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Performing States-Of-In-Between: Dogs, Parrots, and Other Humans in Recent Austrian Performances

Every late spring since 1951, the Wiener Festwochen bring performers from around the world to Vienna for an opportunity to share recent developments in performance styles and present them to a Viennese public that seems to be increasingly open to experimentation. These festival weeks solidify a specific form of Viennese self-understanding and self-representation as a culture that is rooted in performance. This essay seeks to link two recent Austrian performances—one of them was part of the Wiener Festwochen in 2016, the other was staged in downtown Linz during the past few years—to this Austrian and specifically Viennese culture of performance by reading them as contemporary articulations of a tradition of radical performance art that can be traced back to the Viennese Actionism of the sixties and later feminist articulations in the seventies and eighties. They play on the dramatic effect of these actions, specifically their joy in cruelty, chaos, and orgiastic intoxication, by staging regressions and thus making visible what has been dammed up and repressed in contemporary society.¹ Just as their historical models, these two performances merge the performing and the fine arts and they highlight provocative, controversial, and, at times, violent content. But they do it in an interspecies context that adds an entire layer of complexity to the project of societal and cultural critique.

In May and June 2016, the performer duo of Danish artist SIGNA and Austrian Arthur Köstler presented their performance installation *Wir Hunde/Us Dogs* in a run-down apartment complex located in Faßziehergasse 5 in the seventh district of Vienna, just a few minutes from the trendy cafes and museums of the Museumsquartier, an event that was co-sponsored by the Vienna Volkstheater. The festival program cited a “humandog” (“Hundschn”) who reported that s/he was allegedly born as a human but always knew s/he was really a dog and finally, after many years of repression and endless suffering, found a new family where s/he is loved and accepted for what s/he is. S/he now wants to speak out about the plight of humandogs—i.e., a classic coming out story that probes the conventions of the genre by extending them to a trans-species community.²

In May 2016, I took a group of American undergraduate students who were studying German and Viennese culture at a local language institute to this performance after prepping them extensively with information about Viennese performance culture including Viennese Actionism and feminist performance art, but no lecture or reading assignment could have prepared them for this amazing experience; in fact, I lost one student right at the door of the performance venue where we rang the bell and upon entry were greeted by a humandog on a leash barking at us,³ another student after

1 For more background on Viennese Actionism see Hermann Nitsch's home page: www.nitsch.org.

2 See <http://www.volkstheater.at/stueck/site-specific-theatre>. See also <http://signa.dk/projects?pid=94111>.

the formal introduction to the event (a so-called “Tag der offenen Tür”), and several other students midway through the evening after they had visited with some of the altogether seven humandog families in their respective apartments. The students were simply not prepared for the very physical experience of sharing a space with these humandogs who would come close, lick their legs, crawl into their laps, pee on their shoes, drink water out of their bowls, and, most shockingly, in some cases needed to be contained and prevented from seemingly aggressive behavior with the help of a taser gun.

Equally amazing, on June 1, 2017, a scholarly symposium on animal music took place at the major lecture hall of the Kunstuniversität Linz. Speakers and participants sought to

approach the various aspects of musical animal-machine interaction from an interdisciplinary perspective. Internationally renowned experts from the fields of animal cognition, computer science, contemporary arts and cultural studies discuss[ed] the musical capabilities of animals and present[ed] the latest scientific, cultural, and ethical findings in this field. This symposium and the related exhibition at Salzamt [were] part of the ongoing artistic-research project metamusic initiated by alien productions, which is dedicated to the design of musical instruments for grey parrots, a species known for its outstanding cognitive and communicative abilities.⁴

Metamusic aims to develop interactive sound installations and electronic instruments for animals held in captivity with the expressed goal of improving the animals' quality of life by creating an interactive sonic environment in an animal-centered design process.⁵ This environment was explored in a series of concerts that involved human and nonhuman performers and radically challenged the idea of agency and audience.

Both of these cross-species performances probe the limits of our common understanding of how performance space operates, who is supposed to inhabit it, what the interaction is like between performers and audience, and what it means to perform in the first place. In fact, performance scholar Lourdes Orozco goes as far as claiming:

[i]n performance, animals raise questions about the status of both the human and the animal and about the relationship between the two. They transform theatre's relationship by appearing as a real presence onstage; they challenge its meaning-making process and invite a reassessment of the ways in which theatre is produced, received and disseminated.⁶

My essay explores some of the conceptual challenges of human and nonhuman performances from a perspective rooted in animal and multispecies studies relying on recent scholarship on animal performers in research that is inspired by the challenges of the scientific concept of the Anthropocene, i.e., the newly pronounced geological age of the human that highlights human agency in changing the Earth's atmosphere and biological mechanisms, perhaps most prominently featured in discussions of climate change and species extinction.⁷ In the Anthropocene, Jeremy

3 For a sample see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0S8BZdfLlj4>.

4 See <http://interface.ufg.at/animus>. For scholarship on animal music see Hollis Taylor and Andrew Hurley: "Music and Environment: Registering Contemporary Convergences". In: *Journal of Music Research Online* (2015), pp. 1-18, www.jrmo.org.au.

