

# Revisiting *Alice*

## Wilma Cruise

### Summary

Responding to the need to “think of unheard thoughts about animals” (Calarco 2008: 6) I explore the “question of the animal” through the art object. In so doing I interrogate the efficacy of art in effecting social change. I examine the problematic question of humankind’s relationship to the animal by revisiting the children’s tales *Alice in Wonderland* and *Alice through the Looking Glass*. In so doing I touch on questions such as sentience, anthropomorphism and language while engaging with the writings of amongst others Peter Singer and Jacques Derrida.

### Opsomming

As respons op die noodsaak “[to] think of unheard thoughts about animals” (Calarco 2008: 6) verken ek die vraagstuk van die dier deur middel van die kunsvoorwerp. In die proses bevraagteken ek die vermoë van kuns om sosiale verandering teweeg te bring. Ek ondersoek verder die problematiese vraag aangaande die mensdom se verhouding tot die dier deur kinderverhale soos *Alice in Wonderland* en *Alice through the Looking Glass* opnuut te bestudeer. Sodoende roer ek vrae aangaande gevoelsvermoë, antropomorfisme en taal aan, terwyl ek die werke van onder meer Peter Singer en Jacques Derrida bestudeer.

There is no doubt we need to think of unheard thoughts about animals, that we need new languages, new artworks, new histories, even new sciences and philosophies.

(Calarco 2008: 6)

Following Calarco’s call to arms, I investigate the question of the animal through the metaphoric and metonymic means of the art object. Revisiting the children’s tales *Alice in Wonderland* and *Alice through the Looking Glass* I examine the problematic of humankind’s relationship to “the animal”, using as a metaphor (a meta-metaphor?) the texts of Carroll’s

nineteenth-century tales.<sup>1</sup> I touch on questions such as sentience, anthropomorphism and language and engage with the writings and thoughts of amongst others the utilitarian philosopher Peter Singer, and the long meditation on the animal by Jacques Derrida. In so doing I raise the question of the efficacy of art in effecting social change.

The view of the separation of human and animal and the superiority of one above the other has in recent times come to be questioned.<sup>2</sup> According to John Berger, the traditional rupture between human and non-human has never been wider. In his 1980 essay published in *About Looking* (1980) and reproduced in Kalof and Fitzgerald (2007), Berger laments mankind's loss of a sacred metaphoric connection to the animals:

Animals interceded between man and their origin because they were both like and unlike man.

Animals came from over the horizon. They belonged *then* and *here*. Likewise they were mortal and immortal. An animal's blood flowed like human blood, but its species was undying, and each lion was Lion, each ox was Ox.

(Berger 2007: 253; italics in original)

Identifying the rupture between man and animal from the time of Descartes to its apogee in modern times, he maintains we as humankind have isolated ourselves from other species. By marginalising animals in zoos,<sup>3</sup> exploiting them as bio-commodities, reproducing their images – not symbolically but realistically, thereby reducing the animal to its sign – we have effectively pushed the animal into a “receding past” (Berger 2007: 255). “Therein lies the ultimate consequence of their marginalisation. That look between animal and man ... has been extinguished” (p. 261).

In the present (postmodernist) era, as the question of the animal becomes more urgent in the face of the environmental crisis, the animal trope

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1. I do this through a series of exhibitions entitled “The Alice Sequence” (2011-2014), which include “The Animals in Alice” at The Wembley Square branch of iArt Gallery (now Brundyn) in Cape Town; “Alice and the Animals” at the North-West University in 2011; “The Alice Diaries” at Circa on Jellicoe in Johannesburg 2012; and “Will You Won't You, Will You Join the Dance” at the National Art Festival, Grahamstown July 2013 and the Oliewenhuis Museum, Bloemfontein, July 2014.
  2. This superiority of humankind is entrenched in the biblical injunction that man should “have dominion over the fish of the sea, and the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth” (Genesis 1: 28).
  3. Like his earlier thesis on the male gaze in relation to women, Berger maintains zoo animals are the observed, never the observer (2007: 251).



reappears,<sup>4</sup> not as a sacred being, nor as a moral metaphor, but fractured and awkward, its representation “a resistance to the dissolution of human and animal bodies” (Baker 2007: 279). The core question with reference to animal shifts is one of ethics and subsumed is the question whether art can play a role in effecting change. The utilitarian philosopher Peter Singer is downright dismissive: “I am not aware of any contemporary work of art that has really done very much to change our attitudes to animals. The really effective examples are now very old – what has there been that can compare with William Hogarth’s *Four Stages of Cruelty*?” (Singer in Aloi 2011: 13). He goes as far as to say that “the energy used by ... the air-conditioned art galleries in which we view art contributes to climate change” (Singer in Baker 2011: 5) which, as Steve Baker notes, is a criticism that apparently does not extend to “the air-conditioned lecture theatres in which philosophers present their ideas” (Baker 2011: 5)! Other writers such as Tom Regan are more utilitarian in their approach, maintaining that there is no scholarly discipline that cannot make a contribution: “We’d rather be inside the theatre performing, than outside the theatre protesting” (Regan quoted in Baker 2011).

