

Performing Animality: Swimming with eels and squid ink erasure.

In this paper I will discuss my first performance work (Fig.2) *Head Over Eels* (1996)¹ to illustrate how my rethinking of human and animal relations have developed in the decade preceding my latest work (Fig.3) *Felt is the Past Tense of Feel* (2006) Both performances have an emphasis on the body, shared experience, embodiment and transmutation. In these works eels and squid are the partners for these ideas and I am conscious of how my contact with them breaches the bodily boundaries of both human and animal. I'm interested in how this threat of corruption will be experienced and interpreted by the audience.

In the lead up to my first performance I planned to taxiderm eels to critique the way male predators, whether serial killers or game hunters/fisherman, collect and display their trophies as a signifier of power and conquest (Fig.4) I was waiting on eighty eels to be couriered to my studio in Melbourne but to my surprise they arrived alive in polystyrene boxes. I could hear them banging and flaying around inside as I carried them up to my workshop. I hadn't planned to kill the eels (I was going to taxiderm) and this ethical dilemma forced me to come face to face with my own morality. For the eels to become my medium they must become my victim (Fig.5). Unexpectedly, I was faced with performing the role of executioner and serial killer, and like the criminals I had been profiling, I moved from fear of the 'other' to desensitization. To appease

¹ The performance work *Head Over Eels* (1996) is not part of the Doctoral project.

my shame of killing them, I orchestrated my first performance at a privately owned eel farm. (Fig.6) Dressed in a black rubber suit and latex-style executioner's mask, I surrendered myself to a tank of live eels as an act of reconciliation and absolution (Fig.7) The eels were held captive in a storage container at the eel farm awaiting export. Submerged in this tank, I watched their futile attempts to escape up the sides. Witnessing that act made me consider how confinement can cause distress and I wanted the viewer to experience that anxiety when they viewed the performance documentation.

When I previewed the eel video ten years ago, I was asked why I wore a rubber suit and why I didn't take the plunge naked? My initial thought was defensive; this work wasn't designed to titillate. My response to the proposition of performing nude was to say, "I'm not one of those seventies performance artists", referring to Carolee Schneemann or Hannah Wilke — who performed nude as a symbol of reclaiming the female body from patriarchal culture. The irony was the eels were all female and were being sent to Japan to be consumed as aphrodisiacs.² The eel performance was advocating an androgynous position. By shielding my body with the rubber suit I was making it impenetrable to the eels. I was also making it impenetrable to the gaze. The eels themselves emphasised the androgynous concept because they were female and phallic. My naïve logic was that if the distinction between male and female, animal and human were blurred it would be more difficult to privilege one subjecthood over the other.

² This information complimented my research on male serial killers who brutally tortured and murdered their female victims as a sexual stimulant.

I have now worked with dead and living animals in three of my performances to create primordial rituals that enact the catharsis of suppressed human drives and emotions.³ I use my body to express my subjectivity, such as purging my fear of death or the cathartic escape from a melancholic state. As the performance continues the human/animal encounter is somatically shared. What I experience is a shift from the subjectivity of human to animal. Deleuze and Guattari have discussed this as, “a distribution of states . . . there is no longer man or animal, since each territorializes the other.”⁴ This metamorphosis becomes apparent in the performance documentation where my imposing figure progressively dissolves or disappears, making it almost impossible to distinguish the human form from the writhing mass of eels, or to see the shape of my body smudged by squid ink (Figure 5.6 and Figure 5.7). Deleuze and Guattari describe this as a shift, “from the individuated animal to the pack or to a collective multiplicity”, an experience that I recognise as an abandonment of subjecthood.⁵

The animals I have chosen to perform with, forty dead squid, act as substitutes for my terminally ill father. Performing with the animal makes it possible for me to critique human social abnormalities, deviant patterns of behaviour and social taboos. My performances challenge an assumption that working with animals is a purely anthropomorphic enterprise. Instead I co-opt the animal as an accomplice in self critique. Derrida alludes to this dynamic when he states, “as with the eyes of the other, the gaze called animal offers to my sight the abyssal

³ The other animal work produced for the doctorate, *This little piggy...fades to pink*, can be viewed at www.videoartchive.org.au

⁴ Giles Deleuze & Felix Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*. trans. D. Polan, Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 1986 p.22.

