

lucille calmel

The artistic research project *l'animal que donc je suis* ["the animal who i am (following)"] looks at "performance-based creation with, by, and for other animals." It arose from a set of issues that lucille calmel had been mulling over for some time, including the definition of the art of performance, the technology of communication and creation with animals, and the conditions for sharing such creations with audiences, among others. The evolution of research in biology, ethology, and philosophy has in the last several decades opened a vaster and richer field of inter-species initiatives. It was based on the work of thinkers who contributed to this development—including Jacques Derrida, Vinciane Despret, Donna Haraway, Joëlle Zask, Eva Meijer, among many others—that calmel undertook a series of experiments combining technology and performance.

The outbreak of Covid nevertheless overturned her plans quickly. One of the main areas of investigation was Japan, where calmel had planned to work on Lolcats and other famous online felines, to visit the islands of Tashirojima and Aoshima (known for their large cat populations), as well as the rabbit island of Ōkunoshima, while immersing herself in the environment and thought that gave rise to the Gutaï movement, which is essential to performance art. As this trip became impossible, calmel went to Athens at the invitation of the gallery Sub Rosa Space, and then to Sète in the company of Clyde Lepage, Damien Petitot, and Gaëtan Rusquet, where—the healthcare constraints notwithstanding—they conducted experiments in words, gestures, video, and audio with and for birds and cats. Another aspect of the research involved the collection of references, printed and audiovisual, from artists as well as amateurs working in the field of inter-species creation. This archiving process, conducted together with Clyde Lepage, took the form of video compilations, performance readings, or lectures, depending on the circumstances. The initial presentation of the research to the public took place as part of the international performance festival Trouble at Amazone in Brussels, with interventions by Marie Lisel, calmel, Lepage, and Alexane Sanchez. This was followed by a day-long conference at ERG on October 6 with

Art / Recherche (A/R)
lucille calmel (L.C.)
Clyde Lepage (C.L.)

the animal who I am (following)

Léa Le Bricomte, Michela Sacchetto, and Véronique Servais. A third presentation is slated to take place at iMAL in Brussels on December 11, 2021 with Régine Debatty, Fleur Courtois, and Gwenola Wagon.

(A/R) Under what circumstances did this project arise?
(L.C.) It all started with reading a book by Vinciane Despret, *What Would Animals Say If We Asked The Right Questions?*, two of its chapters in particular (the letter A for "Artists" and O for "Oeuvres" [Artworks]), which immerse us in the relationship between animals and artistic creation. She has updated Étienne Souriau's notion of "instauration", which I understand and would sum up as follows: setting aside the idea that being an artist consists of deciding which production makes a work, which production is situated within the field of art and is recognized as such by one's peers, etc., and instead embracing the idea that the work already exists to some extent and that the artist-living being (human or otherwise) feels this and perhaps completes and concretizes it. He also addresses the issue of the perception of the beautiful, of pleasure, and of play, among others, in animal creations. All of this resonated with questions I had been asking myself for decades, such as, what is the difference in the field of performance between recognized works of art and the performances in the television show *Jackass*, for example, where the protagonist climbs into the boxing ring only to be knocked out in just a few seconds by a professional boxer, a Yamakasi, someone climbing a skyscraper in New York City for a cause (or these days, to take a selfie), or someone who is admitted to the Guinness Book of World Records for covering his face with 1,000 bugs? Once you remove the context of the gallery and the artist's signature, what distinguishes these performances from those of artists? It's all a bit hazy. At any rate, I wondered a lot about delineation and identity, about who does or doesn't make art. Already at the age of twenty, I remember watching Asian shadow puppeteers who refused applause because they said they were merely vessels for what they gave.

the art of performance with, by, and for other animals

Reading Despret's writing on the issue of instauration encouraged me to pursue this thread. In addition to Étienne Souriau (and his fabulous book *The Esthetic Sense of Animals*, published in 1965), and this idea that an artwork exists before the artist gives birth to it, that it is immanent, I also found a certain resonance in the concept of *chi*, the vital breath. I think of the Japanese painter Hokusai, who during a competition dipped a chicken's feet in ink and let it walk across the canvas. When he won the competition, he said that it was the chicken's *chi* that gave rise to the work.

All of these thoughts coincided with my discovery and collection, starting in 2008, of Lolcats, videos of the Japanese cats Maru and Shirone Koshiro, the appearance of the first online animal networks, and amateurs who began filming specific, remarkable individuals, and so on. Not to mention the development of technologies that have rendered the languages of certain animals accessible (for example, rats, bats, and fishes) and which have enabled new kinds of interactions between the species (tactile screens, the reduction in size and weight of cameras, microphones, GPS beacons, and so on).

