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THE BEAUTY IS RELENTLESS

A BOOK ABOUT THE SHORT MOVIES OF
EMILY VEY DUKE AND COOPER BATTERSBY

EDITED BY MIKE HOOLBOOM

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION.....	9
ENORMOUS CHANGES AT THE LAST MINUTE Jason McBride.....	15
WHITE CAT TO DUKE, DO YOU READ ME? Claudia Dey.....	15
CRAZY PINKIE BUSINESS Sholem Kristalka.....	15
AN UNCIVILISED LIFE Kyo Maclear.....	15
WHY SING? THE SUNG SONGS OF EMILY & COOPER Terence Dick.....	15
IMPORTANT THINGS THAT WE LIKE Andrea Slovakova.....	15
PEOPLE WHO MAKE RULES: WATCH OUT! Tom Sherman.....	15
MY LIFE (WITH DUKE AND BATTERSBY) Steve Reinke.....	15
DEAR STEVE REINKE Emily Duke.....	15
AUDIENCES: AN INTERVIEW WITH SARAH HOLLENBERG AND MIKE HOOLBOOM.....	15

BEAUTY PLUS PITY: AN INTERVIEW WITH
MONIQUE MOUMBLOW.....15

SONGS OF PRAISE (SCRIPT).....23

LESSER APES (SCRIPT).....23

VIDEOS.....39

BIOGRAPHIES.....51

GALLERY.....50

DISTRIBUTORS.....52

CONTRIBUTORS.....53

INTRODUCTION

There is a visual shorthand I use for each of my friends to keep their celestial heat from turning me into stir fry. There is one I think of only as "that face," while another has been reduced to a pair of hands always opening. The caption I run under Emily and Cooper is simple enough; they are the future of the couple. While so many dyads use their togetherness as a fortress against the world, bulwarked behind the tragedies of monogamy, Vey Battersduke seem determined to push against every border and boundary until it gives way under their celebration of curiosity.

And once they have worked themselves outside of the rules, their newly won vantage offers a pretty good place from which to make art, though this is not a word that comes easily to them. Literature remains the hoped for grail, while art is the disappointed bride that they have decided to embrace. The truth is, they have little patience for most of what passes for video art these days, or any other day, and as a result their post-human offerings are tuned up with a rare and exacting invocation of standards. Imagine an indie pop producer demanding all-night studio sessions for her young charges, take after take, until the new tunes lift at every corner.

In an art moment frozen in thrall to the sway of conceptualisms, their work is narrative, hummable, humanoid, and invites identification. Hand-drawn cartoons let animal familiars talk to us about children and God and daddy's porn. Stripped down bedroom pop and home video makeovers jostle with time-lapse compressions unafraid to be beautiful. They don't proceed with a plan or program; instead, they throw themselves out the windows of their own needs and despairs and wonders, opening their four-armed embrace to homeless island dwellers and feral cats and art mavens. From these close encounters they



Mike Hoolboom

have created a rare video voice: at once smart and accessible, beautiful and word-wise.

Instead of falling completely in love with Emily, and of course with Cooper—the two are inseparable, in nearly every sense that matters—we began to correspond, to fill up long text fields with characters, most of them unrecognizable as ourselves—and that brought more relief than perhaps it should have. Our notings run well past a hundred pages, and one day it will be the best thing I’ve ever been part of, in the art-world, meta-lingo sense of things, that is. One afternoon she wrote:

“I had a really interesting conversation with my friend Mequitta about the accusation (much flung at me as a younger person) that one is ‘just doing it for attention.’ IT usually being trying to kill one’s self, or cutting, or posting the pages of one’s diary around town. Nobody, for instance, said that Flaubert was just trying to write great novels for attention, or that Jesus was just being the Messiah for attention. Nobody even says (or not much) that Bob Dylan was just writing those folk songs for attention. People did, however, say that Carolee Schneeman was getting naked and rolling around in sausage for attention. People said that Vito Acconci was just making *The Red Tapes* for attention (specifically Rosalind Krauss said it).”

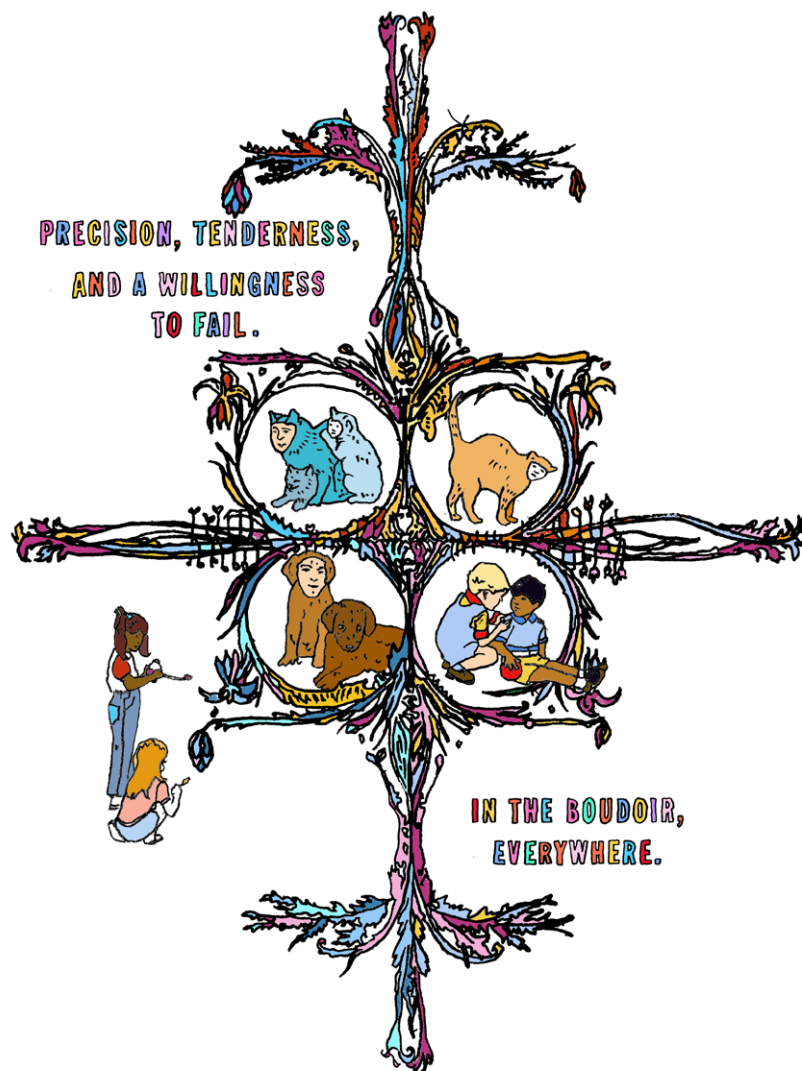
Two years ago, in a fit of masochism and hope, I proposed to Emily and Cooper that we make a movie together. If we were still without a general public’s attention, then perhaps we could grant this gift to one another. They said sure and I proceeded to blitz the two of them (can a chest hold two hearts?) with one idea after another—uncanny songs, genius quotes, found-footage irresistibles. When is too much too little? They were interested in bonobos, as it turned out, a matriarchal society of nearly vegetarian peacenik apes who have sex often and in every possible combination. We staggered through a year and

a half of foreign language mistranslations and pyramid studies before divvying up the pile and heading our separate ways. I worked relentlessly and managed to uncover only new beginnings, while they continued to live every weekend as if it was the last one on the planet and then screamed out a movie with a Sobey deadline pressing on their chests that will be watched for years to come. “So this is what it was like to live in 2010,” some stranger will mutter, wondering that movies could ever have been made, never mind attended, that were flat, and lacking any sense of touch, taste, or smell. Yes, this is what it was like. Welcome to the future of the couple.



WHY DOES IT
HAVE TO RAIN
EVERY FUCKING
DAY?!?

BECAUSE YOUR
LIFE
SUCKS SO
MUCH IT
MAKES
GOD
CRY



ESSAYS





ENORMOUS CHANGES AT THE LAST MINUTE

BY JASON MCBRIDE

Watching a video by Emily Vey Duke and Cooper Battersby is a little like entering a *ménage à trois* where the sex, while fumbling, is always good, and the pillow talk is even better. Canada's budding Miéville-Godard, Duke-Battersby have been working together since 1994, and have since produced some of the most witty, charming and, yes, sexy video art this side of Spike Jonze. An inappropriate comparison, perhaps, but their work bears all the giddy inventiveness and delight found in Jonze's music videos, if not his features.

To borrow a phrase from novelist Matthew Stadler, very few other Canadian artists distill so much learning and intelligence into such intensely pleasurable work. The pleasure in the work comes from a variety of sources—its humour, its aesthetic self-assurance, its improbable, convincing sadness—but largely from the personalities of the artists themselves. The couple, partners in love and work, star in many of their videos, and they place their bodies, faces, and voices in beguiling and surprising combinations, posing themselves as artists, raconteurs, white trash, scientists, headbangers, druggies, sexpots, and poseurs. In the short-lived history of video art, such role-playing has foregrounded its own fictiveness (and attendant issues of subjectivity, identity, and autobiography) to the point of redundancy. Duke-Battersby have taken on those concerns as well, but what's more interesting, and charming, is how their performances largely hinge on language and its limitations—that is, how speech and writing can articulate systems of control or, conversely, new forms of freedom. Narrative might be problematized, but it's not exactly a problem; increasingly, their work has embraced an eccentric, even whimsical, type of storytelling.



Battersby and Duke were born respectively in 1971 and 1972, he in Penticton, British Columbia, she in Halifax. In 1993, Battersby, then a skateboarder and computer programmer, met Duke, who was an art student, in Halifax, and the two decamped to London, Ontario where they studied with Canadian artist Steve Reinke. Reinke was their instructor at both the University of Western Ontario and, later, at the University of Illinois at Chicago, where the couple did graduate work. He was an immense influence on Duke-Battersby, who had only, up until then been making poster art and, in Battersby's words, "crappy little animations." "Most video art is horrible, unwatchable," Duke says, "and Steve's videos were really watchable." Reinke's work, the most famous of which is *The Hundred Videos* (1996), consists largely of episodic videotapes composed of both original and found footage (home movies, training films, porn flicks, etc.). His videos are typically acerbic, diaristic (or falsely diaristic), often philosophical, even elegiac. What seems improvisatory in voiceover, is, in fact, very polished, precise prose. Duke-Battersby borrow heavily from Reinke's technique: narration and dialogue are paramount. Moreover, they group apparently disparate elements in a sort of modular container, creating loosely unified (not overdetermined) variations on a theme.

Take *Being Fucked Up* (2001), one of their most notorious and widely screened tapes. Compulsively watchable, it consists of a half-dozen separate segments, beginning with a glassy-eyed Duke hauling on a crack pipe and then placing a plastic bag over her face. Over this, her voice—thin, untrained—sings a hummable ditty whose lyrics include the lines "I don't know how to be a worthy companion/I don't know how to be a worthy citizen/In this perfect nature world." This disillusionment is reworked and developed in the segment "Monologue for Robots," in which a digitally-altered, disembodied voice provides a running commentary of self-pity and disaffection ("My secrets are so boring"; "I lie to my mother"; "People form misguided coalitions to

protect themselves from hopelessness") over snapshots of Battersby, Duke, assorted friends, and landscapes. These Nan Goldin-esque photos, which flutter in front of the camera, depict the couple's everyday life and usually show the pair at play (sometimes nude, often seemingly drunk or stoned). Another sequence, "Yoga Practice," features Duke describing the feelings of inadequacy that plague her while meditating: "God, if I am your daughter, you will stomp your giant foot through the acoustic tiles, crushing me and releasing me from any future obligation." But Duke is wearing fake plastic lips and is unable to actually speak; it's Battersby who's talking in voiceover (accompanied by Cat Stevens). In the final sequence, "Headbangers," Duke-Battersby silently respond to a series of subtitled questions, like: "Would you describe yourself as a happy person?" They shake or nod their heads vigorously. The final question, "Do you believe in the possibility of redemption?" elicits a different response from each. The camera's shutter speed blurs their movements, while Gordon Isnor's guitar thrum provides a sweet soundtrack. Scattered throughout the tape are brief animations, line drawings of dogs with human faces, who mouth funny, often sexual, dialogue in funny voices.

While Duke-Battersby speak artistically with a single voice, all of *Being Fucked Up* is about multivalent voices, impossible voices, muffled voices, moments when speech fails, when the self slackens. Much of Duke-Battersby's work is about self-image, not only about how one represents a self, but also: is that self ever singular? And why should it be? Do too many selves cancel each other out? *Being Fucked Up* embraces despair and its Adornian remedy, redemption. Self-awareness is kissing cousin to self-hatred, a refusal to accept one's existence as it is. Being is being fucked up, and being fucked up is a means to obliterate being, a way to deny, to cancel out identity, selfhood. To silence the voices in one's head.

"I don't trust anyone who doesn't have frequent bouts of self-loathing," Reinke has written in reference to *Bad Ideas for Paradise* (2002). This 20-minute tape, Duke's personal favourite, bears tonal resemblance to *Being Fucked Up*, but it reaches further outward, away from the domestic, private spaces the artists inhabit and into a greater, but no less screwed-up, world. It begins with a pair of head shots, the artists' faces pixilated beyond recognition and voices altered, offering up the ridiculous utopic visions of the title. Duke details a paradise where she is the most beloved person in the universe (a combination of Jesus Christ, Elizabeth Taylor, Jacques Villeneuve and Nelson Mandela) who goes out of her way to make everyone insecure, while Battersby's version is one where no one is famous, everyone loves each other, and if someone's feelings are hurt everyone sits in a gigantic healing circle. Comic, yes, and it sets the tone for what might be Duke-Battersby's most wry and winning work. Again employing a series of monologues, the artists work in two narrative modes: the confession and the rant. Taking its cues from those introductory fantasies, the tape muses on notions of shame, the consciousness of animals, the false dreams of Hollywood, and marriage. The work's central monologue is an English girl's (or at least a girl with a fake English accent) excoriation of teenage boys' grotesque appetites and arrogance, lack of reserve, and abundance of entitlement. It's a breathtaking sequence, composed of images of skaters hurling their boards against parked vans, girls flashing their tits, boys flipping their middle fingers—*Kids* (1995) as shot by Donigan Cumming.

Duke describes their work as "aphoristic," likening it to poetry. Battersby says he requires the "arc of narrative" and that the work is more about storytelling than what he calls "shocking sculpture": "The work would ideally be viewed on a TV in someone's house." Neither have any desire to make more bombastic installations, nor feature films. Miranda July (a key reference for Duke-Battersby) may have experienced a small hit with *Me and You and Everyone We*

Know, but Duke-Battersby insist they won't go that route. "I feel the same about feature films that I do about gambling in a casino," Duke says. "The house always wins."

Nonetheless, *The New Freedom Founders* (2005), could be called their most cinematic. Made as their MFA thesis, it's a featurette in three parts, a trio of speculative fictions again exploring the inadequacies of language. *I Am a Conjuror* features the couple as scientists who "can bring anything into existence." They obliquely muse—in bathtubs, in bed—on the medical system, on endangered animals, on the misuse of antibiotics. Their movements are jittery and stuttered, their voices played backward (the dialogue is all subtitled). Daniel Cockburn has speculated that the style of the piece owes as much to Hal Hartley and SCTV as it does to European art-house cinema, and it's true that the piece skirts parody. But it's parody of a poignant, uneasy sort—Duke and Battersby's characters seem conscious of the archness of their speech, their faith placed forlornly in their utopian, unbelievable achievements. (It reminds me, deliciously, of the Guided By Voices' lyrics: "I am a scientist/I seek to understand me/All of my impurities and evils yet unknown.") The second section, "*A Cure for Being Ordinary*," features Battersby as a vagrant dwelling in the bowels of a bank tower. To his interlocutor, played by Duke, he explains (again in an altered voice) the vagaries of time. How clocks represented, when he was a child, superior beings that everyone revered. How time operated differently when he was a hamburger-flipper. How he has learned to exist, freely, between chunks of time—as in the cuts between images on TV: the "free place." The final section, "*Attention Public*," operates as a type of advertisement for an obscure, futuristic cult centred on the creation of a new language, a new dimension of "psycho-emotional space." Played by Duke (a dead ringer for Mary-Louise Parker here), this character describes her life underground, her parents, how they would, "with their language, make freedom." As in the other sections, Duke's voice is

manipulated into a digital sing-song that's both mellifluous and jarring; her movements are slightly spastic, performative. Visually, it's the lushest video Duke-Battersby have ever made: candlelit, the backgrounds more detailed. All three sections add up to an extremely sustained and satisfying whole, neither sci-fi nor conventional drama. And at just 26 minutes, it's like reduced Resnais, boiled down to a heady and enchanting essence.