⁵ *ibid.* p.18.

limit of the human, the inhuman or the ahuman, the ends of man.”⁶ This quote extrapolates from the moment Derrida’s cat sees him naked and marks the threshold of his philosophical discussion foregrounding, “the point of view of animals.”⁷ The cat’s gaze arouses feelings of shame and Derrida aligns this sense of ‘impropriety’ with humanity’s misrecognition of animals.⁸ In my performances with the animals there is also a shift in vantage point from self to animal, what Derrida describes, as being, “*seen, seen by the animal*” and being “addressed” from their vantage point.⁹ When I was floating on the surface of the water the eels would nuzzle into my armpits, rest on the surface of my chest and wrap themselves around my neck. I was able to look into their eyes and stroke their heads and I wondered what they made of me. Did they think I was food, heat source, carcass, log or shelter? They nibbled and nudged me with their heads but I was told at this stage in their life cycle I wasn’t in danger of being consumed because their stomach shrinks and they are ready to enter their reproductive stage. This is the perfect time to export them because their systems are clean but would my ‘contact’ with the eels, prior to their export, be considered an act of contamination?

My first performance with the eels wasn’t motivated by the Derridean premise of addressing the animal.¹⁰ The catalyst for me was to swim with eels, just as Derrida’s essay, “The Animal Therefore I am,” was inspired by an animal encounter that induced feelings of shame. Ten years separate the eel

⁶ Jacques Derrida, ‘The Animal That Therefore I am (more to follow)’, trans. D. Wills, Critical Inquiry, vol.28, no.2. Winter, 2002 p.381.

⁷ *ibid.*, p.382.

⁸ *ibid.*

⁹ *ibid.*

¹⁰ *ibid.*

performance and my latest work *Felt is the Past Tense of Feel* and the work establishes that it is possible to be 'addressed' by a dead animal. In this work I position myself astride a pile of forty squid (Figure 5.8). I chose one at a time and methodically suck the ink out and spit it onto my costume (Figure 5.9). My goal is to make myself invisible as a metaphor for rehearsing death. Simulating the squid's natural defense mechanism of squirting the ink so it can disappear constitutes an act of erasure. This is how I imagine my father was feeling the moments before he performed his disappearing act. What would be the best way to escape the sympathetic and devastated faces of family members surrounding your death bed? Act like a squid, squirt ink and become a shadow.

After my father died on Father's Day, September 2003, my mother, brothers and I had twenty-four hours to organise a funeral. In the midst of our grief we robotically conformed to the protocol of arranging the service, a process not unlike organising an amateur theatrical production. One of the decisions to be made was what my father would wear in the coffin. My mum wanted him to be buried in his best formal suit. Ironically that is what he wore to funerals, but also to weddings and work functions. My brothers and I thought he should wear his casual clothes because that was what he was most comfortable in. This choice caused some debate but we eventually decided on the week-end wear. The outfit I wear in the performance is the suit belonging to my father but I have shrouded it in a layer of pink felt (Figure 5.10).¹¹ I was aware of Joseph Beuys's use of felt as a material to represent protection, nurturing and healing. I wanted to produce a feminist response to Beuys's *Grey Felt Suit* (1970) and

¹¹ I chose the pale pink colour to cover the suit because it resembled flesh and this would be a colour my father would choose to represent my femininity.

during the course of the performance the costume and my body becomes stained with the squid's effluvium liquid (Figure 5.11). When the squid ink dried the suit appeared grey except on the back where I couldn't spit the ink and in places where the fabric had creased around my groin, elbows and knee joints (Figure 5.12). The exposed pristine felt appears as wounds or scars marking the ink-stained suit. I imagine my father's body dressed in the coffin. The outfit would be drenched by bodily fluids just as the suit I wore for the performance is now stained and stiffened by the squid ink. The suit is exhibited in the exhibition to symbolise the ghostly presence of the father and evoke the stench of his body breaking down.