5 See <http://interface.ufg.at/animus/speakers/#4>.

6 Lourdes Orozco: *Theatre & Animals*. New York: Palgrave, 2013, p. 3.

Davies explains, “[h]umanity is not at the center of the picture [...] opposing, by its powers of mind, the passive matter that encircles it. Instead, human societies are themselves constructed from a web of relationships between human beings, nonhuman animals, plants, metals, and so on.”⁸ I am interested in the Anthropocene as a cultural phenomenon that helps revisit the anthropological divide and facilitate possible models for rethinking humans’ place in the world as Ursula Heise has suggested in her recent book on the cultural meanings of endangered species.⁹ More radical than the strand of recent thought associated with posthumanism and with wider reaching consequences, in the Anthropocene, cultural expressions like performances explore the radical interconnectedness between the sphere of the human and the nonhuman, i.e., animals, plants, biological agents, but also objects and machines. They blur the boundaries between the realms of humans, animals, and machines in posthuman environs by focusing on the overlapping relations of humans and nonhumans. Anthropocene performances cast human beings in a broader ecological and more entangled network as human beings that live among and with other life forms and co-inhabit the earth. What is especially interesting in the case of these two performances is the fact that they both originated in an Austrian context. Especially *Us Dogs/Wir Hunde*, but in an indirect way also *Metamusic* probe the conventions of Viennese and Austrian performance cultures by staging them in a hyperbolic setting of trans-species actions. The taboo-breaking and often quite violent and radical actions performed by Viennese artists in the sixties as a reflection of their impatience with the conservative bourgeois culture and society in Austria are translated to a level that transcends historical and cultural specificity by making the suppression of the memory of political violence and the atrocious acts committed by the Nazis a matter of intra-species interaction. The shock approach to highlighting the violence in contemporary society and culture is redirected as critique of the power structures involved in the relationship between humans and nonhumans. At the same time, the approach of the Viennese Actionists to their attempt at making their audiences face this history of suppression and violence through art is retained in some of the specific strategies with which the performers interact with each other and with their spectators. Anthropocene concerns meet Austrian performance traditions in a highly provocative turn that invites reflection on rethinking the shape of contemporary performance in Austria and beyond.

7 Paul Crutzen and Eugene Stoermer: “The Geology of Mankind”. In: *IGBP Newsletter* 41 (2000), p. 12. For scholarship on cross-species performances see Michael Peterson: “The Animal Apparatus: From a Theory of Animal Acting to an Ethics of Animal Acts”. In: *TDR: The Drama Review* 51:1 (2007), pp. 33-48. Walter Putnam: “Captive Audiences: A Concert for the Elephants in the Jardin des Plantes”. In: *TDR: The Drama Review* 51:1 (2007), pp. 154-60. Rachel Rosenthal: “Animals Love Theatre”. In: *TDR: The Drama Review* 51:1 (2007), pp. 5-7. Ann-Sophie Springer and Etienne Turpin (eds.): *Land & Animal & Nonanimal*, Intercalations 2. Berlin: K-Verlag, 2015. David Williams: “Inappropriate/d Others or The Difficulty of Being a Dog”. In: *TDR: The Drama Review* 51:1 (2007), pp. 118-27.

8 Jeremy Davies: *The Birth of the Anthropocene*. Oakland: University of California Press, 2017, p.7.

9 See Ursula K. Heise: *Imagining Extinction. The Cultural Meanings of Endangered Species*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017, p. 6

Beyond human performers

In the Berlin of the time when I began researching and writing this essay (fall 2017), the Hebbel am Ufer (HAU) Theater organized an entire festival around the work of French director and artist Phillippe Quesnes, originally entitled “La Nuit des Taupes,” in which human actors in mole costumes perform the work of the blind animal that is constantly digging below the earth on stage and in improvised performances in various locations.¹⁰ *Der Maulwurf macht weiter. Tiere / Politik / Performance 26.9. – 8.10.2017* presented a weeklong exploration into the utopian idea of new (and nonviolent, nonhierarchical, nonidentical) forms of interspecies living through the lens of the mole. Performance styles ranged from theater presented on stage, to street theater, dance, musical presentations, film, and lecture performances in an impressive interdisciplinary investigation of alternative forms of community and the search for a new theatrical and political language that is able to break through the cultural patterns of thought that determine our theories and practices of community building. In these performances, the mole functioned as a sign for a heterotopian practice of living “barrierfree” and together with other beings and nonbeings. Also in fall 2017, and attesting to the relevance of the topic, Berlin choreographer Martin Nachbar explored Simone Forti’s dance moves from her *Zoo Mantras* from 1968 in *Tierforme/l/n* in an effort to understand the bodily movements of zoo animals, indicating a heightened interest in cross-species scenarios in contemporary performance.¹¹

Although definitely challenging in terms of rethinking performative practice, neither *Der Maulwurf macht weiter* nor *Tierforme/l/n* managed to—and perhaps did not intend to—break through the barrier of the stage as a place where humans play humans and/or nonhumans in costumes for other humans, and none of the performers claimed to speak for the animal. The Austrian performances *Wir Hunde/Us Dogs* and *Metamusic* however, go further than that. They attempt to stage human-nonhuman engagements as stages of in-between the human and nonhuman by exploring and exploding the conventions of humans playing nonhumans and/or humans playing along with nonhuman performers. Building on Victor Turner’s ethnographic work on rituals and their power of highlighting transitions, Erika Fischer-Lichte used his concept of the liminal in performance studies to capture the aesthetic dimension of threshold experiences or stages of

10 A PDF of the program with background material is available as download from the theater’s website: <http://www.hebbel-am-ufer.de/programm/festivals-und-projekte/2017-2018/der-maulwurf-macht-weiter>. See also the work of producer and director Antonia Baehr: <http://www.hebbel-am-ufer.de/programm/kuenstler/b/antonia-baehr>.

11 See <http://tanzfonds.de/projekt/dokumentation-2017/tierformeln-at-einstudierung-von-sleep-walkers-akazoo-mantras-von-simone-forti>. See also Astrid Kaminski: “Tanz den Eisbär. Performen zwischen Tier und Mensch; die Reihen ‘Der Maulwurf macht weiter’ am Hebbel am Ufer und ‘Tierforme/l/n’ in den Sophiensälen” In: *faz* (October 5, 2017), p. 24. One of the “Kulturpalast-Sendungen” also featured an interview with Martin Nachbar about his dance moves inspired by animal movements: see Programm.ARD.de (November 11, 2017). See also the special exhibit on animal performers in film which took place from October 17 to November 1, 2017 in the Museo Nazionale del Cinema in Turin, “Bestiale: Animal Filmstars” (see <http://www.museocinema.it/en/exhibitions/bestiale-animal-film-stars>) as well as the exhibit “Tiere: Respekt/Harmonie/Unterwerfung” that was on display from November 3, 2017, to March 4, 2018, in the Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe Hamburg whose expressed aim was “geared primarily towards informing visitors and sensitizing them to ways and means of respectful co-existence” (see <http://tiere.mkg-hamburg.de>).

