Am I leopard?: Seeking Animation and Other Possibilities

Roz Cran

Figure 1. Roz Cran, Wild Cat, 2005

I was 8 years old, alone in the sitting room. I slid the book off the shelf, shuffled the pages to find the colour plate and stared at the mess of black fur and red blood spilt on the snow. Then I snapped the book shut.

‘Cowardice and courage are so close that they are often exchanged. Cowardice is probably the strange, tortuous path of courage.’

‘We are going to cross over borders, just as we recross borders, without knowing anything about it. Where is our border? When I cross a border, it’s my border I’m crossing, though I don’t know which one I’m crossing or which side I end up on. This is the charm of crossing the border. It is also what can constitute its distressing side.’
Figure 2. Roz Cran, Fury, 2005

First Questions

What might ‘becoming animal’ mean?
What is animation?
How can one cross borders to an unknown place?
How can one write ‘between’
What kind of space do the woods offer?
What nature of being are we?
Are we one being or two or other?

It was a Wednesday, in the early hours last November. I was woken by a yowl. My heart beat fast.
Was it a cat fight? A burglar? A child’s cry?
No, It was me. I was snarling.

That week I had been taking photographs of myself eating an apple.
As I had crunched into the flesh of a granny smith, I had felt fierce, wild, strong. I had tried a roar, had scratched the air with my paw. I imagined bounding through the forest. I pictured myself prowling in the undergrowth.

That experience of biting into an apple had prodded my imagination. I imagined leopard-like movements. I felt the ‘leopard’ possibilities of myself. Could I be leopard? I felt leopard-like. Was I part-leopard now? Had I become leopard?

Next day I went into Oxfam and bought a fake leopard-skin hat, scarf and gloves. I began to collect leopard-print clothes and ventured into the woods with a video camera and an assistant to see what would happen.

‘Dressing in leopard-print clothes and running in the woods? What nonsense!’ was one retort to my new project.
Part of me agrees, but another part wants to ‘run wild’, to see what it is like to act differently, to see what I can learn. I know there is something, some place to explore, to face up to, to experience. By slipping under the fake skin of some other being, I want to try to become more, or less, to add something, and fill out or to remove, to lessen. I want to investigate what it is to become ‘other’, another kind of being, to approach the animal, which is alive, eats and sleeps, inhabits the same earth, but seems different. The animal, a leopard in this case, provides an opportunity, an opening that I may be able to slither through. There is a direction – a movement – towards nonsense, in the hope of making new sense, more sense. Masking one’s being may allow the becoming of other ways of being.

I will use this experience of being drawn towards leopard alongside research and art that engages with our human interest in the animal, in becoming animal and in the wild. In what follows I will draw upon contemporary discussion upon art engaged with animals, their otherness, and the recent slippage between us, the complexity of our relationship with them.

Physically we are engaging more closely with the animal in that we use pig valves to repair our hearts, women take hormone replacement medication which contains mare’s milk during the menopause and there is research into how other animal parts may be used surgically and incorporated into our bodies. We are no longer the unique and superior beings we have seen ourselves as. Darwin told us we descended from animals over a century ago but John Gray shows us how we have ignored this and persisted in seeing ourselves as separate, different. Genetic engineering and cloning are shifting our understanding and starting to dissolve the firm borders we have held onto between human and animal. Illnesses – bird flu, mad cow disease/CJD, are ignoring the border controls we had put between human beings and animal beings. Will these changes make us closer to animals or something else completely unknown, some thing so far ‘unbeen’.

There are changes in the way we observe and puzzle over animals, these beings that share our world. This is clear from much of the work shown in three recent exhibitions devoted to becoming animal: Woof Woof, held at the Austrian Cultural Forum, London 2001, Animals at Haunch of Venison, London 2004, and Becoming Animal at MassMoca, Boston in 2005.

In the Becoming Animal exhibition, Kathy High shows ‘Embracing Animal’, a set of four glass tubes staging videos of ‘trans-animals’ which feature interchanges and transformations of animal/humans.

