

ANTENNAE

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Multispecies Intra-

Madeleine Boyd – Multispecies Becoming in the Anthropocene / Madeleine Boyd – Towards a Performative Multispecies Aesthetic / Madeleine Boyd, Hyden Fowler, Louise Fowler-Smith, and Elizabeth Gervay – Multispecies Art Practice / Prue Gibson, Janet Laurence – Janet Laurence: Aesthetics of Care / Craig Campbell – Blackbox Intra-action / Maximilian Haas – Balthazar / Nigel Helyer – Float Like a Butterfly; Sting Like a Bee / Andre Brodyk – The Transponson

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ANTENNAE

The Journal of Nature in Visual Culture

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Antennae (founded in 2006) is the international leading peer reviewed academic journal on the subject of nature in contemporary art. Its format and content are inspired by the concepts of 'knowledge transfer' and 'widenning participation'. On a quarterly basis, the Journal brings academic knowledge within a broader arena, one including practitioners and a readership that may not regularly engage in academic discussion. Ultimately, *Antennae* encourages communication and crossovers of knowledge amongst artists, scientists, environmental activists, curators, and students. In January 2009, the establishment of *Antennae*'s Senior Academic Board, Advisory Board, and Network of Global Contributors has affirmed the journal as an indispensable research tool for the subject, now recommended by leading scholars around the world and searchable through EBSCO.

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BALTHAZAR

Balthazar is a long-term artistic research project by David Weber-Krebs (director), Maximilian Haas (dramaturgy/theory) that explores our cultural relationship with animals using the means of theater. The project consists of a series of three performance productions and a book. Referring to the traditional division of the performing arts between theater, dance, and opera, each performance concentrates on a specific theatrical means: narration, choreography, and sound. And each of them has a different conceptual focus derived from the works of the three philosophers that shaped the contemporary reflection on the animal most prominently: Gilles Deleuze, Donna Haraway and Jacques Derrida.

Author: Maximilian Haas



David Weber-Krebs and Maximilian Haas - Balthazar
Performance Still, 2014

Balthazar is an artistic and scientific research project by David Weber-Krebs (director) and myself (dramaturgy/theory) which looks at animals and their position in western culture. So far three performances were produced in cooperation with theater and dance schools and staged in theaters in Brussels, Hamburg and Amsterdam in 2013 and 2014. The three pieces were evolving in different branches/disciplines of the performing arts, namely theater, dance and music. All three had different conceptual focuses derived from the works of three philosophers that shaped the contemporary discourse around animals and animality most prominently: Gilles Deleuze, Donna Haraway and Jacques Derrida. In direct confrontation with their living object, their notions of the animal were tested, commented upon and criticized. The results of that study were collected in theoretical essays and published in different formats. Balthazar confronts one animal and a group of human performers on a stage. A donkey – Balthazar – is the protagonist, the centre of the action. The piece affirms the uncertainties that such a decision brings with it. Hence the approach is contrary to the circus-paradigm where the animal performs perfection in professional skills. This brings about numerous practical and moral issues, which are incompatible with the regular theatre practice of studio rehearsal and performing/touring in theatres as interchangeable spaces.

The Performance

Balthazar is a piece for one animal performer and six human performers. The protagonist is a donkey named Balthazar who is central to every action that takes place on stage. The project was inspired by Robert Bresson's film *Au hazard Balthazar* (1966), which tells the eventful life story of a donkey: from his early adoption by a human family, through several changes of owners and tasks, until his lonely death; the animal spirals down towards its tragic destiny. The film enacts the dramaturgy of ancient tragedies (especially as understood by Walter Benjamin) and of the Christian passion. These two leading Western narratives concern the isolation of a single outstanding and exemplary person – who represents mankind as a whole – and the fulfilment of his destiny. Bresson takes as his central figure who suffers a distressful fate an animal – that most indulgent of beasts, a donkey. By so doing, he brings animality into the very heart of Western tales that track the course of man into his own being. Unlike in the movie, the human actors in Balthazar have no names and no specified or stable

characterization, and there is no plot. Instead, it is a loose collection of events that happen to or with the animal throughout the performance. The piece sets and modifies performative constellations involving the animal, the human performers and the audience, thereby developing theatrical experiments with notions of animality and the otherness of nature. Balthazar repeats on stage the artistic approach to the animal applied by Bresson on film: the donkey (representing nothing other than itself) is transferred into an alien artistic context designed for representing humankind – and this in turn impacts on the context in which it is placed.

