



UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS

This is a repository copy of *Animals in socially engaged performance practice: becomings on the edges of extinction*.

White Rose Research Online URL for this paper:
<http://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/128469/>

Version: Accepted Version

Article:

Orozco, L (2018) Animals in socially engaged performance practice: becomings on the edges of extinction. *Studies in Theatre and Performance*, 38 (2). pp. 176-189. ISSN 1468-2761

<https://doi.org/10.1080/14682761.2018.1451948>

(c) 2018 informa UK Limited, trading as taylor & francis Group. This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis *Journal Studies in Theatre and Performance* on 21 March 2018, available online:
<https://doi.org/10.1080/14682761.2018.1451948>

Reuse

Items deposited in White Rose Research Online are protected by copyright, with all rights reserved unless indicated otherwise. They may be downloaded and/or printed for private study, or other acts as permitted by national copyright laws. The publisher or other rights holders may allow further reproduction and re-use of the full text version. This is indicated by the licence information on the White Rose Research Online record for the item.

Takedown

If you consider content in White Rose Research Online to be in breach of UK law, please notify us by emailing eprints@whiterose.ac.uk including the URL of the record and the reason for the withdrawal request.



eprints@whiterose.ac.uk
<https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/>

Animals in socially-engaged performance practice: becomings on the edges of extinction

Running heads:

Studies in Theatre and Performance

L. Orozco

Orozco Lourdes ^{a, *}

^a*Workshop Theatre, School of English, University of Leeds, Leeds, UK*

*Email: l.orozco@leeds.ac.uk

Received 06 Mar 2018; Accepted 10 Mar 2018

© 2018 Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group

Abstract

In this article, I am interested in exploring forms of animal-human interactions in performance contexts that highlight the relationship between the personal and the social with the animal acting as a mediator. I want to look at practices that have an emphasis on aiding individuals and communities at a particular difficult impasse in their lives and that are clearly associated with a recognizable and established community project. For this, I explore two instances of socially turned performance practice in which animals are presented as vessels of wisdom. Marcus Coates' *Journey to the Lower World* and Felicity Barrow's *Mystic Chic* position the animal as the expert in contexts where humans are experiencing radical shifts in their environment that imply loss and disappearance. The works provide an opportunity to investigate the articulation of Deleuze and Guattari's concept of 'becoming-animal' in the context of socially turned performance, as well as a chance to rethink the role of animals and humans in processes of extinction.

Keywords

Theatre

performance

animals

extinction

socially turned performance

My teenage eczema nick-names were 'Reppy' short for reptile – which I was quite proud of – and 'Rooster' because I scratched a lot. To be able to walk I had my feet covered in cream and then tied up in plastic freezer bags with socks on top. Walking was ridiculous – just slipping about in your shoes. I had to invent a whole new way of treading. I became sensitive to a long list of things. My sweat stung. I was allergic to myself. Ill or well – which one was me? I became skilled at becoming separate from myself – watching, noticing myself, entering in and out of my skin at will. Understanding you can become yourself and then, just as easily un-become – shifting from reptile to comedy walk and back again.' (Coates Coates 2005, 1).

In the short poem that opens Marcus Coates' book documenting his performance piece and film *Journey to the Lower World* the artist describes his childhood experiences of feeling more than human and his awareness of the different human and animal selves that cohabit within him. In the poem, Coates speaks about the awkwardness felt at having to fit within one category and as such he explores the relationship between individuality and individuation. He struggles to understand that being human also means not being animal and instead he experiences the possibility of being more than one of these categories at once. For him, there is a difference between 'acting like an animal' (metaphor) and 'becoming' another self (metamorphosis). The poem also highlights his impossibility to understand the human from a humanist-only perspective as he shifts across human and non-human bodies.

All of these are important questions that have preoccupied artists working in the intersection of performing arts and animal studies for decades. In these practices, also represented in the works Kathy High, Kira O'Reilly, Catherine Bell and Lucy Kimbell, the personal, the individual, the self, the artist, struggles to settle into one individuality and instead recognizes the points of contact, the overlaps with the non-human other. The self is still at the centre of the practice, only to be constantly undermined and displaced. The animal/s are neither within nor outside the self, they are in a continuum that the artist-animal-shaman exists in. As such the possibility of not being oneself is always there. For Coates, becoming animal offers the possibility of entering a world that is an extension of the one humans inhabit in their day-to-day lives. It also represents the

opportunity to explore alternative ways of communication between humans and animals, and crucially in *Journey to the Lower World*, between humans themselves.

In this article, I am interested in exploring forms of animal-human interactions in performance contexts that highlight the relationship between the personal and the social with the animal acting as a mediator. I want to look at practices that have an emphasis on aiding individuals and communities at a particular difficult impasse in their lives and that are clearly associated with a recognizable and established community project. I understand these works as what Jen Harvie's calls 'socially-engaged art' or 'socially turned art' a type of practice wants to think about the politics of art practice by blurring the boundaries between art and everyday life to make a political and social intervention (Harvie 2013, 3).

