

HORSE BOY

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Declaration

I certify that the intellectual content of this thesis is the product of my own work and that all the assistance received in preparing this thesis and sources have been acknowledged.

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Abstract

Horse Boy

'Horse Boy' outlines the theoretical and contextual framings of a series performance based video works exploring a personal working relationship with animals, predominantly horses. These performances develop into durational exercises where the power balance between human and animal is tested and examined.

Notions of catharsis and the sublime are investigated to frame the experience and analysis of these performances for both the participants and observers.

'Horse Boy' examines the complexities of the role of animals in art, reflecting on the practice of contemporary artists who employ animals as either participants or symbols in their own work. The resolved artwork lends itself to future research that further subverts the power relationship between human and animal within artistic performances by approaching such work as a collaborative practice between the human and animal.

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HORSE BOY

Introduction

Performance rituals are constitutive of interactions between people and things, subjects and objects, and offer promising ground to examine the power relationships inherent in their performance. I interrogate these uneven relationships through utilising video media and performance to explore ways ritual and role-play can, under certain conditions, provoke a cathartic experience. Using animals (primarily the horse) as a personal motif and symbol for the natural world, I engage in various performance exercises, inhabiting the precarious space between control and surrender. These human-animal collaborations are analogous to experiential extremes, psychological struggles and power relationships, through which I propose catharsis as a significant human experience for both learning and healing.

This paper addresses the act and authenticity of performing art, interrogating the difference between 'performance art' and 'art as performance'. Specifically, it will engage with this through the body and its role in both the performance and the extension of bodily agency with and through other non-human collaborators. By approaching the work in this way, it becomes apparent that this is not an 'act', but an actual co-production of human, animal and technology.

I will begin my examination of these performances by investigating the practical application and cultural role of catharsis. Thus, chapter one will commence an engagement with the key themes of this research and will ascertain first the historical relevance and application of catharsis and its relationship with art and performance. Once I have determined how I believe the two devices are aligned, my objective is to

specifically outline how humans utilise catharsis to experience the sublime and how within my art practice I attempt to employ this device.

The notion of the sublime as “art that instils feelings of fear and awe in viewers, overwhelming the senses”¹

will be discussed in relation to the animal as symbol for the sublime and how animal is perceived to provoke that emotion. The work of art historian, Professor Steven Baker is helpful in broadly contextualising animal as artistic device before I interrogate more specifically how I feel the animal contributes to my project and artistic practice.² Understanding how human-animal relationships are represented in art, science and culture more broadly is central to my research. Professor Donna Haraway's writing on a post-human framework illustrates the mutual dependence of the human on both the natural and technological world exploring the idea that it is impossible to separate us from our implicit connection to the animal and our relationship to them biologically and culturally.³ This contemporary exploration of the non-human will be juxtaposed with traditional roles of animals in Mythology. Chapter One therefore is an entry point into these themes via relevant literature.

Chapter two will attend to the notion of control and the surrender of the body. This is central to my work because both the body of the human (myself) and non-human (animal) will engage in a dialogue of negotiated control and surrender through performance exercises using my own body.⁴ Perceptions and roles of masculinity will

¹ ARTnews, "Beyond the Infinite: Robert Rosenblum on the Sublime in Contemporary Art, in 1961," <http://www.artnews.com/2015/03/27/beyond-the-infinite-robert-rosenblum-on-sublime-contemporary-art-in-1961/>; *ibid.*; "Beyond the Infinite: Robert Rosenblum on the Sublime in Contemporary Art, in 1961," (2015).

² Steve Baker, *The Postmodern Animal*, vol. illustrat (Chicago;London;; Reaktion Books, Limited, 2000), 19.

³ Donna Haraway, "When Species Meet: Staying with the Trouble," *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 28, no. 1 (2010): 205.

⁴ Amelia Jones, "Body Art/Performing the Subject," (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 21.

be explored and I will reflect on how my performance exercises are interrogations into how I negotiate my own gendered identity personally and more broadly in a contemporary Australian context. This man/animal interplay will bring into question the perception of the 'rational man' as 'superior animal' over both domesticated and non-domesticated animals.⁵ It is my intention to bridge perceived divisions of the human and non-human 'species', alternatively presenting a tenuous 'to-and-fro' of power between "queer messmates in mortal play".⁶ Initially executed as documented performances, these themes will also materialise in my video and photographic practice. The application of video and photo media as presentation rather than live performance brings into consideration an additional point of contribution to the 'more than human'. Not only will the art be an interaction between human and animal but also machine (the camera) implicating further notions of post-humanism through technologies contributions to the art making process. The added ability to manipulate the footage and documented material subsidises further notions of control through edited representation. Through investigating my relationship and collaboration with animal and machine, the notion of both the domesticated animal and through documentation and presentation, domesticated performance will be introduced and discussed.

Chapter three will explore the work of contemporary artists who have informed this field. Through investigating the work of Joseph Beuys, Douglas Gordon and Marina Abramovic I will be examining the practice of artists who employ animals as actors or participants to inform their art practices. This provides a base from which I can extend

⁵ Donna Haraway, "When Species Meet: Staying with the Trouble," *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 28, no. 1 (2010): 21.

⁶ Haraway, 19.

my own practice and develop the ideas and methods experimented with by those outlined in this chapter.

The next chapter will be an opportunity to reflect on my own practice in the context of human/non-human performance art and catharsis. I discuss the influence the themes central to this thesis have on the development of my art making process and material outputs. Next, I address in detail the relevant preludes as investigations, before discussing the piece or series I consider most successful in investigating these themes (the final work). I consider the work, which speaks most to the themes outlined, as those in which I engaged with horses in various performance events. An examination of the work that helped me come to this conclusion, namely those with a variety of both domesticated and non-domesticated non-human collaborators, will be provided to better explain why I prioritise my relationship with the horse as the most appropriate for me in the investigation of the artworks' themes. Doing so, will also summarise lessons gained through collaborating with those other non-human performers (in this case snakes and an eagle) about control and surrender of the body in regards to working with animal collaborators. The medium with which I have chosen to record and present the work will also be brought into play. My decisions and thoughts regarding why I chose video rather than live performance from a theoretical and practical standpoint will be discussed. Chapter four therefore will attend to my folio of work for this project, discussing methodology, practice and outputs. This is necessary for me to develop my own reflexive practice both as an artist and researcher.

The conclusion will summarise select work in relation to the themes discussed in this paper. As such, it is an opportunity to reflect on the perceived success of the project

and to discuss the relevance of the themes I explored in a contemporary context. The final chapter will also be a place to ascertain how my practice and personal field of knowledge was developed during the research process and any major revelations or surprises which may have determined the success or failure of the research paper and body of work. These reflections also serve to guide and develop future directions in my practice and research interests. In essence, this is an opportunity to draw significant conclusions from the practice element discussed in chapter four, from which I can evaluate the potential cathartic outcomes that have been triggered by these performances.

Chapter One

Catharsis and the Sublime

Within my artistic research practice, performance is utilised as a device to provoke catharsis. I personally believe that a cathartic experience allows me to employ my artistic practice to gain a deeper understanding of the experience or idea I am interested in investigating by synthesising an authentic emotional and sensory response. By doing this I am able to push myself out of the comfort zone of rational contemplation and into a state of tacit learning within the safety net of a controlled environment.

Catharsis has a strong cultural significance in both performative art and psychology. Both definitions of catharsis, one philosophically derived from Aristotle, the other from contemporary psychotherapy, are important to my practice. The reason for this is because the application in terms of psychotherapy is relevant for me as an artist experiencing catharsis through performance. The philosophical definition is important to the audience and informs what they can learn and hypothesise from watching the performance without having to experience the exercise first hand.

As an artist, I am interested in using my art making as a device to explore and learn through the act of 'doing' rather than creating work which makes a conclusive statement. The psychological term, *Therapeutic Catharsis* is the process I believe to be relevant to myself as an artist. It is the act through which an experience is safely simulated, in a manner that is convincing enough for the person experiencing it to generate an authentic response, with enough distance from genuine authentic consequence. Once the simulation or performance has concluded, it is important for me to reflect on my initial, instinctual and emotional reaction to the experience and

use this to rationalise what I feel I have learnt. This method is derived from a psychotherapy exercise which has been called the 're-evaluation theory' which promotes the idea that it is more productive to learn from therapeutic catharsis rather than random unplanned first hand experiences.⁷ The structure of a choreographed catharsis supports the framework for immediate and anticipated reflection.

I do not anticipate that an audience will draw identical conclusions from experiencing the work as 'viewer' as I do as 'performer'. Despite this, it is important to me that the work still provokes a sincere guttural response in the audience, to inform any subsequent rational readings. For the audience, I rely on the philosophical understanding of catharsis originally proposed by Aristotle as the emotion or reaction a performance or piece of art incites in its audience as opposed to the artists or performers who have made it.⁸

Both applications of catharsis for audience and artist contain implicit understandings of communication as central to the experience of catharsis. When discussing a cathartic effect, it is necessary to distinguish between symbol and cause. A 'symbol' of an affected state (take for example anger or fear) is an image, which evokes a concept of that state. It is not necessary for the symbol to provoke the emotion or experience of that state, but simply act as a signifier of that experience. An image that actively produces an affective state in its audience is the 'cause' of that state. The use of an image or icon as 'symbol' will often be done with the intention to produce the same concept in the minds of those to whom it is a symbol. An image itself may cause different affective responses in different people depending on the context of

⁷ Thomas J. Scheff, *Catharsis in Healing, Ritual, and Drama*, vol. Authors guild Backinprint.com (Lincoln, Nev: iUniverse.com, Inc, 2001), 13,53.

⁸ Jacob Bernays, "On Catharsis: From Fundamentals of Aristotle's Lost Essay on the "Effect of Tragedy" (1857)," *American Imago* 61, no. 3 (2004): 13,14.

each person. This implies that although an image may be a ‘symbol’ promoting the contemplation of an idea or inquiry, it is not an intended ‘symbol’ for the varied reactions and responses it may ‘cause’ in its audience.⁹

Both definitions of catharsis are relevant within the context of the performance exercises I execute for this project. I use the ‘animal’ as ‘symbol’, with the intention of universally representing the natural world provoking catharsis associated with the sublime, which I will expand on further. Beyond this, the image of the specific species (for example a horse), has personal significance, and acts as an individual motif for myself, the artist. The intention is for the animal to act as a universal ‘symbol’ for the natural and sublime however; it is not the intention for the animal to be a ‘symbol’ for a specific emotional conclusion but rather a ‘cause’ for a varied emotional experience for its audience. This is an important distinction because my intention is for the artwork to act as catalyst for emotion rather than illustration of intention.

As performer, the specific emotion intended to be provoked as catharsis through the performance is one of both surrender and emancipation, of being dwarfed by the power of nature – in this case with the awareness that this is being staged within the safety of a performance. Although the experience for audience and performer is expected to vary in reading, there is an intended inter-subjectivity provoked by empathy, uniting myself with the audience. Although the initial experience will be unavoidably subjective as the human body in the performances will be mine, I hope in some way my body acts as symbol for the viewers’ own.

⁹ Ibid., 16.

