

Lauren Velvick in conversation with Brigitte Jurack

In discussing, looking at (on a screen) and researching Brigitte Jurack's work towards this text, the environments that both of us were communicating from became a vector for our enquiry. Paying attention to how surroundings might alter our 'calls' is in keeping with Jurack's recent focus on the crow and the fox, two species which have been subject to (or perhaps an active and conscious driver of) HIREC, or human influenced rapid evolutionary change. Instead of studio visits and the experience of being in bodily proximity to these works that so draw on our mimetic capacity, at a distance one must find other ways of constructing an understanding.

This text doesn't offer a neat summary and while we could pull in the themes and threads to weave something precise and small, instead we'll offer a tangle of ideas and references alongside our environmental influences. While rereading and adding initial notes to Jurack's responses to my questions I listened to a radio show called 'Bad Animals' on a station based in New York but that broadcasts internationally. The show is appropriately described thus; 'Songs and sounds to delight a wide variety of animals. Play this show for your cat, dog, turtle, parrot, fish or any animal you happen to know.'

LV: When we first spoke you mentioned 'Aesop's Fables' as a source of inspiration and I wondered if there are any in particular that have significance for your work, or whether it's the Fable format in general that you find interesting/generative?

BJ: I remember visiting the Tetley in Leeds shortly after it opened. On the inside walls of the toilet cubicle doors are printed short fables of Aesop and I recall reading about ants and grasshoppers whilst temporarily confined in the small space. That particular text clipped to aphoristic shortness triggered profound thinking about the relationship between the pleasure of making music or creating art and the drudgery of labour and foresight.

It seems strange that whilst the vast majority of books and movies for small children 'humanise' animals as talking sentient beings, that make friends and help each other to learn and explore the world as equals, this view of the world is raptured and flipped as we entered the age of industrialised farming and wholesale abuse of the environment. Within this context, Aesop's fables become for me like a bridge not only between the historical past and the present, but also between oral traditions, which are based on observation and attribution, both in terms of storytelling and natural science. I think the fables are also an invitation to us human animals, to develop an understanding of ourselves as part of rather than outside of the rest of the animal world. Within Ethics, philosopher Mary Midgley (1919 - 2018) and others acknowledged and theorised this as *the animal turn*, a now well established but sadly not widely implemented ethics that includes understanding animals as sentient beings. Progressive German Theologian Dorothee Sölle re-wrote in the late 1960s a 'green' Credo, shifting the narrative from evolutionary primacy of the human species to that of a servant, with responsibilities for stewardship and shepherding.

It might help to know that I studied Protestant Theology, and that like many of my contemporaries I was influenced by Sölle's ideas of creative disobedience rooted in the critique of any institutional or corporate power and ownership. Her poems, prayers and feminist liberation theology radically and consequentially re-builds the immediate, unmediated connection between human kind and nature (earth, animals, plants, sun, moon, weather etc), as living, breathing, fragile creations of beauty, which have been created in a meaningful way, and through which we in turn gain meaning.

It was during COVID19, that I reconnected with her Earth Credo (written around 1968/72, republished in 2020) with a new sense of urgency. It is an incredibly poignant, clear and beautiful Credo and I'll provide you with a rough translation since I can't find an English version, extracted here:

I believe in the holiness and goodness of God's creation of the earth in the past, present and future. Don't dare to challenge that, the earth does not belong to you, nor to any conglomerate or corporation. We do not own the earth like a thing, which we can buy, use and discard.... I believe in the goodness of the creation of earth for all, not only for the super rich, the earth is holy, every leaf, land, oceans, darkness, lightness, to be born and to die, all sing the song of the earth. Let us not live a day without remembering this.

Soelle goes straight to the heart: unless we respect and regard earth (the german word earth means earth and the planet simultaneously) as holy, we will not stop the abuse. Or the other way round: turning a living organism (earth) into a soulless thing facilitates abuse, greed, exploitation and destruction.

Coming back to Aesop's fables, the two fables which accompanied me in the studio over the past year were 'The Crow and Pitcher' and the 'Fox and Crow'. The former is a fable about inert intelligence and/or learned behaviour in Corvids. For me it is also a story about improvisation in a tricky situation, and a story of hope. What I also really like is that behavioural science has caught up with Aesop's observations, in as far as crows, ravens, jays and rooks are very adaptable, can use tools, are sociable and have a super size brain.

'The Fox and the Crow' is quite funny, I think, since it appears at first sight to be a contest between two equally brainy characters. What fascinated me about this fable is the competition between the two, and the fallibility of intelligence in the warm glow of flattery, vanity and deceit; the acknowledged and tradated moral being that those who take delight in treacherous flattery will usually end up paying a hefty price. Aesop, the ancient narrator of animal tales was translated into Latin and later into Anglo-Saxon and all the other European languages. Images of the fox and crow fable are stitched as coded commentary in three places in the Bayeux tapestry, it has been suggested as covert critique of the establishment with William of Normandy cast as the deceit cunning fox (and incidentally, the Bayeux tapestry features in the British Citizen test that I recently undertook). This, I guess, somehow returns us to questions of ethics, nestled within the moral.