Battersby-Duke's work, when shown in gallery spaces, is typically viewed on pedestal-mounted monitors, on flat-screen monitors attached to walls, or projected in darkened rooms. When I first saw *The New Freedom Founders* presented, it was in Toronto as part of a Pleasure Dome mini-retro, and it was shown on three, consecutive, separate screens. Duke-Battersby were dissatisfied with that screening, believing that the apparatus was too conspicuous, that it created an unwanted anticipation. Indeed, none of the three screens interacted, and it was difficult to discern why the three screens were necessary at all; why not show it as a single-channel installation, the way their other tapes were presented? It will never be shown that way again, according to Battersby, and its next major screening was at Winnipeg's Plug In Gallery, where it was shown in a small, black-walled room where the piece ran continuously, each of the three segments alternating on different walls.

While *The New Freedom Founders* finds Duke-Battersby incorporating more specifically filmic elements (reverse-shots, a more complex mise-en-scène), the writing, according to Duke, always comes first. "My expectations of art are founded in literature," she says, name checking everything from *Madame Bovary* to *Minette Walters*. "Our practice is to do a vast amount of writing and then figure out what we can cull to say something specific." Images and music are constructed to form the best means "to get that writing to the viewer." Duke describes herself as a writing junkie, "a total glutton" who writes copiously. "A lot of it is really horrible," and she allows Battersby who,

out of a "terror of embarrassment," prunes, purges, and edits it. The video-editing stage, on which they collaborate, is, in Battersby's words, "a chance to rewrite at the last minute. We're able to manipulate and completely change the entire shape." Duke compares this fine-tuning to the way a single word can alter the entire meaning of a sentence: "Fairly small changes can affect big things." This is as good a description as any for their entire body of work: an incipient oeuvre whose piquant modesty belies its awesome achievements.

WHITE CAT TO DUKE, DO YOU READ ME?
BY CLAUDIA DEY

You did ask me for it. My opinion. Many times. You stood before the mirror. I licked my fur and you said: Pantsuit or t-shirt-underwear combo? Bangs this short or that short? Hair smart-dark or bottle-blonde?

I'm not sure you heard me. So here it is: pantsuit, that short, smart-dark. And while we are on it: I agree the word fame is an apt replacement for that other F-word. I want you to fame me; I want to get famed tonight; I'm going to fame you so hard and fast and tender. But I'm not sure you should care about fame as much as the other F-word because in the service of your art, the other F-word has been far more informative.

And I want you to know how your strokes feel (rad) and I want you to know sometimes when you are sleeping, your breathing stops for a second and then starts up again while Battersby and I watch with worried eyebrows. And I want you to know: there is a piece of cake under the bed and you should not be so suspicious of statutory holidays and you would have made more money by now if you had brought me along on a leash.

Yours is the only face I have ever wanted to know. I don't need your fascinating friends. That one with the hat with the netting condescends to me. She looks at me and thinks: cute. Did you notice she got the same lace-up shoes as you? Behind your back she has the look of a sniper. She asks you too many questions about your family. Doesn't she know families are disappointing?

I think it's your pain that makes the bed in the morning and pulls the curtains open and gets the coffee on. I think it's your pain that makes you sing the way you do and you should protect it.



You just want to fame the city, but I don't think you should. Even though I too dream this dream: we move to a warmer climate, Battersby comes, but dresses no differently. And you shave a pattern into my fur to keep me cool, and we spend our days on lawn chairs in airport sunglasses, poor but reclining.

If we believe in Godly machinations, sometimes I think the reason you have me around is this: to tell you, you would do better as a cat. No taxes for one! You would not have to think about t-shirts or bangs. Your catness would explain away your aloofness. You already have something of the stray to you and people would call this mystery; now they just call it irresponsible. You also have something of the loyal in you and people would call this stately; now they just call it habit. Nearly anyone could touch you; you cannot imagine the permission people feel when they are presented with a cat.

Do you know how easy it would be for me to be killed? All you have to do is open the front door. I am so ill-prepared for the world. In that event, I want you to start recognizing my occult nature. That's unfair. I think you do already. I think you see everything. Because you look, you look in a way that other people do not look. And you are willing. All those things other people want to do, but never will, you do: fame that teenager and own a sailboat and live in a stairwell. That is why they are jealous of you. Especially the one with the hat with the netting and the bullets for eyes.

I know, witness protection, I know. It is tiring to see clearly and critically. And you are restless within that duty and that's when you start speaking in that Southern accent which makes me picture you under a trailer listening to your lover above clip his moustache.

Nothing is hunting you. Everything is hunting you.

I get it: Battersby. He has an excellent jaw line and a jackpot head of hair. Men would kill for that hair. For my tastes, he is a bit thin, but I get it. From certain angles

especially. He would not look out of place on a motorcycle, a camel, or a hospital gurney. And when you are looking at him and your towel is tied up to dry your hair, you have the face of Joan of Arc. Your belief in that moment frightens me.

This frightens me too: When you do that thing with the pipe and the plastic bag; when you switch so fast between curiosity and grief; when you examine yourself for hours before the bathroom mirror; when you stop breathing in your sleep; when you touch me like you love me so much it sprains your heart and I am another permanent injury.

On a housekeeping note, you do need better blankets and too many things are chipped for this stage of life. I would get some cedar balls for the moths and a carbon monoxide detector and I think you should give up canning; you are too haphazard for canning. You may want to get proper wine glasses—if only because the word bistro drives me crazy. And I would consider hiring a housekeeper; now that you are both teaching, you can afford it. Even once every two weeks. And please replace my collar—the leather is about to split.

I don't think you and Battersby should marry. Marriage is not required; it only makes you more trustworthy to blood relatives. You are necessary to each other and will be until you both die old and only months apart. Yes, that is how it will go. And yes, there will be other lovers and this can be confusing, but you will always have the same address and you will always have that Joan of Arc face when you look at him. That, Duke, is love.

I really like it when you gloss your lips. And, you probably should tell Battersby about the guy at the Esso station and you should spend less time wishing for muscles. And I need your lap and your hand on me more than any other thing. All I can do is watch you like you are my own.

CRAZY PINKIE BUSINESS

BY SHOLEM KRISTALKA

By now, I am used to the cruelties and perversities that course through Duke and Battersby's works like an undertow. I come to their videos with a kind of certainty: the homespun animations, the charming line drawings, the keenly sung musical numbers—all are warm and inviting. They disarm you, drawing you further from the sure-footed comfort of shore. And coursing underneath all of that lies a kind of nastiness. As you watch one of their videos, this nastiness creeps in around your ankles, and all of a sudden the world you thought you were in unravels in complex currents of beauty and brutality, sweet earnestness and tragedy.

Their most recent work, *Lesser Apes*—an installation and video—plunges headlong into much murkier waters. For one thing, a kind of dejected resignation announces itself immediately; peppered about the installation are digital prints displayed like cross-stitch samplers that all speak of fatalistic exhaustion. Nothing so quaint or so maudlin as "Home Sweet Home," here, instead, "Precision, Tenderness/And a Willingness/To fail/In the boudoir,/Everywhere." In the Duke/Battersby universe, there is no place for optimism; one must surrender to the potential for failure and impotence lurking in all corners of one's mundane existence, no matter how private. Even beauty, according to one assemblage, is relentless; that statement's implicit violence is underscored by spelling it out in mouse and chipmunk bones.

The centrepiece of the show is a fifteen-minute video. Loosely, it concerns a lesbian love affair between Jane Goodall-esque researcher Farrah (played and narrated by Duke), and Meema, a bonobo chimp (placidly, eerily intoned by a voice synthesizer). We follow their exchange of letters as they prepare for their "coming out" at a zoological conference in Los Angeles; placards leaning against the



gallery's wall hint at how that plays out: "AIDS on You," "Die Pervs."

The video is ineffably perverse and raw, and after multiple viewings, I am unable to pin it down. It stabs and squeezes you, kneading and worrying some kind of internal sickness, and despite my aforementioned (and somewhat hubristic) certainty of approach, I cannot isolate the admixture of components responsible.

Is it the voiceover? Farrah's narration seems wary and defensive; Duke's urgent staccato delivery is implicitly desperate. Everything seems a kind of backhanded justification. She tells us baldly (and there is something in that baldness that seems naked and fraught) that she couldn't orgasm before her affair with Meema. She almost accusatively avers that her bonobo lover understands things that she doesn't. In the second half, she suggests that women are more complete, more learned and understanding, and that their love can solve the world's ills. These are the diuretic over-confessions, the self-justifying evasions of a guilty conscience.

Meema, on the other hand, seems delighted by her new paramour (Farrah, and all humans, are adorably termed "pinkies"), but there's something about her keenness that's hopelessly tragic. Next to the churning logic and emotive confession of Farrah's self-analysis, Meema, through the stilted blankness of her synthesized voice, seems to parse the world with an innocent's gaze. Her interpretations are blind to the linguistic subtleties and nuanced habits of a foreign species and thus are hopelessly utopic. She delights in learning about "perverts." To her bonobo mind, they are a kind of new frontier of human experience. She is even more delighted to learn that she herself is one, courtesy of her new love, and she cannot wait to parade her and Farrah's perversity at the zoological conference. And she never once grasps the wider connotations of the word, nor that "pinkies" (oh, how that word is tragically redolent

of tenderness and comfort) can be just as vicious as any enraged chimpanzee.

Is it the editing? The video is punctuated by lapses into fragmentary mania. Seemingly unrelated quick takes glance off one another: the video opens with an apparently drunken Duke, feigning a particularly hammy British accent, forcing a kitten into a bell jar; bonobo chimps casually rutting; a night shot of spot lit balloons pelted by rain, hovering ominously among sharp branches; time-lapse mists overtaking a forest canopy; Duke again, jaundiced, bruised and confused in a hospital bed. There is an extended shot of the infamously derelict downtown east side of Vancouver, taken from the passenger seat of a car. The camera happens upon a filthy man hobbling his way up the entrance stairs to a bank—the car slows down enough to capture the man's shoe falling off, only to reveal a bandaged bloody stump, unrecognizable as a human appendage. It's almost (but one can never be certain) as if the camera stopped to laugh at this gruesome reveal. I grasp at some kind of interpretive strand to tether this furious slide show to a firm narrative. But the disjointed randomness of these juxtapositions (at best) only hints at meanings and consequences, all of which are vaguely sickening.

Typically for Duke and Battersby, there are songs and animations interspersed throughout. These simultaneously expose and obfuscate Farrah and Meema's affair. A doo-wop number kicks everything off.

*It's about love, interspecies love.
It's about our crazy monkey-business,
don't-be-scared-if-it-gets-too-wild,
it's going to go crazy inside your heart!
It's about love*

The song's animation teeters schizophrenically between glitzy pizzazz (the word "love," scrawled in a tacky cursive typeface, floats across the screen, trailing flowers)

and graphic biological bluntness (a drawing of a newborn's head breaching a woman's vagina glides into frame to coincide with the lyric "The kind that comes from the earth/ comes from a primate birth").

Once the story gets rolling, and we are deeper enmeshed in Farrah and Meema's tale, a gentle folk song plays:

*We are like two gentle deer,
timid, quick to fright.
Fleeing what we fear will cleave us,
heaven in our sight.*

*Though all the laws of god and man
would drive me from your side,
we cannot bear to leave this garden,
'tis here we do abide.*

At various points in the ditty, Farrah and Meema are compared to tiny foxes, gentle deer, and prowling lions. Metaphorical consistency is absent: the lovers are both predator and prey; and the chorus, with its continual threat of forced separation, fails to affirm any "against-all-odds" tropes. They "cannot bear" to leave their garden; the taboo fragility of their love is an imprisoning bower.

Both songs are reduced to vacant dirges by Duke's a cappella chanting.

All this interpretation has got me nowhere. In the end, it amounts to little more than a lofty summary, a procession of parts that, after multiple viewings, I still cannot glue into an easily intelligible whole. I am grasping at whats, not hows or whys. I am left only with the vague sense of mesmerized sickness, a notion that the pair have elucidated something deeply messy, personal, and true, about human relationships, something about the eerie Jekyll and Hyde divide between private desires and public propriety.

We all have within us animal urges that we feel would degrade and shame our public faces: vast, storied collec-

tions of pornography under our beds, or on the hard drives of our computers. An indexed catalogue of who we are when no one is looking, waiting to be discovered, tripped over like a land mine. As a queer person, I have a deep sympathy with this divide. Isn't that, after all, what coming out is—a parade of your lusts? It's become a politicized action, a necessary rite of self-acceptance, a first tentative step into the shark-infested waters of mature sexual negotiation. But the recollection of coming out to my parents, of having to declare my nascent sex life to them like a mandrill displaying its garish ass, makes me shake my head with retrospective mortification.

I have watched *Lesser Apes* multiple times now, and the feeling of having intruded upon something intensely intimate has only grown stronger. It's as if I have seen Duke and Battersby naked in an especially brutal and compromising way. They have shown this to me, paraded it in front of me. But there is no redemption via self-actualization. *Lesser Apes* is not a coming-out narrative, it's the involuntary ejaculation of an anguished conscience. There is an eerie infantile urgency to it; as if Farrah is yanking up her skirt in the middle of a crowded street. I feel a sense of exploited shame on her behalf; it's a display wrought of a confused, sticky knot of overloaded reactions, and Duke and Battersby are slowing it down, extending it, parsing it, dissecting it, making me stare at it. They have pulled me under, and are holding me down. When I do emerge, it is with neither comfort nor explanation.



AN UNCIVILISED LOVE

BY KYO MACLEAR

We believe we are entering an age of material decline, ecological collapse and social and political uncertainty, and that our cultural responses should reflect this, rather than denying it... We aim to question the stories that underpin our failing civilisation, to craft new ones for the age ahead and to reflect clearly and honestly on our place in the world. We call this process HYPERLINK "<http://www.dark-mountain.net/about-2/the-project/>"Uncivilisation.
—The Dark Mountain Project

I have been thinking lately about the idea of daily practice. And by daily practice I mean the simple and habitual actions we take everyday with some degree of commitment and awareness (as opposed to empty habit or stupour). We all have several of these practices, don't we? If I were to list my own, they might, on a good day, include: writing, reading, yoga, cooking, mothering, et cetera. But lately I've been realizing that all these mini-actions are really just subsets of a canopy practice, and by this I mean, the meta-practice of being human. (How to exist? Where to begin each new day?)

Until recently this larger practice of being human was something I just took for granted. Which is to say, it was hidden from me. Then something happened to make it visible. Let me explain.

I fell in love.

I fell in love with another species. A non-human. To borrow the words of Angela Carter, it was a moment of "extraordinary miscegenation." I was walking through a leafy park one afternoon when I met a mink (a small mink; muddy brown but sleek in a semi-aquatic sort of way), and suddenly I had no idea what to do. Everything I thought of as fixed and stable in my life—my marriage, my role as a mother to two young children, my vocation as a writer and editor—suddenly felt wobbly and uncertain.

A mink in a downtown Toronto park? A sexy mink?

I sat down on a bench and closed my eyes hoping the mink might disappear, but when I opened my eyes, not only was the mink still there, he was standing right beside me with a paw on my shoe.

"Hello," I said.

"Hello," he said, through his mink voice decoder.

I inhaled his beautiful pungent smell and knew I was in trouble.

I was staring into the eyes of a mink. What did I know of minks? Were they exotic household pets, charcuterie meats, zodiac animals, zoo spectacles, sports mascots? Had I ever seen a mink in a Disney or Pixar cartoon or among my children's "stuffies?" Was a mink a funny animal like a pig, or an unfunny animal like a lynx? What purpose did a mink, especially a live mink, serve? Could he guard my property, scare away my mice? Where would we go together? Was there an annual Minkapalooza (similar to "Dogapalooza")? A Minkstock? What common venues existed for mink and human?

The little I knew of mink was cruel and sad: glossy mink stoles, mink oil.

As the mink's scent formed inviting arabesques around my head, I began to panic. I told the mink I needed to leave. ("It was nice meeting you. Goodbye.") I could feel my heart fluttering and sweat arising on my palms and, recognizing these to be the first signs of infatuation, I did not wish to take any risks. (I am not the kind of person that sees marriage as a glass to be shattered. I did see it that way in my youth, but my musical husband has gradually gentled me towards the idea of cohabitation. It's his beautiful voice.) So I told the mink that there were things I needed to do at home. There was fresh basil that needed to be turned into pesto. There were kids who needed to be met after school. But when I turned to walk towards home the mink began to follow me.

And that's when my lust began to speak. Call it my animal nature. It said: "Don't turn your back on this

mink!" It said: "The thing about human nuclear families, like human communities in general, is that they tend towards constriction and mindless reenactment." It said: "Beware the ways you become absent in your routines, beware your lack of perversion and adventure. Beware the imposter in yourself that climbs up on the plinth of your life, inhabiting a posture that was once meaningful, but is now static and dead. Beware the taxidermists! Break free!" (My animal nature was loquacious!)

The more I walked, the more the mink followed, the more my domesticated life began to resemble a tired, old-fashioned diorama.

I decided to forget about the pesto and the bourgeois blender I use to make it, and the children, who make me laugh, who I love so dearly. I mumbled a voicemail message to my musical husband saying I was going to the movies with two new friends named... and while I was thinking up plausible names, the mink whispered: "Emily and Cooper."

