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Familiar Others: Duke and Battersby's Animal Point of View

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The complex roles that animals play in human lives, the way they parallel us, the way they meet needs in us, the way they absorb the love we offer, and, seemingly, for some of us anyway, the way they return, it has long been an area of artistic inquiry. To try and think ourselves into an animal point of view is a daunting prospect, especially in a world where it often seems that something as simple as the points of view of our closest companions and neighbours is beyond our understanding. Humans seem hell-bent on destruction. Perhaps decentering the human from our approach to the world could be an important step to averting a course that sets us up against the other inhabitants of the world, and against our own best interests. Making room for an animal point of view, then, daunting or not, is a strategy for survival.

In their 2013 video *Here is Everything* the artist duo Emily Vey Duke and Cooper Battersby present us with a message from the future, delivered, as so many messages in their works are, by animals who are trying, generously and persistently, to explain to humanity some basic facts of (our) lives. As the guides, a cat and a rabbit, point out in their introductory remarks, “it seems as though you guys are pretty confused about a lot of things. Well, actually, about everything.” The animals explain that they are sending an art video from the future, because “art is a big deal for you and video is the best for actually explaining things.” That’s a broad statement, even with its humorous subtext (“We tried this before with an architecture... but you just ignored it.”) Questions of “best” aside, in the sure hands of Duke and Battersby, the video medium is certainly is good at explaining things, though their explanations are as much questions as anything else.

Animals often populate the videos and installations of Duke and Battersby. They do so in such works as *Beauty Plus Pity* (2009) or *Songs of Praise for the Heart Beyond Cure* (2006),¹ as animated presences who speak directly to the viewer and who take part in the fractured narratives of Duke and

¹ All of the works referenced in this article can be viewed on the artists’ website: <http://dukeandbattersby.com/wp/category/video/>

Battersby's videos. They also appear as recorded from nature, sometimes interacting with human actors, usually not. Taxidermied animals are often integrated into their sculptural installations in which the videos are projected. Animals, as the familiar others that share our spaces, work at several levels in their art: as narrators, as characters, as guides, as symbols and as puzzles.

In their video *Lesser Apes* (2011), Duke and Battersby imagined a sexual relationship between a female primatologist named Farrah, and a female bonobo ape, Meema. Narrated in turns by Farrah and Meema the video combines simple animations, appropriated imagery of Bonobos in the wild, and footage taken by the artists. As in most of their videos, the soundtrack is a combination of characters speaking directly to the audience and songs written and performed by Duke. *Lesser Apes* looks at human/animal relationships at their most taboo. "Human aren't supposed to fall in love with animals," the narration begins. Farrah, the primatologist, is explaining, from her perspective, how her relationship with her subject happened. As Farrah is quick to point out, people fall in love with animals all the time – with their dogs, or other pets. But these are socially sanctioned relationships. There is a line that shouldn't be crossed – that of actually having sexual relationships with an animal one loves. Farrah, who says that she had never had an orgasm before sleeping with Meema, is proud of her relationship, presenting it as the culmination of her research, calling it "successful" and "progressive." As she says, "I was there to study these animals and this animal was letting me into her, um, interiority in a way that was so exceptional and beautiful." There is a tone of self-justification here that is somewhat off-putting, her explanation sounds suspiciously like the rationalizations of, say, a university professor with a student.

Bonobo apes are the closest animal relations to humans and live in a matriarchal society. They also, as Duke and Battersby say on their website, "live without conflict and are unabashedly sexual." Meema is certainly that. She is another messenger from the animal world to humans, one whose direct enthusiasms and active explorations of human concepts, mark her off from the more knowing guides that populate other works by Duke and Battersby.

Where Duke and Battersby most surprise us is in their characterization of Meema. What first seems as naivete, Meema's openness to ideas of 'perversion' and her belief that she can help human beings, is rapidly turned on us – Meema is speaking from such a different place that it is our own limitations that are tested, not any misunderstanding on her part. Perhaps Meema misjudges humans, but not naively. At its heart, *The Lesser Apes* is about the idea of perversion – the 'othering' of behaviours that human society deems unacceptable. Yet, from Meema's point-of-view, it is exactly the

willingness to go beyond the norm that opens up the possibility of real communication across species. From an animal point of view, what is out of bounds? If the human is decentred, how does ‘otherness’ play in the widened sphere of relations? And does the idea of perversion open doors, as Meema hopes?

The video ends with the introduction of a third character, Peter, the groundsman at the preserve where Farrah and Meema live. He too self-identifies as a pervert, a peeping tom who sneaks around taking pictures of Meema and Farrah. He also worries for the two, particularly Meema, who he thinks has an unrealistically rosy view of perverts. Coming from a culture without violence she cannot image the sadists that are attracted to their ideas. As Peter tells us, “For the question isn’t whether one is a pervert or not, there are benevolent perverts, and vicious perverts, and careless perverts, there are those who are excited about maiming the powerless.” Meema and Farrah seem blind to the risks they are running. Peter puts the blame on Farrah – she didn’t learn Meema’s language, but instead taught Meema hers. “Farrah is responsible for almost everything Meema knows about human culture.” The question Peter asks, is who is the lesser ape, “the perfect pupil or the flawed professor?”

Peter has no doubts – we are the lesser apes. But we, as viewers, are left with more of a sense of ambiguity. The only attractive character in the video, ultimately is also the most alien – Meema the Bonobo ape who is so optimistic about our ability to communicate across species. She speaks English, but she doesn’t understand the people to whom she speaks. *Lesser Apes* is, in part, a disturbing, evocative and haunting look at human/animal relationships from the imagined perspective of the animal. The gulf between us is the subject, and whether we, the familiar other, can ever cross over. We cannot appreciate an animal point of view if we continue to hold on to human-centred prejudices and judgements.

The video also serves as a metaphor for so many human relationships, for the power dynamics that are always at play in them. The relationship of Meema and Farrah, and Meema’s absorption into the academic world (speaking with Farrah at an international zoology conference, where she is hoping to deliver a message celebrating perversion) is highlights how we change what we study. It also highlights the desire and the reciprocal neediness that can lurk at the edges of professor /pupil relationships. Experiencing *Lesser Apes*, the viewer was absorbed into Meema and Farrah’s flawed relationship. “It’s about love,” the song in the video goes, but one is forced to ask, is it? And if it is, love for whom?

Adopting, or more correctly, imagining, an animal point of view is often an attempt to grasp something ineffable – to really know the other, that familiar other of the animal presence in our lives.

We strive to know others as a way of overcoming our essential isolation – making sense is a way of making familiar, after all, every attempt to understand is an attempt to communicate. Is anyone, or anything, listening?

At the end of *Beauty Plus Pity* we are serenaded by the spirit guides, animals that, they tell us, we created to punish us. They, however, are more generous to us than we are to ourselves. “But if we can punish you, we can also redeem you... We can walk together, we can be happy.” Can we? We can only try, and trying on an animal point of view is, perhaps, one way of achieving something we often find so difficult – connection.

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