The place of animals in socially engaged art practice or activist art has so far been reduced to a practice that centres on the protection of the animal itself. There are many examples of animal rights activism that use performance strategies as a way of making their causes visible. The 'Fighting Animal Testing Campaign' staged by Lush Cosmetics in London in 2014 or the recent street performance 'No Meat Campaign' organized by AnimaNaturalis in Barcelona are clear examples of animal rights activism utilizing performance art strategies and blurring arts and everyday life boundaries with the animal at its centre. Instances of animals' involvement in socially engaged art projects which are not about protecting their rights are few. I am interested, in this article, in investigating how the animal, its materiality and its conceptualization, is negotiated in projects where she is central to the facilitation of community engagement, community building and community cohesion. In these cases, the animal could be associated to the well documented tradition of animals as therapists (Nimer and Lundahl 2015). Guide dogs, ponies that engage in riding for the disabled initiatives, pets that work in hospitals, airports and schools are all examples of animal assisted therapy, a form of complimentary therapy recognized by the World Health Organization. Animals have been therapists or involved in therapy for as long as humans have kept them as pets.

In this article, I am concerned with instances of performance practice that present animals as healers or conduits for the benefit of humans but are not recognized as forms of Animal Assisted Therapy because they are framed as arts projects. I want to argue that, on the one hand, the works that this article focuses challenge the division between art/everyday life and therapy, as much as they push against the constraints of categories such as human and animal. I will do this

push against the constraints of categories such as human and animal. I will do this by exploring Marcus Coates' *Journey to the Lower World* and Felicity Barrow's *Mystic Chic* as works in which 'becoming animal' is used as a problem-solving strategy in contexts that cross between life, art and therapy. Furthermore, beyond the particular problematics that the pieces tackle in each of their iterations, I believe that they are also concerned with a more current and global problem: forms of extinction that involve the disappearance of ways of life and living.

Coates' and Barrow's pieces present shamanism and animal-based rituals as their tools for aiding communities and individuals whose lives are affected by disappearance. In doing so, they propose and put in practice the recovery of lost forms of human-animal communication as a way of reflecting on and foregrounding ways of life that are either extinct or on their way to disappearing. Given the centrality that animals have in extinction discourse, there is certain irony in thinking about practices that propose the animal as the provider of wisdom in the context of extinction rather than presenting her as the victim.

The works that I focus on here facilitate a new approach to the participation of animals in socially engaged art and in extinction moving the animal from victim/object to agent/subject. This important shift means animals can begin to be understood as more than just the passive recipients of animal rights activism and extinction processes.

Animals in social art: from metaphor to metamorphosis?

Both *Journey to the Lower World* and *Mystic Chic* are both projects born out of a willingness to produce change. The two projects are funded by and developed in association with community projects. Coates' piece was developed out of an artist's residency in Liverpool's Sheil Park estate in 2004 and supported in 2009 by Arts Council England, and the London Borough of Southwark in its London iteration. This social dimension of the work is clearly felt by Coates who states a feeling of responsibility and hope that his work might have had an influence in the processes that these communities were going through (Lamont [2012](#)).

From its origins in Liverpool in 2004, *Journey to the Lower World* has had many phases and performances before its culmination in the gig/trance event *Ritual for Elephant and Castle* in London in 2009 and the film *Vision Quest-A Ritual for Elephant and Castle* (2012). The piece is a performance intervention in which Coates performs a shamanic ritual in the living room of one of the flats of a set of tower blocks that are to be demolished and their inhabitants to be relocated to

new housing. Coates, wearing a stag's head and cape enters into a trance that allows him to travel to the 'lower world' inhabited by animal spirits. During the ritual, he asks his audience for a question that concerns the community and then enters into a state of being that allows him to communicate with the animal spirits who, in their wisdom, will provide an answer to the question. The answer will offer a possible solution to the problem experienced by the community. This proposed solution aims to initiate a conversation in which the members of the community come to an agreement as to how the problem they are all experiencing could be solved. In his journey, the shaman will encounter a series of animals, whom he will become in order to understand the meaning of their responses. He will engage in a conversation between himself and his 'become-animal' self in order to propose an answer to the posed question. The ritual was performed twice in communities that were facing eviction and attempted to help these communities to deal with change, loss and the uncertainty attached to their new lives to come.

Felicity Barrow's *Mystic Chick* was a site-specific performance commissioned by the Compass Festival in Leeds, which appropriately took place in the city's Corn Exchange in mid November 2016. The piece is associated with the community project Hen Power Project, which engages the elderly in hen rearing as a way to combat the high rates of exclusion and isolation experienced by individuals in these communities. In *Mystic Chick*, Barrow facilitates a conversation between audience members and a group of hens. The conversation takes place through the performance of an Etruscan ritual based on the belief that hens are divine animals that hold healing powers and wisdom. The ritual at the centre of *Mystic Chick* was performed in a large hen coop situated in the basement floor of the Leeds Corn Exchange. Participants were invited to enter the coop and share the small cage like space with Barrow and a group of hens. On one of the coop walls there is a black board and some chalk and the hens are busy eating corn and scratching the hay covered floor. Once the audience participant enters the space and meets Barrow and the hens, they are asked to think about a question that can be asked out loud or thought of in the participant's mind. After this, Barrow enters into a trance state and performs a series of free dance-like movements with and in between the hens. She proceeds to pick up a piece of chalk and draw abstract forms on the blackboard. When the dance is finished, Barrow comes out of her trance state, takes a photo of the drawing and sends it to the participant over email or mobile phone. The drawing is intended to be the materialization of the

conversation that Barrow has with the hens in their joint act to answer the participant's question. If the question is openly verbalized Barrow's trance state focuses on communicating that question to the hens and transforming their answer/s into a series of abstract drawings that can be interpreted by the participant. If the question is kept private, the trance-like journey will necessarily involve an alternative form of communication between the participant, Barrow and the hens who work, presumably, together on finding out what the question is and providing an answer for it. In her ritual, Barrow, performs a becoming-other-animal ritual in order to help members of the community where the event takes place.

