Animal Acts
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Things are moving fast in the human-animal world. So much so that an upgrade seems warranted on my earlier take on it, or rather my take on that part of it that intersects with the world of performance, theatre, and performance studies. Version 1.0 of this bulletin appeared in American Theatre magazine a few years ago, and the double meaning lurking in its title has proved to be prophetic. The interspecies performances that are going on in our changing times, both onstage and off, are also good for producing change, not only in the ways we live with animals and the ways we think about them but also by transforming our values more broadly, resetting our priorities, rebooting our sense of what it might mean to be human: “animal acts,” in short, are a powerful way to change the world.

In the past few years, a spate of conferences, scholarly monographs, critical anthologies, book series, college courses, new journals, and special issues of journals have variously registered “the animal turn” in the humanities and social sciences. This academic burgeoning reflects a rapidly dawning “animal consciousness” in the culture at large, recorded in countless recent works of fiction, art, film, and popular culture. The impetus for this heightened attention to animals (or, as we’ve now learned to say: to the other animals) is, of course, varied and complex, but its link to both the animal rights movement and to the accelerating environmental crisis of our times is undeniable. The former, a centuries-old discourse whose current and extremely forceful phase was launched by the publication, in 1975, of Peter Singer’s Animal Liberation, has reached deep into both social and legal practice, transforming the fields of scientific animal experimentation and animal farming. Numerous horrifying exposés of the latter have resulted not only
In major changes in the way so-called food animals are raised and killed but also in a growing army of vegetarians, silently performing a daily refusal of meat culture. While no one working on behalf of animals feels the end of animal exploitation is near, many of us have come to hope that it is possible.

In recent decades, attention to the plight of the other animals has come from a source that tends to be more compelling for most people than concern about animal suffering: human self-preservation. The increasing ravages of climate change have registered most dramatically on certain animal species, including, for example, one of the most beloved of the “charismatic mega-fauna” (a phrase from zoo jargon) who are responsible for bringing in the big Sunday crowds: the polar bear. As the forlorn gazes of these and other “poster animals” of climate-change-extinction peer at us from *Time* magazine covers and Times Square billboards, we begin to acknowledge what we’ve always known and also carefully “not-known”: their lives are contingent, exactly as ours are, on the delicate ecology of the planet we share with them. Now, we have to be concerned about the other animals not only for their sakes but also for ours.

As ecological thought itself moves into a sophisticated new phase, eschewing the conceptually crippling binaries—especially the one that so disastrously divided “nature” from “culture,” making the one into a distant spectacle or recreational escape and the latter into a thing of pure, unconstrained artifice—the cultural conception of species is being transformed as well. Increasingly, it is the continuities and connections between species that are emphasized rather than the differences. At the same time, the crude dualism that put the human species on one side and all others—the millions upon millions of others—on another side, separated by a Great Wall of human exceptionalism, is breaking down. The multitudes of other species that we have so lazily and offensively corralled into one single word—”The animal! What a word!” as Jacques Derrida famously exclaimed—are now roaming across the vast territories of sameness and difference that make each one unique while each one is also multiply enmeshed in the web of all planetary life.

Be it in the work of animal rights, in the texts of animal studies, in the myriad animal practices found in every human culture, or in the vast field of animal representation, “animal acts” of all kinds are changing us, are changing our times, and will change the future of our species. The performances and commentaries in this book invoke all these realms while also contributing to them. They reveal the shaping force of animal discourse in every significant cultural category: gender, class, race, nation, age, profession, sexual orientation, marital status, and, of course, species. Their scope
and extension tempt me to resort to one of the characteristic methodologies of traditional natural history: the taxonomy. I am tempted, for example, to identify the many ways that class mediates the human relationship to animals, ranging from the upper-class traditions of equestrianism discussed in Kim Marra’s piece to the desperate survival tactics employed by Sawong, the mahout who teaches Deke Weaver to ride an elephant in Thailand. I’m tempted to classify the many ways human gender and sexuality are policed through animal practices, ranging from the way Marra’s mother struggles to get her “out of the barn and into a dress,” to the biblical animals whom Jess Dobkin’s unicorn will gloriously challenge: “You know this part: They pair up. Check, check. Two, two. Two, two. Ladies and Gentlemen, dogs and frogs, step right up. They comply. They obey.”

