



Rosemarie McGoldrick, *Trained to speak back to us what we have asked them to say*
(Nicky Coutts in an email to Rosie McGoldrick)

Rosemarie McGoldrick is a London-based sculptor and installation artist who teaches at the Sir John Cass School of Art, Architecture and Design (London Metropolitan University).

Her commissions include sculptures for Futureworld at Milton Keynes, the London Docklands Development Corporation, Homerton Hospital and Chiltern Sculpture Trust in Oxfordshire. Rosemarie organised the art and human-animal studies symposia *The Animal Gaze* (2008) and *The Animal Gaze Returned* (2011) at the Cass, curating two London shows alongside these events. She participated in Olga

Koroleva's Political Animal event at the Showroom, Lisson Grove and has given papers at the global *Minding Animals* conferences (Australia and Mexico) and *Visualising the Animal* at Carlisle.

Koko was a gorilla born in captivity in California, cared for from an early age by Francine Patterson, a psychology academic who taught her a version of the language mostly used by the American deaf community. Language itself has always been a semiotics of the human animal only, arising in our vocal signing first and later in graphic signing. Out of all the billions of other animals whose lives have passed since humans began to hunt, farm, display and then study them, a few gorillas and chimps in captivity are the only other animals who have, usefully or not, signed to humans using our language to any extent. This didn't come naturally to them, but required the learning and teaching skills of human animals who had to occupy these few primates' personal and private space over years and years to succeed in their aims. All of this has been to the supposed advancement of human knowledge, even when we know that this knowledge also retreats, too often with terrible side-effects, and with goals that shift to and fro forever as we age. Yes, Koko's life partly equates with the lives of beagles and research into smoking, with the lives of mice rendered immunodeficient and research into tumour growth. How sadly cruel we have had to be for such a little learning, in order to keep some of us alive a little longer.



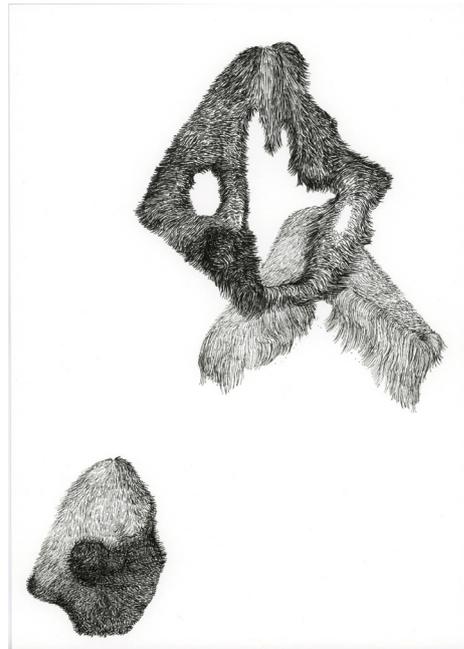
Nicky Coutts *Theory of Mind #1* 2018
laser print on Japanese paper
59 x 85 cm

When humans encounter gorillas, it's a common anthropomorphism to remark on their sad eyes. Yet gorillas are averse to much eye encounter and subjection to the similar primate stare from humans eventually makes them sad and withdrawn. A sadness that lies in the gorillas' human Babylon, megafauna in a mesofauna's world.¹

The film of Koko delivering a script in sign language, sent to the 2015 Paris Climate Conference, embarrasses us, whatever reading we make. We might feel shame at the indictment of humans by another animal, as the film's editors and distributors clearly wish us to. Many may well recoil from a fake, a circus act, an intellectual version of Mr Ed the Talking Horse or Mia the Counting Cockapoo. Or some may just feel sick at seeing a captive, taught primate forced in front of camera to relay some cyborg truths in what appears to be a public service announcement, yet whose point of view, in context, always remains the long-standing, slavish zoo relation. The film-makers wish us to share an understanding with the other animal, when our and Koko's understandings are far more likely to be quite unshared or at best marginally coincident. After all, why might we share understanding with Koko, when so often humans don't understand other humans? The widely circulated comparison of Koko's understanding with a 5-year-old human child is a further co-option. It's a way to establish the human's primacy among primates again, even as we are shown that there may be much more diversity in understandings, simpler or not, than we had once thought possible.

