

# **Animal Drag**

*The Critical and Conscious  
Performance of Animality*

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**Abstract:** This essay proposes Animal Drag as an activist performance in which a human critically and consciously performs animality to de-centre the human. Dress and adornment are key to its dissidence. Animal Drag's potential is demonstrated through an analysis of Terry Notary's performance of a nonhuman primate within Ruben Östlund's 2017 film *The Square*. Drawing on posthuman studies, scholarship on subordinated groups and from the field of animal studies, the reading of this performance shows how Animal Drag inherently queers humanist and essentialist notions of classification, particularly the human / animal divide. Paying homage to drag, the essay demonstrates how the material and social semiotics of performance can render transparent the constructions of race, coloniality, ability, and gender, as much as species — in other words, “doing human”. Through theories of dress and prosthesis, highlighting how techne facilitates in-between and “becoming” states, and affect theory, this article argues that humans and nonhumans might share vulnerabilities via Animal Drag. Culture is understood through language and dress, which have been mobilised to construct Otherness. As such, this essay posits that Animal Drag should take place within capitalist Culture industries, as both weapons and targets, to undress powers present and performed. Animal Drag is offered as both practice and theory, content and form.

**Keywords:** *Animal Drag; Posthumanism; nonhuman; performance; drag; animality*

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have always been intrigued by nonhuman animal guises and they have long inspired my researching, inventing, and painting. For example, in my 2018 monograph *Death of the Artist*, I wrote about the use of gorilla masks by the artistic collective the Guerrilla Girls. While I now see such work as mistaken in its assertion that these feminist artists could avoid the trappings of traditional gender stereotypes by dressing as nonhuman animals, the work of undertaking such analysis made clear that nonhuman animals are neither vacuous nor neutral symbols or metaphors. Indeed, while acknowledging how the gorilla masks served as tools for the group's anonymous political activism, they also provoked serious questions around race. To perform as a nonhuman animal is, perhaps unsurprisingly for readers of the present journal, incredibly complex. It can often serve to perpetuate species stereotypes, whether by overlooking ethics of consumption and exploitation, or by being used for shallow, anthropomorphic allegories.

Many strands of scholarship and art advocating for social justice have taken up allied discourses of the nonhuman animal but there is a gap where these could come together through focussed discussions of adornment and performance. Together, these are key interfaces for artists seeking to question animality, where cultural constructs can be critiqued through the material and social semiotics deployed. I call these acts and their analyses Animal Drag.

Some philosophers discussed in this essay have worked to destabilize arbitrary human/nonhuman animal divides, while other scholars have already analysed acts of what I perceive as Animal Drag. In 1994, for example, Catriona Sandilands's poetic manifesto "Lavender's Green?" referred to drag as a tool for queering environmentalism, "to suggest that 'nature' may be partially performative, and to challenge the boundaries between 'truth' and 'artifice'." In 2004, feminist scholars Lynda Birke, Mette Bryld, and Nina Lykke built upon theories of performativity to argue that co-dependent human-animal interrelating, such as observable in the case of laboratory rats, shape human/animal behaviours. They introduced the term "animaling"

1 Sandilands, "Lavender's Green?", 23.

to “describe how we culturally produce the human/animal divide”.<sup>2</sup> While the authors do not reference drag directly, they do posit that “animating can shift perspective from animal essences to a study of the material-semiotic performativity of human/animal” relationships.<sup>3</sup> Their example follows real life nonhuman relationships but I argue that we might understand such complex constructs and divisions through Animal Drag without further displacing the nonhuman. Building on Karen Barad’s work, they also argue that, while language, culture, and discourse matter as part of bridging and dismantling binaries, so too does phenomena and materiality. It is here that I think adornment and dress play a critical role and require more focused attention.

I further read Mel Y. Chen’s 2010 critique of the portrayal of the chimpanzee in the film *Max, Mon Amour* (1988) as an example of critical discourse on Animal Drag. The plot of the film follows a British diplomat in France who hires a secret detective to follow his wife, suspecting her of an affair. It transpires that she has rented a separate apartment and that her live-in lover is a chimpanzee she calls Max. Max is played by an uncredited human actress, Alisa Berk. Chen traverses film studies, linguistics, queer theory, critical race theory, costume studies, animal studies, and more, as part of their “invitation to consider queer-trans animality”.<sup>4</sup> Their discussion foregrounds cultural productions that “castrate” the nonhuman animal, interrogating problematic discourses of sexuality and race. Chen’s analysis demonstrates how multi-faceted Animal Drag can be but perhaps also why we need a defining proposition for its scope and agency.

The term Animal Drag itself is not entirely new, but it is yet to have been theorized as a distinct methodology. In 2011, scholar Deborah Ferreday used the term “animal drag” when she published on the cultural phenomenon of the Cervine and its community, drawing on gaming, fashion, and the problematic nature of language. For Ferreday, Animal Drag was both a gateway and limitation for those

2 Birke, Bryld, and Lykke, “Animal Performances”, 168.

3 Birke, Bryld, and Lykke, “Animal Performances”, 169–70

4 Chen, “Animals without Genitals”, 294.

wishing to queer the boundaries of the human. Animal Drag was also used in the title of the 2012 PhD submission of Anna M. Giannini, which contended “that performances of [nonhuman] animal characters [...] have more to do with communicating assumptions about human identity than with [nonhuman] animals themselves”.<sup>5</sup> While this is true in certain circumstances, this essay contends that it can also be otherwise, particularly if the performance is conscious and critical, as drag’s artform can be. In a 2015 article, Nicole Seymour interrogated what she claims to be Animal Drag by the cast of *Jack-ass*, arguing that they embody the pain of the nonhuman animals they engage with. She concludes that such enactments “reminds us of how urgently we need performative, camp, queer, and trans\* cultural forms to address questions of the animal and environment”.<sup>6</sup>

Thus, I do not claim to invent the term but to propose, define, and demonstrate Animal Drag as an inherently critical and political, cultural act. Animal Drag has not yet been recognized as a particular modality, nor identified as a *genre* of practice and theory. However, it deserves credit for holistically rupturing several aspects of humanism through a singular niche but tactical act. Identifying Animal Drag means we can recognize and create more acute protests that work beyond, in-between, and outside problematic boundaries and binaries, including those of academia. It also means, as Seymour calls for, collating and mobilizing performative, trans-cultural forms that address pressing ethical questions related to our relationships with nonhuman animals.

