'Living Flesh': Animal–Human Surfaces

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Abstract

While historically animal art served cultural ends toward appropriating and domesticating animals, contemporary art considers the possibility of meeting animals outside of human terrains and outside of cultural ideas about human and animal subjectivity. In such art the relationship between canvas as surface and animal body as surface undoes historical appropriation of the animal. The work of artists Olly and Suzi provides a test case for breaching the divide between human worlding and the ‘poor in world’ or mere surface lives of the animal as explicated by Martin Heidegger. The artists’ paper spread out as surface between the animal and the artists creates a contact zone between the surface lives of animals and the work of art. What develops is a productive site for pidgin language that counters human interiority as the space of rational thought.

Keywords

Agamben • animal • contact zone • contemporary art • Heidegger • language • performance

This article pursues the following premise: that which is most animal, including the biological element of the animal rationale, lives on the surface of things and the animal with its surfaces is an overlooked site of productive meaning. Animals are said to be poor in thought; they have little interior reflection and, consequently, little by way of selfhood and no means of attaining transcendental thought. So, to take up the animal means valuing that from which we differentiate ourselves, the animal and its life on the surface. I’m interested in imagining how the surface as a theoretical space occupied by the animal has a productivity and meaning different from the privileged self-reflection of the human subject. In other words, how does the animal and its non-interiority produce thought differently? How might
we value surfaces despite the overvaluation we put on the transcendental heights of culture and the well-being of our interiority? As a means of investigating this problem, I will make a place for two surfaces over the course of this article: the surface of canvases and the surface of animal bodies. The canvas and the animal body are used in two distinctly different ways at two moments in art history: animal portrait art of the 18th century and contemporary art work such as that of Olly and Suzi. As will be explained a bit later, each use of the canvas reveals a different set of values and yields meaning in different ways.

Throughout this article, surface refers to material surfaces: canvases, paper, the visible and tactile exterior of animal and human bodies. Surface also refers to the means of thinking and productivity removed from the interiority of the subject. Taking surfaces seriously re-evaluates the derogatory claim that animals have only impoverished interiority and live on the surface without the self-reflexivity of thought. Traditionally the human subject is either valued according to a transcendental – as in the Good for Plato – or through an interiority, such as Descartes’ cogito or Kant’s Copernican revolution. Thinking along surfaces yields a different sort of ontology from heights, depths, and interiors. It is thought without recourse to a transcendental method of valuation (what I am calling human heights and depths) and without privileging the interiority of the human subject (but rather situating the exteriority of surfaces against the interiority of the subject).

For the 18th century, the material body of the animal is subsumed within a structure of agrarian and culinary economics. Art plays its role by translating the surface of the animal body into an ideal form on canvases which helps cattlemen to breed their animals for consumption. In this case the exterior form of the animal body – its material surfaces – is observed at a distance by the artist to create ideal images of an animal for breeding and so improve the animal as meat, where the animal’s interior becomes exteriorized flesh for consumption (Figure 1). In contrast, for contemporary artists Olly and Suzi the same exterior animal surface is a site that refuses to be blithely subsumed as content for expression or consumption. In its sheer physicality the surface of the animal body resists taking part in the functional structure of human meaning. As will be pursued in the later part of this article, the art of Olly and Suzi suggests alternative economies of relation to animals.

In the 18th century, paintings of beef cattle help build and establish cattle breeds. These paintings enframed the animal in the field for agricultural purposes. By way of contrast, in the work of Olly and Suzi, sheets of paper and body surfaces are the place where animals leave their marks by biting back, as it were, and provide a glimpse of a world other than our own – a world outside of human enlightenment and enlightening. Rather than paint in a studio, the artists work in the ‘wilds’, the domain of the animal, where they paint the animal’s form on paper and encourage the animal to interact with the paper as well.¹ Their paintings offer a surface for human–animal exchange where the human animals and animal animals trade marks (Figure 2). These works on paper counter livestock portraits used to discern and to
Figure 1  *A Shorthorned Heifer, Seven Years.* Artist unknown, after Thomas Weaver, c. 1840. Reproduced with permission of The Museum of English Rural Life, The University of Reading.

Figure 2  *Cheetabs.* Photograph by Olly and Suzi of their work, *Five Cheetabs*, 1998. Reproduced with permission.
promulgate the cultivation and enculturation of livestock for human use. Animals move from enframed to unframed. At the outermost limits in thinking of their work, Olly and Suzy’s paintings suggest a rethinking of what marks of significance mean within the economy of art, language, and culture. This article addresses how their work suggests another sort of writing, another (minor) language, and a unique means of (re)presenting animals.

