

are ongoing and much contested. For certain curators, critics, and politically-engaged artists, commitment to social knowledge production can and must outweigh contradictions implicit to the public institution being increasingly in the grip of private money. The presence of disobedient objects in a design museum is not simply or straightforwardly antagonistic towards institutional profiles, but, for the curators, 'with and for' the circulation of information beyond current remits or conservative mandates. A careful methodological approach to curating the 'Disobedient Objects' exhibition thus achieves a great deal at a moment when public and civic rights are being suppressed by a tenacious establishment led by a failing ideology. If we – perhaps a little grandiosely – consider that curatorial practice might be likened to governmentality as a social duty of care and provision, then part of this exhibition's achievement is its inclusion of constituencies usually overlooked, ignored or exempt.

At the same time, the diversity of objects also means that it is a little difficult to discern any clear ideological or political affinity. For example, the presence of various defaced currencies makes categorization to traditional binaries of left and right difficult. A Libyan banknote bearing an iconoclast Muammar Gaddafi after his demise does suggest revolution. However, in a territory marred by political, economic, and religious disagreement, both the intentionality and the political agency of the object are less obvious. Coins stamped RIRA (Real Irish Republican Army) also refuse a straightforward non-violent protest narrative, a troubled and unclear history involving an impassioned call to nationalist unity and an often aggressive political conservatism.

What is clear from the collection of objects is a common refusal to submit to political limitations. Anti-state ephemera is also worth considering as a kind of contemporary anti-state apparatus, meaning that an object's proper contextualization might lead to a narrative concerning the campaign to retake freedom and expression in the context of civil restrictions rather than state legitimacy *per se*. It is on this affective level that the more discursive objectives of disobedience become most clear. If cultural institutions remain charged with social knowledge production despite regrettable contradictions in the neoliberal economy, 'Disobedient Objects' reminds us both that design and political art needn't orientate itself completely to the market, and that a material, pluralistic, and diverse democracy is a commodity worth fighting for.

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Marcus Coates, *UR . . . A Practical Guide to Unconscious Reasoning, Book Works and Create London, London, 2014, 288 pages, paperback, ISBN 9781906012618, £12.00*

For over a decade, Marcus Coates' fascination with wildlife has been reflected in what the artist calls his 'becoming animal' works, and in socially-engaged performances where the artist utilizes these 'becoming' skills to assume the role of the shaman. In these latter works Coates travels to the 'lower world', encountering animals in search of answers to dilemmas facing various communities. In *UR . . . A Practical Guide to Unconscious Reasoning*

(2014), Coates extends the reach of such work by providing a handbook which, along with the equipment of two Bic biro, a head-sized box, a 30cm piece of elastic, Tippex and an eye mask, claims to help readers develop their imagination, and access the creative potential of their unconscious to provide solutions to their problems and those of others.

To this end, the book proposes exercises to develop the imagination and a series of 'trips' to practice Unconscious Reasoning (UR) for problem solving. One source for the trips is acknowledged by Coates to be Michael Harner's *The Way of the Shaman* (1980), which attempts to make traditional shamanic practices accessible to a contemporary Western audience. However, many of the exercises reflect the artist's own passion for wildlife and recall earlier works – especially those classified under 'Becoming Something Else'.

In *Bird Brain*, for instance, readers are instructed to cut two eye holes into opposite sides of a cardboard box and wear it on their head, restricting their vision and resulting in the adoption of bird-like movements as they jerk their head from side-to-side in an attempt to see the world around them. A similarly clumsy cardboard construction was worn by Coates in *Human Report* (2008), in which the artist toured the Galápagos Islands dressed as a Blue-footed Booby, reporting on the Islanders' activities from the perspective of this native bird.

For *Becoming Gull*, Coates advises readers to walk between their lounge and kitchen like a seagull, imitating the bird's sounds and movements in an attempt to 'go beyond mimicry and become animal, believing that you are a gull, even if momentarily'. This exercise recalls *Goshawk* (1999), where Coates was attached to a treetop to see the

world from the perspective of this predatory bird, and *Dawn Chorus* (2007), in which members of a community choir were filmed imitating bird song.

