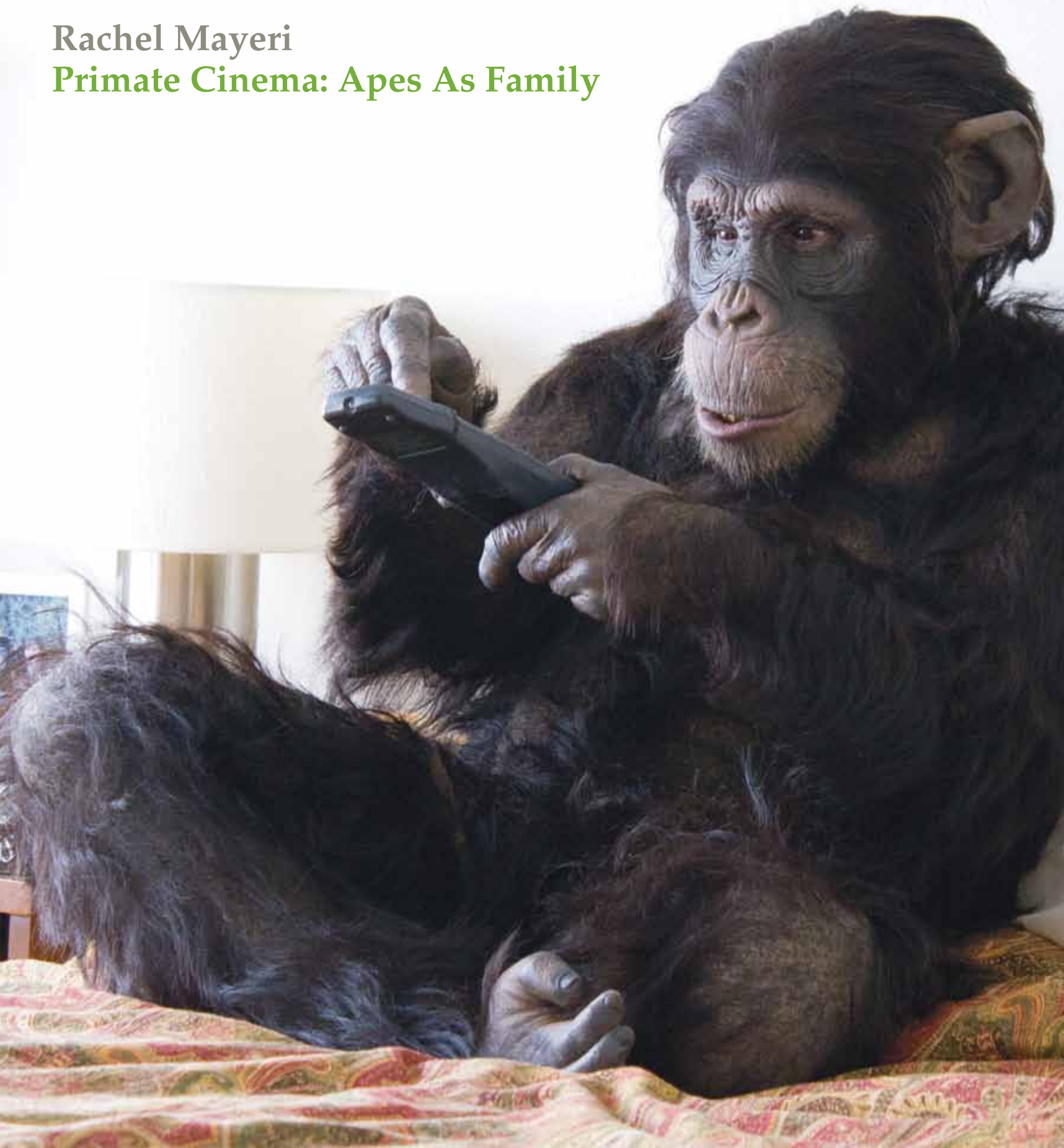
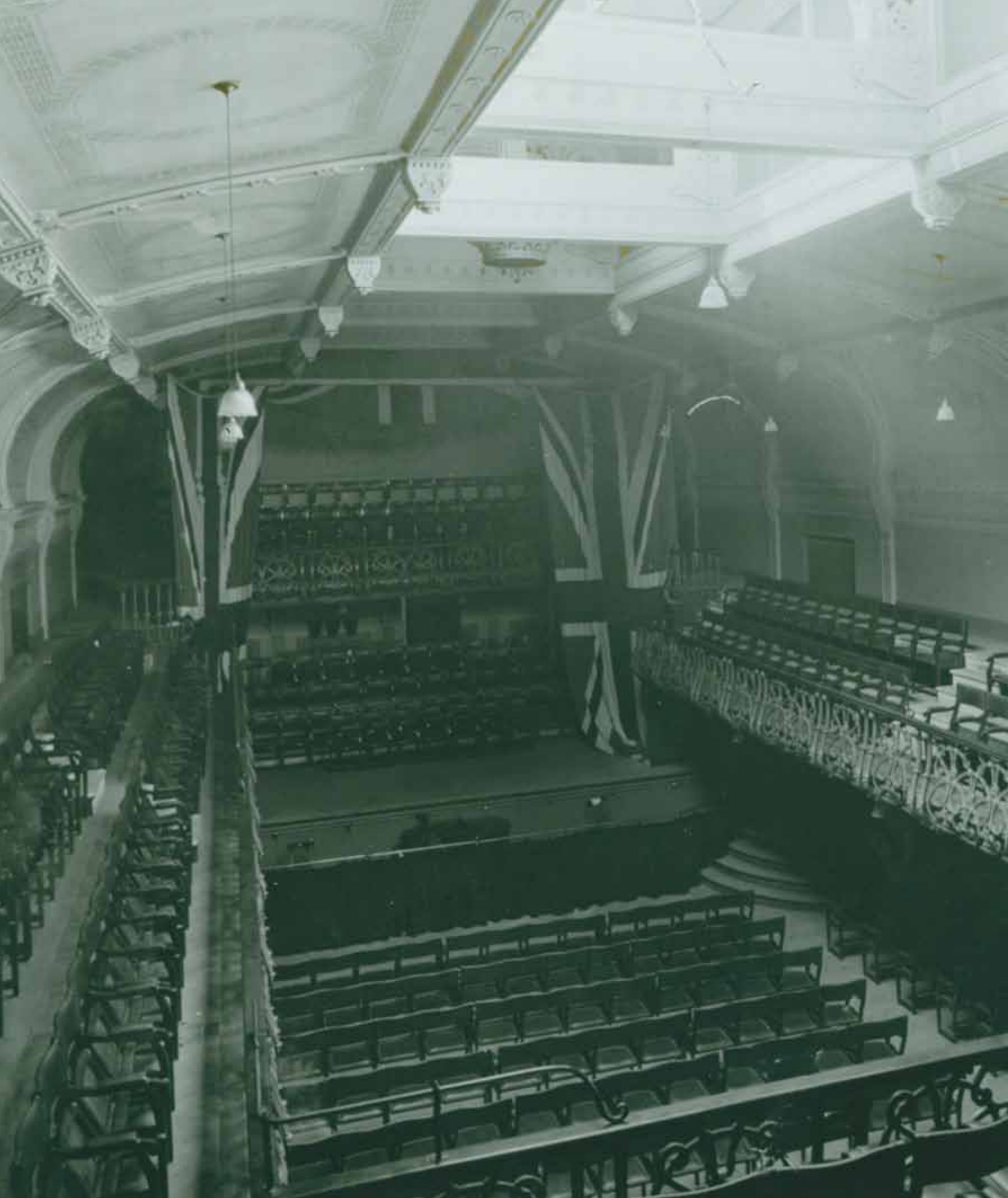