The intended catharsis in the context of my investigation is one provoked by being confronted by a force of nature and how as a performer I negotiate my power role in relation to that force. This is best understood in relation to the definition of the sublime and the emotion it evokes. The philosophical definition of the sublime can vary theoretically and therefore for the sake of clarity, the understanding of the sublime for the intention of this project will be that of cognitive, or precognitive, circumstances such as ecstasy: an emotional state provoked by an object or symbol of nature which inflicts an emotional state on whoever is experiencing it before rational dissection of the experience has time to assert itself.¹⁰ The initial experience in regards to the sublime is often described as a mixture of terror, beauty and awe. It is through experiencing the emotional reaction to the sublime that a greater understanding of the experience can be rationalised on reflection. The key idea addressed in this definition is that the sublime is an emotional state of terror, fear or wonder provoked by a force (or symbol) of nature. This emotional state establishes a comprehension of an experience beyond 'the self' and is described as a species of delightful horror, "a sort of tranquillity tinged with terror".¹¹

It is key that the person experiencing the sublime emotion is not dominated by some operation of his or her own reason, but by the very presence of the symbol or event producing the emotion. The event itself should be a spontaneous emotional one, not an exercise of rationality.¹²

This understanding of the sublime initially lends itself to overwhelming forces of nature on a physically large scale. Storms at sea, the vastness of the desert or a raging forest fire are all examples of natural imagery, which could be employed as symbols

¹⁰ David Baker, "The Sublime: Origins and Definitions," *The Georgia Review* 58, no. 2 (2004): 306.

¹¹ Normand Theriault, "The Role of the Sublime in Art, Literature, and Psychology" (ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 2008), 16.

¹² *Ibid.*, 17,19.

representing the sublime.¹³ However, within my research practice, the symbol of the sublime will not be one of a landscape of physically consuming scale. Any representative of nature, which causes an initial overwhelming emotional response, could be a symbol and cause of the sublime. Fear is identifiable as a ruling principle and potential source of the sublime, "it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling."¹⁴ It is not just the experience of fear that is important but that the emotion is also mixed with a kind of appreciation of its beauty. This is where the device of catharsis assists a sublime experience. Danger and pain, "at certain distances, and with certain modifications ... are delightful."¹⁵ In regards to animals this understanding includes large, intimidating animals as well as small but deadly animals such as serpents whose power to destroy life provokes fear and terror in the imaginations of many people. Here the animal is symbolic of and catalyst for fear, terror and pain experienced in the subordination of the human by nature. The animal as symbol of the sublime helps illustrate how humans perceive the sublime.

Eighteenth Century German Philosopher Immanuel Kant frames the signifier for the sublime experience slightly differently. He argues that it is not the object of nature that is the true cause for the sublime, stating that the experience of fear would overwhelm any subsequent pleasure or beauty. For Kant, the true Sublime are the ideas of reason which we use to assess a phenomenon. He believes it is the moment of rapid alteration whilst realising how small the mountain is in comparison to absolute totality. This is a useful definition when considering the relevance of the sublime for an audience to a performance intended to provoke the sublime. The viewer is in a

¹³ Baker, 305.

¹⁴ William F. Byrne, "Burke's Higher Romanticism: Politics and the Sublime," *Humanitas* 19, no. 1-2 (2006).

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

position where they can assess the magnitude of a natural threat in comparison to absolute totality without having to rationalise their own safety first. ¹⁶

The sublime lends itself to the device of performance by bringing with it the romanticised preconceptions of nature as stage on which the dramas of our experiences occur. German Philosopher Martin Heidegger suggests that we experience the sublime through the prism with which we are predisposed to interpret nature. He states, "man sets up the world toward himself, and delivers nature over to himself", ¹⁷ implying that when experiencing the sublime, we are overwhelmed by a predisposed 'romanticised' perception of nature.

Edmund Burke is another philosopher who supports the theory that the sublime is greatly affected by the romanticised symbolism projected on objects of nature. Burke gives example of this function through the two possible readings of a horse, one being the 'sublime horse of God's creation', a creature of majesty and beauty, contrasting this to the pragmatic, industrial view of the 'non-sublime, useful horse' of the every day. ¹⁸ Burke's example of the horse suggests it is possible to perceive nature as either the symbol (and cause) of the sublime and the 'unknown' or the rational pragmatics of the animal. Here we have two conflicting schools of thought, one "characterised by awe, openness, and a sense of humility, and seen aesthetically in the experience of the sublime". The other "turns irresistibly into material for self-assertive production. The earth and its atmosphere become raw material. Man becomes human material, which is disposed of with a view to proposed goals". ¹⁹ This

¹⁶ Kant. M cited: Burnham.

¹⁷ Heidegger. M cited: Baker, 306.

¹⁸ Burke. E cited: ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

dual perspective of the horse as symbol is important within my performance practice as it provides a safety net for the cathartic aspect of the performance.

Animal as symbol has a wide and varied application within the human world:

Animals help make up the societies in which we humans live. People eat animals, wear products made from them, watch them in zoos or on television, keep them in their houses and in factory farms, hunt them and experiment on them, and place them in mythology and stories.²⁰

However, in my performances with the horse I am summoning the symbol of the horse as one representative of nature in its threatening state. A mixture of awe and fear of the power of the animal is what conjures an experience of the sublime.

Within the structure of postmodern art theory, there are two main approaches useful in interrogating the idea of the animal in art. The first approach has been labeled ‘animal endorsing art’, which by definition is sympathetic towards the animals themselves, speaking to ideals of conservation and preservation. The second is ‘animal-skeptical art’, which unlike the name suggests is not skeptical of the animals themselves (as if the existence of the non-human was in question), but rather questions culture’s means of constructing and classifying the animal in order to make it meaningful to the human.²¹ The notion of animal-skeptical art implies that there is a pre-existing cultural understanding of animals which art can bring into question. My practice is reliant on this pre-existing cultural reading to act as short hand for the audience to understand animal as not only performance partner, but also symbol.

²⁰ Chris Philo and Chris Wilbert, *Animal Spaces, Beastly Places: New Geographies of Human-Animal Relations*, vol. 10 (New York; London; Routledge, 2000).

²¹ Baker, *illustrat*, 9.

Donna Haraway introduces Philosopher Jacques Derrida's proposition within the context of semiotics, that there are two predominant perspectives of the human-animal binary, "One set from those who observe real animals and write about them but never meet their gaze, and the other set from those who engage animals as literary and mythological figures."²²

Neither of these distinctions directly addresses the animal in a sympathetic way, yet is still useful to me as it implies 'other-ness' allowing for the animal to be interpreted as agent for something 'greater' or 'unknown' to the self.²³

Caricatures and stereotypes, which anthropomorphise animals helped inform which animals, I chose to work with as performance partners. The casual cultural observation of animal has led to recognition of patterns of perceived 'typical characteristics' and behavior amongst species by non-scientists. Such characterisations have led to cross-cultural similarities in anthropomorphised generalisations attributed to animals. An example of this is how the human attribute of being 'sneaky' is often associated with a fox. Disparities in specificities may vary globally accounting for cultural variation however it is interesting to note how pragmatic observation contributes to a tacit symbolic reading of animal species.²⁴

A more traditional metaphoric reading of animals also contributes to various culturally accepted associations. Animals are used widely in varying metaphors within religion and mythology throughout the world. Taking into consideration some of these loose cultural projections of meaning mixed with my own personal metaphoric and anecdotal associations with individual species, my decision on

²² Derrida. J cited:Haraway, 21.

²³ Phillip Pahin and Alyx Macfadyen, "A Human-Animal Relational Aesthetic: Towards a Zoophilic Representation of Animals in Art," *Biosemiotics* 6, no. 2 (2013): 236.

²⁴ M. Reza Talebinejad and H. Vahid Dastjerdi, "A Cross-Cultural Study of Animal Metaphors: When Owls Are Not Wise," *Metaphor and Symbol* 20, no. 2 (2005): 139.

specific species of non-human performance partner/s is informed by my own situated experience.

As the primary performer, I choose to take an alternative perspective of animal (than that suggested by Derrida), proposed by Professor Donna Haraway, one which blurs the binary boundaries, “as beings who look back” rather than simply “animals as objects of (the artists) vision.”²⁵ This supports my belief that the animal is a non-human collaborator in my performances as opposed to simply an artistic tool or medium. As the human encountering the animal, my response as performer will be most significant during the performance or initial exposure. Any response I experience from re-watching the performance will be triggered from the association of the authentic experience. I am relying on association with symbols within the work to provoke catharsis or emotion for the audience because they will not be able to have the experience first-hand.

Chapter Two

²⁵ Haraway, 21.

Notions of Control and Surrender

The very notion of catharsis I'm working with implies a 'safety net' through which an emotion can be experienced, though the experience must be evocative enough to provoke a response, which is not initially governed by reason.

The provocation of the sublime sits in the precarious space between being consumed by the experience, yet with enough security for it to be one of both terror and delight. What is at play here is a negotiation of control and surrender. A 'cat and mouse' game where the perceived power balance shifts between subject and experience. The surrender should be stimulating enough for the endorphin release of initial exhilaration. This simulation of experiencing surrender whilst negotiating a level of security and control can be seen when contemplating certain extreme sports. Bungee jumping for example provokes the overwhelming terror of falling. This exhilaration can be enjoyed with the knowledge that control will be reestablished with the security of the bungee rope.

Using animals as a symbol for the sublime and personal motif, I engage in various performance exercises with animals, inhabiting the precarious space between control and surrender. These human-animal collaborations are analogous to experiential extremes, psychological struggles and power relationships, through which I utilise catharsis as a tool to analyse how I contextualise and measure myself based on how I perform under these pressures.²⁶

The randomised element of the 'animal' supports the act of 'authenticity' necessary to differentiate 'performance art' from 'art as performance'. The extension of bodily

²⁶ Jones, 34.

agency through other non-human actors results in a co-production of the 'more than human' rather than simply an 'act'.

It is by contrasting and confronting myself with the 'other' that I am able to compare how I wish to be perceived in comparison to how I appear when made vulnerable in a moment of tenuous control of a situation. This is not to say I am unable to contrive a facade I wish to project, instead I investigate how I negotiate this projection under pressure and reflect on how it may be compromised and revealed through genuinely vulnerable situations. I use my body as a device to question the subjectivity of a body and how the self is framed through everything that represents its absence. I make this proposition through juxtaposing my body with a 'supplement'.²⁷

When referring to a 'supplement' I am employing the definition put forward by Philosopher, Jacques Derrida. Derrida explains that a supplement is something added to fill an originary lack. In the context of binary terms, the second can be argued to exist in order to fill in an originary lack in the first.²⁸ A simplistic example of this is how 'day' could be considered a supplement to define 'night'.

Professor Amelia Jones explores this relationship between the body in performance art and its documentation in her book *Body Art: Performing the Subject*. Jones examines how the meaning of the body in performance is open-ended and reliant on the context in which it is presented. She examines how photography as documentation is one way to influence this contextualising of the body through its

²⁷ Tracey Warr and Amelia Jones, *The Artist's Body*, vol. Abridg, rev. and updat []. (London;New York, NY;: Phaidon, 2012), 39.

