

## Dutton and Swindells

*In 1998 Steve Dutton and Steve Swindells formed the artist collaboration Dutton and Swindells. In 2008 they completed a three month artist residency programme at Ssamzie Space, Seoul, South Korea. Steve Dutton is Professor in Creative Practice at Coventry University. Dr. Steve Swindells is a Reader in Creative Practice at University of Huddersfield. This paper and accompanying images forms a written/visual response to a presentation they delivered at Writing Encounters, York St. John University, 11<sup>th</sup> – 13<sup>th</sup> September 2008.*

### **Writing Encounters: Institute of Beasts (2008)**

Between January and April 2008 we undertook a residency programme at Ssamzie Contemporary Art Space in Seoul, South Korea. We gave our residency the title, 'The Institute of Beasts', proposing the 'Institute' as a structural method of working which was intended to accommodate (in the sense of hosting) what we considered to be increasingly errant and divergent processes developed both prior to and during the residency period; with a view towards ultimately attempting ( but perhaps failing ) to establish an improbable taxonomy of unruly ideas and forms which could be housed, or at the very least, managed, under the auspices of said Institute. The Institute was and is nothing less than a way of embracing the schizophrenic tendencies within our work; the potentially infinite and coagulating contradictory impulses, repetitions, compulsions, detours and diversions, intermittently morbid, critical, dull, childish, unspectacular, wayward, drifting and lacking what might be thought of as progress in any progressive sense of the word.

This paper forms part of that ongoing project by acknowledging, indeed, by summoning those detours, whilst housing them within the context of the academic journal, and by raising the spectre of the 'encounter' within a text written as practice, in particular within the apparition of the text and image appearing as an *animal haunted by human subjectivity*. In this sense the context of the paper is the encroaching animal *becoming* in the text as much as the image; an animal which has a purposeful amorphousness,

oscillating and camouflaged between passages of stealth and dumbness, mimicry and schizophrenia. As in many anthropomorphic experiments our 'animals' often seem to possess a hurt look and a melancholic gaze, reflecting on the huge ordinariness of life, a generous beckoning to share the smallest moments of disappointment and humiliation, where moments of peace and beauty are rare.

The dog turns its head; nose dilated and blowing fumes through flared nostrils. It draws its lips above its incisors and drools. Dog years amongst the human dust and decay of modern life. Dogged! A rich-black brush mongrel that intimates a thousand years of crushed skulls and grinding teeth. The dog accompanies the hunter and yet is sometimes perceived as a scavenger, the dog with many heads, *Cerberus*, the guardian of the entrance to Hades. Black dog. Almanac dog with dark sunken eyes that reflect the planets; an encounter with a profound double-dealer that possesses both the playful and savage paw-strokes of the wilderness. We chance a direction of work that will have the capacity to remain both inexpressible and wandering; polar moons that cast sparkling reflections upon muddy puddles. That canine smell and infinite darkness between the stars; pucker nosed and myopic sight!

We are writing in the text, collaged in things that have no immediate resemblance or affinity to one another. In this space the word is a ready-made. The collage of the reasonable and the ridiculous has infinite potential but we keep returning to the one thing, the one moment or scenario in a practice which evokes both a cackle and a lament. We laugh because we are aware of ourselves both as what we are and what we are not, and we are ambivalent as to which is which.

It was Arthur C. Danto writing about collage in 'after the end of art' who wrote: 'the paradigm of the contemporary is that of the collage as defined by Max Ernst, with one difference. Ernst said that collage is *'the meeting of distant realities on a plane foreign to them both'* - the difference is that there is no longer a plane foreign to distant artistic practices, nor are there realities all that distinct from one another".<sup>1</sup> However, the notion

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<sup>1</sup> Danto, Arthur C. (1997) *After the End of Art: Contemporary Art and the Pale of History*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, Chapter 1, p.2

of an encounter also presupposes that there is, in some form, a confrontation or an acknowledgement of muteness between things, and thus we suggest the notion of collage is something that is in the throws of possible conflation while simultaneously maintaining a suspended and frozen position of indelible difference. The collage itself can never really be fully known as a homogenous entity, if there is any coalition at all it is on the basis of wholesale paradox. We write in the latency and potential of collage within the Institute, which to date continues to ebb and flow under the ice; clearly unfathomable, uncoordinated, un-constituted, unnamed and unnameable.