The human and animal relation is more intimate in the squid performance because our bodily fluids are exchanged and there is a mutual obligation to aid each other's escape. The squid appear alive because they glisten under the hot lights (Figure 5.13). I respond to the animal as if it is unconscious or recently deceased because the ink sacs remain active waiting to squirt out involuntarily when handled. Sucking out the ink involved positioning my mouth over the squid's beak and then our eyes would meet. The glazed, iridescent, ocular disks would wobble and indent if I sucked too hard and momentarily I would think it had come back to life. I had never handled or seen a squid intact before this performance. I hadn't tasted squid ink and when I did I couldn't believe how pungent, salty and corrosive it was or how it stained the skin for a fortnight. The desperate act of sucking, internalizing and spitting the ink is an exchange that represents the futile attempts to revive or resurrect, reiterating

the conditions of loss.¹² The gesture of putting the squid inside the suit jacket next to my bare chest and cradling the remainder in preparation for my retreat and disappearance into the shadows demonstrates what Deleuze and Guattari describe as, “a line of flight” (Figure 5.14).¹³ The squid’s ink disguises my identity and facilitates my escape into the darkness (Figure 5.15). In the case of the squid work I see our disappearing act as a collaborative endeavour where the squid assist my erasure and I aid their departure. Transporting the squid with me on my journey into the abyss illustrates that:

The metamorphosis is a sort of conjunction of two deterritorializations, that which the human imposes on the animal by forcing it to flee or to serve the human, but also that which the animal proposes to the human by indicating ways-out or means of escape that the human would never have thought of by himself.¹⁴

After the performance when I was having a shower I felt sections of my skin dislodge into my hand and thought the ink had caused it to blister and buckle. It turned out to be the suckers from the end of the tentacles that had attached themselves to my stomach and chest. It was a weird sensation peeling them off because it was a resistant trace of the performance that made me realise the squid didn’t have to be alive to express itself. I was being addressed by the squid corpse, its eyes engaged me and its tentacles, ink and suckers still functioned after death.

¹² When we feel sad we are told to “suck it up” so we don’t express our emotion. I thought this performance would allow me to purge the grief I had suppressed but the methodical process of sucking the squid was so memorising that it actually contained the emotion.

The sucking action simulates my father’s tortured and laboured gasps for air. The liquid on his lungs caused him to gurgle when he breathed. His eyes were wide open and didn’t blink. His gapping mouth and stunned expression made him resemble a fish out of water.

¹³ Giles Deleuze & Felix Guattari, Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature, p.36.

¹⁴ *ibid.*, p.35.

In both performances I was conscious of my body representing an interior or abject reading to invert the classical naked female body that privileges exteriority as contained and clean, existing only to reflect male subjectivity and desire. The marine creature's physical form is intact but resembles entrails or intestines alluding to my bodily disembowelment or mutilation. The metamorphosis that transpires from human to inky shadow or my assimilation into the intertwined mass of eels, documents the shift from the initial traumatic breach of human and animal boundaries and the byproduct of the becoming animal, dissolution and self erasure.¹⁵ Mary Douglas has stated:

The body is a model that can stand for any bounded system. Its boundaries can represent any boundaries which are threatened or precarious. We cannot possibly interpret rituals concerning, excreta, saliva and the rest unless we are prepared to see in the body a symbol of society.¹⁶

In the rituals I construct involving the use of animals I dramatise the vulnerability of body boundaries through the interpretation of bodily expulsion. I choose marine creatures such as cephalopods and eels because their visceral properties amplify the abject and anomalous themes punctuating the performance. The passages of the body between inside and outside are the focus of prohibitions that Douglas translates as a threat to the social body. The eel and squid fit into the category of the indefinable because their duplicity arouses suspicion as reflected in the biblical scholarship, *The Abominations of Leviticus*:

The test of whether an animal was clean and therefore an edible kind is how it moves on the earth. If it creeps, crawls or swarms upon the earth it is unclean . . . Eels and worms inhabit water, though not as fish . . . there is no order in them.¹⁷

¹⁵ *ibid.*

¹⁶ Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, London: Routledge & Keagan Paul, 1966 p.115.

¹⁷ *ibid.*, p.56.

The subversive impact of these works resides in the intimate exchange of bodily fluids that contributes to the animalisation of the human form.

Surrendering to the animal is not an attempt to imitate it. The animals act as a poultice to draw out repressed emotion, aid catharsis and facilitate sublimation.

The collision and overlap of our bodily boundaries during the unrehearsed performance incorporates all the senses. The fact that it is unrehearsed enables me to discover and study the animal as part of the performance process — to encounter it as it would encounter me with caution and curiosity.¹⁸

In both scenes I'm surrounded and outnumbered by the animals and the images reveal a danger of being overpowered or polluted by corporeal excess.