Steve Baker suggests making a distinction between art that is animal endorsing and that which is animal sceptical (2007: 276). Even while admitting the relative clumsiness of the terms he maintains that the former position aligns itself with the conservationists while the latter is more likely to question the cultural construction of the term “animal” and its meaning vis-à-vis “human”. In so doing he points to the split in thinking between the Anglo-American philosophers, represented by Peter Singer, who argue for animal rights within the existing framework of an implicit liberal humanist model (Calarco 2008: 9) and the continental philosophers such as Jacques Derrida, who deconstruct “the very notion of moral and legal rights and its underlying metaphysical and philosophical support” (Calarco 2008: 114).<sup>5</sup> Unlike Peter Singer, Elizabeth de Fontenay invests artists with power: “[I]n sacred societies, only mystics and artists had received permission, or rather, had seized the right, to pray for animals” (de Fontenay quoted in Salaud

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4. Animal images were largely absent from the twentieth-century avant-garde largely due to the general retreat from figuration and because animals carried a weight of sentimental or moral meaning that was at odds with the modernist impulse (Baker 2007: 285).
  5. Derrida perceives the conflict between institutionalised violence against animals and the animal rights movement as a war of attrition between compassion and violence with compassion advocates coming off a poor second (Calarco 2008: 114-115). “Their discourses [may be] sound and profound, but everything in them goes on as if they themselves had never been looked at and especially not naked, by an animal that addressed them” (Derrida 2008: 14).

2011: 123). The writer J.M. Coetzee also assigns a major role to the arts. Coetzee has Costello state that it is via the poets (and poetics) that understanding with the animals might be reached: “[They] ... return the living electric being to language” (Coetzee 2004: 111).

I lean towards the latter approach both in philosophical inclination and in my praxis. I deal with the question of the animal visually in a way that (I hope) is neither didactic, nor proselytising. My approach is oblique, employing the tools of metaphor and metonym. There is no prescriptive end to my enquiry, no necessary position of advocacy – only a quest. I use the metaphor of a *flâneur* who wanders through the city with no particular goal in sight, relying on the journey itself to provide the guide. I use this metaphor to emphasise the interrogative nature of my research, which is open-ended rather than fixed. Searching for a solution to the animal question requires an open mind that presupposes a readiness to entertain alternative visions. This is in keeping with the multidisciplinary nature of the field of animal studies in which “new social movements [seek] to develop a postliberal posthumanist approach” to the question of the animal (Calarco 2008: 6).

In the following section I touch briefly on some of the issues raised around my (re)search, which, in their brevity suggest other possibilities of deeper enquiry. These revolve around issues such as sentience, anthropomorphism and language. It is important to note that the artworks are neither illustrations of the concepts nor representations of the animals in Alice; rather they are visual manifestations of the embryonic answers, which visually, at least, are inchoate and unconscious. They derive from “the space between” where, quoting Woodward, “human and nonhuman animal can meet without animals being judged linguistically inferior” (2008: 166).

Although animals featured early on in my artistic oeuvre, notably in my earliest solo exhibition, “Portrait of my Friends and Other Animals” (1987), it was only in 2007 that my ideas on the animal-human interface were first clearly articulated. The exhibition “Cocks Asses & [slightly different title below] I Can’t Hear” (2007-2009)<sup>6</sup> was based on the premise of the inadequacy of language in communication between human beings and between humans and the other sentient beings that inhabit our planet. Through life-size ceramic figures, prints and the pages of “The 100 Page

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6. “Cocks, Asses & ... (I can’t hear)”, University of Johannesburg Art Gallery 7-28 November 2007; Kizo Art Gallery, Durban, 20 June-28 July 2008; White River Art Gallery March-April 2009; Oliewenhuis Art Museum (Reservoir), Bloemfontein, 7 July-16 August 2009; iArt Gallery, Cape Town, 9 November-11 December 2009.



Diary”,<sup>7</sup> I explored humankind’s inability to listen to each other, the environment and the other inhabitants of the world.