(A/R) If I understood correctly, you were in a phase where you were asking yourself a lot of questions about your practice and the borders of performance in general. Was that when the animal perspective surfaced as a potential way forward?

(L.C.) Yes, there was some of that, but we shouldn't focus too much on the personal, human angle, because this also coincided with my shock at reading articles and listening to radio programs on the loss of biodiversity, this mourning and separation from nature that we experience every day. I would say there were several avenues of approach.

(A/R) The project was constructed and initially presented with a number of scientific, artistic, literary, and philosophical references. For that matter, the title comes from Jacques Derrida's last (posthumous) book. What importance did this thinker play in the shaping of your project?

(L.C.) The first time I set foot in the field and interacted directly with street cats, it was thanks to him. I confess that I haven't read

the whole book, because I find Derrida a bit arduous. But the passage where the cat looks at him naked, and he feels ashamed, is touching. He was one of the people who reminded us that what we think is unique to us as humans (laughing, technology, language, culture, and mourning, among others) has been disproven by recent ethological discoveries. He also refused the notion of the animal in the singular, using the plural to pay homage to the diversity of species and individuals. His influence is far-reaching. I would call it a point of departure. In particular, I used this photograph of a cat eating crunchies in the form of a sentence of Derrida's in Spanish. And his title is just great!

(Laughter)

(A/R) The project was conceived in three phases: personal research (reading, listening, watching, and so on), artistic and technical experimentation, and then meetings and restitutions. How did this first collection and study phase play out?

(L.C.) It's endless. Actually, because of Covid, it became the core of the project. I did a lot of reading. And most of all, I worked with Clyde on the references to artists and thinkers who addressed these issues.

(C.L.) It's a sort of collection, mainly of artists, but also of amateurs who made videos in domestic settings using the new technologies that have become part of our daily lives.

They represent another aspect of inter-species creation. The collection also includes scientific practices that many artists have integrated into the core of their work. And then there were the references to the places in the world where these issues are being addressed. All of this made for more than three hundred pages!

(L.C.) It was a lot. Clyde worked a lot on this. There is a plethora of artists and writers who have played with this. For example, I think of the woman artist who creates spaces for birds...

(C.L.) ...Julie Andreyev? Yes, she created the "Bird Park Survival Station" on the roof of her house in Vancouver. It's a space for birds who established their territory in that area, a couple of crows in particular. It provides them with fresh water, perches, and hiding places. The station is also equipped with a system that records the birds' visual and acoustic activities. Julie Andreyev and her team analyze the data, specifically to improve what the station can offer. Over time, a relationship grew between Andreyev and the male crow. They had a game of pebbles that began with the crow giving her a pebble, which she interpreted as a gesture of thanks for the water received, and to which she responded. It went on from there. This all gave rise to a kind of ongoing installation with different kinds of pebbles. Then, this installation was construed as a musical score, and this led to the creation of a sound piece composed of field recordings of the surroundings. The base concept was simply to be there for

the birds, to be at their service, rather than imposing anything and everything on them. This approach also highlighted the importance of observation as the first step in establishing a respectful relationship.

(A/R) What form did you give to this collection?

(L.C.) We began by working on how to give back using a mobile lecture model.

(C.L.) The content was adapted to the evolution of our research, as well as to the context. For example, as part of the international performance festival Trouble, the theme was "1 + 1 is greater than 2." I selected some fifteen examples of inter-species collaborations between a human animal and a non-human animal.

(A/R) Will this collection be published as well, either on paper or in digital form?

(C.L.) We are thinking about publishing it online. It's important to facilitate the work of future researchers interested in this same topic.

(L.C.) It's a great foundation. We also considered ethical issues. We removed certain artists whom we found problematic, although we did leave some in as a counter-model.

(C.L.) For example, in 1999, Céleste Boursier-Mougenot created an installation called *From here to ear*, in which dozens of birds were held in a closed space that they shared with several plugged-in electric guitars. Spectators were invited to walk through the aviary, which caused the birds to take flight and, therefore, possibly hit notes on the guitars. The moment that an animal individual's movement is hindered, I begin to have my doubts. The condition of the animal's wish to participate in the inter-species encounter is paramount. In this example, not only were the birds forced to participate in this performance, but the inter-species relationship was intentionally based on inconveniencing them, scaring them, or bothering them enough to force them to fly off.

(A/R) In addition to reading, were you able to have any meetings, despite the outbreak of the pandemic?

