

TOUCHING ANIMALS



Marcus Coates, *Journey to the Lower World*, 2004
PHOTO COURTESY OF KATE
MACGARRY, LONDON

BY HELENA RECKITT

As a child, I found my psoriasis-prone scalp to be an unexpected source of pleasure. At bedtime, my mother would search my head for flaky patches, which she doused with softening creams and astringent lotions before combing them out. These tuck-in sprees soon developed into thorough physical investigations during which, armed with tweezers and a bedside-table lamp, my mother would prod and squeeze every suspect pore on my face and back.

Living with cats has brought home the latent atavism of rituals that my mother and I called “monkey times.” Beyond revelling in my cats’ idiosyncratic characters, and in our games and shared looks, I find that our mutual desire for physical contact and interaction conjures up memories of my mother’s searching, administering fingers as I scan my pets’ fur for mats and fleas, and the cats in turn subject me to insistent licking. The probing caress of their rough little tongues—in the case of the youngest cat, accompanied by the gentle cradling of my finger between her paws, claws carefully retracted—completes this phylogenetic loop. Along with returning me to our species’ pre-linguistic days, this exchange of grooming integrates my cats into at least my corner of human society—prompting from me something like the goofy, uncensored babble that mothers use with their infants that psychologists call “motherese”¹—and may do more if Robin Dunbar is right in his linking of grooming and language.

Developing a claim that language emerged amongst primates because our societies had become too large to support the time-consuming cleaning rituals that previously maintained social bonds, Dunbar launches his fascinating book *Grooming, Gossip and the Evolution of Language* with a reverie on primate tactility.

The initial frisson of uncertainty in an untested relationship, the gradual surrender to another’s avid fingers flickering expertly across bare skin, the light pinching and picking and nibbling of flesh as hands of discovery move in surprise from one freckle to another newly discovered mole. The momentarily disconcerting pain of pinched skin gives way imperceptibly to a soothing sense of pleasure, creeping warmly outwards from the centre of attention. You begin to relax into the sheer intensity of the business, ceding deliciously to the ebb and flow of the neural signals that spin their fleeting way from the periphery to brain, pitter-pattering

their light drumming on the mind’s consciousness somewhere in the deep cores of being.²

This vivid account, with its suggestion that the author has experienced the visceral ministrations that he describes, helps to explain why reciprocal grooming proved so vital for maintaining social cohesion, and offers a taste of the embodied pleasures of interspecies relations.

Encounters with creatureliness feature prominently in some of today’s most compelling visual art, some of which I included in *Adaptation: Between Species*,³ an exhibition that explored “what happens when humans, animals and the natural world meet.”⁴ “Coming out” as a pet fancier enabled me to embrace the stereotype of the childless, middle-aged woman whose desire for intimacy and “playful domination”⁵ results in an excessive devotion to cats. While not showing nit-picking or fur inspection *per se*, the works I included spoke to the human longing to bond with non-human creatures, and to the communications and miscommunications, identifications and projections that can ensue.⁶ Pieties about animal rights and welfare interested me less than an ambivalent posture that foregrounds failed connections and misplaced desires between animals and humans, as much as glimpses of interspecies reciprocity or exchange.

Art about human/creaturely relations can never escape the spectre of Joseph Beuys, whose shaman-like performances featuring animals (including a rabbit in *How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare* [1965], and a coyote in *I Like America and America Likes Me* [1974]), offer an unavoidable reference point. Marcus Coates’ *Journey to the Lower World* (2004) shows the artist following Beuys as he attempts to heal social problems by channelling animal spirits. Yet where Beuys was earnest in his spiritual and therapeutic aspirations, Coates understands the absurdity of his endeavours. We struggle to suppress a laugh as we watch him don stag hide and antlers over his checked shirt and corduroys be-

fore the residents of a Liverpool housing estate that is scheduled for demolition. Accompanied by bongo drums, Coates emits a succession of squawks, grunts and screeches that, he explains subsequently, he channelled from the birds and beasts that he encountered in the lower world. “I started at the top floor... the 21st floor, and when I got to the ground floor, I just kept going down.” The group’s reactions—of horror, embarrassment, nervousness, boredom, and explosive amusement—comprise much of the footage, giving it a “You’ve Been Framed” quality. “Becoming animal,” as Deleuze and Guattari termed it, Coates tries to counter the strategies of detachment with which we separate ourselves from creatures and from nature. He wants to learn from the world of primal instincts and uncivilized wisdom. Possessed by animal spirits, Coates is “un-manned” a fool and a buffoon of a particularly English sort.