Balthazar juxtaposes scenes in which the animal is involved in simple constellations and patterns of movement, with scenes in which the human performers influence the situation by superimposing fragments of narration onto it that present cultural projections about the animal and evoke these projections in the audience. The piece thus shifts back and forth from performance to theatre – where we define 'performance' as a live and active intercommunication between performer and audience (and among performers) that has an open outcome, and 'theatre' as a specific representation of an absent meaning. It oscillates between provoking a – paradoxical – face-to-face encounter between the animal and the spectators, on the one hand, and presenting the animal as an element in a framed image, on the other.

Balthazar confronts the spectator with his narcissistic desire to identify with the animal, fully knowing that this projection – which is fundamental to conventional theatre – is inadequate for this situation. Looking at the animal, the spectator is tempted to assign a psychological significance to his behavior and an artistic or an anti-artistic purpose; he may assume that the donkey is complying with the performance, that the beast is understanding and approving of it, that he is participating in the piece and developing it further using artistic means. Inevitably we follow this reading of the animal, while being fully aware of its absurdity. Herein lies the performance's humorous component. Neither theatre nor film can communicate an animal's thoughts – or, arguably, their sentiments. In fact, the same applies to humans, but there are conventions and techniques in the media that allow us to forget that. On stage, however, we can bring to the fore anthropomorphization and other projections that the spectator applies to the animal, and reveal the limits of such identifications and projections.