Rachel Mayeri
Primate Cinema: Apes As Family





Introduction

Left: The Cinema at the Regent Street Polytechnic, c.1920. Reproduced with the permission of the University of Westminster Archive Services.

In *Primate Cinema: Apes as Family*, the artist Rachel Mayeri imagines a primate social drama in a contemporary urban context and shows this to a chimpanzee audience.

Her video installation juxtaposes the drama enacted by humans in the guise of apes (of a young female city ape befriending a group of outsiders) with mesmerising footage of the reactions of its ape audience at Edinburgh Zoo.

“As the watchers of the watching chimps, we perceive or we imagine fascination, puzzlement and flashes of anger in their responses. Sited in different spaces in Los Angeles and Edinburgh we are never sure whether we are seeing a lab, zoo, wildlife park, rumpus room or post-apocalyptic landscape inhabited by half chimp / half humans,” explains The Arts Catalyst’s curator, Rob La Frenais. “Mayeri’s intriguing and amusing story-and-response structure contains dark undercurrents in its contemplation of the lives of our captive close relatives.”

Giving chimpanzees television to watch is not new: chimps in captivity all over the world are often shown TV as form of environmental enrichment. To make *Primate Cinema: Apes as Family*, Mayeri collaborated with comparative psychologist Dr Sarah-Jane Vick, testing different styles and genres of film to gauge chimps’ responses and discussing issues around cognition and communication in research primates. Mayeri and Vick also explored the idea of whether chimps ‘lose themselves’ in what they are watching as readily as humans.

Mayeri’s film, which she believes to be the first made expressly for a chimp audience, was shown to the chimps in Edinburgh Zoo’s Budungo Trail, a habitat consisting of several large interconnected outdoor and indoor enclosures that the chimps freely move between, and small research pods that they can enter and leave voluntarily.

Primate Cinema: Apes as Family was awarded an honorary mention at Prix Ars Electronica and was previewed at *OK Cyberarts11* in Linz, Austria. It was a headline feature during *Abandon Normal Devices* festival in Liverpool. *Primate Cinema: Apes as Family* has been commissioned by The Arts Catalyst and made with financial support from a Wellcome Trust Arts Award, Arts Council England and the Aix-Marseille Institute of Advanced Studies.



