Antennae Interview questions

for Lynn Turner

Antennae covers a range of material in art, animal studies, and ecology. Let’s start with some very fundamental questions: Why art? As a theorist what is it about art that draws you to this field? And why animals? What is it about animals that are important to you as a theorist and art historian?

For a long time, after training in an art school that was very conceptually driven and then doing both Cultural Studies and Social History of Art modules as a postgrad, I more or less hated art. Most of it seemed ‘bad’ or ‘ideologically corrupt,’ nothing really moved me (with the possible exception of Nancy Spero, who I loved her since my first year in undergraduate Fine Art). After art school I was more motivated by film, especially feminist counter-cinema, with the emphasis on ‘counter’. Getting involved with animal studies had the happy effect of re-motivating me regarding art. In terms of my writing I still tend towards working with filmic texts (with the exception of Carolee Schneemann and Dorothy Cross, so far), but teaching at the intersection of animal studies, feminist theory and deconstruction in a Visual Cultures department has become a pleasure.[[1]](#endnote-1) While I am interested in the more obvious question of animal allegory, it is the poetics in contemporary practice that really draw me in – poetics that exceed hijacking animal imagery for human ends. One route that overlaps all this – and is a regular point of engagement in my classes – is the way which much feminist art of the 1990’s uses animal imagery and/or materials as a metaphor for the maternal (Dorothy Cross or Janine Antoni for example), but which in hindsight exposes thought about animal bodies as much as feminine ones. Actually it is becoming a lens through which to revisit the word ‘*Geschlecht’* [!]. I’ve written briefly about – and plan to return to this in more depth – the coincidence of Donna Haraway’s amazing artlcle “Gender’ for a Marxist Dictionary’ and Jacques Derrida’s series of essays mediating on the difficult to translate German term ‘*Geschlecht’* in the 1980’s.[[2]](#endnote-2) Apparently a translation of ‘gender’ – the topic of Haraway’s commission, the term also brings up reproduction, stock, generation, classification of all kinds including ‘species’. The poetics of artworks become a way of not revealing (in the sense of ideology critique – look! You have been deceived!), but rather *cultivating* differences.

That said, there is a kind of ideological awakening in the sense that once you start understanding how fundamental the concept of the animal is to how we understand what we call the human, the vast proliferation of animal imagery from advertising to baby-clothing at the time of the fastest extinction rates of real animals is really disturbing. (I’ll say ‘concept’ here to remark how experience is corralled in ways that work against the particularity of that experience). I am still in shock at the announcement made by the WWF a couple of years ago, essentially that the world has lost half of all wildlife over the last 40 years.[[3]](#endnote-3) That bluntly says to me that if and when I am an old woman there will be no wildlife. It horrifies me.

There is also something autobiographical at work. Growing up in rural Sussex we were always in proximity to lots of animals, domestic and wild. I am interested in the way that we narrate who we call kin, and how non-human creatures often co-ordinate these narratives. I think there are fairly classical totemic narratives at stake with regard to paternal authority and animal husbandry – but also the possibility for alternative totemisms too.

In 2002 Jacques Derrida’s “The Animal that therefore I am (more to follow)” was published in *Critical Inquiry*. Given his prominence, this essay was seen as another marker to legitimize animal studies. You’ve edited a collection of essays *The Animal Question in Deconstruction* and you are one of the assistant editors for *Derrida Today*. What is it that deconstruction brings to animal studies and conversely, what do animals give deconstruction?

I’ve called “The Animal that Therefore I am (more to follow)” ‘pedagogical dynamite’.[[4]](#endnote-4) Really, I think it’s incredible – and, while still challenging, to me it has the double effect of both teaching the problem of the elevation of ‘the human’ above and against ‘the animal’ in ways that are endlessly relevant, but also underscoring the ways in which deconstruction has always gestured towards the more-than-human (rather than a literary genuflection, that is the erroneously narrow reading of the ‘text’). That said, I know people not already immersed in Derrida’s style, let’s say, can still be mislead. There’s a moment when he is talking about the abyss between humans and other animals, and that word can at first conjure the same old gulf. However, in the vein of Derrida’s repeated repurposing of familiar terms this ‘abyss’ becomes a site of cultivation.[[5]](#endnote-5) As a gardener this appeals to me immensely! The once and forever divide becomes spatially and temporally uncanny. So much - perhaps everything, comes back to this cultivation of the limit. It speaks also to the way that Derrida poses the difficulty of delineating what we call ‘the living’. ‘The trace’ is also at stake here – troubling the, again, purportedly hard and fast line between the ‘signifier’ and other forms of communication.