Artists and writers are taking a less anthropomorphic position and moving away from seeing them as totally separate ‘things’ to be used and exploited, towards coming alongside them, as other beings and with less clear boundaries between us. Questions are being posed about the differences and similarities. Artists are venturing into the border area of uncertainty, and exploring backwards and forwards along and across this no-man’s/no-woman’s land of the unknown, the less fixed space. Whether this unexplored space is physical or philosophical or in an unnameable category is not clear.
In the catalogue which accompanied *Animals* Christiane Schneider has written an essay ‘Animals looking at us’ and quotes from Elias Canetti, ‘The more that separates us from animals, the more precious they are.’

We live in an increasingly urban and complex technological society very different from our roots on land and sea. Perhaps this explains both our intense interest in and our estrangement from animals. As Canetti states: ‘The animals! The animals! Where do you know them from? From everything you are not and would like to be on a trial basis.’

There is a familiarity in our relationship to animals. Perhaps we want to check and hold on to what we might be losing by the changes in our bodies, our selves, our lives, and consider the ever-increasing distance from our earlier human selves. John Gray says Taoists believe in right action, that the good life is natural life lived skilfully: ‘Few human beings have the knack of living well. Observing this, the Taoists looked to other animals as their guides to the good life. Animals in the wild know how to live; they do not need to think or choose… the good life … means living effortlessly, according to our natures.’

A woman dressed in leopard-print clothes, running through patches of woodland, the remainders of the forest, the geographical edge of our towns and cities as well as acting outside the bounds of conventional behaviour, can be dismissed as absurd. However the experience resonates with this faint familiarity of the animal, our roots in animal-like being and the wish to be alongside that, as well as the need to be in a more fluid state, to be able to stride the bounds, the limits, and at times to pass through the walls that separate us, open to other, to enter between self and otherness. Becoming animal may offer that room to look forward as well as backward in order to get a perspective on the challenges ahead.

Writings by Hélène Cixous and Jean Genet have opened my ideas about crossings, borders, the sliding space between frontiers. Deleuze and Guattari have made me think about becoming animal. In writing and researching this essay and in my art practice I have chosen to step into the gap, to explore this strip of in-between space, which may change my understanding of what we are. My interest in this whole human/animal business is shifting.

Animation
animated
animate
endowed with life
full of activity
vivify
encouragement, inspiration
give the appearance of showing movement by using a quick succession of gradually varying images

border
limit
boundary
edge
brink
a margin

the part lying along the boundary or outline
the frontier line that separates one country from another
lie on the borders of
approach in character

Writing and animation and borders

I am intrigued by the writing of Cixous: ‘This ladder of writing. This is how I figure it: the ladder is neither immobile nor empty. It is animated. It incorporates the movement it arouses and inscribes.’ Cixous believes that in writing one must be both afraid and cross through fear.12

New ideas often arise in a cloudy form. Paradoxically the communication of these ideas through writing must attempt clarity, not to do away with the cloudiness but to show the blurs, to be a channel for the complexities and muddy water of emerging ideas. The writing needs to reflect the new kinds of thinking and art that is surfacing in relation to animal. As the writer, I need to inhabit the border area between academic and creative writing as well as use both these established forms. To write in an unknown way about the unknown would be incomprehensible, even if it were possible. I must allow my imagination to slip down into the ditch between and flow in and out of the murky stream. Readers are invited to accompany this muddy journey.
Following Cixous I want the writing to be animated, to arouse and incorporate movement. But what does animated mean? The dictionary has phrases such as ‘having vital breath, a living organism having sensation and voluntary motion, without rigid cell walls, endowed with life’ but also ‘brutish’. ‘Animation’ equals ‘inspiration’ (key for artists), ‘the action of imparting life, enlivening influence’. Under ‘anima’ I find ‘air, breath, life, soul, mind, the inner self, the source of the feminine component of a personality. ‘Animate’: ‘to fill with boldness, courage, put in motion’. Here are ideas of movement, vitality and courage but also distance and a negative judgement implied by the idea of the ‘brute’. Confused and opposed feelings and thoughts can be provoked by this set of words that has roots and links with our ideas of animal.

