

Shauna Laurel Jones, “Art brute: When the artist is animal”

Presented at Art in Translation: International Conference on Language and the Arts,
University of Iceland and the Nordic House, Reykjavík, September 18–20, 2014

Dim the lights and look down, crouch down, no—*lie down* on the bathroom floor and wait for the artist to emerge. When she enters, she enters with the fluid movement of one segment gracefully trailing the next, shimmying across the tiles with the lightness of a six-footed Fred Astaire. Her antennae quiver with cautious anticipation as she approaches her medium: there, in the corner, the scrap of tissue that didn't quite make it into the trash can. More than a mere blank page, the paper's sculptural potential is magnified and multiplied through the artist's compound eyes. She begins to take a tentative bite near the center of the scrap, then checks herself; she scampers to the side and proceeds to carve her way along one edge. Perhaps it's a formal decision, the start of a composition hinging on the expressiveness of precarious asymmetry. Or perhaps it has nothing to do with expressiveness, but is instead a minimalist acceptance of the material, more easily worked from the side. In the absence of an artist's statement, it might be hard to tell.

As the artist tends to her sculpture, it's now time for confession: I struggle with silverfish. I know I'm probably not alone here in feeling—I'll say it—repulsed by these mild little insects, but I'm a self-proclaimed animal lover who would like to regard all species as equal inheritors of the earth. I'm rather partial to spiders; I've overcome my childhood aversion to earthworms and slugs; and while centipedes render me a bit skittish, I can't say I harbor any ill will toward them. But when I switch on the light in the bathroom and see out of the corner of my eye a silverfish scuttling across the tiles, retreating under a rug or disappearing into the dark abyss between floor and doorframe, I find myself overcome by a distinct sensation of disgust. By the time I've figured out what to do about it, the offending insect is usually long gone, leaving me with nothing but embarrassment for ruffling my feathers over such a tiny little thing.

So on this occasion, as I reflect upon the question of animals as artists, I am not reflecting upon red pandas with paint on their paws, seals leaving inky kisses on canvases, or macaws wielding feathers-turned-brushes in their beaks. Nothing so cute and lovable. I am reflecting instead upon my last frontier in animal appreciation, the

lowly silverfish. What could she draw for me across a canvas of dust to win my heart? What sculpture carved by those paper-chewing jaws of hers would finally gain my affection?

My little silverfish would certainly not be the first insect to be given her own studio. There are Tomáš Libertíny's bees, approximately 40,000 of whom assist him in making a sculptural honeycomb vase such as this one; there are Catherine Chalmers's ants, whose laborious leaf cuttings feature in her recent multimedia series made on location in the Costa Rican rainforest. Perhaps the most opulent example is courtesy of French artist Hubert Duprat; in the early 1980s, Duprat launched into collaborative practice with caddis fly larvae, transporting them from their natural aquatic habitat into a jeweler's paradise of gold spangles, turquoise beads, diamonds, rubies, and the like. In lieu of their usual materials—grains of sand and biological debris—Duprat's resourceful larvae use these precious gems as building blocks for their protective tubular sheathes. The results, dazzling to the human eye even if not to the eyes of the insects themselves, raise obvious philosophical questions about the nature of art; Christian Besson addresses these in an interview with Duprat, ultimately concluding that whether “the caddis worm's precious case [is] the work of the insect or the work of the artist” is “not the right question.”¹ Besson does not, however, suggest what the right question might be, so I will suggest one for him: the right question is not “Is the caddis worm an artist?”, but rather, “What do these works of art reveal to us about the nature of the caddis worm?” Duprat himself hints at one partial answer with his comment that “the creatures may not use all the materials with the same facility, some may prefer pearls or beads, for example.”² That is to say: each case is made by an individual larva with individual preferences or aptitudes. If we consider this observation fully, the implications are profound, because it suggests something that most people are reluctant to afford to insects: particularities, subjectivities—personalities.

In the case of my silverfish, I differ from Duprat, whose work with caddis flies stems from a lifelong interest in and study of aquatic insects. I turn to my little arthropod not to demonstrate the creative capacities I know her to possess, as Duprat does, but rather to reveal herself to me. And also, not to use art to bring the *L. saccharina* species into

¹ Christian Besson and Hubert Duprat, “The Wonderful Caddis Worm: Sculptural Work in Collaboration with Trichoptera,” translated by Simon Pleasance, in *Leonardo*, vol. 31, no. 3, June–July 1998.

² *Ibid.*

meaning—which is what art historian Steve Baker claims Duprat is doing for the species he works with³—but again, to use art to reveal meanings already there.