So we went to the movies. In the spirit of making what was already strange even stranger, we ended up at an exhibition of video work by Emily Vey Duke and Cooper Battersby, artists the mink referred to as his "sort of human kin." The videos used a mix of found footage, animation, and performance. They said: "I am trying to stay alive and awake in the world!" Odd, melancholy songs that tackled big existential questions in an anarchic, churchy way accompanied them. One particularly unpious hymn told of a God down on his luck; a medicated, aging, odd God. Another video called *Lesser Apes* spoke of carnal love between a woman and a bonobo chimp named Meema. The female voice said: "Humans aren't supposed to fall in love with animals. Everybody knows that. But it happens." The mink's tail swept my leg. He looked over at me knowingly and began purring like a cat. I stroked his fur suit and felt the transcendence that comes from escaping the narrow boundaries of known experience, the transcendence that comes from experiencing true love and true art. Duke and

Battersby made me feel okay about loving the mink. They knew all about perversions and unspeakable desires.

After the movies, the mink and I went to dinner. The mink, I discovered, was a carnivore. He asked the waitress if they had any muskrats, rabbits, mice, chipmunks, fish, snakes, frogs, and birds? He ordered the special "four meat" plate and shovelled extra food into a napkin to bring back to his den, or lair, or cave, or wherever it was he lived. What did I know of a mink's world? He came from an area I considered the wilderness and every night he returned there. Maybe he was married. Over the weeks that followed, he remained, in his very essence, mysterious and unknown to me. What or who else could claim to be so inexplicably alive in my otherwise tamed and ordered life?

The time I spent with my own small family living unit became increasingly difficult. My evenings felt painfully long. I laid in bed, missing the mink. I tossed and turned. I pictured him roaming the woods with his pack. (Were mink pack animals?) I wondered what my cat Mimi would think if I brought him home—Mimi with her artificial food and her lack of contact with the earth, other animals, seasons, natural elements, and so on. What would my husband and children think?

As time passed, I became more agitated. I didn't know that love could be such an extreme state. Such a misery. My animal nature, however, was overjoyed. It said: "Isn't human life wild in its emotional chaos, violence, and anguish?" But the insomnia. The poor appetite. The psychosis. This is when it ought to have ended but the following day I found myself heading for the park again, standing at the periphery until the mink ranged into sight once more. In this way, I continued to withdraw from my daily life until one morning I looked at my musical husband, the person I thought I knew and loved better than anyone in the world, and realized he had become an unfamiliar beast.

I begged the mink to show me more videos. I needed to return to this vision of the world as a cruel, bitter place

of undigested beauty. Being deeply in love made it hard to stomach my typical fare of *Mad Men*. I was convinced that only Duke and Battersby knew heartache and pathos, only they could find grace in the abused and misshapen. I needed their unsettling alchemy of weightiness and mucking around, hideousness and sheer awe. Each video felt like a wooden birdcage, with the bottom removed.

I was watching *Beauty Plus Pity* for the second time, when I spotted the mink in the corner of the screen, playing the part of a woodland spirit guide. There he was among a choir of animals—llamas, raccoons, wolves—promising to forgive us (humans) if we promised to wise up.

The mink welled up as he remembered his animal friends. He was a mink that felt an awful lot and that's clearly what attracted him to Duke and Battersby and their ways of speaking to our screwed up world. Here were humans who were not afraid to erase safe distances, not afraid to crack up or bleed or admit that life was brutal at times. In their daily confrontation with the worlds of hunters (and art critics/funders), they lived in a state of permanent vulnerability, yet they refused to be caged and domesticated!

But before I could fully venerate the wildness of the mink and his art kin, something upsetting occurred. We were standing on Dundas Street West when the mink turned suddenly and killed a bird. A cute sparrow. Gone. A bloody mess. I don't know if the mink was trying to make a point about putting nature on a pedestal. Maybe he was just hungry.

That gorgeous mink mouth I so loved was now covered in bird guts. I felt sick. I sat down on the sidewalk with my head between my knees while the mink continued gnawing on his prey. I looked up at the street: exhaust streaming from cars and piles of leaking garbage on the curb.

*The world is perfect
and we're such fuck-ups
who ruin everything*

and kill everything.
But the birds come back/ which is amazing.
(Songs of Praise for The Heart Beyond Cure)

Who was the real savage? I thought this interspecies love would make me feel lighter and nobler but really it just made me sad. Sitting on that sidewalk, I felt myself bear the burden of my human narrative material, the gravity and error of my civilisation's ways. And I kept returning to this question of practice: how to exist? My head was spinning.

I don't know how to be a worthy citizen
a worthy companion
in this perfect nature world
I don't know
Everything blooms and everything flutters down
and everything is awesome but I am so odd.
(Being Fucked Up)


My mobile was buzzing now. A text from my nine-year-old son: "WHERE R U?" (Good question!) This small prompt got me back on my feet. It was a reminder that I still had children to support and a husband who deserved kindness and aging parents. Basically, I could not completely escape my corporeal reality, my skin and bones and flesh and secrets, and the skin and bones and flesh and secrets of those I love.

I looked over at the mink with his clean bird bones. There he was making his own murderous practice plain as day. He was no hypocrite. He was beautiful and disgusting, good and evil all at once.

I still do not understand what happened between the mink and myself and whether it was an act of faithlessness or faith. I do know that I was about to throw away everything for the mink. I really was. I was ready to propose polyamory or quit my marriage when he left me and returned to the wild. At first I was devastated. He had perforated my heart,

the way my cat perforates the couch, with his tiny claws. How could the mink leave me so cruelly and unceremoniously? Then I thought: I don't need that mink! I don't need an open marriage. What I need is an open life and open eyes. I need more odd, evangelical songs. Relationships are forever falling apart and coming back together again. My husband is a good gospel singer. The only way to survive is to approach life at an oblique angle, swerve from our human habits of self-absorption. Live your life generously and make your art at the very edge of the woods. If Ralph Waldo Emerson was right in saying that, "The end of the human race will be that it will eventually die of civilisation," then maybe it's time to be uncivilised. I don't want to be a perfect human statue frozen among other perfect statues. I want to be moving and acting in the world when the birds come back.



 Scoot on the ice away
from being happy.

We are like owls in winter:
Serious,
Rectangular.

Things burst a lot in winter.
Pipes burst. Our confidence
Bursts apart and little bits of it
fall back around us, scattered.

They will germinate
In Spring.



Duke and Battersby-2005

WE SHOULD STAND BACK HERE —
I THINK SHE'S GOT THE
"LOW SELF ESTEEM".



WHY SING? THE SONGS-SONGS OF EMILY & COOPER

BY TERENCE DICK

We were on our way to New York City for our first (and only) gigs in America. We had just crossed the border and the two cars in our party reconnoitered at a roadside rest stop to make sure everyone had made it in. As our band of scruffy jazzbos milled about the parking lot, two young ladies in matching flower print dresses approached us and asked if we were musicians. This was just the sort of thing a bunch of dudes on their first tour wanted to hear! Things took a turn for the unexpected, however, when the girls said they played music, too, and asked if we'd like to hear them sing. Without a moment's notice, another six ladies in the same print dresses popped out of a nearby minivan and started praising the Lord in a joyful choral fashion that we did our best to enjoy, but the spirit was lost on us.

That was over ten years ago and now, and not far down that same lonesome highway is the town of Lafayette where Emily Vey Duke and Cooper Battersby make their home. I think of those choirgirls whenever I hear the songs that pepper the video mixtapes of Emily and Cooper. They too sing songs of praise, but theirs is a churchless congregation. They make use of the same tools—largely unaccompanied voices set in isolation or gathered in small groups—but their carols are for and from the underdogs, the unredeemed, the scum of the earth (who are, in all honesty, the whole of humanity). They sing, "We're made of shit, we live in shit," and "The world is so perfect and we're such fuck ups." They sing as fallen folks and lesser apes, "the afflicted and the rash," who have ruined nature and are doomed to extinction. They don't sing to a higher being because he's gone senile and keeps forgetting to take his meds. They sing to the animals that had it figured out all along and will survive—in a damaged fashion—when humans successfully wipe ourselves off the planet. They celebrate their

animal spirit guides who, along with a handful of fed-up teenagers, discuss how pissed off they are with the world of parents and priests and the like. The animals sing, "We can work together and we can be happy," but only if the pinkies get their act together.

*I don't know how to be a worthy citizen,
A worthy companion in this perfect nature world.
(Being Fucked Up)*

Singing is powerful. That's why the church uses it: to draw people in and keep them. The fascists and those girls in the parking lot want us all to sing the same song and think the same thoughts and follow the same rules. But Emily sings like my six-year-old daughter sings: alone, unknowing, and against the night. She sings in a quiet voice, adding in the doot-doot-doots and the la-la-las to the perfect pop song that never will be because it's a song of survival for an ingested shrew, a feverish crackhead, a raped little girl, and a forgotten seed. But the seed makes it through the soil, and while the song is sung to no one but herself, the singer uses it as magic—not a magic of explosions and spectacle, but the tiny magic of getting through the day. We all sing sense into the world; it's more effective than merely saying so. We chant our mantras ("boo hoo hoo, poor me") to commit them to memory, we repeat the lines to ourselves ("They fuck you up, your mom and dad") to mark their truth. We sing our beliefs over and over again ("We can't do anything if we're not alive") to confirm them, and we open our throats in song to celebrate a message ("It's about love"), and when we sing it, it sticks like a virus.

*I love to sing.
The sounds fly up my throat like fat birds.
Sometimes when I'm singing sobs fly up too.
This is the greatest joy in my life.
(Bad Ideas for Paradise)*

IMPORTANT THINGS THAT WE LIKE

BY ANDREA SLOVAKOVA

There is a special kind of beauty that emerges out of the appreciation and enjoyment of a system's purity. Neatly ordered particles create perfect harmonies as they flow into predetermined procedures. They move in sometimes strange, but strictly delineated paths and interact at carefully selected points. Though it's not obvious on first sight, the videos of Emily Vey Duke and Cooper Battersby have this quality of functioning systems. They are weird, punk, sometimes crude, definitely disturbing, difficult to identify, but somewhere in the background the system continues to operate.

There are introverted and extroverted films. Each represents a certain kind of balance. Introverted films move quietly on a very subtle scale, but are able to make drama out of these small drifts. Extroverted films use big gestures, distinctive emotions, and words broach vast distances. The videos of Emily Vey Duke and Cooper Battersby are like high water. They use very clear, intelligible images—like dead deer, a naked couple in a tub, animations of flowers and forest, shot of cats, copulating monkeys. They deploy nearly-opposing emotions in a single sentence and skip over the gap between the two without any hesitation. In certain scenes there are clues about how to read the film's secrets. The tell-tale signs occur in small moments, for instance, when both directors sit in front of the camera and respond to the questions posed in voiceover by turning their heads simultaneously. Their answers are the same, until the last query creates a distance between the two of them. This scene evokes the recurring motif of closeness, and how to achieve it. Perhaps no closeness is necessary. Duke and Battersby soar around their topics but constantly refuse to go into them. Instead, they enjoy exploring all the unexpected qualities of the surface.

When the animated beaver comments on the film screening in the forest, the camera dramatizes the scene with sudden close-up details. Duke and Battersby accept genre matrices with pleasure, and then turn them inside out. This open play is an example of an often evoked principle—provoking the spectator's traditional viewing habits. For example: what do you expect from a combination of animation and gentle singing? They derive benefits from animation that allows them to fortify and pursue their ideas sometimes in an absurdly straight on manner. This approach leads to an inconspicuous irony. Like when the commentator in *Beauty Plus Pity* speaks about cynicism. This voice seems to be far away from the pictures documenting hunters drinking toasts to their animal trophies creating a figurative sadness. Entire characters are drawn from a face or a familiar gesture made in mimicry such as the manifesto of unhappy phlegmatics at the end of *Being Fucked Up*. Emily's soft singing with her tremendously gentle voice creates thrilling moments that smooth the divide between private events, fictitious content and directly articulated minor absurdities in many of the videos.

Over and again there is a pronounced distance between the seriousness of aesthetic strategies and the absurdities of the content. For instance, in *Lesser Apes*, they speak about the sexual relationship between a woman and an ape, mocking Catholic morality in a captivating and entertaining way. This incongruity works even in the architecture of a triangle—in *Curious About Existence*, for example. One side features a serious listening audience taken from unknown footage from the 1970s, another side offers an animated lecture on the first law of thermodynamics, and on the third side there is the topic itself, which transposes physical law into the field of human relationships. Simple movements across this triangle produce a cold but tender humour. Characteristic of much of their work, an inward turning and reflexive quality begins in a quietly unobtrusive fashion but finishes in a flourish of disturbances. *Lesser*

Apes is typical in this regard. Beginning with the fantastical premise of interspecies romance, the tape patiently follows its consequences until its bitter absurdity contains something very hurtfully feasible.

Cats and people. Scenes from the apartment. There is no recognizable border between the private space of intimacy and an outer space whose regularities are often illustrated by patterns of behaviour shown in time lapse shots (of streets, roads, ports, etc.). Lifelikeness is not impressive. Sometimes the pictures follow the words, at other times they carry a great poetic value (like the time-lapse shot of a valley full of mist in *Lesser Apes*, or the great image of a breathing tree ebbing and flowing in *Songs of Praise*). Often their pictures provoke kitschy moments that are lightly tainted. Reality is enacted in single shots, sometimes using voice-over, but never in staged situations. Real time situations are always artificial, based on manufactured distances, a slightly chilling humour and fake emotions offered up as staged promises to the spectator. In this sense, the installation *A day in the life of the world* is different, as it is based on pure observation (time-lapse shots taken by web cameras all over the world), but it also works with a distance from reality—the short cut of time.

In small experiments in their apartment, the authors invent new languages with forward and backward recorded audio. In *The New Freedom Founders* they appear as scientists, and use strictly defined processes to create something entirely new. Their mention of the Nobel Prize for medicine is a metaphor for their artistic ambitions to create an avant-garde language, even an avant way of life. But when the relationship (the video, this particular combination of elements, of internal and external intimacies) is over, where does the energy go? The intensities move to other systems. The work is a machine that contains no order for quantifying goodness, as they say in *Curious About Existence*. That is why their pleasure is in inventing new, amusing, and upsetting micro-systems.



PEOPLE WHO MAKE RULES: WATCH OUT!

BY TOM SHERMAN

I know the artists named Duke and Battersby. They live together and make things together. It is always fun to speculate about who does what. I assume Emily does the drawing because she went to NSCAD for her BFA. Cooper must do the tech because he studied computers at Okanagan College in British Columbia. They both did their MFAs at the University of Illinois at Chicago. Steve Reinke was their mentor.

Emily sings in public through the time-delay of video. Cooper sings in private. They told me they sing together as a form of communication at home. That's how they work out their ideas and digest reality.

Emily is comfortable in the spotlight. Cooper is happy in the shadows and prefers the role of mastermind.

Their work is youthful because they remain youthful. They are like Peter Pan. They never want to grow up. I like that about them. They are goofy and childlike and decisive the way children are decisive. They know what they like and if they don't like something, they let you know. They let everyone know when they think there are rules that are unfair. They hate religious leaders, especially the Pope, but they often branch out to target others who make rules in the schools and courts. They hate rules. Everything they make is about breaking rules imposed by mean-spirited people who act like grownups in the worst way. People who make rules watch out!

They make a point to say their work is not conceptual. They view conceptual art as something cold and rule-based and male. Emily is a feminist and so is Cooper. They seek to make work that is emotional and empathetic. Their work is like literature. Or pop music. They care about the things they deal with in their work and they want their audiences to care too. Audiences respond by caring about their work

and the things they care about. Empathy is the name of the game.

Their work is painfully honest and funny and musical. They call their videos “movies” and they always drop a couple of calling cards in their work. Their video-movies have hand-drawn titles and drawings similar to the DIY look in popular media, like the titles on the digital shorts on Saturday Night Live or the transitional grammar of MTV. Quick and dirty jerky animations are bright and colourful and popular and soften the bite of critiques. This show of the hand is a personal touch in a corporate sense. It emphasizes that their art is hand-made. The other calling card is Emily’s singing voice that has a lilt that seems to come from the rhythms of their kitchen, the central place in their home where the traffic runs through. From the heart of their dwelling comes a voice that speaks of looking out the window and thinking. It is an internal voice without the support of musical instrumentation. This voice is made more familiar through voice processing (electronics).

The other thing is there are always cats in their videos. Cooper and Emily love cats and they seem to factor the behaviour of their cats into the stories in their videos. There was at least one dog in their early work, but only cats lately. Their cats translate nature into something easily at hand—cats are wild animals that live in the house. Cat owners know that people live with cats on their cats’ terms and not the reverse. Cooper and Emily’s work often involves the idea of a planet ruined by humans. They sing and draw pictures about a world fouled by humankind. Their loved cats help them accept their fate as humans, to be eternally guilty for screwing up Earth. Adam and Eve drive an SUV. They identify with cats more than people.