This regressive, and also peculiarly English, impulse likewise characterizes Lucy Gunning’s *The Horse Impressionists* (1994). Her video depicts five women who answered an ad calling for women who could impersonate horses, and shows them trotting and galloping, neighing and whinnying in London parks, streets and a tunnel. Symbols of phallic power, and beloved by adolescent girls, horses occupy a special place in the female imagination. Through animal drag, these women transgress their prescribed social roles and access a particular non-linguistic agency, pleasure and ecstatic release as they elude simple impersonation and become contaminated with horse-ness.

Coates and Gunning place us firmly within the realm of childish games and role-playing—including a regression that provokes unrestrained laughter from viewers. In contrast, tears and a sense of wonder are the likely responses from viewers of Javier Téllez’s *Letter on the Blind, for the Use of Those Who See* (2007). This stunning black-and-white 16mm film documents what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick calls the “haptic absorption”⁷ of members of one species in another. Téllez, who often collaborates with socially marginalized people in his art, shows six blind people as they encounter an Indian elephant in a disused outdoor swimming pool. With varying degrees of confidence and trepidation they approach the calm elephant, whose hide, trunk and ears they examine with their hands. A voiceover records their responses: her ears resemble “curtains in someone’s mansion”; her hide is like “goat skin”; “fake rubber”; “a car tire, except it was warm.” One man is wary:



Javier Téllez, *Letter on the Blind, for the Use of Those Who See*, 2007 (still from video installation).
PHOTO COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND GALERIE PETER KILCHMANN, ZURICH



FASTWÜRMS, *Crew Portrait*, 1994
PHOTO COURTESY OF FASTWÜRMS



Shaun Gladwell, *Apologies 1-6*, 2006
PHOTO COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND ANNA SCHWARTZ GALLERY



Sandra Meigs, *Girl Pulling Swans by Necks*. red. From the series *Ride*, 2004, oil & gesso on canvas on board, 91.4 cm x 61 cm
PHOTO COURTESY OF THE ARTIST



Sandra Meigs, *Girl Kissing Ducks*. blue. From the series *Ride*, 2004, oil & gesso on canvas on board, 91.4 cm x 91.4 cm
PHOTO COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

“It wasn’t a good feeling, I wouldn’t do it again.” But another bald, suavely dressed guy with rings on his fingers spans the elephant’s body with his arms, presses his face against her side and addresses her like a lover: “Hey girl...you’re beautiful, Beulah, beautiful girl...like the ocean in there, huh.” Sensing her restlessness, he soothes her with “all right, girl, I’m out, thank you,” then kisses his hand and presses it gently to her side. “You feel the ridges and the bumps and you feel the life pulsing through her. You can’t hide it. You feel the power and the strength but you also feel the tenderness,” he rhapsodizes.

Yet for centuries our culture has denigrated human/animal relations, belittling animal lovers as “perverted, pathetic or wasteful... damned with the accusation of sentimentality, as if having sentiments or feelings for other species were a sign of weakness, intellectual flabbiness, or mental disturbance.”⁸ Studies from the mid-60s and early 70s argued that “pet owners are less psychologically healthy than non-pet owners” and that “the pet seems to function as a detriment to effective social relationships and consequently to the person’s mental health.”⁹ Although medical research has since refuted such claims while attributing reduced levels of stress, heart disease and mental illness to the influence of companion animals, such stereotypes persist.¹⁰

After all, between 1560 and 1700 some three quarters of a million people, mainly lonely, impoverished women, were executed on charges of necromancy. In England, the mere presence of an animal companion was enough to provoke charges of witchcraft. *FASTWÜRMS*, themselves practising witches, playfully reference this history in a mixed-media installation that includes a photograph of themselves in witch’s garb and flanked by two ginger tabbies. *Pant Pollen* (2010), an “interspecies collaboration,” is made up of a sandwich board covered with fabric balls that contain home-grown catnip, and a video of a white cat nuzzling one that has been velcroed to a trousered human leg—thoughtfully at cat-chin height.

Writing about the behaviour of the English people during World War II, George Orwell attributed their obsession with animals to their anxieties about the decline of the human species in the wake of such devastation.¹¹ Pet phobia aside, Orwell’s hunch about the displacement of parental feelings onto pets has a point. My childless friends and I make sport of our pet fetishism, posting pictures of our companion animals on Facebook, using

them as avatars, endowing them with our surnames, and joshing about bringing pets into the office for Mother/Daughter Days. This lighthearted self-denigration perhaps masks the reality that the affection of animals is one of the constants in our seemingly unmoored lives. As children, many people who grow up queer or in other ways socially isolated find solace in animals, backing up the observations of therapists who include animals in their work that “the individuals who seem to benefit most are those who, for whatever reason, feel alienated or rejected.”¹²

Certainly the assertion of the animal lover’s abject identity—with pets as inappropriate or even pathetic love objects—resonates with the queer embrace of devalued cultural phenomena and outsiderhood. Carla Freccero’s definition of queer subjectivity as “penetrative reciprocity, a becoming object for another subject and a resultant joy or ecstasy”¹³ speaks as much to human/animal encounters as it does to those between humans of whatever gender.