In-In

Cattle portraiture serves as an example of how art illustrates and helps to transform the natural world. The story of cattle surfaces has a long heritage and is at least as old as cave paintings. Agricultural animals, the topic of so many animal portraits, are enframed by domestication before they are ever framed as paintings. As William Youatt (1834) explains in his 19th-century manual for cattle rearing: ‘when he [cattle] receives a kind of culture at our hands, he seems to be enlightened with a ray of human reason, and warmed with a degree of human affection’ (p. 4). Domestication ‘enlightened’ the animals and brought them within the folds of culture. The birth of modern breeding practices marks one of the most important turns in the story of animal surfaces. Breeding is the measuring of surfaces. Breeders measure key surface points of their animals to size up which sire and dame pair will create the most desired offspring (Broglio, 2005; Trow-Smith, 2006[1959]). The story of modern cattle breeding began in the 1760s at Dishley Farm, in the British midlands, run by Robert Bakewell. As an agricultural innovator, Bakewell focused on improving the form, flesh, and propensity for fattening of his beasts. He developed ‘in-in’ breeding of his cattle, i.e. he bred within the same family lineage. By mating close relations, he helped to insure the purity of the desired characteristics (Ritvo, 1987: 45–81). Under his breeding method animals would gain flesh and fat in less time and consequently increase the grazier’s productivity and profits. Offspring which did not meet his standards were removed from the breeding stock. Deciding which animals to breed and which characteristics of each animal were desirable traits to be inherited depended upon Bakewell having a preconceived image of what an ideal cattle would look like. Having an ideal type to breed toward allowed Bakewell to read the visible body of his cattle and discern which animals were to be bred and which were to be sent out to pasture.

Bakewell’s ideal was realized on canvas by livestock artists of the period, a history which is detailed in Elspeth Moncrieff et al.’s Farm Animal Portraits 1780–1900 (1988). Artists would draw idealized beasts by using prize cattle as their study, then ever so slightly exaggerating the features: a straightened and elongated back for the most famous Durham Ox, a few more bulges of fat for Robert Colling’s White Heifer, and corrected tail and rump of fat in Shakespeare and his sire, D. (These examples of ‘correcting’ the look of the animal through representation include, respectively: The Durham Ox, John Boutlbee 1802; A Shorthorned Heifer, Seven Years, artist unknown, after Thomas Weaver, c. 1840; descriptions of Shakespeare and D in William
Marshall’s *Economy of the Midland Counties*, Marshall, 1796: 324.) The visible surface of the animal body becomes lines on canvas which represent ideal beasts. Beginning in the late 18th century, paintings of prized cattle were made into prints which circulated to illustrate the standard toward which graziers should breed their beasts. These bovine pin-ups changed the way farmers looked at and fashioned their animals. As a result of new breeding practices and the new art of cattle portraiture, cattle in the field became instances designed to actualize the fictions found on canvas. In sum, the visible surface of the animal body gets transposed onto the artist’s canvas but only then to have the artistic image transform the physical body of cattle. The beginning of cattle breeding is a play of surfaces from the cattle’s exterior form to the flat canvas surface then back to the next generation of cattle bodies.

**Inside Out**

Optical supremacy enables the circulation between canvas and the cattle bodies. Since the fundamental means of evaluating and categorizing animals for natural history and for agriculture during the 18th century is by their lines and surfaces – i.e. by what can be seen – artists have a privileged position in the promotion of breeds (Foucault, 1994[1966]: 137; Grasseni, 2005: 35). With a primacy placed on line and form by breeders, the artist is able to employ his skills toward creating a visual argument for the value of an animal. In painting, the cattle’s quality becomes evident at one glance. One can simply look at Boultbee’s painting to see the desired traits. You doubt that an ox can weigh 2400 lbs? Why, simply look at the neck, the shoulders, the dewlap, the fine ribs, etc. (Figure 3). Lest the two-dimensional image not convince, then the inscription of dimensions at the bottom of many paintings and prints will advance the point.

