

## Eloquence: The work of Lisa Roet

Positioned at the intersection between human and animal, the ape embodies a representation of the advancement of civilisation. The eighteenth-century taxonomist, Carl Linnaeus, noted a striking likeness between man and monkeys, placing the two within the same category: *Anthropomorpha*<sup>1</sup> ("manlike"). Classifying *Homo sapiens* alongside monkeys sparked criticism for fundamentally demoting humans from a place of ruling over nature while calling into question our evolution. As we now know these genetic similarities have been proven to confirm that we share on average 98.6% of our DNA composition with that of chimpanzees, suggesting a common ancestor.

Australian artist Lisa Roet also turns a mirror onto ourselves. Roet's fascination in human behaviour is a motive force behind her artistic practice spanning three decades. Her interdisciplinary work draws inspiration from research and studies into this interface with our simian relatives. As the artist states "We are ape. We are the same".<sup>2</sup> By virtue of her investigations, she advocates sustainability and an awareness of animal rights, having worked alongside figures such as the renowned English primatologist Dr. Jane Goodall.<sup>3</sup> This power of observation has enabled Roet to convey her experiences within the field of primatology in order to express new ways of apprehending interspecies relations and our increasingly precarious place within the world. In an effort to distil the dichotomies of humanity and animality, nature and culture, Roet identifies imagery of apes in order to introduce slippage within these boundaries.

Communication is a key element in her visual repertoire aiding in this interrogation. For her exhibition, aptly entitled *Eloquence*, Roet discusses the image of the finger as being central to the show: "The finger symbol started in my practice after working at the Language Research Center at Georgia State University, Atlanta, USA in two residencies in 1997 and 1998 where language faculties of non-human primates had been pioneered since the 1960s. Here I watched the Yerkish Language taught to the apes as a form of communication. I observed how the hand and fingers were integral to scientist's methodologies in interacting."<sup>4</sup> These experiences were formative in her now characteristic motifs of clasped chimp and ape hands universally associated with touch, intimacy and connection. We see this expressed in various bronze sculptures such as: *Primate Fingers*, *Chimpanzee hands* and *Chimp hands clasped*.

Beyond this discourse Roet's diverse practice inherently conflates the prescient topic of sustainability. Early in her career Roet spent time in Berlin during the significant historical moment of the fall of the wall. As curators Maja and Reuben Fowkes indicate, the origins of sustainable art are connected to the rise in concept of sustainability at the end of the Cold War in 1989 at this time and the emergence of a new awareness of global ecological and social problems.<sup>5</sup> Roet acknowledges that this movement had

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<sup>1</sup> *Anthropomorpha* is a defunct taxon replaced by *Primates*. The order was established by Swedish taxonomist Carl Linnaeus - known as the "father of modern taxonomy" - in the first edition of his book *Systema Naturae* (1735) for genera *Homo* (humans), *Simia* (monkeys and apes in general). The taxon is notable for the history of human taxonomy as the first to combine apes (Linnaeus' *Simia*) and humans under the same clade. Linnaeus, Carl, (1735). *Systema naturae sive regna tria Naturae systematice proposita per classes, ordines, genera, & species*. apud Theodorum Haak, Lugduni Batavorum. pp. s.p.

<sup>2</sup> Email communication with Lisa Roet, September 2020.

<sup>3</sup> Considered to be the world's foremost expert on chimpanzees, Dr. Jane Goodall DBE is best known for her 60-year study of social and family interactions of wild chimpanzees since she first went to Gombe Stream National Park in Tanzania in 1960 and her groundbreaking research papers about emotion and communication in animals.

<sup>4</sup> Yerkish is an artificial language developed for primates that employs a keyboard containing lexigrams — symbols representing a word or phrase in English when arranged in the correct grammatical sequence. In tandem with spoken communication and sign language, the apes learned to comprehend spoken and symbolic language through repetition and reward systems. Additional experiences that have informed the artist's work include a residency at Zoo Atlanta, Georgia, USA, ape research at Zoo Atlanta and the Berlin Zoo, the study of apes living in the forests of Borneo, and the observation of Snow Macaques found in the hot springs in Japan and the Golden Monkeys of Yunnan.

<sup>5</sup> Maja and Reuben Fowles also trace origins of this movement to the conceptual art of the late 1960s and early 1970s, with its stress on dematerialisation and questioning of the functioning of the art system. See: Fowkes, Maja and Fowkes, Reuben (2006). *Principles of Sustainability in Contemporary Art*, Praesens: central European contemporary art review. 1 pp.5-12; Fowkes, Maja and Fowkes, Reuben (2009), *Planetary Forecast: The Roots of Sustainability in the Radical Art of the 1970s*, Third Text 100 Special Issue vol 23 issue 5 September; and Fowkes, Maja and Fowkes, Reuben (2008), *The Ecology of Post-Socialism and the*

a profound effect on her work, specifically concerning engaged social responsibility. This critical position is not outwardly emphasised rather, it is a soft unveiling of ideas. Bearing witness to the destruction of environments that lead to the extinction of various animal species, Roet understands the impact humans are having on nature; a consequence of our ravenous consumption of natural resources. Tapping into a disassociation with nature, her film *Weeping forest* (2009) documents the pristine forest of the Danum Valley in Sabah, Borneo; a natural habitat to a large orangutan population. As a deluge of rain peacefully hits the treetops the natural call of the forest can be heard alongside logging trucks, almost as though the forest is weeping. This film, like her other moving image piece in the show *The Shadow* (2001) connects viewers with distant natural environments far removed from our urban experiences, while speaking to indigenous connections to the land.

