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“Becoming Sheep” by Charlotte Grum. A Zoe-Egalitarian Turn in the Artistic Practice

In the olden days the voice of man, raised in reason, was confronted by the roar of the lion, the bellow of the bull. Man went to war with the lion and the bull, and after many generations won that war definitively. Today these creatures have no more power. Animals have only their silence left with which to confront us. Generation after generation, heroically, our captives refuse to speak to us.¹

Charlotte Grum is a transdisciplinary Danish artist who consciously undertakes an artistic dialogue with the philosophical foundations of posthumanism. In 2015, during the “Descendants” exhibition, she made site specific performative action entitled “Becoming Sheep.” Five hours a day, five days during each of the five weeks of the project, Grum spent her time, bound with a harness to a live sheep, walking along the Danish heath, establishing a more just relationship with the animal and the surroundings. Her artistic practice has revolved around Karen Barad’s concept of *intra-action*. By formulating the notion of *intra-action* in opposition to interaction, Barad assumed a continuous relationality of action, constituted by interdependent entities, both human and nonhuman, animals and things. In this way, Grum “wanted to explore the discursive and material effects of the interaction of human and nonhuman animals in order to challenge the gender and anthropocentric reading of history . . .”²

Critical analysis of “Becoming Sheep” by Charlotte Grum will attempt at examination of varied sources documenting the performative action, from

¹ J. M. Coetzee, *The Lives of Animals*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey 1999, pp. 15-46.

² Ch. Grum, *Homepage*, “Becoming Sheep — Description of the Project” (2015), www.charlottegrum.dk/project/becoming-sheep/ (20 November 2018)

photographs, video and audio recordings, interviews, to correspondence of the artist. The emphasis will be placed on evaluation of underlying post-humanist principles and their relevance for the artistic practice.

The New Narrative for Lady Rist³

The direct incentive for the “Becoming Sheep” project was participation of Charlotte Grum in the exhibition “The Descendants” (dan. *Efterkommere*) organized by Kunstpakhuset in Ikast, Denmark, between 19th September and 25th October 2015.⁴ Each of the eight female artists invited was presenting their own response to the life of Johanne Severine Frederikke Rist (1815–1899), a local legendary figure. Mysterious Lady Rist (in Danish Jomfru Rist) orphaned and without funds, in 1857 left prominent family and their bright estate north of Copenhagen and settled first for a housekeeping post at one of the local farms at Hesselbjerggård in Jutland, only later to start cultivating on her own a small plot of land on a desolated heath near Hammerum Herred. She had spent there 20 years, breeding animals, growing crops, struggling against harsh climate, with minimum resources. Tales were told of her hospitality towards children grazing sheep in the heath. Yet, the figure was not remembered as a kind person but a social outcast. In 1963, the municipal council of Gjellerup Sogn erected the memorial stone for Jomfru Rist with short inscription: “Jomfru Rist lived here in solitude, around the 1880s.”⁵

According to Charlotte Grum, the words inscribed on the stone falsified the perception of the life of Johanne Rist, overlooking the company of her animals: sheep, a cow, dogs and hens which lived together with her on the heath.⁶ This discovery became the last straw that made her “write” her personal narrative for Jomfru Rist which in fact turned into a tale of the artist’s own self-chosen exile,⁷ her own encounter with Sheep no. 2, and

³T. L. Hansen, *Jomfru Rist og hendes slægt*, Ikast 1982.

⁴ Among the artists enlisted in the exhibition were: Charlotte Grum, Gerda Thune Andersen, Julie Henriksen, Pernelle Maegaard, Nina Kleivan, Christina Capetillo, Vibe Bredahl and Annette Skov. Kunstpakhuset in Ikast, Denmark, “Homepage” www.kunstpakhuset.dk/uk/exhibitions/previous+exhibitions

⁵K. H. Jørgensen, *Den stolte adelsfrøken valgte det ensomme liv på heden*, October 2015, [in:] www.xn-kurthjrgensen-gnb.dk/den-stolte-adelsfroeken-valgte-det-ensomme-liv-paa-heden/ (20 November 2018)

⁶Ch. Grum, *Transcript of a Becoming Sheep audio recording. Interview by journalist Mads Bernhardt Jensen*, October 2015, [in:] www.charlottegrum.dk/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/InterviewTranscript.pdf (25 January 2019).

