

I offer my power in the service of Love

In this talk I would like to present an older project of mine that situates my pieces in NGBK 's Becomig Animal/Becoming Human exhibition.

This project was an installation entitled Embracing Animal commissioned by Nato Thomson, curator, for the Becoming Animal: Contemporary Art in the Animal Kingdom exhibition at MASS MoCA (Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art), in 2005-2006, North Adams, Massachusetts. In Nato Thomson's catalogue essay for the exhibition, he used a quotation by Giorgio Agamben: "The first task of the researcher observing an animal is to recognize the carriers of significance which constitute its environment." (exhibition catalogue, p.10) My multimedia installation, Embracing Animal, appreciated this need for observation in its recreation of an ersatz research laboratory with 3 transgenic lab rats who lived in the exhibition for ten months.



Kathy High. Embracing Animal, multimedia installation with transgenic rats, 2005-06.



Mike Wilber, night watchman and Tara, transgenic rat [L]. Kathy High administering alternative medicine [R]

In the book *Modest_Witness@Second_Millennium...* Donna Haraway speaks of the complicated relationship she/we have with the Oncomouse™:

“OncoMouse™ is my sibling, and more properly, male or female, s/he is my sister. Her essence is to be a mammal, a bearer by definition of mammary glands, and a site for the operation of a transplanted, human, tumor-producing gene – an oncogene – that reliably produces breast cancer. Above all, OncoMouse™ is the first patented animal in the world. By definition, then, in the practices of materialized refiguration, s/he is an invention. Her natural habitat, her scene of bodily/genetic evolution, is the techno-scientific laboratory and the regulatory institutions of a powerful nation-state. Crafted through the ordinary practices that make metaphor into material fact, her status as an invention, who/which remains a living animal is what makes her a vampire, subsisting in the realms of the undead.”

The rats living in *Embracing Animal* were transgenic lab animals, meaning they housed human DNA as well as their own, both human and non-human at once, also making them a molecular model of human diseases. They had been developed in a research facility that sells transgenic rats as science products. I had been able to slip the order for these rats through my university (through the cracks, so to speak) as there wasn't much oversight at the time. The rats were on exhibit at the museum for ten months.

[PROBLEM NOTED: The rats were no longer lab products, but became art products, again on display, again used as research. Does this shift or change their status in the world? They were still workers and products for sale. But, while the rats were considered “art objects” instead of “lab products,” their very presence in the exhibition made us come face-to-face with the reality and fragility of these small man-made creatures.]

In *Embracing Animal* I also worked with the notions of ‘becoming animal’ as posited by Deleuze and Guattari in their book *Thousand Plateaus*. The installation included an extended rat housing about 20’ long by 10’ in height with various environments for the rats to live and play. There were also four 40” high tubes – giant glass test tubes with 2.5” LCD screens seated at the bottom which screened archival film imagery of people turning into animals: such as vampires, werewolves, *The Fly*, *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* among other beasts. Alongside the archival film imagery were videos where I appeared naked, in animal masks, performing with my pets, in an attempt to cross boundaries, be inappropriate, bestial, deterritorializing and defamiliarizing my pets’ and my relationship. This was a kind of failed experiment, as my pet animals became very nervous by my antics and simply retreated rather than engaging, acting as if I had lost my ‘cool’ and was behaving unbecomingly.

For *Embracing Animal*, I had looked for laboratory research animals that were used for autoimmune diseases like my own. These rats, named Matilda, Tara and Star, were transgenic rats (microinjected gene transfer), model HLA B27 to be precise, exhibiting a phenotype similar to humans suffering B27 related rheumatic disorders. They had been microinjected with human DNA that set them up for a precondition similar to humans’ autoimmune challenges. The injection of human genetic material occurred in the pro-nucleus of rat embryo, and it was passed generation to generation ever after. They were prone to develop disease like reactive arthritis, psoriasis, inflammatory bowel disease, and other things. They were developed for pharmaceutical research studies in systemic inflammation.



Kathy High. *Embracing Animal*, video still, human/non-human performance

In *Embracing Animal* the rat housing was like a penthouse with various environments: providing places to climb, to hide, to be invisible and unthreatened by the public; lots of ‘enrichment’; designed to be easily maintained; also designed to quarantine any rat who became sick from the others. Taking the rats from the ‘clean’ rooms of the laboratory, this environment offered them dirty spaces introducing different microbials to build their immune systems. The curatorial staff generously cared for the rats during the exhibition – especially Mike Wilber, the night watchman who developed a close bond with the rats.

