


Looking into the Face of an Animal As a Mirror: The Case Study of Marina Abramović's Gaze into the Donkey's Eyes/Face

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Abstract. In the context of Una Chaudhuri's interpretation on animal faces, the article focuses on the performance *Confession* (2010), in which Marina Abramović uses a donkey's face as a mirror of her own past/trauma. Specifically, this example provides us with an opportunity to explore Derrida's (2002, 376) question: 'How can an animal look you in the face?' As Derrida (p. 376) points out, according to Martin Buber's book *I and Thou* (1923), an animal's eyes have the power to speak a great language ... 'Sometimes I look into a cat's eyes' (Buber 1958, 96–97). Additionally, the article interprets three more performances (by Croatian artists – Saša Živković, Šikuti Machine and Hrvoje Cokarić) involving *confrontations*-mirroring with animals. The meeting between a man and an animal is, therefore, always 'the meeting of two subjectivities, two wills, which by definition are mutually exclusive' (Grušovnik 2023, 13).

Key Words: face of an animal, performance art, Marina Abramović and donkey

Pogled v obraz živali kot v ogledalo: študija primera Gaze into the Donkey's Eyes/Face Marine Abramović

Povzetek. V kontekstu interpretacije Une Chaudhuri o živalskih obrazih se članek osredotoča na performans *Confession* (2010), v katerem Marina Abramović uporabi oslovski obraz kot ogledalo lastne preteklosti/travme. Natančneje, ta primer nam ponuja priložnost, da raziščemo Derridajevo (2002, 376) vprašanje: »Kako ti lahko žival pogleda v obraz?«. Kot poudarja Derrida (str. 376), imajo v skladu s knjigo Martina Bubra *Jaz in ti* (1923) živalske oči sposobnost spregovoriti v veličastnem jeziku ... »Včasih gledam v mačje oči« (Buber 1958, 96–97). Poleg tega članek interpretira še tri performanse (hrvaških umetnikov

– Saše Živkovića, Šikuti Machine in Hrvoja Cokarića), ki vključujejo soočenje/odražanje z živalmi. Srečanje med človekom in živaljo je torej vedno »srečanje dveh subjektivitet, dveh volja, ki se po definiciji izključujeta« (Grušovnik 2023, 13).

Ključne besede: obraz živali, performativna umetnost, Marina Abramović in osel

An animal looks at us and we are naked before it (her/him).
Thinking, perhaps, begins there.

Jacques Derrida

Marcus Bullock (2002, 99) opens up his article 'Watching Eyes, Seeing Dreams, Knowing Lives' with the question 'What do we see when we look at an animal?' Following this question, this article documents several performances (art) that explore the concept of using an animal's face as a mirror. There have been various performances and artistic explorations where the faces of animals are used metaphorically as mirrors, reflecting human emotions, perceptions, or societal issues. One notable example is the work of French artist Pierre Huyghe. In his film and installation *Untitled/Human Mask* (2014), Huyghe created a sculpture of a monkey wearing a realistic human mask. This installation challenges viewers to consider the erasing of boundaries between human and animal (non-human), raising questions about identity, consciousness, and the human tendency to anthropomorphize animals,¹ and 'evokes many such themes: the monotony of work and the repetition of ritualistic behaviours, the possibility of a catastrophic future, and the power that living creatures hold over us as ciphers of ourselves' (Huyghe 2014).

It is no coincidence that Una Chaudhuri begins her essay '(De)Facing the Animals: Zooësis and Performance' (2007) with countering Derrida's philosophical question 'How can an animal look you in the face?' with the question 'Did your food have a face?' posed on the activist posters

¹ Anthropomorphism, which is often labelled as a blind spot in animal ethics, was exceptionally clarified by ethologist Frans de Waal when he stated that some other scientists always objected to him, asking if the term 'reconciliation,' in the context of his study of chimpanzees, was overly anthropomorphized. On the other hand, de Waal points out, expressions related to aggression, violence and competition have never been problematic in scientific anthropomorphism; therefore, as soon as it was about a friendly outcome of the fight, it was demanded that one switch to a dehumanized language (cf. Grušovnik 2023, 67; cf. Mota-Royas et al. 2021; cf. Moussaieff Masson and McCarthy 2004, 15).

(the skinned head/face of a slaughtered animal) of People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals/PETA (2001).