## **Animal Drag: A Preliminary Definition**

It feels counter-intuitive to set boundaries for defining Animal Drag. When speaking about my work, I have been asked whether it takes place in “fancy dress” or literature, for example. I want it to be theoretically plastic and, in the future, to spill over into pictorial representations and different histories, to be analysed through law or by the social sciences and further afield. But to begin, I use the example

5 Giannini, “Animal Drag”, iv.

6 Seymour, “Alligator Earrings”, 275.

of an ape being performed by a semi-fictionalized human performance artist within the 2017 film *The Square*. The film is set in the Eurocentric, neoliberal culture industry of a Stockholm museum—an archetypal site of contemporary humanism, one might argue. The actual nonhuman animal in this case study is not present. While other species do camouflage themselves and perform as others in acts of survival, or even mimic their human companions, drag here is primarily understood as a human practice of performance, often including traits of exaggeration and parody.

Judith Butler wrote of drag that it is important to remember that “we are actually in the presence of three contingent dimensions of significant corporeality: anatomical sex, gender identity, and gender performance”.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, none of these three may align with the other. As an act of drag, Animal Drag is thus a complex practice in which the performer might not anatomically match with how they identify, nor what they are performing; there could be three different modes of animality or species all present at once. This inherently queers humanist and essentialist notions of classification and being. Following Noreen Giffney and Myra Hird in *Queering the Non/Human* (2008), I take queering to mean “unpick[ing] binaries and reread[ing] gaps, silences and in-between spaces [...] These concern genealogies, aims, priorities, interconnections with activism and other theories and fields, and the thorny issue of who gets to decide on all of this.”<sup>8</sup> I do not though mean to refute scientific distinctions between multiple species, which is different to binary notions of sex and gender. Rather, Animal Drag highlights the somewhat arbitrary divisions between humans and “animals” that Derrida pointed out in 1997 when he coined the term “Animot”.<sup>9</sup> In the same way that gendered drag destabilizes notions of gender, Animal Drag destabilizes “humanness” and its cultural productions of “animality”. “Human” can be performed, gate-kept, and constructed, much in the same way as race, class, ability, and more. In so doing, Animal Drag unsettles the hierarchies these prop up and which have been responsible for countless acts of exploitation.

7 Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 187.

8 Giffney and Hird, *Queering the Non/Human*, 5.

9 This was in a lecture later published in English as *The Animal That Therefore I Am*.

Through the following case study, I define Animal Drag as an activist performance in which a human critically and consciously performs “animality” in order to de-centre humanism, with dress and adornment as key aspects of its dissidence. Because it ruptures culturally curated hierarchies, intended or not by the artist in question, there is similar agency in its analyses. Animal Drag is both practice and theory. Adornment through drag is defined in the wider sense as any form of body modification, be that material, habitual, or temporal. Each of these involves a form of “putting on” by adapting or altering oneself. Animal Drag, therefore, takes as its meeting point for analyses two juxtaposing elements against which Man defined himself as superior: adornment, as a sign of culture, and the nonhuman animal, as the antithesis of cultured.

For subordinated groups who have been treated as “less than human”, the nonhuman animal is sometimes a metaphor (and kin) of oppression. In the following scene of Animal Drag, however, the human is highlighted as a culturally gate-kept subjectivity, forever untenable for some (and let’s not forget the ways that some human groups are often treated as less than some nonhuman animals). We know that nonhuman animals have been used as exploited vehicles for inequality, such as in settler colonial projects of animal agriculture, or the use of feathers as part of sexist consumption habits. The nonhuman animal has therefore been read separately as conceptual content and material form in many theories of ethical living. This proposition demonstrates that, in Animal Drag, the nonhuman animal is both content and form at once; the performance/analyses is critical and conscious of its act *and* materials.

As the following example demonstrates, what makes Animal Drag most potent is its ability to capture many intersections of identity politics with animality simultaneously. This may include class, disability, gender, sex, race, coloniality, and much more, in *addition* to species, within the one performance. Animal Drag thus sits in the middle of a Venn diagram of multiple disciplines and methodologies: it might utilize art history, film studies, or any platform the performance takes place on/in, while it traverses interdisciplinary scholarship, always working in

a bid to agitate societal and cultural divisions to generate new and hopeful conversations around post-anthropocentric, non-normativity.

