

Afterthoughts on *Balthazar* (2011-17)

Maximilian Haas and David Weber-Krebs

Balthazar was a long-term artistic research project that looked at animals and their nature-cultural position in Western modernity with respect to agency, ecology, media, aesthetics and ethics. It took shape in four productions between 2011 and 2017 featuring different casts of performers in different cities (Amsterdam, Hamburg, Brussels and Berlin, plus further touring), each focusing on different artistic means in the spectrum between performance art, dance and theatre. *Balthazar* is also the fictional name of the protagonist of each of these productions, a non-trained donkey. The animal is put next to a group of human performers who seek to engage him or her in theatrical action. The donkey is at the very centre of the action, and the pieces affirm the uncertainties that such a decision brings with it. Based on fixed dramaturgical structures, the *Balthazar* performances unfold in the open interaction between the species. The project was inspired by Robert Bresson's film *Au Hasard Balthazar* (1966), which tells the fateful life story of a donkey in the dramaturgical mode of ancient Greek tragedies and the Christian passion, that is, of Western grand narratives that present themselves as instructions in what it means to be human. Besides some motifs and plot fragments, it is above all the gesture of staging an animal in place of the exemplary subject that was derived from the film and applied to contemporary stage arts.

With various donkeys from local animal-welfare oriented farms, diverse conceptual, institutional and architectural environments, and four casts of human performers, the performances were site-specific in a far-reaching sense. They were partly produced in cooperation with theatre and dance universities as artistic seminars and had different conceptual focuses derived from the works of three philosophers that shaped a certain contemporary discourse around animals and animality in Western arts and theory most prominently: Gilles Deleuze, Donna Haraway and Jacques Derrida. In direct confrontation with their living object, their notions of the animal were artistically tested and criticized. In addition to the productions and seminars, the project resulted in joint lectures, academic and non-academic essays, and a practice-based dissertation published under the title *Animals on Stage: An aesthetic ecology of performance*, published by Kulturverlag Kadmos (Haas 2018).¹ In this conversation, director David Weber-Krebs and dramaturg Maximilian Haas discuss: How the project came about. What it was. What it might have been. And: What it would be now.

¹ For a summary of the book's arguments in English see Haas (2021).

Maximilian Haas: The *Balthazar* project grew out of our shared interest in the performativity of non-human actors on stage and the forms of theatrical meaning that can be constructed for a spectator through and around them. While I was approaching these problems theoretically – I drafted a research project at the time on things, animals and doing nothing on stage; how these agents of passivity appear on the stage and can gain performative value – you made a series of performances in the 2000s that represent very interesting approaches to nonhuman actors – objects, liquids, sound, etc. – questioning their mode of performativity and materiality. And so we planned to work together on a piece. I was critically concerned with anthropocentrism in theatre at the time and how to make this bias for all things human visible; and how to overcome it, yet by theatrical means. Thus, in one way or another, the *Balthazar* project also formulates a critique of modern, that is, post-Enlightenment, theatre, a challenge or refutation of its deep-seated anthropocentrism. But perhaps we should start with the practical conditions under which the project came into being in the first place.

David Weber-Krebs: In March 2011 I had a teaching assignment at the Mime School of the Amsterdam Academy of Theatre and Dance. It was a month-long intensive workshop ending up with a presentation. I was given carte blanche. And when the time came to present what I wanted to work on, I proposed outright to invite another participant to the workshop, someone who was not a student: a stranger, a donkey. And, to my surprise, the daring director (former artistic director Loes Van der Pligt) agreed. But in reality, when we started working with the donkey, we didn't know much about these animals. In the first days of the rehearsal process we naively prepared a few scenes with the students – scenes that we intended to propose to the donkey when he or she would be with us in the space. But at the end of the first week of rehearsals, when the donkey finally arrived, it did not go as planned. Her name was Lilly and in fact, she didn't even want to enter the building. It took hours before she even agreed to

enter the space. So we were faced with a completely different set of problems than 'theatre' scenes. These first events were decisive for the further development of the project. We were suddenly confronted with the full complexity of our idea.

MH: To exaggerate a bit, we thus initially thought the donkey would just 'be' on stage and we would construct forms of anticipation and evoke forms of projection on the part of the spectators in order to create a theatrical event that would still be very much shaped by the artists. That was what we were preparing for, but then the animal came about and shattered the whole approach to pieces. The donkey was way too lively, too demanding, too sensitive, way too 'real' for this. First of all, the whole team had to perform care work in a very utilitarian sense. We had to take care of the animal in order to bring her on stage in the first place. Then we had to reorganize the whole concept and infrastructure of the theatre around this particular donkey.

