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PERFORMING ANIMALITY

RESUMO

Considerando performances com animais como *Going to the Dogs* (Wim T. Schippers, 1986), *Octavio and I* (Linda Molenaar, 2010), *Performances for Pets* (Juurak/ Bailey, 2014) e *A Performance With an Ocean View (for a Dog)* (Kokkonen, 2008), argumento que estes trabalhos ilustram três efeitos emergentes da performance com animais: desafiar uma visão binária e exclusiva da co-presença na performance; determinando modificações na agência de artistas com o animal não-humano; revertendo a tendência de humanização do animal em cena, e ensaiando uma animalização da actuação humana.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Performance, Co-presença, Não-Humanos, Animais, Real

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ABSTRACT

Considering performances with animals such as *Going to the Dogs* (Wim T. Schippers, 1986), *Octavio and I* (Linda Molenaar, 2010), *Performances for Pets* (Juurak/ Bailey 2014) and *A Performance With an Ocean View (for a Dog)* (Kokkonen, 2008), I argue that these works illustrate three emergent effects of performing with animals: challenging a binary and exclusionary view of co-presence in performance; determining a modification of the performer's interaction with a non-human animal audience; reversing the humanization of the animal, by rehearsing an animalization of human agency.

KEYWORDS

Performance, Co-presence, Non-humans, Animals, Real

PERFORMING ANIMALITY



THE GERMAN SHEPHERD ILJA VAN VINKELOORD WHICH ACTED IN *GOING TO THE DOGS* (1986)
BY WIM T. SCHIPPERS, PORTRAYED BY FRED SCHLEY,
IN DISPLAY AT THE STADSSCHOUWBURG AMSTERDAM, IMAGE BY FRED SCHLEY



1

In this essay, I aim to highlight contemporary performances involving animals that, in my perspective, contribute to a reconsideration of the conditions of co-presence between human and non-human animals. My interest in these performances stems from my academic research on the ways in which theatre extends beyond the agency of the professionally trained performer. Through that research, I have come to recognize how the absence of the professional actor, or the absence of human presence, can be seen to be part of a growing interest in contemporary theatre in staging the real, displaying the unrehearsed, and showing the immediate. Strategies for staging the real can vary, ranging from casting non-actors to devising audience participation, re-enacting documentation, or staging natural phenomena. These strategies are often developed from site-specific locations, or recreated in the black box of the theatre. Within this context, in this short essay, I will draw on examples of performances with animals, particularly, a selection of works where human acting attempts to be levelled with the animal's behaviour, rather than dominating it, and the animals' presence is not purposefully humanized. In these cases, performance makers attempt to relate with the physical presence of animals, underlining the materiality of that presence, going along with an unrehearsed real, rather than staging their presence as a surrogate for a representation, metaphor, or fiction. By using performance to concentrate on the spontaneous presence and materiality of animals, artists attempt to create conditions for a more egalitarian co-presence between humans and non-humans.

Considering performances with animals such as *Going to the Dogs* (Wim T. Schippers, 1986), *Octavio and I* (Linda Molenaar, 2010), *Performances for Pets* (Juurak/ Bailey 2014) and *A Performance With*

an Ocean View (for a Dog) (Kokkonen, 2008), I consider how these works elaborate on three emergent aspects of performing with animals: challenging a binary and exclusionary view of co-presence in performance; determining a modification of the performer's interaction with a non-human animal audience; reversing a humanization of the animal on stage, by rehearsing an animalization of human acts.