²⁸ Jacques Derrida, "The Supplement of Copula: Philosophy before Linguistics," *The Georgia Review* 30, no. 3 (1976): 554-64.

self-awareness of deferral. She goes on to explain how “Seemingly acting as a “supplement” to the “actual” body of the artist in performance, the photograph of the body art event or performance could, in fact, be said to expose the body itself as supplementary, as both the visible proof of the self and its endless deferral.”²⁹

It is my intention that video, much like photography is a medium that inhabits this space Derrida describes as “the space of repetition and the splitting of the self”.³⁰

Jones expands on this theory by stating “the presence of the self - in performance, in the photograph, film, or video - calls out the mutual supplementary of the body and the subject” highlighting the mutual dependency of the action to its proof. She goes as far as to state “[The] body art needs the photograph to confirm it having happened; the photograph needs the body art event as an ontological “anchor” of its indexicality”.³¹

My use of video media to record and present my performances act as supplement for both my body and that of my performance partner. The performing bodies are not only supplemented by the documentation of the performance but also by each other. Within my performances, the supplement for the performer’s (my) body is the body of the non-human (animal); it is the animal as other that defines my own body in the performance. My human body as performer acts as an access point for the viewer, inviting the audience to either view my body as a symbol for their own, or as a metaphor for the facet of humanity they feel I represent. For the spectator to truly relate to my exploration of an archetype or empathise their ‘self’ for my ‘self’ as performer, the negotiation of power between human (self) and non-human performer (other) needs to translate as tangible. The effect itself is reliant on the ambiguity of

²⁹ Jones, 34-35.

³⁰ Derrida, J. cited: *ibid.*, 35.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 37.

where power is situated and how it is passed ‘to and fro’ and whether it is ‘offered’ or ‘taken’.

The final artworks will be a culmination of human (performer), animal (performance partner) and digital (recording and presentation method) that investigate the notion of human dependence on both the natural and technological world, exploring the idea that it is impossible to separate us from our implicit connection to the animal and our relationship to them biologically and culturally.³²

The notion that humans are dependent on the natural and technological world is not a radical one since our perception of what it is to be human cannot be defined without addressing our interactions with the non-human. Much like the animal performer in my performances defines the human performer through contrast, human definition is reliant on contextualisation by the things they produce and join forces with. Olli Pyyhtinen suggests “We [humans] have no inherent capabilities”.³³ This implies a dependency on the outside world. Humans are incapable of standing as sole creators of things; our interactions and experiences with the world in which we are entangled significantly shape our identity. The human, therefore is constituted in relation to its ‘outside’ and relationship with ‘other’. Biologically we are reliant on a flow of chemicals and bacteria that are necessary for our survival. Cut off from our surroundings and without the constant interchange of material, we would not be able to survive biologically. Our very understanding of what it is to be human is

³² Haraway, 205.

³³ Olli Pyyhtinen and SpringerLink, *More-Than-Human Sociology: A New Sociological Imagination* (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2016), 78.

dependent on our cross exposure with what we would otherwise define as both biologically and technologically 'non-human'.³⁴

For humans, the sensory experience does not belong solely to us as subject, but is primary in relation to us sensing it and also the object being sensed. Our definition of self is reliant on how we perceive our self in relation to the outside world. We equally define anything we consider foreign to us in relation to our interactions with it. It generates us as subject and the world from itself, "[t]he world makes us in one and the same process in which it makes itself."³⁵ This supports the hypothesis that we have never truly been human, proposed by postmodern literary critic, N. Katherine Hayles. Hayles argues that we have always been 'post human', in that humans have always been tool users and we have always extended the boundaries of the human by the use of tools.³⁶ I agree with this hypothesis because the binaries we use to define what it is to be human are reliant on our cross-pollination by so many factors that are 'other' or 'non-human'.

A broad definition of post humanism philosophically is the consideration of ethics expanding beyond the subjectivities of the human species. This is a shift from classical humanism, which asserts humans as separate and superior to the natural world. Post humanism asserts humans as one of many natural species, rejecting humanist ideas of anthropocentric dominance.

My performance exercises utilise a 'human' body in collaboration and interaction with 'non-human' animal performers, acting as analogues for this 'entanglement' of

³⁴ Sociology Olli Pyyhtinen Of, *More-Than-Human Sociology: A New Sociological Imagination* (DE: Springer Verlag, 2016), 78.

³⁵ Andrew Pickering, "The Mangle of Practice: Agency and Emergence in the Sociology of Science," *American Journal of Sociology* 99, no. 3 (1993): 25.

³⁶ Katherine Hayles and Societies American Council of Learned, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics*, vol. 74 (Chicago, Ill: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 247-50.

identities resulting in a product of the 'more than human'. What it is to be 'human' performer will be defined through the interaction with the 'other' non-human (animal) performer.

Philosopher Ted Schatzki defines this understanding of post humanism as 'Objectivism', which emphasises the role of human collaboration with non-human agents such as animals, plants and technologies.³⁷ This supports the contemporary understanding of post-humanism as a rejection of the historical argument that we are becoming post-human as a result of new technologies such as genetic modification and digital dependence. The belief is that we have always been (and will remain) post-human. We are cognitively 'impure' and worldly. So much of our perception of what it is to be human and how we contextualise our sense of self is determined by external factors, it becomes impossible to define our self without acknowledging what we consider to be the 'other' which frames us.

Digital technologies used to capture my initial performance exercises will contribute the recorded material, which will constitute the final artwork. This implicates a technological element to the post-humanist nature of the work. I will not be presenting live performances as the finished artwork, instead the work will constitute the edited digital recording and documentation of those performances. The final artwork is a product of the extension of my bodily agency through utilising technology. As both performer and documenter, the digital recording device acts as an extension of my bodily agency, allowing me to be both videographer and performer at the same time. Technology enhances my capability to be present in front of the camera and behind it. The lens acts as a prosthetic eye, which I use to frame and

³⁷ Theodore R. Schatzki, K. Knorr-Cetina, and Eike von Savigny, "The Practice Turn in Contemporary Theory" (New York;London;, 2001).

present my own body to an audience; through technology I have a dual presence.³⁸

This supports Amelia Jones's notion of supplement and its intrinsic implications within the framework of bodily representation in a performance.³⁹

Rather than conflicting with the 'ecological' themes of the biological human and non-human animal, the inclusion of technologies to enhance, shape and share the experience will make for a richer post-human experience. Technology's inclusion is a conceptual and material decision, not one of convenience and compromise of the 'genuine' firsthand experience. Digital media allows the performing bodies to contribute biological association and agency without physically (and pragmatically) limiting the experience of consciousness to a physical location and time.

Recording a performance through video, photography or text continues the themes of control and surrender I discussed above. The live performance infers surrender to the randomised implications of a performance exercise. The documentation or recording of that performance exercise brings into question notions of control over how the performance is edited and exported, implicating questions of authenticity in what is presented and influencing how it will be further experienced. I propose a documented performance is a domesticated performance, one with the implied agency of the live body tamed and supplemented through its replication. A live performance allows the performers' action to be interfered with and realigned according to not only the other bodies and subjects within the performance but also those of the audience. Documents and recordings of the body-in-performance are just as easily contingent in these readings of the body depending on the context in which it is presented and which

³⁸ Haraway, 10.

³⁹ Jones, 34-37.

signals are included to inform its reading. Rather than diminishing the significance and experience of the performance, the documentation as ‘art object’ could be used to expose the body itself as supplementary, as both visible proof of the self and its endless deferrals. I am relying on the idea that although the audience is aware they are being presented with an illusion, the experience will still be read as authentic.⁴⁰ Rather than acting as a hindrance or blockage, the supplementary proposes a chain of associations of the very thing it defers. A digital recording of a performance highlights the very fact that what it stands for is the absence of the live authentic performance it represents. Through a video’s agency to highlight the very lack of presence of what it has recorded, it enhances the performance through its very absence. The choice of presentation is by no means neutral but is effectively invisible when the weight of the performance is dominant. The presentation allows the opportunity to manipulate emphasis and erasure, enhancing and highlighting intention rather than diminishing authenticity.

The authenticity or effect of ‘animal’ as other is also brought into question when interrogating notions of domestication. The gradual and varying domestication of animal for industrial productivity, agricultural efficiency and personal companionship highlights humans desire to execute control over an animal with its own agency and intention.⁴¹ Human’s domestication of animals was and is the process of ‘breeding’ a species to be submissive to human authority. This breeding and domestication process affects representing the animal as a symbol of the natural world; a domesticated dog will have noticeably different physical characteristics than a wild wolf. Grandin and Deesing describe the biology of domestication as such:

⁴⁰ Warr and Jones, *Abridg*, rev. and updat []. 35.

⁴¹ Clive Roots, *Domestication* (Westport: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2007), 1-20.

Domestication has involved selection for behavioural characteristics that characterize young animals so, since "behaviour is rooted in biology", domestication has resulted in an array of similar neotenuous physical traits having arisen in various domesticated animals. Such neotenuous physical traits in domesticated animals such as dogs, pigs, cats, and recently foxes are floppy ears, changes in reproductive cycle, curly tails, piebald coloration, fewer or shortened vertebra, large eyes, rounded forehead, large ears and shortened muzzle.⁴²

This domesticated phenotype assists an implicit reading of the domesticated animal as one that already straddles a relationship with both the human and natural world.

The intention of domestication may have been to predetermine behavior and personality traits, however it has been widely observed that domesticated animals such as horses exhibit individual behavioral and personality disparities, maintaining individual agency. For my work the nature of the horse is of particular importance. On observation, individual horses appear to exhibit characteristics and traits of their own personalities much like humans do. Theories vary regarding why horses have such strong individual characteristics. One theory is that they are taught and their personalities are a result of learnt behavior, another is that they exhibit inherent tendencies typical of their breeding. I believe that both ideas are partly correct. A horse's genetics bestows it with its inborn abilities and predisposed characteristics; the horse's experiences expose these genetic tendencies and shape them as the horse grows and matures. The degree to which these factors affect the horse's character more is debatable.⁴³

It is my observation that the animal or 'non-human' performer does not need to be a wild animal to effectively act as agent for the 'sublime' or natural world.

Within the construct of a performance exercise exploring power negotiation, I believe in the short term it is more efficient to engage with an animal, which has a preexisting

⁴² Temple Grandin and Mark J. Deesing, *Genetics and the Behavior of Domestic Animals*, vol. 2nd; Second; 2; (Burlington: Elsevier Science, 2013), 160-61.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 237.

familiarity and relationship with humans not dictated by fear. The very nature of a wild animal would make a meaningful exchange (in the short term) between the human and non-human inefficient and dangerous for both parties. Domestication does not eliminate the animal's capacity to be 'other' but assists a reading that the two parties, the 'human' and the 'non-human' performers have a historical and biological predisposition to negotiate power relationships.

The horse is an ideal candidate for this mode of representation. The horse we are familiar with today is a result of centuries of breeding and domestication. This domestication was due to human's reliance on, and close relationship with the horse for transport, agriculture, military mobility, food and recreation. My personal context is greatly informed by the long relationship I have working with horses for the majority of my life. Subsequently I have developed a familiarity and affection for horses whilst maintaining an awareness of their power and potential danger. Much of my relationship has relied on my ability to assert a level of control whilst respecting the agency of the horse and its role as other.

