

- 2 Okwui Enwezor, 'The State of Things', in Okwui Enwezor (ed.), *All the World's Futures*, Venice, 2015, p. 17.
- 3 The explanation of the filters was available to the public at the Giardini, on a wall-text statement by Enwezor. See also Okwui Enwezor, 'Exploding Gardens', in *ibid.*, p. 94.

Irene Montero Sabin

10.14324/111.2396-9008.020

'Ape Culture', Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin, 30 April – 6 July 2015. Catalogue: Eds Anselm Franke and Hila Peleg, Spector Books co-published with Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Leipzig, 2015, 220 pages, paperback, ISBN: 9783959050067, €29.00.

'Ape Culture' interrogated the relations and continuity between humans and their primate kin, and explored how apes have figured in human culture throughout history. Donna Haraway's book *Primate Visions: Gender, Race, and Nature in the World of Modern Science* (1989) served as a theoretical linchpin for this exhibition, which featured artworks by Marcus Coates, Pierre Huyghe and Rosemarie Trockel, amongst others, as well as a separate display charting a history of apes in human culture and the development of primatology.

In the exhibition catalogue, the curators observe that: 'Situated at the threshold of humanity and animality, and thus of nature and culture, figures of apes do not merely serve as tokens marking these divisions, but [...] introduce slippage and ambiguity into these borders'.¹ Indeed, apes have been used as surrogates for humans in medical experiments, cosmetics testing, space

travel and even waiting tables, dissolving dichotomies of human/nonhuman animal and nature/culture, whilst simultaneously highlighting the unequal power relations inherent to these entanglements. Such reinforcement of evolutionary and behavioural continuity between humans and other primates can exhibit anthropomorphic tendencies, which undoubtedly serve to contribute to the 'slippage' and 'ambiguity' to which the exhibition's curators refer.

Marcus Coates's *Degreecoordinates: Shared Traits of the Hominini (Humans, Bonobos and Chimpanzees)* (2015) was a wall-mounted text installation made in collaboration with evolutionary anthropologist Volker Sommer. The pair posed over 300 questions to viewers based on behavioural traits exhibited across the Hominini subtribes. Including 'Can you walk on two feet?', 'Do you feel joy?' and 'Do you throw your shit?', it is clear that when reading these questions, viewers would recognize such characteristics in themselves and other primates to differing degrees. The work highlighted a contradiction in the ways humans relate to other animals, since there is a tendency to divorce oneself from traits perceived as 'animalistic', yet readily attribute human qualities to other animals. Animal behaviourist John Kennedy has suggested that anthropomorphic thinking about animals is 'built into us', and that we 'could not abandon it even if we wished to', making it all the more probable that we read the behaviour of nonhuman animals in terms of our own, despite the potential for error.²

Pierre Huyghe's film *Untitled (Human Mask)* (2014) opened with a drone panning over a Japanese neighbourhood, deserted following the Fukushima nuclear disaster. The camera comes to rest inside a dank, abandoned restaurant. Sporting a dress

and long, dark hair, the film's protagonist initially appears to be a young girl. However, it quickly becomes apparent that we are watching a monkey, dressed as a human with a wig and a mask. In fact, the primate in Huyghe's film is a macaque, borrowed from a restaurant where the creature is usually found waiting tables. Despite any initial distaste at this crude anthropomorphism, as the film unfolds it becomes increasingly difficult to refrain from attributing human characteristics and sentiments to this creature. As the monkey moves around the restaurant, pausing, sitting and running, it is easy to project human feelings and even notions of human time upon the behaviour of this nonhuman animal: we wonder if the macaque is scared, bored, waiting and so on. Such a response can be described as 'applied anthropomorphism', in which we base our ideas and understanding of what it is like to be another living being — whether human or nonhuman animal — on our own perspective and experiences.³ Whilst anthropomorphism has faced charges of being unscientific, inaccurate, anthropocentric and reductive as a way of thinking about nonhuman animals, many have argued that it can promote productive and empathic interspecies relations, as long as we recognize and respect the ultimate difference of nonhuman animals and maintain an awareness that any such understanding can only go so far.⁴

But we would do well to remember, as animal studies scholar Tom Tyler suggests, that anthropomorphism assumes we know what it means to be human.⁵ Two ink and gouache ape 'portraits' by Rosemarie Trockel, presented alongside her drawing of a woman wearing an ape mask, served to highlight how unstable this sense of self

might be. Writing about the ape 'portraits' in another context, Anne Wagner observed that 'they forge an encounter that has [...] the immediacy of a social interaction; the looks the apes proffer, and we reciprocate, are full enough of interrogatives and uncertainty that we might say the exchange is staged to make us apes'.⁶ In such instances, it seems that human identity is far from firmly established.

Considering that many of the artworks included in this exhibition served to interrogate and disrupt any boundaries positioned between humans and nonhuman animals, and both the exhibition and catalogue expressed a conceptual affinity with the work of Donna Haraway, it seems a pity that 'Ape Culture' was presented in two distinct parts, with artworks on one side of the gallery and display panels featuring scientific and cultural documents on the other. Integrating these would have served to reinforce the dissolution of binaries that Haraway's work holds so dear. Nevertheless, the displays were thoughtful and thought provoking, prompting viewers to reflect not only upon their relations with other animals, but also — as eighteenth-century taxonomist Carl Linnaeus noted beside the *Homo sapiens*, which he finally resolved to place amongst the Primates — *nosce te ipsum*: to know thyself.⁷

- 1 Anselm Franke and Hila Peleg, 'Introduction', in Anselm Franke and Hila Peleg (eds), *Ape Culture*, Leipzig, 2015, pp. 6–8, p. 6.
- 2 John Kennedy, *The New Anthropomorphism*, Cambridge, 1992, pp. 4–5.
- 3 Randall Lockwood, 'Anthropomorphism is not a Four-Letter Word', in R.J. Hoage (ed.), *Perceptions of Animals in American Culture*, Washington, D.C. and London, 1989, pp. 41–56, p. 49.
- 4 See for instance Kari Weil, *Thinking Animals: Why Animal Studies Now?*, New York, 2012, pp. 19–20, who terms this 'critical anthropomorphism'.

- 5 Tom Tyler, 'If Horses Had Hands', in Tom Tyler and Manuela Rossini (eds), *Animal Encounters*, Leiden and Boston, 2009, pp. 13–26, pp. 20–24.
- 6 Anne Wagner, 'Mechanics of Meaning, or, the Painting Machine', in *Afterall*, no. 8, Autumn/Winter 2003, pp. 78–86, pp. 85–86.
- 7 Franke and Peleg, op. cit., p. 111.

Sarah Wade