2

In the field of the performing arts, it is easier to find performances where animals perform to humans and with humans than pieces where animals act exclusively by themselves onstage. The reason might be that performing along with animals allows contrasting the rehearsed and regulated presence of human performers with the — possibly rehearsed but potentially unpredictable — behaviour of animals. Reflecting on his piece with a group of dancers and two donkeys, *Baltazar* (2013), maker David Weber-Krebs states that the spectator becomes confronted “with his narcissistic desire to identify with the animal, fully knowing that this projection — which is fundamental to conventional theatre — is inadequate for this situation.” (Weber-Krebs, 2019). The projections that “the spectator applies to the animal” (Weber-Krebs, 2019) are neither a given of the presence of the animal nor of the act of spectating. Even if the animal's actions are unrehearsed, or if only standing on stage and not performing any significant action, the presence of animals on a theatre stage tends to reflect humanity to the human audience in attendance. Animals on stage disrupt the expectation of a controlled, rehearsed agency, by their spontaneity and “a resistance against anthropocentric expectations from within human theatre, which declassifies the fixed categories of animality and humanity” (Georgelou, 2012: 105).

Along with human actors on stage, non-human animals distract or capture the gaze of the audience, either because they introduce risk and chance into rehearsed, representative devices or because of the irresistible attraction of the real, serving as the “escape point” of a representational frame.

An example of a piece entirely enacted by animals for a human audience is *Going to the Dogs* (1986), by artist Wim T. Schippers. The play was a family drama performed by six German shepherds in a realistic set design representing an interior living room, with sofas and carpets, doors, and windows. Schippers declared that the dogs had been trained for six months by the police and that, on stage, their actions were “prompted by pieces of meat and cookies thrown in the required direction” (Schippers, 1986). The piece was a sell-out success, with full houses during the two days it was presented, driven by curiosity and scandal surrounding the provocation of a piece entirely performed by dogs in the Stadsschouwburg, one of Amsterdam's most important venues, and financed by state funding. The fact that the piece was presented at the Stadsschouwburg and entertained a close relation with the media, made the performance primarily seen as a stunt.

Schippers' performance with dogs seems to have been, foremost, a detailed staging of superimposing the presence of animals over an assumed human-centred scenography. In this way, rather than exploring the contrast of dogs against humans, this superimposing generated effects of humour or contempt. About the purpose of the performance, Schippers declared “the difference between people on stage and dogs, is that people act while dogs remain normal. Thinking about that gives you a new perspective on the theatre” (Schippers, 1986). In this way, Schippers' aim was, not only to be

provocative but also to highlight the difference between humans and dogs in terms of the kind of agency, highlighting how the dog's agency, undisturbed by human presence, and unaffected by the theatrical frame, appeared unrehearsed and spontaneous. By experimenting with the animals' agency on stage, Schippers seemed to be mostly interested in challenging the audience's “perspective on the theatre”. In this sense, by staging non-human animals in a scenic environment reminiscent of actors, the acting of the German shepherds in *Going to the Dogs* aimed to provoke modifications of spectatorship. In a last twist of satire, a lasting effect of this performance was the inclusion of a portrait of the female German shepherd Ilja van Vinkeloord, in the collection of oil-painted portraits hanging in the halls of the Stadsschouwburg, remembering important actors in Dutch theatre. This inclusion may be seen as a humorous reaction in continuity with Schipper's provocative piece but, nevertheless, acknowledging the presence of the non-human animal as a performer.

Differently from *Going to the Dogs* and its manipulation of animals on a large venue, the research of Dutch artist Linda Molenaar in the project *Octavio and I* (2010) was tender and intimate, trying to look for a “way to become part of the animal world” (Molenaar, 2019). While artificially incubating several chicken eggs, one of the eggs was being incubated by a portable heater attached to her body, and by the artist's own body heat. Placing herself as a surrogate of the mother, Molenaar kept it in contact with the body heat of her skin, crafting an adapted pouch over her belly – namely over her navel – simulating the shape of a human pregnant body. By participating in the incubation of a chicken egg with her own body – in a way, “embodying” the incubation – the artist attempted to establish a continuity of the birth process, sharing the agency of the biological act between two animal species. In *Octavio and I*, the bonding between human and



LINDA MOLENAAR SITS WITH HER OFFSPRING OF CHICKEN, IN *OCTAVIO AND I* (2010), BY LINDA MOLENAAR, PHOTOGRAPH BY THE ARTIST.