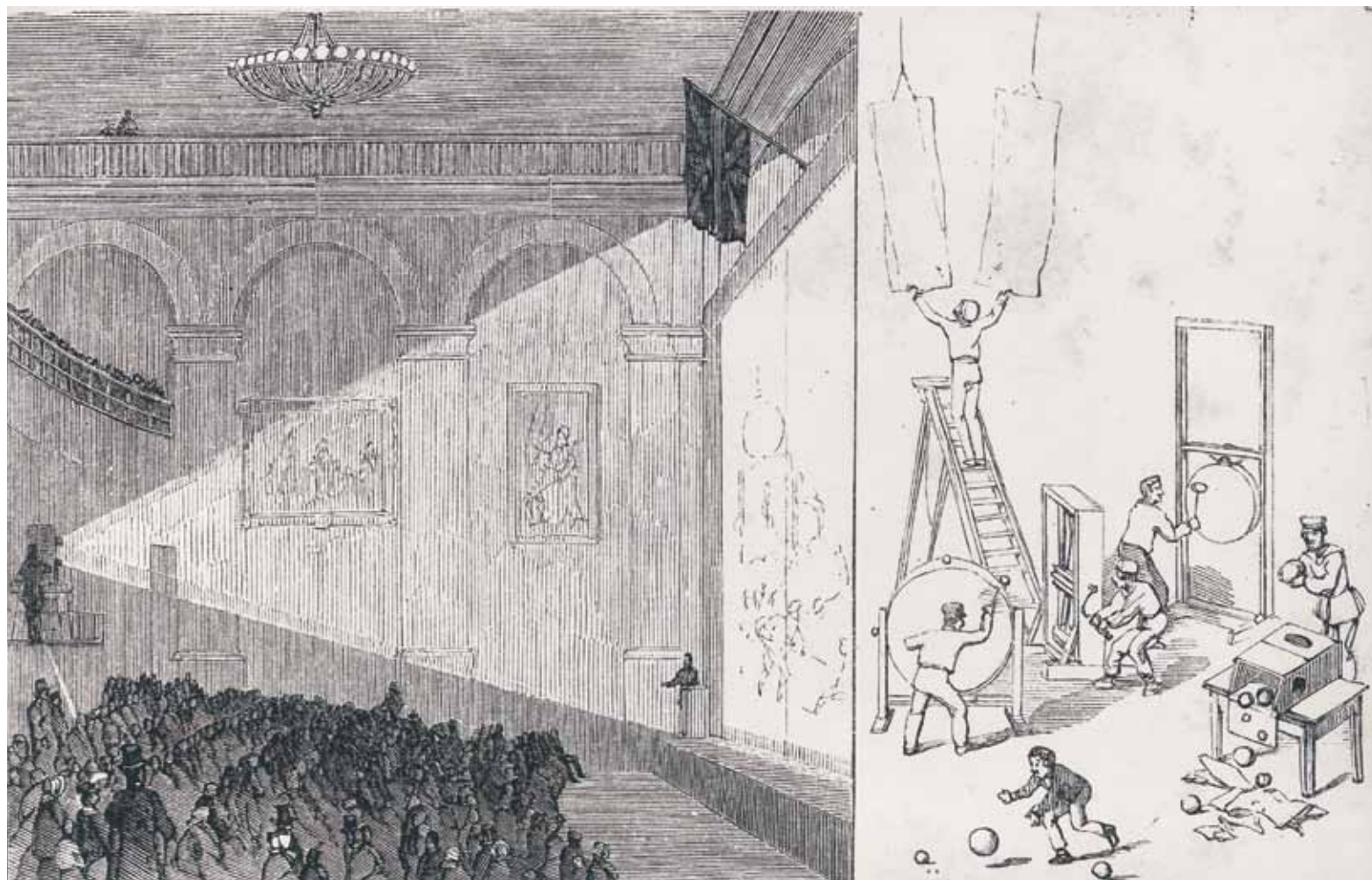
Trans-species Goggle-Box, on Rachel Mayeri's Primate Cinema: Apes as Family

Matthew Fuller

Chimpanzees don't usually watch television. This is something that might be thought to give them an edge in many respects over their near cousins, *homo sapiens*¹. But it should not be thought that it was in order to counter this advantage that Rachel Mayeri worked with members of the latter species in chimpanzee costumes to produce *Primate Cinema: Apes as Family*, a short dramatic film with an intended audience of *Pan troglodytes* – Chimpanzees. Placed on a loop in a reinforced case amongst chimpanzees at Edinburgh Zoo, this project produces a first. Perhaps one day this film will be regarded as an event akin to the first flickers, shadows and blasts of light of the Lumière brothers, another invention met with bemusement, shouts, banter, indifference and contagious fright. To place it in such a history would require an understanding of the cultural means by which humans and apes encounter each other, and further, of the development of the field of art for nonhuman animals.

The staging of primates, from the amphitheatre drawn up to watch bonobos at Apenheul in the Netherlands to the Gorilla Island of London Zoo, or the complex spatial forms of the Budongo Trail at Edinburgh Zoo, is a persistent part of human encounters with other hominids. Webcams, such as those at Edinburgh, add to the visual forms in which animals are scoped and set up. Forms of representation are also regularly moved across from those used to depict humans to other animals. James Mollison's close-focus facial portraits of higher primates gathered in the book, *James and Other Apes* for instance, are highly affecting since the portrait is a kind of looking most attuned to the individuation of the subject². More obviously, genres such as reality tv and the various forms of augmented or depleted realities they foster add to the cross-over, as humans present themselves in situations more akin to the zoological garden. The traffic of such stagings goes in several directions, a number of which are traced and amplified by the *Primate Cinema* series as a whole. (*Primate Cinema: Baboons as Friends*, 2007; *Primate Cinema: How to Act Like an Animal*, 2008.)³

Left: *Canopy* adapted by Rachel Mayeri, original source: *Primate Societies*, Barbara B. Smuts (Editor), Dorothy L. Cheney (Editor), Robert M. Seyfarth (Editor), Richard W. Wrangham (Editor) University Of Chicago Press; 1 edition (May 15, 1987)



Engraving of Magic Lantern Show with Special Effects Room, Royal Polytechnic Institution c.1860. Reproduced with the permission of the University of Westminster Archive Services.

The staging of apes in such manners always refers to interpretations of nature, but is also, structurally artificial and as such brings both categories into question. In a related way, Mayeri's film, (commissioned by the Arts Catalyst and made in consultation with Sarah Jane Vick, a psychologist specializing in research on aspects of animal communication such as facial expression) does not pretend to definitively establish actual communication with the apes who are its audience, nor suggest a means of getting to truths about the possibilities of communication amongst the higher primates. Rather it offers us a means of getting to better kinds of misunderstandings, partial insights that can be refined, scintillations along the edges of possible understandings and sensation.

Part of that field of mutual figuring out, indifference, interest and incomprehension is indeed established by making 'cinema' for the Edinburgh chimpanzees. What does it imply to set up some kind of communicative relay with another species? The relay moves from the initial film made to be shown to the chimpanzees, and on to the recording of aspects of their reaction to it, both of which together form the work as shown to humans in art contexts. But it is also a relay that folds in the process of watching and figuring out as it moves from one mode to another, and in staging or prompting that process in its human audiences. The film also proposes that we come into some kind of relation to the kinds of attention we experience – what would count as something significant to watch or to see for a chimp? What, at all, do they make of moving images on a screen, and how might that be effected by editing techniques, camera angles, close-ups?