The image is not of a face at all: it is of the head of a carcass, skinned and bloody. It is an image of a *missing face*, aptly representing the disappeared animal of the modern meat industry, which invests hugely in suppressing such images, and which systematically and literally keeps its operations, its vast animal factories, hidden – and keeps us, the consumers, in the dark. [Chaudhuri 2007, 13]

John Berger focuses primarily on the gaze of one animal, specifically the gaze of a captive animal, as emphasized by Kari Weil in her article ‘Killing Them Softly: Animal Death, Linguistic Disability, and the Struggle for Ethics’ (2006). The gaze that Berger argues we lost in the nineteenth century can equally be the gaze of the animal we kill, whether in the context of slaughter for food or slaughter in the name of art (cf. Berger 2007). This gaze of the animal at the moment of its slaughter also appears in the academic novels on animal rights – *Lives of Animals* and *Elizabeth Costello* by J. M. Coetzee (cf. Marjanić 2022).

The Donkey’s Gaze and the Gaze in the Donkey’s Eyes/Face

As mentioned in the introduction, we will focus on the view of the animal, specifically on the face of the animal included in the performance arts, with the duo performance *Confession* (2010) by Marina Abramović as our starting point. In this performance, the artist uses the donkey’s face as a mirror, an escape from the faces of people and culture, as a form of rest, and as an opportunity to confess her own trauma, as a mirror of her own past/trauma. We can use this example to explore the question: ‘How can an animal look you in the face?’, raised by Jacques Derrida (2002, 377), which is one of his central concerns. Derrida pointed out that, according to Martin Buber’s book *I and Thou* (1923) (English translation by Ronald Gregor Smith in 1958), an animal’s eyes have the power to speak a great language (Buber 1958, 96–97). Marina Abramović, in her performance/video piece titled *Confession* (2010, 60 min), confronts a donkey while kneeling before him. She explains:²

I took one donkey into the backyard of Nicholas’s [Nicholas Logsdail] house and made a video piece called ‘Confession.’ I confessed

² <https://www.facebook.com/300806525911/posts/i-took-one-donkey-into-the-backyard-of-nicholass-house-and-made-a-video-piece-ca/10156176855450912/>.

to the donkey all the flaws and mistakes of my whole life, starting from my childhood and extending to that day.

Only by the slight swaying of the donkey's tail can one conclude that the recording (video) is not frozen. Abramović states that she chose this animal because of the donkey's exceptional power of immobility, persistence, and endurance. She does not mention the speciesist attribution of that animal as supposedly stubborn.³ First, she tried, by her words, to *bewitch* the animal, *hypnotize* him,⁴ and then silently narrated her life's misfortunes to him as a way of freeing her memory – a confession like a strip of text scrolling across a screen. After the donkey left the interaction an hour later, the artist said she felt a little better (Racanović 2019, 201).

Trisha McCagh points out that animals will mirror us for different reasons. 'They are our constant companions and "roommates" in our home' (McCagh n.d.). In the context of the mirroring process, McCagh also notes that 'our animals' mirror our conditions and issues and this is the point where animal communication is the key to uncovering our *animal's problems*.

The performance with the donkey was conducted by the artist in preparation for her performance piece *The Artist Is Present*, which involved her sitting for eight hours a day over a period of three months in 2010. She trained for months to build the physical stamina to perform the piece, and in her memoir *Walk through Walls* (2019), Marina Abramović comments on how the performance demonstrated the profound need for people to connect. In *The Artist Is Present*, the artist perceptively faced individuals *face-to-face* to get as deep as possible into their psyche and encourage them to think about the meaning of life. After a month of performance-

³ The donkey is primarily symbolically associated with the 'qualities of stubbornness, ignorance, foolishness. It is characterized by its unpleasant voice and long ears, as well as its use for heavy labor. However, in its native habitat of Central Asia and North Africa, the wild donkey does not exhibit the negative traits of its European-transplanted relative. In Phrygia, he was worshipped (Midas I), and he figured as a highly esteemed animal among the Romans. Today, he is featured in the emblem of the American Democratic Party' (Hansen-Kokoruš 2016, 43–52). The donkey/ass was first domesticated in ancient Egypt around 3000 BC, well over a millennium before the horse (Sax 2001, 14; Bough 2012). Unfortunately, in anthropocentric history textbooks, the fact that a small Egyptian white donkey was exploited in the construction of the pyramids is often omitted as well as the fact that 'the ancient Egyptians are using donkeys as their only beast of burden' (Bough 2012, 184).