“The 100 Page Diary” was central to the exhibition. In the pages of the diary I explored ideas through phrases, aphorisms, questions and erasures thereby documenting the halting progress of writing meaning into the visual objects. One such aphorism encapsulated the central tenet of the exhibition and was published contemporaneously with the exhibition.

We have shut our ears to their primal screams, their rumbles, hisses, purrs.  
(Cruise in Schmahmann 2007)

The metaphor of wilful deafness points to a state of ignorance and arrogance on the part of humankind; a refusal to entertain the notion of the animal as an(other) being worthy of full attention. Formalising this metaphor into a statement of intent, I later (c2012) proposed that the entrenched ontotheological dualism<sup>8</sup> between human and non-human animal creates a “space between” humankind and other sentient beings. I interpreted this metaphoric space as a liminal border state between the human “I” and the animal “other”. The visual and theoretical analysis of this divide provides the focus of my research that is an attempt to restore the sense of the animal as a worthy and equal “other”.

That I chose Lewis Carroll’s two texts *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* and *Alice through the Looking Glass* as a conduit for my research needs some explanation. *Alice in Wonderland* was the first book I read, or can remember reading. Thus it was since the inception of my conscious self, part of me. However, the primary reason for using it as a “meta-metaphor” for my visual research is that the animals in *Alice* have the knowledge, the language and the (albeit upside down) reason, as to how Wonderland works. Thus the White Rabbit, much like a modern corporate executive, is forever rushing off somewhere lamenting his lateness. “Oh my paws and whiskers,” he cries as he rushes past the bewildered Alice. His task is urgent, but it is never made clear to Alice or to us, her sympathetic co-journeyers, what this urgent business is. In the upside down, rabbit-hole world, all sense of who Alice is falls away. She is not even sure of her size. “Who are you?” asks the haughty caterpillar, and a little later, the pigeon, who thinks she just might be a serpent, asks, “What are you?”. Alice does not have the answer to either question. The caterpillar’s question is significant. Who is Alice and, by extrapolation, who are we? Are we right to presume our position of

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7. “The 100 Page Diary” (2009-2012)”. Drawing and mixed media. 100 x A3 Pages. Framed.

8. René Descartes’s (1596-1650) perception of animals as automata or soul(less) beings confirmed the biblical dualistic divide between humans and other living beings.

superiority in relation to the animals? Do we really deserve our place on top of the Cartesian pile?

That Lewis Carroll's writings provide such a fecund metaphor for a discussion on the question of the animal is not surprising. Derrida said this about his seminal lecture on the animal that was later formalised into the text *The Animal Therefore I am (More to Follow)* (2008): "Although I don't have the time to do so, I would have liked to inscribe my whole talk within a reading of Lewis Carroll. In fact you can't be certain that I am not doing that" (Derrida 2008: 7). Referring to the hedgehogs in "The Queen's Croquet Ground", he said, "Alice wanted to give the hedgehog a blow with the head of the flamingo she held under her arm, and it would "twist itself round and look up in her face," until she burst out laughing (2008: 7). Derrida goes on to ask. "How can an animal look you in the face?" (2008: 7).

This is not only the core of Derrida's question on the animal but also embodies the central tenet of my research: What happens in the "space between" the animal's look and one's perception of it? What knowledge is conveyed at that moment when the animal looks back at its observer? Is it aware of its interlocutor as ashamed and naked as Derrida was, or clothed and curious as this researcher is?

Like Carroll, Derrida inverts the human-centred position. It is not what the human sees, when he or she looks, or acts, or decides upon, but what the animal sees, or does, or acts upon. Notably Derrida's musings on the animal were not prompted by the abstract machinations of a philosopher. His cat is neither metaphor nor symbol but an actual animal, and his encounter with her is based on real autobiographical experience.

No, no, my cat, the cat that looks at me in my bedroom or bathroom, this cat that is perhaps not "my cat" or "my pussycat", does not appear here to represent, like an ambassador the immense symbolic responsibility with which our culture has always charged the feline race. If I say, "it is a real cat" that sees me naked, this is in order to mark its *unsubstitutable singularity*.

(Derrida 2008: 9; my italics)

This is the key moment in Derrida's exposition of *The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow)* (Derrida 2008). It is when the animal looks back that the space between is breached; where the mute silence is filled with meaning that remains beyond reach; where "the gaze called 'animal' offers to my sight the abyssal limit of the human: the inhuman or the ahuman, the ends of man, that is to say the bordercrossing from which man dares to announce himself to himself ..." (2008: 12).