The underlying oddness of human/creaturally relations interests Sandra Meigs, whose 2004 *Ride* series depicts girlish figures as they merge with domestic and farmyard animals. *Girl Pulling Swans by Necks* depicts a female figure as she grabs the neck of one goose and fastens her lips against the neck of another. With its overtones of fairy tales and children’s songs and stories, the bright red-on-white painting also recalls the myth of Leda being abducted by Zeus who has taken the form of a swan. As in the best children’s stories, dark desires and primal emotions are expressed with a light touch: Meigs’ bright paintings, each in a primary colour on ridged, gessoed canvases, have the feeling of children’s book illustrations or folk art. They also possess the quality of a Rorschach test. Look carefully and you can make out forms between Meigs’ figures and in the white gesso ridges—a ghost or a dog, a penis or a breast? Like Wittgenstein’s famous duck/rabbit test, we bring our own readings to these deceptively simple pictures. In a similar way, these works encourage us to project our feelings about interspecies tactile relations. While Meigs’ evocation of mutual suckling between members of different species may cause offence, and the appearance of a woman breastfeeding a piglet would be likely to provoke moral outrage, Serpell notes that “in countless hunting and gathering or simple agricultural societies, the suckling of young animals is considered perfectly normal and natural.”¹⁴

What Mary Midley characterized as the “gratuitous perversion”¹⁵ of pet-keeping also concerns Michelle Williams Gamaker. In *Sunday Afternoon II* (2001), we see the artist lying prone on a living room floor as two greyhounds (apparently her own) lick her face, legs, and manicured hands with their saliva-coated tongues. Their movements and sounds—claws scuttling against polished wood, muffled growls—are heightened by the video’s slightly slowed-down footage. Inspired by newspaper stories of elderly people who are found dead and ravaged by their famished pets, the piece wonders what might happen when good dogs turn bad. Installed close to the ground as a video projection or on a flat-screen monitor, the work positions viewers from the dogs’ perspective and encourages them to peer down at the artist’s body through the frame created by one dog’s legs. We imagine stifling Sundays when the prospect of erotic dalliance with a pet relieves the tedium of a long afternoon. Like Meigs’ work, this piece also has historical and mythic overtones, tapping into the medieval French cult of Guinefort (the greyhound saint), the prevalence of hunting dogs in portraits of the landed gentry and the presence of dogs, whose tongues were thought to have healing powers, at shrines in ancient Greece.¹⁶

We never see Williams Gamaker’s entire face in the video as the camera moves no higher than her chin. This tendency not to depict the human face also characterizes Shaun Gladwell’s *Apology to Roadkill 1-6* (2007-09), a video in which the artist, dressed in motorcycle gear, keeps on his helmet and never shows his face.¹⁷ Kosofsky Sedgwick considers being refused a look central to the phenomenon of shame:

Theorists and psychologists of shame locate the proto-form (eyes down, head averted) of this powerful affect—which appears in infants very early, between the third and seventh month of life, just after the infant has become able to distinguish and recognize the face of its care-giver—at a particular moment in a particular repeated narrative. That is the moment when the circuit of mirroring expressions between the child’s face and the caregiver’s recognized face (a circuit that, if it can be called a form of primary narcissism, suggests that narcissism from the very first throws itself sociably, dangerously into the gravitational field of the other) is broken: the moment when the adult face fails

Michelle
Williams
Gamaker,
Sunday After-
noon II, 2001
IMAGE
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THE ARTIST



or refuses to play its part in the continuation of mutual gaze; when, for any one of many reasons, it fails to be recognizable to, or recognizing of, the infant who has been, so to speak, “giving face” based on a faith in the continuity of this circuit.¹⁸

So what does this correlation between shame and a withheld mutual gaze suggest about our early and persistent attachments to animals? Most animals are skilled observers. Companion animals not only recognize their owners from a distance (from their gait to the sound of their keys) but also spend much of their time observing and anticipating their behaviour, and establishing eye contact with them. What Serpell calls “the frequency and patterning of gaze and mutual gaze”¹⁹ can be seen in the prevalence of mirroring and mimicry in contemporary art concerning human/creaturely relations.