⁷Ibid.

her own act of defiance against disappearance of animals and nature from the lives of humans. The origins of the divide can be traced in Aristotelian dialectics, identifying the categories of human and animal in strong opposition to one another. The dichotomy was further strengthened in the philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas, Descartes, Kant, Hegel, and Husserl. John Berger blamed the culture of capitalism for the paradox of the historic loss of proximity between humans and animals that occurred during the last two centuries. Zoos, animal toys, urban pets, and animal imagery were supposed to compensate for the withdrawal of live creatures from the daily life of the humans, but rendered them more marginal and remote. As a consequence, the encounter with live animal was made impossible, isolating human beings even further.⁸

The Paradigm of Zoe-Centred Egalitarianism

The essential purpose of posthumanist research trajectory is to question a common human model as the measure of all things. Zoe-centred egalitarianism allows to conclude that human beings are not endowed with life exclusively. Zoe, as defined by Rosi Braidotti, is an all-encompassing, vital life force that acknowledges life not as the right of one species. On the contrary,

... zoe as the dynamic self-organizing structure of life itself stands for generative vitality. It is the transversal force that cuts across and reconnects previously segregated species, categories, and domains.⁹

Zoe-egalitarian turn lies at the core of post-anthropocentrism, it engenders the search of an empathetic pattern of building new human/animal relationships which is essential to the “Becoming Sheep” performance.

Charlotte Grum found the new mode for establishing interspecies relation on the grounds of agential realism, i.e. the concept of Karen Barad’s *intra-action*. According to Karen Barad’s agential realist ontology, the two or more entities that enter *intra-action* “do not pre-exist their acting upon another but rather materialize”¹⁰ in this symbiotic relationship. They enact their agency within phenomena, i.e. the entanglements of intra-active agents.¹¹ It is there — within phenomena — where “individual” components through

⁸ J. Berger, *Why look at animals?*, [in:] *About looking*, Vintage; Reprint edition, 1992, p. 28.

⁹ R. Braidotti, *Po człowieku*, trans. J. Bednarek, A. Kowalczyk, Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, Warszawa 2014, pp. 138-139, 156.

¹⁰ K. Barad, *Intra-actions. Interview with Karen Barad by Adam Kleinman*, “Mousse Magazine” 34, Summer 2012, p. 77.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

intra-actions determine their properties and boundaries, then differentiate themselves and separate subjects from objects. The surrounding reality is, thus, composed of “things-in-phenomena” that co-exist “in the ongoing flow of agency.”¹² *Intra-action* “unsettles the metaphysics of the ‘I.’”¹³ Thus, the essence of the human is no longer determined in contrast to the animal. It is not predetermined before its occurrence but co-shaped by the involved agents.

“We Are in This Together”¹⁴

Central to the “Becoming Sheep” project was the *intra-action* between the artist and the animal. The artist chose to enact this performance in a woollen androgyny costume, “the thickened skin shell, (her) extra layer against weather and wind,” obstructing her moves to situate herself closer to the sheep.¹⁵ Charlotte Grum initiated the action subtly, trying to build trust and confidence in the sheep on the farm. After preliminary introduction, the artist connected herself to the animal with a sackcloth harness and the two figures ventured out to the heath barren.¹⁶ The artist and the animal, wandered off to the new place, the remote, distant heath, seemingly natural habitat, where in fact both seemed to be alien, none of them was used to spending so much time in nature. Both struggled against the cold and the wind; the human sensed the recurrent asthma, and noticed the runny nose of no. 2.¹⁷ For both of them, it was a form of an exile, for Charlotte Grum — from the convenience of her life in Copenhagen, for the sheep — from the comfort of the all-familiar, small farm in Hesselbjerggård.

On the 26th September 2015 Charlotte Grum wrote to Tora Balslev:

¹² K. Barad, *Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter*, “Signs” Spring 2003, p. 817.

¹³ K. Barad, *Intra-actions. Interview with ...*, p. 77.