Performance workshop for *Primate Cinema – How to Act Like an Animal* at Cornerhouse Manchester.

In turn, how do these considerations combine with the actual footage? It seems from *Apes as Family* that there are indeed correlations between what the chimps see on screen and how they behave at times. Images and sounds of social politics, sex, violence, food, along with exciting noises all bring attention to the black metal box with the intriguingly lively surface as it sits in their enclosure. But that the plot, the mix of characters or scenes has any comprehensibility to the chimps over its duration seems unlikely. They wander in and out of view of the device but, from the evidence we are given, do indeed turn to look, to hoot and to crash into the screen when something gets interesting at the level of the individual incidents presented. This is quite a superior way of using what in now rather archaic British *slang* is called the *goggle-box*, a device for inducing glaze-eyed, slack jawed entrainment.

This should tell us something however. For many years the simple fact that a television was on and tuned to a certain channel, whether or not anyone was in the room, was recorded and seen to be statistically significant in marketing and audience research. The set meters device that watched for such data, as used by Nielsen ratings, entrained the careers of generations of TV makers. Equally, the labour of animals in the construction of scientific knowledge has often gone unnoticed as they have, by turns, been treated as machines, behaviourist black boxes, or bearers of aggregates of generic traits, amongst other things. More recently, primatologists have learned that things that have at times been seen as defining barriers between the other higher primates and humans, such as the use of tools and the development of language and cultures, are also characteristic of chimpanzees, bonobos, gorillas and others. Such findings, from the behaviour observation end of research, driven by several generations of equally fascinating scientists, (as documented in Donna Haraway's *Primate Visions*⁴) correlate compellingly with those in genome mapping that show that humans and chimpanzees share 99.4% of DNA sequences, and that within that range individuals chimps and humans can be more similar to each other than they are to individual members of the same species.

In such conditions the call for a species-specific art, as has hitherto tended to be the dominant form, seems somewhat moot. A small but increasing number of artists are responding by developing work for non-human species. Mayeri contributes to this tendency in a subtle manner, through making a film that is at once sited in a chimpanzee enclosure, contains numerous potential triggers in terms of behaviour, sounds, food, sex, social interactions, tenderness and conflicts, but that is not simply operative only for chimpanzees. The layering of plot, behaviours, props and attention triggers makes this a film for at least two species.

We are conditioned more by cinema and television than by nature.

Gene Youngblood, *Expanded Cinema*, 1970

The tale of Goldilocks and the three bears gets turned around in *Apes as Family* since the positions of the interloper and the 'beast' are inverted. A more realistic looking chimpanzee incorporates into the social group of a cartload of humans in chimp fancy dress and starts aping their behavior? What does it imply, for the realer-looking creature, whose costume has more features, lusher facial hair, and who seems slightly more familiar with the accoutrements of a Los Angeleno house to be incorporated into the culture of a group of rubber-faced quasi-apes? Have these humans lost the distinctive human culture, as it is called, and started to reconstitute a means of being together and in the world via their costumes and a cluster of learned ape conventions? How does their behavior feed into our recognition of the results of the creepy training of chimps to act in ways that humans accustomed to cinema recognize as human?

What Mayeri delivers is a way of developing art for animals without falling into the too easy trap of the longed-for 'recognition' across species. This warm imagination of an underlying oneness of being is, let's face it, a rare enough illusion even amongst humans and in the context of human to non-human animal relations tends to come cooked up with a rather distasteful, and conceptually fatal, dosing of species dominance. Eyes are tantalising orbs to gaze into nevertheless, so even this species of interpretation, known as anthropomorphism in the trade, has its uses in inducing some kind of comprehension even when the search for mutual existential identity remains elusive. Anthropomorphism is but only one potential ruse though and it is towards the possibility of other forms of interference between species that this project is most suggestive.



How to Act like an animal, TELIC, Los Angeles, 2008



Media systems, generative of their own artificial ecologies, establish new forms of perception, irritation, excitement and relations to time and the senses. Something of this comes across in the way in which, when framed as research, the coverage of primates watching television in their housings passes as an indicator of enculturation. This is a familiar trope known, for instance, from media coverage of Sue Savage-Rumbaugh's extraordinarily compelling work creating multi-generational intermediation cultures between bonobos and humans alongside the extraordinarily talented Kanzi and others.⁵

But we can also see the creation of interpretative and opportunistic affordances amongst species if we take a wider, biosemiotic view of media. Biosemiotics is a field that has developed over several decades looking at the numerous forms of communication amongst and between species and within an organism. Its interests range from the study of hormones, such as pheromones, operating within and between animals, to the interpretation of languages, behaviours, chemicals and so on. What biosemiotics incidentally proposes is that there is no easy dividing line between things that are traditionally understood as media and things that operate as mediators. A pigeon rising above woodland may signify the

movement of a predator on the ground. A film of mucus under the body facilitates its easy movement, but also its tracking. Ecologies are replete with autonomies, indifferences, things that survive by not communicating, but also with myriads of ways things chance on or work at an existence amongst each other, using, watching, feeding, learning. As such, the television becomes one more operator in a general ambience or ecology of media that also includes the conscious entities that observe or ignore it, but it also means that art, which has often been characterized by a particularly reflexive and inventive working with and as media, migrates even more fully into forms of life. Ecology, which is more than a general calculus of affordances and exploits but also a generality of particular becomings offers, in its biosemiotic articulation, a means of sensing into and taking part in such a field. Art for animals, and Mayeri's precise and multi-layered articulation of it, offers a means of both tracing and inventing the constitution of such an ecology. —

