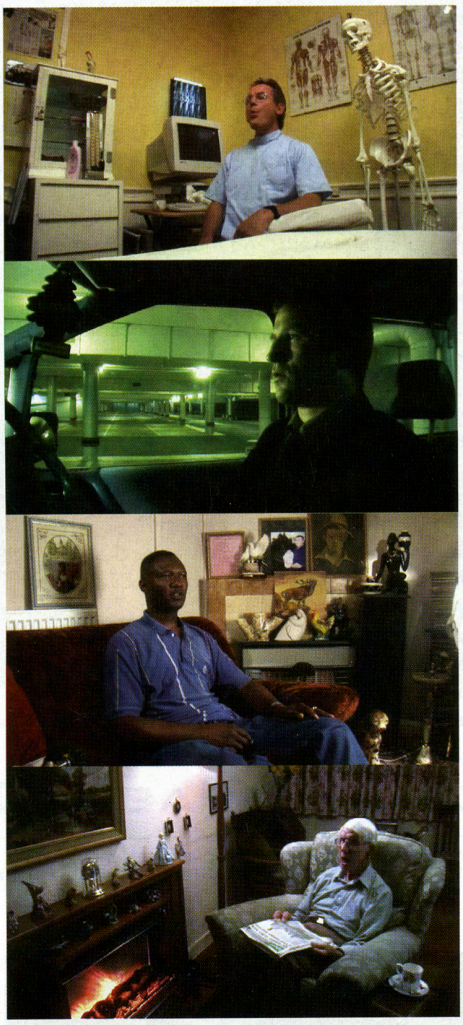
The Art of the Animal Instinct

Marcus Coates *in* Studio Art Magazine, *Issue #172 (Israel,) 2008. Interviewed by Ohad Fishof.*



Marcus Coates, *Dawn Chorus*, 2006. 14 screen installation, duration: 20 minutes (looped). Courtesy of the artist and Workplace Gallery, U.K.

Marcus Coates, *Sea Mammal No.1*, 2003. Archival inkjet print, 62 x 73.3 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Workplace Gallery, U.K.

"I'm interested in the extremes of how we try to understand animals—how we anthropomorphize on one hand and scientifically objectify on the other."

Ohad Fishof: In many of your works you are using the voice to initiate a process of other species' embodiment. Can you talk a little bit about that? What is it about the voice that makes it such am efficient "empathy machine?"

Marcus Coates: The physical position is an obvious and undeniable starting point from which to explore a commonality with nonhuman species. It is perhaps a position from which we explore everything relationally. I'm interested in the idea of a genetic physical knowledge and the potential of this to explore cross-species consciousness and therefore a sense of what it is to be human.

Often the starting point for my investigation is vocalization, the result of a basic common experience—the physical reflex of breathing and the air passing through the voice box. A means of communication, but also perhaps an expression of existence, an impulse to make sound because we and other species can.

Birdsong has evolved into a complex and efficient communication that is not so different from our own in many ways. They change and develop their song in reaction to songs and sounds around them. Birds have regional dialects; they use mimicry, phrasing, repetition, improvisation, volume, and endurance to signal their intentions. I would go as far to say that there is so much development of song that a culture develops between the birds, particularly where there are many singing. This behavior seems so parallel to our own, representing an obvious common ground, but strangely from an animal that is so biologically different from us.

OF: Has studying animals' sounds taught you anything about our own use of vocal sounds?

MC: I work a lot with the tempo of animal sounds, speeding them up and slowing them down to reveal aspects and notes hidden to the human ear, elements that are common across many species. I like to think that the complexity and proximity of these sounds to humans, particularly birdsong, had a fundamental effect on how our languages evolved. It's also taught me the power of the human voice, the skills of mimicry and song used in traditional cultures to hunt and heal.

OF: How much can we trust our assumptions about other creatures' inner experience?

MC: On what level can you relate to another species? I think we can assume that any animal has a sense of being; beyond this it seems to be dependent on the animal and the human. I'm interested in the extremes of how we try to understand animals—how we anthropomorphize on one hand and scientifically objectify on the other. It says a lot about how culture has defined our view of the natural world and in turn our view of ourselves.

OF: You have performed your shamanistic journeys with different communities. Have you experienced very different reactions or are the reactions more or less similar with all groups?

MC: The "shamanistic" journey takes the attempt of embodying another species into an historical context, when becoming animal was used by selected individuals to help their community. I'm interested in this role as an artist, to use my skills for the benefit of society. The reaction from the audience varies wildly from disbelief to hysterical laughter to sincere empathy.

OF: I'm interested to hear about the actual experience of the shamanic trance and the way in which you interpret it to yourself (not artistically, but as an inner experience).

MC: I see this as a state of pure imagination, where awareness of your surroundings is given over to a waking dream. Maybe it is a form of meditation for some people. I

don't see it as very mystical or special, it is a normal place for me to go to and this is probably the same for many other people. I have read that some shamans believe that a yawn signifies a trance—a state of unconscious action. The particular skill of the shaman is to be able to move from a conscious state (to be present with your audience/clients) and then at will, move to an unconscious state (spirit world). This is a skill that I have developed and retained from being a child and being an artist.

OF: Brian Eno once had an interesting definition for the role of the artist in society: "...A type of contemporary shaman... someone whose job is to generate a critical mass of confidence by whatever means." I find that closely related to what you do in your underworld journeys. Can you relate?

MC: My shaman rituals take place in the context of performance. The live ritual and the resulting film are really about and for the audience. They constitute the significance of the work. I am a point around which they can unify and concentrate on their collective problem. I attempt to inspire a confidence in the power of collectivity and imaginative thinking for very practical purposes. Among other things, I've worked with prostitution and people trafficking in Norway, specialist rice marketing and illegal cycle parking in Japan, and housing problems and community fragmentation in Liverpool...

Marcus Coates, *100 Ways to Change the World (detail)*, 2006. Performance, Hayward Gallery, London. Courtesy of the artist and Workplace Gallery, U.K.

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