DWK: So the first time the donkey entered the space she clearly did not want to be there. Once we had managed to lure the animal into the theatre space the only thing she wanted was to be out of it as soon as possible. She tried to open the door that had just been closed behind her. She was obsessed by this door, obsessed to a degree that she was harming herself. It was a matter of real urgency for this animal to not be in this space with us who were so happy to welcome her and start to work together and make theatre together. We tried basic things, like caressing, food, humor... We began to speculate about all the things in the space that could bother her: the floor, the lights, the shape of the space, some odors... This first unexpected difficult encounter in the theatre space made us question the entire endeavor. What made us think that we were entitled to displace this animal into a theatre in order to make art? Retrospectively, I see this moment as the most important of the process because we understood that, at the end of the day, the performance would be about communication. What we would create on stage was communication between a group of humans

and a nonhuman. And the issue at stake would not be making interesting theatre but the creation of a space of cohabitation between the species.

MH: It was very interesting for me to experience this stage as a space of culture, a highly artificial, highly technicized space through the eyes of a donkey. We played this piece in various theatres and it was always an important test to see how the donkey would react to these spaces in their material specificity. Many things that people didn't even notice because they were trained to ignore them as

take the perspective of each individual animal, this specific donkey – with all the conceptual problems, all the epistemological irony, that entails.

DWK: At some point, we found out that the donkey was interested in the sound the shoes of the performers were making while walking, especially when they were walking together. We understood that actually, when they were walking in a kind of formation, they were attracting the attention of the donkey. And this attention became curiosity. And this curiosity moved the donkey and she started to



David Weber-Krebs and Maximilian Haas, *Balthazar*, Amsterdam, 2011. © Maximilian Haas

part of the usual stage environment could become highly problematic obstacles for the donkey, and thus eventually plastic elements of the performance. To some extent, the team learned to see the theatre as such from an animal's perspective. In fact, different donkeys would also react very differently to the same space, so it was necessary to learn to

follow the performers, walking in formation in the space. This became the most important practice and the pivotal sequence of the performance. It was used as a choreography but it also functioned as a test, being the first thing we did with each new animal we cast for *Balthazar* in each new city. It served as a measurement of how communication

would be possible with this particular donkey. It was a sort of 'becoming-friends ritual'. By then we also understood that the performers would keep their distance from her. They would not touch her, or caress her. Communication would happen through positioning different bodies in the space and walking. This rule not to touch the donkey worked as the motor of theatrical tension. Offstage, we were all cuddling them, but on stage there was this rule to treat the animals as colleagues, to address them formally.

MH: The performance took place not so much in a physical space, the stage situation populated by human and nonhuman bodies, but in the active intercommunication between these bodies, which was ultimately much stronger than the material set-up. The whole idea of a donkey and humans walking together, the fact that they can do it so well, is not so much an artistic method of interspecies performance, and clearly no developed instrument of dressage or taming, but dates way back in cultural history, or natural history respectively, where donkeys and humans in fact walked together in groups extensively. Because it was rehearsed for some 10,000 years of mutual domestication, you can actually turn your back to a donkey, start walking at a moderate pace, and the animal will most probably follow. So this practice of walking together turned out to be one of the most interesting for me, also as a test for modern forms of choreography and dance, as it takes the idea of improvisation to yet another level. It is a hyper-improvised emergence of interspecies movement, yet rooted in cultural practices that long predate theatrical practices. On a more theatrical level, however, this scene indeed operates via the anticipation of action and the projection of meaning on the part of the spectators, producing various forms of unintentional comedy. If you are anticipating a certain meaningful action, and it actually happens, that's funny because your expectations match up so clearly with the unfolding of an interspecies reality that we know is largely contingent. Yet if you create a certain image in your mind, which renders the whole scene meaningful, and then this image is destroyed by a tiny gesture of

the animal, this is funny too. However, as a theatre maker, one can hardly design or even foresee these projections as they are completely contingent on the individual spectator's mind or memory and an emergent stage action. So there was this formal conflict, if you will, between a very technical performative doing between the donkey and the human performers on stage, a constant negotiation of relational action, and the theatrical machine, including the spectators, which is constantly creating meaning, generating processes of semiosis that the animal, in a very anarchistic way, supports or destroys.

DWK: Of course, you expect the donkey to follow the performers, but when she or he actually follows them, it's still surprising. This complex situation would not be possible either with a human, or an object.