(L.C.) There was in fact a whole segment of the research that involved traveling to attend seminars, but that all fell through. We did attend an online seminar called *Art & Animals, in the Age of Crispr, Cloning, and Cellular Agriculture* by Régine Debatty. It was very informative, but at the same time, we didn't meet anyone. These seminars are also about eating with people, running into them in the hallways, having a drink together. That's how bonds form. Video doesn't really allow for much growth in that regard. It was really quite sad not to be able to meet people. These interactions also help shape the research. That said, there are other forms of collaboration. For example, we worked with Louise Charlier,

who is connected to the La Cambre Visual Arts School, and who also provided support for the production. With regard to the technological part, we conducted research with Damien Petitot. We were supposed to develop this part by attending seminars and doing field work in Japan, but this obviously didn't happen, or rather, it did only to a very limited extent. Despite everything, we did meet all kinds of scientists, curators, and artists, especially when we went to Paris, where we met Annick Bureaud and Gwenola Wagon, Agnès Rosse in Sète, and Sandrine Willems in Montpellier. These are satellite alliances that will resonate during our next public presentations. We also had discussions with teachers at the ERG Art School and especially at the 75 Visual Arts School, with Michela Sacchetto, the head of research at this school, who has supported us from the beginning. Ultimately, when I make my list, a lot of things did happen, Covid notwithstanding.

(A/R) Something I find interesting in the evolution of your research is the collaborative and pedagogical aspect. This has increased in importance relative to your initially stated intentions, even though Covid could very well have led you to work in isolation.

(L.C.) When I received funding from FRArt, I had been selected to teach in the "installation-performance" orientation at the ERG. The collaboration with the schools grew; we conducted workshops at the 75 and at the ERG, and we formed a special relationship with La Cambre through Antoine Pickels and the commission for Alexane Sanchez's performance as part of the Trouble festival. This made the FRArt research that much more concrete, as well as its dissemination throughout the school network.

I ultimately consider this quotient of sharing to be an essential part of the research. What's more, a lot of students lost their jobs because of Covid. When I started working on some of the more complex aspects of my research, I began looking for someone to help me out. Christophe Alix, Director of the 75, suggested that I contact Clyde. As luck would have it, she was working with me in the installation-performance orientation at the ERG.

(C.L.) Yes, it was quite unexpected.

(A/R) So, Clyde, where does your interest in Lucille's research topic stem from?

(C.L.) My connection to the research grew out of my interest in non-human animals as well as my own performance practice. I have been vegan for ten years now, in which time I have familiarized myself with anti-specist ideology. This forms part of the political struggles that are very important to me. So, when Christophe Alix told me about Lucille's research topic, I was excited to be able to use my political and philosophical experience and to apply it in an artistic setting.

(L.C.) There was a whole eco-feminist component to the research too. A lot of artists who work for and with animals are women.

(C.L.) Yes, we paid particular attention to that. Anti-specism and feminism are political struggles that are obviously closely linked. There is a connection between the oppression and exploitation of animals and that of women; both are due to the same system of patriarchal domination. A number of women thinkers have been working on these issues, such as Starhawk in the US and Emilie Hache in France. The artist Maja Smrekar stages these issues in her work *K_9 Topology*: by nursing her own puppy, she is breaking the framework of the hetero-normative family unit as we know it in our society and making a stand that is at once feminist and anti-specist.

(A/R) At the same time that you were reading and studying, did your research yield any writing?

(L.C.) Yes, during the first lockdown, I wrote the text *we catify a quattro mani* with Macklin Kowal. As a university professor, he works on the relationship between politics and gender, and he also directs a performance space in Athens called Sub Rosa Space. We wrote something for the French academic journal *Formules*, which allowed us to explore in greater depth the notion of language among animals through a lecture by Eva Meijer. It also led to a political reflection, especially in terms of the law and questions of identity, authorship, commonality, and recognition, like certain laws that have recently been passed to recognize the rights of animals and waterways. This topic resonated with our research topic. For example, there is the *Parliament of Loire* by Maud Le Floc'h and Camille de Toledo, which gives the river a means to express itself and defend its interests, by way of a novel system of representation. This echoes Bruno Latour's *Parliament of Things*, in which things are represented by scientists or individuals known for their expertise in a given field.

(A/R) The virus prevented a trip to one of the main focal points of your research, namely Japan. What had you hoped to do there? And how did you process not being able to go?

(L.C.) Yes, there were so many points of resonance between the first Lolcats, which appeared in Japan, the cat islands, and the notion of *chi* that I mentioned, and the Gutai movement, among others. We delayed our trip several times, and then, the airline cancelled our tickets. Like any major production, it took a long time to reimagine and reschedule things. We ended up deciding to go to Athens, because there are lots of cats in the Exarchia neighborhood, where I had already been in January 2020. There was also an opportunity for institutional hosting, thanks to Macklin Kowal. But, because of Covid, we couldn't go. The consulate advised

us against going in April 2021, so in the end, we went for a week to Sète. That was an interesting time. We experimented and shared approaches, all the while in the shadow of Covid (curfew at 6:00 pm, human and inter-species distances, and so on).