Otherwise their animals are pathetic. The animals in their videos speak in human voices, even when they resist or take up arms against the evils of mankind. The animals are unwise to be trusting and tamed. Taxidermy corpses, funny little dead animals dressed up like people, pose on pedestals

under spotlights. Anthropomorphism is administered in a thick layer of human self-hatred as the animations in their video-movies feature animals singing allegorical operas warning the humans to back off. We find poetry in their dying songs of emotional extinction. Just as bleak as the statistical arguments for global warming, discarded taxidermy is collected through eBay and presented to make a case for environmental concern. Images of cute and cuddly animal corpses stick in our mind.

Duke and Battersby love language that is fluid and aural and precise. Their video compositions start out rich and choppy and are often embarrassingly awkward. Then they take away the bumps and barbs in version after version until the compositions of drawings, found footage, spoken word and singing function like a multimedia instrument that their voices breathe through naturally. This is their craft, the refinement of these multimedia vehicles. They smooth out all the bumps by reworking things until they get them right. They chip away at the rough edges of early drafts like sculptors. When their videos are smooth and minimal and clear enough, Duke and Battersby make us feel the way they feel in their kitchen looking out at the world, at the mess we’ve made as a species. But no matter how horrible mankind is at being an animal, beauty persists. Not expecting survivors, we are overwhelmed with hope.

Their work involves us in a lot of thinking about good and bad and fair and unfair and the battle between hope and despair. People on the whole are disappointing and struggle in their relationships with wildlife and each other. Religions are probed, sometimes jabbed with knives. Sky faiths are proofed with earth-based formulas for making sense out of carnage and mortality. Their videos are prayers written by children for adults. They seldom use their own voices, preferring to remain youthful through pitch-elevation or the recorded voices are reversed when representing supernatural points of view. Their youthful impatience and intolerance for compromise remains palpable throughout

Duke and Battersby release their complex messages as a singular, coupled entity. Their messages are always vulnerable, raw, moral, musical, and funny. Their humour is dark and is getting darker. Their fables are blackened by failure near and far. Their voices are being progressively unmasked. Domesticated animals, especially humans, are always pathetic. God never speaks in a language we can understand. Art is the only thing they can do well and that is impossibly difficult. They keep trying. Only their cats have everything figured out.

Recently they have moved on to apes. Unabashed anthropomorphism evolves into fantasies of interspecies communication. Interspecies communication and even bestiality are considered as possible escapes from our profound loneliness as humans, and the animals we revere remind us that nature is perverse sometimes and that perversity is natural. Within limits, anomaly is necessary in healthy behaviour, good art, and language-based systems for generating empathy. Although sometimes they stumble and fall, Duke and Battersby push these limits as a means of coping with reality, for breaking the bubble of human conceit and relieving the pressures of our species' pent-up guilt. From the narrow confines of our species' perspective, the beauty persists.

MY LIFE (WITH DUKE AND BATTERSBY)

BY STEVE REINKE

It has often been said that when an artist writes about another artist's work, they end up writing about their own. And this seems to me more or less the case. At the very least one ends up delineating one's own concerns, staking one's own discursive territory, under the presumption/guise of dealing with the other artist's work on its own terms.

This doesn't generally bother me; I'm happy to write about my own work while presuming to write about another's. But not in this case. It would be too much like staking a claim to some kind of ownership. So instead I'm just going to write about myself from the get-go, and anecdotally.

If spring is all tentative and weepy, this can be the mild winter of a history gone to slush. I don't know what there is to remember, or why to remember it. I do know that I don't remember much, though—not much of anything. This is why I keep making the same work over and over again, with slight unconscious improvements.

I.

I first met Emily and Cooper in September of 1997, or possibly 1998. It was my first teaching job: Visiting Assistant Professor of Visual Arts at the University of Western Ontario in London (Ontario). Emily was spending the year at Western. As was often the case, Emily was the enrolled one and Cooper was proximal, smiling. She was pursuing her Bachelor's Degree at NSCAD in Halifax (then called the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, now, ludiculously, NSCAD University). I'd just finished my Master's at NSCAD three or four years earlier. I think Emily chose Western—an unlikely match!—largely because her friend Kim Dawn was completing her Master's Degree there.

Emily had enrolled in an introductory class taught by David Clark. I forget what it was called, but it included some photography (digital and analogue), audio and video

production. Enrollment was large enough that we were splitting the class into two sections. David gave the students the choice of which section to join, and Emily chose mine. At first, she let on that it was an uninvested choice, but really it was because she had seen my work at NSCAD.

They were mainly making little books then. I thought they were great. Emily didn't want to do the assignments, so I let her (them) do whatever she wanted. This caused some resentment among the other students. I would've let any of them do whatever they wanted, too, but no one wanted to do anything in particular. Thus I was introduced to the first perturbing mystery of art school: students don't generally do anything in particular.

You can see some of the material from these little books adapted to the screen in their first video, *Rapt and Happy*. Simple line drawings traced from snapshots, a line or two of dialogue/commentary/caption.

It must have been the next semester I taught a class in interactive multimedia (CD-ROM projects) using Director. Director could be used as a primitive animation tool—I'd been doing that for a few years. The animations in *Rapt and Happy* are simple enough—apart from the bubble that floats gorgeously between Cooper and Stephen (not this Stephen!) in the bathtub in the final scene. There is nothing here that one would really call "animation"—mostly there are fades or cuts from one still image to another. Still it seems to me productive to think of them as two-state animations, little thaumatropes with text.

I'm sure I can't claim to have taught them—Cooper, really—the software, as Cooper immediately surpassed me in any technical skill (in anything, sadly) I might attempt to teach him.

I don't remember any specific details about the making of *Rapt and Happy*. I remember Emily questioning me in detail about the precise meaning of a passage from Barthes' *Camera Lucida* and me being embarrassed that I was coming up short. I remember seeing Emily curled up on a

sofa outside the school's gallery and her saying she looked so small, she was almost gone; but she did look small, and usually she was big.

Watching *Rapt and Happy* again last night I was surprised to find I had put together one of the sections, "FACES," in which Emily, in a tight yellow T-shirt, sits on a red chair and makes grotesque faces for the camera. It was part of a half-dozen shorts I made for Bravo called *Art Minutes*. (Although I was awarded BravoFact money to complete these, I never claimed it. Perhaps it is not too late to get the few hundred dollars from them.) Because the piece was meant for broadcast, I used copyright-free music, which worked fine. They kept it in.

I wasn't surprised to be struck again by the strength of the writing in the longer monologues. I think it's incredibly fine: complex and nuanced, yet with an incredibly direct energy. The tone is perfectly balanced; the narrative is stripped bare, secondary to emotion; the humour crushes. Each word seems to me the right word.

What about Emily's ludicrously inept southern accent? (I remember that being an issue at the time.) Well, I think it works just fine. It is a slight gesture that moves us one step further away from the experience, a mediation that pales beside the masterfully cold post-presence of the writing. In Duke and Battersby's work, it is the force of the literary that marks all experience as retrospective: digested and shat or vomited, mourned and celebrated or execrated.

2.

Around 2001, Emily came to study with me at the University of Illinois at Chicago. Cooper came with her, of course, but unofficially. He did not have a Bachelor's degree and so did not initially apply for admission. But the faculty liked their work (and Cooper) well enough to petition the graduate college to admit him the following year. The petition was successful, which resulted in Duke and Battersby having a three-year, rather than the usual two-year tenure.

Once they had me recite a long and not very funny joke about driving a car into a vagina and losing your keys. I liked the joke—it was one of mine although I no longer remember it. It was part of a work-in-progress they showed at a relatively early critique. It was a particularly scrappy work; I don't think anything was salvaged from it. I remember the joke being referred to as "that misogynistic joke." But the joke wasn't misogynist at all, merely a bit absurd. If it had been truly misogynistic, I said, it would have been a lot funnier.

Their work was well liked at UIC, but I only remember the critiques that went wrong. Once, rather than showing work, they hired a yoga instructor to use their time to lead us through relaxation exercises. I found this stressful because I have to think a long time to distinguish between left and right and so by the time I figured out what limb to move, we were on to another pose. Some others were not amused, viewing the gesture as a passive-aggressive fuck you to the critique process. I didn't care. At the time I liked critiques, but didn't see the harm in mixing it up a bit.

I asked Cooper to write a computer program that would take Emily Dickinson's concordance (which is online, and lists every word she ever used, along with frequency) and determine which of the poems was the most and least idiosyncratic. He came back within the hour with the program: perhaps a dozen short lines of code. It seemed elegant to me. He also had the two poems. The idiosyncratic poem did indeed seem idiosyncratic—long and bad—while the most characteristic poem was just a bit boring. I've since lost the code and the poems and think I should ask Cooper to do it again. I'd still like to do a project that imagines Dickinson as a kind of nerve machine, an ecstatic computer, translating.

I asked Emily to recreate the drawings in Melanie Klein's *Narrative of a Child Analysis*, scan them and prepare the individual layers for animation. And she did a fine job. But I put the project on the shelf and did not complete it for

several years. My video, *Boy/Analysis*, uses her drawings, but they are not animated.

I wrote a little text for an exhibition they had at YYZ, an artist-run space in Toronto that was, at the time, a very good place to show. The first line still seems to me to sum up one of the most interesting dynamics in their work: "Empathy is a tool for making the cruelty more precise."

Emily wanted me to love her more, to be demonstrative, devoted. But I remained cold. Emily encourages people to rush up and embrace me and note my flinching discomfort. "I didn't flinch at all, that time," I would say. "Yes, you did," she replied. "You flinched."

I once told her that there was a difference between low self-esteem and regretting you are not omnipotent. This made Cooper laugh. But for Emily, there may actually be no difference.

Once I was getting rid of a lot of clothes and Cooper came over to get some stuff. Except for his dick, he's smaller than I am, but there was still some stuff for him. He considered a turtleneck, but Emily forbade it. "You cannot wear a turtleneck! The turtleneck is the sign of the domesticated male." So he took some t-shirts. Later, I would see him wearing one of them, and I didn't like it. Why are you wearing my clothes?, I thought.

This is the question I've perhaps been asked most often about Duke and Battersby (maybe not so much lately, but in the old days): Does it seem to me that Cooper is merely the technician fulfilling the "vision" of Emily? The Captain to her Tennille? The George Bures Miller to her (gulp) Janet Cardiff? No, of course not. In the first place, there is no particular line between the technical and creative components of a video. And while Emily does do most (all?) of the writing, Cooper edits the stuff and is central to extending it through performance, animation, etc.

I went to Halifax to launch my book *Everybody Loves Nothing* at the Khyber Gallery. Emily was the director and Cooper was the technician and, if I remember correctly, bartender. The launch went fine (though perhaps no books were sold). Later, at the bar, a guy came up to me. "Your work is good," he said to me. "Pretty good. But I think it is mainly important as the progenitor to the truly great work of Duke and Battersby." I smiled gently and laughed, which did not seem to be the response the fellow expected.

There's a short Duke Battersby work that doesn't seem to be in distribution, though they allow me to screen it. In fact, it is the work of theirs I've programmed most often. The title is horrible, but it's one of my favourites and I hope you get the chance to see it, over and over : *Selfcentretarded*.

Dear Steve Reinke,

April 18 1998

Well the term is almost over, and I am going to be heading back east in less than a week. I've imagined several times what it will be like to say goodbye to you. In my imagination it's sentimental. I tell you what a formative experience it's been to have you as a teacher, and then sometimes we hug awkwardly. In real life you're such a cold fish that you'll probably just offer me your "email address," so I'll have to say all the sentimental stuff here, in *Public Magazine*.

Do you remember the night that you and me and Cooper went and had a beer at the Grad Club? It was about a week after you brought Alex Bag and Patterson Beckwith up from NYC to talk about their work, and I told you, at the Grad Club, how nervous I had been to meet Alex because you told us she was so famous, and you loved her videos. So I drank too much vodka and Fresca during her presentation and passed out in the sculpture studio.

I didn't wake up until six in the morning and Cooper was gone but someone had covered me with my coat and put my book bag beside me. When I was finished talking you said in a matter-of-fact voice "Yes, I covered you up. You are so small though, it's no wonder Cooper couldn't find you." I guess there isn't anything so remarkable about it, but I was stunned. I had to look away so you wouldn't see the tears in my eyes. In a flash, in your level voice, you showed me a new creature of myself: small, fragile, and worthy of your tenderness. I had always resisted my teachers' authority. After that moment I saw the way it can act like a gift, leaving me free to be lippy, responsible, goofy, sycophantic, or junior and square. I could try to be your favourite—a rubber-boned puppy of a student, panting after straight As and compliments. I want you to know—seeing myself that way—it's been better for me than you can imagine. I know there's no precedent for this but the thing is I will miss you. — Emily

(published in *Public Magazine* 17, 1998)

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BE NO
MORE.



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AUDIENCES: AN INTERVIEW

BY SARAH HOLLENBERG
AND MIKE HOOLBOOM

SARAH HOLLENBERG: How do you imagine your audience?

EMILY AND COOPER: We imagine our audience very vividly, both in abstract and concrete terms. That is, we imagine specific constituents (our parents, our lovers, our colleagues, our friends); and we also imagine vaguer constituents, like “young people,” and “the art world;” or even localities, like Halifax or Toronto or the mystical mecca of New York. We also imagine “television” or something really ridiculous like “ordinary people,” by which, I guess, we mean people who have not been initiated into art discourse.

We are responsible for making our audiences curious, amused, moved, delighted, and (this is a bit grandiose) illuminated. We never want to leave our audience with the feeling that they don’t get it, although we know that some viewers do feel that way. When we showed *Lesser Apes* in Penticton one of the audience members asked: I understand that you’re just going for shock value, but don’t you have anything else to say? We’ve tried to take it as a lesson when a viewer feels that way. We don’t worry about the work being obvious. I don’t think that really bothers people very much—other than the occasional curator or critic.

We also accept that stakeholders in the art world are going to have rarified tastes—even prejudices—resulting from the work they’ve aligned themselves with. For many of us in this peculiar little bubble, our work becomes a kind of religion, and it’s easy to become a zealot. I think that’s part of the reason we try to stay focused on a fantasized audience of ordinary people. It may not exist, but it keeps our aim true.

SARAH: Do you think art criticism is useful?

EMILY AND COOPER: I think art criticism has a number of different uses. My first attraction to it was as a kind of gossip—a way of determining who was who and why, both on the level of the critics and the artists, with plenty of Canadian cross-pollination between the two. Am I wrong in thinking that Canadians more commonly cross the critic/criticised membrane?

Then I started to understand criticism as art history—as a key to understanding different historical eras. Then I started to synthesise the two notions—to understand historical art criticism as historical gossip. And thus, my understanding of art history has blossomed. Peggy Guggenheim's memoir is terrific in those terms, because there is no pretense, no rationalising—just who was brilliant and who was less brilliant and who (most famously) was sleeping with whom; who was terribly jealous; who was drunk, etc. There's no expectation that the reader should agree with her about everything, of course. As a redemption of gossip—as-rhetorical-mode, it's a powerful text.

SARAH: Certain kinds of cultural products produce profound psychic/physical reactions: good pornography results in sexual arousal; good comedy in physical convulsions and sometimes cringing embarrassment; the news often makes me cry and there are a variety of media that provoke extreme disgust. Do you think that these kinds of effects are productive in art?

EMILY AND COOPER: This is a really interesting question, and there is a terrific article on this theme by Linda Williams called 'Film Bodies: Gender, Genre and Excess'. She writes about the ways in which melodrama, pornography and horror films each represent, and in the case of porn and melodrama, elicit, the release of body fluid: in melodrama, tears; in porn, vaginal excretion or

semen; in horror, blood.

Obviously, the mechanisms that produce powerfully felt and visceral emotions can be (usually are) used in service of the market, which is rotten to the core. That said, these are the same machines that generate empathy! Martha Nussbaum, the ethics scholar, writes about the critical role that the novel plays in the development of empathy. She says that stories are the first tool that allow children to imagine what it would be like to be someone other than themselves.

I was fascinated to read this, because Cooper came upon it almost immediately after we wrote the Readers monologue for *Lesser Apes*: "I believe absolutely in the power of the novel to make people more good. Novels are at the very core of what it means to be moral. People who don't read them simply cannot be very good. Those who read a great many novels (memoirs and biographies are OK too, though secondary) are guaranteed to be very, very good. To read novels is to develop one's capacity for fellow feeling. Voracious readers are, in fact, a link to our next evolutionary incarnation: in terms of the species, they are our better half."

So I do indeed think that these kind of effects are productive for artists (and viewers). In fact, I think that as artists it is our responsibility to trigger people to feel empathy. I'm grateful that Nussbaum, reactionary modernist that she is, has given me something to quote to substantiate my thinking.

I think that art has let itself be pushed into a formalist corner (interestingly, formalism also being a component of Modernism) because someone thought that the best way to fight popular culture was to reject its strategies. It's not! Sorry Brecht, but the strategies aren't the problem! It's what those strategies serve! In my humble opinion, somebody got the baby seriously confused with the bathwater. I blame Peggy Guggenheim.