These taxonomic temptations could launch a thousand college papers or journal articles. But it quickly becomes evident that it is not only the standard sociological categories that are being reshaped and inundated with animal effects here but other, more surprising ones as well, mocking the taxonomic impulse with their sheer strangeness. For example, is my originally serious schema going to survive intact if I include décor as one of the categories remade by animal acts? Yet how could I ignore it? In fact, how could I not give it pride of place, when I read that Joseph Keckler’s cat lady is “the Dr. Moreau of interior decorating”? Or when I read this: in order to accommodate their growing family of dogs, Holly Hughes’s lover suggests they buy a sectional sofa, a moment at which, reports Hughes, “A part of me dies.”

Clothing is a close second in frivolity to home décor, and it also turns out to be an unexpectedly busy arena for animal input. But perhaps we shouldn’t be surprised that animals—whom we have long believed to differ from us in their inability to be naked and hence to feel shame—should make us think about how much we signify ourselves through our costumes and adornments. No dog would ever need to wear a t-shirt like the one Hughes finds herself in, that says “This is what a feminist looks like”; yet the chains that Jojo the elephant, in Weaver’s piece, must not only wear but also carry to his captors might have something in common with those outfits worn by women at agility trials, the ones that say, according to Hughes, “I just give up!”

If the range, variety, and strangeness of animal effects causes the taxonomizing impulse to shrivel and die, the task of selecting works for this collection proved equally resistant to system and method. The usual categories for guaranteeing diversity and inclusion—gender, race, ethnicity, nation—quickly proved to be irrelevant. A briefly indulged fantasy of selection by species soon appeared equally nonsensical. We decided simply to include pieces we loved and admired for the freshness they brought to the animal
subject (pun intended). Limitations of place made us leave out many works that fit that description and to excerpt others. We would have loved to include more than one work by some of our artists, but in the end we limited that impulse to the one exception of Deke Weaver, whose lifelong project, The Unreliable Bestiary, seemed—in its focus, dedication, and methodology—to warrant representation by more than one piece.

The process of pairing the performance scripts with scholars to comment on them was guided by a desire to engage a variety of important voices from the fields of animal studies and performance studies. Our request to the scholars was for responses to the scripts rather than introductions to them, with the assurance that we were open to whatever approach— theoretical, analytical, personal, historical, and so on—they felt would work best for them in the unfortunately short space we had available. Our wish was to create as open and generative an arena as we possibly could for a conversation that we felt was long overdue, among the fields of performance, performance studies, and animal studies, in a way that would be pedagogically useful as well as theoretically interesting. Both these goals were challenged by the difficult fact (so familiar to scholars and teachers of theatre and performance) that we were encountering these words on the page—as silent, linear, one-dimensional text—rather than in the eventful three-dimensional space of performance for which they are intended. Some of the commentators had the opportunity to see a performance of the piece they were writing on; most didn’t. They did what we urge our students to do: to read for performance, to extrapolate live effects from textual clues, to see and hear the piece in the mind’s eye and ear. Readers of the book—and the students and teachers who we hope will use it to study this new disciplinary intersection—will have to do the same, but they will also have some help from the video excerpts of most of the performances on the University of Michigan Press’s website: http://www.press.umich.edu/p/animal-acts. The taste of live performance these excerpts provide will, we are confident, combine with the close reading that printed scripts make possible, and with the insights of our commentators, to offer a fertile meeting ground for the fields of animal studies and performance studies.