⁴ I do not use the pronoun 'it' for animals in accordance with the concept of rejecting linguistic speciesism, as advocated by Joan Dunayer (2004).

confrontation, she removed the small wooden table in front of her so she could be as close as possible to the person with whom she had a psycho-emotional duel, conversation, confrontation and/or mirroring. At the same time, the artist also tried to contribute to the associative effect of the spectacle with her clothes; she had a blue dress in March, red in April and white in May. Abramović states that blue signifies peace and tranquillity, red stands for energy, and white, as the last colour, purification (Marković 2011, 196).⁵

Just as the mirror serves as a reflection of the world (Bandić 1997, 190), so too do the eyes of the donkey in this performance function as a passage for the artist between two worlds, two realities – between trauma (the past, the autobiographical story written on the screen) and the present (the encounter with the eyes of the donkey). The eyes of the donkey almost serve as doors of perception (in Aldous Huxley's sense) for confronting one's own past. This is, in fact, the bottomless gaze discussed by Derrida (2002, 381), in reference to Lévinas:

In looking at the gaze of the other, Lévinas says, one must forget the color of his eyes, in other words see the gaze, the face that gazes before seeing the visible eyes of the other. But when he reminds us that the 'best way of meeting the Other is not even to notice the color of his eyes,' he is speaking of man, of one's fellow as man, kindred, brother; he thinks of the other man and this, for us, will later be revealed as a matter for serious concern.

While Derrida poses the question physically naked before the gaze of his cat, Marina Abramović autobiographically exposes all the flaws and mistakes of her entire life before a donkey. However, the effect in meeting the gaze of the animal seems to be the same, regardless of whether he/she involves the body or the psyche. In communication with the gaze of the animal, the Cartesian dichotomy between body and *psyche*, spirit, disappears. Or, as Derrida (2002, 381) would say about his cat's gaze upon his naked body when he rose from the bathtub:

As with every bottomless gaze, as with the eyes of the other, the gaze called animal offers to my sight the abyssal limit of the human: the inhuman or the ahuman, the ends of man, that is to say the border crossing from which vantage man dares to announce himself to

⁵ Cf. 'Mirror Your Audience: Four Life Lessons From Performance Artist Marina Abramović' (n.d.).

himself, thereby calling himself by the name that he believes he gives himself.

In the aftermath of the cathartic experience of *The Artist Is Present*, the artist performed the series *Back to Simplicity* in 2010, stemming from her need to re-establish a simple and immediate connection with nature. As the artist stated ('Marina Abramovic: Luciana Brito Galeria' n.d.):

[...] after I had been looking at one thousand six hundred and seventy five pairs of eyes, after that incredible human connection, I needed to be connected with nature. [...] Being under a tree, holding a lamb for two days, in complete joy, that's what *Back to Simplicity* is all about.⁶

The aforementioned emphasis on the dichotomy between *nature* (a lamb resting under a tree) and *culture/sophistication* (in the Museum of Modern Art – MOMA) is evident, as the artist not only engaged in direct eye contact with the audience but was also observed and *gazed* upon by both the audience and monitored by the media. What the artist refers to as a return to nature is, of course, not natural for the lamb she was holding in her arms.

In relation to *Confession*, I note Emmanuel Lévinas's thinking about the face of animals. Specifically, in Lévinas's ethics, the Other appears as a face, interlocutor and transcendence, or, in his words in *Totality and Infinity*: 'Because the face (of the Other) does not belong to my world, despite appearing in my world, I cannot eradicate it. In a very profound sense, then, the Other remains' (Lévinas 1979, 189–199). But we should add that Jan-Harm de Villiers (2020) noted that Lévinas's writings on animals are 'problematic in denying (albeit inconsistently) that the animal is capable of eliciting an ethical response or, put simply, that all animals have a face.' Lévinas pointed out the following in *The Paradox of Morality*: 'One cannot entirely refuse the face of an animal. It is via the face that one understands, for example, a dog' (Lévinas 1988, 169 in Burgat 2015, 186). The *face-to-face* relation (French: *rapport de face à face*)⁷ is a concept in Levinas's thought on human sociality. It means that, ethically, people are responsible to one another in the *face-to-face* encounter. Specifically, Lévinas says that the human face 'orders and ordains' us. It calls

⁶ Cf. 'Marina Abramović: Holding the Lamb, 2010' (n.d.), Breese (2010); 'Marina Abramović' (2022).

⁷ Unlike Lévinas, Erving Goffman in his book *Interaction Ritual: Essays on Face-to-Face Behavior* (1967) did not study interspecies relations.

the subject into 'giving and serving' the Other.⁸ Marcus Bullock (2002, 99), whom I mentioned at the beginning of this article, states that the muteness that shrouds animals' senses accompanies us in the realm of our language.

In the case of Bobby, a dog who greeted Jewish prisoners in a concentration camp as humans, Lévinas concluded in his essay 'The Name of a Dog, or Natural Rights' that animals can be far more humane than humans (cf. Crowe 2008, 315–316). He wrote that Bobby 'was the last Kantian in Nazi Germany, without the brain needed to universalize maxims and drives' (Lévinas 1990, 153). Svendsen (2019, 137) adds that this statement is ironic because it is known that Adolf Eichmann declared himself a Kantian. Svendsen critiques Lévinas's claims that animals are supposedly incapable of showing interest in or caring for others for their own sake, contrasting this with Lévinas's view that humans are defined by their openness to others. However, Svendsen emphasizes that Lévinas and other interned, detained persons, the Jews in the concentration camp who experienced Bobby's gaze, recognized him as a gaze, perceived it as one of friendship and loyalty (p. 139). On another occasion, Lévinas emphasized that 'one cannot entirely refuse the face of the animal. [...] Yet the priority here is not found in the animal, but in the human face' (Lévinas 1988, 169 in Crowe 2008, 315).