While you can now find books that ‘simply’ or at least more traditionally, present exegesis on particular themes or problems that Derrida has foregrounded (be it on ‘sovereignty’, ‘friendship’, ‘autoimmunity’ or ‘the animal,’ to name only a handful) which can of course be illuminating, developing a taste for deconstruction was for me coincident with being trained as an artist. That is to say, I intuited that deconstruction is always intimate with whatever it is in touch with: it cannot then produce a model. Every engagement starts with the particularity of whatever is encountered, and is affected by it – including by animals. Let us allow attention to animals to undo the fictions on which we have built what we call the human!

Animal studies is becoming a diverse and almost amorphous field cutting across disciplinary inquiries, deploying different methodologies, investigating different historic and contemporary moments. I’m interested in knowing if you see any common thread in animal studies today. And where is animal studies going in the next five years or so?

On the one hand plant studies and lets say ‘microbial studies’ are noticeably putting pressure on current research. What’s crucial is that we negotiate between our ‘tastes’ including the appetite for novelty - including academic novelty, and the models of inquiry that we follow. I have to say I was thrilled to hear of a new book coming out soon on plant horror cinema![[6]](#endnote-6) I just can’t wait. But we have to drop the model of identity politics, I mean the representational model that says ‘oh, this category is excluded from the picture, if we just put it in then the picture will be fixed’. One of the major outcomes of reading the work of Derrida in particular as well as very specific ethological or indeed botanical or biological texts is the way in which frames of thought, categories of thought such as even the notion of ‘species’ are being challenged.

Alongside our increasing specialization and fascination with new knowledge it is crucial that we, in the widest possible sense of that word, remain open to the reshaping that that new knowledge demands. The most frightening obstacle, in short, is ‘because Capitalism.’ Specifically, and recently, it is the rise of “post-fact” culture globally and significantly in the UK and US. Climate change denial at this point is criminal. As with the alarm call raised by the WWF just mentioned, ours is the generation that must start making much bigger revisions to how we live with others – with every other. That means not just eating radically less meat and fish globally, but revising all systems of food production – well, all production that poisons, that exterminates, that decimates environments and ecologies and cultivating more caring tastes. I think there is a tendency now in animal studies to think in wider terms – ‘multi-species ethnography’, ‘becoming-with’ etc. That is crucial. It also poses the question of responsibility again and differently: Sellbach and Loo might ask how we are responsible to those others we barely perceive (insects in their case). I’d want to draw out the unconscious question here – how we are in relations with those others that cannot be brought to consciousness, but which act on and through us nonetheless.

Are there particular philosophical texts that serve as touchstones for you? Can you share one or two with us and how they provide a foundation for your work on animals?

Yes – it's a kind of comfort as well as a necessity that I can circle back and take new steps with texts ostensibly familiar but actually so dense that they warrant repeated forays. One such is the ‘Eating Well’ interview with Derrida, which indexes the, to my mind, richly suggestive and yet to be worked through possibilities between deconstruction and psychoanalysis (there is of course material on these two, but more often psychoanalysis gains the allegiance). This moment in particular hypnotizes me:

For everything that happens at the edge of the orifices (of orality, but also of the ear, the eye-and all the ‘senses’ in general) the metonymy of ‘eating well’ (*bien manger*) would always be the rule.[[7]](#endnote-7)

He is talking about the overlap between identification and ingestion and the way that this overlap itself confounds the distinction between literal and metaphorical (‘the limit’ once more). Crucially Derrida dismantles the priority of the face and the mouth by engaging all the senses in general’. So, by implying forms of identification (of ‘eating the other’) that are not oral, Derrida’s work allows us to imagine other forms of psychic life for humans and non-humans. It might also point to a remodeling of ‘carno-phallogocentrism.’ Its uncannily evocative of Melanie Klein’s work too, about which Derrida has said barely anything, except that she perhaps ‘opens the way’![[8]](#endnote-8) There are lots of others, of course. *The Postcard* has been electrifying for me for years – though its also maddening, not least in the engagement with Freud’s mad text, ‘Beyond the Pleasure Principle’.[[9]](#endnote-9) I know this doesn't sound like classic Animal Studies terrain, but, for example, I’m aware of just how many domestic animals show up in texts that interest me and while I think it was insightful for Erica Fudge to suggest that the function of the pet is to ‘return home’,[[10]](#endnote-10) I think there is a wider problematic. It may be that the *fort/da* game is played out here too, with the body of the cat instead of Freud’s nephew’s cotton reel, being pulled back home: it actually embeds the structure of representation.