I seek animation in my life, work and writing. Other key words are ditch, between, border, howl, other and become. I have slipped these between sections of academic writing. Cixous writes animatedly as does Genet. Reading them has prompted me to experiment, to slip into what I call responsive writing. 

Cixous is a devoted fan of Genet and quotes his writing in relation to animation and lice: ‘They imparted to our clothes an animation, a presence, which, when they had gone, left our garments lifeless.’ This can turn upside down our usual response to the louse. It is possible to see that an uninvited association with the animal world can enliven us, that without liveliness we may be shells. The imaginative use of language can bring vitality as can living imaginatively alongside animal, be it louse or leopard. Both Cixous and Genet play with language and ideas, disrupting customary patterns and expectations, disturbing and bumping the reader.

Becoming leopard is a refreshing but strange place to be (space to inhabit)—in the forest - a traditional arena for change - a retreat from urban consumerism, contemporary emptiness of spirit, away from the confused and alienated business/busyness of modern life, a place of contemplation, temporary time out, a home to beasts, to tales and alien points of view. Cixous comments: ‘I write on all fours in the dark. I write below earth level.’ 

Steve Baker quotes Carolee Schneemann saying, in relation to her cat, ‘something like: “her steady focus enabled me to consider her regard as an aperture in motion”’. Baker continues: ‘It’s as though the animal allows the artist to learn something new, see something differently. And Derrida says that his cat provokes a kind of “critical uneasiness” in him, and he seems to imply that this uneasiness may be the only frame of mind in which any responsible human thinking about the animal can really begin.’ Cixous speaks of ‘unease’ as being crucial to being alive, of engaging with the world.

Some artists, such as Kathy High mentioned earlier, use animals to step through the border between human and animal, to negotiate crossing places. Cixous is interested in crossing borders: ‘Where is our border? How do we cross borders? It can be done in a completely indifferent and apathetic fashion… The person who trembles while
crossing a border casts doubt on their own definition. What ‘nature’ are we? What ‘species’ are we?18 She raises questions, hints at the dangers of crossing, and notes that it is possible to cross half-heartedly and therefore question nothing. Cixous mentions Kafka’s *A Dog’s Searching* and his fictional dog’s question as to what species of dog he is. She continues: ‘We are transformed by animality. Texts of this kind should bring out our animal side. Perhaps the irony is that we are never more human than when we are dogs.’19

Marina Warner includes this picture of a woman feeding her own child and a bear cub in her account of the collapse of the boundaries between human and animal. She writes of her shock in 1995 at this photo published in 1921 as part of the story of a huntsman/photographer and his wife’s account of bringing up a motherless bear cub in their home *Wild Brother*. Warner states: ‘Despite fairy tales’ and folklore’s intermingling of creatures, the talking and helpful animal familiars, despite continuing advances in ecology and changing attitudes to animal rights and human domination, it is startling and feels uncomfortable, even prurient, to look at a woman feeding a bear cub, as if she and he belonged to a common species.’20

Our relation to and interest in animals is both strong, complex and difficult to get hold of, as Willis says: ‘The crux of the explanation of the apparent universality of animals as images of the profoundest symbolic significance would seem, I argue, to lie in the fact the “the animal” is both within us, as part of our enduring biological heritage as human beings, and also by definition, outside and beyond human society.’21
Cixous tussles with the ‘dark, wild, good-bad part in us; the beast-part in human beings’. And she is a passionate advocate of the Brazilian writer Clarice Lispector: ‘In Clarice Lispector’s pitiless works we sometimes measure ourselves and are measured against a being of our species – though one who is violently different from us – sometimes, as a woman, we are measured against a man, sometimes as a woman we are measured against a beggar, or against a blind man, or else against a hen, or against a cockroach; sometimes as a man, we are measured against a dog… Measured and weighed. We must at times go and look for either the worst or the best of ourselves in a purer, more naked being than we are.’

There is something we are drawn to but cannot understand in these living beings that have some similarities to us and yet are so utterly different. Do I and the other artists and writers who have been exploring this space wish for change; will we return the same, or more confused from our explorations? I raise questions. I doubt there are answers, only further questions, but this essay is the start of an adventure into the uncertain leopard world.
More Questions

Can you be in-between two states/two places?
Is there a no-place?
How can one be new possibilities?
How do you become other?
Can you be not-yet?
What kind of space do the woods offer?
Can you cross over and return?
What do we imagine?
Can we wander between?
Is non-place the new space?

