

A Conference about Animals of Manchester
Maddy Costa and Mary Paterson

– I've been thinking retrospectively about a slogan from the weekend, 'You have to be herd to be heard'. On the day I enjoyed the phrase's word play. But looking back, it's felt more slippery. What are the ways in which we have to be a herd – we have to conform – even to be visible in society?

On the first day of *Animals of Manchester*, the artist Ansuman Biswas invited the audience to reflect on the process of rumination. The audience he was addressing was seated on a series of straw bales that had been laid out in Whitworth Park, designated as the 'town hall' in a newly imagined, temporary cityscape. Opposite the audience grazed a pair of cows who acted as 'cow-mayors' for the duration of the event. Rumination, explained Biswas, is the process that cows go through to digest their food, chewing it over and over and over again. To ruminate is also a metaphor for humans to consider and reconsider, to think and rethink, to bring up half-digested thoughts and turn them, stretch them, rend and amend them.

Curated by Sibylle Peters (Theater of Research, Germany) and Lois Keidan (Live Art Development Agency, UK), *Animals of Manchester* transformed the Whitworth and its surrounding park for the weekend of 20-21 July 2019 into, as the duo described it, 'a city where animals of all kinds, including humanz, live together as equals'. Alongside the cow-mayors, the weekend included workshops on how to become more like your dog; lectures and demonstrations about the lives of pigeons, bees, beluga whales and microbes; a beauty bar where you could have an animal-themed makeover; a live-action insect film directed by visitors to the gallery; a human-sized mouse palace, and more besides. It was, in other words, a feast of different perspectives on the relationships between animals and humans, giving much to ruminate on: not least through the questions it asked about the relationships between individuals and the group, and the very concept of the individual as citizen and (non-animal) body in the eyes of law.

We – Maddy Costa and Mary Paterson – each visited *Animals of Manchester* on separate days. Since then we have thought about it, talked about it, and worked together to write about it: as individuals, but also in a shared voice. We note that this was an intergenerational event that we attended without our own children, often noticing their absence, aware that their absence shifts the story we tell of it. We also note that as adults, but also as humanz, we are able to tell this story of *Animals of Manchester* in a language not accessible to the microbes, or the cows, or the squirrels in the park, or the hedgehogs being nursed, or the insects being filmed, or indeed in many ways to the children we interacted with while taking part. This means that our writing inevitably reproduces the inequality being questioned during the event. Finally, we note that an earlier draft of our response prompted a series of reflections from Sibylle Peters so invigorating that we reworked aspects of the text to incorporate her voice in dialogue. Turned over and over, considered and reconsidered, this text is the product of extended rumination.

– I noticed how the organisers often addressed children – whether audience members or participants – as 'we'. This 'we' is a symbol of solidarity but also a type of cajoling, one that adults do with children all the time. We are always trying to bring children into society – acculturating them, making them responsible, without making them scared.

– Listening to how the children responded, I felt very aware of the ways in which they might be repeating things they had heard around the house, or had learned from their parents – been indoctrinated – to think and say.¹

¹ Sibylle Peters responds: *Everybody does that, everybody's words and opinions are a mixture of things we heard and were told. Children are not different than anybody else here. They might have a little bit less selection sometimes. Also, all of us speak according to given discourse and in the frame of our localities of communication. Do we expect children to be free of that? Why? I would like to question this expectation. It is Othering that fires back here on the children.*

– *But there was a sense of attention, too. A keen sense of listening to children, of asking their opinions and valuing them as important. It raises the questions: what kind of responsibilities do ‘we’ give children? What kinds of social reproduction are ‘we’ asking for? There are socially insidious structural differences between adults and children: we – that is, you and I – need to think about how Animals of Manchester tried not to reproduce them.*

As a step towards what she called ‘animal equality’, Peters conducted her role as Master of Ceremonies from a small, fenced-in space, a few metres from the cow-mayors, who were – thanks to health and safety legislation – enclosed within their own, somewhat larger, fenced area. Here, Peters enacted a literal as well as a figurative solidarity – a standing beside. This solidarity also acknowledged socially inscribed classification: the fenced-in cow and the fenced-in human rendered all the more visible and all the more distinct in this arrangement.