MH: With a wild animal, that's not possible either. I remember that we chose the donkey because it is a domesticated animal that moves slowly and in a controlled manner, that is relatively predictable and acts with a certain decisiveness. Their stage presence is reminiscent of classical actors, of the way they dramatically behave in terms of pace, posture, focus, even eye level. But I think it's really important, too, that the donkey is an animal that exists on the verge, if you will, between (nonhuman) 'nature' and (human) 'culture', precisely because it has this history of living and working with humans, yet without the sophisticated means of dressage that you see in equestrianism, for example. There is this very basic, mundane form of communication that allows humans and donkeys to embark on a journey, very literally, which is not predetermined down to the smallest detail by human taming. Yet, of course, spectators asked if the human performers had carrots in their pockets, if they were carrying specific scents or hormones, how they 'made' the donkey follow. Few could actually see that following is the donkey's mode of expressing consent, just as refusing to move is their iconic, 'stubborn' mode of resistance. And, I think, it was also surprising to see this very old form of improvised communication between humans and animals on a contemporary stage, right?

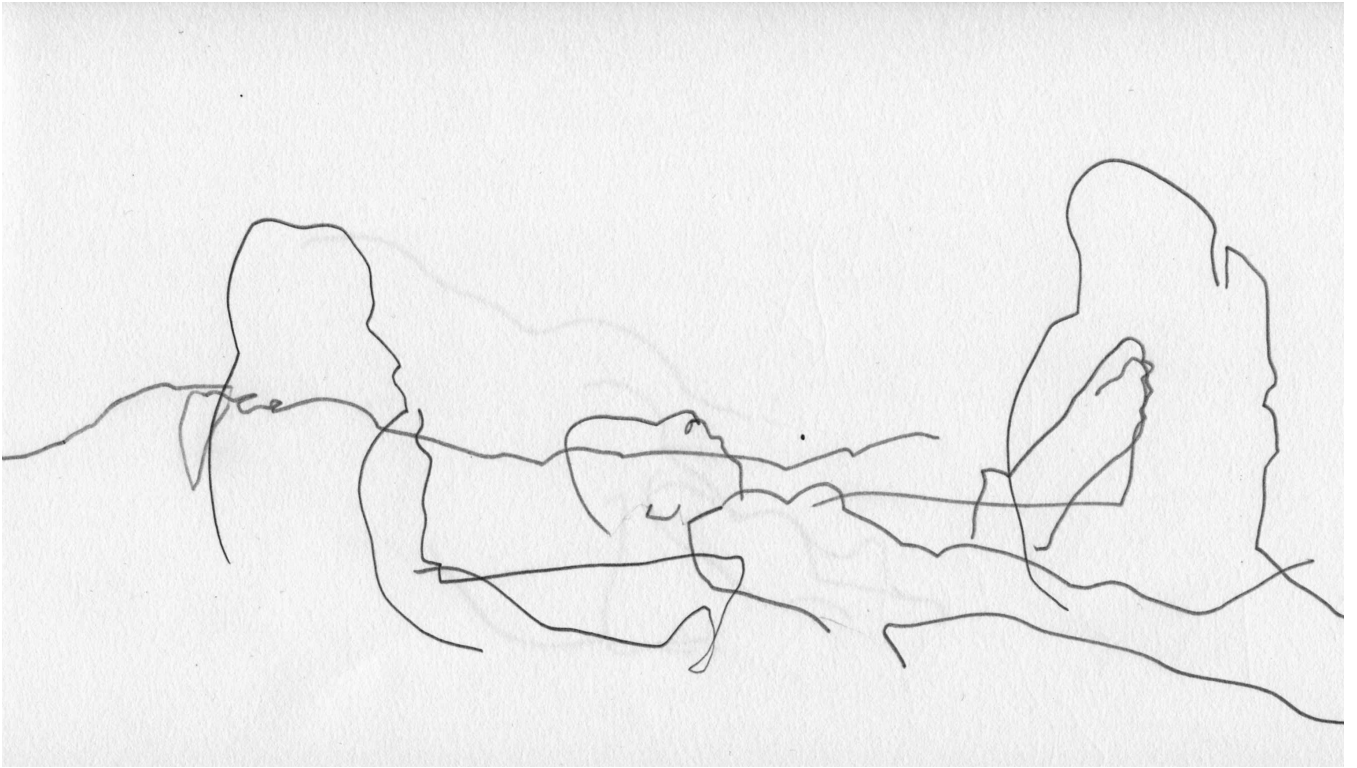
DWK: It was clear to every spectator entering into the space that they were in an experimental setting, in which the artistic goal (let's say it was 'communication') and the dramaturgy are transparent. A tacit contract was signed: 'We are all together in this and it can also not succeed.' Not succeeding was part of the contract. To not succeed was also somehow succeeding.