Marina Abramović's profound interaction with a donkey (through gaze and eyes),⁹ as expressed in her personal narrative of childhood trauma, exemplifies a shift towards psychological communication with animals. By gazing into the donkey's eyes, Abramović uses the animal's visage as a mirror of her own trauma, thereby emphasizing the potential for emotional connection and understanding between humans and animals. Of course, this can be seen as one-way communication, where the artist releases her own trauma through the eyes, or gaze, of a donkey, as a radical animal studies interpretation of the work might emphasize. This possible and realistic interpretation of the duo-performance *Confession* can be connected to Steve Baker's critique of Beuys's weeklong gallery action

⁸ Cf. Burgat (2015).

⁹ Similarly, photographer Tim Flach achieves sensory identification most strikingly and obviously by highlighting the animal's eyes (Kramer 2005, 145): 'Flach applies meticulous care to the problem of illuminating the eyes. [...] Before shooting can commence, Flach spends hours "bending the light" so that the eyes of the animal model are illuminated with requisite precision (a procedure which usually tires the subject long before shooting has even begun).'

Coyote: I Like America and America Likes Me, performed in 1974 at the René Block Gallery in New York. The performance juxtaposes living animals with a rather *clumsy* and/or shamanic human symbolism (cf. Antliff 2014, 107–110; Baker 2000, 151). Although Beuys emphasized that it was a shamanic encounter with an animal symbolizing the indigenous peoples conquered by Western colonialism (which is why the coyote urinates on the *Wall Street Journal*), Steve Baker (2003, 150–151) focuses on Beuys's symbolic use of the gloves that the artist repeatedly threw to the coyote, Little John:

The spectacle presented to viewers through the chainlink fencing separating them from the main space of the gallery, took the form of the artist's and the animals continuing interaction with each other as the week progressed [...]. [A] confrontation of human and animal, through which, Beuys suggested, 'the roles were exchanged immediately.'

Although initially structured by a cycle of ritualized actions, Beuys was acting out the limits of his own control of the situation, with the coyote figuring for him as 'an important co-operator in the production of freedom' (Baker 2003, 151). The animal enabled the artist to edge closer to that which 'the human being cannot understand' (p. 151).

Unlike Abramović, who focuses on the gaze, Beuys focuses on the hands, and in this symbolic interaction he threw his gloves to the coyote, about which he said the following (Baker 2003, 151):

The brown gloves represent my hands, and the freedom of movement that human beings possess with their hands. They have the freedom to do the widest range of things, to utilise any number of tools and instruments. They can wield a hammer or cut with a knife. They can write or mould forms. Hands are universal, and this is the significance of the human hand [...]. They are not restricted to one specific use like the talons of an eagle or the mole's diggers. So the throwing of the gloves to Little John meant giving him my hands to play with.

Baker (2003, 151) links Beuys's statement about gloves/hands to Heidegger's (1947) *Letter to Humanism*:

His initial theses, framed as a means of assessing how it was possible to know or to have access to the experience of the world, ran as follows:

1. The stone is wordless.

2. The animal is poor in world.
3. Man is world-forming.

After the Museum of Contemporary Art of Vojvodina bought Marina Abramović's video performance *Confession* for \$80,000, reactions arose concerning the poor economic situation in Serbia.¹⁰ Additionally, cartoonist Corax (real name Predrag Korakšić), a renowned Serbian cartoonist for the newspaper *Danas*, created a cartoon featuring a *šajkača* (traditional Serbian men's cap) atop a donkey's head, inviting the artist to examine Serbia's historical trauma instead of Marina Abramović's own. 'The cartoon raises the question that is on everyone's minds: Will the exhibition *Cleaner* (the title of one of the artist's exhibition in Belgrade in 2019) provide an opportunity for Serbia, as well as for Marina Abramović, to move past the sins of the past and pave the way for a long-awaited reconciliation?' (Novi Magazin, 2019). Questions were also raised as to whether the donkey was drugged, given that he stood motionless in front of Marina Abramović and watched for an hour.¹¹