¹⁴ Ch. Grum, *Precarious Bodies, Letter to Dr Donna McCormack*, 25 September 2015 [in:] www.charlottegrum.dk/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/Poly-perspectivesDONNA2017.pdf

¹⁵ Ch. Grum, *Tales of becoming — autoethnographical notes from Becoming Sheep 2015, Letter to Tora Balslev*, 15 September 2015 [in:] www.charlottegrum.dk/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/Dear-Tora.pdf

¹⁶ The Sheep no. 2, sometimes called a “Basse” was kindly provided on loan by local farmers from Hesselbjerggård, [in:] F. Thulstrup, *Hedekonen med fåret*, “Ikast Avis” 7 October 2015 [in:] www.auib.dk/artikel/hedekonen-med-fret (20 November 2018).

¹⁷ Ch. Grum, *Tales of becoming — autoethnographical notes from Becoming Sheep 2015, Letter to Tora Balslev*, 26 September 2015, [in:] www.charlottegrum.dk/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/Dear-Tora.pdf

I have placed myself in the sun — I try to make the heat of the sun thaw out and wake up my brain cells. It is cold on the heath. My body takes form after the surroundings. It has caught a cold and is not used to the living conditions of the heath. Maybe this is how it is to be a heath body?¹⁸

With time passing by, the ongoing interplay between the two females and their temporary habitat brought small changes in the way the sheep reacted to the artist: No. 2 approached her faster and lied down in her presence which was uncommon for the sheep.

When that happened for the first time, we had been walking together for a week, and then she lied down at the end of harness. That was a bit of a victory, I thought, either she is very very tired or she feels very very safe with me being in the other end.¹⁹

The sheep sensed leaves flutter in the wind and people approaching from the distance of one kilometre.²⁰ Charlotte Grum, as well, recounted heightened sensitivity, e.g. to the smell of gasoline in Copenhagen that until then was not that distinct, “it is like my senses unfold being with her, her way of being in the world rubs off at me.”²¹

Bound together with a harness, the artist and the sheep experienced physical connection throughout the action. The harness, the pivotal element of the intra-action, was compared by a journalist from a Danish newspaper, *Jyllandsposten*, to an umbilical cord.²² On one hand, it was a visual reminder of the growing bond between the figures, on the other hand, it acted as a form of restraint, obstructing their moves. Its use, disputable on the grounds of building just relations with the animal, raised reasonable, yet exaggerated doubts from ethical standpoint.

At some point of the action, the artist was prone to “a sort of bodily vulnerability” and “fragility of will.” With time, the needs of the sheep were easier to recognize just by observation. When they walked away from the farm, the artist knew the sheep wanted to go back. Yet, the animal did not do anything “as if there was some kind of cease-fire.” Instead, she lingered around, turned slowly as if pretending to eat grass and suddenly began to pull. “I just find it so funny, because it is such a well-chosen manoeuvre —

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ch. Grum, *Transcript of a Becoming Sheep audio recording* ...

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Charlotte Grum, *Tales of becoming — autoethnographical notes from Becoming Sheep 2015*, Letter to Tora Balslev, 15 October 2015 www.charlottegrum.dk/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/Dear-Tora.pdf

as she is almost able to pull me home by doing it,” recalls the artist.²³ It was a subtle, intuitive manipulation. “If she does something slowly, then she might be able to allure me to go with her!”

In the final days of the “Becoming Sheep” Charlotte Grum recounted:

I feel like we have become part of their landscape. . . . somehow the sheep and I are easily folded into the existing texture. Maybe we embody the landscape and the human-nonhuman relations? For sure I have become more sheep and less human. And what a relief!²⁴

The Artist in a Sheepskin vs. Philosophical Sheep

Since the early days of the performance Charlotte Grum identified one of the main problems of the action — its documentation. “How do we capture the tenderness of the heart, the more cuddly side of the sheep, the animal smell from me?”, she asked.²⁵ The artist resorted to various media, namely photography, video and audio recording, interviews with the press and correspondence with Tora Balslev and Donna McCormack. At some point, she even considered measuring blood pressure and checking the amount of parasites in her stomach, to monitor the changes of the becoming process. Alas, none of media selected was rendering correctly the processual character of this intra-action.