Chapter Three

Other Artists

Human and animal collaboration is a device, which many artists utilise to engage with topics of power dynamics and as a method of self-examination through juxtaposing oneself with the other. As previously mentioned, it is common for humans to use nature as a mirror through which we judge our connection to or alienation from

something bigger than ourselves. By engaging with animals as an agent for this natural otherness this assessment moves into the arena of investigation and not simply a representation. Within my own practice and performance exercises, the role of animal is premeditated and loaded with symbolism. This symbolism is not intended to be the dominant factor, but rather informs the action that takes place within the performance.

Yugoslavian performance artist Marina Abramovic approaches many of her artworks in this fashion. I am inspired by many of her performances and presentation criteria, which I attempt in my own practice. The aim is to find a balance where the initial performance is sincere and meaningful and potentially surprising to (myself) the artist, however my intended presentation method is through digital recording. The intention is that through selective shooting, editing and presentation, the documentation acts as a transit for the viewer to experience the emotional anxiety and release of the performance.

The initial bodily experience of the artist is paramount in the success of the work. Much like Abramovic, I believe the role of the artist to be almost shamanistic in using experience to bridge physical realms with the metaphysical 'other' as a method of attaining knowledge. Many of Abramovic's artworks push her body to the extreme. The live performances are powerful artworks however, she accounts for the longevity of the performance and considers the best way to translate the work to a larger audience through videos, photographs and installation.⁴⁴ The use of animals as totems and symbols reoccur in Abramovic's performance practice; much of the symbolism she employs in her work references eastern European paganism.

⁴⁴ Kristine Stiles, Klaus Biesenbach, and Chrissie Iles, *Marina Abramović* (New York; London;: Phaidon, 2008).

Abramovic states that the serpent holds personal significance for her as a symbol representing renewal and the rhythm of nature with strong spiritual associations, such as the kundalini energy, which is represented as a metaphorical snake at the base of the human spine.⁴⁵ The snake also introduces wider cultural associations such as the serpent in the Garden of Eden and mythological figures including Medusa. The symbolic and rational readings of the serpent are secondary to the initial, visceral response of fear necessary to provoke associations with the sublime.⁴⁶

Abramovic's art piece *Dragon Heads* is a collection of recordings of reenactments of performances that took place between 1990 and 1994. Each performance, which collectively constitutes the work, consists of a similar action with only small variation. In all versions, Abramovic sits, looking straight ahead without making any intentional motion while snakes issuing from a large crown on her head slither all over her body, *fig: 1*. While Abramovic's role is consistent and almost expressionless throughout, the snakes add a random element that reveal in close-up, minute facial reactions or bodily contortions that record her emotional response. An audio track of Abramovic can be heard talking over the video: "follow my skin, follow my energies, follow the earth's skin, deep in the center of being..."⁴⁷

In one video her lip is peeled back by a snake climbing over her face; in another the veins on her neck and face are strained as a result of a snake constricting around her neck *fig: 2*. The use of video does not dilute the performance but rather distills and highlights significant elements. In *Dragon Heads*, the added element of close-up video documentation assists the impact of the performance by highlighting minute

⁴⁵ *Encyclopedia of Occultism and Parapsychology*, 5th ed. ed. (Detroit: Gale, 2001).

⁴⁶ Byrne.

⁴⁷ LIMA, "Dragon Heads Marina Abramovic 1990," <http://www.lima.nl/site/catalogue/art/marina-abramovic/dragon-heads/9371>.

detail rather than separating and distracting from the original live performance. These videos are installed each on their own screen with Abramovic's face close to life-size on each of them. The screens are pressed up close to each other so that all seven of the performances can be experienced in unison. The totality and diversity of each execution of the performance work can be seen together to heighten the audiences' experience. Video installation also allows for added components such as the audio track to enhance the experience and direct the reading of the work *fig: 3*.

Abramovic not only engages animal as performance partner but also utilises preconceived cultural associations to assert roles for her within performances. In her video performance, *The Hero*, Abramovic sits astride a white stallion. The performance was dedicated to Abramovic's father who was a partisan during the Second World War. The stallion informs readings influenced by western art history and how a military hero figure was often depicted riding a horse. In this piece the performance is less informed by the intimate human animal interaction and more by the archetypes both artist and horse evoke. The action is minimal but the effect is powerful as a result of the long and complex representational history that humans and horses embody.⁴⁸

⁴⁸ Lorenzo Pereira, "Marina Abramovic Art Pieces You Should Know," <http://www.widewalls.ch/marina-abramovic-art/>.



fig:1. Marina Abramovic, *Dragon Heads*, multi-channel video 29'57". 1990⁴⁹



fig:2. Marina Abramovic, *Dragon Heads*, multi-channel video 29'57". 1990⁵⁰

⁴⁹ Marina Abramovic, *Dragon Heads*, 1990. Multi-channel video 29'57".

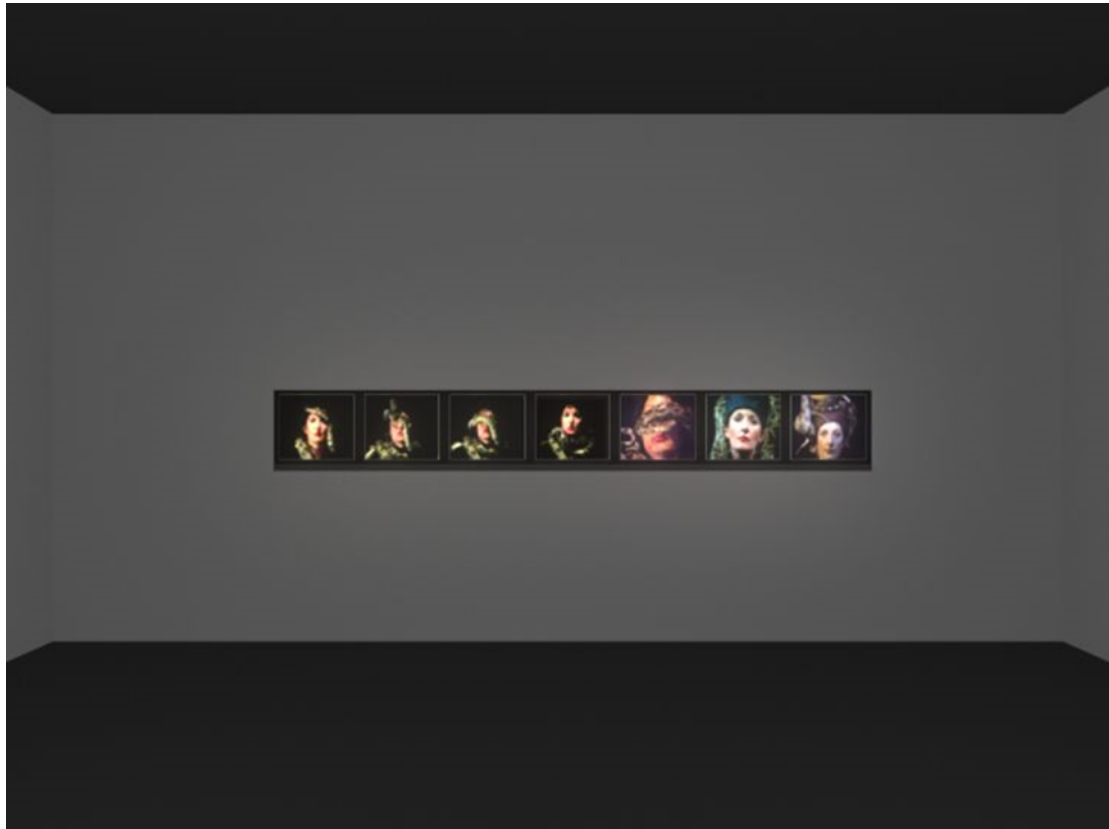


fig:3. Marina Abramovic, *Dragon Heads*, Multi-channel video 29'57". 1990⁵¹

Performance artworks engaging relationships with a wild animal can be productive in exploring power dynamics, especially if time is dedicated to the relationship developing past the initial 'fight or flight' mechanism. It could be argued this is itself a form of domestication.

Within my own practice, I primarily work with the horse, an animal we know to be domesticated. This communicates to the audience that there is both a secure positioning for me to work with it, whilst also exposing myself to the inherent physical power of the horse during the performance. However, although the horse is

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid.

employed as primary performance partner within my own work, for the sake of investigation I also execute performances with less domesticated animals to navigate the effectiveness of incorporating a ‘wilder’ element into my particular method.

German artist Joseph Beuys’s action piece *I Like America and America Likes Me* (performed for the opening of the René Block Gallery in New York), took place in May 1974 as an exchange between Beuys and a wild coyote.⁵² His method was quite similar to the one that I am interested in performing, one where the artist needs to adapt their behaviour to negotiate communication and control with the animal. It could be read that as the animal moves further away from being wild (as it is domesticated) the artist moves closer to being animal. The artist abandons social etiquette and mannerisms in order to imitate the behaviour of the animal in an attempt to communicate instinctually, even if the level of communication achieved is simply a reduction in behaviour that will cause distress to the animal, resulting in a more peaceful cohabitation. The more untamed the animal, the more time and immersion is needed to gain a level of communication.

Beuys’ experience was one of complete immersion with the animal. Continuing with themes of ritual and shamanistic symbolism discussed above, the performance started as soon as he arrived in New York, where he was wrapped in felt and loaded into an ambulance, then driven to the gallery where the Action took place, without having once touched American soil *fig: 4*. His stated intention was to have no contact with America except with the coyote as his symbol of America. Beuys spent the next three days living in the performance space with the coyote. To assist the performance (and

⁵² Warr and Jones, Abridg, rev. and updat []. 76.

for physical protection) Beuys had three main props, a felt blanket, walking stick and gloves. In addition, fifty new copies of the Wall Street Journal were introduced to the location each day, which the coyote routinely urinated on *fig: 5*. Beuys performed by repeating the same series of actions with his eyes continuously fixed on the coyote. The coyote responded and engaged with his behaviour shifting through the three days as he established a relationship with Beuys. The coyote exhibited behavioural traits such as caution, detachment, aggression and eventually companionship, *fig: 6*. At the end of the Action, the performance concluded with Beuys being once again swaddled in felt and returned to the airport in an ambulance.⁵³

Here we see an art performance where animal is engaged as non-human performance partner, bringing with it loaded associations connected with environmental issues and certain cultural meanings. For Native Americans, the coyote had been a symbol for a powerful god with the ability to move between the physical and spiritual world. After European colonisation, it was seen by colonists as a pest and hunted for extermination. Beuys recognised and acknowledged the debasement of the coyote as a symbol of the damage European settlement had done to the American continent and indigenous culture. He viewed his performance as an attempt at a reckoning made symbolically with the coyote to lift some of the historical trauma. Beuys believed that art could evoke a spiritual response in its audience, provoking a healing process. He viewed the role of the artist as parallel to the role of the Shaman. For Beuys, the live performance was very much the artwork and any subsequent photographic documentation acted as proof of that Action. Beuys saw the role of animal as a symbol and representative of the spiritual otherness of nature. Beuys was deeply

⁵³ Steve Baker, "Sloughing the Human," *Performance Research - A Journal of Performing Arts* 5, no. 2 (2000): 72-74.

interested in northern mythology and folklore, in which animals are endowed with mystical powers.⁵⁴ He closely identified with certain animals, seeing them as agents for the spiritual world. Beuys stated: “The figures of the horse, the stag, the swan and the hare constantly come and go; figures which pass freely from one level of existence to another, which represent the incarnation of the soul.”⁵⁵ In this example, we can see that Beuys utilised animals as a universally read symbol for the spiritual and held the horse, the stag, the swan and the hare as personal motifs that had subjective significance for him.