Finally, in relation to the mirroring effect seen in the faces of animals in Marina Abramović's performances, it is worth noting that she also utilized the human skeleton to achieve similar mirroring purposes.¹² The video piece *Cleaning the Mirror II* (1995) involves the act of steady, deep, conscious breathing by the artist, which sets in motion the skeleton placed on her naked body. This produces a living, supine sculpture with a breathing skeleton which is revived through the artist and her naked body (Racanović 2019, 167). The act affirms the reconciliation of the living with their own mortality; the skeleton is a mirror, just as the donkey serves as a mirror into/through the same kind of mortality in the performance *Confession*. Nancy Spector, the curator of the Guggenheim Museum, emphasizes that this work, along with *Cleaning the Mirror II*, evokes 'Tibetan death rites that prepare disciples to become one with their own mortality'

¹⁰ The unpaid nature of animal labour can be explored in performance works, as Nicolas Ridout (2006) demonstrates. Thus, with the return of the animal to the stage, its strangeness does not stem from the idea that he/she has no place there or nothing to seek, but rather from the realization that there is suddenly nothing strange about it. We sense that the animal does indeed have something to seek on the stage and that he/she can be used much like any human performer.

¹¹ Cf. Stojanov (2018).

¹² The artist does not treat the donkey's eyes as a mirror in terms of objectification. Rather, they represent subjectivization, allowing the artist to achieve a 'view of confession' that she could not attain with human beings.



Figure 1 Marina Abramović, *Confession* (2010). 'For the majority of the film however, the donkey remains posed – virtually frozen and with a deceptively sympathetic look in his eye – opposite the artist' (Amicus Asini 2016; photo Marko Ercegović/MSUV, by courtesy of Film, Video and Photography Collection of the Museum of Contemporary Art Vojvodina, Novi Sad)

(Spector n.d.; cf. Pešić 2017, 121). The same scene of lying with the skeleton, filmed from a different angle, became the foundation for her video performance *Nude with Skeleton* in 2005 (Pešić 2017, 121).¹³

Reading as Mirroring to Animals

In contrast to the silent mirror confrontation with an animal and the psycho-emotional confession, I present two examples of confrontations with animals in which artists read selected works to animals.¹⁴

¹³ The dark, mysterious world of Tibetan monks is the basis for her three video performances dealing with death that M. Abramović entitled *Cleaning the Mirror* (1995). She conceived the performances after an invitation from art critic Chrissie Iles to exhibit at the Museum of Modern Art in Oxford (Pešić, 2017, 121).

¹⁴ The classic way to study self-awareness in animals, as encyclopedia notes highlight, is with the mirror test developed by Gordon Gallup, Jr. in 1970. To conduct the test, an animal's body is secretly marked, for example by placing odorless red dye on the face, and then the animal is given access to a mirror. Gallup refers to the mirror test as the real metaphor of the ancient Greek aphorism 'Gnothi seauton,' the looking glass as self-awareness. As stated by veterinarian Marty Becker, among animals, only higher primates, dolphins, orcas, elephants, and European magpies are currently known to recognize that what they see in a mirror is a reflection of themselves. While pigs show no sign of recognizing their own reflections, they can use other information seen in the mirror, such as identifying the location of food placed behind them (Becker 2012). In his chapter titled 'Through the



Figure 2 Saša Živković: *Reading Zerzan* (2022) to the Donkeys (photo by Kruno Jošt)

Reading Zerzan is a performance by Croatian artist Saša Živković performed in 2022 in the village Rasoja (Lovinac, Lika, Croatia, the Lovinac Performance Nights). Živković reads John Zerzan's text *The Case Against Art* (2009) to donkeys who listen to him, and at the end of the reading they leave. Živković's performances, which at first glance appear as a simple or ironic joke, have deeper *philosophical* foundations ('MMK22 predstavlja: LVP performans "Čitanje Zerzana" 2022). In this performance, he opted for John Zerzan's anarcho-primitivism, which is not just a mere assessment of values, and the performance refers to a 'non-human' audience in the open space (in nature, the natural habitat for these donkeys – the audience).

In the aforementioned essay, among other points, Zerzan expresses criticism towards avant-gardes that have lost their original essence by succumbing to sensationalism. He also voices criticism over the symbolic value of art, arguing that it should return to reality (Zerzan n.d.):

Mirror, in the Puzzle,' Svendsen (2019, 67–70) highlights various points, including the fact that dogs and cats do not pass the mirror test. Svendsen explains that dogs primarily rely on their sense of smell for orientation, as emphasized by Stanley Coren's observation on the mental abilities and intellectual potential of dogs: 'I smell, therefore, I exist.' Hearing is the second most important sense for dogs, while sight ranks third. Considering the problematic aspects of the mirror test, it becomes evident that it lacks significance in terms of detecting self-awareness. Or as Lesley J. Rogers and Gisela Kaplan point out, the mirror test tells us little, if anything at all, of the mental aspect of the self. Another notable drawback of the test 'is the fact that it can be used only on captive animals, which may not be representative of their species' (Rogers and Kaplan 2004, 177).



