

AnimalCam: Ocularcentrism and Non-Human Performance

The arts section of the New York Times for 30 November 2004 serendipitously juxtaposed two articles. The first concerned GuitarBot, a self-playing digital musical instrument that has performed both with human accompanists and in solo recitals. One of the latter, at the Juilliard School in New York City, was billed as a 'Robo Recital: No Human Performers' (Beckerman 2004). The second article was about *Cavalria: A Magical Encounter Between Man and Horse*, an extravaganza produced by one of the founders of Cirque du Soleil, intended to show 'the horse unfettered' (Sharkey 2004). Together, these two articles suggested the two sides of posthuman performance: the technological (performance by machines) and the zoological (performance by animals other than human beings).

Neither phenomenon is new, of course. Animals have been pressed into service as performers, often in blood sports, for millennia, and the dream, if not the reality, of machine performers has been around for centuries. But the idea of non-human performers has acquired fresh currency in the age of digital technology. Now that we may converse with chat bots, employ avatars to act in our behalf, and watch films in which human performers share screen time with CGI figures, the need to theorize the non-human in performance feels more urgent. To date, much of the work in performance studies to take up these questions has revolved around technology and the concept of the cyborg. More recently, animal performers have come into focus: *Performance Research* devoted an issue to the theme and most major academic conferences in theatre or performance studies now feature at least one 'animal panel' on their programs.

Looking back from the future, I believe we will see that machine and animal performance are overlapping areas of inquiry, in part because the animal is always technologically mediated in performance, if only through such technologies as bits and bridles. More crucially, performing animals and machines, while different in obvious and important ways, raise similar theoretical and critical issues. For me, these issues revolve around questions of agency, autonomy and subjectivity in performance, questions that pertain equally to human performers. I therefore prefer the term 'non-human' to the term 'posthuman' and am more interested in the shared

characteristics of human and non-human performance than in cyborgian hybridization. Most of the work I have done in this area has been on the technological side of the equation (see Auslander 2001, 2002a, 2002b, and forthcoming) but I have had occasion recently to give some thought to the zoological side as well.¹

Here, I will discuss two human-enabled performances by animals, both achieved through technological mediation. The first is the identity performed by Koko, the famous 'talking' gorilla, on 'her' website (www.koko.org). I will argue that the website emphasizes the importance of vision to Koko, a priority she shares with humans, thus downplaying her status as an animal in favor of presenting her as (almost) human. By contrast, Stanley the dog, the main character of Jana Sterbak's video installation *From Here to There* (2003), enjoys greater control over the technology that frames his performance and is thus able to perform a more specifically animal sensorium and identity, albeit for an exclusively human audience.

The role that Koko is made to perform on the website is that of 'ambassador for her critically endangered species'. Like any good ambassador, Koko is able to communicate with her hosts: the first text on the homepage of the website describes her as 'a 33-year-old lowland gorilla who learned to speak American Sign Language' (ASL); another page identifies her main diplomatic qualification by saying, 'she can speak to us humans in our own language'. Koko's ability to acquire human language is emphasized continuously and the message is clear: we humans can no longer use our capacity for language as a way of distinguishing ourselves from other animals. But the idea that language is a defining human trait remains in force nevertheless: the presentation strongly suggests that Koko's linguistic ability makes her more like us, not us more like her. She had to acquire human language to effect inter-species communication - the researchers who work with Koko communicate with her by using a combination of ASL and spoken English and express no interest in learning to speak gorilla, whatever that might mean. We're much happier to acknowledge Koko's putative humanity than our own animality.

While treating Koko as an honorary human may cause us to be more respectful of animals (or at least the higher primates) and treat them as beings possessing

subjectivity, if not subjecthood, we continue to define subjectivity, like language, in human terms. On the website, Koko is shown interacting primarily with human beings, including such celebrities as Mr. Rogers, the late host of a children's television program popular in the US, and Robin Williams, the actor and comedian. Her interactions with other animals are framed as human relationships: Michael, another gorilla (now deceased), was her 'best friend' and she selected 'potential mate' Ndume by means of video dating (the implication of a monogamous relationship belies male gorillas' normal polygamy). She is also shown with a cat identified as her pet. One of Koko's hobbies is painting pictures that are described in terms of familiar stylistic categories: according to the website, gorillas can produce images that are both 'representational (based on what they see) and impressionistic (based on what they feel)'.