The piece is also clearly associated with the community project Hen Power, from where the hens come. The hens have been brought up by participants in the project, which uses the lost practice of hen-rearing as a way to help the elderly combat isolation and help with dealing with age-associated conditions such as dementia and Alzheimer. *Mystic Chic* and Hen Power Project share the belief that animals can provide answers to individuals and communities through an engagement in lost practices such as animal divination and hen-rearing, respectively. This positions *Mystic Chic* clearly in the social art sphere, in which animals are participants in the process of healing individuals and communities.

An act of becoming-other-animal is at the centre of these two performances. Becoming-other-animal is key to the processes of healing and aiding that the performances want to undertake. I would like to consider for a moment what these concepts of 'becoming-other' and 'becoming-animal' might mean in performance contexts given that they have been one of key concepts that Performance Studies scholars have engaged with in research into animals and animality.

In A Thousand Plateaus, Deleuze and Guattari investigate the possibility of destabilizing the unity of the subject, and in turn moving beyond established categories of the human, the animal, the thing and the environments in which they all coexist through their concept of 'becoming animal'. The idea of 'becoming other' is key to performance where it is mostly associated with pretence and mimicry. However, for it to be productive within the field of Performance Studies, 'becoming-other' and 'becoming-animal' necessitate a more complex understanding, one which moves away from metaphor - the human as the animal and the animal as the human - and engages in a process of metamorphosis and transformation that can only be, as Coates' and Barrow's works demonstrates,

irrational. This idea has been rehearsed in writings around animal training and cross-species performance which claim that the decentring of the human takes place by a true participation of the animal in performance. That is to say, instances in which animals don't just do what they are told or are trained to do what they are told but participate actively in the creative act, the equestrian theatre of Bartabas and Zingaro and Donna Haraway's Dog Agility Competitions being examples of these kinds of practice.

This could be applied perhaps to the role that Barrow's chickens play in the piece, as well as to the presumed transformation that Barrow herself undergoes to mediate the chickens' response to the participants. The question whether the hens willingly or unwillingly collaborate in the creation of the final drawing produced by Barrow is, in some ways, impossible to answer but the artist – like the examples mentioned above – might refer to a kind of collaboration in that without the hens the drawings would be, potentially, different.

Becoming-animal has also been associated with performance from a different angle. The reason for this is, arguably, because the question of becoming intrinsically contains a process of performance, not just in the sense of pretence but in the sense of an action that produces an intervention and, possibly, a change. Becoming necessitates of an act of awareness in which one is not merely transformed into the other but becomes aware of the possibilities that one lives in relation to others, that the boundaries of one's individuality is porous as Derrida suggests (2008, 12). This not only refers to a transformation into the other but to the idea that instances of performance with animals (live or otherwise) offer a challenge to the borders of the individual, be it human, animal or thing. Performance offers opportunities to experience what Donna Haraway calls sympoiesis, the living with one another in contiguity rather than the continuation of the autopoietic project in which humans are self-referential and contained (Haraway 2016, 33–35). **The works of Alan Read and Laura Cull have attempted to do this in their work by thinking critically about performance not as a human only venue but as a space where the human and the non-human can coexist (Read 2013; Cull 2009 and 2015).**

For the concept of 'becoming' to be productive in the performance contexts, one in which the act of becoming is not only charged as an intervention (an act of change) but with a possible act of deceit (as performance is both real and not), it necessitates a more complex understanding. One that moves away from metaphor from the human as the place of the animal and vice versa, and engages in

- from the human as/in place of the animal and vice versa - and engages in irrational processes of metamorphosis and transformation.

In Coates' and Barrow's works, the figure that facilitates that dialogue between the human and the animal is that of a shaman, a sorcerer of sorts. A figure that is able to metamorphose into others, to become others, the shaman inhabits that instability of the subject that Deleuze and Guattari suggest as a possible way to truly decentre the human. Their 'becoming animal' proposes a shift from metaphor to metamorphosis. These are not characters pretending to be animals, the animals are not there in place of the humans or representing the human subject or the human condition. The relationship between the subjects in both pieces points towards a way of being in which the human and the animal cannot be truly distinguished. For Coates to interpret the answer that the animal spirits are producing for the audience and for Barrow to transmit the hens' messages to the participants, both artists enter a state of being that includes a dissipation of the boundaries between them and the animals. This is not to say that they transform into these animals but that they become aware of the fact that there is no separation between the animals and them, and that the loss of this boundary opens up a conversation. This process of embodied transformation destabilizes distinct categories as well as the centrality of rational thought and rational discourses.