Figure 3 Šikuti Machine: Darko Pekica, *Vogrda* (2011), or Reading the poem 'Miracles' by Walt Whitman to the Cows (photo by Andi Bačić)

Reacting against the increasing mechanization of life, avant-garde movements have not, however, resisted the spectacular nature of art any more than orthodox tendencies have. In fact, one could argue that Aestheticism, or 'art for art's sake,' is more radical than an attempt to engage alienation with its own devices. The late 19th century art pour l'art development was a self-reflective rejection of the world, as opposed to the avant-garde effort to somehow organize life around art.

The artist points out that as far as contact is concerned, the animals were calm and sometimes timid when he read the text a little more expressively; it is *interesting*¹⁵ that as he was throwing pages, one of the *she-donkeys* ate a few pages. Patience was closely related to feeding, as they were given hay.

The next example of a performance involving reading to animals is the video performance *Vogrda* by Šikuti Machine (2011), named after a meadow where Darko Pekica (the author of the video performance) reads Walt Whitman's poem 'Miracles' while tending to his cows. The connection to anarcho-primitivism, as outlined by John Zerzan, can also be seen in the activities of the Šikuti Machine collective from Savičenta. Their

¹⁵ Here I emphasize that I personally found it *interesting* as a visual sight.



Figure 4 Hrvoje Cokarić and Vanja Pagar: *Export*, 14th Days of Performance Art in Varaždin 2015

work affirms village life by demystifying artistic processes and promoting rural *culture*¹⁶ toward a place of greater cultural recognition.

The very name of the Šikuti Machine group symbolically refers to the link between rural, or, as the collective itself says, peasant life in Šikuti near Savičenta (in Istria) and modern technology.

While Živković chose to read Zerzan's critique of avant-gardes that have lost their original essence by succumbing to sensationalism, Darko Pekica chose Whitman (n.d.) who addresses (our) existence in the 'marvellously marvellous' poem 'Miracles' (published in the 1855 edition of his book of poetry, *Leaves of Grass*), starting from everyday observations, the physical and material world, enumerating a series of poetic images, possible scenes, situations and experiences to their bridging, transcendence and merging with the spiritual, from a walk through the streets of Manhattan, a bee in an apiary, other insects in the air, the wonders of the sunset

¹⁶ Under the term 'rural,' Šikuti Machines also refer to nature in a simplified sense, as part of the binary opposition between village and city. However, we can also use the compound term 'natureculture,' first introduced by Bruno Latour in *We Have Never Been Modern* (1993; originally published in French in 1991), to denote the ontological inseparability of nature and society. As Jane Bennett (2010, 108) puts it, we live in an era 'when the interactions between human, viral, animal, and technological bodies are becoming more and more intense.'

or the thin arc of the new moon, all the way to the movement of the sea. Finally, in this reflection on life and everything visible – here, there, next to us, and even what we sometimes fail to notice – he concludes the poem with the question ‘What strange miracles can there be?’ At the same time, the poem about miracles seems to ask the question ‘Is there such a thing as a miracle?’ Specifically, while some would look for miraculous healing or resurrection from the dead or some other such dramatic miracle as evidence, Walt Whitman reveals, through the strange phenomenon of life in simple, free-form verses, that he believes in miracles – not because he has experienced biblical or other extraordinary miracles, but because he has experienced the same things most people encounter daily, though many fail to recognize them as miracles.¹⁷

The main goal of the multimedia project *Toward/d*¹⁸ *Europe*, conceived as a community art initiative by the Split multimedia artist Hrvoje Cokarić, is to integrate true artists with the coastal-Dinaric donkeys, who are threatened with extinction in its natural habitat in Croatia. In his monograph *Toward Europe*, he also highlights their view/eyes (Magdić and Cokarić 2016, 40):

You can't put a donkey into a cage. He won't sing. He can't be a slave. Although he is a democratic child, he too is proud, he is dignified and he is able to put himself in order. You think that he thinks you're better than him? You beat him and he doesn't even turn his head. And if he turns his head and *looks at you, you can see in his eyes that he thinks very little of you*. A donkey is full of dignity, he doesn't give you much importance and maybe he even despises you, or feels sorry for you ... Not all donkeys are on the same height, but not all people are the same, you can find all kinds of them. Usually people don't understand him, so they beat him. And that is all that they know.