ALEX BAILEY AND KRÕÕT JUURAK IN *PERFORMANCE FOR PETS* (2014). [F] ERICH MALTER.

animal was not enacted by projections of human behaviour, or similarities of shape or form, but performed through a close, continuous togetherness and, to a point, an identification of the human with the animal. Performed periodically over the incubation period, the durational work became accessible as documentation and through the artifacts created.

Similarly, in *Performances for Pets* (2014), Estonian and British artists Krõõt Juurak and Alex Bailey invest in close interactions with

animals, performing with domesticated cats and dogs in their home environments. Together with two pet therapists, the artists developed a set of actions that aim at drawing a particular kind of attention and interaction with the animals. They prepare for the performance beforehand, by visiting the pets in their homes, meeting their caregivers, and by knowing the animal's behaviour. Adapting their performance each time, Juurak and Bailey move in the house at ground level, on all fours, with slow and respectful movements, avoiding dominant eye contact, and making sounds that elicit responses

from the pets. These react differently, sometimes observing from a distance and going away, other times interacting with playfulness and responding to the human performer's odd behaviour.

Although the piece is intended as an act of interaction with the animals, the scope of spectatorship could be seen to include humans too, either the animal's owners observing the action, or the audience viewing the documentation of the performance. Juurak and Bailey are aware that the project doesn't adhere squarely to categories of the performing arts such as "performer", "audience", "show", "acting", or "beginning". The initial aim of the artists was to reverse the relation of how animals are staged in a performance setting by placing humans in the position of being attentively watched by animals, while performing actions that were purposefully rehearsed to show to the animal. Furthermore, they attempt to make manifest and engage with a quality of pets that they see as related to their work as artists: "Contemporary pets no longer have a practical function in the household. Cats don't need to catch mice, dogs no longer need to guard the house. Pets have upgraded their job descriptions and line of work to what we call immaterial or affective labour." (Juurak, Bailey, 2019). Accordingly, the affiliation established with the animals is not one of productive entertainment or meaningful participation. The focus is on attempting to establish affective exchanges, revealing its immaterial labour. In that sense, following Jessica Ulrich on her reflection about the project: "one could interpret the activities of performers and pets as an always unfinished 'active process of attunement' – and exactly this is the definition of agency by Vinciane Despret." (Ulrich 2023).

One other example of a piece performed for a pet may be found in Finnish artist Tuija Kokkonen's *A Performance With an Ocean View*

(*for a Dog*) (2008). While creating a performance incorporating the perception of natural phenomena, such as the changing weather, a walk in the woods, or the encircling cityscape, Kokkonen became attracted by the idea of redirecting the performance to a dog as a spectator. In the first version of the piece, while working with the perception of natural events, there was a porosity between the presence of non-human actors and the participation of the human audience. In this context, and while accompanied by a dog named Eka during the outdoor events, Kokkonen asked herself how a dog would perceive the experience, and went on to create a second version of the piece primarily addressed to Eka. Kokkonen considered the piece to be a "misperformance for a dog" given that:

A performance for non-humans is a misperformance as it loses its efficacy by reducing the significance of both humans and the spectatorship or by making them something different; the positions of spectator and performer are combined, often contradictorily, into something approaching co-action and co-being. (Kokkonen, 2010)

This step led Kokkonen to a deep questioning of what was her role as a performance maker, but also what was her role as a peer of the animal: "I realized I was constantly asking myself: who is she? And in that case, who am I? (...) [the dog] Eka was the liminal area of our performance." (Kokkonen, 2010).