Throughout my analysis, I draw on key ideas from posthumanist scholars Donna Haraway, Rosi Bradotti, and Patricia MacCormack that support the de-centring of the human. Acknowledging that all subjects are racialized and cannot “become” human comes from the work of Zakiyyah Iman Jackson. I advocate that Animal Drag does not attempt to “become” or mimic other species, with reference to Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari and queer theorist Jack Halberstam, but that drag’s exaggerated art-form might be weaponized; whereby its seemingly dangerous reproduction of stereotypes might parody and thus critique the continuum of white cisheteropatriarchy and the resulting knotted ideologies of civility, coloniality, and species. I highlight how social and material cues are interrupted as part of resisting normative categorization, as drag has historically done. I primarily define performance through the work of feminist and queer theorist Judith Butler. I assert that adornment can be read as *techne* through David Wills’ work on prostheses, which can both aid and Other the being utilizing it. Finally, I advocate that (performed but felt) shared vulnerabilities across (imagined) species might produce more empathy and connection, an affect leading to more critical and conscious audience receptions on questions of animality. I conclude by paying homage to how drag has theoretically and historically informed the concept of Animal Drag while demonstrating that it also has a real history of life and death of its own for its “passing” survivors. I open up definitions of the nonhuman animal and acknowledge that the human is problematically dominant in this proposition but that, by working from within institutionalized notions of culture, Animal Drag is better able to rupture the hierarchies present and performed.

The arrogance of the human species has played a significant part in the loss of up to half of the world’s nonhuman animal populations in just the past few decades. So, as an act that asks us to reconsider anthroponormative positionality and performative behaviours that have impacted the life and death of others, Animal Drag is important and worth focused critique and celebration.





**Fig. 1**

Terry Notary as Oleg in *The Square*, directed by Ruben Östlund (Magnolia Pictures, 2017)

## Animal Drag in Action

In *The Square*, the actor Terry Notary performs as a nonhuman primate to challenge the status quo of toxic masculinity, anthropocentric thinking, and the art world's white elite, itself a microcosm of wider structural power imbalances.<sup>10</sup> Set in Stockholm, the film follows a curator undergoing an existential crisis while simultaneously being responsible for the museum's next big show, featuring a conceptual, public artwork, "The Square". This work is channelled through a nightmare PR campaign that would be more comical if the misdirection of funds and patronizing intentions weren't so painfully realistic. While Christian, the protagonist, comes to reconsider his own ethics and private responsibilities, the audience is drawn into reflecting on the paradoxes of the art world—its capitalist and elitist regime, market driven campaigns and obtuse, exclusive language, all the while ostensibly providing public education and spaces to provoke larger questions around life and altruism.

To celebrate the opening of the "The Square", a private dinner is organized for the museum's patrons and sponsors, something very common in the art world. During the dinner, the audience is called to attention, the lights are dimmed, and an anonymous audio announcement is made to the guests: "Welcome to the jungle", complete with recorded noises of birds and other jungle evocations. This quietens the room with suspense as it becomes apparent that there is to be a "sideshow" attraction. Real-life, specialist nonhuman animal actor and choreographer Terry Notary, of the most recent *Planet of the Apes* franchises (2001–present), then enters through double doors playing the role of Oleg, a performance artist, who begins to roam the room as a nonhuman primate. Oleg fills the role of court jester, clown or even minstrel, in the uncomfortable way that the artist, here, is clearly the spectacle to entertain, and not to be viewed as an equal. Guests initially chuckle and clap with nervous excitement, though it soon becomes apparent that this artist takes his role very seriously.

10 See McCartney, "In Light of #MeToo".

The artist performs as a heterosexual, masculine ape, with the aid of arm-extensions to better drag as the nonhuman animal and embody an apelike gait. The prostheses are evident, discarded and donned when Oleg (or Notary) deems it necessary for his performance. He is also topless, wearing dark, flexible but tight-fitting trousers; he is not naked, nor has any makeup or material attempt been made for the artist to look like a nonhuman primate. Notary's bare chest is also relatively hairless in contrast to what or whom he is embodying through Oleg, perhaps an ironic and unintended reminder of his human grooming choices. Further, there is no CGI, thus the sheer transparency of this drag and its *techne* or materiality makes its manifestation and critique even more pertinent. That this performance generates so much discomfort for all involved is more impressive given how obviously curated it is from the outset. The announcement had also warned, "remain perfectly still [...] safe in the knowledge that someone else will be the prey." This further Others the artist, simultaneously generating fear. The audience stills while he circles their tables, picking at their hair, ridiculing one man, and going on to confront another who assumes a more stereotypically masculine response. They "square off", so to speak, but this human animal ends up leaving the dinner, unable to assert himself outside of cultural norms. The tension is palpable for all except the "wild" and "curious" embodied nonhuman primate, "set free" in the realms of "civilization" at its uttermost extremes of culture—the art world's finest people in their place of worship and leisure; the museum and "private view", dressed in black-tie, a sartorial reminder of classification and divide. These human animals are in drag too, performing their privileged status even among other humans, and not just through adornment, but also their habitus: table manners, self-restraint, and language. Arguably, they are performing cis-species drag; "doing" the human.

As discomfort mounts, Christian tries to draw Oleg back into the "real world" by using his human name and clapping to end the performance, to save face at yet another disaster for "The Square" and, presumably, in fear of further humiliating and thus losing patrons and sponsors due to an artwork seen as having gone too far. This form of curatorial directing is a privilege afforded to the dominant

classes and reminds us of museums' cultural gatekeeping. However, the embodied nonhuman primate does not recognize Christian's human call—Oleg will not be told when to switch his art on and off. Guests look down to avoid being picked on while he is erratic and unpredictable; launching onto tables and making loud calling noises, he soon settles on a woman he seemingly tries to flirt with. Once she retracts her attention, the embodied nonhuman primate physically handles her and pins her down.

This scene is particularly uncomfortable as dominations of sex, gender, and sexuality are emphasized. Eventually, one male-presenting (sartorially aided) guest comes to her rescue and pulls her away. Many other men then join in, pinning down and beating up the embodied nonhuman primate. This act inherently reinforces ideas of white female fragility that play into racialized ideas of abusers, victims, and saviours at the expense of marginalized persons.<sup>11</sup> The scene ends. We are not sure how the embodied nonhuman primate exits—as Oleg, himself a character performed by Notary, or if he continues his Animal Drag until physically debilitated and removed from the room, perhaps by security. For the viewers of the film, he thus conceptually remains in drag.