Do you remember that morning?

Do you remember that morning?
I watched you cross the clearing.
Ears upright you turned.
Our eyes met; we froze.

Much has come, become, from the research and process of writing this essay and experimenting with different kinds of writing, inspired by the work of Cixous. But words can only approach the sense of this. I can get close to the skin of what has been undertaken but not quite communicate the meaning, the understanding, the sense and feeling of the happening.

Similarly, I can analyse my explorations in the woods while wearing fake leopard-skin clothes but the descriptions and images will not quite capture what I think and imagine has happened.

I know I am changed by the act of doing and being. I examine the video footage and still photographs recording the events and try to pick out images that ‘say something’ of the experience, and try to notice what the pictures tell me about the woman in costume roaming through the trees.

I read my writing and wonder. It is possible that at times, I have stepped through into another, other ways of being. I have glimpsed that it is possible to be alive and animated in utterly different ways. The research has opened queries that I did not suspect when starting out on this adventure. The skin/limit of my understanding has been stretched and cannot quite resume its earlier shape. I am more leopard shaped than I was.

The space provided by approaching animal is clearly of contemporary interest to the artists and writers mentioned above. The attraction of this place might be interpreted in various ways.

Moving towards the animal, another place, another being, might be seen as a way out from a narrow life, a too constrained life, an outworn way of living. Crossing the
Woods under the fake skin of a leopard may be a retreat from the challenges of living or in contrast one can explain it as a place to adventure into new grounds.

It can be seen as a clearer space for women, away from the constrictions of a culture, that has changed radically for the better for women, but still carries the smell, the feel, the ropes of centuries of being oppressed and seen as lesser than men.

Artists who allow themselves more leeway to see potentialities of living differently are perhaps attracted to the animal space, attracted to cross the border, to become animated, as a place of potential. They may be the postmodern explorers of new landscapes. They may be following in the wake of Kafka whose narrator became a beetle in *Metamorphosis* and described living from an alien view.

The attraction of animal may be an expression of our sense of oneness with living matter, that we come from the same stuff, are made of the same flesh and bones. John Berger has written much on the animal: 'Animals have always been central to the process by which men form an image of themselves... the animals supply examples for the mind as well as food for the body.'

In some ways it is strange that we look at the animal as a being with such mystery, such unknownness, because: ‘We are not just rather like animals; we are animals. Our differences from other species may be striking, but comparisons with them have always been, and must be, crucial to our view of ourselves.’

We must also consider the challenges to our understanding of ourselves as humans alongside the developments in cosmetic surgery, genetic engineering, the potential to clone, surgical operations to change gender and fresh ideas about transgender and intersex and the use of animal parts to repair our bodies. In the future it may be possible to choose animal parts, the exotic leopard print for example, to become part of our bodies. We have to face potential epidemics of disease crossing from other species such as Mad Cow Disease/CJD and Bird and Swine Flu. We are no longer the unique beings separate from and superior to the animal that we imagined we were.

Artists such as Edwina Ashton, Lucy Gunning, who have inhabited the ‘becoming animal’ space, may wish to balance the spontaneous, feeling aspects of being with the rational, cultured, controlled aspects of living in a ‘civilised’ world. The leopard is untameable. A horse, although broken, remains strong and its neigh, its call represents something unknown, unknowable. The horse, the stag and the dog call from another place. Sometimes we stop and twiddle the dials on our inner radios trying to tune into this no-name network. Thinking of Joseph Beuys, the coyote links us to Native American myths of becoming, of transformation.

Such artists cross into an in-between space, beyond identity. They face contemporary problems and changes. In his essay for *Cabinet* magazine, Steve Baker argues that artists who are making ‘serious art’ rather than ‘sentimental art’ involving animals ‘are broadly related to the notion of the artist that Lyotard had: the artist as someone who has particular kinds of responsibilities in the postmodern world to work against complacency, to refuse what he calls the “solace of good forms,” to continue to try to problematize things.’
In the same article Baker reports Deleuze and Guattari’s argument that most people will have experienced instants of exchange with an animal where they glimpsed something outside the limits of ‘ordinary boundaries of human identity’. [Reference required] He suggests we look for ways for prolonging those instants and ‘seek to elaborate an alternative to the psychoanalytic account of what it is to be human’.