12 See Erika Fischer-Lichte: “Einleitung. Zur Aktualität von Turners Studien zum Übergang vom Ritual zum Theater”. In: Victor Turner: *Vom Ritual zum Theater. Der Ernst des menschlichen Spiels*. Frankfurt: Campus, 2009, p. ix.

in-between.¹² The Austrian performances I discuss in this essay go beyond the confines of performing animality and the human-animal encounter on stage. They play with the possibility of creating new performance spaces, new conceptions of audience, liminal experiences of states of in-between, and a new language for cross-species communication that probes the paradigms of cultural expression in the Anthropocene. A heightened awareness of Austrian performance culture and its sense of the performativity of artistic expressions of power relations becomes the foundation for these new aesthetic strategies.¹³ Viennese Actionism's focus on art performances that involve real bodies with the intent to directly confront the audience's reality is intensified through artistic forms that embrace an understanding of drama and performance as therapeutic and cathartic.

The conceptual context for this discussion, beyond the idea of rethinking the place of humans in a more radically interconnected world and a heightened awareness of Austrian performance culture, is the recent turn of performance scholarship and practice towards exploring human-animal or human-nonhuman encounters. Ursula Heise's call for new literary genres for imagining environmental topics beyond tragedy, elegy, encyclopedia, the database, and anti-modernization narratives can also be understood in the context of an urgent need for new models of framing multispecies cosmopolitan communities and addressing multispecies justice.¹⁴ Her list of examples taken from fiction can be fruitfully extended to the realm of performance where such communities and cosmopolitan values are staged. Heise takes her cue from approaches to multispecies ethnography, a new scholarly tool for understanding environmental justice as a form of multi-species justice reaching across differences of cultures and species by exploring how diverse organisms are entangled in political, economic, and cultural systems.¹⁵ These new approaches are able to rely on research by biologists and ecologists that suggests a far greater connectedness of species' artistic expression than the evolutionist might expect. Yale performance scholar Una Chaudhuri has introduced the neologism of "Zooësis," i.e., the putting into discourse of the animal, into this discussion. Chaudhuri coined this new concept in an essay on "Animal Geographies: Zooësis and the Space of Modern Drama" in which she developed an animal studies perspective on performance within the context of a volume that explores the idea of performing nature.¹⁶ Although this concept is helpful for my investigations into Anthropocene performances and Austrian performance culture it doesn't fully capture the radicality of the kind of encounters these performances of human-nonhuman relations propose. Chaudhuri returns to the idea of zooësis in her more recent investigations into animal acts and performing species today, but falls short of exploring actual animal acts that are not human discourses on animals: none of the performances featured in her and Holly Hughes' video archive put together for

13 See Erika Fischer-Lichte: "Culture as Performance". In: *Performance*, special issue of *Modern Austrian Literature* 42:3 (2009), p. 1-10, edited by Brigitte Prutti and Sabine Wilke.

14 See Heise: *Imagining Extinction*, p. 6ff.

15 See Eben Kirksey: *The Multispecies Salon*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014. For examples see <http://www.multispecies-salon.org>.

16 See Una Chaudhuri: "Animal Geographies. Zooësis and the Space of Modern Drama". In: Gabriella Giannachi and Nigel Stewart: *Performing Nature. Explorations in Ecology and the Arts*, Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005, p. 103. See also Una Chaudhuri: "(De)Facing the Animals. Zooësis and Performance". In: *TDR: The Drama Review* 51:1 (2007), pp. 8-20.

the book bring actual animals on stage; all performers act on behalf of animals.¹⁷ *Us Dogs/Wir Hunde* and *Metamusic* challenge us to rethink what it means to perform cross-species and multispecies communal acts in a much more far-reaching paradigm that includes radical imaginations of the human-animal “continuum.”¹⁸

A recent special issue of the journal *Performance Research*, “Turning Animal” edited by Nicholas Salazar Sutil, takes this basic idea further by linking the question of animal performances “to the new materialist thinking across performance and embodied arts practice.”¹⁹ Contributions explore radical forms of hybridity, interspecies performances, heightened bodily experiences, and other performances that test the limits of the traditional theatrical scene:

- 1) by staging non-human elements, in other words, through the arrangement of performative encounters between human actors or spectators and non-human factors, and considering the latter to be ‘non-human performers’
- 2) by redirecting attention to the non-human factors of conventional performance venues
- 3) by staging performances in unconventional venues and in relation to their non-human factors
- 4) by replacing the human performer altogether with non-human factors
- 5) by studying the transformative potential of human bodies, the ‘non-human in us’
- 6) by performing to ‘non-human spectators.’²⁰

Wir Hunde/Us Dogs and *Metamusic* address some or all of these points respectively. More so than fiction that can deeply move its readers and provide them with models of experiencing an Anthropocene world, the performing mode, especially one that situates itself vis à vis the tradition of Viennese Actionism, adds to this insight the bodily dimension. Günther Brus, Otto Mühl, Hermann Nitsch, and Rudolf Schwarzkogler used their bodies in their artistic collaborations during the sixties to create “actions” before their audiences that would draw attention to societal problems.²¹ They often used dead animals, blood, organ parts, and their own feces to enhance their message and intensify the experience of art through artistic form. *Wir Hunde/Us Dogs* brings this impulse from the world of art back to the performance space later articulations of Viennese Actionism had left to explore video and other medial expressions in the feminist performance art of the seventies and eighties.²² Reaching beyond the bodily

17 See Una Chaudhuri and Holly Hughes (eds.): *Animal Acts: Performing Species Today*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2014, p. 10f.