‘Beside comprises a wide range of desiring, identifying, representing, repelling, paralleling, differentiating, rivalling, leaning, twisting, mimicking, withdrawing, attracting, aggressing, warping and other relations,’ writes the critical theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick², arguing for a system of thought that does not pit ideas against each other, but places them in symbiotic relationships. Importantly, Sedgwick was writing from an embodied perspective – a perspective in which the age-old dualism between body and mind (a cornerstone of the Western philosophical tradition) cannot be upheld. This philosophical stance was also a practical one. Hers was a ‘sick’ body – or, more accurately, a body perceived as ‘sick’ by other people. She wrote through her cancer diagnosis and treatment in the 1990s; as a pioneer of queer theory she also wrote through and against tides of public homophobia, rising in the 1980s and 90s in response to the AIDS epidemic.

– *There is something really complex about the term ‘we’. It’s necessary in a democracy to have some notion of ‘we’ that is inevitably a compromise: to participate in any collective system is also to acknowledge that your needs will not be met in full. It’s a kind of social responsibility.*

In a ‘Life Art Library’ inside the Whitworth gallery, books designated for children sat beside books of philosophy, theory, and art history focused in particular on animal performers. From her enclosure beside the cow-mayors, Peters told the assembled audience about a book that was an inspiration for this event: *The Animals Conference*, by German author Erich Kästner, published in 1949. In this book, the animals of the world unite to stop the wars and other human actions that have such a devastating effect on all the inhabitants of the earth. They try various methods, but the only one to succeed is the most drastic: the animals kidnap all human children. Finally, people take notice. The moral of the story is twofold: firstly, that human actions impact animals in profound ways and vice versa – indeed, that humans and animals are truly interactive³. Secondly, that human children may be the key to change.

Inside a park in Manchester in 2019, it was tacitly acknowledged that many of the children who read *The Animals Conference* in the 20th century grew into the kinds of adults it warned against.

– *At the same time there’s a kind of ‘we’ which is the ‘we’ of collective action for change: ‘we stand together in this’, ‘we stand for Extinction Rebellion’. Here, the importance of the cause overrides any differences between individual members; the importance of the cause is also meant to rupture the larger ‘we’ of collective compromises.*

Animals of Manchester modelled an alternative society/city by reconfiguring sites of identifiable public space. Paths were renamed ‘Pigadilly’ and ‘Dogsgate’, puns on areas in the ‘real’ city beyond, and swathes

² Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Duke University Press, 2003)

³ Sibylle Peters responds: *Humans ARE animals, too! I trained to always say ‘humans and other animals’ for a long time, until I always got it right... One result of this research is to find how really difficult it is to get out of the self-evidence of that difference.*

of the gallery and its park were peppered with sites for learning from animals⁴, watching and taking part: alongside the town hall stood a (hedgehog) hospital, a cinema, and a homage to the Arndale shopping centre, stripped of its capitalist connotations to become a picnic site for squirrels and birds. Participants were encouraged to visit every site on the map, receive a stamp on their programme, and create their own 'conference of animals'. 'Show them to Animalship Registration,' read the instructions, 'and join the animals of Manchester.' A sign at the entryway read: 'No human privilege beyond this point.'