Yet, more important than the visual representation itself is the *spacing* that takes place in the act of codifying the animal. The artist and grazier both judge the animal while maintaining a distance. Furthermore, the eye as window positions the viewing subject as a human with privileged interiority in contrast to the outward surface of the viewed object, the cattle’s corpulence. Through sight, we possess in our minds the animal that is seen from a distance (Merleau-Ponty, 1969: 259). The animal surface is contrasted with and co-opted by the human who uses his own reflexive interiority (i.e. ‘thinking’) to divide the animal surface into cuts of meat, then to project the schematic cuts onto the body of the beast. Cattle now made meat turns the animals inside out. Since these animals are not considered to have an interiority, which is the unique quality of humans, and since they don’t speak in our language, their inside is already made an outside, a mere surface to be exposed for human use.2

Of course, animals look back and, in this look, the center and periphery as well as the interiority (of the human) and exterior (of the animal) get misplaced. John Berger in ‘Why Look at Animals’ (1991) and more recently
Jacques Derrida (2001) in ‘The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow)’ both leverage the look of the animal toward a rethinking of the human arena:

The animal scrutinizes him [man] across a narrow abyss of non-comprehension. This is why the man can surprise the animal. Yet the animal – even if domesticated – can also surprise the man. The man too is looking across a similar, but not identical, abyss of non-comprehension. And this is so wherever he looks. He is always looking across ignorance and fear. And so, when he is being seen by the animal, he is being seen as his surroundings are seen by him. (Berger, 1991: 3)

Animals look at us, and we are confounded by their radical Otherness as well as by the fact that we may be objects in their world as much as they are objects in ours. When animals look back at us, we must grant that there may be something of the animal’s ‘self’ that we do not know. Jacques Derrida in his autobiographical article ‘The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow)’ (2001) uses the look from his cat as the point where thought begins. The reflection emerges from a moment when the philosopher is naked and his cat looks at him. In the exchange of glances between himself and the animal and through reflection on his own nakedness, Derrida begins a bridge in thought across the human–animal divide. The cat under his roof reminds

Figure 3 The Durham Ox, after John Boulbee, engraved by I. Whessel, 1802. Reproduced with permission of The Museum of English Rural Life, The University of Reading.
the thinker of the Otherness of all animals and, furthermore for the philosopher without clothes, it reveals the Otherness that seems forgotten within the human.

Nakedness and the animal body of the human work as a necessary supplement. As Steve Baker (2000) explains in *The Postmodern Animal*: ‘Precisely as an alternative to Descartes’ “I think therefore I am”, Derrida proposes the formulation: “The animal looks at us, and we are naked before it. And thinking perhaps begins there”’ (p. 186). The ‘there’ in Derrida’s statement works as a deferral and displacement of the ground which authorizes thought. The ‘there’ acts as deferral by holding thought in abeyance until one can resolve the placement of the there and here, the placement of the animal outside man which serves as the traditional foil to the interiority of human thought and the problematic ‘here’ of the human which is both rational and animal. Yet, this holding of thought in abeyance is itself the gesture of thought in which Derrida must consider the role of the animal in philosophy and the place of his own disrobed human animality. In the look of the animal, the center of the environment moves outside the human and gets placed upon the multiple centers of the many ‘eyes’ out ‘there’. As a consequence, human identity finds its ‘I’ in the eyes of the Other. Yet, by using the language of ‘the look’ we reinscribe the animal interior and its Otherness within the domain of visual culture. Unfortunately, ‘the look’ already points to human interiority, the depths and heights of our coded special languages from linear perspective to Cartesian perspectivalism and on to the Lacanian Imaginary and Symbolic (Jay, 1988: 4–11).

Even more pressing than the look from animals is their physicality and surfaces of contact. An actual encounter with an animal means physical proximity and (near) contact with the flesh of the animal Other. Humans consider the raw physicality of contact to be a most animal characteristic and one least intelligible within human cultural codes. If for Derrida human thinking begins in the regard of the animal, to move this notion further, contact with animals provides a possibility to think *with* them (Derrida, 2001: 370). Donna Haraway (forthcoming, 2007) has begun to explore the implication of contact with animals in her forthcoming work *When Species Meet*. In reading Derrida’s encounter with his cat, she comments:

Positive knowledge of and with animals might just be possible, knowledge that is positive in quite a radical sense if it is not built on the Great Divides. Why did Derrida not ask, even in principle, if a Gregory Bateson or Jane Goodall or Marc Bekoff or Barbara Smuts or many others had met the gaze of living, diverse animals and in response undid and redid themselves and their sciences? Their kind of positive knowledge might even be what Derrida would recognize as a mortal and finite knowing that understands ‘the absence of the name as something other than a privation.’ Why did Derrida leave unexamined the practices of communication outside of the writing technologies he did know how to talk about?
Haraway suggests there is much to be gleaned from the physicality of encounters. The shock of physicality in contact with animals counters the distance of visual enframing within traditional animal portraiture. It enlivens the surface of the animal body as something other than an object enframed by human desires. The question pursued in the following pages is how art might employ this positive knowledge and as a consequence aid philosophy in rethinking the space where, as Derrida claims, ‘thinking perhaps begins’.