18 See the emerging discussion of post-human positions in German-language performance scholarship, f. e., Maximilian Haas: “Das Tier auf der Bühne,” as part of a co-authored essay on “Bühnen des Nichtmenschlichen”. In: *Episteme des Theaters*. Bielefeld: transcript, 2016, pp. 202-5. See also an earlier version of this material by Maximilian Haas and Daniel Weber-Krebs: “Balthazar: Ein Tier auf der Bühne”. In: *Theater der Zeit* 9 (2014), pp. 73-76. An English-language version of the Balthazar material is available in *Antennae* 31 (2015), pp. 61-64 in a special issue on “Multi-Species Intra-Action” edited by Madeleine Boyd. See also Maximilian Haas: “Interspecies Performance zwischen Literatur und Theater, Ethik und Ästhetik”. In: *Tierstudien* 8 (2015), pp. 182-84. For a dance context see Mariama Diagne: “Tanzende Tiere. Eine Bestandsaufnahme”. In: *tanzraumberlin*, Magazin zur tanzcard (März/April 2013), pp. 1-2.

19 See Nicolas Salazar Sutil: “Jism for Schism”. In: *Performance Research* 22:2 (2017), p. 1.

20 Esa Kirkkopelto: “Species-Beings, Human Animals, and New Neighbors”. In: *Performance Research* 22:2 (2017), pp. 87-96.

21 See Brus Mühl Nitsch Schwarzkogler: *Writings of the Viennese Actionists*. Edited by Malcolm Green. Vienna: Atlas, 1999, esp. pp. 37ff.

22 See Markus Hallensleben: “Importing Valie Export. Corporeal Topographies in Contemporary Austrian Body Art”. In: *Performance*, special issue of *Modern Austrian Literature* 42:3 (2009), p. 29-50, edited by Brigitte Prutti and Sabine Wilke.

and cruel aspect, *Metamusic* also interrogates sonic landscapes and highlights the role of the auditory in these performances, adding another level of reality that is staged in these actions. In my discussion of *Wir Hunde/Us Dogs* and *Metamusic* respectively, I explore these cultural expressions as Anthropocene performances in the context of Austrian performance culture and show how their explosion of the human-animal divide that has defined human performances of nonhuman nature adds to an understanding of the radical form of interconnectivity that we have come to appreciate in conceptions of inter-species communities and multi-species ethics.

Performing Trans-species Communities

I begin with an analysis of SIGNA/Köstler's performance installation *Wir Hunde/Us Dogs*. First of all, there is the entrance into the space. The performance venue signaled "private residence" with its doorbells and names, presumably indicating different apartments. Upon ringing one of the bells, we were greeted at the door by a woman who took our tickets, then entered a narrow hallway and passed by a growling humandog on a chain, hung up our coats in a closet and were then encouraged to move upstairs to a large room that was set up like a salon with different sofas, groups of chairs, tables etc. and take a seat—in other words, all the genre expectations for Viennese performance actions were addressed: the unconventional venue, the shockingly aggressive behavior of the performer who played the humandog, and the theatrical salon setting. Once everyone found a place to sit, the official event began and we were all handed programs that served as invitations to the fortieth-year celebration of *Canis Humanus's* open-door day (Tag der offenen Tür), a pretense to reflect on the achievements of this human-dog community with songs, poems, and a pink bubbly drink. While the humandogs were crawling among the audience, the human performers of human roles put on a program that lasted about forty minutes and included a variety of songs, welcome speeches, and instructions for how to behave during our visit with the seven human-dog families. These rules were also printed in the program and included instructions about keeping calm, not to move about in large groups, not to rush in and out of individual apartments, respecting the neighbors, respecting the humandogs' individuality, not pulling on their collars, where to smoke, the need for arriving punctually for the appointment in the "Zwinger," and, most importantly, how to react when a human-humandog encounter might get too physical and uncomfortable, namely by employing the typical commands used in dog training: "Pfui" and "aus!"²³ These rules and the power dynamic that fuels these interactions were staged in a theatrical setting that encouraged audience exploration and critical reflection.

Most visitors recognized by the latest at that point that we were dealing with the deliberate and hyperbolic exploration and putting into performance of the genre conventions that govern events such as this open-door day celebration, especially if understood in the context of Viennese performance culture; but some of my students

23 See *Canis-Humanus*: "Einladung zum 40-jährigen Jubiläum. Tag der offenen Tür," (2016), program for *Wir Hunde/Us Dogs*" Volkstheater Wien and Wiener Festwochen 2016. For a literary-historical exploration of commands used in dog training see Sebastian Schönbeck: "Auf, auf, auf: Die wilden Hunde *Penthesileas*". In: *Tierstudien* 8 (2015), pp. 22ff.

and some of the other spectators were simply overwhelmed and had no idea how to react to what was proposed to them, whether or not these proposals were for real, whether the performers really meant what they said, whether they were “living” what they were performing, and how to relate to the performers which made it into a really scary experience for some of them. This is important as it signals toward an understanding of the performance not as metaphor but as the experience of actual transgression in the tradition of Actionism. The Austrian context encouraged this exploration of the liminal threshold between performance and real-life experience by referencing this tradition and its later feminist articulations whose artistic “actions” shocked the Viennese public of the sixties and seventies by staging the human body, particularly the female body, in overtly sexual and violent poses that called attention to its objectified status.²⁴