Matthew Fuller's books include *Media Ecologies, materialist energies in art and technoculture*, and, with Andrew Goffey, *Evil Media* (Both MIT) *Behind the Blip, essays on the culture of software* and *Elephant & Castle* (Both Autonomedia). He is a Reader at the Centre for Cultural Studies, Goldsmiths, University of London.

www.spc.org/fuller/

¹ For a discussion of the use of television as substitute socius for chimpanzees in solitary confinement see, M.A Bloomsmith and S.P. Lambeth, "Videotapes as Enrichment for Captive Chimpanzees (*Pan troglodytes*)," *Zoo Biology* 19, 2000, pp.541-551

² James Mollison, *James and Other Apes*, Boot, London 2005

³ For further information on the series, see Rachel Mayeri's website, www.rachelmayeri.com/projects/primate-cinema/

⁴ Donna Haraway, *Primate Visions, gender, race and nature in the world of modern science*, Routledge, London, 1989.

⁵ Pär Segerdahl, William Fields and Sue Savage-Rumbaugh, *Kanzi's Primal Language, the cultural initiation of primates into language*, Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2005



Should we be talking to the Chimpanzees? Rob La Frenais

A provocation to accompany Primate Cinema: Apes as Family

At the end of Frans de Waal's classic popular science book *Chimpanzee Politics: Power and Sex Among Apes*¹, two chimpanzees who had competed for the position of alpha male were shown *The Family of Chimps*, a documentary film about their social grouping. In this anecdote, the previous alpha male, Nikki, appeared in the film even though he had drowned in the zoo moat during a battle. The new alpha, Dandy, ran screaming in to the arms of his old rival, Yeroen, at the apparent resurrection of the old deceased alpha in the film.

Rachel Mayeri's *Primate Cinema: Apes as Family*, made partly at the Budongo Trail at Edinburgh Zoo, tries to get inside the heads of chimpanzees and discovers as much about humans as our closest relatives. Rather than trying to transpose human behaviour and ape behaviour in the way that Will Self's illuminating novel *Great Apes*² does, she attempts a different stimuli on a similar group of chimpanzees as studied by Frans de Waal at Arnhem Zoo in Germany. Before I discuss what Mayeri did at Budungo, I will attempt to give a brief background on what seems to be happening in zoos and primatology as an interested outsider.

Elizabeth Hess' book, *Nim Chimpsky: The Chimp who Would be Human*³ (later to become the movie *Project Nim*), gives us a rare insight into the history of language studies and primatology. Ever since Roger Fouts' development in teaching ASL (American Sign Language) to the chimpanzee, Washoe, behavioural scientists have become split between two points of view. That of B.F Skinner, who maintained that language could be acquired by humans and non-humans alike, and that of Noam Chomsky, who argued that language had evolved in humans exclusively. The paradox shown in the book and movie occurred when human-reared chimps were removed from the often unconventional and non-scientific home backgrounds they found themselves in. It was still uncertain whether it could be proved scientifically that human-style language had emerged. Moreover, when these chimps reached maturity they became unmanageable, so found themselves as strangers in a strange land among socialised chimps in language research facilities, or worse still, medical research labs or zoos.

Rachel Mayeri, still from
Primate Cinema: Apes as Family.

It is remarkable how recently in history zoologists and zoo owners have realized that it is cruel to keep social animals, such as chimpanzees, singly or in small groups. If you look closely at a zoo's history you can see that the animals there come from a complex series of backgrounds, ranging from individuals bred in zoos to those rescued from poachers, retired circus chimps, and (in one case at Budongo) ships' mascots. When Desmond Morris, famous for his popular blockbuster science book *The Naked Ape*⁴ ran Regents Park Zoo in the 60's he was a pioneer in correcting the worst excesses of zoo practice. He began to integrate the findings of figures such as Jane Goodall into contemporary animal management for 'higher' or 'great' apes.

Goodall's observations in the wild also went some way to resolve the paradox about ASL-trained chimps. Of course the early language researchers regarded the juvenile chimp brains as a blank canvas. Goodall showed (and demonstrated this by dramatically pant-hooting at primatology congresses) that chimps develop their own specific language structures. By trying to teach chimps human-based language structure in ignorance of chimp communication patterns they were essentially scrambling the chimp's brains.

Morris was of course vilified in some quarters for enthusiastically applying evolutionary biology to human sexual politics. It could also perhaps be true that the new field of ethology, starting with Konrad Lorenz in the 50's then came into vogue in the 60's and 70's with *The Naked Ape*, can be criticised for trying to explain all of human behaviour in terms of animal behaviour. Perhaps primatologists are understandably guilty of seeing all of life through the lens of their intense observations of animals in the wild and their total immersion into the minutiae of the lives of the 'higher' apes.

But the first efforts of the primate language researchers, such as Sue Savage-Rumbaugh, took things further, bringing into being a new notion of human-type rights for 'higher primates' and today organisations such as the *Great Ape Trust*⁶ campaign for these. Self's 1997 primatology satire, *Great Apes*, in which *Guardian*-reading chimpanzees decry the plight of captive humans, brought this new movement into sharp focus.

Why do we give special consideration to chimpanzees, bonobos, orang-utans and gorillas? One reason is simply their size, hence 'great' apes. More influence came from observations such as those by Goodall and Nishida and others observing chimps in the wild which brought about this revolution in zoo keeping, including observation of 'fission-fusion' where large groups of chimps split up in to travelling parties through the forest. Equally important were the chimp studies in captivity done by Gordon Gallup, in the 'mirror test' using a red dot placed on the forehead of a sleeping animal (acclimatised to seeing its own image in mirrors and tries to rub the mark off on awakening), which indicates self-recognition among these four species and places them in common with the often-unrecognised fifth great ape species, the human primate. The great apes have social, familial, and cognitive lives which are remarkably flexible, cultural and complex.

