

Tuija Kokkonen: Non-humans and Performance.

II Non-human spectators: (Mis)performance for a dog

Widening and complicating the performance into the area of the non-human highlights a mounting question of our time: is there anything outside the performance? In performative societies, can performances have an exterior? If they do, do we perceive such a performance as a misperformance that has lost its efficacy? Because performances and the processes of subjectification produce one another all the more, it is necessary to consider these two notions in relation to one another. The questions of the boundaries of human subjectivity and performance, of interior and exterior, became more acute during my work on *A Performance with an Ocean View (and a Dog/for a Dog) – II Memo of Time*. I will ponder these matters in the light of a question that arose during the process: what does it mean to perform or to create a performance for a non-human (as a spectator) – in this instance, a dog – and could this bring into the open the limit and the outside of performance, and even provide a possible way out of performative societies? I will also touch on the relation of this question to the production of knowledge and artistic research.

Relation to the exterior.

Felix Guattari has presented the idea of mental, societal and environmental ecology as inseparable. He argues that the relationship between subjectivity and its exteriority – “whether social, animal, vegetal or Cosmic” (2000: 10) – has deteriorated and is moving towards regression and implosion. Another perspective on subjectivity, unavoidable in this context, is that of Jacques Derrida, who posited in his late animal texts that human subjectivity is based neither in reason, nor in being, nor in the human other or unconscious, but in animals (2008: 90). According to Derrida the limit between humans and (other) animals is not an abyss, but a multiple, divided and moving border, in light of which we are now passing a historical phase, one for which we have no scale, namely the edge of an anthropocentric subjectivity (2008: 31).

I will first pick up on two trends that have exploded in recent years. One is that of animals disappearing, meaning not only the removal of animals amongst humans, but

also animals becoming extinct. Recent reports show that over a third or even half of all species on earth are in risk of extinction by 2100, and the numbers of around half of all species are in decline. Researchers consider this to be the single greatest threat to humans. The other trend is the vast growth of ‘performance species’ - performance practices, discourses and research. Jon McKenzie (2001) has written about the age of global performance, and Baz Kershaw (2008) about performative societies and performance addiction. By following these two ‘mega trends’, we can create a possible future world, which is a dystopia. It is a world without animals, but filled with different representations of animals, attempts to remember animals and to bring them back to life and perform them with the help of gene banks and cloning technology.

What do these trends and their logical conclusion, the disappearing world of animals and the developing world of their representations, mean for our understanding of human subjectivity? Research into biology and environmental history has indicated that humans and human intelligence have developed as responses to the challenges created by living together with other species. Over the last 200 years, this joint life has changed essentially: having once surrounded humans, the circle of animals and the animals’ gazes have withdrawn, while representations of animals have increased enormously, as cultural historian John Berger has pointed out (1991: 3-28). At the same time, as Derrida states, the development of new forms of knowledge and intervention techniques have replaced, with violence, the traditional forms of treating animals, and live animals have been reduced to mere products (2008: 25, 89). He posits that the creation of our subjectivity and of our entire society is based on the sacrifice of animals and animalism – also of humans branded ‘animals’ - and “organizing on a global scale the forgetting or misunderstanding of this violence” (2008: 25-26, 90-91). Thus, animals have turned from being our companion species, who constituted us and our reason, into something that is entirely outside the human, something non-human. We may ask whether becoming a representation means becoming a victim. At least – in light of this – one can argue that the central question of human subjectivity is our relation to non-humans, principally to animals. The disappearance of animals would appear to present an unthinkable threat to the processes of subjectification.

Of the other trend, the explosion of performance research and knowledge during the last few decades, I will extract two features. One, presented by McKenzie, is an idea of a mutation, the becoming performative of knowledge itself: postmodern knowledge legitimates itself by performance-efficiency, and this “contains a certain level of terror: be operational (that is: commensurable) or disappear” (Jean-François Lyotard in McKenzie 2001: 14). Another feature presented by Kershaw, based e.g. on McKenzie, is that we are currently living in performative societies in which performance and spectatorship are so pervasive that they constitute human subjectivity, producing a global addiction to performance. Kershaw also links the performance addiction to our current ecological situation (2007: 11-14). This raises the following question: If we live in performative societies in which animals are rapidly disappearing, and yet we become humans in relation to animals, what does this mean to performance practices and research, artistic research in performing arts, and the knowledge they produce?