3

In *Octavio and I*, *Performances for Pets* and *A Performance With an Ocean View (for a Dog)*, animals take over the role of human actors performing to human audiences, or they attend to the acting of humans, or to what humans envisioned for them to experience. Such involvement with the animals destabilizes a human-centred and binary account of co-presence. Performances involving non-humans bear the potential to destabilize the assumption that the co-presence between human performers and human audiences is a fundamental element in defining theatre. A view of co-presence as a core characteristic of theatre is often attributed to Peter Brook's claim in 1969: "A man walks across [...] [an] empty space whilst someone else is watching him, and this is all that is needed for an act of theatre" (Brook, 1996: 7). While, in the 1960s, the notion could be instrumental to aggregating distinct practices of experimentation in theatre, by the decade of the 1990s however, the notion of co-presence had become an exclusionary assumption defining the very practice of theatre, such as in Erika Fischer-Lichte's view that "the minimum pre-conditions for theatre to be theatre are that person A represents X while S looks on" (Fischer-Lichte, 1992: 7).

Such a view of co-presence premises that the encounter between human actors and audiences, in a simultaneous space and time, configures the basic conditions for a performance to occur. The shared gathering of humans was seen as a pre-condition of performance, theatre, and dance, as well as instrumental in distinguishing performing practices from other artistic practices such as cinema, literature, or visual arts. However, this human-centred view of co-presence has been challenged by a number of contemporary discourses that rethink the encounter between audience and actants within



A PERFORMANCE WITH AN OCEAN VIEW (FOR A DOG) - II MEMO OF TIME, BY TUIJA KOKKONEN, MAY 2008, MAUS AND ORLOVSKI, KIASMA THEATRE/ MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART. [F] KAISA ILLUKKA.

a digital culture where tele-presence is pervasive, or where the notion of body has expanded, for example, to include the non-living bodies of objects and machines, or the non-human bodies of animals.

In the section "Irruption of the Real" of *Postdramatic Theatre* (Lehmann, 2006: 99), Lehmann uses the word "irruption" to refer to pieces where an aspect of reality breaks through the contained fictional cosmos of dramatic plays and becomes "explicitly into a 'co-player'" (*ibid.*, 100).

The postdramatic theatre is the first to turn the level of the real explicitly into a 'co-player' — and this on a practical, not just theoretical level. [...] The main point is not the assertion of the real as such [...] but the unsettling that occurs through the undecidability whether one is dealing with reality or fiction. The theatrical effect and the effect on consciousness both emanate from this ambiguity. [...] Aesthetically and conceptually the real in theatre has always been excluded but it inevitably adheres to theatre. (*ibid.*, 100–103)

In Lehmann's view, the real always relates to the theatre in a relation of adherence, that is, of constant close contact but, when the real is involved as a "co-player", an unsettling undecidability is created. Accordingly, in the performances mentioned above, the issue was less about whether the presence of animals equated that of human performers or audiences, and more about creating undecidable situations of encounter. Although artists kept on devising relations of co-presence, such relations did not occur exclusively between human performers and spectators. Rather, the relation is established between humans and non-humans, and, while practices of acting with animals are reimaged, new relations of spectatorship are attempted. Following Lehmann's view of the real as a "co-player", such mode of co-presence "lowers the humanness of the human body and radically resists anthropocentric theatre customs (...) [they] let an unexpected 'being-with' between human and nonhuman animal bodies happen on stage" (Georgelou, 2011: 123).

The claim that these encounters with animals were theatre, dance, or performance art remains a speculative and unilateral human claim. Simultaneously, the artists' views of these encounters are telling of their effort in rehearsing attempts to come closer to the animals' perception, in order to communicate and understand the animal's ability to be attentive, to perceive meaningfully what they see, to experience something common together. In this regard, these works attempted to resist the common humanization of the animal on stage and, instead, rehearsed ways of "animalizing" human agency. Perhaps such performances may indicate an emergent direction, where animality becomes a quality of human acting to/ with animals, beyond the superficial imitation of an animal's behaviour by humans, or the humanization of animal's behaviour. In rehearsing new forms of performance to/ with animals, humans revisit their perception of each animal's animality and, perhaps, of their own. ::

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