Humans have had long history with rats. As Jonathan Burt says “rats are the totem animal of modernity” and they are a mirror of man and our activities in many ways. The image we have of rats is

typically as pests. Rats are incredibly adaptive and resilient, but are also thought to be sneaky, greedy, cannibalistic and plague bearing. To play out this negative image for rats, in New York City, a giant inflatable rat is installed at the protest site when laborers are on strike. The inflatable rat signals to everyone who walks by that the managers of the striking construction/labor site are dirty rotten RATS.

The earliest captive rats were trapped by rat-catchers, like the infamous Jack Black, who was Queen Victoria's Head Rat Catcher. The captive rats were sometimes used as bait for dogs, such as terriers who competed in 'rat pits' wracking up their rodent prey. Captured rats were also turned over as pets to society women, starting the fancy rat societies, or alternatively sold for science research.

Thus rats have been used in science laboratories since about the mid-1800s. Rats make good research subjects as they resemble human physiology very much. Their nervous systems are similar to human's, and 90% of their genes are the same as human and mice. "The rat in an instrument, or perhaps one component in a larger instrument, for quantifying responses to stimuli. This kind of psychology sees that rat as stripped down



Rodent round-up... dead rats in Sydney during the plague epidemic in 1900
Photo: Courtesy of State Library of NSW

version of the human, bare of things taken as constituting the distinctiveness of humanity, such as language and culture." P. 101 RAT by Jonathan Burt.

The twentieth century saw rat becoming more of a machine, a critical part of the science industry, a laboratory workhorse. From 1906 onward the research facility at the Wistar Institute



Rat pits with terrier dogs in Victorian England

in Philadelphia became a site where in breeding and selective breeding was practiced and perfected developing standardization for lab rats. By 1915, Helen Dean King, a geneticist and breeder, had produced 22 generations of Wistar albino rats without mutations that were so closely alike it was as if they were cloned. These Wistar rats became the perfect tool for science research and experiments.

Milton Greenman, the Director of the Wistar Institute, also had an interest in standardization of the lab rat as product. Greenman "recognized in the



Helen Dean: King with Wistar lab rats, Philadelphia

rat the potential to be a living analog to the pure chemicals that legitimated pure science. From management literature he extracted the ideals of uniform production, standards of quality, efficiency of production, applying them to scientific practice to generate an animal model that thrives as standard equipment in laboratories throughout the world today.” (Bonnie T. Clause: “The Wistar Rat as A Right Choice”) By 1930s Wistar rats were sold as far as China and Japan.

So the rats, Matilda, Star and Tara, used in Embracing Animal, or trans-rats, were synthetic ‘products’, part of the machinery of scientific production systems, and perfect platforms for science/ medical/ pharmaceutical research. These rats were created to research treatments for my human autoimmune diseases, or something close. As per Haraway’s description of the Oncomouse™, these rats were my siblings, my mirror, but more than mere products, in this installation they became individuated and acknowledged.

Throughout the exhibition, Matilda, Star and Tara, were treated with ‘alternative’ medicines, good food and enrichment – as I had treated my own diseases. They were also checked by a veterinarian every month – although regulations in the USA does not demand rats such oversight. In the USA, rats, mice and birds are not considered ‘animals’ under the Animal Farm Act, nor are they given the same protections as larger mammals, such as dogs, cats and primates. They are considered products – much like the standardized chemicals that Wistar’s Director Milton Greenman had worked so hard to create one hundred years ago. This ‘framing of rats as manufactured goods keeps research costs down and allows for the consumption of millions of rodents for research each year. There are over 80 million lab rodents used every year in scientific research in the United States alone.

There was a website developed to accompany the Embracing Animal exhibition: www.embracinganimal.com. This website explained my position and involvement with the rats, their history as a workhorse models, and featured a ‘rat love manifesto’, rat home movies and more.



At the end of the Embracing Animal exhibition, the night watchman and his wife, Mike and Peggy, asked me if they could care for Matilda, Tara and Star until the end of their lives. Mike and Peggy took Matilda, Star and Tara to their home, giving them love and comfort until they died.