Like in zoos and animal theme parks and keeping within the thought experiment of performing and putting into discourse trans-species intra-action, the audience was given a map of the building and a set of instructions and then encouraged to spend time with each family. We were sent off to explore the seven trans-species communities that lived throughout the building. Each family had extended a warm written welcome to the audience in form of a one-page statement as part of the program in which they explained who they were, how they were related, what the basic characteristics of each community member was, what they liked and disliked, and, in some cases, what they did for a living. The overarching framework for this open-door day, aside from the fortieth anniversary of *Canis Humanus*, was the impending ailment and soon expected passing of the founder of the community, Sigbert Graf Trenck von Moor, who lived in one of these human-dog families. On the example of his impending death, the genre conventions of performing death on stage (i.e., dramatically posing frailty etc.) were interrogated, perhaps even parodied. The aristocratic name of the count referenced the convention of bestowing titles and nobility status on purebred dogs, a practice that especially in Austria, where (human) nobility was stripped of their titles after World War I, seemed especially absurd and encouraged a reading of the performance that appreciated its hyperbolic nature. What is more, the language of these individual welcoming statements often resorted to common clichés ranging from “Platz ist in der kleinsten Hütte!” to “Wir laden alle Freunde ein zum gemütlichen Beisammensein” or “Wir feiern die Feste wie sie fallen.” Finally, on the last page of the written program, all performers were listed with their stage names and telephone numbers and audience members were encouraged to stay in touch over and above the performance itself—another indication for the deliberate putting into performance of theatrical conventions for the sake of critical inspection by the audience.

I visited four of the seven inter-species communities. I tried to keep an open mind, find an educational as well as entertaining value in these encounters, engage with the genre of the performance installation on its own terms, and generally be open to new experiences. This attitude was challenged at a number of occasions. While my visit with the count’s family went well in terms of learning about the history of the community, I was unable to accept the snacks that were offered out of repulsion. The general impression of the place was that it was filthy and unclean—a condition that

24 See Margarete Lamb-Faffelberger: *Out from the Shadows*. Riverside: Ariadne, 1997, p. 15ff.

referenced the filth present in many of the performances of Viennese Actionism but translated to an inter-species environment. One of the humandogs that lived in the count's family was outright aggressive and I was unable to break through the barrier between performer and visitor and find a mutually acceptable topic for conversation or common interest—also not unlike the performer-spectator relationship in some of Nitsch's or Mühl's actions but intensified through artistic form to bring out a heightened consciousness of inter-species power relations. In another family, my expressed curiosity about the location of one of the humandog's bed and his bowl landed me locked into a small bathroom as the only visitor with the performer blocking the door. Despite of my discomfort due my claustrophobia, I did remember the commands "Pfui" and "aus" that I was supposed to utter in such situations and to my delight they worked! The performer backed away and unlocked the door so that I was able to leave the small bathroom unharmed. I had a really interesting visit with a third family because of their ability and willingness to articulate their trans-species experiences including questions of gender, family relations, and sexuality. Incidentally, that was the only family that included a nonhuman performer, i.e., a small pug who I got to hold during my visit after an intense scrutiny of my preparedness for this task. According to my impression, the dog was the only being in the room that was never confused about who was a dog and who wasn't, but that may have been an anthropocentric assumption. That particular performance raised the issue of the animal as performer and the question of audience: who was performing for whom and what does looking at animals really mean?²⁵ This particular example also drove home the need for understanding this performance in the context of Viennese Actionism and its legacy by highlighting the fact that some of its aesthetic strategies were still operative in Austrian visual culture of the nineties such as Ulrich Seidl's documentaries *Tierische Liebe* from 1995, for example, i.e., artistic material that SIGNA/Köstler surely must have been aware of.²⁶

The visit to the fourth family proved to be the most challenging one as the lines between humans, humandogs, performers, and audience members were radically blurred—perhaps taking the tradition to a radical point. Humandogs peed on visitors' shoes and talked openly about sex with humans and humandogs. They constantly licked our legs and performed signs of sexual attraction to some of the visitors—in fact, I had to intervene on behalf of one of my female students who was pursued by a male humandog and cornered into a bathroom with the alleged intention of touching and kissing her.²⁷ One of my students took advantage of his designated appointment for the enclosure, the "Zwinger" (I was unable to explore this part of the performance due to my claustrophobia).²⁸ The invitation to the "Zwinger" was issued by the director of the kennel who was

25 See John Berger: *Why Look at Animals*. London: Penguin, 1980.

26 See the trailer to Ulrich Seidl, "Tierische Liebe": <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J7fu8jSJtbs>. I am thankful to Alice Kuzniar for alerting me to this material.

27 For an analysis of artistic practices that involve the love of animals see the papers collected in Jessica Ullrich and Friedrich Weltzien (eds.): "Tierliebe". In: *Tierstudien* 3 (2013). See also Jessica Ulrich: "Tiere in der Kunst". You Tube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MVsGm5SNbYA>.

28 For more background on the scenes in the Zwinger see Benjamin Wihstutz: "Prekäres Spiel: Beobachtungen zu SIGNAS 'Wir Hunde'". In: *Spiele spielen: Praktiken, Metaphern, Modelle*. Ed. Friedemann Kreuder and Stefanie Hüsel. Munich: Fink, 2018, p. 159-71. Wihstutz reads the performance against the backdrop of Schiller's idea about play and the precariousness of play in the context of the logic of power and submission that is so central in sado-masochistic scenarios.

allegedly in the process of training (“abrichten”) four humandogs so that they might be sufficiently domesticated, house trained, and fit for life with one of the human-dog families in the future. The language used in the rules document for the enclosure openly and hyperbolically put on display the conventions that guide the instructions given to visitors of enclosures in which wild animals are kept and trained: all verbs were rendered in command form, legal language was cited to avoid future lawsuits by potential visitors, rules were given for appropriate hygiene, posture, visual contact, how to approach the animals, and how to react to potential aggression. The visitors to the kennel were supposed to keep calm, avoid screaming or moving about abruptly, and, in the case of continued animal aggression, throw themselves to the ground, roll into a ball, and cover their ears. These instructions played with and hyperbolically staged the conventions of rules documents, their legalistic framework, their command style, and their intention of setting firm behavior expectations for the visitor thus framing the human-animal encounter as one defined by power and human control over the animal. What is more, the optional but encouraged use of the Taser challenged visitors’ understanding of the boundaries between what can, might, or should happen on stage when encountering an untamed animal. Perhaps more than any other aesthetic device, the actions in the “Zwinger” continued on the path of violence and controversy adopted by Viennese Actionists but developed it further to include the critique of human-nonhuman violence based on human-nonhuman separation in contemporary society and culture.