It's this millennial discomfort at having to live with such new pluralities for neighbours that Nicky Coutts takes as her starting point in the exhibition *man stupid*. The juxtaposition of Koko's portrait with English gothic vaulting in the photographic prints is dissonant, awkward and unfixated. An abyss between nature and human culture first gapes wide and then as quickly closes, given our knowledge of Koko's film. The 'fur-following' pen and ink drawings derive from the figure

of Koko as she signs 'See Nature', to end in quiet, abject abstractions positioned in white, negative space. Each of the larger drawings begin around one of Koko's five signs in the film, yet finish in graphic islands that float



Nicky Coutts *See Nature #16* 2018
pen on paper 29.7 x 21 cm

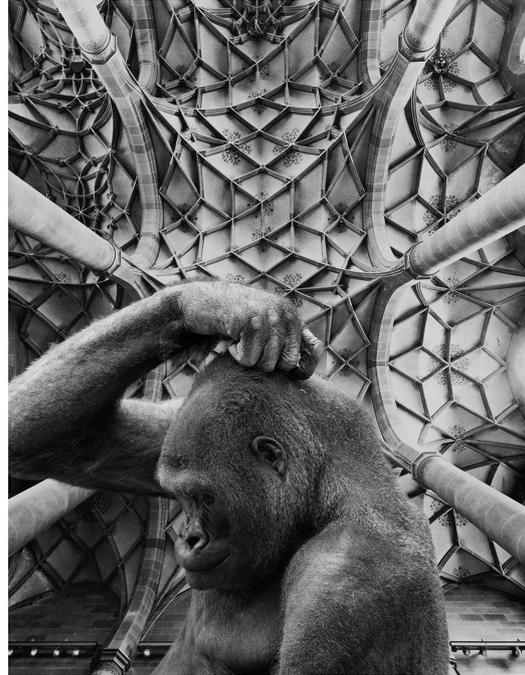
on their paper, archipelagos of understanding, discrete, but part of a chain. There's a welcome and familiar 'not knowing' here. Nicky's stated intention in the *man stupid* work was to be less human when making it. Not to become gorilla at all, but to give herself as an artist over to process and so allow images to have 'an unexpected say'.

Process is that zone in which artists famously say they think by doing, a method that may not predict a result or arrive at a prefigured destination. Process doesn't require plans, drafts or studies. This way lies improvisation, free-form, even the unexpected road to nowhere. Why might *ad libitum*, slow-pulse thinking-by-doing in the

zone appear less human (more animal) to an artist than thinking by any other trajectory? Is it that working in the flow state (no end in sight) is considered romantically primal, free of logic, a paradisaal, prelapsarian undertaking? Or is it that while many human animals can chalk out on a blackboard detailed workings for different types of logical reasoning — deduction, induction and abduction — there are few, if any, who can do the same for art process with such accuracy? The unfathomability of thinking via art process maps nicely to the unknown ways of thinking to whatever unknown ends that Koko the gorilla must have used when signing or not signing. Indeed, that any other animal must use.

We often forget that since Lamarck and Darwin our own animality is a given, an *a priori* argument for our humanity. We still tend to think of ourselves anthropocentrically as the special species, or at least first among equals, despite our best intentions. So we tend not to see our cities and rural settlements as our own animal homes, or our environment as our own animal resource, with our technology as our own animal adaptation. Yet on those very terms, the human animal is of course as wild as any other and, in theory, both sets have been able to meet each other on the common lands of a universal ideal. The discomfiting film of Koko now taps, strokes and prods the simple character of that universality, as we come to think how complex and compromised the practicalities of our animality are going to be. The artist's not knowing, the unfathomability and 'the unexpected say', are exactly what it will take to reposition ourselves, form new habits of thinking and re-imagine other animals for a new relation to them.

1. Megafauna are larger animals, most of which research suggests, have largely become extinct as hominins and humans hunted them for meat and reduced and isolated their populations so much that they became unsustainable — e.g. the mammoth and the moa. We can probably count ourselves as megafauna now, but I've neologised and called us mesofauna (middle-sized) as a rhetorical device.



Nicky Coutts *Theory of Mind #2* 2018
laser print on Japanese paper
110 x 84 cm

Cover: **Nicky Coutts** *See Nature 1 #2* 2018
charcoal on paper
59.4 x 42 cm

Nicky Coutts *man stupid*
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