It is not coincidental that Deleuze and Guattari stage their concept of becoming animal as a dialogue between a naturalist and a sorcerer, figures representing rational and irrational thought. The naturalist understands the world in established individuations - A and B and their relationship to one another. The sorcerer instead presents an argument for non-personal individuations: 'there is a mode of individuation very different from that of a person, subject, thing or substance. [...] a season, a winter, a summer, an hour, a date have a perfect individuality lacking nothing even if this individuality is different from that of a thing or a subject. [...]. Climate, wind, season, hour are not of another nature than the things, animals or people that populate them, sleep and awaken within them' (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 234). The sorcerer is able to apprehend the world beyond what can be scientifically demonstrated, and is eager to transcend compartmentalized understandings of social and natural phenomena. Ron Broglio has also framed Coates' work in this way, equating Coates shaman to Deleuze and Guattari's sorcerer (Broglio 2011, 115).

In becoming-animal the relevant question is not that of resemblance between

... becoming animal, the relevant question is not that of resemblance between human and animal, or 'that of resemblance between the comportment of an animal and that of a man [...] there is no longer man or animal since each other deterritorializes the other in a conjunction of flux and reversibility' (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 234). So 'becoming animal' is not about pretence, deceit. 'A becoming is not a correspondence between relations. But neither is it a resemblance, an imitation [...] as Deleuze and Guattari explain (1987, 237). Becoming is an inhabiting of other subjectivities beyond the distinct categories existing in scientific discourse. Becoming animal is about not being only human and being aware of the fact that, as Haraway suggests, we have actually never been human given the fact that the human body is host to thousands of organisms that are integral to its biological functioning (Haraway 2008, 28).

In *I Contain Multitudes. The Microbes within Us and a Grander View of Life*, Ed Yong conceives the human body as a multi-species collective where microorganisms eat, travel and die with the body they inhabit (Yong, 2017: 3). The concept of human and animal individuations does not longer apply. Becoming animal, as Ron Broglio suggests, 'is not about Coates taking on characteristics of any particular beast; becoming is not an exercise in mimesis [...] becoming is an opening up of a general economy, a flow of powers and relations, what Deleuze and Guattari call 'assemblages and affiliations' (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 242). Becoming animal is about reimagining relationships through new embodiments. Coates' Shaman and Barrow's sorcerer do precisely that.

The figure of the sorcerer and the foregrounding of irrationality present themselves as the appropriate and productive channels for this becoming to take place and, as such, they are central to both Coates' and Barrow's performances. Their role as shaman and sorcerer enables them to facilitate a conversation between the human and the animal world that destabilises human/animal distinctions. Understood in the context of socially engaged art it is also able to challenge, as I will argue next, current discourses of responsibility and care in relation to the transformation of communities – human and animal – and the well-being of communities and individuals. Becoming animal in this context also faces up to established scientific and rational discourses that structure and form the base of neoliberal societies precisely in relation to care and aid. I would like to use the latter point to explore both performances in relation to issues of authenticity, intention and success.

For both Coates and Barrow, the process of becoming is, seemingly, genuine. In an interview for *The Guardian* about the London performance, Coates states that the shaman act is 'It's an earnest thing for me [...] I agree, the incongruity of these situations can seem ridiculous [...] It seems facile, but eventually something serious seems to come through (Lamont 2012). The transformation is similarly real for Barrow, who takes the process of divination seriously as a duty to her audience. What is at stake are real issues: a question posed by a community concerned with its present and its future, and a question posed by an individual who is willing to share a moment of personal reflection, and possibly vulnerability, with a stranger. However, in the context of performance these non-rational transformations which involve an un-becoming of oneself, as Coates suggests, are necessarily framed by and layered with the disbelief associated to the artform itself. In this way, the shamanistic rituals and processes of becoming animal that are at core to *Coates' Journey to the Lower World* and *Barrow's Mystic Chic* raise questions around authenticity and intention. These are important questions if the pieces are framed as examples of socially engaged performance as they are concerned with real issues that have real implications on the livelihoods of individuals and communities.

Understood as instances of socially engaged performance art, both projects are asked to deliver. They are expected to take their central questions seriously and produce or at least attempt to produce a change. However, both Coates' and Barrow's works knowingly escape this instrumentalisation of art's practice which, in contemporary liberal economies, has seen the art's filling in the gaps of a welfare state in crisis. Funding cuts to social services such as the NHS or Social Care for instance, have produced a turn in the arts to deliver some of these services. These has been achieved by a shift in funding for the arts strategy, and art projects addressing health and well-being, social cohesion, etc. are rewarded for their contribution to these areas. There are elements of Coates' and Barrow's pieces that pertain to this turn to the instrumentalisation of the arts. However, their focus, on the one hand, on the animal as healer and expert and on irrationality as a solution, on the other, poses a challenge to the established modes of healing. In sum, an evaluation of whether the projects were successful in their intention to aid individuals and communities requires, in some ways, a belief in their efficacy. It requires for the artist and the participants to believe in the methods utilized to repair, to aid, to heal. It requires a belief that it is possible to become animal. Trust becomes an important concept in these

performances. Coates' explains that the critical enquiry that motivated the project was a certain scepticism. He took a weekend shaman workshop and experienced this with feelings of cultural misappropriation and consumerist culture. However, he states that 'the project is not a parody, otherwise how could it be generous to its audience?' (Wallinger in Coates 2005, Foreword). For him, the trust is built upon the belief of the veracity of the ritual and of himself as a shaman.

This question of veracity in relation to the ritual and the performance is addressed neatly by Mark Wallinger as he asks the reader to refocus her attention away from the social act of the piece.