For this next question I'm drawing on a brief reading of Midgeley, and thinking about ingenuity and the act of farming, both in terms of the destructive nature of monocultural farming and the way animal husbandry requires a 'vacant' epistemological stance towards animals (as in there's a sense of responsibility towards them, but at a certain point thought has to stop being applied in order for the processes of industrialised slaughter to continue) and in terms of questioning who is farming who.

I saw a meme joking that plants are actually farming humans by providing us with oxygen to grow and then consuming our decomposed bodies, and thought about applying this to urban wildlife (foxes, crows, pigeons, even rats and mice) what happens if we tell a story where they have the agency and are 'farming' us to provide them with food & shelter, like how cats are sometimes said to have domesticated humans and not the other way around.

Thinking about the roles of ingenuity, responsibility and honour/honourability in 'The Crow and The Pitcher' and 'The Fox and The Crow' as well as how traits like

cynicism and self consciousness are presented as humanisms by Kafka's ape in 'A Report for an Academy', I wondered about whether and to what extent your practice of modelling & making has changed how you conceive of either our (in general) or your (particular) relationship with these animals. For example, do you now take for granted the inner life of a fox in a way you didn't previously? Or feel more awareness of their presence in the urban landscape?

This is a far from straightforward question, and you are right in thinking that answering will tempt me to move in different directions simultaneously.

I start with the question of representation as a form of mimicry (*Nachahmung*), rather than a photorealistic copy or a stuffed and preserved originally alive being. This representation of a living being through a kind of 'dumb' material such as clay, wood, plaster, oil paint or pencil is really at the crux of an embodied relationship with the world. On the level of animating the inanimate, artworks, photographs, rituals, avatars or music are determined to overcome death as the transition from a living being to a dead thing. For me, this has something to do with the gaze, most easily recognisable in portrait paintings, where the sitter looks at you looking at them. This gaze in turn is somehow magic, especially considering that the painting is still nothing but its materials. Walter Benjamin, Michael Taussig, Bernadetto Croce or Immanuel Kant and others would call it the 'spiritual essence'. The word 'essence' suggests a kind of compression; a sum total of something other than just the empirical facts, the word 'soul' though unfashionable is still useful in this context.

I call it the mimetic faculty, the nature that culture uses to create second nature, the faculty to copy, imitate, make models, explore difference, yield into and become Other. The wonder of mimesis lies in the copy drawing on the character and power of the original, to the point whereby the representation may even assume that character and power. In older language, this is 'sympathetic magic' and I believe it is as necessary to the very process of knowing as it is to the construction and subsequent naturalization of identities. (Taussig, Michael, 'Mimesis and Alterity: A Particular History of the Senses', 2018)

When I was 12 or 13, I spent a few weeks on the dairy farm of a distant relative in North Germany. During my stay, I went along to bring a trailer full of cattle to the slaughterhouse. I walked in the yard, saw the animals unloading and the way they were ushered into the killing pens, hoisted on giant hooks to be skinned and cut open, bleeding out with gallons of blood and mountains of skin, every day. The stench, the cries, the noise of the bone saws and the men in their rubber boots and aprons; I saw with my own eyes the monstrosity of the machine, which has expanded to such terrifying and numbing dimensions. This should not be normal, and it dehumanises those working in these conditions and roles. Pigs cry and meet your eyes; let a cow look at you and see yourself reflected in their eye or tickle the nose of a pig. If you allow yourself to feel and encounter these animals as sentient beings, other, but perhaps equal or even superior or holy, and you will not seek the cheapest meat anymore. So, forgive me that I drifted from apes to cows and pigs to finally return to your question.

To be truthful, prior to making the foxes and crows, I don't think I had a particular understanding of these animals. Whilst now numerous in urban and suburban environments, both are difficult to get close to. It is nearly impossible to look them in the eyes, and this was a big problem to start with. Unlike the monkeys in New Delhi which sat on my studio wall, looking at me looking at them, foxes and crows are not as near, with the exception of one young crow in Manchester that was more or less grounded due to injury. I got close to her and she to me. What drew me to these creatures was the mixture of perceived wildness, attributed traits such as intelligence, adaptability and cunning and their inclusion in stories, art and mythology.

In that sense there are similarities to the monkeys of New Delhi, but it was more difficult to arrive at a level of mimicry or representation which enables encounters with the other, and in its spiritual essence. I am not sure if I got there, but that is what I am aiming for when I work. It is a kind of ‘setting them free’, making it possible to look at them looking at us.

In that sense the sculpture of a crow or fox becomes a stand-in for the being it represents, which in turn allows the viewer to have an encounter. There is also the side effect of elevation through representation; ‘I have seen you and I created an image of you’. Perhaps it is best understood as a form of adoration and admiration. I like the meme you mentioned. In the Schnutgen Museum, Cologne is a collection of small Gothic momento mori carvings, all showing the dead human body eaten by worms and other insects. I like the idea of providing nourishment once gone.