Outside Out

Let’s suppose it all takes place on the surface. That is, after all, what we are told about animals, isn’t it? They have no eternal soul and no substantial interiority; they are, as Heidegger (1961[1938]) says, ‘poor in world’ (p. 185). Because they supposedly have no interiority and thus no place for philosophical thought, animals don’t think like we do; in their life without the depths, they don’t know that they are going to a slaughter house; they don’t even know that they are animals! Of course, why should they be required to know these things (Coetzee, 1999: 28–9)? ‘Animal’ is our word, a human word for all that crawls, slithers, creeps, stalks, and walks the earth other than ourselves, of course, or at least the part of our selves that is not the least – that which is culturally recoverable from our animal bodies (Derrida, 2001: 392). I would like to think through, no, rather think uttbh the animal surface, the literalism of the surfaces and the material bodies both as they have been used historically to determine the animal’s being from the distance of culture and how surfaces collapse the heights (and transcendental impositions) of cultural appropriation of the animal. If, as the Nietzschian aphorism goes, truth is a metaphor of which we’ve forgotten it is a metaphor, then surfaces deflate both the cultural scaffolding of metaphor and of truth by returning thought to the site where bodies meet. In this collapse of cultural cache, material surfaces offer a means of thinking about humans and animals outside the hegemony of privileged interiority of the human subject. The suggestion here is that surfaces offer no retreat to an Archimedean point within the human that is removed from exterior events and used to leverage (in thought) the rest of the world. Without such a distance or remove, there is nowhere else to go, no chance to remove ourselves in ways that rationalize our superiority ‘over’ or ‘above’ other animals. In brief, the longstanding philosophical assumption that animals live only on the surface and the negative valuation that follows from this can be turned as a positive site for production.

Heidegger’s work on the notion of ‘world’ proves an important starting point where we can cut our teeth before moving elsewhere. His sense of a limited animal world, animals ‘poor in world’ compared to human world-building, encapsulates much of philosophy’s history with the animal question. Heidegger’s most discussed topography of the animal’s world appears in his 1929–30 seminar published as The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics: ‘the stone is worldless; the animal is poor in world; man is world-forming’
(Heidegger, 1961[1938]: 185). Animals certainly have environments (*Umwelt*) but they are not aware of their environments in the same way that humans are. Derrida (1991) summarizes Heidegger’s position by explaining: ‘As for the animal, it has access to entities, but, and this is what distinguishes it from man, it has no access to entities *as such*’ (p. 51). Heidegger’s lizard, for example, sits on a rock and enjoys the sun but does not know the rock as rock nor sun as sun. Heidegger (1961[1938]) goes so far as to explain that:

> When we say that the lizard is lying on the rock, we ought to *cross out* the word ‘rock’ in order to indicate that whatever the lizard is lying on is certainly given *in some way* for the lizard, and yet is not known to the lizard *as* a rock. (p. 198, emphasis added)

The animal is caught up in its series of relations to other entities without an ability to remove itself from the ‘captivation’ which such a series presents.

Heidegger draws his notion of an animal world from Jakob von Uexküll, a founding figure in ethnology and semiotics. In ‘Stroll through the Worlds of Animals and Men’, Uexküll moves beyond mechanistic biology to develop a line of inquiry into the animal’s sense of its surroundings, something close to an animal phenomenology (Ingold, 2000: 176). For Uexküll, the animal’s environment is constituted by the ‘carriers of significance’ or ‘marks’ which captivate the animal. All other elements in the world drop off and have no place in the animal world or what Uexküll calls *Umwelt* (Uexküll, 1957: 10–11; Agamben, 2004: 52–5). So, Heidegger’s lizard may know a warm surface but he does not register the rock as rock or the sun as sun. Instead, the animal functions within a world that has carriers of significance or marks of significance. Caught within the series of relations that is their *Umwelt*, animals simply cannot get outside their surroundings to have a look around.

