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The Salon of Becoming-Animal

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me" (*comme moi*) most frequently repeated, and the additional phrases only occasionally added. As they are chanting these words, the company moves frantically but in an uncoordinated manner, less a dance than a kind of running in place. The dance and chant go on and on, lasting between eight and ten minutes. The stage is never in full light, but across the continually moving bodies of the dancers play the film clips, already several times seen, of the animal laboratories and slaughterhouses. From time to time one or more dancers will fall to the stage, apparently exhausted by the activity and the weight and confinement of their bulky, full-body costumes, but they then get up and continue. At last all collapse, some still twitching and thrashing a bit. After a moment all slowly crawl out of their costumes, like larvae emerging from cocoons, strip off the sweat-soaked undergarments they were wearing, and either wring them out over their glistening bodies or lick the sweat from their own limbs. Thus the last of the production's bodily fluids are collected and the audience is given a final and most graphic reminder of the fact that at this basic physical level, the ground of dance itself, what they have been watching was the work of (in the most comprehensive and laudatory sense) "performing animals."

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Hargreaves, Robert, Stanley Damerell, and Tolchard Evans

1932 "Let's All Sing Like the Birdies Sing." By Buddy Greco. Epic Records bn615 (album).

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The Salon of Becoming-Animal

Edwina Ashton and Steve Baker

> *All performances in alien kinds of bodies [...] share a kind of double-negation: the person is not the species he is imitating, but also he is not* not *that species.*
>
> —*Rane Willerslev (2004:638)*

This is a reflection on the process (and experience) of making something, rather than an account of the completed project itself. Edwina Ashton and Steve Baker had been invited to contribute to the group exhibition Animal Nature, which was shown at Carnegie Mellon University's Miller Gallery in Pittsburgh from August through October 2005. Initiated by artists Lane Hall and Lisa Moline and curator Jenny Strayer, Animal Nature aimed "to create an open, experimental 'laboratory research' model," not least by encouraging the display of work that might upset traditional distinctions between creative production and academic critique (Hall 2005).

Ashton and Baker had not collaborated before this, but Ashton had been making performance-based video work with animal themes (and in animal costumes) since the mid-1990s, exhibiting in galleries in Europe and North America, and Baker had been writing about work of this kind since the late 1990s, notably in *The Postmodern Animal* (2000a). *The Salon of Becoming-Animal* was driven by a shared enthusiasm for the writings of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, especially their elaboration of the concept of "becoming-animal" in *A Thousand Plateaus* (1988:232–309).

Art and Becoming-Animal

For Deleuze and Guattari, the "reality" of becoming-animal resides "in that which suddenly sweeps us up and makes us become." They write: "We can be thrown into a becoming by anything at all, by the most unexpected, most insignificant of things"—by "a little detail that starts to swell and carries you off" (1988:279, 292).

This being-swept-up, unexpectedly, with which the human nevertheless goes willingly along, resembles some of what Deleuze and Guattari write about art. In moving the human away from anthropocentric meaning and subjective identity, the aim of the arts is to "unleash" becomings. To "make your body a beam of light moving at ever-increasing speed," they write, is something that "requires all the resources of art, and art of the highest kind"—the kind of art, that is to say, through which "you become animal" (1988:272, 187).

Ashton and Baker envisaged the *Salon of Becoming-Animal* as something more awkward and earthbound that might, almost incidentally, constitute an obstacle to (or a means of botching) Deleuze and Guattari's high-flown rhetoric of the wild and the tame—a rhetoric in which the admirable wolf is contrasted with the contemptible domestic dog, and in which the artist is of course on the side of the wolf.

Baker and Ashton took the view that there was something unsustainable in Deleuze and Guattari's ideas on art. Baker saw their insistence that "becoming animal does not consist in playing animal or imitating an animal" (Deleuze and Guattari 1988:238) as incompatible with the practices of contemporary art. Art's animal imitations, he had argued, tend instead to "act out the instability rather than the fixity of the thing nominally imitated," by being "both outlandish and preposterously transparent" (Baker 2000b:78). Ashton's 1997 video performance, *Sheep*, had been one of Baker's key examples of this kind of animal imitation.