### **Animal Drag Analyses**

In *The Square*, the artist's embodied nonhuman primate performance explicitly satirizes and problematizes issues with class, gender, sexuality, and species. But racialization also implicitly shapes all subjectivities. Oleg and the audience are all white, much like most of the capitalist art world, but we can also read the embodied nonhuman primate as a metaphor for historical instances of racist entertainment exploitation, alongside the idea that Oleg is introduced as a "jungle threat", where racist connotations can be made around perceptions of bestiality and so-called savage behaviour. This scene lends itself to challenging antiblack connections made between the African diaspora and animality,<sup>12</sup> but also evokes the idea that non-

11 See Phipps, "White Tears", and Davis, "Rape, Racism".

12 See Jackson, *Becoming Human*.

human animals cannot be said to “have” race the way that humans experience it, yet they are inherently racialized.<sup>13</sup> I do not believe that Notary is attempting to speak on behalf of others or perform black-face but his own ethnicity complicates the way that racialization exceeds and works through bodies in this scene. Coloniality is also a perpetual overtone where civility is upheld in the way the character of Oleg needs to be justifiably tamed or eliminated.

Oleg’s arm-extensions, or crutches, can be perceived as disability aids, which both aid and ostracize him. Here, readings can be made between those who are often marginalized but nominally incorporated into society, oscillating between enfreakment and mainstreaming.<sup>14</sup> Wills’s foundational work describes prostheses as functioning in-between many “distinct orders”, including flesh/steel, theory/fiction, translation/quotation, literal/figurative, familiar/academic, rhetoric/medicine, nature/artifice, public/private and more.<sup>15</sup> Notary’s prostheses facilitate his Animal Drag but also reiterate its artificiality; conflating margins between nature and culture, and species. To this extent, we might also understand his arm extensions as “companions”. In *The Companion Species Manifesto*, Haraway famously writes about the specific, mutually dependent relationship between people and dogs. She articulates this as “an implosion of nature and culture” and that the “co-constitution” is “bonded in significant otherness.”<sup>16</sup> This is evident in the prostheses used by Notary (and Oleg) in the way that they literally and metaphorically—in form and content—constitute the artist’s relationship with his nonhuman Otherness. In *When Species Meet*, Haraway specifically discusses crutches as “companion species”, and their utilization as part of a “mind-body inventiveness”, when attributing her father’s successful sporting career to his living “in regard to” these “partners”.<sup>17</sup> The matter of the crutches serves to inform Notary’s embodied animality, whereby

13 For more on this idea, see Harlan Weaver’s *Bad Dog* where he makes this argument regarding the Pit Bull.

14 See Melkumova-Reynolds, “Fashioning Disability”.

15 Wills, *Prosthesis*, 10.

16 Haraway, *Companion Species*, 15

17 Haraway, *When Species Meet*, 168–70

the artist-as-Oleg is able to phenomenologically read and respond to the room through this extended and conceptualized multi-species bodily sense; *enabling* him to get into character with different physical perspectives. His *techne* facilitate the idea that body and mind are intertwined, not divorced, thus critiquing Cartesian ideas of mind over matter, and the notion that perception is as dependent on bodily sensory clues as on the mind's understanding of them.<sup>18</sup>

Some prostheses also require complicity; they can represent the choice to resist, conform, and /or transform oneself. In this sense, prostheses are also modes of dress and adornment; their objecthood is mobilized, enacted, and weaponized, and contains agency as well as stigma. Oleg's crutches here, however, do not read as invitation of pity, a common ableist perception of those perceived or highlighted as different.<sup>19</sup> Instead it mobilizes his *actions*. Wearing prostheses is thus also a tool for drag; not least because the *techne* used in traditional gendered drag—for tucking, shaping, or flattening, for instance—might be considered prostheses, but because drag plays with the material and social world, which prostheses act in-between. As Birke, Bryld, and Lykke write, drawing on Karen Barad, matter is not a fixed substance, but a doing, and performativity should be understood as jointly emerging from language/representation *and* material discursive factors.<sup>20</sup>

In all layers of this scene, the artist is othered, thus he highlights and questions the usual roles of power ascribed to white, rich heteronormativity. The performance does, however, also contribute to stereotypes of animality, such as being explicitly sexual and volatile, but this plays into the paradoxes of drag; questioning the extent to which drag can both perpetuate and problematize dangerous dualisms. That the embodied nonhuman primate is ultimately dominated by the usual suspects demonstrates the sad fate of many non-human animals and minorities. I read this scene as a parodic attack on the particular classist and misogynist art world by “the artist”, via

18 As in Merleau-Ponty's canonical work in *Phenomenology of Perception*.

19 See Taylor, *Beasts of Burden*.

20 Birke, Bryld, and Lykke, “Animal Performances”, 177.

an empathetic, self-dehumanizing performance. Here, neither Notary, Oleg, nor the embodied nonhuman primate want to assimilate, thus protesting the tenets of what it means to live in a contemporary, late capitalist system of exploitation, or to be human.