By way of contrast, the human world has manic-depressive heights and depths – from Plato’s ascent out of the cave to Empedocles’s refusal to climb out but rather to dig in and dig deeply (Deleuze, 1990: 128–9; Young, 2003: 10). It is human uprightness, verticality, that sufficiently dis-places us from our surroundings so that we can see the rock at a distance, a rock as rock. Animals do not have this distance. ‘Their whole being is in the living flesh’, as Coetzee (1999: 65) explains. As Derrida has explicated in *Of Spirit*, world is for Heidegger only possible for humans, those beings who have spirit. As much as they are poor in spirit, animals are left ‘poor in world’. The ‘uprightness’ of humans is both physical and metaphysical while the animal world is decidedly flat. Without heights and depths, the animals are left with marks on the surface; these marks are a ‘cross out’ that (re)marks in our language the place of their relations (Heidegger, 1961[1938]: 198; Derrida, 1991: 53). To consider animals and take seriously the role of surfaces in thought and language means to re-evaluate physical and metaphysical uprightness of humans.

Gilles Deleuze in *The Logic of Sense* (1990) counters the verticality of Plato and Empedocles with the horizontal animality of Diogenes; the cynic
philosopher ‘is no longer the being of the caves, nor Plato’s soul or bird, but rather the animal which is on the level of the surface’ (p. 133). Known as the dog of Athens, Diogenes lived on the surface. If he wrote anything, none of it survives; we have only anecdotes: he ate without discernment whatever he happened upon in the streets, masturbated in public, took to insulting his contemporaries, and lived in a tub. Plato could not coax ‘the dog’ into a dialogue, a conversation meant to invite Diogenes within the Academy where he would be refuted by the masters of language, Plato and Socrates. Fed up with words, always more words, Diogenes would offer his detractors food, something to stuff their mouths with and stop the babble of culture. Food could stop the philosophical abstraction and recall the animal body of the speaker. Fredrick Young in his article ‘Animality’ (2003) explains:

Plato had no idea how to deal with Diogenes. For Diogenes refused to argue on Platonic grounds, refused dialectics and the rational ‘voice’ that goes with it by means of which ‘man’ speaks. With Diogenes, there’s a different modality of argumentation, if we can even call it that, the performative and animality. The Diogenic is more than a literal abject attack on Plato. More significantly, Diogenes’ strategies are irreducible to any modality of dialectics or philosophy proper. Again, what we have is the problematics of the surface, of animality – a physiognomic performance that unleashes the performativity of animality into the Platonic landscape and architecture. (p. 16, emphasis in original)

The performative is thought for Diogenes. His actions with his body in space are his thinking. This is the literalism of surfaces without retreat to a Platonic architecture. In like manner, Coetzee in *The Lives of Animals* (1999) explains that ‘the living flesh’ of the animal is its argument. When Coetzee’s protagonist Elizabeth Costello is asked if life means less to animals than to humans, she retorts that animals do not respond to us in words but rather with gestures of the living flesh. Its argument from its flesh is the animal’s ‘whole being’ (p. 65). Like Coetzee’s animals, the world for Diogenes is not that of the culture which surrounds him and which seeks to incorporate his corpus, if he would ever get around to writing one. Instead, he offers corporality, bodies and surfaces that evade the manic-depression, the heights and depths, of his contemporaries. It comes, then, as no surprise that Diogenes lived his life in exile from Sinope, his birthplace.

Diogenes’ performative thought indicates an-Other world, something other than the distanced observation by which humans understand an environment through a privileged interiority and reflexive consciousness (Sloterdijk, 1987: 104). Collapsing heights and depths to surface, there is no space for interiority and reflexivity. In this collapse, Diogenes sides with the animals. While for Heidegger animals are benumbed to the possibility of seeing objects in themselves, the animals do see and interact with the world around them. If not a Heideggerian clearing – reserved for humans – then is it possible that animals have some other sort of clearing and revealing available
to them and not to humans? Even Heidegger in addressing the poverty of the animal must admit this. The living flesh of animals is not ‘something inferior or that it is at a lower level in comparison with human Dasein. On the contrary, life is a domain which possesses a wealth of being-open, of which the human world may know nothing at all’ (Heidegger, 1961[1938]: 255, emphasis added). If human knowledge is that of distances and interiorities (our heights and depths), it is possible that one way of knowing that has been closed off to us is that of surfaces, a space where animals have often been relegated in their ‘poverty’.