My understanding is that for Beuys, the performance itself is unquestionably the art. The recording of that performance is simply documented proof, presented as art object.

⁵⁴ Sean Rainbird, *Joseph Beuys and the Celtic World: Scotland, Ireland and England, 1970-85* (London: Tate, 2005).

⁵⁵ TateModern, "Joseph Beuys: Actions, Vitrines, Environments: Room 4," <http://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-modern/exhibition/joseph-beuys-actions-vitrines-environments/joseph-beuys-actions-4>.



fig: 4. Joseph Beuys, *I Like America and America Likes Me*, performance documentation. 1976⁵⁶



fig: 5. Joseph Beuys, *I Like America and America Likes Me*, Performance documentation. 1976⁵⁷

⁵⁶ Joseph Beuys, *I Like America and America Likes Me* 1976. Performance Documentation.



fig: 6. Joseph Beuys, *I Like America and America Likes Me*, Performance documentation. 1976⁵⁸

My own practice utilises the documentation method in a different manner to Beuys.

Rather than simply acting as an object of proof of a performance, I use recording methods to translate the performance through edited construction. Through this awareness of manipulation and deferral, my agency as artist is extended beyond the primary performance.

One artist who works in this way is Scottish artist Douglas Gordon. Gordon explores themes of human command over the non-human in his large-scale video installation titled *Play Dead; Real Time*, 2003. The work consists of two large and two smaller screens on which footage plays of an elephant lying down and rolling around at the command of a human instructor. The performance takes place in the ‘white cube’ of

⁵⁷Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

New York's Gagosian Gallery *fig: 7*. The camera through which the animal's actions are recorded is from the perspective of the artist. Constantly circling the large animal, never stationary, the recording highlights the only two perspectives in the room at the time of the live performance. The large screens illustrate the size of the elephant relative to that of the spectator with the immersive experience of the surrounding screens simulating how dwarfed in comparison to the animal one would feel in its presence.⁵⁹ The secondary viewer can experience the delicate power balance between human and animal through the perspective offered by the initial human collaborator. The work is confronting, not just because of the initial size but also through the ethical questions it proposes to the audience by making them feel active participants and not just impartial observers. The elephant is a familiar symbol, usually representing majestic power and untamed nature. The decontextualized elephant in the sparse, clinical gallery space speaks of the 'exotic' being relocated to become 'familiar' and convenient for human consumption. The very idea that such a majestic, powerful and intelligent wild animal could be subject to the commands of a human are also unsettling, questioning by what motivation or bluff does the animal obey the commands when it could reassert its power by refusing or rebelling. The reading of the work is further informed by the notion that a trained elephant would most likely come from a circus (which this elephant did), meaning that the exchange of human command and animal obedience for entertainment would be a frequent occurrence in this animal's life, a regular negotiation of power relationships.

The title of the work *Play Dead; Real Time* contributes to the sinister overtones of the work. The elephant is an endangered species as a result of human interference. In

⁵⁹ Tate Britain, "Artist Rooms: Douglas Gordon: Play Dead; Real Time," <http://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-britain/display/artist-rooms-douglas-gordon-play-dead-real-time>.

Gordon's work the elephant is symbolically acting out its species' 'death' at the command of a human, the species that is responsible for the elephant's destruction. The performance is therefore a reflection on the power and abuse by humans of nature on a large scale *fig: 8*.

All of these readings however, are provoked by, yet secondary to the initial experiential response provoked by the sublime emersion of the artwork itself. This is most effectively achieved through the recording and presentation methods chosen by the artist and would not have been as effective for the audience had the performance been live with them at a safe and equal distance from the power negotiation taking place.⁶⁰ A live performance of this nature would have dramatically shifted the experience for the audience. It would have been less provocative as the action would be a more familiar sight, much like a circus act or performance at a zoo. The ability for documented media to command the audiences' eye erases the human instructing the animal from visibility within the work. This gives the impression the elephant is alone commanding its own obedience. It highlights the futility of this action it would likely perform repetitively on a daily basis. This implies a sinister and nihilistic overtone to the human/animal relationship.

⁶⁰ Ryan Lejarde, "Douglas Gordan's Provocative "Play Dead; Real Time" Video Installation at Moma," untapped cities <http://untappedcities.com/2013/05/29/douglas-gordons-provocative-play-dead-real-time-video-installation-at-moma/>.



fig:7. Douglas Gordon, *Play Dead; Real Time*, video instillation documentation. 2003⁶¹

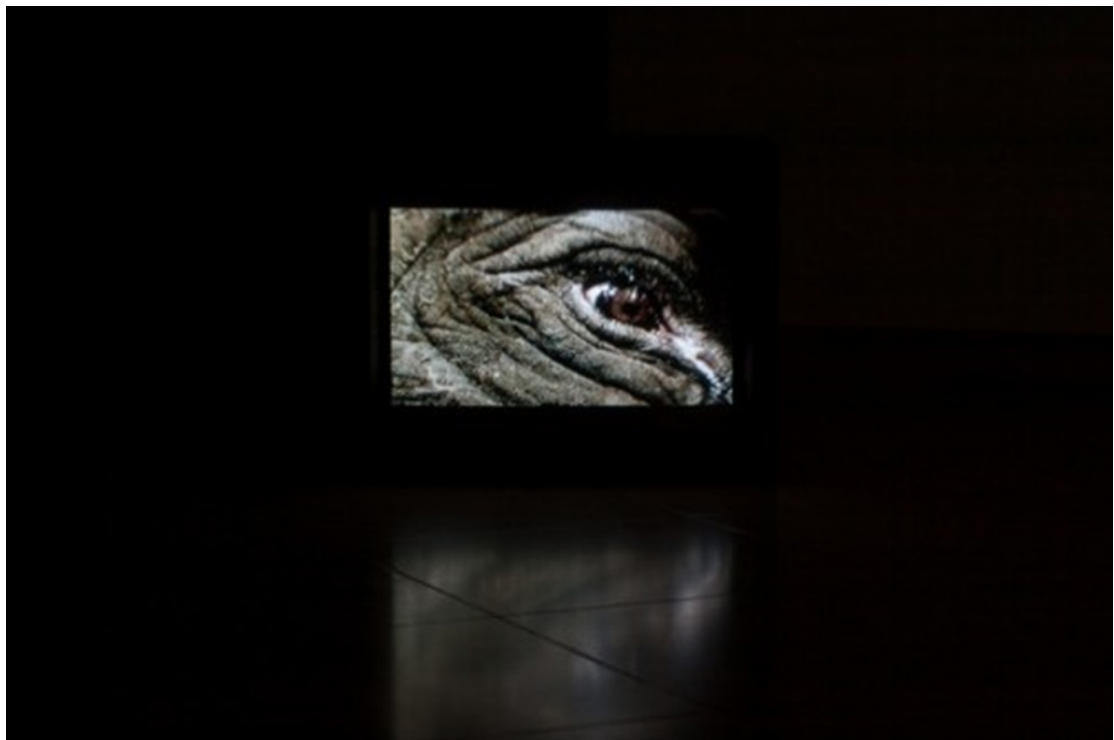


fig:8. Douglas Gordon, *Play Dead; Real Time*, video instillation documentation. 2003⁶²

⁶¹ Douglas Gordon, *Play Dead; Real Time*, 2003. video instillation documentation pictify

⁶² Ibid.

I found it useful to examine the practice methods and intended investigations of these three artists to contextualize my practice within the human, animal collaboration paradigm. Abramovic, Beuys and Gordon all engage with animal as symbol for both personal and cultural metaphor. This metaphoric use however, is only ever the underlying effect. Through engaging with actual live animals, the overarching reading is most likely to be that an authentic negotiation is taking place between human and animal performer. This implies an element of uncertainty in outcome due to the animal's implied free will and ability to assert its own agency should it choose to. The fact that in all three cases the dominant presentation of the performance will always be the documentation, does not reduce the tension in the exchange being presented. These deferrals instead highlight the intended reading of the artist by acting as supplement for the original performing bodies.

When considering Abramovic's *Dragon Head* and Beuys's *I Love America and America Loves Me*, the free will of the animal is a calculated risk and in some way relied upon by the artist within the parameters of the performance. Gordon's *Play Dead* sits differently to this as it is reliant on the animal's obedience to the command of the human performer, who, because of presentation method, is only visible through the elephant's reciprocation to their demands. This reliance on reciprocation through familiarity of obedient action is paramount to the success of the piece's slick execution. I personally find the surrender of the animal in Gordon's work the most distressing as it implies the animal is defeated and resigned to the repetition of the demand before the work ever took place. All three artists regardless of artistic objective share an overarching exploration into themes of humanity's relationship with nature, and through these interactions question how we define ourselves as human.

Chapter Four

The work

Previous Practice

Prior to 'Horse Boy' my art practice was stylistically and thematically different. My practice was dominated by both digital and analogue photography. The subject matter and visual style, far more formalised and theatrical. Until 2015 I had lived my entire life in the Swan Valley, approximately forty-five-minute drive from the centre of Perth in Western Australia. I worked in the city but lived in an area surrounded by bush land and vineyards. The work I produced borrowed heavily from pastoral, baroque aesthetic influences and I believe the environment I lived in was a major contributor. Having lived in Perth during the mining boom I witnessed a decadence and level of luxury being enjoyed by peers in their early twenties. I saw this

bacchanalian lifestyle as a stage on which this demographic were living out every day experiences. I drew parallels between the way renaissance and baroque artists depicted excessive biblical or mythological scenes whilst exploring what would have been contemporary grand narratives, symbolically relevant to the people at the time the work was being produced. I became curious about what appeared to me to be humans' inborn desire to live hedonistically whilst maintaining contemporary concerns to do with personal, social and environmental responsibilities. The process of my art making was to construct a staged scenario which both visually resembled a biblical or mythological grand narrative whilst allowing the subjects in front of the camera to act out a personal scenario they were currently negotiating in their everyday life. I selected subjects through my broader personal and professional networks on the understanding that they understood the artistic goals and process and consented to participate. The resulting work was often a series of large scale photographs resembling renaissance paintings with contemporary signifiers such as tattoos or sneakers left in as a signal to the audience that what they were viewing was self-aware in its construction.



fig: 9. David C Collins, *She's not my Girlfreind*, giclée fine art print. 2011



fig:10. David C Collins, *What Yo Pappa Said*, giclée fine art print. 2011

The project *Horse Boy*, was a personal departure from my familiar methodology of producing art. I decided to explore a more self-referential approach. Still interested in the process of photo media, I chose video as a way of documenting performances using myself for the first time as primary performer. I stripped back my usual heavy aesthetic to direct the viewer's focus to the action on screen. Horses were chosen as my initial performance collaborators, having grown up riding horses they hold personal significance as a representation for my childhood and family. Choosing horses as my performance collaborators is illustrative of the love and affection I have developed for them over many years of working closely with them. I believe this also contributed to the anecdotal significance the work holds for me as the artist. Choosing to begin by working with horses my sister owned and trained, I felt this

personal connection would contextualise the performances as emotionally loaded experiences for myself as performer and artist.