– *But then there's the 'we' that imagines relationships and responsibilities beyond what is possible, the kind of 'we are all in this together' of the Conservative party, or 'we have to stop using single-use plastics, says Shell' – and in these cases the 'we' commandeers people's time and their energies in order to distract from a bigger issue.*

This animalship that requires an active application stands in direct contrast to the 'citizenship' to which humans are assigned at birth by nation states. A citizen is not simply a member of a civic community, but someone who submits to its authority. (This is the reason given when citizenship is revoked, for example, for people like Shamima Begum: a child who left the UK to join a jihadi organisation in 2015, and has since been refused re-entry.) Just as the cows must, by law, be fenced inside Whitworth Park, the notion of citizens' submission is enshrined deep into our social fabric. Tracing the philosophical roots of the British parliamentary system, the historian Quentin Skinner⁵ points out that parliamentary democracy – the apex of our civic society – has always been imagined through 'the ancient metaphor of the body politic'. This metaphor is based on the myth of the individual coherence of an individual body, and contains within it a contempt for divergence – or, more accurately, perceived divergence.

Echoing the distinction between slaves and citizens, Skinner writes, 'free states, like free persons, are thus defined by their capacity for self government'. Just like free persons, of course (and unlike Shamima Begum) these bodies are always imagined to be male, white, and in possession of a certain type of education. Nevertheless, the democratic body also carries some sickness. 'The reason why we are bound to regard the will of the majority as conclusive,' says Skinner, drawing from the 18th-century writer Algernon Sydney, 'is that government becomes impossible if everyone retains "a right, by their dissent, to hinder the resolutions of the whole body."'

– *Marcus Coates and Adam O'Riordan worked with a class of primary school children to write poems about extinct animals, which were exhibited as memorials: painted onto wooden planks and nailed to posts like signs, or tombstones, or crucifixions. They were devastating.*

– *They were! I wrote some of them down to remember:*

"We don't understand why you destroy everything – why didn't you help us?"

A democracy is always a troubled body: a weak body, never wholly itself, its limbs always dragged in different directions. If the body is sick, it must be fixed. So the forefathers of parliamentary democracy created systems whereby 'the mass of the people [is] to be represented by a national assembly of the more virtuous and considering'. If this solution does not exactly fix the malady, it does at least change the relation. The 'sick' are now those who do not conform, and the healthy, collective body is the one that follows most faithfully the opinions of its elite.

As writer and activist Sarah Schulman⁶ notes in *The Gentrification of the Mind*, a polemic memoir of the AIDS crisis and analysis of the gentrification that followed: 'The very privilege of supremacy – the ability to

⁴ Sibylle Peters responds: *Is there a difference between learning and research?*

⁵ All Quentin Skinner quotes are from the book *Liberty Before Liberalism* (Cambridge University Press, 1998)

⁶ Sarah Schulman, *The Gentrification of the Mind: Witness to a Lost Imagination* (University of California Press, 2012)

deny that other people are real – becomes the fatal flaw keeping us from collective integrity as a society.’ One of the ways in which that supremacy is exercised is to declare some people subhuman, animals, or indeed less than animals. Written for children (who are defined within parliamentary democracy by their incapacity for self-government) in the very recent wake of Nazi Fascism, which had prized animals above humans it deemed degenerate, Erich Kästner’s *The Animals Conference* found the possibility of renewed collective integrity in rejecting the politics of human, white, adult, male supremacy.

“Look out, all things are important, I’m a part of this world.”

‘It matters what matters we use to think other matters with,’ as the writer Donna Haraway says⁷; ‘it matters what stories we tell to tell other stories with; it matters what knots knot knots, what thoughts think thoughts, what descriptions describe descriptions ...’ Haraway writes about species in companionship with each other, as opposed to in competition, or indeed arranged in any kind of hierarchies of intelligence, value or need. This goes a step further than the solidarity of being ‘beside’ one another, to species being so entwined in each other’s existence they make each other possible. ‘The capabilities of pigeons’, for example, ‘surprise and impress human beings, who often forget how they themselves are rendered capable by and with both things and living beings.’ Crucially, this companionship removes moral judgement – so that humans can neither pretend to be a special case sitting above the rest of the animal kingdom; nor a wretched failure, absolved of all responsibility.