We performed the show in different contexts, on different types of stages. Some architectural contexts bear a certain transparency, where the audience is in the same space as the stage (flat floor theatres). In contrast, in proscenium theatres the stage is often the representation of another world. The piece also changed through that. Not only on the level of representation but also on the level of agency. For me this aspect became very important: the agency of the spectator in relation to what is happening on stage. The audience was laughing out loud a lot in *Balthazar*. It was a peculiar laughter, a laughter that seemed to be deliberately directed towards the donkey, as a strange dominating action of sorts. And this laughter was actually producing curiosity on the part of the donkey: the donkey would look at the audience or approach the tribune to check what was happening there. And the careful action proposed by the performers was therefore altered. Spectators realized they had a direct agency on the action unfolding.

MH: One of the axioms of the project we were constantly struggling with was the necessary distance between the donkey and the human performers in order to maintain the theatrical tension. In the Hamburg version we experimented with forms of interspecies intimacy; we asked the performers to hug and caress the donkey and to find ways of performative abstraction in that, in the intimacy of touch. But we always went back to maintain the theatrical tension also spacewise. In the end, the performance remained about forms of extimacy on various levels. But, of course, there are various artistic approaches, for example, in contemporary dance that work through the sensual corporeality of intimacy and touch, but also entail forms of abstraction or conceptual feeling, of rational pleasure.

DWK: Of course we did. We tried it and I'm really glad we did it so that we could understand that it wasn't the way to go. I think it's also a question of artistic signature and definition of theatre. For me, as an artist, the moment the human performers touched the donkey, something fundamental was lost. But I can imagine that this would be precisely the starting point for other artists' research. The tension you mention was fundamental to the whole project. This is also the reason why we approached the donkeys we would work with as individual beings, as persons. In each city we worked with a different donkey. It was this donkey's 'first time'. They were fresh and curious and the experience was real. At least that was our aim. The French choreographer Luc Petton, for example, starts from a radically different principle. He breeds his own birds and performs highly controlled and aestheticized dances with them. His principle is fidelity and truth. Ours was freshness and reality.

MH: I think it's funny how we really used the affordances, the artistic infrastructures of modern theatre and at the same time enhanced the idea of performance as an emergent happening between the elements of a constructed situation, including the situational feed-back loop between stage and audience, which presents itself as an important factor to the development of the stage action. These are the fundamentals of performative arts as described in contemporary performance studies, and they are hyper-enhanced through the fact that the protagonist of the piece is a donkey. Yet I remember at one point we tried to incorporate more conventional forms of dramatic theatre, such as staging a dialogue between humans, with the donkey just standing around, thus artistically decentring the animal on stage. However, these theatrical endeavours did not work at all with the donkey; they were exposed as mere construction by the sheer presence of the animal. So, we had to boil down all our prepared projects, turn them into processes that could be realized with very simple, quiet gestures. They had to approach the donkey's mode of being on stage, their abilities, temporalities, in order to function as the donkey's theatrical device.



Drawings by Ines Lechleitner during the rehearsals of *Balthazar (2. a Choreography)* at Kampragel, Hamburg, 2013. © Ines Lechleitner