The development of Horse Boy

My own work focuses on the horse – the animal with the most personal significance to me. Having grown up on a property with many horses and working with horses from a young age, I feel I have come to reach a level of understanding of the horse's nature and basic communication methods.

The domesticated horse is closely tied to the evolution of much of human civilisation. Humans and horses share a rich history of companionship, dependency and exploitation. Dr. Mikkel Schubert contextualises humans' dependence on horses through explaining how,

“The domestication of the horse revolutionized warfare, trade, and the exchange of people and ideas. This at least 5,500-y-long process, which ultimately transformed wild horses into the hundreds of breeds living today... ”⁶³

I learned to ride at a young age and became responsible for the care and well-being of the horses I worked with. I have competed in equestrian sports, trained horses and dedicated time to be educated in horse behavior, biology, health and care. Such a close working relationship with horses has led to a pre-existing relationship of communication and power negotiation. It is for this reason, the primary non-human collaborator I have chosen to work with in my performance exercises are horses.

⁶³ Mikkel Schubert et al., "Prehistoric Genomes Reveal the Genetic Foundation and Cost of Horse Domestication," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 111, no. 52 (2014): 34.

I believe the horse to be the best choice for my performance partner because I already have a relationship of negotiating power roles through my time working with horses. It is this familiarity and understanding of the precarious nature of the power exchange, which informs my context going into each performance with a horse. The horse acts as agent for the other, whilst bringing with it the long history of human cohabitation. This brings with it a short-hand for a fragile communication that will occupy the control/surrender criteria.

The primary performer in all the work I produced for this project is myself. The role of my body within the performance is an important one; on commencing this project I was unaware how significant my gender would be in the outcome and reading of the work. The initial performance exercise is intended to provoke sincere action and reaction from both human and non-human performers. The staged nature of the work allows for an ambiguous reading, questioning how much is contrived and how much is purely reactive. The making of the work is a two-stage process, the first being the authentic performance where the direct exchange between human and animal takes place, the second being the review, editing and presentation of the documentation media that ultimately becomes the finished work. The second stage of this process allows me to be a witness to my own performance and to reflect and examine the initial experience more objectively. I was reluctant at first to treat the exercise as an examination of masculinity; I personally find hegemonic masculinity (the representation of men that western society views as the most indicative of normal and pure masculinity) and 'toxic masculinity' (the stereotypical masculine archetype that is both harmful to woman and men themselves) one and the same thing. Dr. Terry A. Kupers describes toxic masculinity as "the need to aggressively compete and

dominate others and encompasses the most problematic proclivities in men.”⁶⁴ In the context of performance exercises exploring power dynamics through control and surrender, I found it impossible to review the work without wondering to what extent my masculinity informed my behavior. I found it a confronting and embarrassing idea that any part of me would wish to align with or project myself as a stereotypical male archetype. It was on review of the performances that I found my negotiation of this expression blatant, highlighting the relevance of these performances as explorations of my own masculinity, how I view these roles in our society and how I contextualize myself within this structure.

One of the ways I do this is through inhabiting a parody of a masculine stereotype. A stereotype acts as a short-hand for an archetype, which through performance can be interrogated. This is not only important as a tool to communicate these roles and questions to the audience but also for me as performer to abandon pragmatic routine and truly explore a role.

With this as catalyst for a performative act, I granted myself permission to inhabit a mental space necessary to let my guard down and interrogate suppressed characteristics and desires.

Performance Exercise 1: I Wish I Were A Cowboy

⁶⁴ Terry A. Kupers and Aaron B. Rochlen, "Toxic Masculinity as a Barrier to Mental Health Treatment in Prison," *Journal of Clinical Psychology* 61, no. 6 (2005): 713.

The first performance video I executed *I Wish I Were A Cowboy*, fig:11, explored the idea of catharsis through embodying a stereotype to understand the facet of my personality, which related to the characteristics of that stereotype.

Within this performance, the horse did not act as much as a constructive collaborator executing a level of its own agency whilst negotiating power relations. Instead the horse's role was similar to the horse in Marina Abramovic's *Hero* artwork. The horse acted as symbol linking the image of the horse to cultural preconceptions of the romanticised role of the horse.⁶⁵

The role of cowboy, which I'm invoking to enact the performance, is the romanticized vision of Richard Price's *Untitled (Cowboy) 1980-1989* series, the stoic Marlboro man promoting masculine ideals, "harking back to a fantasy of pastoralized American life."⁶⁶ This version of the cowboy is a fetishized fantasy that only existed in film and advertising. The cowboy is shown to be silent, athletic and strong. The decorative attire of a cowboy is ironically camp in comparison to the rigidly masculine persona it is seen to represent. This type of performance is an exercise in which I employed the horse as performance partner to experience the fantastical role of masculinity offered to me in the 'myth' of the cowboy image. The performance allows me to have a cathartic experience in the safety of that construct. I find the performance cathartic because it allows me the freedom to inhabit an identity and perform an act of arrogant, postured machismo. I'm free to experience the repressed instinctual desire to make a spectacle of my physical agency in a stereotypically masculine way that is heightened to the point of parody.

⁶⁵ Pereira.

⁶⁶ Wales Art Gallery of New South, "Untitled (Cowboy) 1980-1989," Art Gallery of New South, Wales, <http://www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/collection/works/L2011.45/>.

For me this is cathartic because my rational belief is that this sort of behavior is not only embarrassing, but also damaging in the aggressive body language and mindset it asserts. On some level, however, I still wished to experience it and display it; this performance allows me the opportunity and safety construct to live this repressed instinct in an uninhibited burst. After the performance, I could retune to everyday life with a greater understanding of the role that vision of masculinity offered in that image, assessing its value and how much of that I bring to everyday life.



fig: 11. David C Collins, *I Wish I Were A Cowboy*, 7min digital video. 2015

Performance Exercise2: I Wish I Were Your Hero

This performance video followed similar cathartic criteria as *I Wish I Were A Cowboy*. Intended as a companion piece, *I Wish I were Your Hero*, fig:12, was an exercise examining contemporary ideas of what is fashionable and ‘cool’ and juxtaposing this with traditional romanticised imagery of the Knight in Shining Armor. The cathartic act in this exercise was that I dressed and behaved in a way I rationally have chosen to reject, yet on some level, still wish to experience. The clothes I chose to wear are not those of a horse rider but derived from street wear more closely associated with skate and street culture. During my formative teenage years, I did not fit the perceived masculine criteria to be accepted into the skate subculture of that geography or era (early 2000/s Perth, Western Australia) however, surrounded by it, I was ridiculed and rejected by those who did. Based on this experience I had chosen to dismiss any value from what could be learned from this particular image of what is ‘cool’ and ‘acceptable’. Despite this outward rejection, on some repressed level I still wished to inhabit that image and perform a feat of athletic skill much like a skater. Having no experience or expertise skating I turned to the one physical sport I knew I could ‘show off’ performing; that of horse riding. The performance itself has a dual purpose, it acts as a parody of the masculine identity I have chosen to critique whilst giving me the excuse and opportunity to evoke and perform the archetype I’m sceptical of.



fig: 12. David C Collins, *I Wish I Were Your Hero*, 2.08min digital video. 2015

The two pieces, *I Wish I Were A Cow Boy* and *I Wish I Were Your Hero* are both exercises where I employ the horse as symbol and engage my familiarity and skill to perform cathartic actions for myself to better explore facets of masculinity and identity. I was confronted by how much I enjoyed these roles and to what extent I truly wished to inhabit the construct of masculinity I rationally find problematic. The exercise not only became an exploration of power dynamics between horse and rider but also an examination into the level of control one has over rational and instinctual behavior. My intention is to also use my body as a cipher and through these actions provoke the viewer to critique the value of these stereotypes and the possible absurdity of what this behavior represents. The titles of both works have been generated as synthesized generalisations of mission statements centered on clichés of stereotypical masculine grand narratives. These narratives act as a vessel for my

performance explorations to inhabit. The titles and style of presentation imitate cinema, highlighting the synthetic nature of the performance and contrasting this with the reality and sincerity of the action recorded.

Performance Exercise 3: I Want You to Remember Me

My use of video media brings with it associations with cinema. I am interested in exploiting this as a device in communicating to the audience how footage can be manipulated to project masculine ideals and influence how identity is constructed. The work *I want you to remember me (I/II/III)*, fig: 13,14,15 is a series of three film stills, taken from footage of me lying in the grass with a foal. I've arranged the stills in chronological reverse order so that instead of it showing the foal standing up and moving away from me, it reads left to right as if he approached me and lay down in the grass next to me. I've manipulated the reading from my presence to the baby horse as an uncomfortable, possibly intimidating one, to make it look as though he finds me comforting and protective. This perversion of my own physical agency is an exercise in examining how memory can be manipulated to recall an idealized version of self. I view this sentimentality as potentially damaging, as it enables a method of self-denial preventing genuine and productive self-criticism and growth. However, as an exercise this piece was an examination of that method rather than a damning criticism.

The act itself of lying with the foal was cathartic; it provoked in me the desire to nurture and protect whilst connecting to the animal. The documented media let me examine my behavior more objectively and note how my perception of the experience

during the performance was obscured by my romanticized emotional response at the time. Through this act, I can momentarily convince myself I am a good and trustworthy person. The reality was the foal tolerated me to a point and then moved away to be closer to its mother where it truly felt comfortable. By manipulating the documentation I can choose to sentimentally relive the cathartic experience whilst questioning perceptions of reality.



fig:13. David C Collins, *I Want You to Remember Me (I)*, video still, giclee fine art print. 2016



fig:14. David C Collins, *I Want You to Remember Me (II)*, video still, giclee fine art print. 2016

fig:15. David C Collins, *I Want You to Remember Me (III)*, video still, giclee fine art print. 2016



These works all relied on my level of inquisition into inhabiting the identity of an archetype I wished to examine, to further explore whether I asserted stereotypically masculine traits such as a desire to affirm as much control as possible in a situation

which forces me to submit and surrender. To achieve this I needed to push myself further out of my comfort zone engaging more with the ideas of surrender and confront myself with the agent for the sublime (and that fear and beauty it provokes) which, I nominate within a performance.

My intention was to introduce a randomised element through which there would come a point where I would surrender my position of power. I decided to do this by conducting a feat of endurance, at which there would come a point in the action where it was no longer physically possible for me to continue and I would have to yield to my body's limitations.

Performance Exercise 4: Can't Skate

My first exercise to explore this was to perform a handstand on the saddle of a horse for as long as I could, until my arms could no longer hold my weight and I would fall from the horse, *fig:16*. At that point I would be vulnerable to the response or action of the horse and momentarily have no control over the situation.

As the horse from this point on would no longer act as an agent for the symbolic representation of the horse but become a performer itself, the role needed to be contemplated on a more individualistic basis.