What are you working on now and how is it pushing your thinking in new ways?

In our work, right now, for the *Edinburgh Companion to Animal Studies*, I’m working on the question of voice – again a concept that should immediately be pluralized to index vocalization in animals other than Homo sapiens. I’m particularly fascinated with cetacean sound production, including of song. Broadly, giving attention to such phenomena crosses over – and challenges the limits of so many disciplines and practices, from bioacoustics to activism to philosophy. More specifically it revises the territory that Trauma Studies has founded, and takes it out of a politics of representation (in which trauma is locked into not being able to speak of one’s experience).

Incipiently, over the next year I want to think through material on 2 films in particular – both engage animal studies, deconstruction and feminism. One, in my view, helps us address the ways in which the concepts of ‘the animal’ and ‘the feminine’ inform each other as they support the virile concept of ‘man’. It’s called *The Woman*, and it is a horror film drawing on both cannibal and rape revenge narratives.[[11]](#endnote-11) In one sense it is problematically an ‘abjection 101’ lesson (as my students know too well!). Yet also, it fascinates me by posing the problem of thinking through alternative models of authority (alternatives arguably under severe strain through the taming of the creature formerly human but rendered into a beast-like form by the film’s evil patriarch, remodeled as a ‘pet’ by the titular woman). The other, *White God*, draws a diagram of carno-phallogocentrism in the courtyard of an abattoir – really![[12]](#endnote-12) Viewers are drawn in by the publicity material showcasing this incredible shoot of hundreds of real dogs ecstatically pouring through the streets of Budapest seemingly lead by a young girl on a bicycle, only to have the narrative of ‘man’s best friend’ be completely withdrawn. We are left in lieu of conclusion in this incredible hiatus in which word, phallus and law are all suspended as the young girl and her father prostrate themselves in silence before the army of dogs. Any decision regarding ‘what next?’ is effectively ours, the viewers.

1. Lynn Turner ‘When Species Kiss: some recent correspondence between *animots’* in *Humanimalia: a journal of human/animal interface studies*, 2:1, 2010, pp. 60-85 [www.depauw.edu/humanimalia/](http://www.depauw.edu/humanimalia/)

   Lynn Turner ‘*Hors d’oeuvre*: some footnotes to Dorothy Cross’s *Spurs’* in *parallax* 19:1, 2013, pp.3-11. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Donna Haraway “Gender’ for a Marxist Dictionary: the Sexual Politics of a Word’ [1987] in *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: the Reinvention of Nature*, London: Free Association Books, 1991. Jacques Derrida, ‘Heidegger’s Hand: *Geschlecht* II’ [1987] in *Psyche: Inventions of the Other*, *Volume 2*, eds. Peggy Kamuf and Elizabeth Rottenberg, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2014/sep/29/earth-lost-50-wildlife-in-40-years-wwf [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Lynn Turner, ed. ‘Introduction’ *The Animal Question in Deconstruction*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013, p.2. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Jacques Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, trans. David Wills, New York: Fordham University Press, 2008, 29. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Dawne Keetley and Angela Tenga, eds. *Plant Horror: Approaches to the Monstrous Vegetal in Fiction and Film*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2016. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Jacques Derrida, “Eating Well' or the Calculation of the Subject,” trans. Avital Ronell, in *Points*…*Interviews 1974-1994* Elizabeth Weber, ed. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995): 281. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass, London: Routledge Kegan Paul, 1978, p.231. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Jacques Derrida, *The Postcard: from Socrates to Freud and Beyond*, trans. Alan Bass, Chicago University Press, 1987. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Erica Fudge, *Pets,* Stocksfield: Ashgate, 2008. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. *The Woman*, dir. Lucky McKee, US, 2011. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. *White God*, dir. [Kornél Mundruczó](https://www.google.co.uk/search?rlz=1C5MACD_enGB513GB565&espv=2&biw=1878&bih=790&q=Korn%C3%A9l+Mundrucz%C3%B3&stick=H4sIAAAAAAAAAOPgE-LWz9U3MDTISUk2MFbiAnEs0wuyS4y1xLKTrfTTMnNywYRVSmZRanJJfhEArEOs1zMAAAA&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwifqpS24uDMAhXHJ8AKHW-LB1cQmxMIpQEoATAR), Hungary, 2015. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)