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TDR Comment

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The use of animals in performance has always given me the creeps, if not outraged me. I have rarely been

aware of artists using animals in a way that was respectful and humane. Rats, for example, have been decapitated and burned to death, starved, incarcerated, mocked. Easy victims with no escape or opportunity to fight back, animals were often the unwilling illustrations of humanity's callousness toward and dominance over other species; or they were anthropomorphized and made to embody and represent human foibles or defects. Placing them in an "art" context didn't hide the playing out of age-old attitudes vis-à-vis animals and our need to control and often hurt and kill them.

No art theory or concept can excuse the immoral use of animals in art. Very few artists have demonstrated an ethical approach to including other species in their performances, or to incorporate them with any sensitivity. I remember once seeing a performer who did a piece with her white pet rat. She simply let her rat wander all over the stage while she performed,

which the rat did, as an obviously seasoned performer. That was lovely, and an exception to the rule. I have included my and others' companion animals in my pieces over the decades. *The Others* (1984) integrated around 35 different kinds of animals—dogs, cats, reptiles, birds, farm animals, research animals, pet rats, exotics, horses, and pigs! The piece highlighted our human relationships with non-human beings. It was performed in Los Angeles at the Japan/America Theatre; in La Jolla



Figure 1. Rachel Rosenthal, Traps, Espace DBD, Los Angeles, 1982. (Courtesy of the artist)

in the Museum of Contemporary Art; in North Carolina in the State University of Raleigh. When onstage, the animals were left to just be themselves. The unmounted horse walked, the monkeys scrambled around on and off their attendant person, the birds perched on hands, a turkey pecked at seeds on the floor, the boas were draped around necks. It was a thrilling show, addressing our views of "the others" according to utility, affection, dominance, mythology and religion, poetry and science. At times I played the animal, at times the exploiter, sometimes myself. Toward the end there was a carousel of animals to live music. Each of the

Rachel Rosenthal, a winner of OBIE, Rockefeller, Getty, NEA, and College Arts Association awards, among others, is an interdisciplinary performer and theatre artist who toured her solo and group works nationally and internationally from 1975 through 2000. She was awarded an honorary doctorate by the School of the Art Institute in Chicago in May 1999, and in 2000, was named Los Angeles Cultural Treasure and received the Association of Performing Arts Presenters Award of Merit. Rosenthal stopped performing in 2000 to resume a long dormant career as a visual artist, working in both oils and watercolor. As Director of the Rachel Rosenthal Company, she continues to teach her signature brand of improvisational theatre, and has recently formed a new ensemble, The Fauve Conspiracy.

beasts told his or her name via the human attendant and received a flower; it concluded with a voice-over while, on a platform, I played with my dog and cat.

Traps (1982) was a piece in which my dog Zatoichi was featured, not in person but in slides and in the script; my rat, Tatti Wattles, was present. Tatti came out from under my table at the end of the piece and traveled on my arm around the stage as images of my hands and fingers grooming him were projected large upon the back wall. The piece had a hopeful ending.

Gaia First Version (1983) was a site-specific performance conceived for the high, pink brick staircase outside Royce Hall at UCLA [University of California–Los Angeles]. It dealt with the Earth and our relation to it; toward the end, a large number of people in lovely regalia descended the steps, accompanying their dogs. The spectators on the lawn below could then meet and play with the dogs—and were encouraged to pet each other!

I have featured or referred to animals throughout my career of about 40 full-length pieces. *Timepiece* (1996) began with an image of linear versus circular time. Linear time was personified by a *butoh* dancer slowly advancing in a straight line; circular time was represented by a videotape of my dog Barney Bear, indefatigably running in circles after a ball, catching it, returning and dropping it, and starting all over again without end. The eponymous performance *Zatoichi*, created after the dog's death at 19 years of age in 1989, was totally about him, his entire life, through his final years. It was a funny and sad solo. Almost all my pieces have featured a central or peripheral reference to animals.

My most recent piece, performed in 2005, after I had officially “retired” from performing in order to paint, was called *Painting is Hell*. It was a “reality show”—structured, but with no script and no rehearsals. People played themselves. I had my painting teacher come and critique my work, projected as slides on to the back wall. However, our lesson was continually cut off, first by my own dogs and then by the “visits” of my friends and students with their



Figure 2. *Sasha, the dog, runs into the audience. Rachel Rosenthal, Painting is Hell, Highways Performance Space, Santa Monica, CA, 2005. (Photo by Kate Noonan)*

leashed dogs. My teacher, after repeated interruptions, became angry. The stage was filling with dogs and their human companions—close to 25 dogs by the end! The audience gasps with each new entrance! As I talk to the spectators about my dogs, about all the other dogs, about the people, about running from the dog cops, about learning dog language, etc., my teacher finally gives up and leaves in a huff. *Drumming* (1971) by Steve Reich, barely audible to start, crescendos; people are chatting louder and louder. I am yelling over the din. A fire truck passes. No dogs howl but all the people

do. Finally I yell: “Everybody off leash!” All the dogs are set free and run toward each other, all around the stage, into the audience, with the people scrambling to catch them back! Pandemonium! I give up, screaming, “Painting is Hell!”

My dogs participate in all my workshops, are in the audience at my pieces, and have been present in galleries, museums, and lecture auditoriums. I always try to bring them wherever I work. They have the protocol down pat and behave like theatre and art lovers.

Dogs don't speak our language—but neither do we speak theirs. It doesn't mean that they don't communicate. Their language, as a matter of fact, is very eloquent. They understand each other perfectly and, with attention and perseverance, we can too.

The lives of animals are fascinating. Their decisions, their preferences, their ways of telling us what goes on with them—these are endlessly exciting moments that can open our minds. We are so close to animals physiologically and genetically, yet we distance ourselves, blocking an avenue of knowledge and experience that could teach us so much. It is a true loss in our lives. To be able to boast of a true animal companion is a very special thing. To use and exploit them, whether for art or any other reason, is a crime. I hope that artists can display humaneness where perhaps other people can't. If artists don't, they are doubly guilty. I assume artists to be capable of empathy, compassion, understanding, respect, and intelligent behavior. If they knowingly hurt or demean animals, forcing them to “perform” against their nature, that is a punishable sin. And I would gladly be the one wielding the whip!