

Art and the Animal Revolution

I

On 3 January 1889, Friedrich Nietzsche witnessed a horse being flogged by the driver of a cab in the Piazza Carlo Alberto, Turin. According to Ronald Hayman: ‘Tearfully, the philosopher flung his arms around the animal’s neck and then collapsed.’¹ This scene of Nietzsche’s psychological collapse upon the stricken horse is a replay of a similar display of emotional empathy in Dostoevsky’s *Crime and Punishment*, where, in a ‘terrible dream’, Raskolnikov relives with horror an episode in which, as a boy of seven, he and his father witness a group of drunken men flogging a horse to death.² Whilst the gang, led by the horse’s owner, is savagely lashing the beast’s eyes and brutally taking a metal bar to its back, Raskolnikov escapes from his father’s clutches to comfort the dying horse, kissing its face and eyes. Such display of sympathy for the flogged animal by the childhood Raskolnikov is in distinct contrast to his later open distaste for the old woman whose head he cuts open with an axe. Nevertheless, the lasting affect of this scene – and one which, no doubt, reverberated in Nietzsche’s weakening mind as he beheld and intervened in a similar spectacle in Turin – is the recognition of the intolerance, inhumanity and injustice which scars the history of human relations with animals and legitimises their coming revolution.

II

‘So, the question of politics becomes the question of survival of fireflies, which begin to disappear from Europe in the 1950s. For fireflies disappear along with collective ideologies. They disappear along with pollution and the collapse of the political imagination. Fireflies are tiny markers of resistance, the suicide bombers of the insect world. If Lyotard’s ‘Résistance’ were ever to be brought into being, it would have to involve fireflies. Lots of them. It would be a posthumous show about something that no longer exists or is disappearing. Or about something that does not yet exist.’ (Simon Critchley)³

In the previous issue of *Art and Research*, Simon Critchley confirmed a suspicion that there is in fact an animal revolution ongoing in our midst. It is happening in a parallel world to our own. Of course, being human, we are not given access to the revolution. A predictable revolution is one already within our system of intelligibility. Such a revolution is already co-opted by the current state of affairs. Instead, the animal revolution — these militant fireflies and hundreds of thousands of other species as well — remains outside what we can fathom, out of our depths. Indeed, to be revolutionary is to be out of time, out of history — which is to say, human time and human history. So, the open secret unknown and unknowable to the human is this Other time, the time of the Other. It is an event and rupture in which time is ‘out of joint’. This is not only a difference in time but also of place. While humans and animals occupy the same earth, we inhabit different worlds. Each world has its own way of being, its own compartments and values. Such a revolution brings with it an

inhuman politics which de-centers our liberal humanist values. Stare long enough into the light of the firefly and one is seduced by an inhuman illumination.

The artists in this issue of *Art and Research* – including Steve Baker, Hellen Bullard, Roz Cran, Kate Foster, Maria Fusco, Ingvild Kaldal, Carolee Schneemann, and Frederick Young – work between worlds. Their work circulates, takes on meaning, and functions in our human world as part of culture. The function of art has been for culture to tell stories about itself, to take measure of itself and its directions. Art then is fundamentally a product of and for culture and one that points to foundational concerns regarding what it means to be human.

Yet the artists working with animals here point to and cast bridges across the divides to the non-human worlds of animals. What a wonderful disorientation takes place in this gesture of reaching across spaces and times. To invite the animal to art entails a particular sort of hospitality. Hospitality here means the ability to host all sorts of unexpected guests, not always wanted, with their particular demands and eccentricities and to allow them to flourish outside one's own expectations.

Hospitality to/for the animal other means letting slip particular human values, i.e. characteristics valued as and for humans. Such work becomes not simply an art that tells us stories about ourselves but something which opens onto an earth larger than our own (human) world. Most particularly and strikingly there is a suspension of reason, domination, and control. Art that suspends human values risks instability, unreason, rejection and collapse. Such art does not properly 'serve' culture and so fits awkwardly as an object within the art and gallery world. Indeed, such art speaks to culture by turning from culture, gesturing to an Outside; such art hopes to turn culture with its turn from culture.

With the exception of Jan Verwoert's 'Animalisms,' a rhythmic series of extended 'aphorisms' on animality, animation and animism, especially conceived for this issue of *Art and Research*, and Maria Fusco's 'Fieldnotes from an Urban Pastoral'⁴, a brief narrative fusing stricken fledgling, childhood memory and brutal murder, much of the contributions here arise from and extend work developed in the *Animal Gaze* conference organized by Rosemarie McGoldrick at the School of Fine Art, London Metropolitan University in 2008 and the Pidgin Language Symposium organized by Hellen Bullard at the Kings Lynn Arts Centre in 2009. Likewise, it looks forward to the next *Animal Gaze* conference in October of 2011.