With whom do we live on this earth?

I return to the possible world I presented earlier. The dystopia in question has, in various ways, haunted the Memos of Time performance series. One example concerns the performance *Mr Nilsson – I Memo of Time* (2006), which dealt with our relation to animals and death and ended up as an attempt to recall animals. It included a dolphin scene, and working on it, my collaboration with an evolutionary ecologist Jussi Viitala and the new knowledge about dolphins’ so-called human and ‘super-human’ abilities, senses and their interiority – which developed in my mind as my knowledge of dolphins expanded – brought my imagination to an area that, though it felt somehow familiar, was in fact unreachable and impossible. This led to great artistic frustration (which was then followed by some new ways of working, especially working with a real, living dog in *A Performance with an Ocean View*).

The other example concerns a text in a spectators’ booklet in *A Performance with an Ocean View*, a short depiction by Jared Diamand of the execution of human limits and the way the white researchers - just over 100 years ago - presented their research objects, who faced a genocide during the research. For example, one researcher introduced a tobacco pouch he had made of skin of the last Tasmanian man, William

Lanner (parts of his body were kept as research souvenirs by the researchers), and the bones of the last Tasmanian woman, Truganini, which were exhibited in a museum until 1976. The question as to who is human is generally understood as a question of who/what can be considered within the boundaries of our species and who/what is outside these boundaries (for instance, severely handicapped people are sometimes referred to as 'vegetables'). Only until very recently, (Western) research still considered Tasmanians to be non-human.

These misperformings of humans and animals can be seen as markers on the path towards a world without animals but filled with representations of animals. At the same time, they too expose the fact that the concepts of human and animal are, at the very least, unclear and that their limits are uncertain. Is it possible, that we do not yet know who we are, or that we have never been humans, as philosopher Donna Haraway has argued (2008). If we do not know who we are, and if our subjectivity is constituted through animals, one has to ask: what are animals – as long as they still exist? With whom do we live on this earth?

Instead of asking 'Can animals reason, speak, use tools, die?' etc. – as animals have been assessed until now – Derrida suggests that we should ask 'Do animals suffer?' As he has posited, this is no longer a question of skill or ability: "Being able to suffer is no longer a power; it is a possibility without a power, a possibility of the impossible." (2008: 27-28) It is a question of compassion, of sharing mortality, our joint finitude with animals, and the possibility of this non-power (2008: 28).

A performance for a non-human.

Donna Haraway seeks a more active relationship and radical, positive knowledge of and with animals, and in her recent book *When Species Meet* she questions Derrida: isn't the more promising question, can animals play or work (2008: 21-22)? While developing and rehearsing *A Performance with an Ocean View* I began to work with a dog, Eka, and ended up directing a performance for this dog. In a performance (*with a dog*) Eka was one of the performers, along with other non-human and human actors. The other performance (*for a dog*) turned towards the animal: the dog was the spectator, the being for whom the performance was produced. Yet human spectators

were present for some of the time. Human performers were putting on small performances for her – blowing soap bubbles, feeding her a bone, throwing a ball, dwelling. Otherwise they stood on the edges of the roof with their backs to roof (and to the human spectators), leaving the space to the dog, watching the horizon and the sky, waiting.

The impulse to make a performance for a dog came from practical reasons: Eka didn't enjoy being on the roof, especially after the woods, rocks and water-filled caves on the ancient shore. I wanted to produce this performance on the future shore for the dog, so that she, as our only or last animal, would remain with us on that tarmac roof, a place offering few sensory stimuli. And because I do not have a special history as an animal lover, the first time I looked more closely at an 'animal' was when it became my colleague. In working with a live animal, I realized I was constantly asking myself: who is she? And in that case, who am I? What is a performance produced for a dog, and what happens to its human actors?