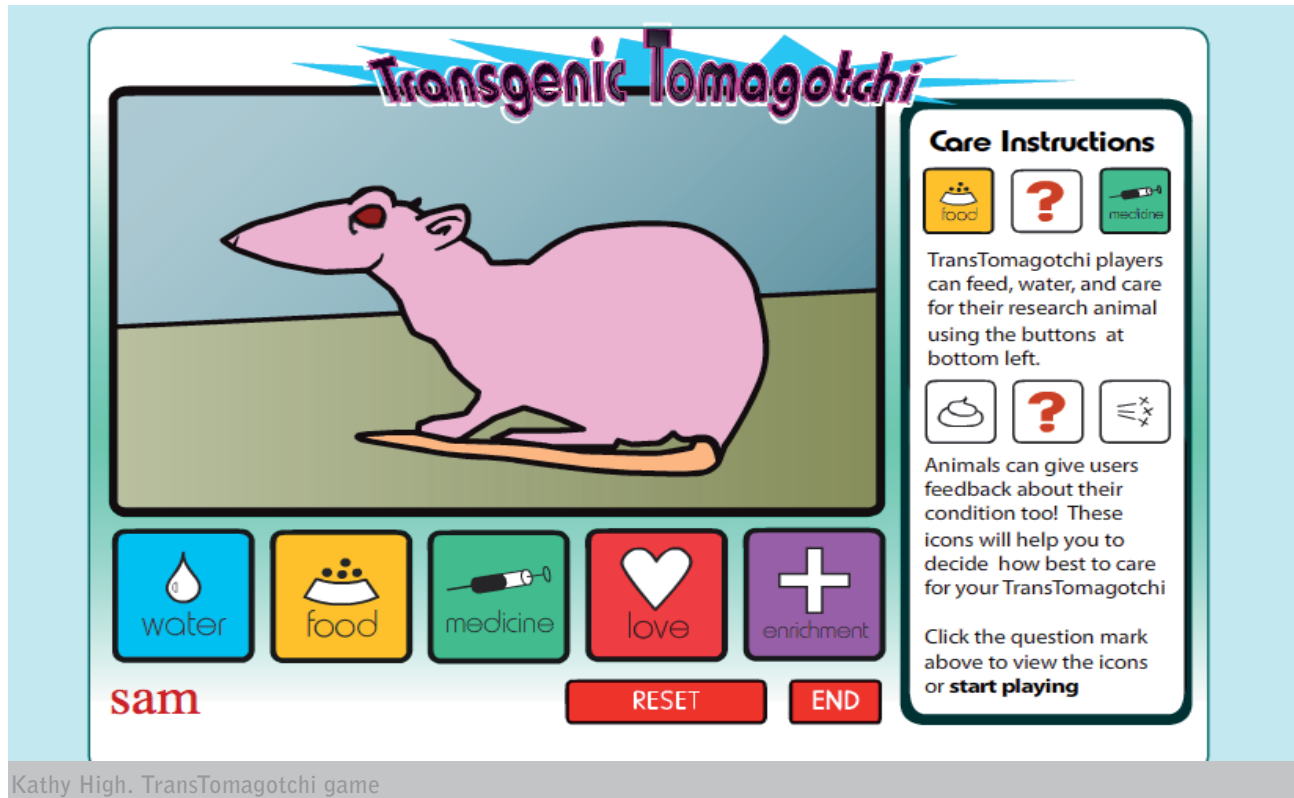
My exhibit at NGBK as part of Becoming Animal/Becoming Human, was a kind of homage to transgenic rats, these instruments of science. There were 4 smaller glass tubes with videos of human/non-human 'becomings'. Alongside this, in memorial to my rats, was Burial Globes: including five glass globes (in the spiky shape of white blood cells) holding the cremated ashes and bones of the five HLA-B27 transgenic rats that I worked with in the past (Echo, Flowers, Tara, Matilda, Star). Alongside the globes were wall hangings with faint, almost invisible script listing a history of the various disease types of transgenic lab rat models developed from 1990-2008 (thanks to the scientists who generated these tables: Ignacio Anegón, M.D. and Séverine Ménoret, INSERM U643, Nantes, France). This piece was a symbolic gesture to ritualize the invisible worker rats who remain unnamed, uncounted, unrecognized.



Kathy High. Rat Models: a list of selected transgenic lab rat models



Also on exhibit at NGBK was the Beta version of a child's video game, entitled TransTomagotchi, creating a virtual tamagotchi research animal that any player could care for – or not. In TransTomagotchi, the trans-rats were bred sick, and most often were euthanized at the end of the experiment, revealing science practices to the public. (This Beta version of the project was developed with designer, David Balluff. See <http://www.transtomagotchi.com>)



Kathy High. TransTomagotchi game

Currently I am working on the animal care committee at my university, the IACUC Committee. This is the animal ethics committee that reviews every research experiment conducted on campus and how many animals are used, making sure they will not be in pain, and when they are culled (as they most often are at the end of the experiment) that they are killed humanely. All I can do at present is advocate for reuse of animals or limiting their numbers, perhaps encouraging the use of tissue banks instead of live animals. I am developing strategies for intervention for the future.