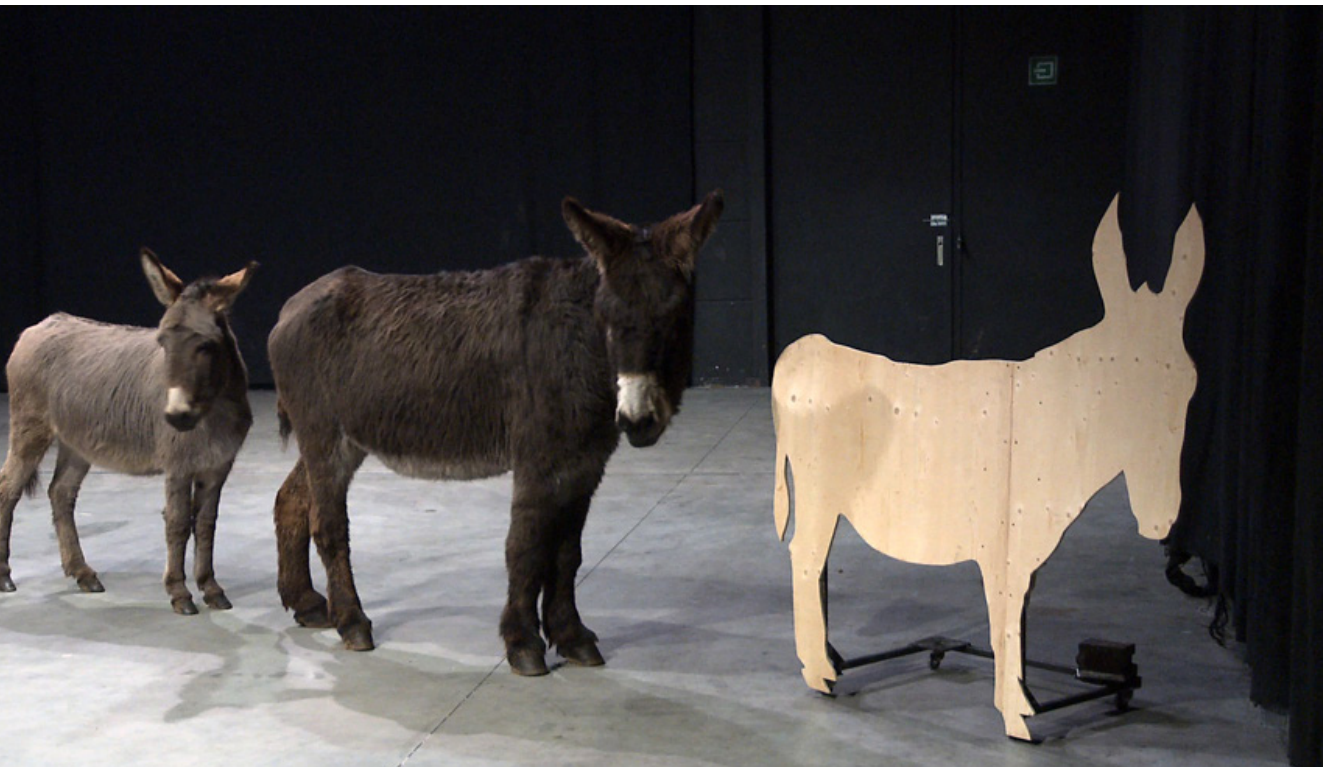


Photograph by Ines Lechleitner during the rehearsals of *Balthazar (2. a Choreography)* at Kampnagel, Hamburg, 2013. © Ines Lechleitner

For me, this was a crucial lesson learned from the first contact we made there in Amsterdam.

DWK: We were evaluating staging possibilities on whether or not we could recognize them as being a true communication with the animal. I'm thinking about this paradigmatic scene in which a performer enters the stage with a big speaker and plays music to the donkey. The donkey always somehow reacted to this music. But this reaction was not always clear, or was only clear at times. Sometimes the donkey did exactly what our narcissistic gaze wanted

by laying on the floor it was drawing a frontier on the stage and the donkey was actually reacting to that frontier and not to the music. The music in this moment was becoming the soundtrack of a scene in which a donkey reacts to the fact that suddenly the stage is split in two by a cable. But we very quickly abandoned some other addresses: like, for example, speaking directly to the donkey or taking the donkey as a witness to something happening on stage and asking the donkey's opinion about it. All speech-related actions appeared to be failing because they were using a code foreign to



David Weber-Krebs and Maximilian Haas, *Balthazar (1. Stories)*, Brussels, 2013. © Ines Lechleitner

him or her to do: by reaching out their giant ears and listening. There was something magic at this moment. We thought: 'Oh...! We are the same, the donkey also likes the music!' But sometimes we had these speakers connected to a large electricity cable. During some shows the cable appeared to become the main co-agent of the scene, because

the donkey and thus not involving him or her in the communication. We narrowed down the range of actions that we thought possible to stage in a theatre. Some were possible, others absolutely not. This was quite pleasurable to notice because it was framing the project aesthetically. But, in a way, I also like to think that maybe other artists would

have found an entirely different range of actions.

But the performance *Balthazar* definitely is theatre. It stages various attempts by a group of humans to communicate with another being: a donkey. This creates tension because there is something at stake, which is precisely communication itself. And then at the end of the show, a second donkey enters and this functions as a tension releaser. The humans on stage become the backdrop of another sort of action involving two donkeys on a theatre stage.

