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## HOW DO NONHUMAN ANIMALS MAKE ART? ART AS A PRACTICE OF INTERSPECIES QUESTIONING

This issue poses, once more, the centuries-old question: “What is art?” and invited respondents to answer this question either from the perspective of the “creator” or the “recipient” of art. We were invited to answer a question about “the essence of art”, and to specify the position from which we write in terms of this creator-recipient duality.

Conventionally and controversially for some of us, providing essential definitions of art (as well as normative evaluations and ontologies of art) has been a task that the Western philosophy of art has assumed for itself. Philosophy has conceived its task as defining the properties which can and cannot be assigned to art as a phenomenon in ways that some have critiqued as an authoritarian gesture.<sup>1</sup> The project of this journal issue invites other voices into this definitional practice: gathering a “variety of responses from very different people who interact with art in different ways”. This is a welcome gesture towards a greater inclusivity; to perform art’s philosophy otherwise.

However, my starting point is to speculate towards a further extension or mutation of this gesture. My starting point is the provocation—both playful and serious—that we need to invite nonhuman animals into this questioning too. We, human animals, need to find ways to ask nonhuman animals what art is or, better, what art might become. “What happens to standard human definitions of art when nonhuman animals are the creators and recipients, artists and audiences?”

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<sup>1</sup> François Laruelle, *Photo-Fiction, a Non-Standard Aesthetics*, trans. Drew S. Burk (Minneapolis, MN: Univocal, 2013).

## 1. UNLEARNING ANTHROPOCENTRISM: PERFORMING ART AS INTERSPECIES QUESTIONING

As Eva Meijer has stated “The destruction of the natural world is made possible because people see themselves as an exception, separate from that world.”<sup>2</sup> The concept of art is part of the history of that human exceptionalism and anthropocentrism. Art has been historically thought to be an exclusively human trait, with both art making and the perception of art being used to shore up humans’ sense of what sets them apart and above nonhumans.

Anthropocentrism, including human exceptionalism, is not “just an idea” but a material reality and a set of bodily practices; anthropocentrism is real insofar as it gets under our skin, inhabits our bodies, and shapes our perception as well as determining the lives of animals themselves. Anthropocentrism is a knowledge system that dominant cultures not only operate within, but also *enact, performatively* including through art. We need to unlearn anthropocentrism as a structuring knowledge within art and aesthetics in an embodied way. Unlearning the anthropocentrism of our concepts of art is part of dismantling that knowledge system.

Humans need to (re-)think concepts of art, not on their own but with, alongside and in dialogue with nonhuman animals. Interspecies art is one place where this performative, dialogical thinking can happen: a field of practice already offering diverse instances of how this questioning might be *done* or how new interspecies concepts of art might be produced performatively in and as art.

In my work, I am interested in the anthropocentric politics of the concept of art itself and how it might become more radically inclusive of and responsive to how nonhuman animals make art in their own ways. I am concerned with how the creation of concepts of art takes place within a dynamic field of power relations: as a means for producing zones of inclusion, exclusion and hierarchy in terms of relationships between humans and nonhuman animals.

### HOW DO NONHUMAN ANIMALS MAKE ART? ART AS A PRACTICE OF INTERSPECIES QUESTIONING

In order to dismantle anthropocentrism within aesthetics, the key question is not “*Do* animals make art?” but rather “*How* do nonhuman animals make art?”.

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<sup>2</sup> Eva Meijer, *When Animals Speak: Toward an Interspecies Democracy* (New York: New York University Press, 2021), 53.

The former, as Vinciane Despret<sup>3</sup> has warned us, is neither a ‘polite’ nor the ‘right’ question to ask nonhuman animals if we seek to go beyond anthropocentric logics. The question “*Do animals make art?*” remains trapped in a logic where nonhuman animals are judged according to human standards; it leaves the human at the centre of values. “*Do animals make art?*” implies the silent and acknowledged act of measuring the extent to which animals make art ‘like us’. And in this appeal to an “us”, this question also risks reducing human art to an essentialised, universal definition — which acts as the standard measure not only for nonhuman animals but for pluralities of human activity too. Here, inclusion for those who are like “us” often means conforming to the standard of human art as defined by the white, male European tradition.

In contrast, the question “*How do nonhuman animals make art?*” invites humans to pay close attention to how nonhuman animals already act as creators and recipients of art in their own ways which, in turn, can performatively expand and mutate standard humanist concepts of art. However, it is also important to consider *how* to ask this question itself: how can questioning itself be performed — and through what forms — particularly when we seek to enact it across species boundaries? What if art is enacted as a practice of interspecies questioning: a mode of inquiry conducted with and alongside nonhuman animals as collaborators and audiences, including an investigation into art itself as thought, felt and experienced according to varying degrees of kinship in difference?

Humans making art for nonhuman animals is not new and is by no means intrinsically emancipatory in itself; there is no guarantee of a reevaluation of values through the sheer act of positioning of nonhuman animals as audiences, for example. Indeed, such reversals can serve to reinforce anthropocentrism. As Jessica Ulrich<sup>4</sup> discusses with respect to Annika Kahrs’ *Playing to the Birds* (2013) — in which music by Franz Liszt is performed to an audience of caged birds in a concert hall: “Art that confronts animals with human paintings or plays human music to animals stays deeply anthropocentric and clings to a value system animals usually cannot relate to.” It is “the musical preaching of an all too human convention of music,” rather than any responsiveness to the birds’ themselves who have no choice (it seems) but to listen from their confinement.