The gambit in this article is that there is an animal clearing or ‘open’ on the surface of things and the performance of surfaces. Otherwise said, I am experimenting with the possibility that the ‘poverty’ of the animal and its lack of interiority or depth is a site of productivity and a different economy of meaning. While it remains stubbornly difficult to enter into the perception of animals, humans can come to know the world of the animal through their own contact with the corporality of beasts and humanity’s own animality. Amid human worlding, a raw physicality can pull us away from the interiority of the subject and point the way to an-Other relationship. Uexküll (1957) marks out the terrain of this relationship with his notion of animal Umwelt and its carriers of significance. Within this terrain are two facets that I have outlined in this article: an animal ‘open’ of which, as Heidegger (1961[1938]: 255) says, ‘the human world may know nothing at all’ and, despite the unknowable, positive interactions expressed by Donna Haraway and explored by Bateson, Goodall, Bekoff and Smuts (Haraway, forthcoming). The unknowable has its economies, relations, and productions such that Haraway and Heidegger, in this case, can find a meeting point. The figure of this meeting point could be Diogenes. He refuses to engage in a mastery of language found in the Academy, where language and thought distance us from the object of study and from this distance allow us to evaluate beings. Despite his refusal to enter the Academy, Diogenes still ‘speaks’ through positive interactions of silences and performance.

It is in the context of physicality, surfaces, and performance that the work of contemporary artists Olly and Suzi gains currency. Their paintings jostle the Umwelt of the animal and the world of the human through the particular set of parameters under which their paintings are executed. This team of British artists works in the environment of animals under conditions that threaten and impose upon the human as they execute drawings of the animals. From the Arctic to African deserts the two artists place themselves in extreme environments – sites that are at the limits of human dominion and more likely to be the center of the animal’s domain and world. In a shark cage, squatting within range of a polar bear, a few paws’ length from a lion, the artists work ‘hand over hand’ creating sparse, strong, moving lines in the shape of the animal before them (Olly and Suzi, 2003: 8). The artists feel ‘helpless’ and ‘out of our depths’ by working within the environment of the animal rather than in the familiar terrain of an artist’s studio (Olly and Suzi, 2003: 184). Working in the animal’s terrain produces a sense of fear that becomes important to Olly and Suzi’s art:
Fear plays a vital role in our art-making process. We are constantly challenged by and confronted with environments and animals, especially predators (polar bears, white sharks, big cats), that trigger adrenaline, a primal response that alerts us to the potential of imminent danger . . . The knowledge we gather [about the animal] arms us, but fear is still present; a warm glow, keeping us warm. (Olly and Suzi, 2003: 162)

Fear is something that rises to the surface, that keeps the artists in contact with the surface, preventing them from slipping into an interiority of selfhood that would provide a safe haven and at the same time a danger to their bodily well-being while in the realm of beastly animals (Steeves, 1999: 136).

As Olly and Suzi work at the surface, their physical presence becomes one of the marks within the animal domain. They are one of the ‘carriers of significance’ captivating the animal from within its world. From the animal’s world the artists are a marked surface while from the human’s world the animal body is a surface to be illustrated. One surface meets another. Between these two surfaces paper is spread out. The blank space of the paper is fair game from within the world of both humans and animals. The artists draw from within the domain of the animal and ‘encourage the animals to interact’ with the paper (Olly and Suzi, 2003: 145). A white shark bites off a corner, a leopard tears at the cloth, an anaconda slithers across the surface leaving a mud-stained track (Figures 4 and 5). The animal as surface and human as surface leave their mark on a mutual environment of paper that has become the outside, the outer margin or limit of each domain where the outside finds a way out of a limited Umwelt and becomes evidence of a much larger world. The outside limit becomes the site of production and possibilities.

Their work is a performance. The making of their art is part of the art itself and gets documented in photographs taken by Greg Williams, Olly’s brother, who accompanies the artists in their travels. The paintings are not something to be executed at a distance from the ‘object’ of study, as in farm animal portraiture. Like Diogenes, their actions disavow the linguistic markers of the dialectic and the Academy with us humans on one side and the animals (caged) at the other side (James, 2003: 2).