In a review of The Open Matthew Wolf-Meyer suggests that Agamben finds a relationship between the boredom of man and the captivity of the animal, and that the human is awakened to its own being-captivated, an opening to a not-open. 26 According to Wolf-Mayer, Agamben sees power in ‘a-knowledge’, that state of leaving something outside of being, of ‘letting be’, for the ‘posthuman’ to become ‘a-human’, ‘a not-yet’, ‘a zone of indifference’, ‘anti-hybrids’, ‘un-animals’.

Jutta Ittner begins her chapter ‘Who’s looking? The animal gaze in the fiction of Brigitte Kronauer and Clarice Lispector’ by wondering what the fascination of humans is that ‘makes us come back again and again to the zoo, that sad “monument to the impossibility of animal encounters” in order to catch the eye of the tiger behind bars – what are we hoping for?’27 She concludes her explorations by seeing the implications of the works of these two writers as ‘dizzying: The only way to become truly human is to “un-become human”’. 28

Writing this has stretched my thinking about my own art projects into unimagined shapes and broadened ideas about the areas that I might touch when I venture into the woods ‘being leopard’ accompanied at times by another ‘leopard being’. The strange place I enter is a non-place, a place free of much cultural reference, towards the animal but not animal, a wondering and wandering place, an indifferent space, where I am not-yet.

In May 2005 the Belgian performance artist, Benjamin Verdonck, became The Birdman of Birmingham 29 when he lived for a week in a large nest he had attached to a tall modern building. This seems to encapsulate the contemporary fascination/infatuation with becoming a sort of animal. He looked down on the world from his perch and sent daily despatches.

Figure 5. Benjamin Verdonck, The Birdman of Birmingham, 2005

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http://www.artandresearch.org.uk/v4n1/cran.php
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2 Cixous, *Three Steps on the Ladder of Writing*, p. 130.
3 On the street I noticed a woman in a leopard-print coat and another wearing a printed scarf. In the next charity shop I counted 5 items of leopard-print. I saw women wearing gloves, carrying bags and umbrellas, wearing a printed hat or trousers. It was everywhere. Why were all these women (not men) wearing this exotic print? I looked on ebay and found countless items of underwear, shoes, hot-water-bottle covers, tights, books, record players all covered in fake leopard-skin offered for sale. Clearly leopard-print has powerful associations that include links with the exotic, power of wealth and sex, the dramatic pattern itself and the attraction to animal.
4 John Gray, *Straw Dogs: Thoughts on Humans and Other Animals* (Granta, London 2002), p. 38: ‘Other animals are born, seek mates, forage for food, and die. That is all. But we humans – we think - are different. We are persons, whose actions are the results of their choices. Other animals pass their lives unawares, but we are conscious’.
5 An article in *The Guardian* Education 26 July 2005, p. 1 reports the move of Ian Wilmut who created the first cloned mammal, Dolly the sheep, to Edinburgh University to work on cloning embryos: ‘For him moving on to human biology and medicine is just a step along a continuum from his work with animals’.
8 In Schneider, ‘Animals looking at us’ in *Animals*.
9 In Schneider, ‘Animals looking at us’, *Animals*.
13 How strange there are so few categories of writing—factual, fictional, creative, reflective, autobiographical—none of these fits the exciting use of language by Cixous and Genet and I have experimented with responding to situations, emotions—responsive writing is a temporary class.
17 In Cixous, *Three Steps on the Ladder of Writing*, p. 31.
21 Cixous, *Three Steps on the Ladder of Writing*, p. 43.
25 [http://reconstruction.e-server.org/BRreviews/revTheOpen.htm](http://reconstruction.e-server.org/BRreviews/revTheOpen.htm) [Accessed: 10 May 2011]
27 Ittner in *Figuring Animals*, p. 118.