The photographs taken on site possessed unquestionable aesthetic qualities, yet frozen frames failed to recognize the growing connection between the artist and the animal. The exchange of correspondence between Charlotte Grum and her colleagues was planned as a resonance chamber where the artist was able to juxtapose her thoughts, experiences against the voices of fellow critters, Tora and Donna. This resulted in interesting source of personal remarks on the attitude of the artist and the sheep as well as descriptions of encounters with passers-by who approached the pair, often bearing gifts of food and souvenirs, which proved a greater social impact of the project to that previously planned. Moreover, a good documenting practice was noticeable in audio material recorded by Mads Bernhardt Jensen on the spot. The journalist accompanied the artist and the sheep on their way and recorded interesting interview with the artist together with the sounds of the animal, wind, and nature, leaving behind 1-hour audio account of their encounter.

²³ Ch. Grum, *Transcript of a Becoming Sheep audio recording* . . .

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ch. Grum, *Tales of becoming — autoetnographical notes from Becoming Sheep 2015, Letter to Tora Balslev*, 26 September 2015, [w:] www.charlottegrum.dk/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/Dear-Tora.pdf

The most biased proved to be the coverage by media, issued by the local newspaper “Ikast Avisen”²⁶ and the news programme on TVMV.²⁷ On the arrival of the journalists to collect the materials, Charlotte Grum failed to convince them to situate themselves within the performative intra-action as the active agents. Thus, their presence inhibited the existing ritual of the sheep and the artist. The TV material, limited to 2-minute video, did not render their symbiotic relationship, but the very nature of othering process that occurred earlier. Together with irreverent titles such as “Artist in a Sheepskin,” “Philosophical Sheep,” “The Wife of the Heath with Sheep” and indulgent commentaries: “a woman dressed in wool and a sheep in the same dress,” the press material secured publicity but the project started to co-exist in a different, ridiculed dimension, apart from the posthuman encounter.

Modes of Becoming

. . . “we” are of the world. We are part of the world in its differential becoming.²⁸

Not only the given title of the work of Charlotte Grum but also its theoretical framework imposed association with Deleuzian concept of “becoming animal.” Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari traced the nature of “becoming” in different stages of reconstruction of the self and the other. The process of becoming, thus, referred to transition, metamorphosis, occurring in time, in space, and in being itself. Becoming other, becoming woman, becoming animal did not refer to the formation of yet another entity, but described the notion of “becoming imperceptible,” minoritarian. Rather than indicating a shift from one being to another, from one identity to yet another one, Deleuzian term “becoming” deconstructed the concept of the dominant subject.²⁹

For if becoming animal does not consist in playing animal or imitating an animal, it is clear that the human being does not “really” become an animal

²⁶ F. Thulstrup, *Hedekonen med fåret*, “Ikast Avisen” 7 October 2015, [in:] www.aoib.dk/artikel/hedekonen-med-fret (20 November 2018)

²⁷ “Kvindelig kunstner i fåreklæder,” *Nyheder, TVMV* (4 October 2015) < www.tvmidtvest.dk/nyheder/04-10-2015/1930/kvindelig-kunstner-i-fareklaeder?v=0_n9dm667b&autoplay=1#player (20 November 2018).

²⁸ K. Barad, *Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter*, “Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society” 2003, vol. 28, no. 3, p. 829.

²⁹ R. Braidotti, *Metamorphoses Towards a Materialist Theory of Becoming*, Polity Press 2002, Chapter 3: “Metamorphoses: Becoming Woman/Animal/Insect.”

any more than the animal “really” becomes something else. Becoming produces nothing other than itself.³⁰

In this way, from the process of becoming emerged the politics of difference in itself, not construed in any opposition. “It is in the field of difference that we may . . . move towards a more fundamental transspecies zoontology.”³¹

Similarly to the Deleuzian reasoning, “Becoming Sheep” was never intended to explore a literal transformation of one species into another one. Unlike later quests for knowledge of Thomas Thwaites³² or Charles Foster³³ who searched for closer connection to animality by actually turning animal, Grum initiated her performance from the position of respect and concern about the animal. For Thwaites, the exploration began from an attempt to escape from humanity, for Foster it resulted in heightened awareness of his own human nature. Both failed at their attempts to convince the readers of possibility to turn animal. The destined failure of these human-animal transformations, their human driven character, however, did not efface the significance of their engagement and raised awareness of the non-human animal.³⁴ Heightened sensitivity towards the animal and its natural habitat was also essential observation of Charlotte Grum.