“The artist”, however, is fictional, and we might reflect on that fact that the performance also functions as a conduit for the political message of the director, Ruben Östlund, who did not fully convey the plan to the “guests”, or film extras, of this scene prior to filming.<sup>21</sup> They were Stockholm’s real art world elite who agreed to take part at Östlund’s invitation. Nor did Notary know that these persons were “playing” themselves until toward the end of his role in the film. They also, probably, felt relatively comfortable in their formal costume, blurring the lines of dragging as themselves, amid a familiar “set” to many of them. So, we can read the tension and reaction of these persons as both real and improvised; they did, to some extent, genuinely dictate the fate of the fictional Oleg and the embodied nonhuman primate he performs as and secure their own positions of power, literally and through enactment. As a viewer, one feels compelled and confused at whom to sympathize with: the woman who is abused; the artist who is patronized; the nonhuman animal who is dominated; and/or Christian who is embarrassed? At no point, however, does the Animal Drag side with the white, rich, cisheteropatriarchy of the room.

### **“Becoming-Animal” and Affect in Animal Drag**

The artist and his Animal Drag in the scene from *The Square* described above is drawn from the work of real-world performance artist Oleg Kulik. In his career, Kulik has repeatedly performed as a dog, sometimes taking his role as far as biting gallery visitors, and several curators have closed his shows early. Mila Bredikhna, a collaborator of Kulik’s, has praised him for “*renounc[ing] the language (languages) of human culture.*”<sup>22</sup> His shows have historically bordered on drama: in performing as breeds associated with guard dogs and installing warning signs with barred cages for himself, Kulik has stereotyped

21 Carew, “Social Responsibility”, 55

22 Bredikhina, “Pavlov’s Dog Theses”, 52 (italics in original).

the predatory animal and “dr[awn] out a macho competitiveness in male viewers”.<sup>23</sup> Moreover, “by abdicating language and notions of decorum, the artist addresses his work to the mob, to the pre- not post-human”.<sup>24</sup>

As others have written, “the trouble with Kulik is that he tries to look and behave as much as possible like a real dog, and does not recognize that it is only human beings who can enjoy this game—that is why there are no dogs who come running to his shows”.<sup>25</sup> This recalls the anthropocentric privilege to drag as a nonhuman animal and the responsibility of the artist to consider their critical agency in doing so. To simplify a performance into one aspect of animality—that of aggression—is to patronize the nonhuman animal, to reproduce perceptions of Otherness. Further, in appealing to a “pre-human”, “mob” mentality, Kulik inadvertently romanticizes an animal kingdom no longer feasible in a neoliberal world where so many nonhuman animals are exploited as commodities and inextricably bound to humans. There is also a danger in the fantasy of humans returning to a pre-linguistic state. The satire of Kulik, as portrayed by the fictional Oleg in *The Square*, might be another provocation of the mob, bringing out the “beast” of the otherwise cultured humans in their attempts to dominate the embodied nonhuman primate. The difference, however, is that the scene in the film is a deliberate parody.

Language and dress have been used to divorce Man from other species. They are thus problematic emblems of human culture. However, given that it is currently almost impossible to disentangle oneself from them, it might be more productive to consider these as gateways to the politics of drag; a performance based on the semiotics of adornment. Drag isn’t always attempting to “pass” or transform fully. Drag has power in its processes to reveal and operate in liminal states. As sociologist Deborah Ferreday has warned, the “notion of either being ‘fully human’ or becoming/‘returning to’ the animal” actually “perform[s] the anxiety and melancholia at stake in

23 Drobnick, “Oleg Kulik”, 144.

24 Drobnick, “Oleg Kulik”, 145.

25 Salecl, “Love Me, Love My Dog”, 16.



anthropocentrism”.<sup>26</sup> The more one attempts to distinguish oneself as human or nonhuman, the more anthropocentric and binaristic one becomes. Similarly, as Jackson argues, there is a naïveté to assuming an uncritical, universal humanity.<sup>27</sup> Simply put, ideology lacks critique. Thus, as we see in *The Square*, Animal Drag might be extremely transparent in its performance; it might employ colonial cultures of language and dress as part of its critique, to recognize that we are inextricably, socially bound by these structures and to highlight their own performativity and construction.

The notion of “becoming-animal” stems from the writing of French thinkers Deleuze and Guattari. They posit that there is a politics to “becoming” for those oppressed, in revolt, or always on the fringe. Thus, “becoming-animal” is a philosophical form of alliance with the nonhuman animal. “Becoming” subjects have nomadic modes of existence, are less stable, and operate in more generative ways of being. “Becoming” is an interminable process. Specifically, Deleuze and Guattari argue that human-animal relationships ought to have an affinity with the Other, not act in mimicry; they even discuss the significance of “emitting” dog, not just imitating dog.<sup>28</sup> Art theorist Jim Drobnick argues that Kulik does this via the odour of his performances.<sup>29</sup> This would be impossible to determine with Notary’s performance because *The Square* is a film, but it might be worth considering the discomfort generated — between the guests at the museum, the film’s viewers (myself included), and the embodied nonhuman primate performed by Notary as Oleg — as a shared, human-animal affective affect of fear. Fear also smells.

Affect is defined here as emotions and movement that pass across bodies, materially and psychologically connected and reacting to each other. Affect thus undoes any easy division between self and other, human and nonhuman. Braidotti argues that “the recognition of shared ties of vulnerability can generate new forms of posthuman

26 Ferreday, “Becoming Deer”, 219.

27 Jackson, *Becoming Human*.

28 Deleuze and Guattari, *Thousand Plateaus*, 302.

29 Drobnick, “Oleg Kulik”.

community and compassion”.<sup>30</sup> The shared moments of vulnerability in *The Square* are performed and real, given its semi-improvised nature. Thus, for all those who become embroiled in the scene, experiencing fear (including the threat of losing one’s power) is a plausible means of “becoming animal”.