Before executing further performances, I chose to consider my non-human performance partners more carefully. The horse would no longer simply act as a register for the culturally romantic imagery of a horse but have an active part in the direction and outcome of the performances. For the handstand exercise, the horse I chose would have to be comfortable enough with me to allow me to do a handstand on its saddle as at this point I am already surrendering most of my control over the horse. From the start of the performance the issue of who holds the most control is already in question, am I in control as rider or is the horse in control having the dominant physical presence and power, whilst I surrender the comfort and familiarity of sitting on the horse and holding the reins? Much in the same way Abramovic assumes the snakes' nature and behavior whilst she allows them to slither over her face in *Dragon Heads* I too am using my knowledge of the horse to estimate that although I am surrendering some of my control, it is unlikely the horse will exploit this to behave in a hostile way. I needed a horse I knew was familiar enough with me and trusted me enough for me to behave in an unexpected way without it feeling in immediate danger or threatened.

This method of pre-selection could be read as a compromise to the criteria of ‘surrender of power,’ however I chose to view it as part of the process of power negotiation. By selecting a performance partner in a horse who I felt I had some familiarity with, I was enabling the execution of the performance with a hypothesis of how each one might play out. The randomised element is not compromised because the horse will still always maintain free will and respond instinctively in unfamiliar situations.

The act of an endurance handstand was an exploration into my desire to ‘show off’ a feat of strength. The use of slow motion video recording operated to inflate the appearance of my capacity for endurance, utilizing the technological element as a means of exaggeration. The fall itself was inevitable; how I chose to ‘save face’ when surrendering to this predestined outcome was the moment of interest for me. The horses and my own instinct for self-preservation were triggered at the same time. As I fall, the horse is shocked and runs away. The horse however, behaves unselfconsciously moving purely from instinct. My own reaction to the fall on reexamination was a mixed one; whilst falling I moved instinctively to best land safely, *fig:17*. My body language however, once I’ve landed is staunch and nonchalant in an attempt to appear unshaken or fazed by the momentary loss of control, *fig:18*. Despite orchestrating a situation where I knew a moment of loss of control would occur, on reflection, I see my desire to have as much control as possible or at the very least appear to be in control was dominant in this exercise.



fig: 16. David C Collins, *Can't Skate*, 3.4min digital video. 2015



fig: 17. David C Collins, *Can't Skate*, 3.4min digital video. 2015



fig: 18. David C Collins, *Can't Skate*, 3.4min digital video. 2015

Performance Exercise 5: Bathing of a Red Horse

I became interested in introducing an element of the domestic into the performances, straddling the line of raw performance whilst still engaging with symbolic visual action and imagery. My intention was to take a routine activity that both human and horse would be familiar with and subvert the power balance. It is usual after riding a horse to unsaddle it, wash it, dry it and dress it in its paddock rugs. For the following exercise, I would at each stage mirror what I was doing to the horse. When I undressed the horse, I would undress. I would wash the horse and myself with the same water, dry us both and then dress us both in our nightclothes, *fig:19*. Although I would still maintain an element of control over the horse by having it tied up, this departure from the normal routine shifted the balance dramatically. The intimacy of the performance was within this action, through which we became familiar and comfortable with one another.

The act of stripping naked made me vulnerable and established us both as animal, having removed the human comfort of cloths. My feet felt most at risk, now having no protection from the hard hooves of the horse should he step on me and break a toe. The horse's body language was tense; mid-way through the performance he became scared by a sudden movement, snapped the rope and ran backwards. At that moment, I lost all control over the situation, his fear had caused him to assert his size and agency and leave the performance space and me. I had to run after him wet and naked, completely vulnerable and through non-confronting body language calm him enough for him to allow me to approach him and take him back to the performance

space. This moment was pivotal in the power negotiation and it became clear to me my authority was not tacitly implied but in this situation volunteered through trust. The level of engagement required to maintain communication with the horse to keep him calm overrode any pretensions in my body language. I couldn't afford to put on a 'macho', aggressive or even overtly assertive body language, for fear of frightening the horse. Out of necessity my actions became authentic in a desire to communicate with the horse; in this video I surrendered control over my projected image to maintain some control and communication with the horse.

The performance was recorded in slow motion to capture the nuances and subtleties of both our actions and performances. I chose to perform just after sunset with chiaroscuro lighting, informing associations of renaissance imagery of Christ submitting by washing the feet of the disciples. This baroque stylistic choice was also a visual link to my art practice prior to commencing this project. This consideration of aesthetic presentation came into play because I felt the performance act itself could be assisted by suggestions of the history of the horse being used as a symbolic agent. Although I have previously stated I do not want this to be the dominant role of the horse, I believe these aesthetic triggers could heighten the emotional response of the audience. This is itself an exercise of aesthetic control, where I utilise the cinematic nature of the recording media to further influence the audiences experience of the performance.



fig:19. David C Collins, *Bathing of a Red Horse*, 49.58 min digital video. 2016

Performance Exercise 6: Rip Tide

My interest in these investigations lies in my curiosity regarding where the negotiation of power sits, is it by some bluff that a horse will believe a human has more physical power or is it through cooperation brought on by persuasion? I find the figurative description of a 'push-pull' relationship apt when communicating these exchanges. I chose to make this metaphor a physical realisation by simplifying the performed action to a single act.

For the following exercise, my performance partner and I met in a stubborn (nonviolent) confrontation. I attempted to push the horse from the chest and make her walk backwards; motivated by food behind me (and in front of her) the horse would push on me to make me walk backwards, *fig:20*. In the resulting video work, the horse obviously has physical dominance, however the exchange is a subtle one. Whilst being firm and pushing against her she pushes back and forces me to walk backwards. When I am being gentle, stroking her and passively leaning on her chest she yields and walks backwards, *fig:21*. The physical exchange quickly becomes one of negotiation rather than force. My immediate instinctual reading of this exchange was that it was an act of mutual compassion; on reflection, it is apparent that this was a sentimental projection. It is more realistic to deduce that the horse was accepting its familiar role as obedient animal, performing a directed task in the hope to receive food as reward.

The back and forth continues because we are both motivated by our action (her for food, me to see if I could convince her to walk backwards away from where she would prefer to be). Power is exchanged back and forth however, it becomes apparent, I have the power to move her when she allows me to move her, not because

I have any real force or physical power. The moment of deciding whether to yield or push can be seen in the subtle swaying and clenching of the muscles on both bodies. The tight frame of the video lightly draws attention to the strain and release on the performers that sway within the frame. The video is looped to emphasize the never-ending negotiation of power.

In order to obtain a true sense of surrender, making myself vulnerable to an agent of nature (a horse), I felt it necessary to shift my bodily exchange with the horse to a less familiar and potentially more extreme one.

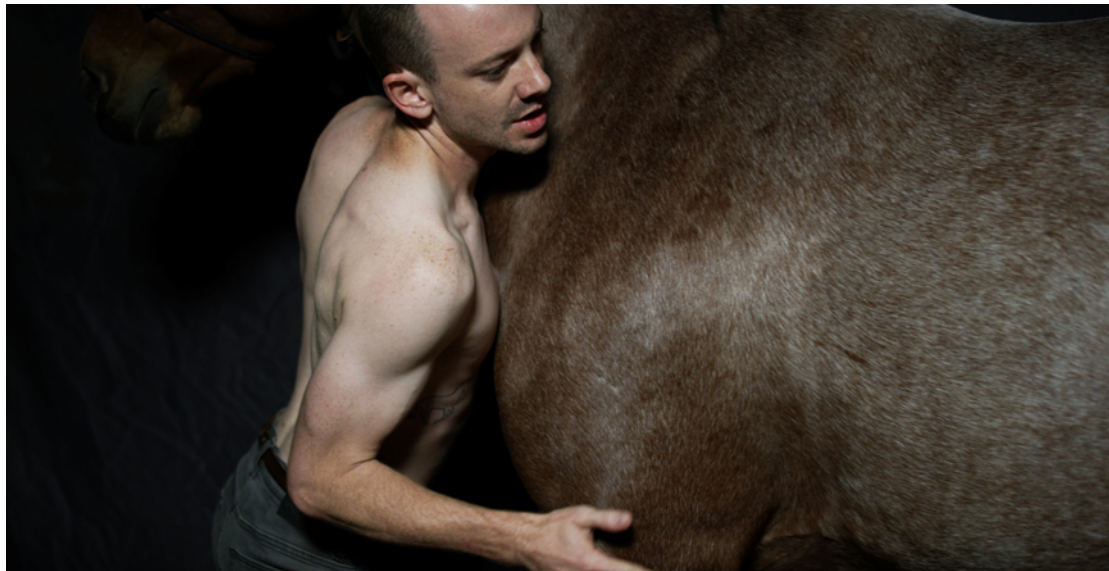


fig:20. David C Collins, *Rip Tide*, digital video loop. 2016

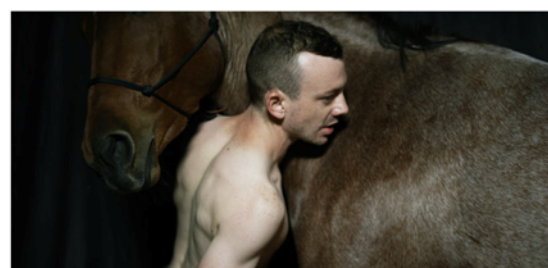
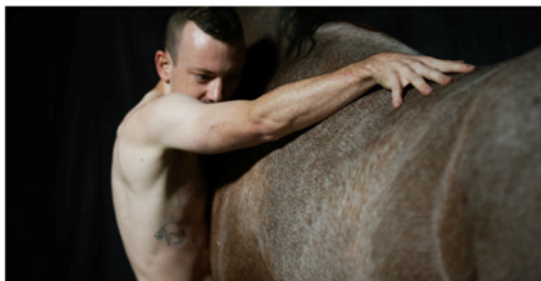


fig:21. David C Collins, *Rip Tide*, digital video loop. 2016

Performance Exercise 7: Jett Rink

For all previous performances, my role read very much as ‘human man’, although this reading is unavoidable I wished to alienate my senses and my appearance. In the work, *Jett Rink*, I make myself vulnerable to the horse, giving up my cloths, my sight and any control of the horse.

For this performance, I was naked and covered all over in thick molasses (a horse food and treat). My eyes were sealed shut by the sticky substance and I could barely hear from it covering my ears, *fig:22*. I stood in the paddock with the horse who approached me; I presented myself for her to lick the molasses off me in any way she liked. In surrendering all control and agency over to her, I experienced a sense of exhilaration fueled by fear and uncertainty, *fig:23*. I found her response to be firm but gentle; she approached me but did not do anything until I reached out in her direction towards where I could feel her hot breath on my skin, only then once I offered my hands towards her did she start to lick the molasses off me. Starting at my hands, a place she is familiar and comfortable with taking food from, she then worked her way up my arms but didn’t lick my face or body or anywhere that wasn’t being

volunteered. It was interesting to note she gently used her teeth to scrape away the molasses but never bit me hard; the action was similar to when a horse firmly grooms another horse. Despite having full control and no discernable fear of me, the horse chose to only take what was offered and was gentle and respectful towards my body. When she was no longer hungry she turned her back on me and walked away.

I found this exercise the most successful in provoking in me a sense of the sublime in that I truly felt I was at the mercy of my collaborator yet with enough trust in her to experience the excitement in a meaningful way.