The performance *Export*, as part of the project *Toward/d Europe*, fea-

¹⁷ Here I would like to mention the performance *Requiem for Boškarin* (2005, Svetvinčenat, Istria) by multimedia artist Darwin Butković, dedicated to the Boškarin *who* was slaughtered the next day. (The term *B/boškarin* refers to a breed of cattle native to the Istrian peninsula, which spans parts of Croatia, Slovenia, and Italy. The Boškarin is also a symbol of Istrian heritage and is celebrated for its cultural significance in the area.) Along the lines of the activity of St. Francis, who preached to the birds, the artist thus decided to play *Requiem for Boškarin* (cf. Marjanić 2014, 1662).

¹⁸ ‘Toward,’ not ‘towards’ in this specific case because of the play on words. The Croatian word *tovar* refers specifically to a donkey used for carrying loads or cargo. In English, it can be translated as a ‘pack donkey’ or simply a ‘donkey used for carrying goods.’

tured two donkeys from Varaždin – Jura and Ferdo – alongside the artists Hrvoje Cokarić and Vanja Pagar. In this project, the donkey-artists and their human artist colleagues, as Hrvoje Cokarić (2016, 24) points out, become the ultimate suprematists, ‘those who will resist the world that we ourselves have created and which wants to destroy us.’ Just as Traveler’s donkey from 1922 became Croatia’s first Dadaist donkey (cf. Marjanić 2014), and for some a Zenithist or futurist, maybe even a constructivist, what is important is that he is an avant-garde figure.¹⁹ The leader of the Uzgon association, multimedia artist Hrvoje Cokarić connects with the Dalmatian donkeys, who are disappearing, drawing a parallel to the donkey Benjamin from Orwell’s allegorical novella *Animal Farm* (1945). Benjamin represents *kynicism*, a philosophical teaching focused on virtue, a return to nature, and the rejection of social conventions – principles championed by figures like Antisthenes and Diogenes. Cokarić adds that *kynicism* is synonymous with anarchism, and he identifies his Dalmatian donkey as both an anarchist with artistic determination and a suprematist.

In Conclusion as *Reflection*

All of the animals used by the artists in these case studies are mammals or those with faces that humans would likely recognize, such as donkeys and cows. These artists are not focused on animal rights, nor is their aim to *disrupt* “normalized” human-animal interactions. Only Hrvoje Cokarić’s self-sacrifice serves a dual purpose: both for the preservation of donkeys, *who* are unfortunately disappearing in Dalmatia (Croatia), and for the artistic project called *Toward Europe*. However, they do not anthropomorphize these specific animals; rather, they *use* animals in their *natural state*.²⁰ Marina Abramović stated that she ‘took a donkey into the backyard of Nicholas’s (Logsdail) house,’ while Saša Živković performed *Reading Zerzan* to the donkeys in their *natural habitat*. Additionally, Darko

¹⁹ Hrvoje Cokarić and Vanja Pagar also came up with a gilded ‘donkey dung’ as a souvenir that tourists can take home from Croatia. The multimedia project *Toward Project* explores the protection of the coastal Dinaric donkey and includes an ironic cryptocurrency based on donkey dung. The ‘cryptocurrency donkey,’ gilded donkey dung, becomes an exceptional Croatian souvenir, with the project aiming to lay the foundation for a future park for indigenous Dalmatian animals with educational and cultural content.

²⁰ By the term ‘natural state,’ I mean that the animals remained in their living space; they were not placed on a theatre stage or in a gallery. Of course, the term ‘natural state’ does not imply their potential freedom in this context.

Pekica, from the artistic collective Šikuti Machine, uses cows as a scenography for Whitman's poem 'Miracles' about nature and its wonders. It is not known how Marina Abramović managed to calm the donkey for one hour; she wrote that after about an hour, the donkey decided to leave, 'and that was it. I felt a little better' (Abramović 2019, 283). She recorded the performance on the island of Lamu in the Indian Ocean, where she had come at the invitation of Nicholas Logsdail. She described how she was fascinated by the donkeys on the island: 'They are the most static animals I have ever seen – they would stand for hours in the strongest sun, almost motionless' (Abramović 2019, 283). Saša Živković told me that he kept the donkeys calm with hay, and Darko Pekica had no need to calm down the cows because they were in their territory, on the meadow Vogrda, where they graze on the grass.

Like Derrida, these artists also use animals to explore ontological questions. Zerzan's anarcho-primitivism is reflected in Živković's performance with donkeys while Whitman's poem, celebrating the wonders of nature, resonates in Šikuti Machine's performance. Both can only be fully appreciated by animals untouched by civilization. Or, as the Šikuti Machine states (Marjanić 2014, 1162):

At the moment when the objective and social reality disappear in imposed 'reconstructions,' re-branding and re-design, led by market economy and cruel interest when a strip of land represents a property and the social interest in ecology gets marginalized, Vogrda take us back into nature and encourages us to believe that there is a spot under the sun where the pastoral idyll is true.

