

## **Interspecies: artists collaborating with animals**

An **Arts Catalyst** touring exhibition

*Opens: January 2009. Exhibition runs: 2009 – 2010.*

*Venues: Cornerhouse, Manchester. Edinburgh Science Festival/Stills Gallery, Edinburgh. Allenheads Contemporary Arts, Northumberland. GSK Contemporary, London.*

There have been many examples in history of 'living art', where artists have manipulated the actions of swarms of bees, herded sheep, commanded dogs and sent rats down mazes. But can artists work with animals as equals? It has recently been discovered that humans are closer to the higher primates than was previously thought. Following the lengthy observations by primatologist Jane Goodall of chimpanzees in the wild, it has now been found that they can be taught a form of language in captivity, while tribes of bonobo apes are known to leave visual directional cues via bent sticks, almost like messages, for each other.

The Arts Catalyst is building on its extensive work in bringing knowledge about contested issues in science to the public through a new project-based touring exhibition, *Interspecies: artists collaborating with animals*. *Interspecies* comprises new work by a group of four artists (Nicolas Primat, Kira O'Reilly, Antony Hall and Ruth MacLennan), and existing pieces by Rachel Mayeri, Beatriz Da Costa and Kathy High. All the artists in *Interspecies* question the one-sided manipulation of non-human life forms for art. They instead try to absorb the animal's point of view as a fundamental part of their work and practice.

**Nicolas Primat** has proposed to work with primatologists and zoos to make a new work in which higher apes are taught video skills. The apes will make the creative decisions, with humans simply providing guidance and training. Primat's work explores how the animals' "natural" communication skills can be extended into the realm of human/ape creative collaboration.

**Kira O'Reilly**, one of the most experimental and controversial performance artists in the UK, will present an action/installed performance featuring herself and a sleeping female pig. The work addresses the ethics of human and non-human animal interaction, acknowledging the implicit ambivalences and violence in the appropriation of animals as a resource.

**Antony Hall** will encourage the public to directly communicate with live electric fish in the gallery space, through mild electrical impulses (both tactile and visual). The artist's motivation for this project relates to his long term interest in aquariums. Typically installed as calming objects, on closer inspection there are revealed as contained environments of both aggressive conflict and submissive tolerance.

In the Northumberland and Edinburgh sections of *Interspecies*, **The Department of Eagles (Ruth MacLennan)** will produce a participatory project, examining the

communications between falconers and falcons. For centuries, these birds have served to naturalise human surveillance. Arguably, their existence only continues today through human intervention such as tagging, breeding programmes, and the construction of artificial nesting environments.

Three existing works will also be shown in the touring exhibition: **Rachel Mayeri's** 'Primate Cinema', which casts human actors in the role of mating non-human primates, **Beatriz Da Costa's** 'PigeonBlog' which investigates the military use of homing pigeons, and **Kathy High's** 'Embracing Animal', which explores the relationship between humans and laboratory rats.

*Interspecies* will tour during the Darwin 200 celebrations in 2009. 12 February 2009 marks the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Darwin's birth. *Interspecies* will open at Cornerhouse in Manchester in January 2009, and then travel to Northumberland, Edinburgh and London. A series of talks and debates between the artists, writers, scientists and animal welfare experts will accompany the exhibition.

*\*The Arts Catalyst is a London-based arts organisation that commissions new art which experimentally and critically engages with science. It produces provocative, playful, risk-taking projects that aim to spark meaningful conversations about our changing world.*