MH: The outcome was very minimalistic – and yet a bold gesture. In post-Enlightenment theatre, there's this scandalization of animals on stage, this idiomatic rule of 'no animals on stage' because they steal the show. And against this tradition, one of the most direct, obvious things to do is to just put an animal on stage, walking around freely, interacting with a group of human performers in performance spaces that are still very much governed by modern conventions of theatrical presentation. The piece is kind of iconic in its simplicity, and this is why, I guess, it circulated as an *eidos*, an anecdote, even among people who hadn't seen the show. Because this image is emblematic of a certain problem in modern theatre. On the other hand, this minimalist simplicity created the space for all this complexity and contingency that the actual performance interactions bring. *Balthazar* was approachable from many perspectives; we had very diverse audiences: regular and professional theatregoers came; academics wrote about the piece; and at the same time it attracted people from the donkey communities, tabloid journalists, and children who had a very direct access to what was happening on stage. In this way the piece created a concrete encounter between diverse social fields, including arts, academia, nature lovers, etc. This was the anatomy of the show, which, however, did not really appear on stage. Through formats like aftertalks, which we began to incorporate into the show, it became apparent how much of an encounter had already taken place in the audience, more or less independently of what was happening on stage. Although their backgrounds and approaches

couldn't be more different, I think that these diverse audiences actually saw the same piece. Each in their own way, they got the fundamental tension of what was going on between the donkey, the human performers and their own agency as spectators. Through this minimalist narrowing down of options, theatrically speaking, the social, aesthetical and material relations diversified and multiplied.

I remember a show that took place in Berlin that went sideways: the donkey really didn't want to be on stage, probably because of the sudden presence of a larger audience. Basically, for the whole show, he tried to leave. And the performers kept trying to bring him back centre stage, with continuous collective walking, or gaining his interest by surprising him, and ever more desperately – they brought hay and carrots and so on. I think that for everyone in the audience, including us, it was not pleasant to watch, because you could see that the protagonist of the piece did not agree with the conditions of its presentation. We felt obliged to present a performance in front of a paying audience in a big theatre, yet we couldn't keep up the show. Later a friend said: 'Why didn't you let him go? Relax, open a window. It's fine, we paid for an experiment. Then why do you have this urge to present a fully fledged theatre piece?'

DWK: No alternative was planned in case the donkey did not want to be on stage at all, because it had never happened. We had always somehow managed to establish some sort of communication with the donkeys we had worked with. But I remember that we had lots of difficulties with the version we made in Berlin in 2015. They were due to the architecture of the theatre. The stage was not on the ground floor. The technicians at the theatre HAU Hebbel am Ufer had built a very impressive ramp for the donkey to walk up from the courtyard to the stage. During the show you are referring to, a storm broke out after the performance had already started. It was in HAU1, a big proscenium theatre in which conventionally people come to see accomplished shows. Maybe if we had been in a more experimental setting we would just have stopped it. Of all the shows we have done that is

probably the only one we should have aborted. The communication we usually so carefully established was impossible. The performers tried. But eventually what you saw was humans desperately trying to tame an animal on stage and force it to do what they wanted. It was unbearable. Maybe the plausible alternative to this situation would have been to step on stage ourselves and start to talk to the audience in the form of an aftertalk of sorts. Actually, this was the period where we decided to systematically add an aftertalk after each performance. The team would come on stage and talk with the audience about the performance. We felt this need when we started to perform in proscenium theatres. Somehow the show needed it, really because of the architecture, because stage and audience were separated.

MH: It is really striking how sensible the performance is to environmental conditions, even those outside the theatre space. There is this storm going on, which is hardly perceptible in the theatre space. And still the donkey is affected by it. He brings the storm feel to the performance, thereby destroying the conditions of the performance. But at the same time, when the piece is on, the threshold between environment and performance needs to be highly protected in order for it to work. Another solution in the Berlin case, in which the donkey refused to participate, could have been to literally open the stage door for the donkey, giving him the choice to leave and return as he wished, and also the audience's doors, so that the spectators could go, come back, have a chat, etc. There was certainly that artistic pressure, which I think came from the fact that we were actually experimenting with theatrical representation through the animal. So, with respect to the performances themselves, it wasn't so much a space of interspecies conviviality. The communication between humans and the animal was to support a theatrical event under precarious conditions. And without this theatrical tension, the encounter would have become more mundane and thus qualitatively different from the experience we were aiming for. Yet I wonder how the project could have generated a stronger metabolism, or just porosity, between the artistic realm and the other ways of engaging with a

donkey, beyond the standards of modern theatrical performance – potentially in the mode of weak or relaxed performance, of durational and landscape dramaturgies, in which space, time, elements and events are organized more loosely. I wonder, then, if it would have been possible to multiply and diversify the means by which the performers, including the donkey, could respond to particular situations, conditions and moods on that day, in that theatre.