Ashton herself felt put upon by Deleuze and Guattari's objections to characteristics and characterization, thinking of her own works as involving character, whether animal or human. In her video *Bat* (2005), for example, the costumed human in the guise of the leathery-winged creature of the title acts out something like the role of an unpaid janitor, obsessively brushing the dust off an empty FedEx box in the cramped broom cupboard he inhabits. The voice-over (through which the bat's thoughts are conveyed) shifts from speech to song as he explains that his landlord's family likes to "sit around and sing" to him as follows (to the tune of the old song "How Much is That Doggy in the Window?"):

> We don't want a doggy or a horsey,
> We don't want a parrot that squawks,
> We want a nice tidy kitchen
> And we want a bat who talks.
> (Ashton 2005a)

Talking creatures edgily fulfilling mundane tasks are something of a feature of Ashton's work, and are genuinely difficult to think of as anything other than "characters."

At any rate, dreaming up the Pittsburgh project in a spirit of contrariness, the notion of a "salon"—with its connotations of polite society, pretension, and domesticity—was settled on with glee by Ashton and Baker as an affront to the moralistic disdain in *A Thousand Plateaus* for ordinary human emotions and experience.

Edwina Ashton's *films and drawings, in which mice, grubs, and sticks grapple with the minutiae of life and language, have been exhibited at the Museum of Contemporary Art, North Miami; Arnolfini, Bristol, UK; and the State Museum of Contemporary Art, San Morino. She has written reviews for* Untitled *magazine and catalogue essays on artists such as Michael Raedecker and Daphne Wright. Currently she is the Wingate Rome Scholar at the British School in Rome.*

Steve Baker *is Professor of Art History at the University of Central Lancashire, U.K., and author of* The Postmodern Animal *(Reaktion Books, 2000) and* Picturing the Beast: Animals, Identity, and Representation *(Manchester University Press, 1993; University of Illinois Press, 2001). He is a member of the editorial board of* Society and Animals *and a founding member of the Animal Studies Group, whose coauthored book* Killing Animals *(University of Illinois Press) was published in 2006. He is currently working on a book titled* Art Before Ethics: Creativity and Animal Life.

Always in the Middle

Collaborative work is seldom described from the perspective of being in the middle of it. At the start of *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari glibly note of their writing that "Since each of us was several, there was already quite a crowd." More usefully, they propose that a plateau "is always in the middle, not at the beginning or the end," and that in their collaborative working they "had hallucinatory experiences, we watched lines leave one plateau and proceed to another like columns of tiny ants" (1988:3, 21-22).

Those words are a little closer to what Ashton and Baker experienced during their own collaboration in 2005, where long conversations followed chaotic trajectories, and where there was a sense of their somehow infecting each other's work, each other's ideas. There was, it's true, a shared perception that questions of art and of the animal were somehow, inexplicably but productively, bound up with each other. Baker first encountered Ashton's work in her short feature in the journal *Angelaki*, called "Becoming Animal and Double-Baked Attempts at Becoming Artist" (Ashton 1998).

But their discovery of less predictable shared enthusiasms seemed just as important to the development of the *Salon of Becoming-Animal*: these included the Billa supermarket on the Fondamenta Záttere in Venice, and the massed terrapins in the little moat around the statue at one end of that city's Viale Garibaldi; Italo Calvino's essay "Lightness" (1996), Jane Graves's essay on making a "beast costume" (2003), William Wegman's 1974 *Spelling Lesson* video with his weimaraner Man Ray, and just about anything concerning notions of mayhem, botching, and things going wrong—going wrong while still having, somehow, a lightness and a rightness about them.

What Kind of Animal?

Una Chaudhuri has proposed that for the arts, "the process of reclaiming our close relation to animality requires an interest in animals as themselves" (Chaudhuri 2004). Ashton and Baker certainly supported that view, but favoured approaching it with stealth. The point about Ashton's individual animal characters was often precisely their *outside-of-speciesness*: "They're not meant to be animals, but they're not meant to be people either," she has stated.[1] In *Sheep*, for example, the creature's voice "was meant to be some mid-point—not sheep but not not sheep." A strikingly similar idea has been used more recently by the anthropologist Rane Willerslev, writing of Siberian hunters whose imitation of their prey renders them simultaneously "not animal," and "not *not*-animal" (Willerslev 2004:649).