In the centre of the straw bales in Whitworth Park, a group of young children introduced their research on pigeons. Pigeons are the fastest flying bird in the air. Pigeons make milk. Pigeons have been used in wars and won medals for their bravery. When two pigeon keepers (‘fanciers’) arrived with a box of homing pigeons, the children were so excited they had to be asked to stay away from the box, for fear of overwhelming the birds. Released into the crisp sky, the pigeons began to make their way home, feathers iridescent in the afternoon sun. We – adults and children – all laughed, as they each flew off in a different direction.

“Please remember we were who you are now.”

If it matters what stories we tell, it also matters which contexts we find to tell them. Haraway goes on to describe the concept of a model species, as used in scientific research: ‘A model is a work object... A model is worked, and it does work. A model is like a miniature cosmos, in which a biologically curious Alice in Wonderland can have tea with the Red Queen and ask how this world works, even as she is worked by the complex-enough, simple-enough world.’

While model species like the fruit fly are used by scientists to imagine, test and disprove theories for the reproduction of their kind, Haraway wonders what would happen if we found paradigms that were predicated on mutual reproduction – on a social, as well as a biological, level. Perhaps a start would be the *Interspecies Family Portrait Studio* at *Animals of Manchester*. Here, the artist Benji Reid began to tell family histories through portraits in which ‘all species, all genders, all ages are welcome’. Or the *BeetleFilmTheatre*, in which the insects resident in Whitworth Park were filmed by audience members, their movements magnified and accompanied by abstract music as warm and thick as goo. Led by the artist Tim Spooner, this cinematic experience was housed in a small, warm shed, the humans huddled in together, transposing ourselves to the size of the beasts that continued to crawl, imperceptibly, beneath our feet.

“We mattered – you ignored.”

All change requires a shift in perception. On the first day of *Animals of Manchester*, the space in front of the cow-mayors was occupied by the artist Andy Field and a class of children from a local primary school.

⁷ All Donna Haraway quotes are from the book *Staying With the Trouble* (Duke University Press, 2016)

Together they had worked on a manifesto for small creatures everywhere – or rather, they had studied microbes, and in doing so began to stretch the word ‘small’ to encompass the overlooked and marginalised, all creatures (animal or human) whose essential work is ignored or erased. ‘Small animals must be noticed,’ the children chanted together. ‘Notice each other.’

Within this act of noticing was a distinct act of introduction: each child in turn described themselves as ‘a collection of microbes’, gathered across time and space: from the places they were born, had visited, had lived; from the foods and drinks they had consumed, particularly their favourites; from the family, carers and friends who surround them; from the times they had done something brave, experienced something scary, or been hurt in some way. Here was Haraway’s entwinement in action: an exercise grown from understanding that humans don’t exist in isolation but within an infinitely complex network of other humans, animals, microbes, matter animate and inanimate. This recognition, key to *Animals of Manchester*, ought not to be worth saying, but becomes so through the ways in which humans have built, and continue to build, systems – whether architectural or economic or technological – that seek to isolate humans from the rest of nature and indeed other humans. These systems are integral to human ideas of civilisation.

Language might be seen as another system: one that has been used to classify, shape binaries, and create myths of human supremacy that not only separate humans from animals, but also adults from children. ‘Why?’ asks Peters, in response to this text. ‘*Children and adults both use language, and there are lots of new studies arguing that other animals are anything but without language, as was argued for so long to keep up the binary.*’ In a lecture on beluga whales, artist Laura Cull Ó Maoilearca invited an adult and a child to translate the electronic symphony of echolocation into English. ‘Where are you?’ one called, eyes shut, stepping backwards. ‘I’m here,’ called the other, eyes closed, stepping away.

– I reread the *Dark Mountain* manifesto recently: it’s a self-published pamphlet from 2009, written by Paul Kingsnorth and Dougald Hine, that talks about the concept of ‘uncivilisation’⁸. It argues that people need new stories, need an ‘uncivilised art’, because the myth of civilisation – of human supremacy – is destroying the environment, animals, and humans as well. I was led back to it by a book on theatre audiences that quoted something alarming: a historian of the ‘civilising process’ who argued that calls for civilisation become more pronounced at times of ‘significant ethical decline’.⁹

– That raises big questions about who we choose to listen to, and how. After they read out their poems in the ‘*Standing Conference of Animals – Extinct Species*’, the children asked us to lie on the floor, imagine we were an extinct animal, and tell everyone how we thought the animal was feeling. I normally hate that kind of thing but it was actually really moving.

