a long time have been overlooked – a consequence of staying within the bounds of acceptable behaviour and of being so sure of our separateness and distinctiveness, when in fact, any natural extrapolation of evolutionary theory actually seems to unravel most claims for the specialness of our case. We believe that other species may have much more commonality with us than is recognized, which we just don't or can't see because the type of knowledge upon which we have come to rely that provides us with and supports our world view, precludes it. Because we share a world with other species, why would we not be interested in the principals of interconnectivity when an eschewal of such interest for so long has left us unprepared for all manner of environmental effects and consequence?

Not long after embarking on a trek in *Hornstrandir* in the far northwest of Iceland during July of 1999, our paths crossed with some of the denizens of that area, most memorably, an arctic fox in its dark, summer pelage. The animal actually sought us out, clearly having noticed us from afar and as he trotted towards us, we became aware of his purposeful if casual approach only as he drew near. *Hornstrandir* is a reserve area of around 240 square miles, almost entirely unpopulated by humans. The fox has no predators here and when humans show up from time to time he is far more curious than wary. In fact this was more the case then, than in 2009 as ten years ago the visits of tourists were less frequent. It can nevertheless be suggested that since this was a nature reserve, the fox had also learned that humans bring disposable food with them, thereby providing an easy meal for the day. As for us, we were sluggish under the weight of nine days shelter and provisions – he was light, inquisitive and in the mood for a game. And this is just what ensued. Once up close he began to leap and bound around us, feigning attacks and withdrawals in rapid succession

and behaving as much like an adolescent pet pup as is imaginable. The surprise of course was not that he was in many ways 'like a dog', but simply that he was playing in such a disarmingly relaxed manner around aliens on his patch. Both here in the encounter with the fox and previously with the seals when making the work *Three Attempts* we have found it appropriate to deploy words such as 'game' or 'play' in order to elucidate not just the apparent nature of the respective meetings, but also a form of exchange or communication, significantly, beyond words. It is in a particular type of play involving the feint, the lunge and equally rapid withdrawal, the teasing appearance and disappearance, intended there is no doubt, to provoke a response, that body language is seen conspicuously to take precedence over other forms, allowing a genuine trade of reflexes, privileging intuition and instinct.

The performance of Joseph Beuys *I Like America and America Likes Me*, (1974) has been referenced innumerable times in animal studies' discourse and will no doubt continue to be referenced for many proper reasons in the future. For the purpose of this text we raise it again as in the footage that survives the event, an evolving relationship can be detected between the two protagonists, Beuys and the wild, but environmentally compromised coyote, *Little John*. The coyote was imported into a loft gallery space in New York, (from whence is frustratingly unclear) in order to meet and cohabit for three days with the artist. Their relationship begins with a degree of wariness on the part of both – wariness and respect. Whilst it is conceivable that Beuys consciously deployed respect in his dealings with the coyote and that conceptually this was always strategically going to be the case, the documentation of their meeting nevertheless seems to reveal a study in inquisitive negotiation and the process of two beings getting to know one another in unfamiliar surroundings.

Back in *Hornstrandir*, our fox, with all the freedom in his world to choose, bobbed and darted around us for a good fifteen minutes as we walked; we laughed and yes, spoke to him and around the time we sat down to take off our boots in order to cross a river, he became bored and scampered off in the direction of a distant flock of seabirds he'd spotted at the river mouth. Ten minutes later a commotion of startled gulls signalled his mischievous arrival amongst them.

Since 2007 we have been researching for a project entitled *Uncertainty in the City* commissioned by the Storey Gallery in Lancaster. As part of this project we designed a

mobile radio station called *Radio Animal*<sup>3</sup> that we have been touring around England and at the beginning of October 2009 we took it to London as part of the *Interspecies* project mentioned above. *Radio Animal* has been investigating contested spaces and our conflicting categorizations of what constitutes a pest. Among those that we interviewed in London was the acclaimed historian and one of the founders of the *British Animal Studies Network* Dr. Erica Fudge. Fudge told the story of a mouse (or mice) inhabiting her kitchen and how by giving it a name, she had overcome her antipathy towards this animal. Giving an animal a proper name is a common identification strategy in nature studies applied equally often but for different reasons by those working scientifically for instance like Ian Douglas-Hamilton in his study of elephants (Mitman, 2005) and for amateurs such as Timothy Treadwell in his study of Grizzly bears (Herzog, 2005). But as a means of bestowing individuality in order to reduce anxiety we detect another more telling dynamic. In 2009 we were invited to give a talk at Sheffield Hallam University as part of a series of events entitled *Transmission: Host*, which explored the concept of *The Stranger*. Our host was Chloë Brown and together we made a bookwork as part of the series, in respect of which the editor Sharon Kivland, quotes Jacques Derrida.

the stranger is the one who is irreconcilably 'other' to oneself, but with whom one may co-exist without hostility, to whom one must respond and to whom one is responsible. The stranger reminds one of the other at the heart of one's being (Brown, 2009)

Applied in this context the statement could be seen to suggest our desire strategically to accept the animal through the identification within ourselves of a parallel and correspondent 'other'. A further qualification of this would arise from considering the dynamic of naming as 'owning' and Fudge herself has described the act as a kind of co-opting of the mouse into a kind of 'pet hood'.