The Viennese press had a variety of different responses to this performance, generally favorable, ranging from welcoming the embrace of the theater’s traditional effects such as catharsis, aura, sensuality, and the production of knowledge and dramatic meaning (*Die Presse*)—perhaps the most meaningful way to connect this performance with the idea of drama as catharsis theory and quasi psychoanalysis favored by Hermann Nitsch—,²⁹ to praise for the production’s perfect illusion (clearly lost on some audience members) (*Wiener Zeitung*),³⁰ celebrating the perfect mimesis of animal behavior by the humandog performers (*Nachtkritik.de*),³¹ and applauding the production of intensive borderline experiences (*wuff.eu*).³² This last review raised an important issue by pointing to the importance of including human “wolves” (or problem dogs) in the kennel part of the performance as a foil for looking at the plight of the domesticated animal from a critical perspective. *Wir Hunde/Us Dogs* staged some of the assumptions we harbor about human-animal relations that are deeply ingrained in our culture and that are based on power relations; it explored radical forms of liminal experiences of in-between and the power of trans-species encounters between performers and spectators. Even though the humandogs were still played by human performers, these performances nevertheless crossed the protocol our culture provides

29 See Barbara Petsch: “Von der Freund- und Feindschaft zwischen Mensch und Tier”. In: *Die Presse* (May 16, 2016): <https://diepresse.com/home/kultur/news/4989565/Von-der-Freund-und-Feindschaft-zwischen-Mensch-und-Tier?from=suche.intern.portal>. Also see Nitsch’s reflections on his new work for the theater, *Das Orgien Mysterientheater*, on his home page: www.nitsch.org.

30 See Petra Paterno: “Hundstage”. In: *Wiener Zeitung* (May 16, 2016): https://www.wienerzeitung.at/nachrichten/kultur/buehne/819016_Hundstage.html.

31 See Eva Biringer: “Mach Mensch!” In: *Nachtkritik.de* (May 16, 2016): https://www.nachtkritik.de/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=12560:wir-hunde&catid=38:die-nachtkritik-k&Itemid=40. Biringer also provides background on Signa/Köstler’s previous artistic work.

32 See Christoph Griessner: “Wiener Festwochen. Mit Signa den Hund entdecken” (May 16, 2016): <https://www.wuff.eu/wp/wiener-festwochen-mit-signa-den-hund-im-mensch-entdecken/>.

for human-nonhuman encounters and, with that, left the safe space of metaphor and crossed over into actual experience, cathartic moments, and dramatic ritual. In the tradition of Austrian performance cultures, they also provided heightened bodily experiences through the confrontation with humans and dogs in dense theatrical spaces and tested the limits of the traditional theatrical venue by staging nonhuman elements along with traditional human interiors; they also arranged performative encounters between human actors and spectators with nonhuman factors, including nonhuman performers like the lap dog. The audience's attention was redirected to the nonhuman factors of the performance venue in the individual apartments but especially in the kennel scenes. Through all of these devices the transformative potential of human bodies on stage was emphasized in relation to the nonhuman in us and around us. Lastly, the questions of agency and spectatorship were raised to the extent that we asked ourselves: who was doing the performing and for whom? The effects of these performances on the spectators were produced by hyperbolic acting and intense staging techniques drawn on Viennese Actionism, extending them into a cross-species performance space and involving the inversion of genres like the classic coming-out narrative, allegations of sodomy, and a radical exploration of the human-dog relationship. What is more, our protocols for the domestication and training of animals, the study of power relations between species, the investigation into the question of what constitutes wildness, and, in general, a culture that is not conducive to models of co-habitation, interspecies being-with, and other modes of in-between were at stake. In other words, Anthropocene themes that question this culture of separation were linked with aesthetic strategies that the audience was familiar with and that drew on the repertoire of Austrian performance culture in its radicalized version.

Cross-Species Concerts

While *Wir Hunde/Us Dogs* provided a radical reflection on cross-species power relations, alien productions' *Metamusic* project tried to undo these relations by emphasizing the animal's wellbeing as one of the ethical goals that drove the artistic project. Since 2012 a group of artists has been working together with a group of scholars from a variety of disciplines in creating a space in which the animals can have meaningful experiences. The premise was that musical instruments were given to grey parrots in their enclosure so that they can "make music" and chose to treat the instrument entirely according to their liking. There was deliberately no training process involved other than the parrots' status as captive zoo animals: the birds were given the instruments and the question was: how will these birds react to this opportunity and to the musical stimuli it provided? The project website presents us with the following reflections about the project:

In every bigger city, there is a zoological garden, where animals are on display for the public. A zoo is an architectural space that widely reflects the relationship we have to the animal world [...]. We understand that boredom is a major problem of living in captivity. Much has to be undertaken to offer new challenges and diversions to the zoo inhabitants. Our project aims to build electronic sound installations to be used by the animals themselves. Using a wide range of sensors and tools, the animals become able to explore and to play with sounds and sonic moods. The animals, not the humans, will be in full control of the outcome of this sonic sculpture. [M]aybe, they find meanings and use in sound, which we have not yet discovered, and what we can enjoy once we let them take control themselves.³³

33 See <http://alien.mur.at/metamusic/site>.

Like *Wir Hunde/Us Dogs*, *Metamusic* emphasized animal agency. In fact, the project website offers several audio files through which the audience can explore the shape and range of the animals' musical expressions.