Topics concerning biodiversity loss and conservation are at the forefront of Roet's work, prompting viewers to reflect upon environmental stewardship.<sup>6</sup> Former notions of progress are presented as unfeasible and the inhabitants of these environments come into focus. Individually cast primate figures appear staged representing species under threat. Memorialised in bronze Roet presents us with her immaculately cast sculptures: *Silvery Langur (Borneo)*, *Silvery Gibbon*, *Spider Monkey*, *Japanese Snow Monkey (bust)*. From marble and concrete, the Myanmar snub-nosed monkey is immortalised in *The Sneezing Snub Nose, Yunan*. This critically threatened species was uncovered due to deforestation in previously inaccessible areas. Its name is derived from a unique trait of sneezing due to its short, upturned nasal flesh. In 2016, the monkey served as inspiration for Roet's monumental inflatable piece *Golden Monkey*. Clinging to the facade of Beijing's Opposite House Hotel, the 10-metre sculpture radiated within the dense urban setting coupled with a soundtrack of sneezing in stark juxtaposition to its natural environment.

Beyond her ambitious large-scale works, Roet's investigations into intimate objects are also presented in the form of jewellery — wearable art objects. Viewed as part of her practice, Roet explains: "My large-scale bronze chimpanzee hands and orangutan foot were all designed for people to sit in and experience on a physical level. This is related to my jewellery also, where the hand of the gibbon wraps around the wearer's wrist or neck. This creates a physical interaction that represents the biological link between humans and other primates. I see all of these works as both a conceptual project and a performance piece. By wearing the pieces, each person is buying into a philosophy or understanding of what it means to be human". By employing jewellery designed to adorn the body, Roet imbues these objects with potent content.<sup>7</sup> Discussions concerning the critical reception of jewellery as an art form are long<sup>8</sup> and so too, is the lineage of artists who have worked with jewellery in order to extend its boundaries.<sup>9</sup> Roet's distinct jewellery series' aims to represent different elements of human culture. For the pieces in this show, the hand is representative of evolutionary history as conveyed in *Gold Finger, Chimp. Index Finger Coat Hook*. These pieces are juxtaposed with the artist's *Skin* series — cast from gorilla and orangutan specimen skin rubbings — emulating a "skin on skin" transferral. This physical interplay is heightened with cut-outs that reveal the skin of the wearer below. Cast in precious silver, gold and brass: *Caste Orangutan Skin Cuff* and *Gorilla skin imprint cuff* are just two examples. In Roet's *POPE* rings, the relationship with spirituality, evolutionary theory and the human ability to distinguish oneself via symbolism is engaged with. These weighty rings often seen adorning the hands of cardinals

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*Implications of Sustainability for Contemporary Art in Art and Theory After Socialism* edited Malcolm Miles, Plymouth Press. For origins about the conservation movement, see also: Marsh, George Perkins. 1965. *Man and nature*, Edited by: Lowenthal, David. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press.

<sup>6</sup> For discussions about sustainability within art see: Kagan, Sacha, (2011). *Art and Sustainability: Connecting Patterns for a Culture of Complexity*, Transcript Verlag: Bielefeld, Germany.

<sup>7</sup> British jeweller and historian Roberta Bernabei describes "jewellery as content," in Bernabei, Roberta, (2011). "Introduction." *Contemporary Jewellers: Interviews with European Artists*. Oxford, UK: Berg, p.25.

<sup>8</sup>See: Turner, Ralph, (1976). *Contemporary Jewelry: A Critical Assessment 1945-75*, London: Cassell & Collier Macmillan; Astfalck, Jivan, (2005). "Jewellery As A Fine Art Practice." *New Directions in Jewellery*, London: Black Dog Pub., pp.18-24 and Marbeth Scho (2004). *Modernist Jewelry 1930-1960: The Wearable Art Movement*, Schiffer Publishing Ltd.

<sup>9</sup> Historically artists such as Georges Braque, Alexander Calder, Lucio Fontana, Man Ray, Salvador Dalí and Picasso turned their hand to making jewellery as an extension of their practice. More recently, contemporary such as Jeff Koons, Erwin Wurm and Chiharu Shiota have also created jewellery alongside their artistic practices.

embody Christian meaning. Here, Roet's renditions replace the design with the head of an ape as an emblematic gesture to signify what separates us from other apes.

Throughout this exhibition Lisa Roet invites audiences to examine the intersection between primates and humans while assessing our place within nature. Expressed through her striking videos, sculptures and jewellery derived from source material and direct experiences within the field of primatology, the artist urges viewers to fundamentally reassess our relationship with our environment and how we understand ourselves: *nosce te ipsum* (to know thyself).<sup>10</sup> This line of questioning aims to bring about a renewed way of perceiving human nature in an effort to transcend an anthropocentric model.

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<sup>10</sup> Linnaeus cited in Franke, Anselm and Peleg, Hila, (2015). 'Introduction', in *Ape Culture*, Leipzig, ppp. 111. Exhibition catalogue for the group exhibition *Ape Culture*, Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin, Germany, 30 April – 6 July 2015.