David Weber-Krebs and Maximilian Haas - Balthazar
Performance Still, 2014

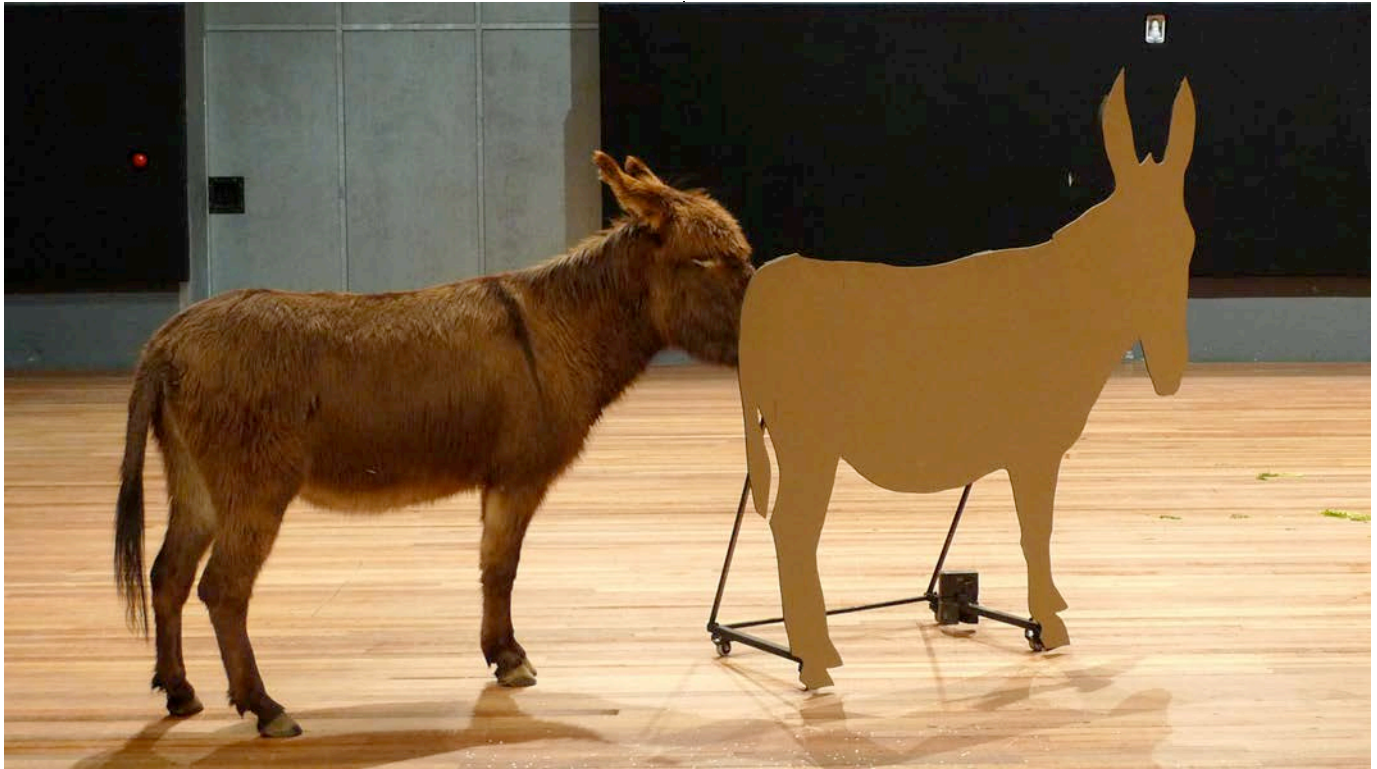
The Process

In the vast majority of theatre performances, any animal on stage is a mere attribute of a human character – often a silent and loyal servant of a master. It is thus a stage prop rather than an actor. *Balthazar* creates a contrast to this archetype by assigning the donkey a protagonist's role.

To do this it was necessary to find a mode of presentation in which the animal and the human performers give each other enough space to develop their own complex presence on stage. Usually, animals are assigned a clearly defined position and significance, be it in highly choreographed theatre, in circuses or in magic shows: the horse is hot-blooded, a withheld force; the lion is ferocious, but nonetheless obedient to the tamer; and the rabbit from the hat is in fact no more than a living object. The donkey was our attempt to find and present the un-fixed animal (a notion that Friedrich Nietzsche claimed for man), a potential for meaning that can develop in a wide range of directions. Our approach was aimed at ridding ourselves of cultural conceptions of the animal.

We originally planned to stage at least some tightly scripted and choreographed theatre scenes with the animal. We soon realised, however, that any action involving the human performers and the

donkey had to evolve from their respective attitudes. There were both aesthetic and practical reasons for this. It was clear that in the presence of the entirely non-theatrical element of the animal, any dramatic performance by the humans on stage would appear overdrawn, hysterical and exaggerated, and therefore not credible. Any prepared and specified action imposed from the outside by the author or director would have felt forced upon the stage or its elements. For this reason, we chose actions that produced certain atmospheric qualities and which presented specific pictorial elements and intended semantics. However, when placed in the context of communication with the animal these components produced a range of different results. In fact, every rehearsal and every presentation featured another expression and another course of action. It proved unfeasible to perform a wholly composed play with the donkey – who remained unpredictable and capricious throughout. We devised a number of scenic tools with which we were able to influence the behavior of the animal in one or the other way, and thereby implement our aesthetic concept. But there was always the risk that – for foreseeable or unforeseeable reasons – the donkey would be too anxious, tired, agitated or uninterested to 'act' in a way that was convenient for the performers on stage. We therefore dismissed the causal and consequential approach. We disaggregated the



