



What's left

behind

Until about ten years ago, I had not explored the work of Brigitte Jurack. Her studio is now just around the corner from the Williamson Art Gallery and this proximity, linked by a framing shop and one or two other existing and developing projects, begins to give a 'creative quarter' feel to the area that we all hope will be extended in prospective future developments in Birkenhead.

In 2012 Brigitte installed a suite of sculptures in Wallasey's Central Park on the site of the former Wallasey School of Art, and the figural work *Just wait for me* was created together with local young people. The placing of the three figures opposite each other across the space gives a sense of participation that could never have been made with a single piece. In developing recent works, she has continued her involvement with a wide range of communities in the UK and also in various residencies in the USA, Spain, India and her home country of Germany.

Having had a small outdoor installation of work during the 2018 Liverpool Independents Biennial, we planned to showcase Brigitte's work at the Williamson during 2020 which of course proved impossible. We were however able to commission two films as a stopgap or as a teaser. One, *Concentration*, a meditative abstract watercolour study, is perhaps counter-intuitive for a sculptor to present, except that it reveals an attention to surface detail and texture that you might expect.

The other, *What is left behind*, is a studio visit looking at her current work and giving a foretaste of what is included in the exhibition at the Williamson Art Gallery. The concentration on monkeys, foxes and



crows is a reflection on the edges of society, on the clever scavengers who eke a living from the in-between spaces and leftovers from the rest of life.

Having spent many hours watching crows on the beach, learning their tactics for tackling awkward-to-access shellfish from the gulls, I recognise the cunning and ingenuity bound up in these creatures. We may all have had our moments of scavenging in the last twenty months, whether it was securing a treasured bag of pasta at the start of 2020's lockdown or identifying an otherwise overlooked place for both fresh air and safety in a crowded environment.

More seriously, we look at the plight of those who have to fight or roam the world to find their own safe spaces, always with a wary eye on the threats that confront them and those that begrudge them the security they crave: the monkeys, foxes and crows of human society.

Colin M. Simpson
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Lauren Velvick in conversation with Brigitte Jurack

Without studio visits and the experience of being in close proximity to Brigitte Jurack's work, one has to construct other ways of understanding, at a distance. In this conversation, conducted remotely over several weeks, we discuss the origins and development of Jurack's interest in animals and their inner lives, alongside fables, creative disobedience, canniness, play, responsibility and care.

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

BJ: I remember visiting the Tetterley in Leeds shortly after it opened. On the inside walls of the toilet cubicle doors, short fables of Aesop were printed and I recall reading about ants and grasshoppers while temporarily confined in the small space. The short aphoristic text triggered profound thinking about the relationship between the pleasure of making music or creating art and the drudgery of labour and planning. Whilst the vast majority of books and movies for small children humanise animals as talking sentient beings – ones that make friends and help each other to learn and explore the world as equals – this view of the world is overturned as we enter the age of industrialised farming and wholesale environmental abuse. I think fables are an invitation for us to develop an understanding of ourselves as part of, rather than outside of, the rest of the animal world. Within ethics, philosopher Mary Midgley (1919–2018) and others theorised this as 'the animal turn', which includes acknowledging animals

as sentient beings. Likewise, the progressive German Theologian Dorothee Sölle (1929–2003) wrote a 'green' Christian Credo in the late 1960s, shifting the narrative from the evolutionary primacy of the human species to that of a servant, with responsibilities for stewardship and shepherding.

One of the sections roughly translates as: 'I believe in the holiness and goodness of God's creation of the earth in the past, present and future. Don't dare to challenge that, the earth does not belong to you, nor to any conglomerate or corporation. We do not own the earth as a thing that we can buy, use and discard.'

Coming back to Aesop's Fables, the two which accompanied me in the studio over the past year were *The Crow and the Pitcher* and *The Fox and the Crow*. The former is a fable about inert intelligence and/or learned behaviour in corvids. It is also a story about hope and improvisation in a tricky situation. What I also really like is that behavioural science has caught up with Aesop, in as far as crows, ravens, jays and rooks are very adaptable, can use tools, are sociable and have a super-sized brain. *The Fox and the Crow* fable is quite funny I think, since it appears at first sight to be a contest between two equally brainy characters. What fascinated me is the competition between the two and the fallibility of intelligence in the warm glow of flattery, vanity and deceit; the acknowledged moral, passed down through oral tradition, is that those who take delight in treacherous flattery will usually end up paying a hefty price.