There is a strand of justice activism – social justice, but inevitably environmental justice too – that is articulated through the concept of emergence. In her book *Emergent Strategy*, adrienne maree brown¹⁰ defines this in relation to the natural world. ‘The natural world actually supports any worldview,’ she admits, looking at how the behaviour of lions is used to justify human behaviour that is ‘competitive, powerless, isolationist, violent’. She suggests aligning instead with ‘small, collaborative species. Roaches and ants and deer and fungi and bacteria and viruses and bamboo and eucalyptus and squirrels and vultures and mice and mosquitoes and dandelions and so many other more collaborative life forms continue to proliferate, survive, grow. Sustain.’

Like Haraway, brown is interested in systems of mutual reproduction, moving beyond animals to look also at plants. ‘Dandelions spread not only themselves’, she writes, ‘but their community structure, manifesting their essential qualities (which include healing and detoxifying the human body) to proliferate and thrive in a new environment.’ For humans to take cues from the collaborative and sustainable practices of

⁸ The entire manifesto can be read here: <https://dark-mountain.net/about/manifesto/>

⁹ Quoted in Kirsty Sedgman’s book *The Reasonable Audience* (Palgrave, 2018).

¹⁰ All adrienne maree brown quotes are from the book *Emergent Strategy* (AK Press, 2017).

companion life forms, and through that transform socio-political structures, the better to support human life and the ecology we inhabit, Brown suggests that we, as humans, need to ask ourselves a simple yet complex question: 'What are we as humans, what is our function in the universe?' She offers her own complex yet simple answer: 'Perhaps humans' core function is love.'¹¹

In a simple gazebo structure, packed with wide-eyed humans, Barbara Roberts held a baby hedgehog barely bigger than her thumb joint, feeding it antibiotics and milk formula through a plastic syringe. As it suckled the hedgehog rippled its paws as though playing invisible bongos or a tiny piano. Roberts has over a hundred of these fragile creatures, all separated from their mothers and lost, some infected with maggots on arrival, now cuddled in incubators heated to 98°F – the same temperature as their mother would have been. The level of care, and the attention to detail required to notice these creatures so they can access that care, is humbling.

– The more I think about the day, the more I think of it as a compromise position¹². The cows were still inside the enclosure, confined within human risk assessment. The insects had to be taken to a special film set. Dogs and other pets weren't allowed inside the gallery. At Angela Bartram's workshop Human School (be your dog!), many of the dogs were just lying on the ground with their human lying next to them. It felt to me that dogs are so conditioned to behave themselves that even in an outdoors space where they have all the freedom, they still behave in this polite, quasi-human way.

– That's interesting that you think they're behaving themselves, rather than doing what they want. I also went to watch that workshop and felt like I was intruding – it was so private. All the dogs were lying down or gently wandering over to a corner, having a bit of a sniff and then lying down again.... I was impressed at the quietness, the intimacy of the proceedings. I wondered if perhaps, every other time I see dogs, they're doing some kind of performing for me.

Writing for *The New York Times* in 1953, Marjorie Fisher described an English translation of *The Animals Conference* as 'a genial fantasy'. *Animals of Manchester* engaged with ways to knit that fantasy into real life: it was a real, if temporary, model of a different way of thinking, being and interacting in the world, without disavowing our responsibilities to the ways things are. It adhered to the legislation regarding cows, for example, and it stood in solidarity with them. It involved children in reciprocal activities in which they were invited to imagine a different world; it asked them to perform for their parents and teachers and also listened when they asked the audience to perform back. This commitment to an imperfect world adds strength to the model. Similarly, it is perhaps because we – as adult humans – are able to tell this story of *Animals of Manchester* in a language not accessible to the microbes, or the cows, or the squirrels in the park, or the hedgehogs being nursed, or the insects being filmed, or indeed any of the children taking part, that we can acknowledge the limits of our own perspectives, taking note of where we stand in solidarity, in power, in co-existence, in accord and in disagreement.