David Weber-Krebs and Maximilian Haas - Balthazar
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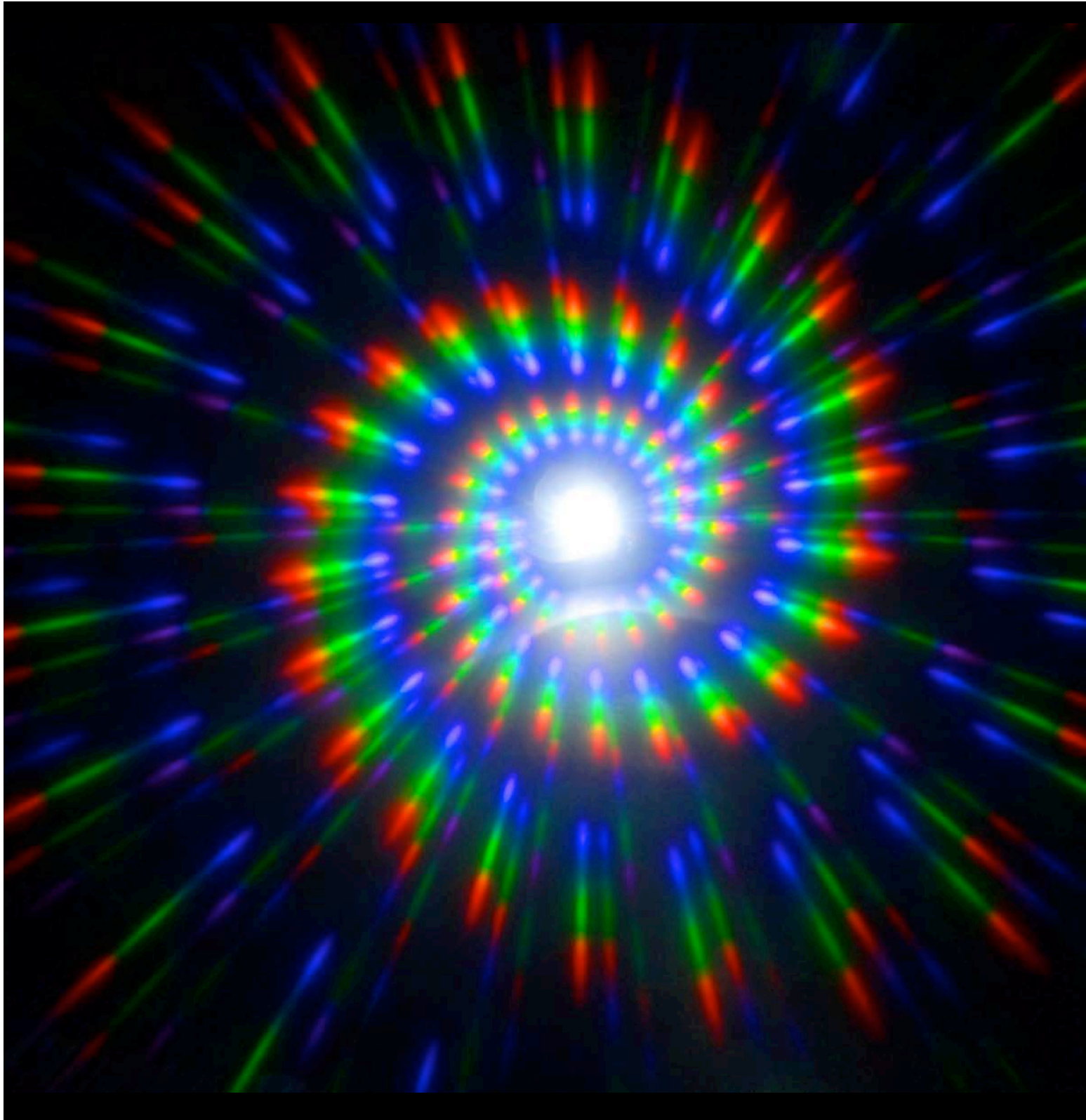
material that we had assembled in rehearsal and drew up a list of actions which could happen to and with the animal. These actions were preset to occur at specific moments in the play but they could, in principle, be tried, interrupted or repeated at any moment, depending on the possibilities or needs of the situation on stage.

An animal on stage compels improvisation – an open form. It cannot be known at any given moment of a piece created in this way whether an action relating to the donkey – developed with it and specified in rehearsal – can be initiated in the performance itself. The representation is at all times a decision ‘into the open’; it is a theatrical challenge, and an artistic evolution both imposed on the animal and developed with it. This model sees theatre emerging only at moments where a constellation of circumstances and events on stage meets the theatrical expectations of the audience, triggering a fictional interpretation – whether intended or not.

The donkey is the protagonist in Balthazar, its moving centre towards which all actions are orientated. He is the master of the stage. He appoints the performers; nothing can happen without him. He is the cloudy centre of the piece

where all narrative strands converge, become entangled and are lost. He is an insurmountable hurdle for the constitutive elements of the ‘stage’ as an artistic system: intention, identification, representation, framing, shared experience, community of minds, and so on. It thereby questions that entire system. The presence of the donkey shows the obscene underside of action. All the guiding lines of the stage events are directed towards the protagonist who did not choose this role and who excels primarily in apathy. It makes no difference what happens – when the play begins, when it ends, whether the performance is a success or not, whether its artistic message is interesting, which notions of animality are addressed, or whether the public applauds – the donkey couldn’t care less!

Maximilian Haas (*1982) is a cultural theorist and dramaturg based in Berlin. He studied at the Institute for Applied Theatre Studies in Gießen, Germany. He is currently staging and writing a practice-based PhD project at the Academy of Media Arts Cologne on *Animals on Stage: An Aesthetic Ecology of Performance*. He has worked at the Volksbühne Berlin and collaborates with performance-makers and choreographers. Haas teaches in art academies and universities. His research interests and publications primarily address the field of animal studies and performance aesthetics as well as Poststructuralism, Actor-Network-Theory, New Materialism and Pragmatism.



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