Gorillas' sensorium is very similar to that of human beings: they see and hear well and are not as dependent on the sense of smell as some other animals. The importance of sight to the gorilla is subtly emphasized on Koko's website as a means of making her seem human. She produces visual art, looks at videos of potential mates and gazes fondly at the kitten she holds in her arms. Koko looks at the same kinds of things, and for the same reasons, as we do, and we look at Koko looking. We permit ourselves to believe that she is (nearly) one of us in large part because she apparently places the same premium on the sense of sight as we do. Ocularcentrism is thus bound up with anthropomorphism, even with respect to Koko's linguistic achievement, since Koko's acquisition of language is confirmed visually. Although we human beings cannot hear Koko communicate, we can see that she is linguistically competent because she is trained in ASL, a visual form of verbal language.

Our ocular relationship to Koko is different, however, from the ocular relationship between human beings and animals described by John Berger in 'Looking at Animals'. Berger identifies a modern, technologized human gaze that objectifies animals: 'animals are always the observed. The fact that they can observe us has lost all significance' (1980: 14). Berger contrasts this condition with an earlier one characterized by 'that look between animal and man, which may have played a crucial role in the development of human society, and which, in any case, all men had always lived with' (1980: 26). The case of Koko challenges Berger's account of this transition somewhat. As the various interactions with human beings on Koko's website show, she is not simply the observed. Her ability to observe us actually is important to us, and the fact that we are interested in exchanging gazes with her is an index to a new way of thinking about (at least some)

animals. But Koko's ability to observe us is important to us primarily because we want to believe that she is one of us. Cary Wolfe suggests, 'the figure of vision is . . . ineluctably tied to the specifically human' (2003: 3). The emphasis on vision in the way Koko is presented allows us to regard her as (almost) human; when she looks at us, we implicitly believe that we are exchanging the same kind of gaze - a human gaze. We do not feel ourselves to be the object of an Other's gaze, an animal's gaze, which is what Berger is talking about. While granted a degree of subjecthood, Koko is not permitted to perform a distinctly animal subjectivity, only a quasi-human one.²

Given the classic status of Berger's writing on this subject, dare I say that while I find his account of the progressive physical and cultural marginalization of animals useful and convincing, I also find his account of ocularity in human/animal relationships to be surprisingly anthropocentric? In his descriptions, the exchange of gazes between 'man' and animal always works to humanity's advantage without providing any clear benefit for the animal. In arguing that the 'look between animal and man' may have contributed to the development of human society, Berger distinguishes the human response to the animal's gaze from that of other animals by saying, 'man becomes aware of himself returning the look' (1980: 3). So, man gains self-consciousness from this exchange, but what does the animal get? The framing of Koko's performance as a gorilla ambassador to humanity sidesteps this issue: since Koko's animality is suppressed in this performance, her audience need not be troubled by the question of parity in ocular transactions between humans and animals.

The close association of the visual with the human raises difficult questions for artistic practices, including performance, seeking a critical stance with respect to anthropocentrism and speciesism. Since performances produced by humans inevitably reflect the priority of vision in the human sensorium, 'it is . . . tempting', as Wolfe notes, 'to abandon the figure of vision altogether' (2003: 3) and insist that only performances that engage other senses can be considered truly posthumanist in outlook. But Wolfe is not quite ready for such a radical rejection of ocularity, and neither am I. He proposes instead that 'one way to recast the figure of vision (and therefore the figure of the human with which it is ineluctably associated) is to resituate it as only one sense among many in a more general - and not necessarily human - bodily sensorium' (2003: 3). In conclusion, I shall discuss a video installation I saw at the Venice Biennale in 2003 that constitutes a step in the direction Wolfe indicates.

The installation, entitled *From Here to There*, was by Jana Sterbak, the Canadian representative to that

Biennale. I will simply quote the description from the press release: ‘made up of a series of short segments, the work chronicles the adventures of Stanley the dog in the City of the Doges, as well as on the banks of the St. Lawrence River. Without conventional plot development or predictable aesthetic choices, spectators will observe life as it appears from a height of 35 cm above the ground’. Sterbak made her video using a puppy-cam attached to the adventurous Stanley, a young Jack Russell terrier. The resulting images are slurred and oddly cropped; the frame bounces and vibrates according to the rhythms of the dog’s movements.