Like those hunters' imitations, Ashton's characters' outside-of-speciesness can be an indirect means of thinking about the circumstances of actual animals. She wrote to Baker:

> I like animals looking bad tempered and being impolite as it is such an extremely and solely human activity. So there seem to be different ways of anthropomorphizing: there is a different agenda to painting a bad tempered robin to painting one courageously fighting off a cat attack. (Ashton 2005b)

In her 2001 exhibition, We Speak Your Language, at London's Imperial College of Science, Technology and Medicine, without seeking to impose any particular reading of her work, Ashton was nevertheless conscious of displaying her idiosyncratic creatures in "that monumental institutional structure—full of dissection, analysis, experiments" (2001). This may be one clear example of what Chaudhuri calls "farcical style" bringing contemporary animality into view "just as vividly as scientific naturalism" (2004).

Animal Characters and Animal Observers

Partly influenced by his reading of Francisco Varela (1999:28, 34) on the ethical work undertaken through attentiveness—through a wholly nonjudgmental attentiveness—Baker became increasingly convinced that the space of the *Salon* should somehow feature *the animal as observer*.

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[1] Unattributed quotations from Ashton are drawn from her occasional conversations and correspondence with Baker since 1999.

He suggested to Ashton that the costume from her *Bat* video might be used again in a new silent piece that would show the creature staring directly out from the screen: just watching, as something like a sentinel in the space. Ashton insisted that her characters were not to be co-opted in such a manner. Costumes were not necessarily transferable. In the videos where the animal character is given a "voice," she said, the costume is a "disguise" but the real disguise is the voice: "The costume has to be right, but unless the voice is right, the costume's useless."

The animal observer theme was in any case probably better addressed through a partly concealed space in the *Salon* that drew on the idea of what hunters in North America call a "blind," and bird-watchers in England call a "hide." This was a small narrow space, to be discovered only by the curious, with a slim view out on to the main gallery. Binoculars were provided inside, but attached to them were pairs of clumsy pawlike gloves, so that only by taking on this awkward animal garb could viewers get to see what the rare and peculiar humans out there in the wilds of the gallery were doing. Only later did Baker happen upon Viveiros de Castro's observation that "Animals see in the *same* way as we do *different* things because their bodies are different from ours" (in Willerslev 2004:637).

Ideas versus Things

Books. Gloves. Televisions. Binoculars. Chairs and benches. Photographs. Tables. Nail scissors. These basic elements of the *Salon* are examples of what Varela calls "the middle-sized things with which we continually interact"; his own list includes domestic animals: "dogs, cats" (1999:16). Some things work; others don't. Baker had a crocodile mask, bought in Venice in 2004, and some of the early filming for the *Salon* featured him wearing it while reading chunks of *A Thousand Plateaus* to camera, or interacting with Ashton's costumed characters. It soon became clear that costumes worked; masks didn't. But gloves were another matter. No matter how approximate their nonhumanness, they changed what the human body could do. As Ashton observed, "you're guided by an object rather than by any kind of intention." The gloves imposed what she had earlier called a "becoming-inept."

This being guided by *things* is what Varela calls acting "in harmony with the texture of the situation at hand, not in accordance with a set of rules" derived from the "Western tradition of rational judgment" (1999:31–32). On one trip to London, accompanying Ashton to a local hospital's minor injuries unit to have her suspected dislocated toe looked at (this is what many of their meetings were like: catalogues of accidents, of becomings-inept), they talked about judgment in relation to a statement made by John Cage in a 1968 interview: "Why do you waste your time and mine by trying to get value judgments?" Cage asked. "Value judgments are destructive to our proper business, which is curiosity and awareness" (in Meyer 1972:viii). Baker liked the statement hugely; Ashton had some doubts. Her point was that artists *had* to make judgments, deciding what worked and what didn't. His view was that Cage had in mind an audience's willful judgment of works as "good" or "bad."