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<sup>3</sup> See Vinciane Despret, *What Would Animals Say If We Asked the Right Questions?* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2016).

<sup>4</sup> Jessica Ulrich, „Art for Animal Audiences,” Presented at Sophiensaele, Berlin on the occasion of *Animal Forms & Formulas - On the human-animal-relation in contemporary performance*, 1st Oct 2017. Published on *Performance for Pets* website, last accessed 18 July 2022 <http://www.performancesforpets.net/text>.

In contrast, let me briefly present a counter-example which touches on non-human art, art as questioning and thinking beyond the creator-recipient duality in one:

In 2016, the UK based arts company *Fevered Sleep* were commissioned by the Wellcome Collection to make a live event to be part of their year-long *Making Nature* exhibition and program: a commission that resulted in the first iteration of the project *Sheep Pig Goat* (2017). The exhibition sought to expose the value systems at work in human ways of knowing the natural world and how persistent hierarchies continue ‘to influence our actions (or inaction) towards the planet’ (Wellcome). In this context, *Fevered Sleep*’s initial concern was to explore to what extent it might be possible to encounter nonhumans animals beyond the extant ideas we have about them. The project framed itself as a use of performance to investigate a series of questions, including: “how well do humans see animals as they really are—not as we tell ourselves they are?”; and “what do animals perceive, when they perceive us?” Described by the company as a “creative research studio,” *Sheep Pig Goat* involved a week-long public presentation of “a series of improvised encounters between human performers and animal spectators”: specifically, sheep, pigs, and goats with dancers and musicians. The visiting publics in this project were not invited to attend to the encounters as an audience watching a “show”; but as fellow participants in a research project, alongwith the company, contributing to the larger enquiry through acts of paying attention and reporting back (whether in writing on the cards provided or in the conversations that followed the encounters). According to one version of events, the visitors’ task was to “properly, respectfully and carefully observe animals watching a performance and reflect and report back on what they’ve seen, whether it’s the body language of a pig or a goat” (David Harradine in Lyn Gardner blog<sup>5</sup>). This shift in attention—to the animal as observer as well as the observed, as the holder of a gaze and point of view rather than the mere object of human perception—was an important move in itself: part of a wider consideration of how to decentre the human in performance.

And yet, it is perhaps not strictly accurate to say that what visitors were observing was indeed “animals watching a performance”. At least, it is important to remember that the ‘performance’ was a series of structured improvisations rather than pre-devised, and that it was not so much presented to the animals as it was cautiously developed with and in response to them on the basis of the

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<sup>5</sup> Lyn Gardner, “Sheep Pig Goat: Theatre for an audience of animals,” *The Guardian*, theatre blog, [www.theguardian.com/stage/theatreblog/2017/mar/15/sheep-pig-goat-theatre-show-for-animals](http://www.theguardian.com/stage/theatreblog/2017/mar/15/sheep-pig-goat-theatre-show-for-animals) published on Wednesday, 15 March 2017. Last accessed 18 July 2022.

performers' and directors' own acts of attention. Of course, Fevered Sleep wanted to be very clear that the animals were not being made to 'perform' in the conventional sense of circus (or indeed, in events like the pigs races increasingly seen at UK children's farms). But it was also not the case that the sheep, pigs and goats were passive audiences. Rather, as far as possible within the limits and constraints of the context, the idea was to invite the animals to engage with the encounters 'on their own terms': which might well and often did include *not* watching what the human performers were doing (whether out of disinterest or because it was more interesting to smell or listen to what they were doing than to watch). But it also included more or less active modes of participation in the performance itself: vocalizations, individual and collective movements and other forms of interaction.

Likewise, the nature of the musicians' performance was radically different from Kahrs' work insofar as it was fully improvised and ostensibly structured to be responsive to the sounds made by the animals themselves. However, the company have reflected on the ways in which the encounters changed over the course of the week: becoming "more to do with being together rather than dancing or playing or singing for. 'How can you leave a trail of scent for this pig with your breath?' rather than 'can you see if this sheep will watch you dance?'"

Is this the beginning of how the animal animalizes performance? The performer is, still, performing for the animal, but in a context where performing no longer means "dancing or playing or singing" so much as leaving a trail of scent because her audience is a being who produces a world where smell means more than sound. What matters is our openness to mutating performance itself—finding "tools" to open human art to the diverse interests of animals as they manifest in specific encounters. The aim is to embody a kind of behavioral openness to what performance might become through interspecies encounters, rather than measuring the unknown according to extant (human) standards.

Thinking alongside companies like Fevered Sleep, I consider my research as a practical experiment that departs from the hypothesis that art is a radically contingent multiplicity of ways of knowing, including those of nonhumans.

My emergent proposition is that we need an ethico-political practice of knowledge in relation to nonhuman animals, that is built on the principle of what we might call our 'kinship in difference' with animals—or a 'differential' continuity'—rather than on principles of resemblance or analogy (or indeed of transcendent alterity).

And so, my response to your question—what is art?—is, deliberately, not an answer but more questions which I hope might act as prompts or invitations or for new practices to come: "How can interspecies art enable humans to re-think

concepts of art in dialogue with nonhuman animals? How do we re-think the arts from our entanglement in nonhuman life rather than from an assumption of separation and exception?”

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