In picking up on these themes, I link contemporary art to its surrealist progenitors via the writing of Roger Caillois, particularly his article “Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia,”²⁰ a study of adaptive mimicry by insects and plants that appeared in a 1935 issue of the surrealist journal *Minotaure*. Caillois teases out the spatial confusions inherent to cross-species mimicry and camouflage, and their social and psychological ramifications:

To these dispossessed souls, space seems to be a devouring force. Space pursues them, encircles them, digests them in a gigantic phagocytosis. It ends by replacing them. Then the body separates itself from thought, the individual breaks the boundary of his skin and occupies the other side of the senses. He tries to look at *himself* from any point whatever in space. He feels himself becoming space, *dark space where things cannot be put* [emphasis in original]. He is similar, not similar to something, but just similar. And he invents spaces of which he is “the convulsive possession.”²¹

Caillois recognizes the inherent regression of camouflage. “Life,” he notes “takes a step backwards,” as “the assimilation to space is necessarily accompanied by a decline in the feeling of personality and life.”²² This unnerving observation, which influenced both the Bataille Surrealist circle and Jacques Lacan’s theories of the mirror stage, taps into the dark side of our fascination with otherness and the

lure of organic states that Freud linked to the death drive. It addresses the human desire to rid ourselves of consciousness and responsibility by losing ourselves in animals and in nature.

Or the reverse—affirming our affinities with and responsibilities for nature, as Gladwell gestures towards in *Apology to Roadkill 1–6*, in which we see the artist park his motorcycle beside one after another slain kangaroo in the Australian outback. Waving away flies as if wafting incense, Gladwell scoops up the ‘roos’ bloodied, rigid corpses and, like a black-clad angel of death, slowly carries them, with little circling steps and a tender cradling movement, to the other side of the road. In doing so, Gladwell echoes Beuys’ embrace of a rabbit in *How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare*, but where Beuys’ symbol-laden performance seemed convinced of its redemptive potential, Gladwell’s implicates himself in this indigenous animal’s fate.

Such contradictions lie at the heart of these art works. They also speak to my own contradictory place as an animal-loving primate who is heir to the messed-up power relations that my species has imposed on other life forms. I am buoyed up by the possibilities of human/creaturely encounters yet dogged by guilt; reverent about the grandeur of non-human life forms while skeptical about our fantasies of becoming one with nature. Straddling these strong yet seemingly contradictory impulses, I am drawn to art that opens us up to the life-sustaining experiences and emotions that intimate relationships with other species offer, as we revel in our own beastly natures and recognize ourselves as just one animal amongst many. ♦

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ENDNOTES

- 1 James Serpell, *In the Company of Animals: A Study of Human-Animal Relationships* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), 64.
- 2 Robin Dunbar, *Grooming, Gossip and the Evolution of Language* (London: Faber & Faber, 1996), 1.
- 3 *Adaptation: Between Species*, June 19–September 12, 2010, The Power Plant, Toronto.
- 4 Press release for *Adaptation: Between Species*.
- 5 Yi-Fu Tuan, *Dominance and Affection: The Making of Pets* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1984), in Serpell, 41.
- 6 Philosopher Karen Houle points out that the exhibition concerns relations between humans and non-human others, rather than the more expansive “between species” of the subtitle. I wasn’t aware of my anthropocentric perspective until Dr. Houle pointed it out, and I appreciate her insights about this blind spot.
- 7 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2004), 23.
- 8 Serpell, 170.
- 9 *Ibid.*, 29.
- 10 For instance, the 2009 remake of Albert and David Maysles’ 1975 documentary *Grey Gardens* presents as irrefutable evidence the Beales women’s obsession with animals as a sign of their mental derangement.
- 11 George Orwell, *The English People* (London: Collins, 1947), quoted in Serpell, 65.
- 12 Serpell, 79.
- 13 Carla Freccero, *Queer/Early/Modern* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2006), 102.
- 14 Serpell, 26.
- 15 *Ibid.*, 20.
- 16 *Ibid.*, 74.
- 17 Numerous other works in *Adaptation* present human heads as masked, camouflaged or otherwise obscured, including portraits by Hew Locke, Robyn Cumming, Hanna Liden, Olaf Breuning, and Jeff Sonhouse and videos by Allora & Calzadilla and John Bock. In the few cases where people’s faces are depicted completely, the human subjects mimic or morph with animals, or are blind and, hence, cannot return the gaze.
- 18 Sedgwick, 36.
- 19 Serpell, 110.
- 20 Roger Caillois, “Mimetisme et psychasthenie légendaire” (*Minotaure*, 7, June 1935), translated by John Shepley as “Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia” (*October*, 31, Winter 1984).
- 21 *Ibid.*, 6.
- 22 *Ibid.*