John W. Locke, in a catalog essay for the exhibition, argues that we should not see the images in this video as subjective camera shots from the dog’s point of view. (In fact, he argues against the whole concept of the subjective camera on the grounds that the camera’s version of vision is true neither to human nor canine perception and subjectivity.) To call the puppy-cam a subjective camera would be to imply that we understand and can recognize canine subjectivity. The video camera replicates neither a dog’s subjectivity nor the way a dog sees, of course, and its emphasis on sight belies the dog’s perceptual world (although sound plays a large part in this piece as well). Nevertheless, the video serves, in Locke’s words, as ‘a record of Stanley’s visual attention. The image precisely follows every movement of the dog’s head. We don’t know what he is thinking, or even if thinking is the right concept, but we are seeing where he is looking and the speed of his shifts of attention’ (2003: 10). Whereas Koko is always shown directing her attention to things that would also attract a human being’s interest, Sterbak’s puppy-cam allows us to see what a dog chooses to look at when left to his own devices.

In a different essay in the same catalog, Gilles Godmer claims provocatively that Stanley’s attention is not visual in nature at all. ‘Through Stanley’, writes Godmer, ‘the image subjects us to the animal nature of smell’ (2003: 88). The camera’s position (35 cm above the ground) is that of a non-human being for whom olfaction is the primary sense. In *From Here to There*, ‘the camera serves interests that rely to a great extent on the olfactory and that are foreign to us’ (2003: 88). For Godmer, then, the video is a visual record of Stanley’s olfactory attention. There is, of course, no way of enabling Stanley’s human artistic collaborator and audience to share in or understand his sensorium. Arguably, by presenting images of the things to which a creature driven more by smell than by sight chooses to give his attention in a way that traces the trajectory of his shifting interests, the installation at least allows us humans to experience what vision looks like when it is subordinated to another sense.

Oh, and it may interest Berger to learn that Stanley exhibits no inclination whatsoever to observe the people around him, who appear only as vague, momentary presences. As opposed to Koko, who is always represented as interacting with human beings, Stanley displays no desire to exchange meaningful looks with man – his own interests direct his attention elsewhere.

NOTES

1. This essay is based on the response I presented as part of a panel on non-human performance at the 2003 meeting of the Association for Theatre in Higher Education. Although I do not refer directly to the papers presented on that occasion by panelists Una Chaudhuri, Jennifer Parker-Starbuck and Erika Rundle, I thank them all for their inspiring work without which I would never have engaged with these ideas.
2. I wish to emphasize that my critique of how Koko is represented is not intended as a critique either of the scientific research of which she is a subject or the efforts to protect endangered gorillas undertaken in her name.

REFERENCES

- Auslander, Philip (2001) ‘Cyberspace as a Performance Art Venue’, *Performance Research* 38: 123–6.
- Auslander, Philip (2002a) ‘Live from Cyberspace, or I was sitting at my computer this guy appeared he thought I was a bot’, *Performing Arts Journal* 24: 16–21.
- Auslander, Philip (2002b) ‘Live from Cyberspace: Performance on the Internet’, in Jutta Eming, Annette Jael Lehmann and Irmgard Maassen (eds.) *Mediale Performanzen: Historische Konzepte und Perspektiven*, Freiburg: Rombach Verlag, pp. 321–35.
- Auslander, Philip (Forthcoming) ‘Humanoid Boogie: Reflections on Robotic Performance’, in David Krasner and David Saltz (eds.) *Staging Philosophy: New Approaches to Theater and Performance*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Beckerman, M. (2004) ‘The Guitarist is Metal. No, Not Heavy Metal’, *New York Times*, 30 November.
- Berger, John (1980) *About Looking*, New York: Pantheon.
- Godmer, Gilles (2003) ‘Roving Photographer’, in *Jana Sterbak: From Here to There*, Montréal: Musée d’Art Contemporain de Montréal, pp. 77–91.
- Locke, John W. (2003) ‘Experiments in Camera Movement: Venice 1896 to Venice 2003/Lumière to Sterbak’, in *Jana Sterbak: From Here to There*, Montréal: Musée d’Art Contemporain de Montréal, pp. 99–109.
- Sharkey, J. (2004) ‘The Stage Is Set: Enter Horses at Full Gallop’, *New York Times*, 30 November.
- Wolfe, Cary (2003) *Animal Rites: American Culture, the Discourse of Species, and Posthumanist Theory*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.