One of the first elements they had agreed on for the *Salon* installation was the "good books/bad books" table, by which they continued to be perversely entertained. Books on (mainly) animal themes—from posthuman theory (John Gray's *Straw Dogs* [2003] was something of a *bête noire*) to Beatrix Potter stories—were left in a shifting disorderly heap on a table labeled "good books" at one side and "bad books" at the other. Visitors were free to read and to classify the books, whether or not they chose to comply with the sign instructing them to don pairs of the pawlike gloves before doing so. The piece alluded, it seemed to Baker, to the willful judgments in which people engage all the time, which are merely masked from view by the etiquette and supposed objectivity of academic critique. Nevertheless, despite its centrality to the *Salon*, Ashton was generally skeptical of work of this kind, which seemed to be driven by ideas rather than by materials. In her view it could all too easily pose what she called "the wrong questions—certainly for making things." In contrast, she liked Baker's spontaneous decision to place some branches on a cushion outside the blind, seeing it as the clearest example of his being guided by objects, not ideas.

Whittling away at Literalism

Baker was aware of the process of his whittling away at the literalism of his early thoughts on the *Salon*. Both he and Ashton tended to favor the oblique, the indirect, the *just over there*. The animal theme of the exhibition didn't mean that the *Salon of Becoming-Animal* had to be full of animal stuff. Realizing this, "of becoming-animal" was shed from the *Salon*'s title as their discussions progressed. They took heart from Deleuze and Guattari's recounting of the story of "the local folk hero, Alexis the Trotter, who ran 'like' a horse at extraordinary speed," who "whinnied, reared, kicked" in the manner of a horse and "competed against them in races, and against bicycles and trains," but who "was never as much of a horse as when he played the harmonica" (Deleuze and Guattari 1988:305). (Baker's enthusiasm for having music in the *Salon* had been quietly—and probably wisely—resisted by Ashton.)

Their attempts to turn things that didn't work into things that did were shaped in part by a shared liking for an observation by Adam Phillips: "You don't have to do very much to get things done, as long as you don't need to know what you are doing" (1998:66). Or, as Martha Fleming puts it, "Following a line of least resistance is not just a question of avoiding problems, but rather of being guided by them" (2004:31).

One example concerned early video footage featuring two costumed grubs, the disorderly Gilles and Félix, showing their fidgety resistance to their philosophical instruction by a third figure, a crocodile, the food-obsessed Monsieur Croc (Baker here failing to resist a taste for pathetic punning as well as carnival masks.) The narrative was too contrived, and needed replacing with something more gnomic.

The grub, seen holding a copy of *The Dog Lover's Companion*, suggested an answer, because the manner in which its almost shapeless costumed body enveloped and overwhelmed the book cover's image of the perfect pet seemed stronger than any satirical narrative. That particular video footage was abandoned, and a decision was made instead to use Ashton's short video *Soothing Cat* (2005) in the *Salon*. This was a simple film in which one of the costumed grubs strokes a real cat that has climbed on to its lap, and in which the balance of power between grub and cat seemed more precarious. It was made wholly by Ashton, but made during the period of her collaboration with Baker, and the decision to use it as part of the *Salon* suggested an open-endedness about what might count as the work of their collaboration.

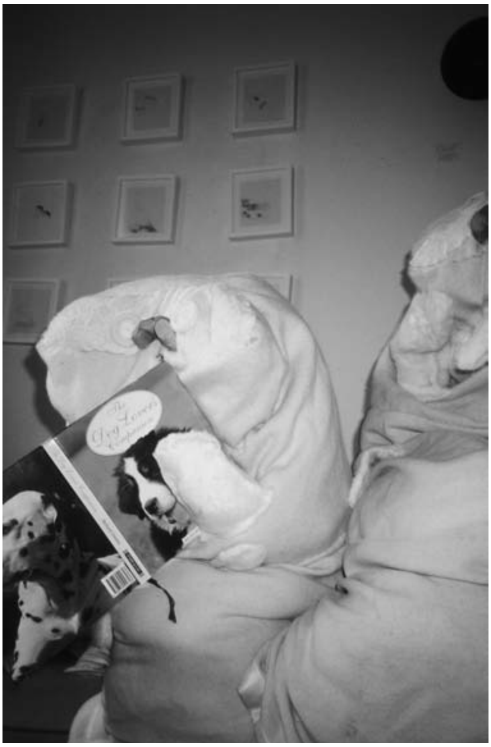

Figure 1. Bored by philosophy, Gilles and Félix indulge their enthusiasm for learning about dogs. Still from abandoned video footage by Edwina Ashton and Steve Baker, 2005. (Photo by Steve Baker)