Insomuch that there has developed a new militancy adopted by the main proponents of interspecies communication since the early experiments with teaching sign language to chimps. For example Nim Chimpsky, Washoe, and more recently the bonobo Kanzi, and the work of Susan Savage-Rumbaugh who is now father to a third-generation human-language trained chimp, Teco, (ironically named after the company that finances the Great Ape Trust where he lives). Also the main resident primate at the Gorilla Foundation⁶ called Koko interviews her human carers before hiring them.

Organisations like the Great Ape Trust and the Gorilla Foundation have merged primate language research institutes into campaigning organisations that advocate human-style rights for their language-trained apes. This appears to run counter to the work of field primatologists like Goodall whose aim is to closely observe social groups of chimps in the wild while creating minimum disturbance, although in the early days at Gombé Research station it was admitted they made mistakes, such as feeding them bananas and disrupting foraging patterns and playing, and even physically holding and cuddling chimps in the wild, when trust of humans could prove fatal with the upsurge in poaching and the bushmeat trade.

Where there are poachers, there are rich people prepared to pay for young chimps who are often taken forcibly from their mothers and sold as pets. As trainers of chimp actors know (part of the tragedy with *Project Nim*) cuddly juvenile chimps grow into dangerous, strong and often violent adolescents before becoming even more dangerous adults.

Language researchers now realize these problems and allow for them in the development of their chimps in using the knowledge gained in observations in the wild to create a safe environment for their animals many of whom, including Kanzi, have been bred in captivity. They see the ability to allow bonobos and gorillas to apparently 'tell their own story' as vital in campaigning against poaching and destruction of natural habitats in Africa and elsewhere. These animals can never return to the wild but perhaps can help their cousins still out there by somehow becoming ambassadors to the human primates. But at what cost?

Creating multi-generational human language-trained chimps changes instinctual parenting skills for example, in the case of Teco he is seen in one youtube video playing with his father, Kanzi, in a disconcertingly human way. Humans have backed themselves even further into an anthropogenic world where human intervention into the lives of other species is irreparable. There is also an entry point here into the politics of liberation, where the human carers become allied with their non-human primate charges although this is interestingly misaligned with the politics of animal liberation, as illustrated in Sarah Gruen's primatology thriller, *Ape House: A Novel*⁷.

Have we created ape / human primates in these language facilities and if so, can they still represent their species or are they fatally-flawed, anthropomorphic hybrids born out of the human desire to understand the Other and thus eventually condemned like Nim, to a lifetime of confusion, boredom and emotional damage? Or by giving them human-like status as ambassadors for their species are we undertaking the enterprise advocated by Savage-Rumbaugh: "*We must rejoin the great stream of life from whence we arose and strive to see within it the seeds of all we are and all we may become.*"⁸

Nim Chimsky and Laura signing. Image courtesy of © Susan Kuklin.



What about zoos? One reason we were very happy to have our research and filming project accepted by Edinburgh Zoo's Budongo trail was that this was clearly a state of the art facility allowing chimps to live socially, with extensive indoor and outdoor enclosures and wildlife material replicated. Perhaps not as idyllic as the chimpanzee island studied by de Waal, but still with trees, nests, swings and private areas to accommodate a mature group of around 20 chimps.

Furthermore, Budongo feeds resources to and has a staff exchange programme with its partner in Africa. It can be said that although its chimpanzees, who have accrued from a historic collection, can never be returned to the wild, they receive excellent stewardship from a team of committed keepers and zoo managers.

In Edinburgh cognitive non-invasive research takes place with chimpanzees with the help and co-operation of the keepers and zoo managers. The chimps are allowed to pass freely in and out of the research pods and are not forced to take part in psychological experiments although they are sometimes rewarded with food treats. Also, while there are many areas where they are on display to the public, they always have access to private,

off-display spaces. That said, they cannot, of course, actually ever leave.

This essential truth, along with the need to make money through public admissions, and by definition public voyeurism, always make zoos very conflicted spaces. Symbolically they represent a historic blind alley along which we humans are trapped in our relationship with animals.

The writer, John Berger, talks of the 'loneliness of man as a species' and the gulf of incomprehension as we look into the eyes of animals. Other contemporary philosophers have followed, with the much quoted Jacques Derrida finding himself, naked, before his cat, in *The Animal That Therefore I Am*⁹. His agonised musings on the interspecies gap begins like this:

"Since so long ago, can we say that the animal has been looking at us? What animal? The other."

"I often ask myself, just to see, who I am – and who I am (following) at the moment when, caught naked, in silence, by the gaze of an animal, for example, they eyes of a cat. I have trouble, yes, a bad time overcoming my embarrassment."

Derrida concludes after some lengthy discourse about what the cat is not doing:

“...it can look at me. It has its point of view regarding me. The point of view of the absolute other, and nothing will ever have ever given me more food for thinking through this absolute alterity of the neighbour or of the next-door than these moments when I see myself naked under the gaze of a cat.”

These discussions have continued in art theory books like Steve Baker’s *The Postmodern Animal*¹⁰ and in exhibitions such as *The Animal Gaze* featuring work about relations with domestic animals such as that of the Scottish artist Andrea Roe.

In Edinburgh Rachel Mayeri, in *Cinema for Primates, Apes as Family* has worked very closely with the inhabitants of Budongo, both human and non-human to produce a work which, in a sense underlines this loneliness referred to by both Berger and Derrida. By using three layers of primates ranging from real chimps in the zoo through to a lifelike chimp ‘unit’ (played by a human actor in an animatronic costume controlled by two puppeteers) to humans ‘acting as animals’, then feeding the results back to the (consenting) chimps in the zoo she has opened up, rather than closed, the essential dilemmas of species interaction.