DWK: It all comes down to this idea that what we created was enhancing the fragility of what a theatre event can be. Everybody present understood that the situation we were proposing was fragile, that it could fail, that it actually was always failing somehow, and that we were embracing this very fact. In order to do this, we needed a strong frame around the event. Maybe in Berlin we should have accepted that this frame was a fiction after all, and we should have abandoned it. I remember that when we did the very first show in Amsterdam, we really did not know how the donkey would react when hundreds of spectators entered the space. I was therefore welcoming the audience in small groups at the entrance, telling them in a very dimmed voice that what they were about to be part of was an experiment and that it had already started. People entered the space thus with the awareness of their potential agency on what would happen on stage. But eventually what we made was a theatre evening with a beginning and an end, with a clear dramaturgy and even a *pointe*. We could have decided on a looser form. It would have been a much longer show and it would have been more open to moments of void or boredom. Maybe this would have been interesting. Generally speaking, the performance could have been less of a perfect theatrical event and more of an experiment. But what would have been the aim then? Would it 'just' have been about cohabitation?

MH: Instead of the aim, I usually think in terms of tensions or problems: what is the interesting problem and which tensions come along with it? For me, the tension in this project was clearly in the clash between a certain theatrical mode of representation – which emerged in Western

modernity and is still so dominant that you can't completely disentangle yourself from it – and this particular performativity of the animal, which has to do with a fundamentally different way of being in a theatre space, with emergent action, contingency, a specific form of intentionality that doesn't match the artistic decisionism that usually governs this space. Without the theatrical frame, this tension would dissolve. There are, of course, other approaches to animals on stage that have been developed in very interesting works by various artists and that do not, for example, involve a conventional opposition between performers and spectators.

regularly invited to present and exchange about this project in different contexts. And we both feel that lately, in the past few years, some new questions have arisen that were less present in the times we were performing the piece actively. Those are mainly questions about the ethics of the project. They all revolve around one main question: is it OK to take a being that doesn't really have the choice to refuse and place it on stage in order to make art with it? This question was always present, but it was always overshadowed by the careful and respectful way we treated the animal on and off stage. Now, in some talks, it becomes the main question, the one that is prior to any consideration about the project. And



David Weber-Krebs and Maximilian Haas, *Balthazar*, Frankfurt, 2016. © David Weber-Krebs

DWK: There is this main question about the ethics of the performance. We started to work on this performance in 2011 and performed it until 2016. Since then, you have written your PhD with this project as a case study and primal topic. We are both

it pushes us to wonder if, in the world of today, we would create this performance as it was, with the same premises. Would we initiate a project like this today? And, more concretely, if the project was invited again, would we perform it as it was?

MH: The representational frame of modern, Western theatre is highly efficient in creating a sense of importance. Everything that is aesthetically exposed on stage is ethically enhanced, including, not least, human–animal relations. Behaviour that would be inconspicuous in everyday life proves its inherent violence under the magnifying glass of the stage. The ethical ramifications of certain gestures or objects become apparent on stage. For instance, when a performer tries to lure the donkey centre stage with a carrot, it becomes an aggressive object. A carrot can be inherently aggressive if you use it to impose your will on an animal that wants to go backstage. And you feel it so much more when it happens on stage. The question is: can you legitimize this kind of forceful behaviour through the fact that it is critically exposed and ethically enhanced on a theatre stage? I remember that we wanted to portray violence as an important aspect of human–animal relations, but the question was how to do it on stage with an actual animal. For example, we had this scene where the performer took out a stick as a potentially hurtful tool towards the donkey. It was pretty funny because the donkey was always so interested in the stick and started nibbling on it or snuggling with it. And so, the whole intention of explicitly thematizing violent human–animal relations was rendered absurd by the donkey.

DWK: Yes. This is one of the scenes we abandoned because it was not primarily based on communicating with the donkey but on a sign that only the humans in the space could understand as potentially hurtful. But there was this other scene, where you had a performer (Sid Van Oerle) engaging in a one-to-one dance with the donkey. It was primarily read as a game in which a human was teasing an animal. But the goal was to act at the verge of what could be experienced by the donkey and interpreted by the audience as violent. We deliberately wanted to play on that verge during this scene.