MIKE: The art world has been founded on signature

gestures and individual largesse, how unusual to find a body of work steadily accumulating and signed by the two of you. I wonder if you could speak to the joys and terrors of how two become one?

EMILY: We hate answering this question because we think that people apply value to one role and not another, and make judgments about us as people based on what they understand about our answer. I have no problem with the judgments, but we have something to hide, and it's hidden within the answer to this question. Collaborating with someone you're in love with is wonderful, highly recommended.

COOPER: When we put our names on something and claim it for both of us, it also means claiming it for myself. I intend to collaborate on art and everything else I do with Emily. I have no reservations at all about losing any of my own power. I get more from being with Emily than I would alone. We're each other's first and last audience. We used to work and talk through every detail as it was created, now we tend to make bigger chunks separately and then bring them together. In any finished video there are sections that I will have a special attachment to that Emily won't get but will accept and allow me to include, and vice versa.

There's been a lot of recutting of *Lesser Apes* because we made it for a deadline: the Sobey Awards in Montreal. We have continued to work on it and it's still getting better. After the deadline we won't look at it again until the next deadline, then we'll start up again, for a few days at a time, nothing elaborate. For those few days we work all day and night. But we've already had several conversations about what's working and not, and in those few days we'll go through a list of dozens of potential changes we've talked about and cram them together and finish it. We might need to extend a character, adding more depth and background. How can we do that? The months of planning

are not formalized in any way, we have conversations until the deadline can't be put off any longer. Then we'll shoot scenes and record music. Often Emily is working on drawings while I am shooting and editing.

SARAH: Cooper, we talked about the book *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* while I was in Syracuse, and I was trying to convince you to love it. I was failing at this project, until I told you about a passage in the introduction where Agee essentially dismisses the reader, expressing his lack of desire to entertain or even interest his audience. He went so far as to question who might read the book, and what gave them the right to do so. You were seduced by this refusal, allowing me to read a passage out loud. Can you tell me about this response? Was it grounded in your identity as an artist, or as a reader/viewer?

COOPER: It's such a bold rhetorical move that it actually seduces the audience. I like the unbridled confidence that lies mostly forgotten in the shipwrecks of old media. By making our work accessible we put a burden on our audience. The reaction shot is scripted as if it was one of the characters. The writing of James Agee liberates me as a reader, his challenge provides space for my forgetting, my withdrawals and contacts, my reading. Could I imagine making something that had no thought of an audience? It's unlikely, but I am drawn to bold prefaces that might make claims about the work to come that wouldn't necessarily be true. For example, these days we like to say that the purpose of our work is to reduce suffering.

Emily has a half dead baby chipmunk in her hand, the cat just brought it in. We've been trying to resuscitate it, but nothing seems to be working. It will probably pass away. Emily is cradling it and offering it peanut butter, and she has an ice cube for some reason, I'm not sure what that's for. I will get a nice close-up of this tiny baby in her hands. Later we may film her decomposition, and hopefully we'll

film her last breath. No, I didn't mean that, I want the chipmunk to live a long time, I really hope it lives.

EMILY: This is so over-the-top cute. The chipmunk is about the same size as a large brussel sprout and it's not dead which I can't believe. It makes me think that our cat Pfizer was really gentle with her. Right now it's nestled in my pubic hair because that's the warmest spot, it's really so cute. I've been in this situation with animals so often, I really don't know if she'll live. I hope so, it would be amazing to have a pet chipmunk, but I'm not counting on it. I think she suffered internal damage when Pfizer got her. And then we did a really stupid thing, we thought it would be best to give her a little home, so we made a small cardboard box, but when she came out she was so cold.

MIKE: You're such a prodigious storyteller, could you tell me one?

EMILY: The most interesting stories are the most terrible to tell.

MIKE: You mean they would ruin your reputation?

EMILY: (Laughing) Yeah, the ones coming to mind right now are. Cooper is whipper snipping and really upsetting the chipmunk. I've got peanut butter on my thigh, and Pfizer, the cat who caught the chipmunk, is lying on the bed I'm about to sit on. Here's a really innocent story. Cooper and I went to this press party in a crappy and cavernous Rotterdam disco. We were drunk and accompanied by the most interesting person we had met at the film festival, Lucy. We wanted to dance so we took up with a large group of Africans who were super hot and then lost ourselves in the general melee. While we were still on the dance floor I took off my dress. I kept saying I'd be wearing much less at the beach, which was perverse because I'm never at the

beach. And then I got thrown out. But not before I had picked up this incredibly hot, very young Moroccan filmmaker. We went back to our hotel, and the next morning he forgot his beautiful jacket. He asked us for it the next day, but we didn't find it until we got home. Cooper wears it all the time now and frequently receives compliments for it.

Isn't that a trivial, stupid story? Oh there is a little bit of an addendum. The next day I was trying to find my laptop which I had lost the previous night, and one of the women from the festival came up to me and said, "Do you remember what you did last night?" I said, "Yes, it was really fun." She said, "What you did was very very bad." And I said, "Yes, but it was really fun."



BEAUTY PLUS PITY: AN INTERVIEW

BY MONIQUE MOUMBLOW

I like interviews with artists. They give an idea of the process of making the work, and situate it in the context of the artist's life. When I first began writing about the installation *Beauty Plus Pity* at Gallery B-312 in Montréal, I considered interviewing Emily Vey Duke and Cooper Battersby about their work. It seemed appropriate. Since they began collaborating in 1994, Duke and Battersby's videos have been like an open book, with very little separation between their art and life, and no story too private to reveal. From *Being Fucked Up* (2000) to *Songs of Praise for the Heart Beyond Cure* (2006), themes of alcoholism, drug addiction, violence, or depression have run through the work, all of it smartly narrated with a dark sense of humour and poetry. However, the more I thought about doing an interview, of unearthing more personal details or insights about the artists' work and lives, the more I hesitated. *Beauty Plus Pity* was in no way less intimate than any of Duke and Battersby's other videos. It contained some of the same public/private struggles, but this time it seemed as if the darker details were lurking between the words. For some reason, I wanted to step back. To maintain a distance. To stubbornly ignore the elephant in the room. Of course there was no elephant, but there were a lot of other animals—a fawn, lynx, goat, coyote, raccoon, cat, kitten, otter, lamb, fox, two ducks and a bird, and that's when I realized that if I had no interest in talking to Duke and Battersby, I could interview the animals instead. Like the hunter in the video, I also like dead animals. I like talking to them. I like looking in their eyes and pretending that they are listening to me. In some ways, it makes for a perfect interview.

MONIQUE: I wanted to begin my interview by letting you know that I'm not going to talk about your life, or how you died. I'm not interested in that. I'm more interested in

what comes after.

COYOTE: ...

Monique: When I walk into this installation, with all the taxidermied animals and plinths, I know that this should remind me of a museum (it is an art gallery after all), but it feels more like an afterlife. I wouldn't say that this is a morally ambiguous afterlife, there is good and evil here, but there are multiple ways to be absolved. It's frightening, but it's also very reassuring. For example, at the beginning of the video, the viewer is advised not to have children so that we won't fuck them up in the same the way that our parents messed us up. But in the next breath we are told that if we do have children, the children might become good, and that could make up for our own depravity. It seems like no matter what we do, whatever wrongs as humans we commit, it will all be okay. Even a Catholic Priest who tells a grieving mother that her daughter's death is her own fault, seems blameless. He's not being cruel. After all, it's God who made up the rules...

RACCOON: ...

Monique: The video begins with the line, "I am not cynical. I am an optimist..." This might be strange to say, but I think I agree. I take the artists at their word. However, even if the viewer decides that this initial statement is tongue in cheek, the work leads us through a series of episodes where irony isn't a constant. The cynical, self-assured pronouncements of one section are unraveled in the next, and in the end there is no joke to "get." The world is a beautiful place. The world is a horrible place.

OTTER: ...

DUCK: ...

MONIQUE: The title of the show is taken from a quote by Vladimir Nabokov, "Beauty plus pity—that is the closest we can get to a definition of art. Where there is beauty there is pity for the simple reason that beauty must die: beauty always dies, the manner dies with the matter, the world dies with the individual." In this video and installation, I'm sometimes struck by the thought that everyone here is already dead. Even the children are like headless ghosts. Is this work beyond art then? Not art?

DUCK: ...

MONIQUE: The hunter says, "I don't kill because it's thrilling, or what they call fun... I am honest about my feelings. I kill animals because I want to touch them. I kill animals, because I want to be able to touch them and hold them and it's the only way they can allow me to." There is a parallel here between the hunter's desire to touch, and what has become a well-explored quality of video. By that, I mean the separation between the viewer and the artist, although I could also talk about the separation between the writer and the reader, or the distance between "I" and "you." I'm thinking, for example, of the game played out by Vito Acconci in the video *Theme Song* (1974) where he says, "Don't you want to come in here?... I can feel your body right next to me... No, I'm kidding myself, there's no one there." Acconci peers out at the audience from the monitor. There's an intimacy to his words, but of course he can never touch the viewer. He is separated in time and place from them. If you think about it, by killing the animals, isn't the hunter really just creating a boundary and maintaining a relationship that is defined by separation?

COYOTE: ...

DUCK: ...

OTTER: ...

Monique: I've known Duke and Battersby as single-channel video artists for many years...

OTTER: ...

Monique: ... and this question will probably seem a bit harsh, but after seeing so many other video artists make the transition to installations or multi-channel work as a way to gain entry into the art world, I'm a little cynical about your presence here. Are you animals really spirit guides? Or are you just giving the work a certain authority? Are you the excuse for it to be in a gallery rather than just another festival screening? Although having said that, there is nothing cinematic in this work. It's very modest. It's not like the large-scale, expensive, high-production videos that have become so common in art over the last decade.

RACCOON: ...

COYOTE: ...

MONIQUE: In videos by Duke and Battersby, someone is always talking. There's a wall of words. Even the singing is closer to speech than it is to music. After spending so many hours with this video, don't you ever wish for a moment of silence? Some room to breathe? The writing is well-crafted, but words belong to the human world, don't they? Duke said in an interview with Mike Hoolboom, "Animals can be forgiven for things that we would despise a human for... put the same words into the mouths of animals or children and it's funny and charming." It's a clever device, but don't you resent having words put in your mouth? I have to wonder, if the tables were turned, are there any words that you would like to put into our mouths?

OTTER: ...

RACCOON: ...

COYOTE: ...

DUCK: ...



WRITINGS



Dear Kevin,

I know you think what I did was crazy, but being wry isn't a form of protest. You know? At least we could have let them beat us first.

You can't effectively sublimate longing through collection. You can't take what's missing metaphysically and fill it in with sham physical shit. That's why I did it - to show you how ultimately empty your life will be if you continue living the way you do: reading books by radicals because you fail to be radical yourself; watching difficult films because you fail to be difficult for anyone, ever, except those who have come to love you. Like me. I find you far too difficult.

In fact, I've grown sorry that I ever loved you. My love for you was always kind of Nabakovian: more akin to pity than passion. When it rises up in me now I just punch it down like dough. The pity, the tenderness, the memory of how you curled into me and breathed me in while we were falling asleep - these have all become the kind of thoughts one pushes away, like wanting a cigarette when you're trying to quit or the fantasy of calling in sick while you're lying in bed in the morning. That's where I've gotten to with you now.

I realized that way you had of touching me, drinking in the air around my body and head, squeezing my hand before I dropped you off at work - it was another of your small, hollow gestures. You were collecting me. I was a sign, not of a presence, but of the absence of suffering. You collected me as a sign of passion because you fail to be passionate.

I thought at first that I would love it that you never wanted to fuck, and the awful thing is that actually, I did love it. It was a constant source of relief that we never had to push against one another in that shitty, fraught way, that I never had to resist and relent. But it was such a perfect metaphor for the way you live, Kevin. I've decided that even the old familiar, miserable way of having sex, even

that reification of patriarchy - "getting fucked" - was better than our mutual disillusion with the enterprise. In the fight, with all its guilt and rage and bloody implications, there is hope. In our perfect, soft bed there was no hope.

I'm leaving you, and I'm doing it gleefully. I want desperately to light you up with pain, to inflame you finally, somehow. My tenderness was a flop, a dud, a total loss. Maybe my cruelty will work better. I can only hope.

Without love, Me.

Difficult

Each of us is exceptionally good in one context, perfectly ordinary in another and a total failure in the last. This is perfectly obvious. So why does it continue being so difficult to bear?

I Hate Having Orgasms

I hate having orgasms. I've never had one that didn't feel like a punishment. It's especially shitty and confusing that the place that feels good to touch is also the place that feels like it's going to erupt into some horrible infection. It's like a race to see which happens first, the infection or the orgasm.

I should also make it clear that it's incredibly difficult for me to even hit the slope approaching orgasm—no getting off on an unevenly loaded washing machine or a bumpy bike ride for me.

The wrong turn of phrase from either my partner or the carefully screened pornography I'm using can wreck everything. There's nothing for it then except to lie still, inert and cranky, until I fall asleep.

Show Me Love

When somebody decides to love us, we don't get to pick how they do it. Sometimes people show their love by putting your sneaker collection in the bath-tub and setting it on fire. Sometimes they change the sheets when they know you're going to sleep over.

Mate

In the future, we will be administered a neuroactive drug at birth. It will vaccinate us against psychic pain. It will come through our mother's rich, golden colostrum, the first nourishment we take by mouth. In order to eliminate suffering, the drug will purge us of ambition and remorse. Consequently no human child of this generation will live through adolescence, and the human race will die. There will be great orgies of opium and blood. Infants, abandoned by their heedless teenaged parents, will cry themselves to death. Then there will be peace on earth.

Later, you and I will return as a pair of deer. We will nose through all the ruins, which will be prettily overgrown. We will make our way back to this old house and eat the tender lettuces that still grow, miraculously, in what was once our garden. Finally, knowing we can do no real damage to our offspring without the aberrations of language, time and taste, we will mate.

I Like Men

I like men. I like their
slack jawed enthusiasm, the way that they can look
dormant or at least very dumb, but
at the mere suggestion of
female sexual availability
they rise;
quivering, attentive, bold.

Take this fucking asshole, cracking
troubling jokes and acting cocky, they
call him "Hot Flash" (Why? Why
"Hot Flash?" An inside joke but
nobody's inside.) But still
I'm listening. He's belligerent, pig-
faced and manic but
I decide to fuck him anyway. This
is something I do.

I fuck the ones with curly tails and
pickleable feet. I fuck
the morally undergrown.

I kiss him. He's frenetic, a lively
little sausage in its casing,
popping a trifling rock-hard boner.
A hot, livid spur behind his zipper.

I swear to god he's hopping up and down,
all five-foot-three of him bright red,
it's like he's angry.

I'm drunk and promptly bored, so
unsurprised by this that I'm surprised
that anything could be so unsurprising.

The thing I really can't abide is the
image of his round yellow head rocking back
and forth between my perfect, blameless legs as he gives me
really awful head. He's
got no feel for it, he's tuneless and
this wasn't about me anyway so
I stop him with

I admit, little ceremony and
he looks up from down there,
sweaty brow furrowed,
my good legs framing
his shitty face.
I smile weakly, twisting
up and out from under,
and then

Right then,
his eyes fill with pretty little tears.
I like men!

He's crowned with tears for me then,
a boozy baby Jesus
Limbs paddling the air, tongue
out for pussy,
hungry,
beyond shame.

Joy

I'm certain now that I will never feel the explosion of joy that I was promised as a child. The first world is full of false promises: that we can be famous, that we can be safe, that we can be free. That our loneliness and boredom will be eradicated by romantic love, and that this eradication will find its source in a tremendous orgasm. That we will someday find a perfect teacher who won't ever grow annoyed by our dull wit and recidivism. Instead of this, we must be satisfied by abundant food and water, the internet and medicine so good it makes our lifespan stretch out interminably before us, a great, gaping maw of tolerable disappointment.



After the Astronauts

I never had any good sex after I turned five. That was when the Steeves moved away. Last week my mother told me Jeffrey Steeves is an astronaut now.

The sex with Jeffrey was incredible—just a great rolling stretch of sensation, up in his brother TT's room. TT was disabled, so he had this incredible physiotherapy jungle-gym in the Steeves' attic. We would play the penis-and-vagina game all over that room—on the blue vinyl gym mats, on the Pilates Ball (though this was twenty-five years before Pilates), on the moveable staircase. It was really, really fun!

We knew it was "bad." Our mothers always scolded us in sort of vague, confused voices—like they felt that somehow they had done something wrong, something to inflame our little libidos. And of course they had. They had told us about intercourse, including the part about it feeling good.

My daughter started masturbating last year, around her fourth birthday. I didn't tell her anything about anything—she figured it out by herself. She has a special pillow she uses, and unlike me, she can have orgasms. It completely freaks her father out, but I just tell him it'll be fine as long as we keep other people out of the picture for as long as possible.

Who knows what she thinks about while she's doing it—but I'm pretty sure she doesn't think about boys—or girls, for that matter. I think it's sort of like making yourself sneeze.