Rachel Mayeri, in her previous work *Primate Cinema: Baboons as Friends* refers to parallels with humans and baboons, reflecting the pioneering work of primatologist Barbara Smuts, who discovered in her fieldwork that she could not observe the baboons un-ignored, as if she was a rock, an event well described by Donna Haraway in *When Species Meet*¹¹:

“Smuts recognised that the baboons were unimpressed by her rock act. They frequently looked at her, and the more she ignored their looks, the less satisfied they seemed. Progress in what scientists call ‘habituation’ of the animals to the human being’s would-be non-presence was painfully slow. It seemed like the only critter to whom the supposedly neutral scientist was invisible was herself.”



Cinematic Cat by Andrea Roe
Model cat, Maltesers box,
fibre optics, power supply.
© Andrea Roe 2005

This affected Mayeri’s approach in her new project but created new dilemmas:

“People have asked me – why did you try to communicate through cinema, instead of theatre? Or, did you want to (or get to) touch or hold the chimps? I guess I wanted to resist the desire to have a personal, physical relationship with the chimps. I admit to having the urge to reach across species, to make friends with chimpanzees, but I don’t entirely trust it. I think about the thousands of zoo visitors who press themselves against the glass of the enclosure, make faces, tap on the glass, to try to get chimps to perform for them or react to them. What’s in it for us? What’s in it for the chimps? Can I keep up my end of the relationship? I hoped to make a film that would be for them first – showcasing chimps, not humans. (Of course, without using chimps as actors.) The result was probably more for us than for them – it wasn’t as strangely “chimpcentric” as I had imagined it would be. Maybe a chimp director, commissioned to make a film for humans, would also make movie ultimately for chimps. It could be primate nature.”

Interestingly, the current context for Mayeri’s *Primate Cinema: Apes as Family* is part of Tue Greenfort’s homage to Donna Haraway. The Worldly House archive in an old boathouse as part of the current Documenta 13, Kassel haunted by video images of Haraway’s dogs, written about memorably in *When Species Meet*.

In a key scene in Rachel Mayeri’s film, a highly convincing chimp-played-by-a-human is in the bedroom, calmly watching soporific wildlife movies, TV zapper in hand, with a photo of a chimp-human family, the artist as one of the parents. Next to the photo is a dog-eared copy of Donna Haraway’s seminal *Primate Visions: Gender Race and Nature in the World of Modern Science*, a highly influential feminist view of primatology and primatologists. I will give the prolific Haraway the last word here in her critique of *Primate Societies*¹² by Barbara Smuts et al:

“Children, AI computer programmes and nonhuman primates: All here embody ‘almost minds’. Who or what has ‘fully human status’? As if the answer were self-evident, the adult human scientists who wrote (the chapter) ‘Future of Primate Research’ did not ask that question. And yet, primatology has persistently been about just what fully human status will be allowed to mean. The authors quietly embodied the maturations of the ‘almost minds’ that they signalled: adult to child, human to nonhuman primate, scientist to machine artificial intelligence. What is the end, or telos, of this discourse on approximation, reproduction and communication, in which the boundaries among and within machines, animals and humans are exceedingly permeable? Where will this evolutionary, developmental and historical communicative commerce take us in the techno-bio-politics of difference?”

Perhaps Mayeri’s *Cinema For Primates – Apes as Family* attempts to point the way. —

Dr Rob La Frenais has been a contemporary art curator for 25 years, working internationally and creatively with artists mainly on original commissions. Before that he was the founder and editor of *Performance Magazine*. For the last 15 years he has curated The Arts Catalyst’s programme. He believes in being directly engaged with the artist’s working process as far as possible, whilst actively widening the context within which the artist can work. He has been interested in primatology for some time, since curating the exhibition *Interspecies* and this exhibition, but the views expressed here should not be taken to represent those of the world of primatology and zoos.

¹ Frans de Waal, *Chimpanzee Politics: Power and Sex Among Apes*, The John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1983.

² Will Self, *Great Apes*, Bloomsbury, London, 1997.

³ Elizabeth Hess, *Nim Chimpsky: The Chimp who Would be Human*, Bantam Books, 2008.

⁴ Desmond Morris, *The Naked Ape*, Jonathan Cape, London, 1967.

⁵ www.greatapetrust.org

⁶ www.koko.org

⁷ Sara Gruen, *Ape House: A Novel*, Hodder and Stoughton, 2011.

⁸ Sue Savage-Rumbaugh & Roger Lewin, *Kanzi: The Ape at the Brink of the Human Mind*, John Wiley & Sons, Inc, 1994 (pp. 264).

⁹ Jacques Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I am*, Fordham University Press, 2008 (pp. 3–4).

¹⁰ Steve Baker, *The Post Modern Animal*, Reaktion Books Ltd, 2000.

¹¹ Donna Haraway, *When Species Meet*, University of Minnesota Press, 2008 (pp. 24).

¹² Donna Haraway, *Primate Visions: Gender, Nature, in the World of Modern Science*, Routledge, 1989 (pp. 376).

Cinema as Primatology Symposium

The Crypt 2011, St James Church, London

18.10.2011



RM = Rachel Mayeri
A = Audience member

Left: Rachel Mayeri, stills from *Primate Cinema: Apes as Family*, commissioned by The Arts Catalyst, 2011.

Right: *Primates Gaze* by NJ Emery, The eyes have it: the neuroethology, function and evolution of social gaze. 2000. Center for Neuroscience, Department of Psychiatry & California Regional Primate Research Center, University of California.

RM: You've already seen me talking for quite a long time, so please, yes?

A: I was wondering if you could say a bit more about your position as an artist working with animals in captivity rather than in the wild, and what you were trying to say about that in your work.