Although the human spectatorship in a performance for an animal is an important question, I give only a tiny glimpse of what it was like to perform for a dog – specifically to a living dog, not to its representation. I put on my own small performance for Eka only when the human spectators had left. It was part of a series of variations I have slowly been developing based on Joseph Beuys' performance *How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare* (1965). Together we walked through the installations and I asked what she remembered of that earlier performance on the ancient shore. The dog didn't seem at all interested in the installations, sometimes there were interesting smells, or I had hidden something to eat in them, but she enjoyed running between them. Thus, every evening this part of the performance turned to our joint running, dotted with brief flashes of the installations, static and moving images, fleeting human figures, stops in unexpected places and the joy of that movement, of relating to the sun, the asphalt, the wind, the smells, the clouds. The animal spectator's response changed the event: what I had originally planned as the content of the performance became a fleeting object, but my senses, movement and awareness changed along with Eka's participation.

What happens to a performance performed for non-humans? Eka was the liminal area of our performance. Though the performance was designed for a dog, we could not predict

her as a spectator the same way we can with humans. From human plans, we moved more towards being-with or becoming-with a dog. The becoming happened in the direction of the sensuous; for humans the world returned in order to be sensed, but with the dog's different kinds of senses the world also became more unfamiliar. The becoming also happened in the direction of widening time: the humans' and dog's time was right now and unquantifiable; the limits felt by humans were not our common limits. Together the world appeared differently.

The performance for a dog was a performance, and yet it was not. Eka watched the performance, yet did not. Perhaps she remembers it, perhaps not. And what about the seagull chick who followed every performance from a nest on the edge of the roof, the feathered oblivion that our performance probably sunk? Or the clouds, the central agents of our performance? 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. However, it is precisely this 'mis-' that could provide us with a way out of performance addiction and performative societies, even simply as an act of sinking the performance into non-human oblivion, into other kinds of memories. But just as some aspects of the performance – or, the performance as we know it – will disappear into that event, at the same time the performance and its human participants will obtain from the non-humans (who in addition to our shared qualities have other senses and different minds) answers that humans cannot give. In performance, at work and art, those responses may be taken more seriously, and new links and communities are made possible. Then, perhaps, the impossible, almost frozen traces in human subjectivity - an almost dead memory of close contact with animals - even in the reason itself, will move. And, perhaps, our new answers will be subjectivities and performances that are to become something other than performance, something resembling a meeting place emerging on the different boundaries between species, but which is currently standing sideways to us, difficult to perceive or name.

The non-power at the heart of the power.

But perhaps the biggest opportunity for a potential exit from performative societies,

stems from humans relating to the non-power of animals. The ability to suffer indicates an inability, "the non-power at the heart of the power" (Derrida 2008: 28). For modern subjectivity it is this weakness that is the most unpleasant exterior to relate to. In performative societies, powered by the norm of operational efficacy, it is actually impossible. This norm cannot be broken using the same tools as have been used to create it, and yet the norm repels other tools. Breaking the efficacy of the performance paradigm requires that it takes place within performative knowledge production and performance related research. It also requires that it be related to the senses, which subjectify the exteriority, to the sensuous life, which in performative societies has drifted further away from us, and, on some level, to our relationship to animals. Artistic research taking place through performance itself always incorporates a concrete, sensory event, in which the limit and the connections between humans and non-humans can once again be questioned, and can also be answered by the non-humans. Furthermore, the knowledge produced by that event is only partly controllable. Sensuous knowledge remains always, and perhaps even primarily, in the area of potentiality, as an insight; it can be sensed, it is effective, but not entirely understood. As such, artistic research could appear for the moment, in its unshaped form, to offer a possibility of creating a reflexive relationship with this non-power and the almost non-knowledge born from it, at the animal heart of reason, a possibility of creating one entrance to this complex, delicate terrain of weak and non-human co-agents and other times, where subjectivity and spectatorship are not indivisibly intertwined.

If, as it appears, we are facing a fatal error in our understanding of human subjectivity, misperformances for non-humans and all the other exits from performative societies are needed faster than we realize. Artistic research is not a solution, but for the time being it happens to have suitable tools for addressing this error.