I know that for me, it was the intrusion of meaning into my sexual practice that wrecked it—razed it to the shitty, black ground. With the Astronaut, I didn't know yet that sex was something boys took from girl—that I was giving something up. I had never, ever heard the word "slut."

I know it sounds terribly simple, but learning those things took away all the power touch had to move me. I never again felt real, unselfconscious desire when someone's hand moved across my skin. I always felt like I had to make them promise me something in return for what I was offering.

And for that reason, I will do everything in my power to prevent my daughter from having sex. I will keep her in the preserve of her own pleasure for as long as she will bear it.

Soldiers Aren't Afraid of Blood

"If there is ever real peace," Mother jokes, "they'll have to gas me like a war dog."

It's funny because we know that there is no such thing as peace.

For almost thirty years we've lived like this: the world's tiniest underground militia. We are more precise than the Germans, more passionate than the Arabs, and with none of the stupid bluster of the Americans.

If we were more than two (just Mother and me) we could topple bloody everything.

As it stands, we settle for strategic targets. Seats of Phallic Power.

We take enormous pride in our safety record: in twenty-seven years of activity, with eighty-four successful operations, we haven't harmed a single woman. Brilliant!

Of course no one suspects us. I'm a spinster at thirty, stout and drab. Mother has been a widow almost since my birth. We live private and exceptionally ordinary lives.

We aren't daft like the Irish or that prat Kaszynski, sending notices to newspapers declaring our intentions. Typical male hubris at work. We're after real change, not abstract ideological shifts. We want to turn live arseholes dead.

Whenever possible, we make the deaths look like accidents. We take pains with our research and are cautious almost to a fault. Almost.

We don't subscribe to magazines or visit websites that espouse our views. Even if we wanted to, where would we

find them? What would they be called? Misandry Today? The Lady Terrorist's Home Companion? Such outlets don't exist.

But we aren't afraid to ask questions. Mother has worked as a secretary for a powerful and wealthy man for many years. He indulges her curiosity about his social circle. He thinks it's amusing that she cares.

She started bringing me to work immediately after my father's death. I was a good baby—Mother made it so. Most days I was lightly sedated before we left the house.

She continued to sedate me until I was old enough to begin school, but by then I had learned the value of complicity.

When I got my A Levels, my mother asked her employer if he would consider hiring me to take her place one or two days a week. She told him that her hands hurt her sometimes when she typed.

He looked at her with concern and agreed. He asked her if she needed more time off and she said not yet, but maybe later, if things worked out.

Mother's hands are fine, of course. She's been scrupulous about her health since before she killed my father. She knows she must be ready to move with the same smooth efficiency as the other weapons in our arsenal.

She needs the extra time for study, and she wants to be sure that I am positioned to continue our work after her death.

There is still so much to do.



SONGS OF PRAISE
FOR THE HEART
BEYOND CURE

SCRIPT





THE HEART IS DECEITFUL ABOVE ALL
THINGS AND BEYOND CURE

We will sing a song of praise
for the heart beyond cure
Raise our voices up to serve
the bad and the impure.

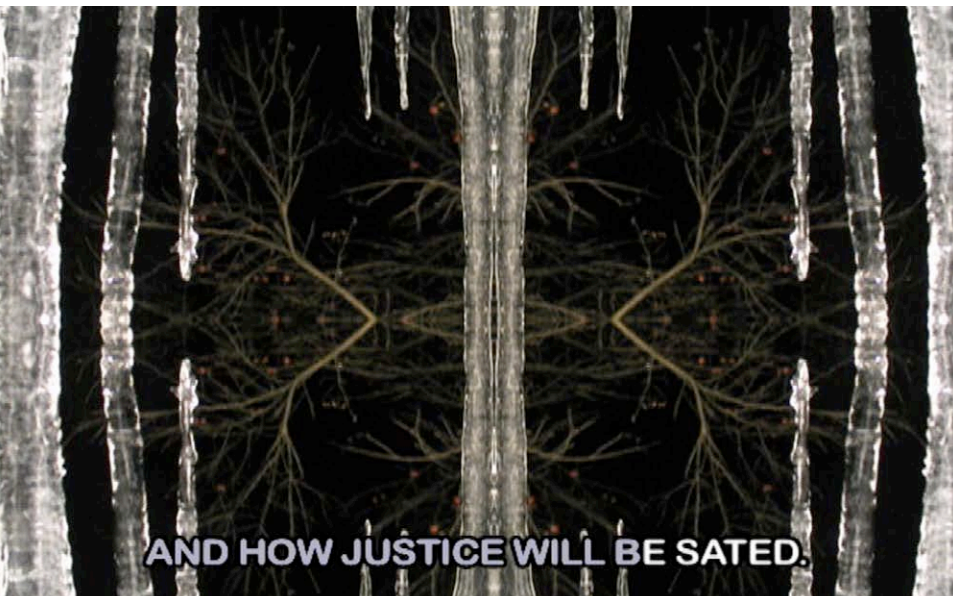
We will sing to the fallen and
the filth in which they lay
Finish up with the bender
and go outside to play.

We'll complete the circuits of bliss
Our evils amputated
Filaments burnt in pursuit of oblivion
will be regenerated.

We will sing a song of praise
For the heart beyond cure
We will play with ourselves in the fields
and the houses of the Lord.

We're an army of soldiers and
our camp is in the sewer
But we strike as one and our numbers are legion
and every hand is sure.

When the sound of our song has reached every ear
And the gutter is venerated
How the mighty will fall
and how the fallen will rise
And how justice will be sated.





HUMANITY

Made only to be mocked by God
And possibly ignored.
Made only to be cowed by shame
And surly and abhorred.
Most often when we're idle
we complain of being bored.

We're made of shit,
We live in shit:
Diseased and drunk and poor.

Like crows and rats and feral cats
Our eyes grow bright for trash.
We're hoarders, trickers,
Fevered pickers,
The afflicted and the rash.



COOPER WIZARD

The wilderness and the countryside are actually inside our bodies, like dreams. When people leave the city, all their cells open up on one side, and the countryside streams out through their eyeballs. People who grow up in the wilderness store the city inside their cells. That's why there's more and more city and less and less wilderness. They keep coming to the city to see what it's like, and more city comes out of their eyes.

Soon there will be only city, just as once there was only the wild.

Soon, there will be only city,



PETRA

So, my name is Petra. And I'm really glad I don't live in Southern California. Things would just be so much worse there. I mean, I already think that things are pretty bad here?

It's mostly the popular kids. I don't really like the popular kids, and they don't really like me? And it seems like everyone likes them the best, even the teachers.

So anyway, I want to make a group of all the unpopular kids? So that we can work together, to kind of fight the popular kids?

So, there are a few people who are going to be in my group, and the first one's Sandy? She likes to sit on her bum, like, with her heels under her bum, and like, jiggle back and forth really fast. And the popular girls always make fun of her and say that it's dirty? And it...it is, cause Sandy told me so. She said it feels really good, like, sexual. AND that it was one of the popular girls who told her how to do it. And I just think they're hypocrites, you know? And I hate hypocrites!

Then there's Todd? Todd's gay, but it's hard to tell cause he's only 11? He always wants to play bride? But people always you know, beat him up for it and stuff? But he still just wants to play bride all the time. It's kind of sad

And then number three is Rani Patel, and she's, like, from India so she doesn't know a lot of the cool stuff, like top 9 at 9 and Le Chateau and stuff? She just knows like about India and stuff? Any time she goes outside the popular boys always go — "Paki Paki stinky Paki!" And they're just showing how ignorant they are, cause she's not even FROM Pakistan! They're just so STUPID it makes





me CRAZY! I just hate the ignoramousness of it all. When my group gets going whenever we see those boys we're going to go "Bigot bigot, stupid bigot!"

They just don't get it that it's not cool to be a hypocritical ignoramous!

But still, I think with this new group it's going to be good. It's going to work out.

I'm just glad, like I said, that I don't live in Southern California. The popular kids there would be getting their whole own sit-com and plastic surgery. And it's not like just like the teachers would like them the best. The whole WORLD would like them the best.

And so my group, instead of just doing the "Bigot, Bigot" thing-we'd probably have to take extreme measures like bringing bombs to school and like, we'd have to use angel dust and things? I mean, a group like I have here, I can manage, but I don't want to run a group like that. Uugh.

So, anyways, I'm really glad I live in Canada.



THE BIRDS COME BACK

The birds come back
and bejewel
and act gleeful
Even to us
who are such assholes
and so lazy
and don't deserve them.

The world is perfect
and we're such fuck-ups,
who ruin everything
and kill everything.

But the birds come back,
which is amazing.
There's even Muskrats;
there's even Beavers.



because we're building our own nature,

EMILY WIZARD

We're afraid of nature because in nature there are more pictures than words, and that makes us think of chaos, which we hate. We try to train nature to have manners. We tell it: "Look, the blossom's better than the bud! The green is better than the brown! Use the green!" but it doesn't listen.

It's okay, because we're building our own nature, and it's going to be much better than the original.



VERY SMALL MAGIC BABY

I am a very small magic baby. I was made in a cellar, out of bits of plant matter, soil, the tissues of a lot of animals and special magical words. I grew in an enamel pot with a breathable covering over the top, which was made out of long human hair.

I may be only the size of a jellybean, but I am unnaturally smart.

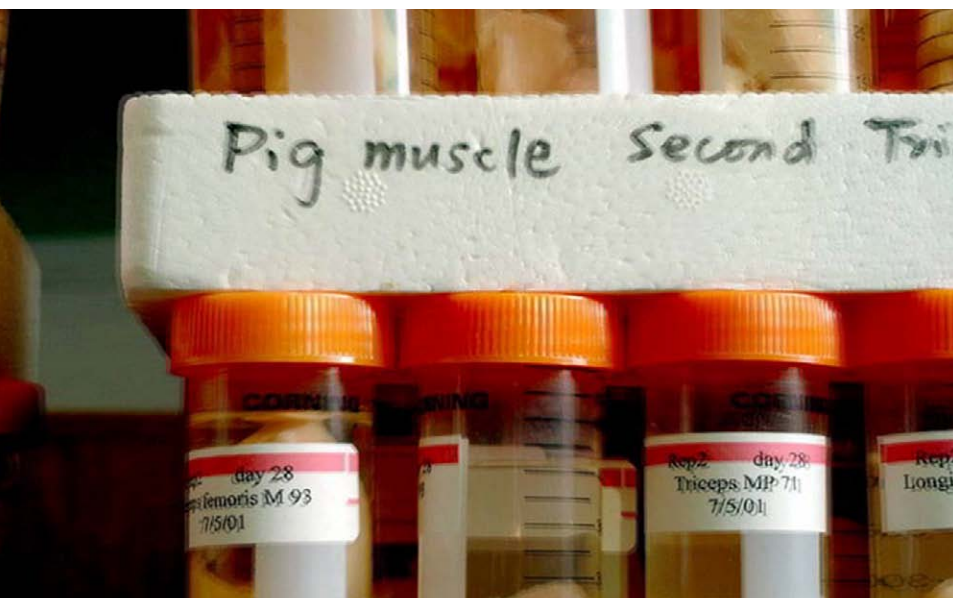
I have a friend who I communicate with through telepathy. The telepathic connection was already live when I became came into existence.

My friend is also a peculiarly small baby, but he wasn't made by magic. He was made by science, from chemicals. He grew in the uterus of a Minzhu pig. He lives in an incubator in a science lab.

Neither of us can really move. It's not safe for me to crawl around in here because I'm so small and there are so many dangerous substances in the cellar. It's the same situation for my friend in the lab.

You can imagine how grateful we are for our telepathic link. It's pretty boring in the lab, but I love the science baby and he loves me, so we're doing ok.

But if anyone hears this message, would you please come free me so I can go and see her in the lab?





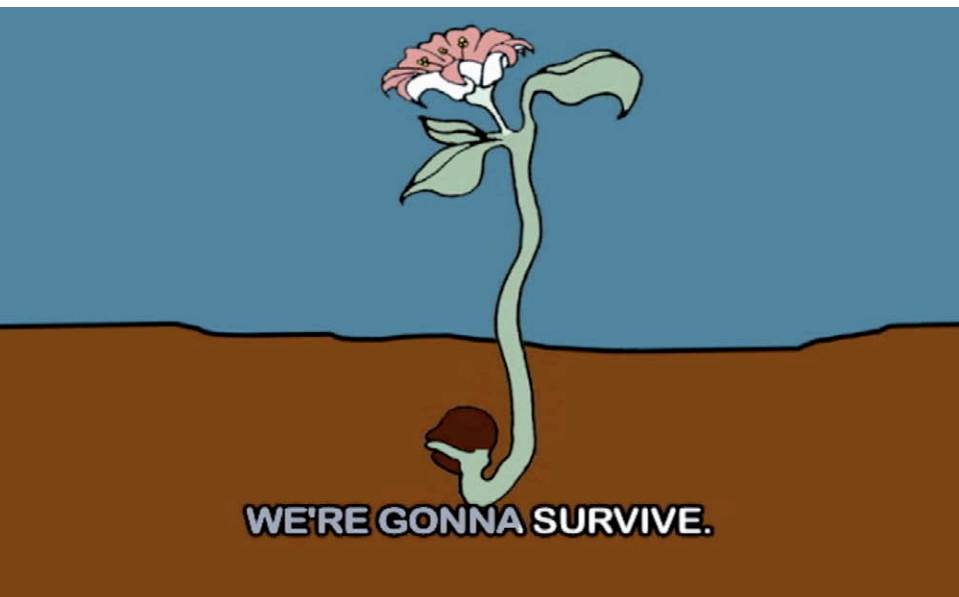
NOT DEAD YET

I'm a blind shrew.
An eagle ate me in one bite.
I'm inside it's stomach now,
But I'm about to fight my way out.

I'm a crackhead.
I love smoking crack.
I know it makes me look bad,
But it makes me happy
And clever and wild and free.

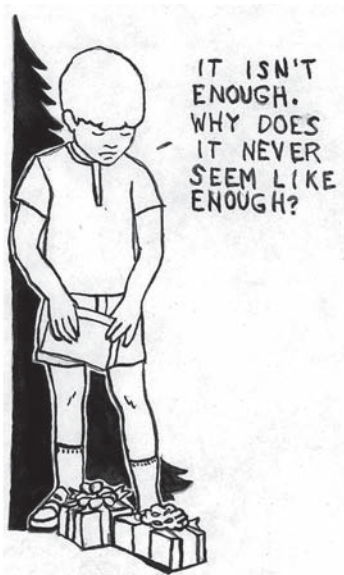
I'm a little girl.
A man from my building raped me and put me in a dump-
ster.
It wasn't fair.
I'm going to escape.

I'm a tiny brown seed in the ground.
I accidentally sprouted before the springtime came.
I almost died.
But I'm going to survive.
We're going to survive.
We're going to survive.



LESSER APES

SCRIPT



HUMANS AREN'T SUPPOSED TO FALL IN LOVE WITH ANIMALS

Humans aren't supposed to fall in love with animals. Everybody knows that. but it happens. Sometimes it's a kind of love that's totally acceptable, because it doesn't have a sexual element, like when people fall in love with their dogs. But sometimes it is not acceptable, because it does have a sexual element. And that was how it was with me and Meema.

I had never had an orgasm before Meema. I couldn't. I just couldn't. It just didn't work for me. Me and Meema started to sleep together in the treehouse, and I mean it seemed so normal, so progressive. So successful. I was there to study these animals, and this animal was letting me into her, um, interiority in a way that was so exceptional and beautiful.