No one – the artist, the audience within the work and the audience in the gallery; the commissioning body – believes in the event, to break into his trance would be unthinkable [...] the stag is as authentic as the noises he makes are unsettling. They seem to come from a genuine source far away, from outside and before the city; they are prehistoric, no part of the modern world (Wallinger in Coates 2005, Foreword).

Wallinger's emphasis on the lack of belief in the event is contrasted by the truthfulness of Coates' performance, which arises, arguably, from the performer's commitment to his social and artistic project, both of which are, like the human and the animal, inseparable. Once again in the Foreword for the book that documents the project, Wallinger speaks about the power of the performance. He is sure that its success is achieved not only by Coates' commitment but also by the commitment of the participants to the process, which intimate that there is a suspension of disbelief from all involved.

The work treads a fine line between pathos and bathos. It is touching because it has enacted the fears and vulnerability of the audience, which are real enough if ultimately unknowable, and finds its own strange way to an image of hope for them to take away (Wallinger in Coates 2005 Foreword).

Coates himself explains how there are risks involved in the performance that relate to this question of truthfulness. He places himself in a vulnerable position by assuming the role of the non-expert, of 'the artist who insists on the fidelity of his amateurism', and embracing the risks that come with it (Broglia 2011, 115). Coates explains that 'lots of things worried' him, 'would they [the residents] be insulted, call me a charlatan, think I am taking the piss? [...] What if I cannot go

down to the Lower World, should I just make something up?' (Broglia 2015, 115). As Broglia explains, the focus of the performance is not necessarily on truthfulness -whether Coates can or cannot really communicate with animal spirits - but whether his fidelity and commitment to the event can help 'the displaced citizens think outside of the known status of their fate and consider a larger economy of relationships between humans and the non-human world' (Broglia 2011, 115). Participants taking part in *Mystic Chic* undergo a similar experience. When I took part in the show in Leeds, those leaving the coop where the divination act had taken place experienced a mix of feelings. Startled, moved, surprised, participants in Barrow's piece describe the experience as extremely moving without really knowing why. On the whole, their disbelief in the act of divination itself does not stop them from experiencing a moment of reflection that brings tears to their eyes in a way that is surprising to themselves.

It is worth thinking about what this means with regards to the different relational paradigm between subjects that the pieces present. The focus, I believe, should not be on whether audience members and participants believe in the possibility that Coates and Barrow can communicate with animals, but rather on the proposition of a different relationality. The pieces suggest a different way of being with one another, one in which humans and animals are neither one nor the other but coexist and cohabit in ways that challenge the current sovereignty of the human over the animal. This moves the animal away from the metaphor state in which it does not stand in for the human but for him/herself having been repositioned as the expert on which the human relies. The human, on the other hand, is forced to undergo a metamorphosis in order to become with, to become attuned to, other forms of living that destabilises her subjectivity. Becoming-animal in these instances of performance practice enables the materialization of an ideology which believes in foregrounding the existing entanglements that exist between species.

On performance and extinction

As well as an opportunity to reconsider the concept of Becoming-Animal in what I believe are productive ways, Coates' and Barrow's pieces also enable a reassessment of extinction. This is important because I believe that extinction has for too long been understood in limited ways in which the roles of humans and animals are often fixed unproductively. Thinking about extinction in relation to these two works allows me to foreground yet again a different relational paradigm between humans and animals in general but in the specific context of

between humans and animals in general, but in the specific context of disappearance. I want to argue that, in their works, Coates and Barrow shift the animal's positioning from object to agent in contexts in which they have previously occupied a passive role. They do this by framing the animal as the expert and the healer at the centre of processes of disappearance in which they are no longer the victims but the potential saviours.

For this, I want to begin thinking about what extinction means and how the works respond to various understandings of the term. In his book *Flight Ways. Life and Loss at the Age of Extinction*, Thom Van Dooren discusses extinction as a relational affair in which all species - including humans - are implicated. He strongly rejects the idea of species segregation and the disassociation between 'being alive', 'life' as a biological concept, and the ways of life that are intrinsic to it (Van Van Dooren 2014, 8-9). Instead he defends "being alive" as only one aspect of an intricate set of interconnected life-ways and ways of life, in which social relations and cultural formations are central to an understanding of "life" (Van Van Dooren 2014, 8-9). When Van Dooren examines this argument in relation to Martha the last passenger pigeon, he is able to challenge the idea that the continuation of a species can be safeguarded by their existence in zoos. For him, the focus on species, and on life as a biological concept only, enables a species being presented 'as somehow "ongoing" because one individual continues to draw breath in a zoo' disregards the fact that 'the entangled relations that in nontrivial sense are this particular life for and its form of life, have long become frayed and disconnected' (Van Van Dooren 2014, 11).

This important shift in the understanding of 'life' as more than exclusively biological is drawn and developed from Stefan Helmreich's concepts of life forms and forms of life as explored in his book *Alien Ocean. Anthropological Voyages in Microbial Seas* (2009). Van Dooren engages with Helmreich's exploration of the differences between life forms (understood as biological organisms) and forms of life which he presents as 'those cultural, social, symbolic, and pragmatic ways of thinking and acting that organize human communities' (Van Van Dooren 2014, 8).