Conclusion

If we had a keen vision and feeling of all ordinary human life, it would be like hearing the grass grow and the squirrel’s heartbeat, and we should die of that roar which lies on the other side of silence.³⁵

Awareness of the animal others, concern about their needs, and respect for them lay at the core of the zoe-egalitarian turn. Charlotte Grum’s project situates itself in the field of interspecies performances, along with the

³⁰ G. Deleuze, F. Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. by B. Massumi, University of Minnesota Press 2005, p. 238.

³¹ M. Radomska, *Towards a Posthuman Collective: Ontology, Epistemology, and Ethics*, “Praktyka Teoretyczna” 2010, no. 1, p. 101.

³² Th. Thwaites, *How I took a Holiday from Being a Human*, Princeton Architectural Press, New York 2016.

³³ Ch. Foster, *Being a Beast*, Profile, London 2016.

³⁴ L. Orozco and J. Parker-Starbuck, *Goats, Badgers and Other Beasts Turning animal and performing the limits of the human*, “A Journal of the Performing Arts,” *Performance Research*, 22:2. www.doi.org/10.1080/13528165.2017.1314695 (20 November 2018).

³⁵ G. Eliot, *Middlemarch*, Penguin Group 2012.

works of Rachel Rosenthal, Holly Hughes, Kira O’Reilly, among others. The artist refrained from attempts to romanticize the relationship, to turn to anthropomorphization of the sheep or to acknowledge the self-imposing, heavily charged religious reading of the species. Post-human philosophical and conceptual foundations resonated strongly in her work.³⁶ Its performative form emphasized the processual impact of the long, 5 week-run project, and echoed Deleuze’s rhizomatic structure, openness to the external factors such as changing weather, mood, or health condition. In the attempt to challenge the divide between human and non-human animals in the field of art, the artist did not impose radical forms of persuasion, on the contrary, she used rather subtle means of expression. In order to develop the relation with the animal, the artist distanced herself from her everyday life. Together with the sheep no. 2, her “partner in crime, co-producer of the project,” Grum was creating a relational structure, fluctuant figuration embodying “the human,” “the animal,” “the nature,” subject to various becomings.³⁷

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Abstract

Charlotte Grum is a transdisciplinary Danish artist, consciously undertaking an artistic dialogue with the theoretical foundations of posthumanism. In 2015, as part of the collective exhibition “Descendants”, she made site specific performances entitled “Becoming Sheep.” Five hours a day, five days in each of the five weeks of the campaign, Grum spent her time, connected with a harness to a live sheep, walking along the Danish moors, establishing a close relationship with the animal and the surroundings. Performance chosen as a form of artistic expression emphasized the processual aspect of the project, its openness to external factors, modifications. The starting point for her artistic practice has become the concept of intra-action by Karen Barad, a continuous relationality of action, constituted by interdependent entities, both human and nonhuman, animals and things. In this way, Grum “wanted to explore the discursive and material effects of the interaction of human and

³⁶ Ch. Grum, Re: Resonance Chamber 2 A Letter to Tora Balslev, 2 October 2015, [in:] www.charlottegrum.dk/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/Dear-Tora.pdf (20 January 2019).

³⁷ Charlotte Grum, Re: Resonance Chamber 2 A Letter to Tora Balslev, (13 September 2015) www.charlottegrum.dk/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/Poly-perspectivesDONNA2017.pdf

nonhuman animals in order to challenge the gender and anthropocentric reading of history . . .”

On the basis of posthuman research, Rosi Braidotti used the term “zoe-egalitarian turn” to encourage us to establish more just relationships with animals. It was the search for an empathetic pattern of building new human / animal relationships that inspired Charlotte Grum in the “Becoming Sheep” project. In the proposed paper, the theoretical foundations of post-anthropocentrism in the writings of Karen Barad, Rosi Braidotti, will be tools for analysing the artistic activity of Charlotte Grum.

Keywords: Charlotte Grum, intra-action, zoe-egalitarian turn, becoming animal.