The many shifts recorded in the pages that follow are bookended by two statements that express a pair of fundamental principles of interspecies performance. In the book’s first script, Holly Hughes begins her performance by declaring that it’s really about dogs: for her, animals are not a metaphor. In the book’s last script, Rachel Rosenthal ends her performance by telling us that all the animals who participated in the performance of The Others were adopted. Thus the first article of faith of interspecies performance
is that we are trying hard to talk about actual animals now, even when (as very often, including very often in the works that follow) we cannot help but also see them as symbols for our ideas and metaphors for human dramas. One sure way of determining that a piece belongs to the category we are defining here—interspecies performance, the new kind of “animal act”—is that, whatever else animals may come to mean in the piece (and they will undoubtedly mean many things), we will be reminded—or we will want to remind ourselves—of their real existence, their actual being as members of a biological species with a specific morphology, geography, and history. And this will be so, I want to assert paradoxically, even when the animal being discussed belongs to an imaginary species, like the unicorn in Jess Dobkin’s piece, whose difference proves to be a sharp new lens, as Jill Dolan shows, for gaging the baneful effect of dualistic thinking on all species.

The geographies of most animals today are vastly diasporic, their histories surprisingly intertwined with those of humans; charting these dispersals and tracing these stories are a major interest of interspecies artists. A primary mode of interspecies performance, then, is literalization, a steady focus on—or regular return to—the animal or animals around whom the performance revolves. Notwithstanding sporadic—or even regular—manifestations of those flights of symbolism and those tides of anthropomorphism that have long characterized animal discourse—before Aesop and since—the animal acts being forged today are committed to never forgetting the animal and to always asking: “Where are the real animals in all this?” This is no easy task, because the realities of animals’ lives have for so long been submerged in the ugly feelings that attend cruelty to others, making them hard to see clearly. As Rosenthal says, “The sewers of the human psyche are clogged with the corpses of children, animals, women, animals, slaves, animals, prisoners, animals, animals, animals . . .” Animals are and have always been powerful metaphors; they have been not only “good to think with,” as Claude Levi-Strauss famously said, but even better to imagine with, to make poetic sense of our lives with. John Berger writes that just as “the first subject matter for painting was animal” and that probably “the first paint was animal blood, it is not unreasonable to support that the first metaphor was animal.”7 The reason for this powerful metaphoricity is, however, rooted in the specifics of animal lives: in their shapes, colors, patterns, movements, sounds, behaviors, habits, and habitats. The animal acts of our changing times are interested in these specifics as much as in the vital human meanings they produce.

This is probably the place to make a crucial distinction between the kind of interspecies performance presented in this collection and the kind many
people think of when they hear that word: namely, performances that involve actual animals doing things alongside human performers. The circus is the classic site of that kind of interspecies performance, and its history and stories are endlessly fascinating to the artists and scholars in this book. On occasion, that kind of interspecies performance has spilled out of circus and into theatre, performance art, and dance. When it has, it has brought with it many of the questions that arise in the study of circus, about the ethics of training, captivity, and the commercial use of animals. Those questions are often intensified around the category of art practice that Meiling Cheng has called “animalworks” and defined as “performances and installations that use animals as either materials or performers.” I have long argued that the figure of the animal requires a more capacious concept and have proposed the term “zooësis” to refer to the vast field of cultural animal discourse and representation. The neologism is inspired partly by Platonic “poïesis” and Aristotelian “mimesis,” but it also owes a debt to early feminist theorist Alice Jardine’s concept of “gynesis,” which she defined as “the putting into discourse of ‘woman’ as [. . .] intrinsic to the condition of modernity; indeed, the valorization of the feminine, woman, and her obligatory, that is, historical connotations, as somehow intrinsic to new and necessary modes of thinking, writing, speaking.” Obviously, I want this term, zooësis, to mark the ways the animal is put into discourse, but I also share Jardine’s progressive hope that it will contribute to the valorization of animals and teach us that they are “intrinsic to new and necessary modes of thinking, writing, speaking.”

The performances in this book, with one notable exception, do not bring real, living, nonhuman animals onstage. Rather, they are records of and reflections on the relationships—real and imagined—between human and nonhuman animals. Their claim to the adjective “interspecies” derives from their keen interest in the lives and meanings of the other animals. It derives too from their commitment to letting the experience of those lives mold and deepen and change the ways we understand our own—human-animal—lives.