Jacques Derrida, in his article 'The Animal That Therefore I Am,' addressed his readers on the subject of standing naked in the presence of his cat, 'or *this* cat, *this* specific cat with which he shared aspects of his life, and this cat with him' (Reich, 2022).

I often ask myself, just to see, *who I am* – and who I am (following) at the moment when, caught naked, in silence, by the gaze of an animal, for example, the eyes of a cat, I have trouble, yes, a bad time overcoming my embarrassment. Whence this malaise? [Derrida 2002, 372]

However, there are similarities between Derrida's view of the cat and Abramović's view of the donkey's face, both of which involve searching for pathos in the eyes of animals. 'What Derrida experiences, and is searching for an expression of, is *pathos* – the pathos in the artificial human-animal relationship. He finds pathos in the suffering of animals' (Reich, 2022). Or

as Derrida states in his article 'The Animal that Therefore I Am (More to Follow)' (2002, 372–380), the animal can be looked at, but he also warns that philosophy may forget that the animal can look at us and that he/she can have his/her own point of view towards us.

It has its point of view regarding me. The point of view of the absolute other, and nothing will have ever done more to make me think through this absolute alterity of the neighbor than these moments when I see myself seen naked under the gaze of a cat. [Derrida 2002, 380]²¹

As I pointed out, the duo-performance *Confession* by Marina Abramović can be contextually linked with Beuys's action involving a coyote, particularly regarding the zoo-ethic use of the animal. Additionally, in terms of the symbolic meaning of the two performances (Saša Živković, Darko Pekica) involving reading to donkeys/cattle, we can also draw a symbolic connection to Joseph Beuys's action *How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare* (1965). By contrasting the hare (*intuition*) with the human (*rationality*), Beuys covered his head with honey and gold leaf, then spent three hours walking through an exhibition of his work, explaining the art to a dead hare (Berghaus 2005, 161). Beuys points out that 'even a dead animal preserves more powers of intuition than some human beings with their stubborn rationality.' Human thinking was capable of achieving so much, but it could also 'be intellectualised to a deadly degree, and remain dead, and express its deadliness in the political and pedagogical fields' (Antliff 2014, 62).²²

²¹ Žarko Paić solves the aforementioned meeting of the cat's gaze and the naked philosopher with the inverted question: why is Derrida's cat (not) ashamed of the reciprocal shame of the philosopher as a non-cat? Derrida states that he is not looking at the 'naked' cat, but that the little cat is looking at him, the 'naked' Derrida, not the man-philosopher. He describes how the cat's gaze disrupts his sense of identity and challenges his perception of being the master of language and reason. Derrida emphasizes the cat's gaze as something that sees him without any cultural or linguistic mediation, exposing the vulnerability and animal (non-human) aspects of his existence. 'In this gaze, the Other, i.e. man, sees something sublime and monstrous in general, because the gaze comes from an animal. Shame is Derrida's response to the event of meeting "his" cat while he is bathing naked in the bathtub. It is not just any kind of shame, not even the apocalyptic one of Josef K. at the end of Kafka's novel *The Process*: "Shame will outlive him!" It is the pure vitality of individual contingency, the irreducibly "human-all too-human". It is only through this encounter that man perceives himself as 'naked' in the presence of the Other Being (species/genus of animal). Who is truly "naked" and who is actually "looking" at whom – is Derrida as a man looking at a cat/an animal or vice versa?' (Paić, 2022, 613).

²² The performance based on interpreting his own work was staged at the opening of the ex-

Aldo Leopold, in the essay 'Thinking Like a Mountain' (first published in 1949), wrote about how, in his youth, he witnessed a dying wolf and how that experience changed his attitude towards nature (Leopold 1987, 130):

We reached the old wolf in time to watch a fierce green fire dying in her eyes. I realized then, and have known ever since, that there was something new to me in those eyes – something known only to her and to the mountain. [...] But after seeing the green fire die, I sensed that neither the wolf nor the mountain agreed with such a view.

The green fire in the gaze of a dying wolf taught Leopold a lesson for life (Sanders Pollock and Rainwater 2005, 7).

In any case, this donkey's gaze (cf. Yong 2017; Saporito, n.d.), this *zoo-centric* essay²³ will only be read by those with a sense of *Solastalgia*,²⁴ as Glenn Albrecht would say.

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hibition *Joseph Beuys ... irgendein Strang ... (Some Rope or Other)* at the Schmela Gallery in Düsseldorf on 26 November 1965, which was also his first exhibition.

²³ The article is a part of the project *Bestiary of Croatian Ethno-Culture: Interdisciplinary starting points (BESTIA)*.

²⁴ A form of emotional or existential distress caused by environmental change.

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