LV: Thinking about the roles of ingenuity and responsibility in the fables, as well as how traits like cynicism and self-consciousness

are presented as humanisms by the ape in *A Report to an Academy* by Franz Kafka (1883-1924), I wondered about whether your artistic practice has changed how you conceive these animals – do you now take for granted the inner life of a fox in a way you didn't previously, or feel more awareness of their presence in the urban landscape?

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

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

In that sense the sculpture of a crow or fox becomes a stand-in for the being it represents, which in turn allows the viewer to have an encounter. There is also the side effect of elevation through

representation: 'I have seen you and I created an image of you'. Perhaps it is best understood as a form of adoration and admiration.

LV: Considering your work broadly, something that stands out is a concern for play and responsibility, if not quite in those exact terms. Play is sometimes evoked in terms of childhood, a 'childlike' understanding of animals and their potential motivations. Human responsibility emerges in relation to nature and the individual's obligation to be canny and shrewd, rather than a responsibility not to do harm. This balance is borne out, for example, in political ideology and individual behaviour. Could you talk a bit more about your understanding of play and responsibility, and perhaps the relationship between the two?

BJ: Let me link play and responsibility with two bridging words: nurture and knowledge. It is well researched and known that, as infants (and likewise infant animals), we develop our relationships with the world through play. Playing is animating the world – that is, giving it souls. As parent or teacher, we should nurture play since it is through play that we gain embodied knowledge of the world. Animating the inanimate, pretending to be others, turning tables and chairs into dens is sheer magic and unites us across times and cultures. Commencing right at the beginning of our lives, play is central to becoming and being in the world. Perhaps it is useful to bring Sölle in here too, since nurturing play is also nurturing creative disobedience. Through play you are enabled not to take things at face value, i.e. the table is not a table anymore, but a den, invested with lots of emotions and alternative experiences by playing underneath it; turning the thoroughly known into the thoroughly unknown.

Creative disobedience requires canniness; if you don't want to be tracked, leave the phone behind. Flattery puts the spotlight on the delusional power attributed to ownership: Kafka's ape cunningly flatters the expectations of the assembled dignitaries before they are reminded in two short turns of the discrete limits of their knowledge.

The inane object and word is transformed in and through imaginative play and the child becomes its temporary caretaker. She is responsible for the den in a caring manner. It is our duty as humans to nurture and care. That's the job, the only job that leads to all other jobs – but caring is not surveillance. Kafka's ape and the monkeys in New Delhi learn in those moments when they *feel* un-observed. One of the great advantages of tree houses and under-the-table dens for example is that they are out of sight. I guess my studio is like an under-the-table den.



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Extended conversation: www.brigittejurack.de

The Hand, the Ape and the Artist

As a self-proclaimed 'modeller', artist Brigitte Jurack's practice centres around the manipulation of materials by hand. Situated adjacent to a main road, her studio is housed in a repurposed one-hundred-year-old bakery in Birkenhead, a location that she openly admits is not conducive to being in the 'hub' of the art world. The studio's remoteness, however, offers a solitude that is integral to the artist's practice of thinking through making, and which centres around the manipulation of materials by hand. In the following text, Jurack's contemporary sculptural practice offers an opportunity to think about the historical role of the hand aligned with labour through a consideration of the artist's personal history, practice of making and the inspiration and subject matter of her works.

We might think of 2020 as the year in which contemporary life as we knew it slowed down; in-person contact was restricted, we were asked to stay indoors and, for some, work stopped. In some ways, locking yourself away indoors is a more familiar experience for a studio practitioner like Jurack who has always viewed her studio as a place of retreat and solitude, something akin to a temporary hermitage or sanctuary. Inside the studio, through the process of making, Jurack adopts a practice of mimicking life in order to understand, adopt or even influence it. What the numerous UK lockdowns offered her is time, and a quietening down; as people were furloughed or worked from home, the sound of traffic outside on the main road lessened and Jurack found herself turning more frequently to drawing and painting in response to the surrounding calm in the studio, an act typically reserved for Sundays.