RM: You know it was extremely political to do this work at a zoo, I mean it's an extremely sensitive place to work, in terms of creating media and managing the meaning. Zoos feel like they're under siege right now, and Edinburgh Zoo is a model zoo for how well they treat their chimpanzees. What you get to see just a tiny bit of is how engaged and invested the zoo keepers are about the chimpanzees, so I was privy to that world, which I think is very well intended, compassionate; people who work very hard to make sure that individual chimps are happy to the best of their knowledge, but you know it was a bit bizarre to be partly part of the zoo.

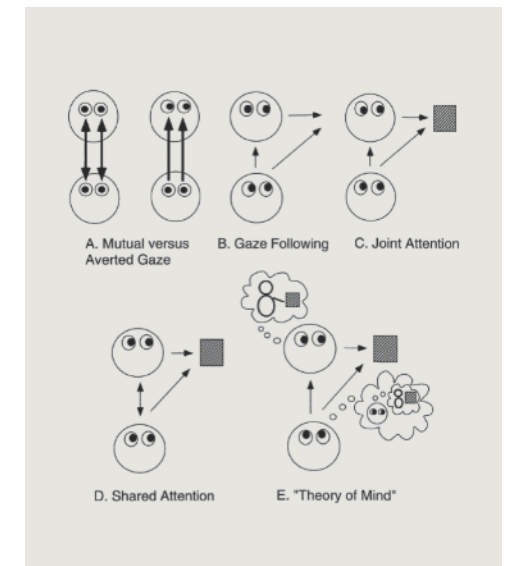
A: It's an interesting notion that only chimpanzees in captivity would be interested in TV in the way that it connects us with them.

RM: It's true, and doesn't it reflect back on why it is that we like to watch TV too, maybe that's what you're getting at?

A: Yes.

RM: Of course it's a curious way of having a social life. Many people have talked about media as a substitute for actual social relationships, but what's really interesting, and I wish Dr Vick were here to back me up on, primatologists' theories about the origin of language, and how our minds have really evolved in order to deal with the complexities of social life.

The primatologist Robin Dunbar has written the Gossip Hypothesis of the evolution of cognition, and says it's really the challenge of living in a group which is why we've evolved to be able to speak to each other, and I think it underscores really the gaze, the idea that we need to monitor each other constantly in order to know what's going on in a social context, so all the Facebook basics, like we monitor each other in terms of who's friends with who; what kinds of alliances are there in this room right now.



Rachel Mayeri is a Los Angeles-based artist working at the intersection of science and art exploring subjects ranging from the history of special effects to the human animal. In 2009 her *Primate Cinema: Baboons as Friends* (2007), a film noir reenactment of a baboon social drama with human actors, was presented by The Arts Catalyst as part of Interspecies: artists collaborating with animals at A Foundation, London and Cornerhouse, Manchester. This film was produced in collaboration with primatologist Deborah Forster, received a semi-finalist honour for the International Science and Engineering Visualization Challenge (sponsored by NSF and The Journal Science) and showed at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Denmark. *Stories from the Genome: An Animated History of Reproduction* was supported by Creative Capital Foundation and won an International Media Art Prize, sponsored by ZKM. Mayeri has programmed a DVD of videos by artists and scientists entitled *Soft Science*.

www.soft-science.org

As Guest Curator at the Museum of Jurassic Technology, Mayeri contributed to an exhibit on the history of special effects, *Miracles and Disasters in Renaissance and Baroque Theater Mechanics*. Her writing on artists' experiments with science documentary was published in *Tactical Biopolitics: Art, Activism, and Technoscience*, edited by Beatriz da Costa and Kavita Philip (MIT Press, 2008). Mayeri has also shown at Los Angeles Filmforum, The Center for Art and Media, Germany, and P.S.1/MoMA, New York. She is currently Associate Professor of Media Studies at Harvey Mudd College.

Dr Sarah-Jane Vick of the University of Stirling is a comparative psychologist, exploring cross species commonalities in cognition and behaviour, using both observational and computer-mediated approaches. Her primary research interest is primate social communication, including gaze, facial expressions and gestures in chimpanzees. She is a member of the Scottish Primate Research Group and has previously collaborated with Edinburgh Zoo (Royal Zoological Society of Scotland) for teaching, research and science communication activities.

Primate Cinema: Apes as Family, is an exhibition curated and commissioned by The Arts Catalyst.



Shown at:

The Arts Catalyst
50–54 Clerkenwell Road,
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Weekday Cross,
Nottingham NG1 2GB
7 December 2011

AND Festival
FACT, 88 Wood Street,
Liverpool L1 4DQ
29 September to 2 October 2011

www.artscatalyst.org

Published by The Arts Catalyst
Edited by Claudia Lastra
Proofreading by Z Richter
Online publication by Lisa Haskell
Design by Mike Carney www.mikesstudio.co.uk

This book is also available as e-publication.

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ISBN 0-9534546-8-1

Cover images: Rachel Mayeri: *Primate Cinema: Apes as Family* (development still, 2011). Photos by Matt Chaney.

Acknowledgments

Rachel Mayeri would like to thank:
Rob La Frenais, Gillean Dickie, Steve Pallrand, Joe Seely, Erin Merritt, Alex Juhasz, Anne Bray, Roberta Kenney, and the Chimpanzees – Edith, Eva, Pearl, Emma, Lucy, Liberius, Ciny, Rene, Paul, Ricky.

Very many thanks also to:
The contributors
Darren McGarry, Helen Arthurs, Dee Masters, Alison Bates and all the keepers at Budongo Trail, Edinburgh Zoo, Stuart Bennet, Andrea Roe, Deborah Jackson and Edd McCracken at Edinburgh College of Art
Sorcha Carey and the team at Edinburgh Arts Festival
Nick Lawrenson and Chris Miller, Arciform
Deirdre McKenna, Stills, Edinburgh

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