Contact

The larger world which humans and animals create in alliance with one another can be considered a ‘contact zone’. The word comes from Mary Louise Pratt’s Imperial Eyes (1992) where she uses the term to describe the ‘social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination’ (p. 4). The grappling between humans and animals forms a topography much like the space described by Pratt. With Olly and Suzi, for
Figure 4  *Shark I, Shark II,* and *Shark III*. Photographs by Greg Williams of Olly and Suzi’s *Shark Bite*, 1997. Reproduced with permission.
example, such topography is an actual relation between bodies – a marker or carrier of significance of each other’s body from within their respective domains. The marks cross, and cross out, till there is a space negotiated and shared between human and animal through their re/marks. Such remarks take on the character of a hybrid language similar to the origins of Pratt’s (1992) term:

I borrow the term ‘contact’ here from its use in linguistics, where the term contact language refers to improvised languages that develop

Figure 5 *Anaconda on Painting*. Photograph by Greg Williams of Olly and Suzi’s *Green Anaconda*. Reproduced with permission.
among speakers of different native languages who need to communicate consistently, usually in the context of trade. Such languages begin as pidgins and are called creoles when they come to have native speakers of their own. Like the societies of the contact zones, such languages are commonly regarded as chaotic, barbarous, lacking in structure. (p. 6)

It is exactly the asignifying scrawls across the paper spread out by Olly and Suzi which bear witness to and constitute the pidgins and forked tongues of the animal–artist alliance.

It is not that Olly and Suzi have drawn animals. Rather, they have formed alliances that become the agents of painting (Baker, 2000: 126). Foremost, the artists talk about respect for the animal, a respect that makes alliance possible. They glean from experts in the field the various information needed to survive within the Umwelt of the Other. How far to stand from a polar bear, how to not look afraid in front of a large cat, and how to handle an anaconda is a knowledge leading to physical comportment, a manipulation of their own body surface in relation to the animal’s. Olly and Suzi’s physical bearing in the world of the animal and how the animal reacts to their actions serves as a syntax for the pidgin language between species.

It is certainly possible to read the work of Olly and Suzi as a naïve, hopeless effort to engage animals in a project in which the animals have no interest. The artists themselves consider their work with predator species as a way of bearing witness to endangered ecological chains which sustain the predators and which the fierce animals help constitute. As such, it is a project in ecological awareness. But perhaps the hazy romanticism resides in the notion that the art is an alliance. Baker (2000) counters this argument in part by considering the authenticity or earnestness of the project, a sincerity that produces something new rather than taking refuge in art as satire or irony (pp. 24–5, 38). My own interest is in how this art shows a concern for human and animal phenomenologies. Humans and animals share the same earth but live in different worlds. What, then, are the possibilities to think at the edge of the human world, at the place where it bumps up against the animals’ worlds? What happens where the surfaces of skin and scales meet? Negotiating this meeting place, this contact zone, requires that the artists momentarily suspend or leave behind much of the world of culture and acquire new gestures and a different awareness of their bodies before the body of the Other. They do not put themselves in absolute danger as a sort of stunt; rather, they negotiate the space using some technological elements of culture (wet suits, shark cages, special paints, etc.) and some cultural awareness of various animals’ behaviors but also, as I’m emphasizing here, relying on bodily movements and the physicality of the environment. So, for example, when encountering a polar bear, the artists have technological equipment of transportation, warm clothing, paints that will not freeze too quickly, and a camera to document the event. However, they also must rely on knowing the proper proximity to the animal, how to crouch down, and how to maneuver in the snow.
Each of the sections in *Olly & Suzi: Arctic Desert Ocean Jungle* (Olly and Suzi, 2003) is filled with tales of how they navigated extreme environments. Details of bodily motion – buoyancy under water, cautious wading in the marshy domain of an anaconda, rapid brush strokes in the –40° Celsius weather of the polar bear’s icy habitat – are more than adventurous tidbits meant to titillate the admirers back home. Motion and environment contribute to the individuality of the pidgin language and the space in which this language is formed. Rather than an imposed form, pidgin language created between species arises from tentative gesturing, assertion of ground, meanings conveyed or missed. The lack of structure creates possibilities but also threatens collapse of all meaning. Contact zones bring together physicality and linguistic exchange in order to create new tentative meanings and temporary societies.