The one work here that includes actual living animals is the last one in the book, placed there—without accompanying commentary—because it seems to offer a multifaceted coda to the “argument” of this book, which is, in short, that animal acts can change the times. Rosenthal was far ahead of her time in knowing this, and The Others invoked many of the topics and questions and discourses that animate contemporary animal studies. It also managed to do so without raising any of the ethical questions that surround trained animal performers (simply because it used domesticated animals
rather than trained animal performers). At the same time, it adumbrated a key principle of interspecies performance by dedicating itself to actual change.

Thus the second article of faith of interspecies performance is that, in addition to talking about real animals, we act on behalf of those animals. The two meanings of the verb “to act”—”to represent mimetically” and “to do”—afford enormous ethical and political potential to interspecies performance (as they do to other activist performance). In the pieces that follow, the human artists who play the roles of other animals, or who talk about their interactions with other animals, do so with the consciousness that when animals are used by humans to make meaning—be it in art, philosophy, or everyday life—that discursive use of them inevitably shapes and impacts the real lives of the actual animals in question. As Cary Wolfe brilliantly puts it in an early classic of animal studies, “even though the discourse of animality and species difference may theoretically be applied to an other of whatever type, the consequences of that discourse, in institutional terms, fall overwhelmingly on nonhuman animals, in our taken-for-granted practices of using and exploiting them.”12 Whatever is said or implied by cultural performances about the other animals will inevitably—however circuitously—affect the way those animals are treated by humans out in the real world. Few performances will have as immediate an effect as The Others did—each performance producing a new interspecies family!—but the animal acts of today unfold within an ethical awareness that deepens and complicates the experiences they invite us to share in. Thus even though all the performances that follow—except The Others—do not bring live animals on stage,13 many of them allude to other performances that did involve live animals (Hughes’s adventures in agility trials, for instance, or Marra’s horse-riding), suggesting that animal presence—in performance as in cultural life—is a continuum rather than an absolute. The relative distance of that presence in the scripts that follow is not intended in any way to signal any programmatic opposition, on our part, to performing (with) live animals. Rather, that distance is a reflection of the current (and, indeed, traditional) conjuncture of animality with theatricality, an effect of various characteristics of this genre that are not shared by other performance genres (like dance) and other art forms (like sculpture, film, and photography) but that do not therefore shut down the genre’s interest in animals or limit its potential for making valuable contributions to the current reimagining of animals and of the human-animal relationship.

A hallmark of interspecies performance today is something I would call “epistemological crisis.” Animal acts bring us face to face with our assump-
tions about what we know and how we know it. They loosen the tightly bound categories into which we’ve packed our knowledge about the other animals—separately packaged for ease of transportation and convenient stowing—and they reorder the hierarchies about what counts as relevant fact and reliable truth.

The great gift that the other animals have always offered to the human species is the gift of their radical otherness, their ultimate unknowability. They have always faced us, as John Berger wrote in his classic essay “Why Look at Animals?,” across “a narrow abyss of non-comprehension.”14 Since the early modern era if not before, their enigma is a gift we have preferred to reject, choosing instead to launch at animals the full force of Enlightenment inquiry—in the form of collections, dissections, taxonomies, illustrations, definitions, classifications, natural history museums, zoos. The “scientific facts” about animals now commingle promiscuously with mythological remnants, old wives’ tales, superstitions, rumors, saws, and Internet hoaxes. Do elephants really never forget (as Weaver’s elephant asserts)? Are bees really vengeful serial stingers (as Kestutis Nakas’s piece fantasizes)? And on what ass does the cockroach—Carmelita Tropicana’s cockroach or any other—sit?