The aspects that interest me most from a perspective of understanding Anthropocene performances and their Austrian context are the concerts that involved human and nonhuman performers as well as design of an artistic parcours above the rooftops of Linz entitled *Höhenrausch*. Music and the performance of music in concerts are such central dimensions of Austrian identity and culture that it is worthwhile dwelling on this particular aspect of the project. In fact, during summer and early fall 2015, a series of concert matinees were held with human musicians in the presence of twenty parrots.³⁴ A blog recorded the weekly progress the animals made in appropriating the various instruments, their reactions to them, and their level of participation in the concert matinees. The animals's reactions were described by human project participants, often from an anthropocentric perspective though remarking upon the parrots' alleged satisfaction after checking out the instrument s/he received in their enclosure, the joy-stick, for example (i.e., picking them apart or starting to move the joy stick around and producing musical sounds). After characterizing the different animal musicians in their individuality according to the ethics of care and mutual respect that was informing the project—all parrots have names and character traits that mark them as individuals—, the blog features a series of different instruments that were presented to the animals on a weekly basis. They ranged from the guitar to the “tear,” the grid, the gong, the carton, the ambient mike, the sonic swing, the edible piano, the touchpad, the violin, the keyboard, and the branch and the blog focused on the individual response that each parrot had to the various instruments. Human visitors were able to attend these various concert matinees during which human performers played human instruments such as the violin or the piano and animal performers played and produced sounds on the instruments given to them at the same time (or not), all according to their own time, attitude, and individual preference.

For the artistic project of *Höhenrausch*, a roughly one-mile long wooden parcours that led from the OK-Platz in Linz to the courtyard of the Ursulinen cloister was erected connecting the rooftops of downtown Linz and making them accessible to human visitors who were then able to stroll through town up high, gain new perspectives, and look down onto the city from a bird's perspective. This parcours was filled with a variety of different artistic encounters, objects from museums and private collections as well as items from flea markets that all thematized “everything that flies”—perhaps the closest tie in terms of aesthetic strategy with the human-humandog performances in Vienna by populating the performance space with items that reflect the nature of the concert performance. This path led visitors through a number of enclosures where the parrots were exploring their instruments and were making music if and when they chose to, entirely on their own schedule and according to their liking. Upon closer look, however, I noticed that the instruments had to be rotated and exchanged on a weekly basis in order to to entice the animals' continued interest; in some cases, the instruments had to be re-painted with bright colors and/or redecorated with all kinds of interesting strings and/or embellished with edible parts. What was

34 See the blog: <http://alien.mur.at/metamusic/hr15>.

presented as cross-species ethics of care and respect in the blog turned out to be just another human-centered approach to animal training—this time with a softer touch perhaps. To address the problem of boredom in captured animal enclosures a whole set of assumptions about what constitutes animal satisfaction and joy was applied to this cross-species performance installation. The effect, however, was nevertheless a critical reflection on the use of materials and objects after their removal from their “intended” context. “Human” objects like the painter’s grid purchased at a local hardware store became musical instruments thanks to the fact that the animals took an interest in them and put them to a different use. While the underlying assumptions of this project were still primarily driven by anthropocentric values about what constitutes boredom in captivity and how to remedy it, the concerts and the parcourse nevertheless created performance spaces where cross-species musical encounters and liminal stages of in-between were explored in radically innovative ways—building on performance traditions first explored in Viennese Actionism and its later articulations in Austrian performance art of the seventies, eighties, and nineties. While the sado-masochistic cruelty, the slaughter, and the actions with real flesh were bracketed, the joy in chaos, dramatic effect and what Nitsch calls the aesthetic intoxication of the audience and participants were intensified by the addition of the animal performer.³⁵

Media scholar Dan Gilfillan observed one of these concerts and worked together with the artist collective. He was interested in how these performances complicate what we consider sound in the Anthropocene. For Gilfillan, the human-parrot concerts are “one sound-based example that imagines acoustic realms where human-centered listening becomes problematized, where human voice and human noise reside solely as players within a larger phenomenology or ecosystem of communication.”³⁶ Where *Wir Hunde/Us Dogs* complicated cross-species performances, *Metamusic*, in particular the concert matinees and the parcourse *Höhenrausch*, provided another layer to the complexities of listening and the composition and constitution of soundscapes, bringing an Austrian preoccupation with musical performances to Anthropocene settings. According to Gilfillan, “in the long durational encounter between humans and parrots, the installation series makes inquiries about what it means to be human, what it means to be animal, and what it means to engage each of these experiences in a type of co-produced form of agency.”³⁷ He claims that the installation and the cross-species concert performance “asks its audiences to think beyond human-centered understandings of the world, and instead allow other models of experience to reside alongside these anthropocentric ones.”³⁸ What is at stake for Gilfillan is an exploration of different temporalities at work in these concert matinees that perform Anthropocene soundscapes. Even though still driven by anthropocentric values, these Anthropocene performances nevertheless provide exposure for the audience to experience the radicality of entanglements that exist before, beyond, and alongside the human.³⁹ The Austrian context, in my mind, adds a specifically cultural dimension to

³⁵ See Nitsch’s home page: www.nitsch.org.

³⁶ Dan Gilfillan: “Of Parrots, Behaviors, and Moods: Listening Before, Beyond, and Alongside the Human,” p. 1, unpublished work from a chapter in a book-length study by Dan Gilfillan titled *Sound in the Anthropocene: Sustainability and the Art of Sound*, used by permission of the author.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 1.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

these soundscapes as it becomes clear that listening to music in the Anthropocene is an intensely local experience that draws on the conventions of listening that guide this specific audience. Listening to music in the Anthropocene meets Austrian performance cultures by providing a radical space in which different sets of temporalities can be explored and tied to the project of unfolding and overcoming the boundaries between species. While Gilfilan's interest is more aligned with thinking through the medial nature of soundscapes in Anthropocene futures, the impetus for my reflections on *Metamusic* has more to do with rethinking performance conventions and reflecting about the web of interrelatedness of human and nonhuman realities.

