

## ***About Three People And The Sounds They Make and The Animal Sound Society***

This is a complementary text about my research behind my movie *About Three People And The Sounds They Make* (1). It gives further insight to a broader spectrum of my practice as a visual artist, also in other fields than film making, such as performance.

In my artistic work I keep returning to the topic of our human relationship to what we like to call “nature”. I had come to contemplate on the categorization of humans and animals, as belonging to different hierarchies of life and how western philosophy and Christianity struggles with the division of mind and body, animal and human. One of the things that are said to differentiate humans from the animals is the use of language. I found an online archive boasting to have a collection of 120 000 different animal sounds (2). It struck me as very sad, as if we need to hurry up to record the voices of our kin species before they disappear so that we can remember them. Then I found that among these recordings was also a category of homo sapiens. This very dry scientific acknowledgment of humans as just another species amazed me. It made me wonder: what are the characteristics of the human voice? How do we as sound to an animal?

My work about humans imitating animal sounds started with a performance in de Oude Kerk (3) in Amsterdam, called The Animal Sound Society. It was a choir of 12 people who performed their animal sounds that they had learned (4). Directing a choir in a church to perform animals sounds was a suggestion to re-evaluate the spiritual bond between animals and humans. I wanted to give more hints about the persons behind the sounds, so after my performance I decided to continue with making the movie “About three people and the sounds they make”, choosing three people with very different karisma. I was intrigued by their integrity when talking about their sounds as well as the characteristics of the animals they imitate.



As I talked about my project, more and more people came to me, revealing that they could make a sound of one or several specific animals. On youtube one can find people who like to impress with their ability to imitate animals, and I found that a gospel catholic choir touring with a piece of well composed cat meows (5). Meanwhile, it seems to be a trend to upload “funny videos” of animals trying to fit into a domestic situation, and imitating the behaviors of humans. When people upload videos of themselves imitating animals it is presented as a voice skill, showed off as a funny and impressive trick (6). This is different to the somewhat pathetic attempts of the animals that we laugh at. It is easy to brush the whole phenomenon off as nonsense comedy. And putting it in contrast to the marginalization of animals in our world, this seems rather sad.

However, when avoiding the “professional” animal sound - makers, I found that there was a unique and touching story behind these sounds. One of these people is Julia, who imitates a forest dove. Something about the way she talked about her sound made me realize that this is an intimate thing that she didn't like to show off to a big audience (mainly because of her I used a banner in front of the choir to hide their faces). She had grown up close to a forest where there was a dove couple, and she felt attached to them. Later on, when talking to her twin sister, it becomes obvious that she also identifies with these doves. Her twin says that “the sound fits her personality”. I also found Masaki, imitating a rooster and Ina, a dolphin.

I have consciously decided to keep a very serious approach to this subject, even though many people, like Masaki and Ina, shake their animal-sound-making skill off as a triviality. To sincerely attempt, and perhaps fail, to imitate an animal would probably be considered weird. To seriously interview people about their ability to imitate animal sounds is slightly uncomfortable. It makes the interviewee look as if she's confessing an embarrassing secret. When the banner fell down after my choir performance, revealing the faces of the sound makers, there was an awkward tension between them and the audience. Some people from the audience replied with making animal sounds themselves. This immature reaction made me wonder. Did they want to make fun of the performers, or is this mimicking of mimicking a way for the audience to understand or connect to the performers? It is perhaps the same behavior as the original mimicking of animal sounds?



I can't say to what extent mimicking an animal is suggesting a bond, but I do believe it depends on the very attitude when developing this “skill”. There are birds that mimic all kinds of sounds, not differentiating between if it's another animal or some kind of machine or city sound. I can only guess but I think it is not a coincidence that it is so popular to imitate animals rather than other sounds. Julia talks about the forest doves as a “respect animal”, as a particular fascinating animal because of its integrity. It is very similar to how she talks about people she likes, and herself.

There is also a practical aspect to imitate animal sounds in social interaction between humans. It is a bodily type of pre-language communication, the same kind of communication that takes place between animals. With his rooster call, Masaki is able to get attention in a lighter way than if he would ask for it with words. His sound is piercing and unexpected, it surprises people and makes them laugh. We don't know exactly why roosters call but consciously or unconsciously Masaki acknowledges its characteristics and borrows it in his own communication. Ina doesn't relate to dolphins herself, but our culture does. Dolphin images are everywhere, on posters and as decoration objects. Dolphin quotes usually include friendship, love, cuteness and intelligence. The cool girls in Ina's school imitated dolphins. Ina was mimicking the cool girls as a way to approach them



The visual artist Katja Novistkova talks about animals as high tech carriers of information to explain the huge amount of cute animal images uploaded on the internet and in advertisement (7) . We react strongly to animals and read their expressions instinctually and we bond to them emotionally. We look at animals and their characteristics are important to humans to understand ourselves. Imitating animals is not an philosophical or intellectual attempt to understand animals, but as a bodily, emotional respons to these animals. Listening to the sounds of animals touches us, makes us laugh and helps to create intimacy.

(1) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zJ6B3My96RY>

(2) <http://www.animalsoundarchive.org/>

(3) <http://www.oudekerk.nl/en/>

(4) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4sRCwLMLcI>

(5) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZPdqdqj3ghY>

(6) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=54icChYV1Is>

(7) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PDfEXUCGwjg>