Several pieces here are dialogues among artists and theorists. Since it works between the modalities of the formal essay and the informal report from the field, this conversational mode is particularly useful in sketching out the grounds of animal art. Such conversations reveal what questions are particularly pressing to animal studies. They also provide shifting of ground by which no one voice is in command and control of material. Leading figures in animal studies, Steve Baker and Susan McHugh work through Baker's recent *Roadkill* art series; Bryndís Snæbjörnsdóttir and Mark Wilson develop a number of art and theory concerns in dialogue with Kate Foster and her careful observational field work; Nigel Rothfels, the well known

scholar on zoos and human-animal interaction, illuminates the roll of animal displays through discussion with Ingvild Kaldal about her work in natural history museums; and Frederick Young discusses his applied theory experiments; Carolee Schneemann reveals the risk of crossing the divides of animals and humans; Giovanni Aloï, the editor of *Antennae: the Journal of Nature in Visual Culture*, provides a thematic set of concerns representative of the current directions in animal studies while looking at a range of art on enclosure and becomings from Francis Bacon through Joseph Beuys to Oleg Kulik and Marcus Coates; Roz Cran follows up Aloï in working through becoming in her art; Helen Bullard develops what the key concept of pidgin language might mean as she works through what it means to be between worlds; Emma Cocker reveals how animals present a palpable physicality that challenges art and theories of material culture in an essay which develops themes latent within the present collection.

The 'end page' of this issue is 'Cat Stuck in Organ' by Alan Currall which combines a narrative and audio track in an account of a recurring dream about a cat called Werner who gets himself trapped inside a Hammond organ. In a prose style which echoes the descriptive exactitude of Thomas Pynchon's preoccupations with the minutiae of quantum mechanics and which ends with a humorous take on the paradox of Schrödinger's cat (the dreamer is called Erwin after all), Currall gives us an out-of-body-experience in a dream world which is nonetheless sensory (in its framing of an audio track), and which revolves around the interplay of man, machine and animal.

Our hope is that this issue of *Art and Research* will serve as a sounding of the state of affairs in animal studies as well as fertile ground for new directions in animal art and as a companion to conferences, seminars and exhibitions which explore the intersections between animality and artistic practice.⁵

III

A final comment is due on the image of Carolee Schneemann with Treasure, her lost cat, which appears as the cover image of this issue. The animal's 'insistent gaze' seems to recall and recast Derrida's embarrassed encounter with the animal gaze of his cat chancing upon him naked. However, Derrida's sense of impropriety is not present in Schneemann's clothed encounter with her cat. Rather, it is as if the artist – more than the philosopher, perhaps - has consented to yield to the interiority of the animal, an interiority to which we nonetheless have no direct access. There is no animal manuscript – or manifesto for that matter - which would confirm if the stare of Schneemann's lost cat Treasure conceals a creative inner life akin to that of Hoffmann's Tomcat Murr.⁶ The viewer is left in an equally dumbfounded position which echoes, perhaps, that of the youth in Robert Walser's tale 'I Have Nothing' who asks of the different animals he encounters (calf, dog, goat): 'What do you want from me, you good animal? I can see that you'd like something from me, but, alas, I have nothing. I'd be glad to give you something if I had anything.'⁷ Notwithstanding our failure to access the animal revolution in our midst, the animal gaze presents us

with the inability to relinquish the feeling that we are the temporary recipients of the uncanny hospitality of the animal, that we are participants, in the words of Derrida, in 'a kind of *animalséance*'.⁸ For those with eyes to see and ears to hear, the animal revolution and the obligation to the Other beckons...

*'... already the knowing animals are aware
that we are not really at home in
our interpreted world' (Rilke)*

Ron Broglio
Ross Birrell

¹ Ronald Hayman, *Nietzsche: A Critical Biography* (London: Quartet, 1981), p. 334-5.

² Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *Crime and Punishment*, translated by David Magarshack (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1966), pp. 72-8.

³ Simon Critchley, 'The Infinite Demand of Art', *Art and Research* Vol 3 No 2 Summer 2010.
<http://www.artandresearch.org.uk/v3n2/critchley.php>

⁴ 'Fieldnotes from an Urban Pastoral' will appear later this year in *Beyond Utopia*, edited by Sophie Warren & Jonathan Mosely, and published by Errant Bodies Press (Berlin).

⁵ The intersection between animality and artistic practice was the focus of the seminar 'Of animals and monsters', MACBA, 21-23 October 2010

http://www.macba.cat/controller.php?p_action=show_page&pagina_id=33&inst_id=29639&lang=EN&PHPSESSID=qn9vqhfg3cm71pt4pgucfne1e1 [Date accessed 16 June 2011]; and of the exhibition *Animal Kingdom – There Was an Old Lady Who...*, curated by April Lamm, Schinkel Pavillon, 5 March - 4 April 2011, which asked: Is it possible to employ an animal as a readymade? <http://www.art-agenda.com/shows/animal-kingdom-there-was-an-old-lady-who.../> [Date accessed 16 June 2011].

⁶ E. T. A. Hoffmann, *The Life and Opinions of the Tomcat Murr*, translated by Anthea Bell (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1999). See, for example, the description of Murr observed in the act of composing his manuscript (p. 61-2).

⁷ Robert Walser, *Masquerade and Other Stories*, translated by Susan Bernofsky (London: Quartet, 1993), p. 103.

⁸ Jacques Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, edited by Marie-Louise Mallet, translated by David Wills (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), p. 4.