Whilst in 'What Is It Like to Be a Bat?' (1974) philosopher Thomas Nagel declares human imagination inadequate for understanding the subjective experiences of animals, he does concede that whilst we are unable to imagine what it is like for a bat to be a bat, we might instead behave as a bat behaves.¹ Coates appears to directly reference Nagel in *Be A Bat*, in which participants are instructed to emit high-pitched noises whilst blindfolded, using the reflected sounds to distinguish between a set of objects, mimicking bat echolocation.

Although Deleuze and Guattari position imitation as an ineffective means of becoming-animal, (since 'becoming animal does not consist in playing animal or imitating an animal'), and imitation offers no genuine insight to the unworlds of other animals, it nevertheless remains key to Coates' attempts to both understand the other than human, and to unlock the creative potential of the imagination.² According to Steve Baker, imitation offers artists the opportunity to imaginatively perform animals, sloughing human identities and approximating animal ones to produce artworks where animals emerge as beings that must be 'thought actively' and performed, therefore approaching 'that genuinely experimental state of becoming-animal where things "cease to be subjects and become events"'.³ It seems that through his practice, and indeed in this book, Coates is pushing the boundaries of what we his readers deem imaginatively possible, using imitation to interrogate the degree to which we can relate to non-human animals and see the world from a perspective

other than human. Coates asks readers: 'if you move and behave like a bird, are you more able to imagine what it is like to be one?'

Whilst Western philosophy has repeatedly placed a border between humans and non-human animals, in shamanic cultures animals are frequently regarded as sources of wisdom, respected as equals, even ancestors, and as a result human-animal relations are conceived quite differently. Indeed, along with the Unconscious Reasoning consultant, creative thinker and problem solver, Coates offers the shaman as an identity his readers might assume when practicing UR. It seems significant therefore, that some exercises in the handbook involve imitating bats and birds since flying, and birds in particular, are important features of shamanic cultures, symbolizing the ability to transition between worlds.⁴ Whilst our unconscious and our imagination initially appear to offer little hope of resolving our problems today, in shamanic cultures insights from other worlds or realms are treated as equally valid as those rooted in lived reality, offering multiple sources for knowledge acquisition. In becoming bird and bat, Coates offers new lines of flight and ignites our imaginations through suggesting the possibility of other ways of knowing.

Throughout the book, Coates uses his trademark combination of humour and a makeshift aesthetic to offer earnest and thoughtful observations. As a result, readers may wonder whether the book is sincere,

parodic or both. Yet this uncertainty need not diminish the effect of the work. In relation to Joseph Beuys, who also assumed a shamanic role in his practice, curator and critic Robert Storr suggested that viewers might 'suspect that his myth was pure hokum . . . and yet . . . readily succumb to its lyricism,' being moved by the artist's vision for social change.⁵ It seems that what matters in Coates' book, therefore, is not whether or not we buy into UR, but that we realize the need for the opportunities Coates offers to enliven and enrich our imaginations, lest we risk losing access to the creative possibilities it unleashes, the knowledge it yields, and the hope of seeking answers regarding what it means to be human, other than human, or indeed something indiscernible somewhere in between.

¹ Thomas Nagel, 'What Is It Like to Be a Bat?', in *Philosophical Review*, vol. 83, no. 4, October 1974, pp. 435–450, p. 439.

² Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, trans. Brian Massumi, London and New York, 2013, p. 277.

³ Steve Baker, 'Sloughing the Human', in *Zoontologies: The Question of the Animal*, Cary Wolfe (ed.), Minneapolis and London, 2003, pp. 147–164, p. 159. Baker also quotes Deleuze and Guattari, op. cit., p. 306.

⁴ Mircea Eliade, *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*, trans. Willard R. Trask, London, 1964, pp. 477–481.

⁵ Robert Storr, 'The Idea of the Moral Imperative in Contemporary Art', in *Art Criticism*, vol. 7, no. 1, Donald Kuspit (ed.), New York, 1991, pp. 36–41, p. 38.

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