Seemingly endless minor obstacles to making films together with any success led to a realization that their lengthy discussions and exchanges were themselves the thing they were making together. That making seemed to lie in the finding of what was already to hand. D.W. Winnicott, writing about the basis of creativity in childhood play, said something similar about a question the parent should never put to the child: Did you make this, or did you find it lying around? (see Winnicott 1971).

What Ashton and Baker came slowly to see—really only a matter of days before the Pittsburgh installation had to be set up—was that everything was already there, and that trusting in the process of what was being done (which of course involved botching a lot of stuff along the way) was itself the manner in which the work was emerging. The necessary process of stripping things down, stripping them back, seemed to leave them not with less but with the discovery that other stuff was already there underneath, brought newly into focus.

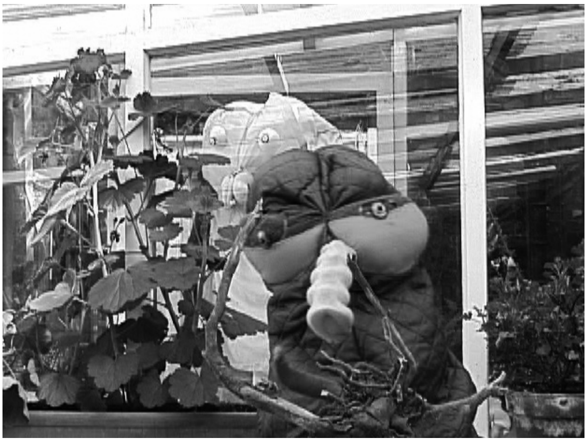

Figure 2. Edwina Ashton, video still from So Much Potential*, 2005. (Courtesy of the artist)*

So Much Potential

Ashton's video *So Much Potential* (2005) shows two particularly odd and unidentifiable creatures in a greenhouse setting, tending a dead tree stump, their hot and shapeless costumes apparently stitched up from bits of old quilted sleeping bags, foam, and suchlike. (Ashton always seemed surprised when Baker failed to see what the characters were meant to be: "They're weevils, or possibly George is an aphid," she explained.)

The voice-over describes the stump as a recently acquired plant of which John, the foam-snouted weevil in the foreground, was inordinately proud. Rupert ("one of George's nephews") has come to visit, and is shown in close-up perched on the stump. He appears to be a real (but dead) cockchafer. John had "recognized him from the newspaper as a special species which, given the right encouragement, could be taught to dance." Despite John's enthusiastic description of "how creativity and growth could transform you, and how, once, he had been inspired by leaping horses," Rupert turns out to be no dancer. "Maybe he didn't understand words like sleeve, nose, and ball, which John used in his demonstrations" (Ashton 2005c).

The three bugs, though hardly a swarm, seem to epitomize what Deleuze and Guattari call "dark assemblages," those provisional and informal comings-together that the authors specifically distinguish from rigid or proprietorial "organizations such as the institution of the family and the state apparatus." These are the assemblages of which they write: "Becomings-animal are proper to them" (1988:242). Baker thought of *So Much Potential* (in which he played no part) as capturing something of the spirit of his own very different collaboration with Ashton. It was included in the *Salon*.

Afterword

Ashton's perception that idea-driven objects might pose "the wrong questions" seemed to Baker to have been right. His experience in Pittsburgh was that people showed no inclination to *classify* the books on the "good books/bad books" table, but seemed all too keen to read them, even with the gloves on. And the blind ended up serving as a space of play (rather than simply as an inversion of human and nonhuman points of view), with furry paws poking through the narrow viewing slit to alarm passing visitors, or with those visitors poking at the "animals" inside the blind with branches they found lying around outside it. Viewers, in other words, found their own means of inhabiting these spaces, in ways that immediately seemed more interesting and varied than the ones that he had envisaged.

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