MH: I guess the structure of force inherent to every show becomes particularly visible with the donkey on stage because he or she never agreed to be there

in the first place. But this indeed applies to human performers too, to everybody on and around the stage, yet in different ways and to varying degrees. They are all drawn into this process of forcing a theatrical event into being. And everybody has to perform their role in that. And, of course, it might be harmful to humans, too, in the case of rehearsal injuries for example. And I think that all elements of performance, including human and nonhuman performers, can make this force visible, but can also create an occasion to organize it differently. This force is very ambivalent for me because on the one hand I can definitely see where it is harmful, but on the other it also makes for great theatrical events – for humans, that is, doesn't it? I think that most of the theatre performances I remember from past years are driven by exactly this force. Hence, in *Balthazar*, too, we were forcing a theatrical event into being and everybody had to perform their role and this can be harmful to all participants in different ways. At the same time, animals can make this visible and can provide an occasion to organize things differently. They can practically dismantle or deconstruct the stage apparatus, inherited from modern, post-Enlightenment theatre, by revealing its foundational separations or violent dualisms.

But maybe it's enough just to open a window, to go outside, to find ways there. When I look back, it all seems so forceful also from our side, conceptually. I think it's extremely important to critically work through modern human–animal relations, but they're embedded in a larger network of importances.

DWK: In an article Jeroen Peeters wrote about the performance, he recognizes the artistic qualities of the performance, but questions its true contribution to the discourse about human–animal relations (2013: 46–51). According to him, the work is fascinating but it does not really transcend the anecdote of communication. What would you say about that?

MH: The problem of animals was pretty new to both of us when we started developing the performance, right? Only later – through the

project and writing about it – did I come into contact with the academic field of (critical) animal studies, which was still emerging at the time. Through this engagement, questions of animal ethics or ethical practice with animals became more central to my interest. I think we're in a time when humans are trying to situate themselves in new ways within more-than-human webs of life, unlearning modern modes of approaching nonhumans, including animals. For me, the *Balthazar* project is not only about ways of producing and perceiving theatre in Western modernity, but also very much about ways of addressing an animal in its cosmology. In the performance, the animal is exposed as an individual animal, playing with the modes of identification this renders possible. The spectators, as well as the performance makers, are invited to project themselves into the head of the animal and try to see the theatrical environment from its perspective. Through a strategic anthropomorphism a certain anthropocentrism is challenged. While this problematizes a particular modern notion of animality – as the Other of those who call themselves human – it does so by projecting onto the animal very human concepts (in terms of the humanist's human) of individuality, psychology or sociology in line with the modern subject–object divide.

Conceptually the piece is thus some sort of misbehaviour within the modern episteme, yet it doesn't transcend it. It's more like a crack in the established human–animal (but also human–human) relations activated and represented in theatre. But it does not go very far beyond this dualism, for example by means of ecological sensation, mediation and microperformativity, of complex causation, latency of effects, and the implicatedness of observers – or of technology. We were, as you said, very transparent with the way we employed certain technological elements, and the technicity of the stage itself was apparent through the eyes of the donkey. And yet, technology remained very much separated from the modes of being of both humans and animals on stage. I think we have thus ignored some of the forms of

hybridization that characterize our contemporary experience of/as organisms, including technology, as well as a notion of life/live processes that are not reducible to organic forms and functions. I guess, for me, it is mainly the issue of individuality versus multiplicity, or ecology, that is at stake here.

Human–animal relations are indeed important nodes, but they are embedded in larger networks. To me, it's a matter of increasing complexity. Or rather: it's a matter of acknowledging increasing complexity. It's a matter of opening up to surrounding ecologies, to complex systems between different species, including nonliving species like physical, chemical or technological elements and processes. So, there is certainly a possibility of digging deeper into the micro- and macrocosm of the production of 'life art' and to reconnect it in some way to the living environments of donkeys and humans beyond the theatre, also in terms of the cultural history or anthropology of human–animal relations. This is very speculative, but could serve as a vague idea to open the mental limitations we have created for the project: to stage a donkey as an individual animal with a group of human performers for a specific timeframe and in a highly isolated and controllable situation. This is a way of looking at things, but it also hides various forms of relations that do not have to be constructed, but are always already at play, and which have been rendered invisible, anaesthetical, in the performances in order to isolate the object of interest, the epistemic thing, in a specific perspective.

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