In taking a broad view of your work and reading back through this exchange something that stands out are ideas around play and responsibility, if not in those exact terms. Play is sometimes evoked in terms of childhood, and a ‘childish’ understanding of animals and their potential motivations.

Responsibility emerges in terms of human responsibility towards nature, but also an individual’s responsibility to be canny - not to get tricked or taken advantage of - versus the responsibility not to do harm, and how these are born out in eg. political ideology as well as individual behavior. Could you talk a bit more about your understanding of play and responsibility, and perhaps the relationship between the two?

Let me link play and responsibility with two bridging words: nurture and knowledge. It is well researched and known that we develop as infants (and infant animals) our relationships through play, in the sand and making pretend cakes or castles, playing with teddies to make friends, playing hide and seek with each other and so forth. A child deprived of playing will be severely damaged in its development. Playing is animating the world, that is, giving it souls.

As parent or teacher we should nurture playing, since it is through play that we gain an embodied knowledge of the world. Animating the inanimate, pretending to be others, turning tables and chairs into dens is sheer magic and unites us across times and cultures. Commencing right at the beginning of our lives, playing is central to becoming and being in the world. Perhaps it is useful to bring Sölle in here too, since nurturing play is also nurturing creative disobedience. Through play you are enabled to not take things at face value, i.e. the table is not a table anymore, but a den, invested with lots of emotions and alternative experiences by playing underneath it.

The inane object and word is transformed in/through play and the child becomes temporary caretaker. She is responsible for the den, and with responsibility I always mean *caring* responsibility. It is your responsibility to nurture and care. That’s the job. The only job that leads to all other jobs, but caring is *not* surveillance. Kafka’s ape and the monkeys in New Delhi learn in those moments when they know or feel un-observed, and one of the great advantages of tree houses and under-the-table-dens is that they are out of sight. I guess, my studio is like an under-the-table-den. You mentioned ‘canniness’, and yes, creative disobedience requires canniness; if you don’t want to be tracked, leave the phone behind, and flattery puts the spotlight on the delusional power attributed to ownership. Kafka’s ape cunningly flatters the expectations of the assembled dignities before they are reminded in two short turns of the limits of their knowledge.

Ich glaube an gottes gute schöpfung die erde
sie ist heilig
gestern heute und morgen
Taste sie nicht an
sie gehört nicht dir
und keinem konzern
wir besitzen sie nicht wie ein ding
das man kauft benutzt und wegwerft
sie gehört einem anderen
Was könnten wir von gott wissen
ohne sie unsere mutter
wie könnten wir von gott reden
ohne die blumen die gott loben
ohne den wind und das wasser
die im rauschen von ihm erzählen
wie könnten wir gott lieben
ohne von unserer mutter
das hüten zu lernen und das bewahren
Ich glaube an gottes gute schöpfung die erde
sie ist für alle da nicht nur für die reichen
sie ist heilig
jedes einzelne blatt
das meer und das land
das licht und die finsternis
das geborenwerden und das sterben
alle singen das lied der erde
Lasst uns nicht einen tag leben
und sie vergessen
wir wollen ihren rhythmus bewahren
und ihr Glück leuchten lassen
sie beschützen vor habseucht und herrschsucht
weil sie heilig ist
können wir suchtfrei werden
weil sie heilig ist
lernen wir das heilen
Ich glaube an gottes gute schöpfung die erde
sie ist heilig
gestern heute und morgen

Dorothee Sölle
'Loben ohne Lügen'
Kleinmachnow 2000 ©Wolfgang Fietkau Verlag.

‘Glaubensbekenntnis’ (Sölle)

Ich glaube an Gott,
der diese Welt geschaffen hat,
damit Glück und Frieden sich ausbreiten;
der es nicht zulassen will,
dass Menschen in Hunger und Elend bleiben
und sich gegenseitig töten.

Ich glaube, dass Gott die größte Macht hat
und dass ich mich auf ihn verlassen kann.

Ich glaube, dass Gott nicht nur ein Gott der Menschen,
sondern auch der Tiere und der Pflanzen ist.

Ich glaube, dass Gott für mich das Leben will und nicht den Tod,
die Freude und die Traurigkeit und dass er immer bei mir ist bis in alle Ewigkeit.

Ich glaube, dass Jesus so gelebt hat,
wie wir leben sollten. Er half den Menschen, heilte sie und verzichtete auf Gewalt.
Ihm waren alle Menschen gleich viel wert.

Er half denen, die in Not waren
und ist für die Menschheit gestorben.

Er ist auferstanden;
denn durch ihn
ist ein neuer Geist in die Welt gekommen.

Ich glaube an die heilige christliche Kirche,
dass keiner unterdrückt wird
und alle Menschen als gleich angesehen werden.

Ich glaube auch an den Heiligen Geist,
dessen Kraft in der Kirche wirkt
und uns alle beschützt, verbindet
und uns Mut gibt,
für Gerechtigkeit, Anerkennung und Frieden
in der Welt zu kämpfen.

Amen