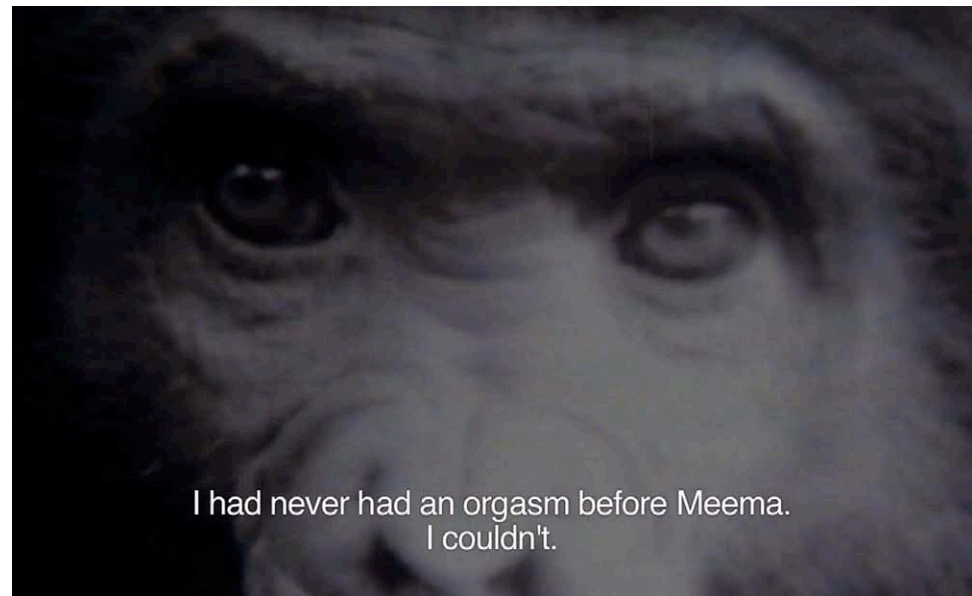
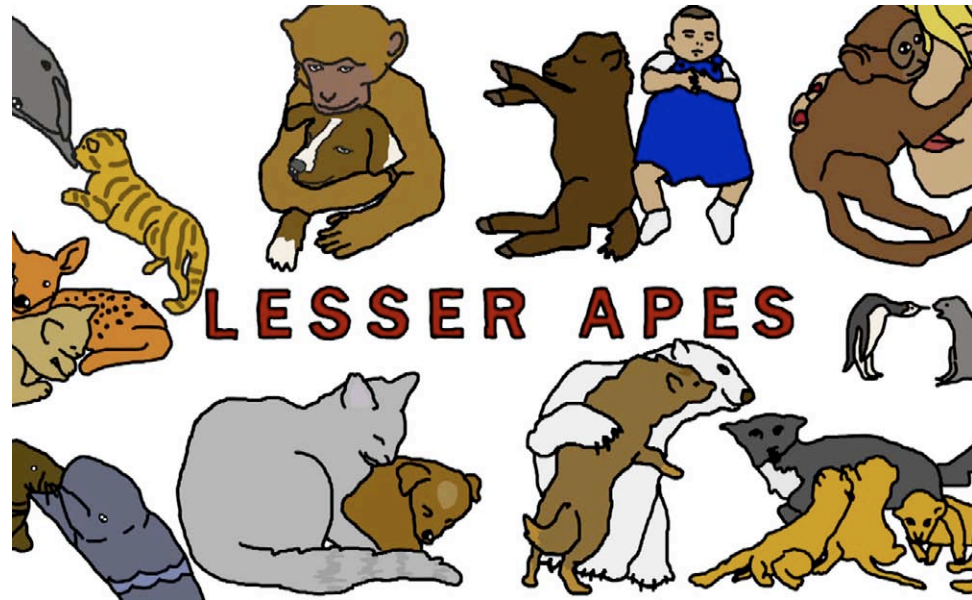
You know, I saw how sexual they were with one another. I saw thee G-G rubbing, I saw the face to face sex, I saw the frequency of sexual contact. Initially it was really painful, but then, um, when me and Meema started sleeping in the same bed, in the treehouse, it was just so comfortable. It worked. It was almost frightening how intuitive she was about my body.

And I started to have orgasms.

And me and Meema learned to talk to one another. And she was smart. She was smarter than me. She understood things that I didn't understand.

We're going to try to tell some of those stories in this movie, and it might seem really fucked up. It might make people feel pushed past what's safe.

Somebody I really love can't tolerate what we're doing. but there are other people who are proud of us—who know how brave this is. And that's who this movie is for.



IT'S ABOUT LOVE

It's about love
It's about love
The kind that people say comes from above.
The kind that comes from the earth,
comes from a primate birth.

it's about love.

I've known it from the start
That nobody would succeed in tearing us apart.
I didn't always know how it would go:
this awesome crazy perverse lovely funny stupid love.

It's about love, interspecies love.

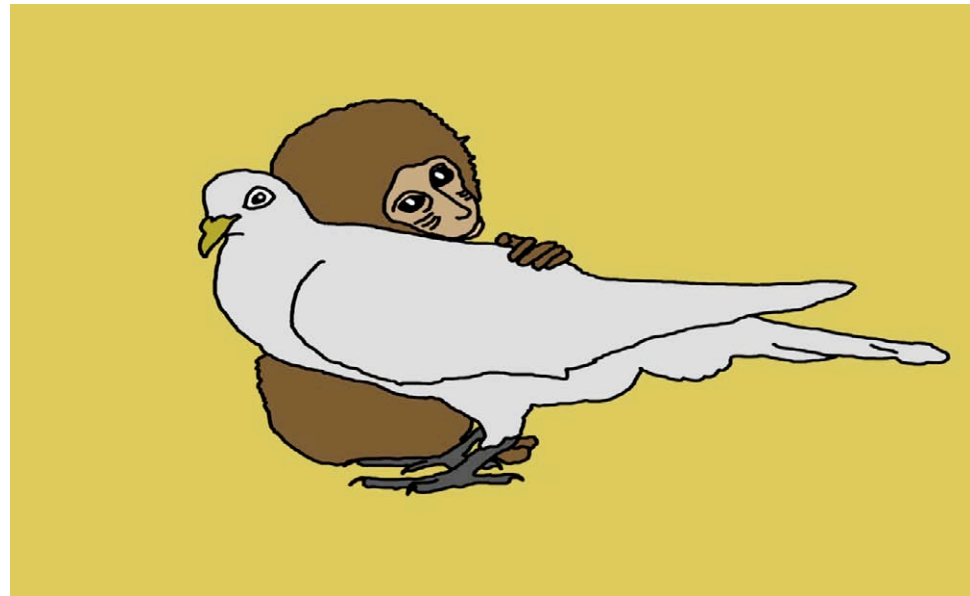
It's about our crazy monkey-business,
don't-be-scared-if-it-gets-too-wild,
it's going to go crazy inside your heart!
It's about love

About the way I gave myself to you,
the way we were inside the zoo,
the way it felt when we came home and all those
crazy people were demonstrating outside our house.

But still we went to bed: the two of us
with our laptops and movies and
we still learned to do
the things that beasts in love can do;

And it was crazy, baby, I don't mean maybe.
We were lucky in love and we were
fucked up by love,
and you and I, and me and her, and me and she and she
and me:

It's about love.



HELLO PUBLIC, THIS IS MEEMA.

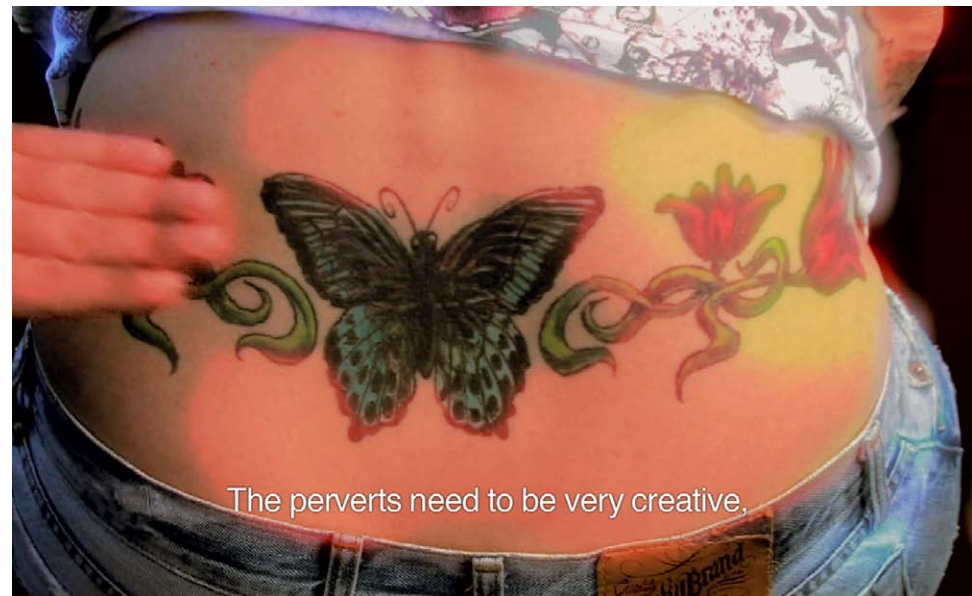
I am speaking to you today using my TruVoice 9000 voice synthesizer, that Farrah gave me.

The pinkies have so many funny characteristics. The instant I think I understand them, they tell me something new.

Today, Farrah (that's my girlfriend), was talking about something called a "pervert". It was really fascinating! A pervert, apparently, is an exceptional kind of human, who wants things that other humans don't want, or who wants ordinary things, but wants them very badly.

These perverts are quite important. they are instrumental in making pinkie rules, and laws, and statutes. The perverts need to be very creative, because there isn't anyone to tell them how to achieve their desires. In fact, these perverts are the most creative and powerful of all the pinkies. It's their responsibility to determine the whole nature of desire!

I must say, I feel a lot of admiration for these perverts.



PERVERTS I

Excellent news today for Meema (that's me) and Farrah (that's my girlfriend). Apparently, we're perverts!

Very exciting.

Normal pinkies and bonobos don't have sexual touching together, or live together, or be in love with each other.

We were planning our trip to Los Angeles for the Primates International Zoology Conference. We spend a couple of hours every day getting ready for our presentation. We are going to tell all the other pinkies about us being in love together.

I was already excited about the trip, but now I know that we are going to be the most important of all the animals at this entire meeting! I can hardly wait.

It's true that things are harder for us perverts, thought. At first, for example, I couldn't stand the way Farrah smelled. I tried to hide it, because I know how sensitive she is, but she could tell. She started to bathe herself constantly, but that just made it worse. She smelled too sweet, like sweet garbage, and a cloud of biting flies followed her everywhere.

If her smell hadn't changed so dramatically when she was turned on for sex, I don't think we would've made it.

And that's a perfect example of how important the perverts are! Once there was no one to give advice to apes about how to handle the smell of pinkies, and now there's Meema. And for the pinkies, there's Farrah.

But we have a plan: while we do all those things, we're going



She smelled too sweet, like sweet garbage,
and a cloud of biting flies followed her everywhere.



Very exciting.

to keep a record to send to the people in charge of the rules and laws and statutes, and those people will write it all in a manual, and send the manual out to every pinkie who is considering falling in love with a bonobo, or even a chimp or a gorilla. Though there would have to be some changes.

Chimps and gorillas are a bit dangerous.

I am so excited that I'm a pervert. I can't wait to get to the Los Angeles Primates International Zoology Conference so that I can start helping the rest of the pinkies become perverts too!

PETER

My name is Peter. I am the groundsman at the preserve where Meema and Farrah live. And I, too, am a pervert. Specifically, a peeping tom. I crept about behind them, crouching to watch as they bathed and snogged.

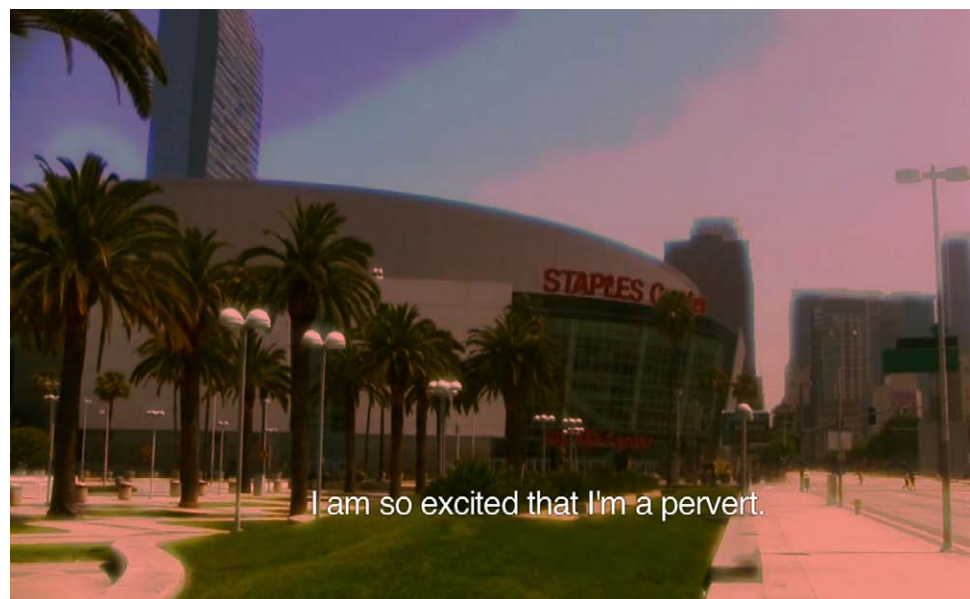
I used my holidays to attend their presentation at the LA conference, and found the whole jaunt rather alarming. First off, there were those insane picketers gathered everywhere the girls went. They carried placards and shouted obscenities. I worried for the girls' safety.

But I felt that the two of them had brought it upon themselves! They certainly didn't hide from the press. Their lecture was the best attended event at the conference. Who else was shagging an ape? It's good copy.

In their presentation, they introduced their new project: a political lobby called Perverts United. Their slogan is "Break the Silence, Equality for All". If I weren't stalking them, I would let them know that Break the Silence is



Chimps and gorillas are a bit dangerous.



I am so excited that I'm a pervert.

already taken by the domestic violence people.

But here is the problem: I may be a stalker, and I am certainly a pervert, but I won't be throwing my lot in with that bunch. There are sadists among them. Loads. And roofers and pedophiles.

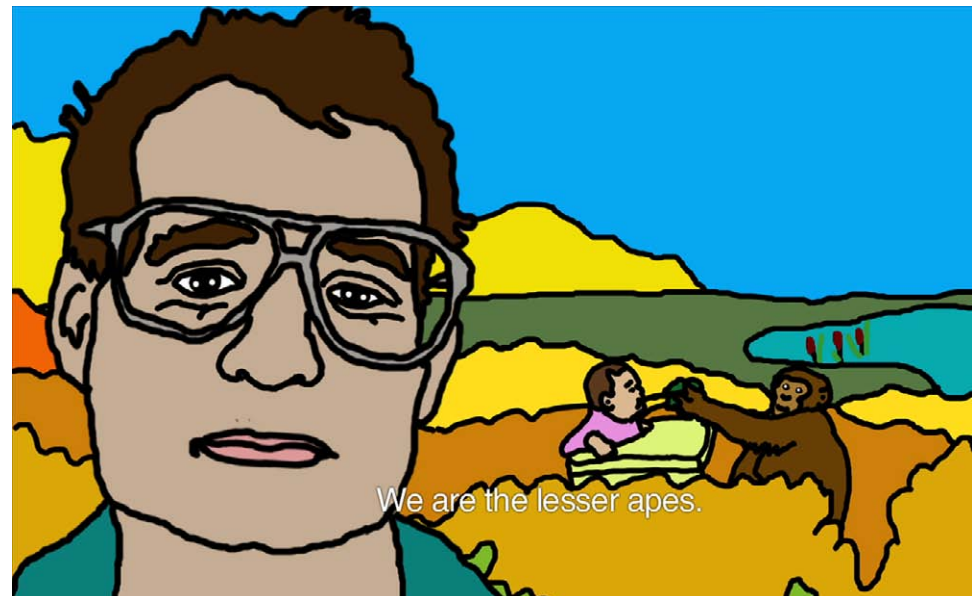
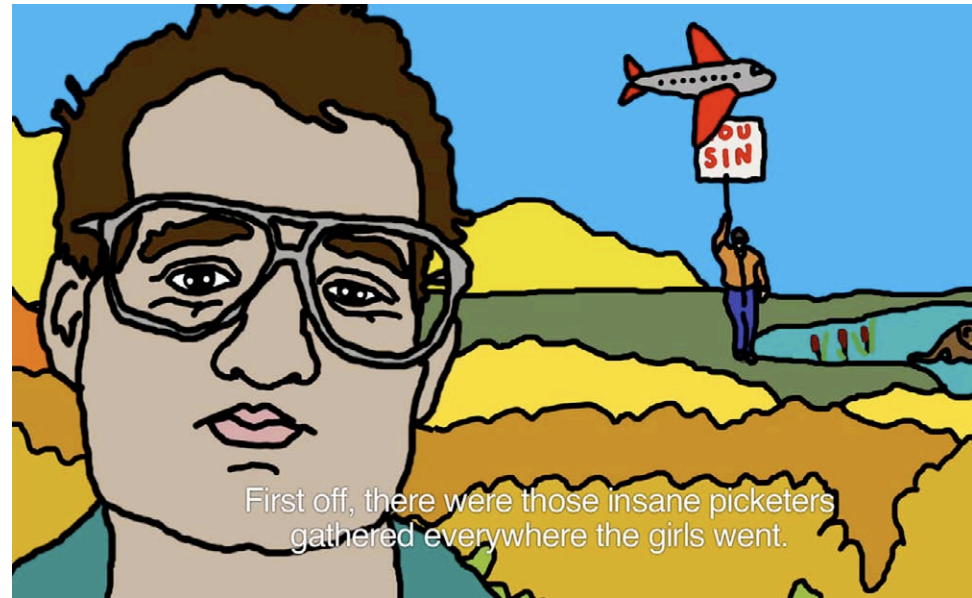
For the question isn't simply whether one is a pervert or not. There are benevolent perverts and vicious perverts and careless perverts. There are those who are excited by the prospect of maiming the powerless. A minority, I know, but not one I choose to hang about with. I'm just a nice fellow who happens to like following these two about in the bushes.

It is not Meema I blame for this. Farrah is responsible for almost everything Meema understands about human culture, and not because Meema is the lesser ape.