As several of the commentators in this volume point out, animals are the privileged site of both human knowledge and human gullibility. And as all the performance pieces demonstrate, humans’ interactions with animals are mediated by slews of misinformation, prejudice, and ignorance. That’s one reason that animals make such good metaphors for immigrants: we relate to ethnic and national others, as we do to animals, as much on the basis of what we don’t know about them as what we do. No wonder, then, that Carmelita Tropicana’s cockroach adopts Manu Chao’s “Clandestino” to sing of her own experience. At the same time, as the speaker’s neighbors in Nakas’s “No Bees for Bridgeport” make clear, the cultural differences that divide humans from each other are just as dangerous to animals, threatening their very existence.

Interspecies performance wades deep into the epistemological morass to which we humans have exiled the other animals. In doing so it recognizes both the cultural variety and the historical longevity of animal meaning. Animals mean all sorts of contradictory things to different people. In the Power Point-based regimes of contemporary information, the monkey is (as Weaver slyly shows) both “almost entirely arboreal, the loudest animal in the New World,” and “an incarnation of Shiva, . . . a magic monkey who could make himself smaller than a mouse lemur and thousands of times larger and stronger than the biggest gorilla.” In the ecologically correct present, as we learn in Nakas’s piece, a “beekeeping hobby craze is sweeping the country.
Michelle Obama has even installed a hive in back of the White House and tends to it with her children and secret service detail"; yet Nakas’s working-class emigrant neighbors shout in unison: “NO BEES FOR BRIDGEPORT!”

So varied and contradictory are human accounts of animals that any survey of them, including as informal a one as the works here represent, reveals that the real meaning of animals is that they always escape the systems of meaning we construct for them. Their infinite variety and mystery are such that the best taxonomy remains the one that inspired Michel Foucault’s seminal critique of the Enlightenment:

This book first arose out of a passage in Borges, out of the laughter that shattered, as I read the passage, all the familiar landmarks of my thought—our thought, the thought that bears the stamp of our age and our geography—breaking up all the ordered surfaces and all the planes with which we are accustomed to tame the wild profusion of existing things, and continuing long afterwards to disturb and threaten with collapse our age-old distinction between the Same and the Other. This passage quotes a “certain Chinese encyclopedia” in which it is written that “animals are divided into: (a) belonging to the Emperor, (b) embalmed, (c) tame, (d) sucking pigs, (e) sirens, (f) fabulous, (g) stray dogs, (h) included in the present classification, (i) frenzied, (j) innumerable, (k) drawn with a very fine camelhair brush, (l) et cetera, (m) having just broken the water pitcher, (n) that from a long way off look like flies.” In the wonderment of this taxonomy, the thing we apprehend in one great leap, the thing that, by means of the fable, is demonstrated as the exotic charm of another system of thought, is the limitation of our own, the stark impossibility of thinking that.15

What Foucault calls the “wonderment” of this taxonomy is exactly the response that the interspecies performances in this book strive toward: many moments of astonishment and wonder, leading to a hope-filled embrace of the impossible.

Ironically, the way out of the epistemological crisis of interspecies performance is often through entrance into specialized knowledges and arcane mysteries. “Beekeepers,” Nakas tells us, “good ones, have a special kind of knowledge. A sense of ease that allows us to draw near the hive without arousing fear or anger. It might be a gift.” At the opposite pragmatic extreme, Kim Marra remarks that although “riding is at the center of what you do with the horse, […] it occupies a relatively small portion of the time spent on a daily basis. You also must feed and groom the horse, clean all the
tack, learn how each piece of equipment works and needs to fit, muck the stall, keep the barn clean, monitor the pasture for hazards, hold your horse for the vet and blacksmith.” Sometimes, animal knowledge must proceed by constructing whole new disciplines—like Marra’s hippology, or “horse science.” At other times it proceeds by deconstructing sense itself, as when Keckler’s mother, otherwise a “militant grammarian,” repeats the baby-talk words “Cubs don’t do ‘rithmatic! No. Him don’t do no ‘rithmatic” over and over again, until, as Keckler says, “As Warhol dissolved the aura of celebrity through his serial representation of famous faces, as the Marquis de Sade used his characters’ repetition of criminal and perverse acts to purge the acts of their meaning, so my mother, through repetition, flushed all the logic out of the fact that a cat can’t do math.”