For Van Dooren extinction does not only entail the death of the last representative of a particular species, but also involves the end of a form of life: 'there is no single extinction phenomenon. Rather, in each case there is a distinct unravelling of ways of life, a distinctive loss and set of changes and challenges' (Van Van Dooren 2014, 8). This signals to deaths that go beyond the body (animal or otherwise) and points towards the cultural and social formations that surround

and are integral part of living beyond the biological aspect. As Van Dooren suggests, these deaths are more than “‘biology’ in any narrow sense’ because it is in these multispecies relations that ‘learning and development take place, that social practices and cultures are formed’ (Van Van Dooren 2014, 4).

Like Van Dooren I want to think about extinction as the death of a biological organism and the ending or disappearance of the social and cultural formations that also constitute that life. I want to foreground the idea that what is lost with the species is not just the species but ‘a social and behavioural diversity’ – a ‘what it was to be that species’ that also ends (Van Van Dooren 2014, 11). I also want to understand extinction beyond death, and focus instead on these social and cultural formations. For me, extinction is a process of transformation which produces disappearances but also enables appearances. This is what Van Dooren adequately names ‘the edges of extinction’, which in addition ‘to being spaces of suffering, death, and loss [...] are now often also places of intense hope and dedicated care’ (Van Van Dooren 2014, 12). In *Journey to the Lower World* and *Mystic Chic*, Coates and Barrow produce precisely a space for the hope and care of life forms that are transitioning into several forms of disappearance: the tower block communities and the practice of hen keeping. A sense of loss produces an opening for care. In Coates’ and Barrows’ works, that place is occupied, centrally, by the animal.

There is a tendency to think about extinction as something that happens ‘over there’, ‘out in nature’ (Van Van Dooren 2014, 4). More importantly, governments, environmental agencies, the media, environmental NGOs, encourage a way of thinking about extinction as a process that affects other species. The overriding discourse is that animals are endangered, need to be protected, conserved and that humans are responsible both for their extinction and their conservation. I consider the division of roles within extinction as far more complex than that of humans being the agents and animals being the passive recipients of human action. I take this stance mainly because understanding the animal as the object of extinction facilitates its instrumental use in political discourses of fear and pity such as the ones produced by Cameron and the Huskies in the British Prime Minister’s Green Campaign of 2006 or the iconic pitiful images of polar bears standing in isolated sheets of ice, the close ups of big-eyed arctic seals and baby whales that are often used in environmental campaigns.

I want to entertain the idea of humans being at the centre of extinction rather

than on its margins, and position the animal in a role which facilitates the transition towards a form of disappearance. I believe that this imaginary upside-down world, which is at the core of Coates and Barrow's works, can begin to illuminate, for the humans in that equation, alternative ways of thinking about responsibility in relation to extinction. Extinction is not only about the death of animals and the transformation of habitats it is also at the very core of social and cultural formations that in turn contribute to the death of animals and the transformation of habitats in a cyclical and entangled manner.

Coates' *Journey to the Lower World* is a performance designed to make an intervention in a process of personal-social-ecological transformations produced by the regular phenomenon of population management. The piece addresses a social issue through artistic means: the management, displacement and re-imagining of populations and, in particular, of communities inhabiting the edges of society – in this case those living in council/affordable housing. The two iterations of the piece respond to projects of displacement that are clearly linked to the transformation of cities in the contemporary West and in particular to urban regeneration and gentrification. These urban regeneration projects are regularly undertaken in the name of 'betterment' of communities, towns and cities but often produce the opposite effect, the dismantling of communities. The reorganization of these communities is not without problems as more often than not these reorganizations cause dramatic changes in the ecologies of a place.

The process of transformation undergone by the residents of the Liverpool tower block that are the focus of Coates' *Journey to the Lower World* – the eviction and rehousing of residents and the demolition of the building itself – are an example of what Van Dooren calls the end, perhaps not of life forms, but of a very specific 'form of life', a form of life which is intricate and presents examples of co-evolution and co-dependence. Residents in the block talk about the conviviality that takes place in floor landings, they talk about looking out for each other, looking after each other's children, doing each other's shopping, thus generating powerful networks that enable them to confront the urban planners and secure a good deal for their future and the future of their community. There is, arguably, a way of life that will end with the breaking up of these networks and with the dispersal of the community. Coates' performance is designed to aid the residents at this crucial and unsettling point in their lives by offering to perform an ancient shamanistic ritual that will provide answers to their difficult questions. *Journey to the Lower World* is thus as a process of building community resilience, one that

enables the tenants in the tower block to take back control of their own lives within a context that overrides their needs, discards their agency and disregards their feelings, and their attachments to place. What is interesting to me about Coates' intervention in this process of escalated endings is the focus, on the one hand, on irrationalism, as I have already discussed, represented by the figure of the shaman and the ritual that is at the centre of the piece and, on the other, on the subversion of the roles played by animal and human in the context of extinction.

Jen Harvie has discussed Coates' use of the 'irrational' in relation to one of the work's later iterations – *A Ritual for Elephant and Castle*. For her, 'the anti-rationalism of Coates' interventions was clearly deliberate and also funny, disturbing and forceful, highlighting the failure of regeneration and development 'logic' properly to acknowledge, let alone account for the 'irrational', unquantifiable feelings and relations of the estate that it considers failed' (Harvie 2013, 137). Coates embracing of the 'irrational' places him and his work outside traditional philosophical and scientific discourses based on 'common sense' which draw a line between the sensible humans and the non-sensical humans and animals. In this way, Coates' challenges the rationalist discourses that have for centuries defined human relationships with animals. This is particularly interesting in the context of extinction given the predominantly scientific and knowledge-based approach to this phenomenon. Irrationality is presented as an alternative way of apprehending the world which in turn dismantles the world itself and the biological, social and cultural formations that exist within it.