Press reviews of the concert matinees focused on the artist-scholar collaboration (*Wiener Zeitung*)⁴⁰ and the artistic exploration of the world of the parrots (*Mein Bezirk. at*).⁴¹ The web portal *Soundcloud* even featured extensive English-language commentary on the various concerts.⁴² What *Metamusic* adds to our understanding of the shape of performance in the Anthropocene is an emphasis on the urgent need to reconsider agency, spectatorship, and what constitutes theatrical enjoyment and entertainment. These performances go well beyond the current state of the scholarship on Zoömusicology, an emerging subfield of ecomusicology that is concerned with the sounds of the more than human, because they question the hierarchy between humans and animals: it is no longer the impetus of human analysis that is informing the production of cultural meaning—even though remnants of anthropocentric thinking were still part of the project—but animals were given the opportunity to chime in and increase the range and complexity of who is doing this producing and how. These performances also go beyond the Balthazar material that Maximilian Haas introduced for the stage with his piece for an animal performer (Balthazar, a donkey) and six human performers where the animal becomes the protagonist and the human performers remain unnamed in the program. In this piece, the spectator is confronted with “his narcissistic desire to identify with the animal, fully knowing that this projection—which is fundamental to conventional theatre—is inadequate for this situation.”⁴³ While the Balthazar performances bring to the fore the mechanisms of anthropomorphization which they try to address by putting the animal on stage as the master of the stage, “into the open” so to speak referencing Georgio Agamben's philosophical plea for leaving all interpretive decision with regard to human-animal encounters open,⁴⁴ *Metamusic* widened the opening between human and animal performers to include the level of animal-human interaction that is explored from a perspective of a broadened concept of creative agency. In its Austrian context, *Metamusic* staged the conventions of performance cultures with respect to acting, producing sounds and music, and listening to sounds and music by adding a layer of complexity to the question of what constitutes music in the first place and who controls its performances.

40 See Anon.: “Das Rätsel der Musik. Das Konzert der Papageien”. In: *Wiener Zeitung* (December 29, 2015): http://www.wienerzeitung.at/themen_channel/wissen/natur/793202_Das-Konzert-der-Papageien.html?em_cnt_page=2.

41 See Anon.: “Papageienorchester über den Dächern von Linz”. In: *Mein Bezirk* (June 1, 2015): <https://www.meinbezirk.at/linz/lokales/papageien-orchester-ueber-den-daechern-von-linz-d1362389.html>.

42 See <https://soundcloud.com/ecas-musikprotokoll>.

43 Haas: “Balthazar,” p. 62.

44 See Martin Puchner: “Performing the Open. Actors, Animals, Philosophers”. In: *TDR: The Drama Review* 51:1 (2007), pp. 21-32.

The Shape of Performance in the Anthropocene

While many important topics that shape life in the Anthropocene ranging from energy to climate change, extinction, waste, and nuclear pollution are still waiting to be explored by performers and scholars of performance more systematically, the division between humans and nonhumans is at the center of recent cross-species performances that question its alleged divide. In highlighting these trends, I am interested in exploring performance as a place in which performers and audiences alike can have experiences that encourage us to embrace the richness and diversity of complexities in distant futures. In referencing and exploring the Austrian tradition of Viennese Actionism and its later articulations, the two performances discussed in this essay actively denounce their entanglement with social, political, and cultural violence and instead stage ecological modes of living with others, encourage cross-cultural and cross-species forms of expression, and foreground complex relationalities and pluralized modes of existence. By drawing on radical aesthetic strategies first introduced by Viennese Actionists these contemporary performances create spaces where greater complexities and distant futures can be physically experienced. By going beyond the Austrian context they add a layer of complexity with regard to understanding and experiencing inter-species interactions. Theater and performance become privileged locations for these inter-species explorations since they involve all senses and invite affective, emotional, haptic, as well as intellectual reactions to objects, spatial arrangements, and human-nonhuman relations. Thanks to the important work accomplished by artists such as Günter Brus, Hermann Nitsch, Otto Muehl, Rudolf Schwarzkogler, Valie Export and others who experimented with radical images and the use of real bodies in their provocative actions, we can understand these images and actions as attempts to provoke direct confrontations with the audience. The concept of Anthropocene performances brings together these new modalities of theater and performance that question the remnants of humanism on stage and instead embrace a new performative practice that includes a vision of global interconnectedness, a nonhierarchical approach to species, the deeper exploration of how bodies are affected by their nonhuman environments, and a broader sense of agency, creativity, and crisis. These two Austrian performances build on the concept of the post-dramatic insofar as they trouble, disrupt, and eschew the technologies of theatrical representation, fracture temporal progression, challenge the concepts of plot and character, complicate what it means to listen, question dramatic agency, and explore mediation—all techniques that draw on aesthetic strategies developed by Viennese Actionists and Austrian performance artists. Beyond the post-dramatic, Anthropocene performances explore performing styles that stage environmental embodiments by adding the level of species to the mix, linking the Austrian performance tradition with more global and trans-cultural concerns in interesting ways. These Anthropocenic actions rethink the use of the body on stage in a larger framework but they continue to shock their audiences by highlighting the violence that humanity is capable of in an intra-species context. These extreme happenings address the role of animals and their bodies in contemporary society and culture in ways in which the repressed becomes visible on an experiential basis with the idea of overcoming the species divide. They ultimately expand our understanding of what constitutes tragic reality, dramatic agency, and theatrical space.