Animals show us how much we still need to know, not only about them but also about ourselves. At the same time, they show us how very hard it is going to be to attain that knowledge, especially if we cling to our old habits of inquiry, our old reliance on “ocular proof” and disembodied ideas. Much of the new knowledge gained through animal acts comes from going way past the limits of logic and book learning, and accepting instruction, instead, from the life of bodies. This is, of course, why performance offers more to animal knowledge than any other cultural form: its reliance on physicality, materiality, and embodiment makes it especially useful for venturing into areas where language is absent. For example, Weaver finds out that there “are a couple of ways to get on and off an elephant,” and all of them involve novel uses of human and animal body parts. If you follow your mahout’s instructions, even the ones that make no sense, and if the elephant doesn’t wrap its trunk around your torso and tear you in half, well, here’s what happens: you [. . .] put your hands over your head. With your right hand you grab the top of his right ear. You put your left hand on the gray-wrinkly wall and grab a handful of elephant skin (it’s like heavy padded canvas). The elephant lifts his right foot. You put your foot on the raised right knee. One! Two! Three! HUP! You push down with your right leg, your elephant boosts you up, you pull on his right ear and his right shoulder and swing your left leg up and over his neck.

Sometimes, the connection between animal knowledge and the human body is simple and direct: “The key to good riding is a good seat,” Marra tells us. At other times, as Hughes reminds us, learning about animals requires that “first you have to struggle into your body.”

Animal acts convey new knowledges through new bodily experiences in space and time. They invite us to explore new habitats, where we might prac-
tice more imaginative and ethical ways of life. They encourage us to develop new habits of heart and mind so that we can return again, however sporadically, to live in that long-ago poem that Hughes talks about, in which “we rhymed with all the other animals.”

This book is after other kinds of rhyming as well: between theory and practice, performance and analysis, animal acts and animal studies, animal acts and performance studies. We come to animals, as Steve Baker has said, “as a reminder of the limits of human understanding, and also of the value of working at those limits.”16 If one creative solution to the epistemological crisis that animals precipitate is embodiment, another is dialogue, especially dialogue across traditional boundaries of knowledge. We are immensely grateful to all the artists and scholars who collaborated with each other and with us on creating the dialogue-performance that is this book.

NOTES


3. In J. M. Coetzee’s contemporary classic of animal studies The Lives of the Animals (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), his protagonist Elizabeth Costello famously (or notoriously) compares the modern denial of animal practices to the denial of ordinary Germans in Nazi Germany, characterizing both as a “willed ignorance,” a nonknowing “in that special sense” (20–21).


5. For a brief discussion of how changing accounts of evolution in biology are affecting ecological thought and what these changes offer to the fields of ecocriticism and animal studies, see Timothy Morton, “Guest Column: Queer Ecology” PMLA 125, no. 2 (Mar. 2010): 273–82.


10. I have, however, written at length about this work elsewhere, in terms that explain why I regard it as seminal and paradigmatic: “In formal terms as well as in substance and subject, *The Others* is encyclopedic. Every medium and every channel of performance, every element of the theatrical apparatus is pressed into service to deliver a mountain of information and an ocean of feeling on the subject of animals. Using dialogue, monologue, song, music, dance, movement, slides, voice-overs, video, physical movement, stage architecture, technological devices and—yes—forty-two live animals, Rosenthal embarks upon an epic missionary performance on behalf of animals. The range of discourses she manages to incorporate makes the work a solid introduction to the major tenets of the animal rights movement.” See Una Chaudhuri, “Animal Rites: Performing Beyond the Human,” in Joseph Roach and Janelle Reinelt, eds., *Critical Theory and Performance*, rev. ed. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007). 506-520


13. Dead animals are, of course, always present on every stage and in every scene of human life, in the form of the many corporeal “by-products” that saturate contemporary material lives. See, for example, a recent article in the *Daily Beast*: “Animal Products. http://www.thedailybeast.com/galleries/2010/05/22/animal-products.html#slide1. Accessed July 2012.