That the guests of the museum relearn to use their bodies, to act on their instincts, and to communicate in a common language with the embodied nonhuman primate, denouncing culture, as Ulik calls for, could also be read as an acceptance of the invitation to “become animal”. It is worth observing, however, that much of the fear and action here is not pre-cultural and, in fact, relies on colonial and patriarchal matrices of race and gender, like concepts of fragility and civility. Thus, the scene’s Cultural affect is another potential reproduction of stereotypes; Notary’s affect of fear plays with and aids the disruption of problematic dualisms but also perpetuates them. His affective performance nonetheless decentres humanness. Through explicit reproduction, he provokes questions of gender, race, and embodiment that include nonhuman animals, imagined and real.

One last thought on affect here is that Notary-as-Oleg is giving corporeality back to the nonhuman primate not present. This is not to substitute nonhumans for humans, whose habitats and populations are rapidly declining and who deserve to be present in the world (if not in a museum). But it offers an answer to an argument posed by scholar Emily McAvan, namely that “cute” species, like the koala, can be commodified while simultaneously having a “face” capable of addressing a call for care, that is distinct from other, less charismatic animals, like that of a snake.<sup>31</sup> This might be better known as the “Bambi effect”. McAvan argues that the “face”, according to the philosopher Emmanuel Levinas, should be read in more abstract terms, so that humans feel a sense of responsibility towards *all* non-human animals and their environments. Human-animal scholar David Redmalm makes a similar point, arguing that “the animal face is not bound to a certain discourse”, thus expanding Levinas’s

30 Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, 69.

31 McAvan, “I Just Care”.

phenomenology of the “face” to help us meet across species borders.<sup>32</sup> What Animal Drag offers, then, is a physical human face/body to a species otherwise out of sight/mind. It might also generate an affect capable of addressing animals, animality, and environments beyond the “cute”.

## The Material and Social Body

In his analysis of Kulik’s work, Drobnick references Elizabeth Grosz’s work on *Volatile Bodies* (1994), which challenges the problematic dualisms of the mind and body.<sup>33</sup> Through Grosz, he argues that the body, itself, once acknowledged as a mutable subject, is capable of disrupting humanism’s binaries. The body is always shifting and unpredictable in ways akin to MacCormack’s argument that the body is a plastic state of in-between,<sup>34</sup> and also in the way that “becoming” is never complete. This is similar to the notion that we should dispense with ideologies of an “end game” for transitioning bodily states — of beauty, ability, or sex — which unhelpfully reproduce hierarchies that are themselves entangled with racism and classism. In their book *Trans\** (2018), Halberstam uses *The Lego Movie* (2014) to articulate how the body and its landscape is always under construction, and how this might be playful, suppressed, or even commodified.<sup>35</sup> The point is that the body and the spaces it shapes and inhabits are malleable, and this is also its freedom, in not conforming or longing for a reductive ideology.

As Deleuze and Guattari state, to become “produces nothing but itself”.<sup>36</sup> The plastic and liminal being, while not to detract from how some bodies have been marginalized because of such liminality, is also a (sometimes involuntary) site of resistance. The body in-between, or as Wills would call an always-already prosthetic being, is thus a flexible, extendable body, capable of more imagination and creativity in pushing the very definitions of human and form.

32 Redmalm, “In-Your-Face-Ethics”, 94.

33 Drobnick, “Oleg Kulik”, 146.

34 MacCormack, ‘Multi-Dimensional Modifications’.

35 Halberstam, *Trans\**, 129-36.

36 Deleuze and Guattari, *Thousand Plateaus*, 238.

Drag—the play and disruption with traditional semiotics of adornment and embodiment—facilitates this. Drag, in practice and theory, highlights the body’s state of process between various classifications and thus ruptures traditional dynamics of race, gender, sex, class, ability, species, and more, by not wholly conforming to any of these or, in Notary’s case of (un)dressing, making extremely transparent those classifications as performative, constructed and/or unravelled discourses of power.

Drobnick cites Grosz’s proposition that: “Volatility implies unfinished and an unfinishable project that is the body, subject to continuing forces that effect both its material and social dimensions.”<sup>37</sup> The fashion theorist Joanne Entwistle argues that dress is a form of embodiment, which “orientates oneself to the situation, acting in particular ways upon the body”.<sup>38</sup> Notary’s performance, neither fully human nor nonhuman, plays with materiality, through his prostheses and semi-dress, in order to suspend (obvious) disbelief. He also plays with the social, in the way he interrupts the art world gathering’s usual etiquettes. His body literally swings in a volatile fashion between varying material *and* social states. These two forces—the material and social—propel the performing body of Animal Drag. While drag has traditionally used the body and materiality to disrupt social constructions of gender, Notary’s performance demonstrates that Animal Drag can also unsettle social and material models of class, race, ability, *and* species.

### **Meta Animal Drag**

Some final thoughts attend to this scene’s hyperreal and multi-layered experience of production and spectatorship. There is little distinction between Östlund and the character of Oleg because the director staged much of the artist’s critique; but there is also little difference between Notary and Oleg, or the embodied nonhuman animal, because Notary so convincingly takes on the role of an artist performing a nonhuman primate, which is his own career in the

37 Grosz in Drobnick, “Oleg Kulik”, 146.

38 Entwistle, *The Fashioned Body*, 29.

world beyond the film. Where Oleg begins, and the embodied non-human primate ends, is also slippery. This is as much to do with the material adornments that are cast on and off, and the way that the scene abruptly ends, as it has to do with the fact that the artist of the film does not respond to his human name. That the scene and the name of Oleg is a satire of another animal-activist artist adds a further dimension, in addition to the fact it was also received by a second group of paralleled black-tie guests, on the other side of the screen at its première in Cannes. These people mirror those guests in the film dragging as themselves. Perhaps they perform these roles in private, public, and now for mass media consumption too.