Density and lightness, slowness and speed, thick and thin are states of being inhabited by the lines on paper, the flight and repose of the animals, and the corporeality held by the human–animal alliance. The surfaces and bodies refuse signification and in doing so take us elsewhere, to the ‘poor in world’ of the animal that is rich in its own textures: ‘signification may be undone, with both literal and metaphorical attempts to fix meaning giving way to “a distribution of states”; and that individual identity may be undone, with both human and animal subjects giving way to “a circuit of states”’ (Baker, 2000: 117–18, emphases in original). The paintings bear witness to the ‘distribution of states’. The ‘hand over hand’ method of the artists along with the interaction of the animal diffuses the agency of the artwork and creates an event structure.

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Crossing and marking: the artists’ bodies cross into the animal’s world and become carriers of significance in that world. The privileged interiority of the human subject unfolds, unravels, becoming more like paper spread out than a selfhood and more like an element than a person. Following Uexküll, Olly and Suzi can say that *We are markers of significance in a world that is not our own* as a whale shark glides along the length of Olly’s body, a great white shark bumps the diving cage, an alligator’s tail pushes against Suzi’s hand, a snake’s scales rub against their skin. The animals leave their marks. Double-crossing: being astute to the way animals work in their terrains, Olly and Suzi do not give in and give themselves up to the animal. They understand enough to maneuver in the animal world. They also know how to use a blank white surface. Let the shark bite the paper and the anaconda slither across it (Figure 5). The paper will record one of the many crossings in the ‘inky, impenetrable darkness’. The recording becomes the double-crossing, the betrayal and portrayal of an event that cannot be fully captured but which leaves traces of its passing. The paper bears witness to the event. In a gallery, it functions like a map indicating an experiential terrain that has been traversed. The painting on paper is both presence and absence, a production and a loss of the actual event. It points to the animal’s ‘wealth of being-open,
of which the human world may know nothing at all’. The artists have extended themselves to the limits of the human world to bump up against this wealth. As viewers we stand in the shadows of this Other and foreign openness and we wonder at its surfaces.

Throughout this article, surfaces are shown to have a power of production by leveraging their negative place in philosophy to think outside of typical philosophical architecture, which privileges human interiority over and against objects of inquiry. At the heart of this article is a claim by Coetzee’s character Elizabeth Costello who explains that animals don’t think like us nor speak like us but rather ‘Their whole being is in the living flesh’ (Coetzee, 1999: 65). I have employed Uexküll’s biosciotics of Umwelt to further Costello’s claim about the flesh of animals as well as the visceral and tactical qualities implicit in the notion of ‘living flesh’. If, as Coetzee claims (through Costello), there is something meaningful in the living flesh of the animal and if Uexkull’s work bears this out, then what are the implications for the visual arts?

Turning to a notion of living flesh changes the animal from an object of cultural consumption into a meaningful agent with an Umwelt. One way of exploring this Umwelt is by taking philosophy at its word and thinking with the poverty and ‘mere’ surface of the animal. Since the world of the animal as a world remains foreign to humans (or as Thomas Nagel, 1974, says: we will never know ‘what it is like to be a bat’ from the bat’s perspective), we can only know the animal through surfaces. We know it through contact with the surface of the animal and the surface of the animal’s world or ‘bubble’, as Uexküll explains. Olly and Suzi work with the animal surface, its living flesh, as well as the surface of the animal bubble as it meets our own in contact zones. The resulting marks on paper are instructively different from animal portraiture and the history of animal painting. The pieces of paper have circulated in a human–animal economy and bear witness to an animal world. This witnessing is not a knowing and consuming like cattle portraits that subsume the animal and its world and subsequently deprive animals of a space outside of human understanding. These works leave the mystery of the animal and its world intact while calling attention to its existence.

Notes

1. Olly and Suzi worked in the ‘field’ in the 1990s and early 2000s. Currently, they are producing canvas paintings in their London studio. These canvases weave together real and imaginative narratives of the various animal encounters from their previous work.
2. See Ron Broglio’s ‘Heidegger’s Shepherd of Being and Nietzsche’s Satyr’ (forthcoming) which takes up different methods of knowledge and/as consumption of animal flesh.
3. Steve Baker has recently extended my use of the animal surface to include taxidermy art or ‘botched taxidermy’. See his article ‘What Can Dead Bodies Do?’ in the exhibition catalogue for Bryndis Snaebörnsdóttir and Mark Wilson’s Nanoq: Flat Out and Bluesome (Baker, 2006).
4. Steven W. Laycock (1999) and Ralph R. Acampora (1999) provide a language and examples for an animal phenomenology in their articles.
References


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