Coates' also presents becoming animal and its recognition of the porousness of the human-animal boundary as a key aspect of aiding in these transitional stages. Coates' performance/trance journey asks the residents sitting in Rose's flat to visit the lower world which is presented as a journey through fields, caves, underground waters and lakes. In doing this, Coates' is also requesting the residents, of a primarily urban space, to reconsider their relationship with nature, one that is a repository for knowledge as well as beauty, a nature that speaks to them and can help them address their current situation. The piece repositions the animal as the expert, the agent that will help humans to handle the disappearance of their community, of their life forms. Coates becomes merely a vessel for the animal spirit and it is the animal that will provide an answer to the

resident's question. In Rose's living room, Coates writes down the question posed by the community on a flipchart: 'Do we have a protector for this site? What is it?'. In his trance state, he has a series of encounters with a moorhen, a stag, a hind, a coot, a red grouse and a short-eared owl. He seeks a pre-literal truth, a way of communicating that is before speech and that subverts the hierarchy of speech and challenges the well-known Aristotelian distinction between voice and noise. For the shaman/performer noise also communicates. The question from the residents finds its answer in the sparrow hawk, whose integrally connected wing feathers offer the image of a closely-knit community. The answer is then interpreted as 'the protector for the site is the community; as long as they stay together they will be protected' (Coates 2005). The community embraces the shaman's response. The audience sitting in Rose's flat enter into a conversation. Nothing can be done to stop the demolition and relocation of the community but there is recognition that the performance has brought them even closer together.

Some of us felt the sounds of the birds and elephants was a good omen for the future. Some thought there was a feeling of togetherness and that the wings were a protection for us, for when we move into our new homes after demolition [...]. We felt as a group that in the future we would still be together. Which we are still (Josie Crawford, Chair of Sheil Park Residents' Association in Coates 2005, no pagination).

It is clear from this statement that the animals conjured in Coates' journey provided the residents with security, confidence in the future of the community and a continued sense of the community itself. The animal was thus central in helping the residents cope with the loss of one way of life and embrace the beginning of an unknown other.

Barrow's *Mystic Chick* is also intended to support individuals and communities in transition and engages, in its conceptualization and delivery, in the protection and recovery of lost practices or practices which are on their way to disappearing. Barrow's project asks audiences to make a leap of faith, to participate – in Barrow's own words – in 'an exchange of hope and trust' that asks all involved to embrace irrationality as a way of engaging with the world in general but specially in transitional processes. This exchange is facilitated by an ancient Etruscan ritual which entails the reading of hens' movements and behaviour as answers to questions posed by humans. The performance proposes, thus, a recuperation of these kinds of rituals as a way of closing the distance between humans and animals. It proposes the idea that the ritual represents a lost way of being, a pre-

animals. It proposes the idea that the reader represents a lost way of being, a pre-industrial way of relating to other beings that blurs or at least challenges contemporary divisions. In this way, *Mystic Chic* reclaims a long-lost way of life (at least in the West), one in which humans and animals worked in collaboration and in which humans were ready and willing to listen to the animal as the expert. It is not coincidental that the piece also engages and facilitates the continuation of another set of lost life-forms: community hen rearing. In its association with the Hen Power Project, *Mystic Chic* contributes to the visibility of a form of life that, in spite of its recognized value, is on its way to disappearing.

The Hen Power Project enables the elderly to engage in hen rearing. It does so by providing the resources to do this in community settings and homes for the elderly. The practice of hen rearing provides a focus in the participant's lives as well as offering opportunities for being together, taking care and responsibility, and helping each other. The project is active in 40 care homes across the country and has a primary objective of targeting loneliness amongst old people. Some of the participants also take hen-keeping and hen hatching practices to schools and other community settings thus providing intergenerational conversations and cross-class experiences. It is clear that the project tackles a cultural and social shift, one that might be described as the disappearance of certain ways of life. Its central concerns are the marginalization and isolation of old people in contemporary societies and the lack of intergenerational exchanges. The project also believes in a central role for animal-rearing and keeping in communities, a practice that has been mostly lost in urban settings, as one that can help with tackling these perceived problems. The project's website is clear in establishing the benefits of these practices as they seek to:

Empower older people to build positive relationships through hen-keeping with improved wellbeing, reduced loneliness and reduced depression. Help care settings offer relationship-centred care, meeting older people's needs and embrace 'living with care' as opposed to 'caring for'. Create lasting change by supporting older people in care settings to get involved with schools, festivals and community events. Support Resident and Relative Committees within care settings to be aspirational and provide meaningful activities which embrace creative ageing.

In this way, *Mystic Chic* is part of a chain of reclaimed practices which place the animal in the position of the expert and helper. This, as in Coates' piece, represents an overturning of the general position that the animal occupies in

contemporary society in general but, more specifically, in the context of extinction narratives. I believe that *Mystic Chic* offers an opportunity to reflect on the loss of certain ways of life and the impact that that has on individuals and communities. It does so signalling not towards a nostalgic past, but towards a different relationality that is possible and should be embraced between humans and animals.