Are the eels smothering me or am I smothering them? Am I at risk of being poisoned when I ingest the concentrated ink of forty squid?¹⁹ The animal's natural discharge is a form of protection. The squid's inky veil allows it to

¹⁸ Karen Finley stated in an interview that all her performances are unrehearsed: "I never rehearse a performance, that's the scariest thing — that I'm going to go out there and I don't know what I'm doing. That is the performance to me." Richard Schechner, 'Karen Finley: A Constant State of Becoming.', *The Drama Review*, vol.3, Spring, 1988 p.155.

This performance was unrehearsed because it involved commissioning a commercial fisherman to individually line catch the forty squid. I wanted their ink sacs, eyes, tentacles and suckers to be intact. If I used trawled squid they would have been a lot cheaper but they would have been damaged — no eyes, tentacles and most importantly no ink sacs. They would also be stripped of their mottled, luminescent skins. I also wanted the fisherman to catch large squid so they would possess more ink. I had to hire a town hall for two weeks so I could paint the stage black and cover all the windows in thick plastic. Then it had to be reconverted to its original state. These financial and logistical restraints contributed to the spectacle being a one off. This didn't mean the work lacked preparation. I rehearsed the work over in my head every day since my father passed away in September, 2003. I think if the performance is unrehearsed there is more room for it to unravel in the moment so the action isn't too prescriptive. This way I'm more attune to my instincts, for instance I didn't plan to stuff the squid in the suit and cradle them in my arms while I was retreating backward. I realised when I had sucked the ink from the squid and started sliding back into the darkness that I needed to accompany them into the 'underworld.' I didn't realise at the time of the performance, Deleuze and Guattari's theory, "line of flight" or the shaman's ability to metamorphose into a spirit animal and transport the souls of the dead to the other side. These concepts illuminated the performance after the event.

¹⁹ Three weeks after the squid performance I passed a kidney stone that resembled a small black pearl.

escape or hide from a threatening or probing gaze and the eel's slimy sheath traps oxygen so it can shift between aquatic to land dweller. Its natural discharge lubricates the skin's surface making the eel almost impossible to clutch or possess. I associate the animal's bodily emissions as a means for self-preservation and this becomes a metaphor for my own desire for rescue or escape. Rescue from attachment to the lost other represented by the Freudian model of melancholia and escape from fear producing obstacles or the sympathetic gaze of a funerary congregation.²⁰

With each work there is an underlying discourse of loss, surrender and guilt. Each performance represents a cathartic act of self-sacrifice. The animals sacrifice everything. In the eel work I'm less willing to surrender total physicality to the eels and resist exposing my body to direct contact. My exposure to the eels is a psychological surrender. I imagined after the performance that if I was ever held hostage like they were in the polystyrene box, I could remember the experience of submerging myself with the eels and how I overcame the fear. I attribute that shift to a change in perspective, a move away from myself to the eels and considering the situation from their vantage point.

My surrender to the squid is more extreme because there is greater risk taken to expose my body to the animal. When I start to disappear into the inky shadow during the course of the performance my body exhibits signs of transmutation. The movement of my hands and feet are indistinguishable from

²⁰ See Sigmund Freud, 'Mourning and Melancholia', The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, trans. J. Strachey, vol. 14, London: Hogarth Press, 1957 pp.237-243.

the agitated tentacles on the squid corpses. I relate the viewer's discomfort to this transgression as relating to the fear of mythical creatures, such as half-human, half-beast mutants like the wolf man, vampire and yeti. These hybrids evoke horror and suspicion because they signify disorder and present a potential danger of infiltrating and contaminating community boundaries.

My sexual identity is masked in both performances by my costume and my body is situated amongst the undeniably phallic presence of writhing eels and the visceral squid corpses that one reviewer described as, "bloodless male genitalia."²¹ In these performances I am conscious of creating a diversion from my body as fetishised object. These inscriptions are perpetuated by erotic images of women and sea creatures, as in the nineteenth century wood cut, *The Dream of the Fisherman's Wife*, (1820) and pornographic films that display women engaged in acts of aquatic bestiality (Figure 5.16).²² My performances subvert the emphasis of the voyeuristic look from being pleasurable to repulsive and this strategy exposes the male spectator to the dangerous consequences of his own desire. The fear of castration usually evoked by the sexualized presence of the female body is disrupted by the display of my ambivalent sexuality.²³ I'm aware of the phallic nature of the eels and squid but our interaction is not eroticized, the animal performs as itself not as a living sex toy.

²¹ Robert Nelson, 'Black is back and grief tastes like ink.' *The Age*, November 29th 2006 p.22.