Östlund has spoken out about how he wanted to mock contemporary art jargon and the artist that he likens to the allegory of the naked emperor.<sup>39</sup> His Oleg then, might be a parody of Kulik's career, a jibe at the artist and the elite art world, as much as it is at the guests of *The Square*'s première who are also performing cultural gatekeeping. Either way, the anti-normative politics that I read into the scene hold. It acts as a microcosm for all the late capitalism (artworld) issues that *The Square* otherwise raises. It also highlights that we cannot get away from the market economy infrastructures where human/nonhuman animal relationships might be acted out—real and performed.

Through this essay, I have shown how Animal Drag might be utilized to challenge human exceptionalism. Braidotti has argued that a more realistic and knotted response—between cultures, capitals, and species—“requires more effort of our imagination to ground our representations in real life conditions and in an affirmative manner”.<sup>40</sup> The scene from *The Square* is a representation, but it is also an actual, embodied nonhuman primate performance. Its layers of hyper-reality—from the “real” audience to parodies of Kulik and Notary's “instinctive” Animal Drag—show how real contemporary colonialist and gendered capitalist infrastructures can be acknowledged and critiqued from within. There is no benefit to setting “a nostalgic invention

39 Östlund in Carew, “Social Responsibility”, 3.

40 Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, 46.

of an all-inclusive holistic ideal”,<sup>41</sup> nor to imagining unrealistic and romantic environments for the (pre- or) post-anthropocentric arts.

I have shown that Animal Drag does not require the performer to fully become the nonhuman animal. Instead, it extends and flexes conceptions of what such a becoming is or, as in the case with Notary-as-Oleg-as-embodied-ape, it dehumanizes itself as part of a rupturing of anthropocentric thinking. Animal Drag lays bare the fact that species can also be performed; human beings are in fact often “doing” the human. Animal Drag is more than the pervasive philosophy of “becoming”: it demonstrates action, it takes theory into practice, and shows us how significant, ironically, cultured forms of adornment are in the critique and parody of culturally determined definitions of humanness and its ongoing alliance with white, ableist, cisheteropatriarchy.

## Conclusion

To open and historicize the drag in Animal Drag, I need to pay homage to drag and queer culture and theory as significant axes of Animal Drag. I have my own struggles as a disabled woman, but I want to be transparent about the fact I am also white and straight; I do not wish to contribute to the colonialist intellectualizing I have inherited, nor continue the legacy of those who have appropriated queer culture and experiences for abstract theory without actively supporting the lives and deaths of those it discusses. As such, I want to make clear that Animal Drag, as an idea, implicitly benefits from heteronormative white supremacy, but I also write this to argue that it can also practice activism.

When Jennie Livingston’s *Paris Is Burning* (1990) brought drag into the popular culture limelight, it also highlighted that drag is racialized, and is a cultural phenomenon that cannot be separated from socioeconomics. For example, those that partook in the late 1980s New York ball culture were also less likely to have access to health care and had higher mortality rates, especially in the wake of the HIV/AIDS crisis at the time. Marlon M. Bailey reiterates this, describing the additional dangers working-class, Black, and Latinx queer

41 Braidotti, “Animals, Anomalies”, 529.

persons face, often living in poorer, urban neighbourhoods that operate more rigid heteronormativities and thus with increased crimes of homophobia and transphobia.<sup>42</sup>

It would be naïve to assume that any form of drag is without its issues. Butler questions “whether parodying the dominant norms is enough to displace them: indeed, whether the denaturalization of gender cannot be the very vehicle for a reconsolidation of hegemonic norms”.<sup>43</sup> bell hooks specifically critiques *Paris Is Burning* for its portrayal of Black people emulating (and aspiring to) fashion editorials, a portrayal which “privileges the ‘femininity’ of the ruling class white woman, adored and kept, shrouded in luxury, [which] does not imply a critique of patriarchy.”<sup>44</sup> Animal Drag thus needs to be careful in how it too might perpetuate species binaries, in addition to other aspects of identity. In *The Square*, for example, we saw reproductions of white masculinity upheld by the sartorial markers of menswear and its paradoxical “savour” and “mob” mentality.

The use of material adornment to support an identity that one best aligns with at a given time might, at one end of the spectrum, be seen as trickery, and survival at the other. The seemingly dangerous artifice of gendered drag, like femininity or the figure of the femme fatale, is argued to be a projection of masculine insecurities,<sup>45</sup> “synonymous with disguise, artifice, inauthenticity, and duplicity”,<sup>46</sup> and has been used to legitimize “trans panic”.<sup>47</sup> Drag can also be a private performance, in rehearsal, and a more subtle, fluid spectrum of practice than traditionally conceived. It is utilized by

42 Bailey, “Gender/Racial Realness”, 336.

43 Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 125.

44 hooks, “Is Paris Burning?”, 217.

45 See Doane, *Femmes Fatales*.

46 Tseelon, *The Masque of Femininity*, 32.

47 This pertains more to femme drag. See Halberstam and Del LaGrace’s *The Drag King Book* for another perspective. It is worth noting that drag and trans\* lives are very different. They can be considered independent modes of being/doing but which participate in intersectional spaces. Many of the trans\* community lean on gender performance—often less explicitly than one might associate with public drag acts—to experiment with gender identity. There is also, as with critical race theory and feminist theory, a rich relationship between animal studies and transgender theory; see Hayward and Weinstein, “Tranimalities”.

those experimenting with or confirming their felt genders and/or sex, those in transition and who identify as non-binary too. For, if we were to agree with Butler, then *all* gender is performed,<sup>48</sup> including that of the cisgendered community. Because drag is a mechanism for communities to practice skills of identity construction, both on and off the street, and is one cultural mechanism of survival whereby adornment is key, drag acts and their materiality are *always* political.