And here I find an ally in British artist Lucy Kimbell, who began research for her performance lecture *One Night with Rats in the Service of Art* without a deep affinity for the species in question. As she admitted in the lecture, “I knew nothing about rats other than that they were both objects of disgust and fear in Western culture and objects of respect—as survivors, fast breeders, quick adaptors.”⁴ Kimbell’s *Rat Fair*, held at the Camden Arts Center a few days before and visited by rat fanciers and the general public, included a drawing competition for attendees’ pet rats. On the artist’s website, this is described as an activity “in which rat and human collaborated with a software tool to create a drawing”⁵ (in the photo here we see the drawing area above which a webcam was suspended to trace the rats’ movements). In her lecture, however, she described the resultant drawings (on the right) as “perhaps best thought of as portraits of curiosity. ...Openings, tunnels, corridors and holes are all of interest to the artist-rat.”⁶ In this sense, the drawings are less a product of a collaboration and more revelations of rat natures—how each individual rat navigated this particular environment on a particular occasion with conscious thought and free will, albeit mediated by human handlers.

Stepping back a moment beyond Lucy Kimbell and Hubert Duprat, animals seem to be everywhere in art these days, whether as subjects or as objects. By subjects, I mean both subject matter and subject in the Cartesian sense, in the form of conscious creators: the caddis worm goldsmiths, the rats who draw. By objects, I mean object in the Cartesian sense—the object of the subject’s gaze and of the subject’s metaphor—and I mean literally *objects*, in the form of bodies and parts of bodies. Of course, it’s the latter sense of “object” that has drawn the most critics and the biggest crowds: the goldfish that Marco Evaristi left to swim vulnerably in a blender, the pet cat killed and turned into a handbag by owner TINKEBELL, the cows and calves cleft in two and displayed in vitrines by Damien Hirst. The ethical rabbit hole of whether artists have a moral obligation toward the animal lives they use in the name of art is a deep and murky one, and as I gesture

³ Steve Baker, *The Postmodern Animal* (London: Reaktion Books, 2000), p. 82.

⁴ Lucy Kimbell, transcript from *One Night with Rats in the Service of Art*, 2005, cited in Steve Baker, *Artist Animal* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), p. 46.

⁵ Lucy Kimbell, “Rat Fair/One Night with Rats in the Service of Art,” retrieved from <http://www.lucykimbell.com/LucyKimbell/Rats.html>, accessed September 12, 2014.

⁶ Baker, *Artist Animal*, p. 53.

toward it, my silverfish is watching. “What can we learn about humans,” she asks herself skeptically, “through the art *they* make?” It is not just the use of living animals in art that can be ethically problematic, however. To use, again, an animal as an object of the human subject’s metaphor—animal as symbol—can be seen a problem insofar as it services an anthropocentric view of the world, a human-centered view which depends upon a crisp distinction between the human and the animal other.

“But wait a minute,” I hear my silverfish protesting. “It’s unethical for a human being to create an image of me and use it symbolically, but it’s fine to ask me—an insect—to make art in order to appeal to human audiences? Can’t you find me appealing on my own terms? (And by the way, *would you please stop putting words into my mouth?*)”

I’m not sure. Environmental anthropology has taught us that as long as there have been human beings, human beings have been shaping and reshaping the natural environment. While we may wax nostalgic about “unspoiled nature” prior to Western colonialism, or prior to the Industrial Revolution, or prior to the plow, there is no Eden untouched to which we can return unless we retreat beyond our evolutionary origins (and even still, other creatures also interact dynamically with their environment, so there is no Eden untouched, period). If we have always affected the ecosystems of which we are a part, if we have always changed nature, and if other animals are a part of nature, then it follows that we have always changed animals. That is, humans and other animals have co-evolved, and continue to do so, both in ways we’re beginning to understand and in ways which—I’m certain—we’ve yet to discover. As one musical example of co-evolution in progress, ethologist Jonathan Balcombe points to several studies from the past decade that have demonstrated certain European songbirds’ responses to the urban din: they sing louder, and they adjust the timing of their calls so as to avoid competing with rush hour traffic. Balcombe believes that over time and with natural selection, these conscious behavioral changes will become innate. Not all birds, he points out, have the same physical capacities to adapt their vocalizations to urban conditions, and as a result their populations are decreasing.⁷ To extrapolate and to generalize, if animals want to survive in the anthropocene, they might need to do so on human terms.

⁷ Jonathan Balcombe, *Second Nature: The Inner Lives of Animals* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), pp. 100–101.

So finally, to answer my silverfish, I borrow photographer Britta Jaschinski's words of regret to a certain rhinoceros: "I hope you don't mind me telling you that your strength and craving for an unrestricted existence make you quite anachronistic."⁸ Unrestricted, in the case of my silverfish, means unmediated, means left alone in the natural environment of the bathtub.

Should I, then, bring my silverfish on a trip to the zoo, where paintbrushes are being placed in paws and beaks in the name of animal enrichment? One such zoo, the Smithsonian, defines its animal enrichment program—of which painting is one component—as providing "physically and mentally stimulating activities and environments" in which "the animals have the opportunity [...] to use their natural abilities and behaviors in new and exciting ways."⁹ Finished products of zoo enrichment studio sessions were among the works included in *Art by Animals* at University College London's Grant Museum of Zoology, held in 2012 and believed by its curators to be the first interspecies painting exhibition.¹⁰ The burning question raised by the curators, as well as by numerous online reviews of the exhibition, was the question of "Is it art?" That is, are these traces of paint made by animals works of conscious creative intent? Co-curator Will Tuck is quoted in the press release as saying, "Although it is fairly clear that any notion of art by animals is essentially anthropomorphic, it starts to raise very interesting questions about the nature of human art."¹¹ But it seems we've circled around again to the wrong questions about Duprat's caddis worms.