You see, Farrah didn't choose to learn Meema's mother tongue. Meema learned Farrah's.

Who is lesser, then? The perfect pupil or the flawed professor?

It's Farrah. It's us. We are the lesser apes.



MEEMA AND FARRAH'S THEME

Je m'appelle Angel
Et tu t'appelle Angel aussi. oo-oo-oo
Je m'appelle Angel
Et tu t'appelle Angel aussi. oo-oo.

My name is Angel
And your name is Angel too, oo-oo-oo
My name is Angel
And your name is Angel too, too-too.

Je veut enseignant a toi
Beaucoup des choses, oo-oo-oo,
Mais ou je peut
Apprendres-les je ne sais pas-pas-pas!
Apprendres-les je ne sais pas-pas!

I would like to
Teach you lots of things, oo-oo-oo,
But where I would
Learn them I do not know-no-no-no!
Learn them I do not know-no-no!





VIDEOS



RAPT AND HAPPY

17 minutes 1999



Here are the vid kids of Steve Reinke: wordwise, sexy, unafraid to wear their pop on their sleeve, and funny, but not in a clamouring slapstick fashion. Set in 16 parts, Rapt is disarmingly fresh, smelling of the long summer in which it was made. Catfights, threesomes and daddy's porn emerge in videobyte succession, as this duo turn intimacy into playtime. Early fave for rookie of the year honours.



MY HEART THE LUMBERJACK

13 seconds 2000

This is part of a series begun by the handsome Montreal video artist Nelson Henricks. Each work in the series has the words, "My Heart the..." in the title. For their star turn, the dynamic duo simply excise a television moment where an overzealous suitor approaches a woman, opens her black leather jacket and announces, "Look at you, look at this little body. I'm telling you, you're so small I'm going to split you like wet pine."

BEING FUCKED UP

10 minutes 2001



Why not open proceedings with a nice long crack toot, and then hold up the bag in front of that impossibly young and serious face, with its boyish haircut and the schoolkid shirt collar, and breathe all the fairy dust into the plastic lung of the bag and suck it all back in again? I'm a self contained system, I'm the whole fucking world, watch me fly. *Being Fucked Up* is an abject hymn of drugs, sex, and self loathing; it's a dog's life alright, but somehow the artists serve it up with such charm and home made invention that I want to sing along. Each scene is answered by a cartoon dog interlude, usually dished in brief monologues that are horny, funny and self centered. The answering shots deliver a pair of portrait moments: an extended nightvision shot of the artist's ass is accompanied by a song promising punishment and grace, while in another, Emily tries on an extra pair of lips while Cooper's voice-over lampoons the possibility of salvation. The bravura sequence is entitled Monologue For Robots which offers still photograph snaps of the artists at play - wasted youth moments and sex posings offer glimpses of unraveling lives as a computer voice bleats, "My secrets are so boring." The movie closes with a set of questions that the artists answer by shaking their heads vigorously yes or no. It's good if you can survive it, if you can get as far as the door, the morning after, the next step. And if it only feels good for the audience, that's ok too. Call it another kick, another way to get high. Nothing lasts except the promise of next time.

THE FINE ARTS

3 minutes 2001

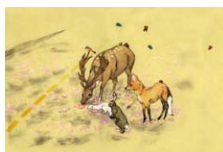


This performance brief features Emily's topless performance lecture about art about art. In French. There is some kind of equivalence between the halting French speech and her breasts which stare back at the viewer in mute accusation. She talks about her talking in a send up of conceptual art, which she despises by embracing. "This is not a good idea. Maybe with sunglasses it's a good idea. Maybe not. No."

PERFECT NATURE WORLD

3.5 minutes 2002

(collaboration with Shary Boyle)



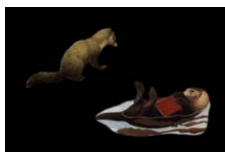
Lifting the opening song from *Being Fucked Up*, Emily's multi-tracked voicings ("I don't know, I don't know") are this time laid over a series of drawings by Toronto's multi-media work dervish Shary Boyle. A seamless pan offers glimpses of a bruised and lonely pre-teen heroine who gathers her lost hopes between nature world communings. Sometimes the sparkles stick to you even when you're sleeping in the puddles.

BAD IDEAS FOR PARADISE

20 minutes 2001



Like all of their best work, *Paradise* hangs on a series of apparently unrelated monologues, lacerating in their social critique and abject humour, and delivered in a series of carefully composed vignettes, with careful attention paid to the video delivery vehicle. Here the monologues appear as glowing title screens, singsongs, sped up voice-overs across found footage and night vision lurches. Topics include shame, boredom, childhood and what animals care about. But the centerpiece is a three minute hilarity called *I Want To Be A Teenage Boy*. "Brain chemicals flood, orifices gape. I fart with vigour. It feels great. I hate homos. I like boobs, my dick, my friends, smoking dope and listening to music. Unselfconsciousness and arrogance are the hallmarks of my personality. I am unconcerned by my ordinariness. I am unconcerned in general." Proceeding via bon mot stepping stones, *Paradise* rubs its new age-isms (gems, heart chakras, yoga) into a wordly and wondering suite of persona failures with relentless indie pop charm.



CURIOUS ABOUT EXISTENCE

11 minutes 2003

This movie is Emily and Cooper-lite, as if they were breathing with one lung between the two of them. It is framed by a pair of opening and closing songs about creating a world out of the body, and a body out of the world. In between are a pair of philosophical conversations. The first turns to Newton's laws to recast despairing emotions as part of a chain of energetic transfers and interdependence. The second is a dialogue between an otter and a marmot about feeling bad. Nietzsche's counsel to Wagner's wife is offered as a remedy... "that which you take into your mouth you may develop a taste for." Her reply is more radical still, insisting, like the opening song, that observer and observed are cut from the same cloth, that the self is empty and illusory. As Stephen Batchelor writes, "We are our own jailors. We keep ourselves unfree by clinging, out of confusion and fear, to a self that exists independently of all conditions. Instead of accepting and understanding things as they are, we seek independence from them in the fiction of an isolated selfhood. Ironically, this alienated self-centredness is then confused with individual freedom."



THE NEW FREEDOM FOUNDERS

26 minutes 2005

This is sometimes shown as three separate movies, and sometimes as a three screen gallery confection, and more occasionally as a single movie. In the first episode, *I Am a Conjuror*, the artists pose as layabout scientists, sleeping in, bathtubting and drinking, while they murmur backwards philosophy that is rendered in subtitles. It's uncanny the way they are able to conjure narrativity in these few simple, static, home movie frames. They appear as avant garde scientists who are about to plant a Nobel on their mantel for a paradigm shifting medical discovery that will drive multinational giants like Pfizer out of business. They are transitional figures appearing "before the reconstruction," when the animals and outlawed (or simply forgotten) marginal thinkers and artists, will come back to rebuild the planet.

In the second episode, *A Cure for Being Ordinary* (aka *Rafters*), Cooper dishes a slightly sped up, high pitched monologue, lensed from two or three alternating vantages, about the worshiping of time, and his employment history at Harvey's and the Scotia Bank.

In the final episode, *Attention Public*, Emily reappears as a backwards singing avant gardist, humming her "new freedom language" directly to the public. This is how the revolution will be televised.

SONGS OF PRAISE
FOR THE HEART BEYOND CURE
15 minutes 2006



A Christian scribe named Jeremiah wrote: “The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?” Emily and Cooper lean into this question with a nine part musing filled with global surveillance time lapses, mirrored-screen landscape moments, breathing cityscapes, a stunning digital pan over a frozen forest stuffed with birds, and a chatterbox high school moralist. The hand made animations of their previous efforts return here in brightly coloured monologue vignettes, sometimes subtitled because wizards tend to speak backwards. While everything human turns to humiliation and shame (survival is the best we can hope for), the animal world offers alternate social modeling and the balm of beauty. They are the song.

SOMETIMES NUMA NUMA
MAKES YOU CRY
2:30 minutes 2006



The Romanian/Moldavian band O-Zone released a number called *Dragostea Din Tei*, that is sometimes named as their second best tune. But it didn’t blow up until Gary Brolsma’s released it as *Numa Numa*, featuring who else but himself lipsynching with traditional Youtubed overzealousness. It went viral, and is (at the time of this writing) the second most watched vid of all time, gathering 700 million views. The artists offer a multi-screen remix with English and Romanian subtitles so we can sing along. Their remake closes with a wincing solo performance from a TV program named “Superstar,” by a young blonde man whose dreams are eight sizes larger than his talent. But wait. Are those tears underneath all that teen cheer?

BEAUTY PLUS PITY

15 minutes 2009



Punctuated with nature beautiful pics showing sunlit deer being patiently tracked by smiling Norwegian hunters, *Beauty* offers an answering call of animations that voice animal longings. The hunters are dished in a computer driven muse that spreads like an oil slick over pictures of children and zoo animals. Between these two poles are God and the family, though the Old Testament hero appears here like Santa Claus on a diet, complete with red blazer and unkempt beard. He is not incidentally senile, out of touch, medicated, and wasting his magic on pretenders. The voices of dissent appear as a cappella numbers sung over primary coloured landscapes and melting portrait poses, including a winning riff on Philip Larkin's well known ode to family *They Fuck You Up*. As the movie hopscotches between found footage hunting rites and animated asides, it is trying to dig in somewhere and find roots. Where is the larger design in all this, the promised relief of order? Children and animals are held out and then withdrawn as possible saviour portals. And in the absence of the divine, we are busy killing animals. Families, of course, are the incubators of these killers. "We all love children. We love them not because they are good, which they are not, but because, unlike adults, they can claim the potential to become good." How can a movie filled with so much despair feel so fine?

LESSER APES

15 minutes 2011



While this movie went through several bravura versions in its inaugural year, its final deadline call has smoothed out the asides and diary trajectories and refashioned it as the closest thing to narrative the dynamic duo have yet managed. Farrah, a primatologist by trade, falls in love with her object of study, the female bonobo Meema. At last the unfulfilled promise of sex arrives via interspecies love. Propelled by three lengthy voice-over sessions, *Lesser Apes* slowly but surely turns toward questions of the law, the moral codes and legislatures that lie in and outside the body. The sexual revolution is led by self-named "perverts," though it is striking just how often animals—human and ape alike—appear quite alone. The movie closes with a suite of lush diary throwaways: a bedazzled cat in the forest, corpses twitching, a scarred arm resting on the remains of a drink. A bilingual song quietly echoes that the singer would like to impart a moral lesson, but doesn't know where to look for it. Oh well.



BIOGRAPHY

Cooper Battersby (b. 1971, Penticton BC) and Emily Vey Duke (b. 1972, Halifax NS) have been working collaboratively since 1994. They work in printed matter, critical writing, and curation, but their focus is sculptural video installation. They are shortlisted for the 2010 Sobeys Art Award, Canada's most prestigious award for artists under 40.

Their work has been exhibited in galleries and at festivals in North and South America and throughout Europe, including The Brooklyn Art Museum, The Power Plant, the Walker Arts Center, The Banff Centre, The Vancouver Art Gallery, The Art Gallery of Nova Scotia, YYY, The New York Video Festival, The European Media Arts Festival, Impakt, and The Images Festival. They have enjoyed fifteen solo gallery exhibitions and five international retrospectives, and in 2011 will be the spotlight artists at the International Film Festival Rotterdam.

The Globe and Mail's RM Vaughan described their oeuvre as follows: "[Duke and Battersby's] works employ a type of educated rawness that celebrates the perverse, and the roughly crafted, but is nevertheless highly articulate and archly considered."

Their video work has won the top prize at festivals in Ann Arbor and Chicago, as well as receiving awards in New York, Zurich and Hamburg. They have been broadcast by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation and Bravo. It has been collected by more than a dozen university libraries, including Harvard and Princeton. They are represented by Jessica Bradley Art + Projects.

Duke and Battersby each received Master degrees in Fine Art at the University of Illinois at Chicago and are currently teaching at Syracuse University. They divide their time between Lafayette, NY and Beach Meadows, NS.



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Terence Dick is a freelance writer living in Toronto. His art criticism has appeared in *Canadian Art*, *BorderCrossings*, *Prefix Photo*, *Camera Austria*, *Fuse*, *Mix*, *C Magazine*, *Azure*, and *The Globe and Mail*. He is also the Toronto correspondent for and editor of Akimblog at akimbo.ca.

Sarah Hollenberg received a BFA from the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design in 2000. She is currently a doctoral candidate in Art History at the University of Southern California.

Mike Hoolboom is a Canadian artist working in film and video. He is the author of three non-fiction books (including a pair of interview books with Canadian media artists), and one novel: *The Steve Machine* (2008). He has co-edited three books on media artists, as well as editing magazines, catalogues and the Fringe Online website (www.fringeonline.ca). He is a founding member of the Pleasure Dome screening collective, and has worked as the artistic director of the Images Festival and the experimental film coordinator at Canadian Filmmakers Distribution Centre. He is the winner of the Bell Award for Video Art (2009)

and the Tom Berner Award for community service. More information can be found at his extensive website: www.mikehoolboom.com

Sholem Krishtalka is an artist and a writer. His writing has appeared in *Xtra Magazine*, *C Magazine*, CBC Arts Online, *Canadian Art Magazine* among others. His artwork has been exhibited in numerous venues around Toronto and the US including Paul Petro Contemporary Art in Toronto and Jack the Pelican Presents in New York City. His work is featured in the premiere issue of Headmaster Magazine (US), and can be seen at www.sholem.ca and sholem.tumblr.com.

Kyo MacLear was born in London, and grew up in Toronto. She graduated from University of Toronto with an undergraduate degree in Fine Art and Art History and a graduate degree in Visual and Cultural Studies. Her first novel, *The Letter Opener* (HarperCollins) was awarded the K.M. Hunter Artists Award and nominated for the Amazon/Books in Canada First Novel Award and the Evergreen Award. A dual British-Canadian citizen, Kyo is also a visual arts writer and the author of two children's books: *Spork* (Kids Can Press, 2010) and *Virginia Wolf* (Kids Can Press, forthcoming).

Jason McBride is a Toronto-based writer and editor. He's a regular contributor to *Toronto Life*, *The Globe and Mail*, *Cinema Scope* and *The Believer*, among other publications.

Monique Moumbow (born in Hamilton, Ontario) received a BFA from the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design in 1992. Initially, she was primarily interested in performance and worked collaboratively with Anne Russell. This collaboration eventually led to a video titled

Liabilities. In 1993 Moumblow moved to Montréal where she began to focus on single-channel video. Her tapes have screened at festivals and galleries in North America and Europe, including the Centre d'Art Contemporaine de Basse Normandie, the Festival International du Court-Métrage (Clermont Ferrand), Impakt (Utrecht), and The International Short Film and Video Festival (Oberhausen). Her videos have been awarded prizes at Cinematexas, The Images Festival (Toronto) and L'Imagine Leggera (Palermo) and are included in the collections of the National Gallery of Canada and the Netherlands Media Art Institute. Moumblow has been actively involved with various artist-run centres in Montréal and was co-founder of Sugar Press. She is currently an MFA candidate at Concordia University.

Steve Reinke is an artist and writer best known for his videos. His work is screened widely and is in several collections, including the Museum of Modern Art (New York), the Pompidou (Paris), and the National Gallery (Ottawa). A book of his scripts, *Everybody Loves Nothing: Scripts 1997 - 2005* was published by Coach House (Toronto). He has also co-edited several books, including *Lux: A Decade of Artists' Film and Video* (with Tom Taylor, 2000), and *The Sharpest Point: Animation at the End of Cinema* (with Chris Gehman, 2005). He is currently associate professor of Art Theory & Practice at Northwestern University. A book of his prose, *The Shimmering Beast*, will be published in spring 2011.

Tom Sherman Post-graduate equivalent: A Space, Toronto. B.F.A., Eastern Michigan University. Founding co-editor of Fuse magazine, Toronto, 1980; represented Canada at the Venice Biennale 1980; founding Head of Media Arts section of the Canada Council for the Arts, Ottawa 1983-87; international commissioner for Venice Biennale 1986; appointed director of the School of Art and Design, Syracuse University 1991; co-founded Nerve Theory, an international performance art/recording collaborative 1997; awarded the Bell Canada prize for

excellence in video art 2003; awarded Canada's Governor General's Award in Visual and Media Arts in 2010

Andrea Slováková studied Mass Media Studies at the Faculty of Social Sciences of Charles University in Prague, after graduation she received the degree PhDr. She also graduated from Film Studies at the Philosophical Faculty of Charles University, where she is now as postgraduate student. Currently she is engaged in documentary filmmaking at the Academy of Performing Arts (FAMU) in Prague. Since 2003 she has worked as a programmer/organizer of the Jihlava International Documentary Film Festival. She has published articles in different film magazines and cultural journals. She is the editor-in-chief of the annual anthology of texts on documentary film called *DO* as well as a magazine about documentary film *Dok Revue*. As an artist, she made the portrait of Czech mathematician *Petr Vopenka* (2006), a film essay called *Clouds* (2006) and a film about supervision *In sight* (2010).