The animal in Animal Drag is much more than a symbol, metaphor, or intermediary articulated through costume and artifice, and deserves its own attention. For example, we should consider what being an animal constitutes and who or what decides this, much like the power struggle witnessed between Christian and Oleg in *The Square*. Lourdes Orozco and Jen Parker-Starbuck critique human-animal performances for their anthropocentric privilege.<sup>49</sup> In drag, “womanliness”, for example, can be taken off,<sup>50</sup> just like “animality”. This doesn’t just render such states as constructed, but exposes networks of power and privilege in gatekeeping what constitutes being or acting a nonhuman animal and to potentially fetishize it. For a human animal to take a nonhuman animal perspective is also impossible and risks speaking on behalf of the Other and so further silencing it.<sup>51</sup> Animal Drag that attempts to consider an Other perspective, then, might at least be leaning toward decentralizing the human status quo.<sup>52</sup> Another way of doing this is to perform the human or dehumanize (or ahumanize) oneself,<sup>53</sup> as Notary does in *The Square*. Animal Drag that parodies the normative able body or humanism might be called cis-species drag, just like we saw with the unwitting guests of *The Square*, who do the human by acting as themselves.

48 Butler, *Gender Trouble*.

49 Orozco and Parker-Starbuck, “Goats, Badgers”, 63-8.

50 As in the famous 1929 case study presented by Joan Riviere, “Womanliness as a Masquerade”.

51 This echoes the work of Spivak in “Can the Subaltern Speak?” There are some humans who want to permanently transition into other species. It is hard, however, to imagine many nonhuman animals longing to become human. While such a discussion is beyond the scope of this paper, one could draw parallels with complex debates on directions of privilege in transracial and transgender cases. For more on this, see Brubaker, *Trans*.

52 As suggested in Orozco and Parker-Starbuck, “Goats, Badgers”.

53 MacCormack uses “asignified” and “ahuman” in Gardner and MacCormack, *Deleuze*, 6.



Animal Drag is indebted to posthumanism and takes its cue from the ethics of those seeking to create a more sustainable necropolitics for all. Future case studies should though continue to ask what might be in it for the animal.<sup>54</sup> *The Square* uses the nonhuman primate for provocation; it reminds us of the exoticization and exploitation many minorities and nonhumans face as well as various intersecting human-animal identity politics. It cleverly uses a medium beyond traditional animal activism to reach a wider unsuspecting audience to reflect on its own makeup.

If we understand queerness to be a form of dissidence and challenge to the status quo, then Animal Drag, beyond sexuality, is inherently queer. As Haraway states, “queering has the job of undoing ‘normal’ categories, and none is more critical than the human/nonhuman sorting operation”.<sup>55</sup> At the very least, if to queer something is to subvert and overturn outdated and oppressive social constructions, then Animal Drag is indebted to the nonhuman animal for helping to queer notions of humanness and animality.

It is key that Animal Drag takes place somewhere in the cartographies of late capitalism else it would risk failing to question the hegemonic and colonial mapping of disciplines, labour, and spaces that continue to impact all animals. Because these are human-created problems, they need to be questioned as part of thinking critically about species. Notary’s meta scene in *The Square* recognizes the pitfalls of contemporary society but demonstrates that there is space to create and consider what Braidotti calls a “system of representation that matches the complexity of contemporary nonhuman animals and their proximity to humans”.<sup>56</sup> While some of the characterizations and nonhuman representations in *The Square* might appear reductive, its performance, adornment, complex production, and reception, posits a conceptual and visual reflection that critiques how Otherness is constructed and reinforced across and through the cultural industries of dress, art, and film.

54 See Birke, “Naming Names”.

55 Haraway, “Foreword”, xxiv.

56 Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, 43.

Animal Drag is not, however, a perfect political weapon. The human animal is still very present in the performance, representation, and theory here. At times it might be too romantic, too imitative, or risk privileging the human animal. However, it is positive in its attempt to critique the contemporary world around it and offer of agency from within these power structures, pushing us to question them even more.

Through this essay I have identified a gap in practice and theory where Animal Drag might traverse more than one protest at a time, raising multiple issues of identity politics and social justice through a singular performance with serious considerations of adornment. Notary's "companion" prostheses help us understand adornment as Othering and supportive, as transitioning techne, acting in-between the human and nonhuman. Like Deleuze and Guattari's philosophical "becoming-animal", Animal Drag doesn't strive to conform fully, or else it would only prop up dangerous ideologies of classification. But it is also more than a philosophy: it is contemporary, action-based, and works at destabilizing more than one social construct at a time, especially the human animal. I acknowledge that Animal Drag might perpetuate stereotypes, but I have demonstrated how its cultural form, as a work of drag, socially and materially renders its act as a doing and allows it to expose stereotypical constructions.

This essay has built upon Butler's ideas to argue that we are all complicit in our performance of the human and has used ideas of affect to consider how Animal Drag acts might answer Braidotti's call for shared vulnerabilities across human and nonhuman relationships. I have suggested that, as an embodied performance, Animal Drag might offer a corporeality to other nonhuman animals often marginalized or overlooked within popular culture, fundraising, or research.

A brief look at the works cited here demonstrates that there is an already rich and plentiful scholarship on animality and independent subordinated groups, but Animal Drag acts as a space where these conversations can come together through a single critical and conscious act. Operating on sliding scales and slippery slopes

somewhere in between, outside, and in the liminal spaces of cultures and academic fields, often because their modus operandi is not yet fully understood, popularized, or given much attention, Animal Drag advocates for the beings that are often minoritized or less heard and seen. I hope this piece forms the beginnings of a rogue, nomadic pack of Animal Drag-ers.

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