### **We are not alone**

At this juncture, we ask what if intellect alone is not enough for us to understand our new and challenged position in the world? Indeed, what if the rationality of our approach obscures or limits the possibilities of wider understanding? Ultimately the video work *Three*

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<sup>3</sup> [www.radioanimal.org](http://www.radioanimal.org)



*Attempts* is not solely concerned with our relationship to the seal, but is a 'landscape' work, that simultaneously acknowledges the integrity of landscape and its constituents whilst interrogating what the term has come to represent. The back of the artist is turned towards the lens of the camera, which is the eye that we human-animals so easily and often mistake as our own in perceiving and understanding the world. It is an insinuation between the audience and the event, which it partially occludes. All the readings mentioned in the previous chapter, of charm, absurdity, pathos, melancholy, sentimentality, vulnerability are indeed embedded and to be found in the work and yet just as crucially, they serve to fuel and extend another more fundamental reading – that 'landscape' or 'environment' if they are to mean anything in the future, must cease to be objectifying terms, which describe 'something to be looked at' or used whilst simultaneously functioning as registers of our detachment from them. Just as increasingly we understand that other animals are specifically so in relation to the constitution of their dwelling, so we must nurture a larger economy of thought and larger sense of community recognizing our own interdependence with habitat and the danger that by sustaining our unfettered and exploitative use of 'resources', including land and 'animal others' we resolutely keep our backs turned on the enlightening and rewarding conversation we might otherwise have.

Where the cultural deployment of animal representations in general seeks or has managed to frame and delimit our understanding of the non-human animal, it is hoped that art of the kind proposed in the above examples can test such practices and invite a reappraisal of these relationships. Because most representations are constructed to perform some agenda of our own – in the case of animals, to entertain, to inform, to provide food, to stand for all of a species, to symbolize human behavioural characteristics etc – in this process, the animal itself is occluded – eclipsed by its avatar or likeness, which is always a simplification and therefore must accordingly signify a loss. In another component of the installation *between you and me* the audience is invited to follow at close quarters the transition of a real although dead animal body as it is made to become a representation of itself. The work entitled, *the naming of things* (Snæbjörnsdóttir/Wilson, 2009), scrutinizes and we believe reveals the flawed nature of the presumption and pitfalls of our attempts to close up and enforce a reductive approach in our world-view. In juxtaposition to the other works (the series of interviews, *Three Attempts* etc) in the exhibition it allows us the space to think through and thus challenge what we have come to believe it is to be 'animal', what it is to be 'human' and what indeed is 'landscape' and to consider the consequences of the abbreviated forms with which we populate our intellect and our experience. Since it is upon these

accepted but polarising constructions that we human-animals base our behaviour towards other species and to our environment, at this time it seems appropriate to be digging deep and deploying whatever methods may be at our disposal in order to reappraise their contemporary validity.

So with this in mind, consider our experience as we made our way on foot one morning along the southern perimeter of Hyde Park in London. It was autumnal, sunny and we were deep in conversation as we walked. The traffic was medium, to medium-heavy. The nature of the conversation is not remembered but we do recall that out of the blue, we were interrupted by a voice, clearly intoned over the noise of the traffic. The voice said, 'hello'. Immediately, we stopped in our tracks. Ahead there was no one to be seen and as we looked behind, there was nobody even within shouting distance. The voice came again, 'hello' this time clearly from overhead. We looked up and there, perched on a telegraph wire directly above us was a crow. He/she stared at us inquisitively and as we gaped, said it again. Naturally, we returned the salutation and this time the crow reciprocated. We stood there, the two of us on the pavement and the crow aloft, for over five minutes, exchanging greetings in a bewilderingly agreeable and curiously private encounter on that warm fall day.

Crows are great mimics. Unlike many species, we recognize and acknowledge their intelligence (because we think it is like our own). This bird, free as it seemed, may well have been trained when young by a carer, to say some words. Notwithstanding this, to be deliberately and formally addressed by a member of another species, so unexpectedly and in English, was simultaneously both uncanny and touching and it reminds us of the childhood wish exercised so exhaustively in literature and film, that the animals could talk. In the same way a contemporary desire is expressed for a genuinely collaborative relationship between humans and other species, it's clear that intentionality is the key to the viability of such a project. In the absence of a common, syntax-based language we must continue to look elsewhere to facilitate and develop any possible symbioses of purpose.

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