The 1967 film 'Doctor Dolittle', from the book by Hugh Lofting, musically tells the story of a doctor who learns from his pet parrot how to talk (and sing) to animals. Things take a complicated turn when a friend of Dolittle's from Tibet sends him a rare two-headed llama-type creature, the 'Pushme-Pullyu'. Throughout the narrative the animal is continuously immobilized by itself, unable to make a decision on which way to turn. The Latin term *nolens-volens* literally translates as 'unwilling-willing' but is commonly used to signify an absence of choice. It is an irreparable world, where an unrelenting alterability with the self stands between what is thus and not otherwise. *Nolens-volens* condenses a sensibility within the work and the Pushme-Pullyu has the peripheral vision of a cubist fundamentalist, displaying continuous movement with no orientation, where backwards, forwards, left or right, up and down do not exist as concepts of progress. Fated to jerk forever in a multi-faceted world the Pushme-Pullyu will always be tethered to itself.

'Tales of the Riverbank', was a television show created in 1959 by David Ellison and Paul Sutherland. The show used a hamster, a water vole and a guinea pig as characters in short dramas for children. In order for our studio bound hamsters to give the appearance that they are talking and singing should we apply peanut butter to the roofs of their mouths? Should we have human voices provided by Johnny Morris<sup>2</sup> in sync to the actions of our two hamsters thereby giving the impression that the hamsters, while inhabiting modern art sculptures as mini architectures are also performing ritual activities of Pagan folklore in a warped form of Morris Dancing?

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<sup>2</sup> Johnny Morris (1916 – 1999) Children's programmes TV presenter. Through humorous filmed inserts he presented voice-over mimicry of animals that appeared to display human emotions and characteristics: *Tales of the Riverbank* (BBC 1960, 1963, 1971) and *Animal Magic* (BBC 1962 – 1983).

The 'talking' hamsters, sniffing and crapping on and in modern art animate an alliance that exceeds itself, a further reversal or bestial inversion that revels in the transgression of art, animation and animal husbandry. In this respect the talking hamster is a show of weakness as well as a display of power. It is an act of self-assertion that also performs vulnerability with aplomb. For Deleuze and Guattari, becoming-animal<sup>3</sup> signifies the crossing of a threshold into a world of 'absolute deterritorialization', where productions and actions begin to constitute their own worlds, potentially lacking any subject or goal. So there is no longer anything but movements, vibrations, tics and instincts in a series of representations; hamsters, dogs, primates, turkeys, deer, lovebirds are distinguished only by this or that threshold, this or that vibration, this or that sound in the rhizome and burrows of the Institute. But that is another story!

The paper floats on the flatulence created by the zoo and the academy in which patterns, objects and images, are butting, parading, showing their multi-coloured arses, seducing, cropping, staging, editing, falling, staring or confronting each other in a sense of mute appreciation and anticipation in a zig-zag or elliptical and often tedious, relentless, durational performance. The subject of this performance; the errant and contradictory nature of practice, the work; the developing sense of momentum, an enveloping aura, or nexus of events within which there might exist some sense of a precarious developing libidinal being. The collage is an animal in the throws of becoming. The paper has no narrative other than this slow appearance, if it stalks any sense of linearity it is no longer an encounter. The writing of an encounter merely outlines what cannot be said and its lack may reveal more than the sum of the paper.

The trees are dense now with singing birds, whitethroats, titlark, yellowhammer and the cooing of wood pigeons, each filling the air with the insanity of dawn, each being individually drenched by nature's profoundest secret. In the centre of the wood there exists a natural clearing, perfectly level and smooth with glassy lichen, a dark emerald covering. Towards the perimeter of the clearance leaves and branches scurf it over. One can sense the ancients at those edges; there is a faint uncertain odour that ruffles

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<sup>3</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, (1988) *A Thousand Plateaus*, pp. 174-5, 306-7, Athlone, London

the fern. A wild deer walks out of the trees, crosses the clearance, and stops to snuff the ground. Large bright eyes search. I stopped for a moment, overwhelmed by a displaced universe, in which each being is appointed non-communicable. I watched its glittering brown eyes watching me. The deer's presence announced a far deeper and stranger reality than any classification of plants and animals – a priority of existence over death, of the individual over the homogenous, being over nomenclature. The deer momentarily awoke my own *wild-side*, itself a startled animal, but a creature that swiftly melted back into my own subconscious forest as quickly as it surfaced. A return to present consciousness was a realization that I am not the Green Man; I am excluded from this place, shut out from the art of greenwood folklore. I could stand here in Albion, but not enjoy this place, only envy and fear the deer and birds their hysterical ecstasy.