¹¹ Sibylle Peters responds: *Doesn't look much like it, yet, does it?*

¹² Sibylle Peters responds: *Yes, oh so many compromises. It is obviously an impossible task to postulate a zone of animal equality. And it is supposed to be impossible and improbable, because that turns it into a site of research. This is a crucial and central aspect for me: that this was a site for collective research of most heterogeneous teams of researchers: artists, children and their families, scholars and scientists, animal activists and other animals of different species. We all did research together on how equality, or at least more equality among animals might be possible, how human privilege might be counteracted, how we, the different animals, might find new forms of encounter, new gestures of respect and gratitude towards one another. "How can we improve relationships between species?" This was the question all visitors were asked on the first page of the brochure. The challenge was to insist on this transgenerational and transspecies research under the conditions of the production of a 'free family event'. And I appreciated that challenge, as this just IS the condition of transgenerational research these days. I'm not sure if we succeeded – but if we did or not, we invented the Animal Equality Zone as a heterotopian site, a format and a setup for collective research. I do believe that this format will prove helpful and has a future.*

– It's interesting to me that the animals chosen to be mayors in this imagined city were cows, because in terms of the conversation happening around climate change, cows are pretty high on the enemy list. All that ruminating produces methane. In fact, one thing we might do to take action against climate change might be to slaughter a lot of the cows¹³. I found the way Ansuman talked about ruminating beautiful; it suggested a deep respect for the cows, and for the sacred place the cow holds in Hinduism. But the fact is, the Amazon is on fire – and that's because agribusiness needs land to graze cattle and grow soy to feed cattle.¹⁴

– I hadn't thought about that. But I did notice how often Sibylle thanked the cows. She described the number of cows there are that provide milk and meat for Manchester. I thought about how we kill animals and enslave them, and wondered whether thanking the cows was a first step towards their freedom.

The weekend ended on Sunday afternoon with the presentation of a document both recording the event and setting out a new manifesto – an animafesto, perhaps – of future co-existence. Hand-made over the course of the weekend by the artist David Caines, it was given to the Lord Mayor of Manchester, dressed in all his regalia, on behalf of the two cow-mayors. Caines had occupied his own small gazebo in front of the town hall: here he wrote, drew and collaged ideas and sentiments that arose from every activity, discussion, idea and unpredictable unfolding in the space between him and the cows. His live documentation is both a beautiful record and an incomplete archive of *Animals of Manchester*. Its gaps are part of its beauty – the sponge-like pores in which other ideas can enter.

Directly before the presentation, the Lord Mayor sat on the straw bale listening to Peters and Keidan summarise the event, thank participants, remember what had happened, and leave questions hanging in the air. Then he stood up and made his way to the enclosure. The staging of this act ringed it in the starry dust of a sacred ritual, even though it's safe to assume this ritual has never happened before. The thoughts of the Mayor, carrying out his social duties with good grace and enthusiasm, were as unknown to most of us as the thoughts of the cows who lowed, perhaps accidentally, but let's say on purpose, at the appropriate moment.

¹³ Sibylle Peters responds: *We did talk about that at the Town Hall quite a lot. Not as much as we wanted, as the cooperating school and learning team had so many concerns about us talking about shit and farts with kids around... Initially we wanted to invite the kids to do research about farting. Anyway. Illusions. But this is actually one of the main reasons we chose the cows.'*

¹⁴ For more information on this, this article is useful: <https://theintercept.com/2019/07/06/brazil-amazon-rainforest-indigenous-conservation-agribusiness-ranching/>