This performance was shot in slow motion in black and white. The use of monochrome was to further enhance the 'alien' otherness of what my body was transformed into during the 'more than human' performance. The black and white enhances the sense of texture and detail in the performance. The materiality of the molasses and the interaction between my skin and the horse's tongue becomes more palpable in slow motion, imitating the heightened sense of touch I was experiencing through being blind and partially deaf. Viewed through the framework of traditional notions of masculinity, I have also made myself vulnerable in this performance. The act of surrender does not match the imagery of machoism and 'tough' bravery. The body I am inhabiting within this performance is soft, vulnerable and exposed. I am not negotiating power with the horse through an act of strength, but passive surrender. During the live performance, I was preoccupied with the practicality of negotiating my exchange with the horse, at the time I interpreted her gentle interactions as a signal of care and intimacy. On reflection, I believe this interpretation to be a result of my human need to project an emotional meaning on to what I was experiencing as

an act of intimacy. I am aware the horse was most likely acting out of pure pragmatism and instinct. On review of the recording of the performance, the act itself enhanced by slow motion could be read as erotic, this is an observation from the safe distance as observer. At the time, I was too preoccupied with negotiating my safety to interpret the act as intimate to the point of erotic. From my perspective, this work was the most successful in testing ideas of surrender and control because my actions were passive and my authority over the situation was limited.



fig: 22. David C Collins, *Jett Rink*, 10.47 min digital video. 2015

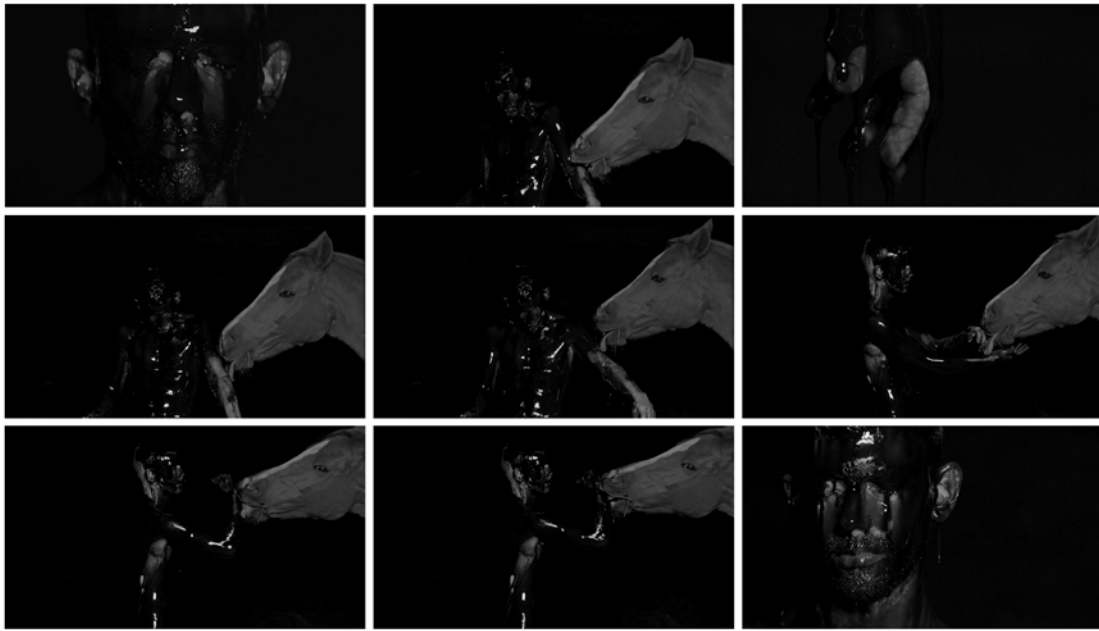


fig: 23. David C Collins, *Jett Rink*, 10.47 min digital video. 2015

Performance Exercise 8: Wilhelm Scream

The action and experience of falling from a horse is one I am familiar with as a regular rider, but also fear. For the performance and video *Wilhelm Scream* I aimed to ride a horse shirtless and bare back in an arrogant boastful way, and then surrender my safety on the horse by throwing myself from its back at a canter, *fig:24*. I wanted an action that worked against all sense of self-preservation and that was in itself a ‘foolish boast’ much like young men doing dangerous things to show off. I performed this action several times; each time at the moment of falling I experienced uncertainty, I was surrendering to the danger of the fall and the possibility the horse might hurt me by kicking out or stepping on me. The repetition of the action highlighted that, despite moments of genuine uncertainty in the act of falling, the fall itself was intended and a voluntary act, *fig:25*. I expected with each leap/fall I would gain more confidence as I decided what worked as a safe execution. I found instead, each time I performed the leap I became more nervous as my reflexes whilst falling

went from quick and instinctual to slower and more hesitant from expectation. Rather than diluting the action, the repetition of falling only enhanced the uncertainty of a safe result.

I choose to highlight this in the performance's presentation by displaying it as a three-channel video, each one starting at a slightly different time but the falls all occurring at once. I'm not simply acting out an action I feel is reflecting harmful male behavior (putting the self at risk to both show off and experience a thrill), I'm exploring and



reflecting on my own desire to practice this sort of behavior. The action of riding the horse is a communication and collaboration between horse and rider; at the moment I throw myself from the horse I am relinquishing any control over the horse. Although the work's presentation and the choreographed action was constructed and pre-determined, I am satisfied that both mine and the horse's reaction whilst performing the action is genuine and real.

fig: 24. David C Collins, *Wilhelm Scream*, Three channel digital video loop. 2016



fig: 25. David C Collins, *Wilhelm Scream*, Three channel digital video loop. 2016

Despite deciding on the Horse to be the predominant performance partner, I chose to investigate the idea of human, non-human performance confrontation with other animals which I believed could provoke enough fear to experience a feeling of loss of control.

Performance Exercise 9: Gorgon

Although domesticated to some degree I chose animals, which did not have as long a history of human collaboration as the horse. As such I chose to work with two Southwestern carpet pythons in a performance in which I lay under a sheet of clear Perspex with the two pythons feeding on rats on top of my face, *fig:26*. I had previously been bitten by one of the pythons; the intention was for the aggressive action of the python as it fed on the rats to allow me to relive the initial fear of having once been bitten.

Although I found the actual live performance cathartic, allowing me to feel the initial terror of the strike and then the luxury to watch in fascination as the snakes swallowed the rats, I feel the documentation does not translate this experience. I recorded the performance from above, shooting through the snakes down onto my face looking up. The Perspex is too strong an element making the figure of the human performer

just another spectator from behind the screen of Perspex as opposed to an active



participant whose body is engaged in the performance exercise.

fig:26. David C Collins, *Gorgon*, 30 min digital video. 2016

Performance Exercise 10: Thief

I felt the investigation including an animal that was closer to nature through being semi-wild was worth re-examining. Deciding food was a good motivator for animal response I chose to once again make an animal eat in close proximity to my body. The animal I chose was a wedge-tailed eagle, *fig:27*. They are a familiar sight and symbol for me, having grown up in the Perth hills; the very sight of the animal provokes awe. I found just being in its presence exhilarating. For the performance, I sat with a branch lying across my exposed stomach. The eagle sat on the branch tearing apart and eating a liver. In my vain, human attempt to project a meaningful exchange with the animal I try and interact with it as it sits and tears meat apart just above my stomach. The eagle responds defensively each time I try to react with it, lashing out as if I am trying to take its food away. Several times the eagle stares me down, making eye contact, trying to determine whether I am a threat, *fig:28*. As the eagle eats and I see how powerful and sharp its talons and beak are I'm aware I'm in the presence of something truly dangerous and powerful that has decided to tolerate me because it is aware it has dominance.

On re-examination, I realise I mirror the eagle's movement, during the performance I am lost in the exchange, simultaneously feeling that if I make the wrong move I could be attacked yet wanting to maintain the connection I feel with the animal. As the eagle becomes familiar with my presence and possibly less hungry I am able to reach

out and stroke its back, *fig:29*. It tolerates this though in hindsight I'm aware that although this was a meaningful gesture for me, it was unlikely to have been anything other than a mild annoyance to the eagle.

The performance was recorded in high definition slow motion. This captured the majestic and sharp motions of the eagle, translating its power and natural agency. The footage has been edited to focus mainly on close-ups, highlighting significant actions. My facial reactions to the eagle's responses to me is one of terror and I quickly move to reposition myself.

I believe the video evokes at least some of the fear and fascination the eagle provoked in me. Although I feel this piece is more successful than the pythons, I consider these exercises to sit separately to the body of work involving horses, which I feel is most constitutive of the overall project.



fig: 27. David C Collins, *Thief*, 20 min digital video. 2016



fig: 28. David C Collins, *Thief*, 20 min digital video. 2016

fig: 29. David C Collins, *Thief*, 20 min digital video. 2016

Conclusion

Horse Boy addresses the effectiveness of performance exercises as potentially cathartic for both participant and audience. The performance exercises I executed for this project were staged confrontations mostly using the horse as my collaborator. The animal, 'non-human' performers including the snakes and eagle were selected for their effectiveness in representing the natural world and to act as agents for the sublime. For this to be achieved as primary performer I needed to place myself in a position of negotiation where power roles were unstable. By surrendering an assertive role in my confrontation with my non-human performance partners, I experienced feelings of threat and fear that I believe brought me closer to a sense of awe and reverence before nature. This experience gave me an emotional understanding of the sublime that I hope translates to the audience in the representation of the performances in the video recordings.

The first two performances I executed acted simply to excite and release a desire to embody a particular caricature or archetype of masculinity. Although this was in itself cathartic, the investigation was not deep and did not connect me to my equestrian performance partner on more than a basic and familiar level. Through further investigation and the subverting of familiar roles for both the horse and myself, I felt a deeper connection of negotiation and communication as balances of power were tested. These investigations triggered a respect and deeper understanding for the constant and inseparable relationship I negotiate with the natural world. In an attempt to translate the emotional and experiential enormity of the performance to an

audience, I carefully chose a documentation method and presentation for each performance. Footage speed, camera focus points, lighting and colour balance were all considered to put emphasis on particular motions, actions and reactions endeavoring to provoke a sympathetic reading and response in the viewer. Stylistic choices and presentation were not only chosen to enhance the authentic action within the performance but also to signify preconceived cultural understandings and readings of human-animal imagery, mythology and stereotypes.

I found the performances in collaboration with horses to be the most effective in achieving the project goals. Not only do their large, commanding presence immediately demand respect and awe, but I found the negotiations of power were informed by my preexisting understanding of the complexities of their nature.

The performance *Jet Rink* effectively provoked in me the raw emotional response of the sublime, and I believe the uncanny nature of the imagery within the performance will be most effective in provoking an empathetic response in the audience.

The transformative, almost hypnotic effect animals can command over humans in both a physical, psychological and spiritual way is a reoccurring interest in many contemporary artists' practices. I am interested in how this acts as a metaphor for humans' relationship with the natural world. Within my practice, I aim to continue to probe these themes through engaging both new technologies and subjects from the natural world. I intend to do this through further performance investigations engaging with animal and human collaborators. I am also deeply interested in further investigating and exploring gender roles and binaries that surfaced during these performance exercises. I aim to do this by continuing to engage my body in

performances where I interact with others and test my own responses to unfamiliar situations.

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