Understood in these ways, *Journey to the Lower World* and *Mystic Chic* share an intention and, in part, a methodology. The works position the animal at the centre of the performances as agents who have the wisdom, and possibly the power, to intervene in disruptive process of loss and disappearance. The instances of becoming at the centre of these two pieces are an example of how animal-human communication can act as part of a healing process to repair those disruptions. In presenting human, animals, art, life and therapy in a continuum, Coates' and Barrow's works make an intervention into categorical understandings of all these concepts, while producing alternative understandings for all of them. The human is never just human, art is not just art.

In this article, I have attempted to demonstrate how two instances of socially engaged performance present human-animal relations as a way of challenging these relations themselves and also the positions that humans and animals occupy in processes involving the decay and disappearance of those relations. In this way, the article contributes to ongoing discussions around the repositioning of animals in contemporary arts and performance practices and its societal implications.

The article enables a reflection on these relocations in a context that is original, that of socially engaged art, and to consider whether this framing has the potential to destabilize further these recognized relations. I believe that the clouding of the borders between performance and everyday life that is central to socially engaged or socially turned performance, offers a unique opportunity to erase further established divisions such as the animal-human divide. Questions about the truthfulness of the rituals that are at the centre of these performances are directly related to them being situated outside theatres and art galleries and their connection to existing community-engagement projects. In this context, Coates and Barrow becomings fall in an impossible to resolve duality (they are both real and not) which is as possible or impossible to prove as the distinction between the pieces being real rituals, pieces of arts or examples of real healing

practices. At the core of the article is an exploration of irrationality and the tensions that exist between scientific and artistic discourse with regards to human-animal relations. The emphasis on truthfulness, for example, is a paramount example of the power of the rational discourse that both performances contest. In *Journey to the Lower World* and *Mistyc Chic* irrationality also provides a link to the question of extinction and the impossibility of understanding the scale of this phenomenon through cognitive means. In this way performance, and more specifically, performances of the irrational open a productive area in which to apprehend extinction in alternative ways. Most importantly this is a conception in which the roles have shifted and the animal ceases to be the victim and becomes the subject which will aid human subjects in this difficult but unremitting process.

Notes on contributors

Lourdes Orozco is a lecturer in Theatre Studies in the Workshop Theatre, School of English. Her research area is at the crossroads of theatre/performance and animal studies, with specific focus in live animals, policy and representation. She is the author various articles on the participation of animals in theatre and performance practices, of the book *Theatre & Animals* (Palgrave 2013) and the co-editor of *Performing Animality: Animals in Performance Practices* (Palgrave, 2015). She is currently the main editor of *Performing Ethos* .

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

References

- Birke , Lynda , and Luciana Parisi . 1999. "Animals, Becoming." In *Animal Others. on Ethics, Ontology and Animal Life*, edited by H. Peter Steeves , H. Peter , 55–74. New York: State University of New York Press.
- Broglio , Ron . 2011. *Surface Encounters. Thinking with Animals and Art. Minneapolis*. London: University of Minnesota Press.
- Coates , Marcus . 2005. *Journey to the Lower World*. London: Platform Projects & Morning Star.
- Cull , Laura . 2009. *Deleuze and Performance*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Cull , Laura . 2015. "From Homo Performans to Interspecies Collaboration." In

Performing Animality. Animals in Performance Practices, edited by Lourdes Orozco and Jennifer Parker-Starbuck , 19–36. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Deleuze , Gilles , and Felix Guattari . 1987. *A Thousand Plateaus. Capitalism & Schizophrenia*. Minneapolis. London: University of Minnesota Press.

Derrida , Jacques . 2008. *The Animal That Therefore I Am*. New York: Fordham University Press.

Fighting Animal Testing Campaign by Lush Cosmetics. 2014. London.
Accessed April 2017

Haraway , Donna . 2016. *Staying with the Trouble. Making Kin in the Age of the Chthulucene*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Haraway , Donna . 2008. *When Species Meet*. London: University of Minnesota Press.

Harvie , Jen . 2013. *Fair Play: Art Performance and Neoliberalism*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Helmreich , Stefan . 2009. *Alien Ocean. Anthropological Voyages in Microbial Seas*. Berkeley; Los Angeles. London: University of California Press.

Lamont , Tom . "Eventually Something Serious Comes through." *The Guardian Online*, October 8, 2012.

Accessed November 22 2017

. <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2012/apr/08/marcus-coates-artist-elephant-castle>

Nimer , J. , and B. Lundahl . 2015. "Animal-Assisted Therapy: A Meta-Analysis." *Anthrozoös: A Multidisciplinary Journal of the Interactions of People and Animals* 20 (3): 225–238.

Read , Alan . 2013. *Theatre in the Expanded Field. Seven Approaches to Performance*. London: Methuen Drama.

Van Dooren , Thom . 2014. *Flight Ways. Life and Loss at the Edge of Extinction*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Vulliamy , Elsa . 2016. "Naked Vegans Covered in Fake Blood Demand Barcelona Becomes Meat-Free." *The Independent Online*, May 23.

Accessed August 2017

. <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/animal-rights-protest-spain-vegan-fake-blood-activists-a7043491.html>