(A/R) Were you nevertheless able to carry out certain technical and artistic experiments?

(C.L.) There is a "sailor's cemetery" in one of the posh neighborhoods in Sète, on top of the hill. I went several times at dawn to record the birdsongs. Later on in the day, I gave this back to the wild cats in the Pointe-Courte neighborhood, down in the lower part of the city. It was a kind of spatial and temporal hacking, because the cats don't normally hear those birds in that place or at that time.

(L.C.) Damien Petitot experimented with video modules. As a video artist, he was fascinated by interactive mechanisms, using micro-cameras placed on the ground. What's more, this is a place where the cats do what they feel like doing. He realized that the cats were becoming the project's directors, that there was a shift in authorship. Gaëtan was invited because of his research and specific experience with bio-energy, which included a focus on forms of animal communication. I instead had a more ethological relationship to this clowder of cats. I spent a lot of time watching them to understand what was going on before meeting them. As with humans, when the group numbers thirty or forty, it's hard to form deep relations. I spent a week observing them, actually. I experienced a kind of perpetual installation-performance watching them move about and occupy the space. It was magnificent. It made me contemplative, a spectator. It changed my perception of things.

(A/R) That's interesting, because the notion of observation, which is essential to research in ethology and other scientific disciplines, is rarely invoked, much less championed in artistic research projects.

(C.L.) The art historian Estelle Zhong Mengual argues for "a style of attention in which knowledge of living beings explicitly seeks to create a relationship with them." She took her inspiration from 19th century English and American women naturalists who, in learning to name and distinguish the (animal and plant) beings that surrounded them, "invited themselves to the festival of life." This approach stands in counterpoint to modern thought, which despoils life of any interiority, turning it into a dead material for humans to exploit.

(L.C.) Yes. I am still looking for this kind of being in the world, despite all the time spent looking at screens and all the production aspects of our research. For that matter,

we moved very quickly to the public restitution phase, with the "1+1 inter-species" at the Trouble festival, and all these organizational issues.

(A/R) What was that day about specifically?

(L.C.) It began with a performance of my own, in which I read out the titles of the articles and programs we had explored since starting our research; this was almost exhaustive, and it was limited only by the time factor. Then Clyde gave the lecture that we mentioned. We also commissioned a work from a young artist who had graduated from La Cambre, Alexane Sanchez, on the topic of inter-species creation, which she had already been working on. She used an online app to find her dog soulmate, a kind of inter-species Tinder. In the end, she found herself with her neighbors' dog Walter, with whom she interacted using a series of objects. Lastly, we held an inter-species hypnosis workshop. Marie Lisel proposed a trip from a bird's perspective. She proposed flying and thereby having a different sensory experience from humans, perhaps a kind of introduction to other kinds of knowledge, like the ones developed in that magnificent book by the anthropologist Nastassja Martin *In the Eye of the Wild*.

(C.L.) Yes, it was an attempt to explore other ways of being alive.

(A/R) You have scheduled other days like this at the ERG and the iMAL. What do you have planned?

(L.C.) On October 6 at the ERG, there will be a conference with Véronique Servais (an anthropologist at the ULB in Liège), Léa Le Bricomte (an artist working and living with pigeons), and a reading by me, all moderated by Michela Sacchetto; and a discussion workshop by Clyde. At iMAL, there will be a performance by Gwenola Wagon, a discussion between Fleur Courtois, Régine Debatty, me and the audience, and a modulation of Clyde's lecture on the theme of technology. We will also present another collection assembled with Clyde and Renaud Giuliano, a student at the ERG. Since I have been collecting animal videos for almost thirteen years, following a commission by Lucile Haute, we made a film about the relationships between animals and machines, all the while trying to be inclusive, because there are already a lot of talking cats and birds on line...

CAPTIONS

- fig. 01 Interview opening page: CATSCROLLING, performance by Lucille calmel, Sub rosa space, Athens, January 2020. Photo credit : Alexandra Masmanidi.
- fig. 02 lucille calmel & cats, *aadk blanca*, 2016.
- fig. 03 Cat island in Japan.
- fig. 04 Maru, internet celebrity, 2008.
- fig. 05 Shironeko, Japon, 2011.
- fig. 06 *Flair*, performance by Alexane Sanchez & Walter, Festival international de performance Trouble, Maison Amazone, July 2021. Photo credit: Colin Delfosse.
- fig. 07 Léa Le Bricomte, *Surveillance pigeon*, 2014.
- fig. 08 Damien Petitot and cats, Pointe courte, Sète, April 2021.