So I call again on art historian Steve Baker, who writes of the animal's place and potential in postmodern and posthumanist thought: "The classic dualism of human and animal is not so much erased as *rendered uninteresting* as a way of thinking about being in the world."¹² To let my silverfish scuttle across paper with ink on her feet in the name of insect creativity might be cute, but it is also rendered uninteresting if it serves the discourse in which old lines in the sand are again to be redrawn. In his seminal book *The Postmodern Animal* and his 2013 book *Artist Animal*, Baker explores on the other hand a

⁸ From Britta Jaschinski's *Wild Things* (2003), as quoted in Baker, *Artist Animal*, p. 160.

⁹ Smithsonian National Zoological Park, "Picasso or Panda? Budding Animal Artists Emerge at the Smithsonian's National Zoo," press release on Flickr photostream, retrieved from <https://www.flickr.com/photos/nationalzoo/sets/72157628221751097/>, accessed September 12, 2014.

¹⁰ University College London, "Art by Animals Comes to London," retrieved from <http://www.ucl.ac.uk/news/news-articles/January2012/270112-art-by-animals>, accessed September 12, 2014.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Baker, *The Postmodern Animal*, p. 17.

number of artists who work with animals in nonmetaphoric ways so as to muddy the line between species and to offer new opportunities to understand our fellow creatures. One of Baker's central tenets in *Artist Animal* is that art is uniquely able to open spaces of uncertainty—or, to connect with the theme of this conference, of *in-betweenness*—within which we can explore much more interesting and meaningful questions about animal natures than we can through science or philosophy.¹³ Some of the artists Baker highlights, such as Allison Hunter, Mary Britton Clouse, and Olly and Suzi, are especially exciting for me because their work seems to turn the question of how to look at animals on its head, asking instead, how should animals look at humans? Through the spaces they open up, we are cast into an empathic exercise not of translating animal bodies or experiences into terms we can understand, but of translating ourselves for animals' benefit.

However, even if as a species we still struggle to immerse ourselves in the empathic in-betweenness between ourselves and other animals, translating their mysterious bodily realities and quiet inner states into experiences that make sense to human faculties is an invaluable step. Looking at a work like Geoffrey Mann's *Dogfight*, made in collaboration with two moths whose flights are digitally traced and given material form through subsurface glass engraving, I see more than just a "solid echo" (to borrow the artist's words) of the insects' movements. I see the erratic flight at a scale and with a stillness I can more easily comprehend; I see not capricious fluttering but a deliberate dance between the two moths as they encounter one another in the air; I can begin to imagine the weightlessness of those wings as they propel tiny bodies up and around in a fluid yet punctuated trajectory in the vastness of a small space. I'm inspired to new degrees of curiosity about the authors of such forms, a curiosity that—as Donna Haraway has pointed out—must be practiced if we are to truly connect with other creatures. In fact, Haraway regards "a provocation to curiosity [...] as one of the first obligations and deepest pleasures of worldly companion species."¹⁴

The title of my paper, "Art Brute," is meant as more than a play on words. To put it simply and, admittedly, rather crassly, art by the mentally ill in the 1920s and Jean Dubuffet's Art Brut of the 1940s and '50s did wonders for the PR of psychiatric patients.

¹³ Baker, *Artist Animal*, 175–179.

¹⁴ Donna J. Haraway, *When Species Meet* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), p. 7.

With art as ammunition, suddenly to be mentally ill did not have to mean being less than human, but could mean being the possessor of a rich inner world and singular extraordinary vision. Similarly, being involved in producing aesthetically pleasing artifacts has the potential to make members of “unappealing” animal species—caddis flies, silverfish—more appealing, even charismatic, to borrow animal geographer Jamie Lorimer’s term. Lorimer has explored both on philosophical and policy level how the positive affect produced by nonhuman charisma “provides the vital motivating force that impels people to get involved in conservation.”¹⁵ In this sense, one might say that from an ecological standpoint there is a practical benefit in collaborating with animals to make art for us, if the process and/or the products of such collaborations can produce positive affect—can make us like certain animals more.

However it may be lacking in charisma, the silverfish—household pest that it is—has little to fear. Like the songbirds who have adjusted their songs due to the demands of the urban din, the prehistoric *L. saccharina* has successfully adjusted its behavior to fit, or rather, thrive in, the human world. It has no need to make art for us in order to safeguard the continuation of the species.

What about *individual* silverfish? What about that silverfish I squashed unceremoniously in a panic a couple weeks ago when I saw her right next to my baby on the floor? I’m sorry, little silverfish, that I hadn’t yet solved the answer to our collaborative practice. I dedicate this paper to you.

¹⁵ Jamie Lorimer, “Nonhuman Charisma,” in *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, vol. 25, no. 5, 2007, pp. 911–932.