As a sculptor, the hand is really important in realising the work itself. This is not a text that will fetishise the hand of the artist (so often tied to the male artist), but one in which the relationship of the hand through labour is explored. As noted, Jurack's studio is a converted bakery which, coincidentally perhaps, connects to the artist's early experiences with the manipulation of materials. She recalls watching her mother beating dough on the kitchen table of the Düsseldorf tenement in which she grew up. This process of working the dough and baking bread mimics the transformation of wet clay into something solidified and fully-formed when 'baked' in the oven. Similar material transformations took place in the back of her grandfather's house which housed a home forge. Again, the material transition was one that utilised heat (and a temporary unstable form: molten metal) resulting in something solid. When he encountered interesting cast objects such as gates, she recalls the meticulous drawings that he would make so that he could reproduce these at home. Drawing is an integral part of Jurack's own practice as a sculptor.

These formative experiences no doubt had an influence; these were early encounters with transformative, craft-based labour in the home. We might further understand these lived experiences in terms of class, of ones encountered growing up in a working-class environment and one that fostered an ethos of making (countered with today's experience of instant gratification through buying bread and other items ready-made). Making was present in other ways; Jurack's father was a fabricator - a metal turner - who worked on a production line in a factory. This was a period in which the transformation of craft-based labour was becoming

increasingly industrialised with the introduction of more mechanised and fragmented processes in the workplace. Whilst workers did not entirely lose their craft-based skills (such as those associated with metal turning) as industrial capitalism developed, the wider process of de-skilling limited production to increasingly separated, piecemeal tasks which, in turn, fragmented the worker, whose knowledge was limited to the construction of only a part of a whole.

Whilst it is common practice for sculptors to employ the assistance of others, be it studio assistants, fabricators or foundry workers, the one thing that Jurack would not hand over is the process of modelling. The manipulation of materials by hand is key to her practice. This is where the thinking through making takes place; so, when the artist encountered daily the monkeys that co-habited the Delhi-based compound in which she was undertaking an artist's residency, she began to think about their relationship to the humans and the wider world. In making this work by modelling the figures of the monkeys, Jurack's encounter with them becomes important. The cultural connections and references are created through this process; it is here that Jurack turned to read Franz Kafka. In his short story *A Report to an Academy* (1917) Kafka presents a fictional first-person narrative of the life of a captured ape now living as a human. As the story unfolds, we discover that the ape remains somewhat trapped; he does not truly belong anywhere – he could not return to his home habitat and live as an ape and neither does he fully belong to the human world. The 'report' tells of the ape learning from his captors in order to survive, from which Jurack drew parallels in observing the monkeys' daily routine of scavenging from and co-habiting with the humans in Delhi. Similarly observant, the monkeys learned

the humans' daily movements and reacted accordingly. Much like Kafka's exaggerated story of the ape, they have learned to survive in a (capitalist) human world.

There are connections (and distinctions) to be made here between Kafka's *Report* and Frederick Engels' *The Part Played by Labour in the Transition from Ape to Man* (1876). In his essay Engels explores the evolution of ape to man through the lens of labour with the hand playing a key role within this evolution. He writes that, using their hands, the apes:

'... grasp sticks to defend themselves against enemies, or bombard their enemies with fruits and stones. In captivity they use their hands for a number of simple operations copied from human beings.' (Engels, 1876: n.p)

In Kafka's account, the ape goes beyond imitation for survival to become a learned 'man'. Once he finds his voice, he continues his education to 'the level of cultivation of the average European.' (Kafka, 1917: n.p). For Engels, the thing that sets the human apart from apes is labour. He claims 'Labour begins with the making of tools.' (Engels, 1876: n.p) and concludes that, through years of labour including adaptation of the hand to new operations, developing muscles, ligaments and bone structures through this adaptation, the hand undertakes more complicated operations until it achieves 'the high degree of perfection required to conjure into being... the statues of a Thorwaldsen ...' (Engels, 1876: n.p). Notably, for Engels, artistic skill – the manipulation of materials for artistic production - lies at the end of this evolution.

The journey from ape to sculptor returns us to the idea of thinking through making, connecting the mind to the hand. The inherent connection between modelling in Jurack's practice through looking, doing and thinking. The act of articulation is tied to the hand. After her residency, Jurack searched for a UK equivalent of the Delhi monkeys and found it in the exhibited crows ('monkeys of the sky') and foxes. Through sculpting these animals who scavenge and constantly adapt to what Engels refers to as the human 'mastery over nature' (in this reading, urban life), emerges knowledge. And whilst often the layers of cultural connections unfold post-production, the silent process of the hand laboriously recreating the animals remains integral to an understanding of the represented animals and their respective significations for Jurack. Adaptation (especially in the current climate) links these animals and us within our shared environments. But there remains a distinction. Engels writes: 'And what did we find once more as the characteristic difference between the troupe of monkeys and human society? Labour.' (Engels, 1876, n.p).

