

Animal Drag Kingdom

Saturday, July 17, 9pm

Outdoor Screening @ 401 Richmond St. Courtyard

A co-presentation of Pleasure Dome and The Power Plant.

This screening examines the playful and perverse forms of mimicry that complicate distinctions between human and non-human animals. In the twenty-first century, the limits between human and non-human animals are collapsing, thanks to ecological devastation, genetic research and interspecies plagues, among other phenomena. Increasingly we project the most eccentric human qualities onto animals, and then try to explain our species' own bizarre behaviour through reference to their "natural" ones. The result is a messy kind of inter-species drag.

F. Percy Smith, *The Strength and Agility of Insects*, 1911, 4 min, UK.

Wendy Tilby and Amanda Forbis, *When the Day Breaks*, 1999, 10 min, Canada

Kathy High, selections from *Everyday Problems of the Living*, 2000, 23 min, USA

Ray Birdwhistell, *Microcultural Incidents in Ten Zoos*, 1969, 10 min, USA (excerpt)

Guy Ben-Ner, *Second Nature*, 2008, 10 min, Israel

Steve Reinke and Jessie Mott, *Everybody*, 2009, 4 min, USA

Kristin Lucas, *Smaller and Easier to Handle*, 2003, 7 min, USA

CBS TV, "Conquest: Mother Love," 1960, 4 min, USA (excerpts)

Douglas Gordon, *The Right Not to Be Tortured*, 2010, 10 min, UK (total: 82 min)

The Strength and Agility of Insects presents a wondrous multi-species cavalcade of miniature performers as they supposedly manipulate objects far bigger and heavier than they. Science and spectacle made strange bedfellows in the early years of cinema, especially as all manner of special-effects trickery was being explored. Regardless of the film's dubious authenticity, animals have always been thrust into the role of performers for our amusement – but they've never been quite so small.

In the quietly profound NFB animation *When the Day Breaks*, animals are not mere performers but full-fledged, upright-standing citizens of the modern metropolis who run errands, fix breakfast, watch hockey, ride the subway and, in the case of Ruby the Pig, trip down the rabbit hole of existential angst when she is present at a stranger's accidental death. After the gruff chicken is killed crossing the road – without looking both ways first – Ruby puts the kettle on and can't help contemplating the interconnectedness and fleeting moments of contact between all things.

Everyday Problems of the Living portrays the artist Kathy High as nagged by fears of her own imminent death and about the violence in the world around her. Living closely with several animal companions, she finds her anxieties mirrored in beasts both inside and outside of her household. In this darkly personal, claustrophobic serial, her pets vomit, piss, suckle and stare as Kathy speaks to telephone psychics, mediums and tarot-readers; she plays dead at home and in the car wash as her animals wander around her; and she finds a tiny, fragile cadaver on the street.

Another kind of mirroring occurs in the experimental anthropological lecture *Microcultural Incidents in Ten Zoos*, a strange audiovisual artifact from the late 1960s. The film documents an idiosyncratic discourse on cross-cultural differences in how people interact with animals in zoos, from Europe to Asia to the United States, through the help of filmic “evidence” and an analytic projector. Scientists watching people watching animals – the anthropologist’s gaze has never seemed more ridiculous and impotent.

Second Nature continues artist Guy Ben-Ner’s interests in pedagogy and the highly constructed relationships between grown-ups, children and animals. Around a crooked old tree, he stages a “backstage” production of Aesop’s fable “The Fox and the Crow” by way of Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*, starring two animal actors and the two animal trainers wrangling them (and of course the rhyming Ben-Ner behind the camera, training the trainers, and instructing us too). As in his 2004 video *Wild Boy*, the binary of wild and civilized plays out through the figures of actor and director.

The script of *Everybody* is similarly mannered, with its surreal, florid descriptions of desire, eroticized violence and desecration ventriloquized by a menagerie of animated animals including a bat, rabbit, antelope and unicorn. Their cavalcade of perversion and “seepage” among damaged bodies is worthy of the Marquis de Sade. (Script and drawings by Jessie Mott, soundtrack and animation by Steve Reinke.)

Smaller and Easier to Handle refers to the new spots acquired by the sedated child who is being transformed into a cheetah in her family’s DIY home laboratory. In clownish costumes, parents and siblings gather round to give injections, sponge her tender new hide and suck up spillage, all to facilitate their daughter’s annual inter-species transition (she was a tiger last year, and an elephant before that). The video ends with an interview with her about the process and her new body and identity.

The experiments in the clips of Dr. Harry Harlow from his infamous “Mother Love” episode of the 1960 CBS science TV show *Conquest* are far less playful. Harlow’s goal was to measure an infant’s love for their mother through a series of malevolent experiments gauging the attachments of infant rhesus monkeys to artificial “mothers.” His quest to quantify – of all things – love, is utterly devastating to behold. It turned out the babies tended to choose a barren but soft cloth mother (“contact comfort”) over a milk-supplying but cold wire mother (sustenance).

Part of a Scottish series illustrating “The New Ten Commandments,” produced to mark the 60th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, *The Right Not to Be Tortured* offers troubling, visceral images of a spot-lit sheep (and her lambs) in a moist, dark interior, spooked by startling noises. As we connect across species lines with their confused distress, we understand fear to be universal, and are forced to reckon with our complicity in terrorizing animals behind closed doors on a daily basis