²² This woodcut is by Japanese artist, Katsushika Hokusai (1760-1849). Unlike my squid performance it depicts a pleasurable and erotic encounter with an octopus. Edward Lucie-Smith, *Sexuality in Western Art*. London: Thames & Hudson Ltd., 1991. p.255.

²³ See Sigmund Freud, 'On Narcissism: An Introduction', *The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*. pp.92-93.

The squid and eel work investigate the way I respond to loss, and both works are a reaction to witnessing death. The eel performance investigates the experience of the performer's shifting role from executioner to victim. The squid work is about the public recognition of death as more than a funerary ritual controlled by religious and social protocol. Rather it is an opportunity to publicly grieve and display emotion. In both works risk, penance and endurance are prominent themes. The performance is analogous to shamanistic curing ceremonies devised to overcome a fear of death or the guilt of inflicting death. In these works the animals are symbolic and the ritual carries a meta-social commentary or aids the selection of personal experiences for concentrated attention.

In the squid performance the ritual externalizes experience and puts feelings that have not been expressed into cathartic action. The compulsive repetition of sucking and spitting becomes a literal smokescreen, a way of distracting my memory, by erasing the thoughts of witnessing my father die. Replaying his death and empathising with his pain and suffering is also a strategy that allows me to express my grief. The last thing my father said before he lapsed into a coma was, "Cath, I can feel salty liquid seeping out of my legs." I tried to imagine how uncomfortable and frightening that must have been for him. I try to emulate his trauma by recreating the experience of the body break down in the squid performance. I had a bucket of squid ink poured behind my backside before I started and eventually it was absorbed by the material. I marinated in the stinging liquid for an hour while it stained, burnt and corroded my bare skin.

Derrida has stated, “that it is only in us that the dead may speak, that it is only by speaking of or as the dead that we can keep them alive.”²⁴ When I remember my father I remember his death and performing it was a way of translating the experience and mapping the trauma of loss.²⁵ By reenacting the death of my father with the lifeless squid and sacrificing myself to eels, the subject of my execution I ritualise death and melancholia.²⁶ Ritual in this context refers to a symbolic act without religious connotation or efficacy and facilitates a cathartic release. The squid, unlike the eels were not made into art works but after the performance were washed and consumed at a communal barbeque.²⁷ In both performances there is an interest in the agency of the animal as itself and as raw material. Their idiosyncratic traits contribute to a displacement or de-centering of my subjectivity, a process that involves submitting to a transformation. The results of undergoing that transformation cannot be charted in advance and cannot be fully comprehended after the performance.

²⁴ Jacques Derrida, The Work of Mourning. Pascale-Anne Brault & Michael Nass (eds.), Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001 p.9.

²⁵ I use the word mapping here because after the performance my struggle to move backward into the darkness left behind a skirmish in the puddle of squid ink that maps on the stage the decent into the abyss.

²⁶ It is interesting to note in relation to the squid work that shamanistic ceremonies include a dramatic search for the deceased’s soul to ensure it has left the home as part of their purification ritual. Some shamans will escort the soul to the underworld and so they won’t be recognised by the spirit world inhabitants, they smear their face with soot. I recognised the relationship between my performance as an act of erasure and the shaman’s role to guide and protect the soul of the dead on its journey to its new dwelling place. For more information on the shaman’s descent to the underworld see Mircea Eliade, Shamanism Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy. trans. by W. R. Trask, London: Routledge & Keagan Paul, 1964 pp.181-214.

²⁷ This feast was an integral part of the performance because it meant the squid weren’t wasted. Like the cake works for the *Making A Baby* ritual the squid were consumed and this symbolises a link between the art work and everyday life. The calamari banquet was arranged after the performance and mirrored the wake after my father’s funeral. Our family arranged an elaborate afternoon tea after the service. The congregation was invited to have coffee, cake and sandwiches with my family. The last thing I wanted to do was eat and talk to friends of my fathers. They kept telling me how much I looked like him and how proud he would have been of me. That is when I wanted to be the squid and squirt ink so I could escape their consolation.

What I have reflected on since performing these works is that some artists who work with animals have a conscience and others do not; the ambiguity created through the relationships between human and animals imply that some lives are grievable and others are not, some lives are dispensable and others are not, and we are all subject to death at the whim of another. These reflections are reasons for fear, anxiety, grief and the subject of performance art.