Engels, Frederick *The Part Played in the Transition from Ape to Man* (1876), available at: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1876/part-played-labour/>

Kafka, Franz *A Report to an Academy* (1917), available at: https://www.sas.upenn.edu/~cavitch/pdf-library/Kafka_Report.pdf

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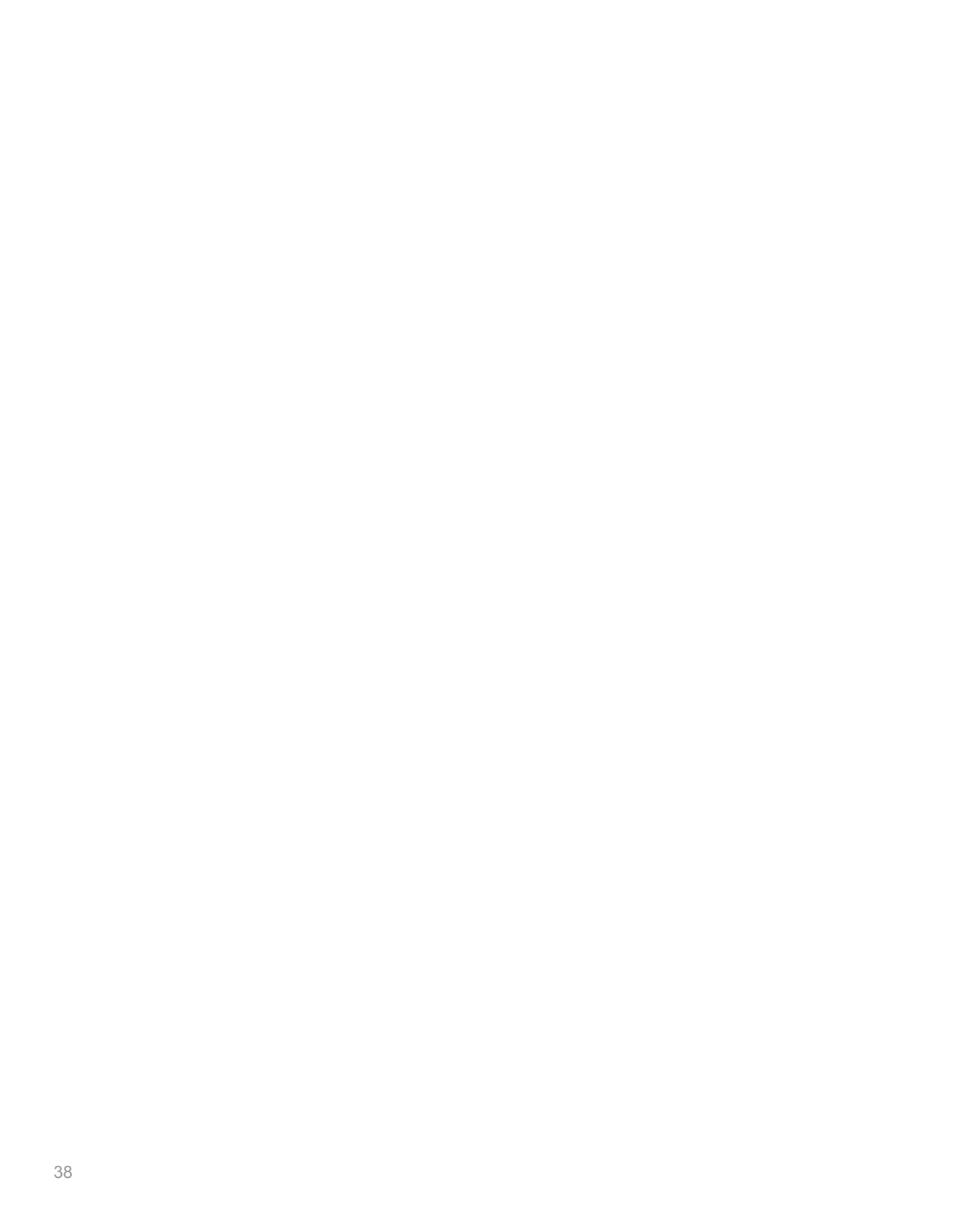






















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