My idea of the "space between" finds various theoretical echoes, notably in the writings of the French literary feminist Hélène Cixous, whose concept of *écriture féminine* suggests a reformulation of the relationship between language and the body. She rejects what she terms "critiques that persist in a logocentric Cartesian discourse that posits the mind as the source of writing"



(Dobson in Simons 2004: 130). The space between is “a risky country ... situated somewhere near the unconscious: to reach it you have to go through the back door of thought” (Cixous in Atterton & Calarco 2011: 189). The idea of a knowing achieved beyond conventional modes also finds echo in Merleau-Ponty’s metaphoric blind spot, the *punctum caecum* in which “every visible is invisible ... that to see is always to see more than one sees ...” (Merleau-Ponty quoted in Reynolds 2004: 78). Deleuze and Guattari completely collapse the space between humankind and the non-human animal by a radical dissolution of the binary terms. Notably, for Deleuze and Guattari becoming animal is not simply a case of imagining oneself as animal, but involves a more intuitive mode of being which is based on a constellation of affects (2011: 92). Nevertheless, their central concept of “becoming animal” (2011: 94) is identified as a point in the middle where a new state of being develops in the way of “becoming animal”.

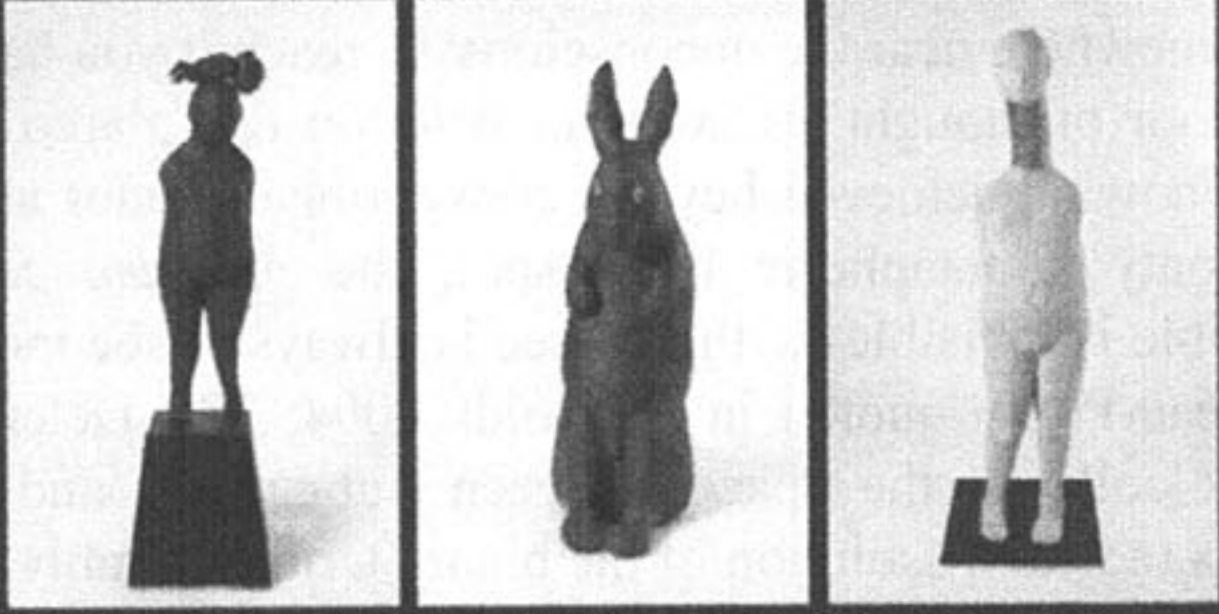
A becoming is always in the middle; one can only get to it by the middle. A becoming is neither one nor two, nor the relation of the two; *it is the in between ....*

(Deleuze & Guattari 2011: 94; my italics)

Yet, I cannot pretend to know what “becoming animal” *looks* like, although I am pretty sure that the therianthropic representations of half human and half animal are not it, or are at best a simplification. I would suggest that the two drawings made early on in the series might approximate it. “Alice: Self-portrait I” and “Alice: Self-portrait II” depict Alice contemplating the small animals affixed to her breast. Like much of my work, the two Alices are armless, that is, they lack agency.<sup>9</sup> They neither hold nor cuddle the animals nor do they look affectionately at them. What is meant is not clear and like Deleuze and Guattari, who maintain that there is “nothing metaphoric about becoming animal”, I suggest a simple interpretation is not on offer, not to me the artist nor (necessarily) to the viewer.

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9. These figures are without hands, an anatomical feature that, according to Heidegger, is a signifying mark of the humanity of man and his capacity for thought (Wolfe 2003: xv).



The Alice Diaries

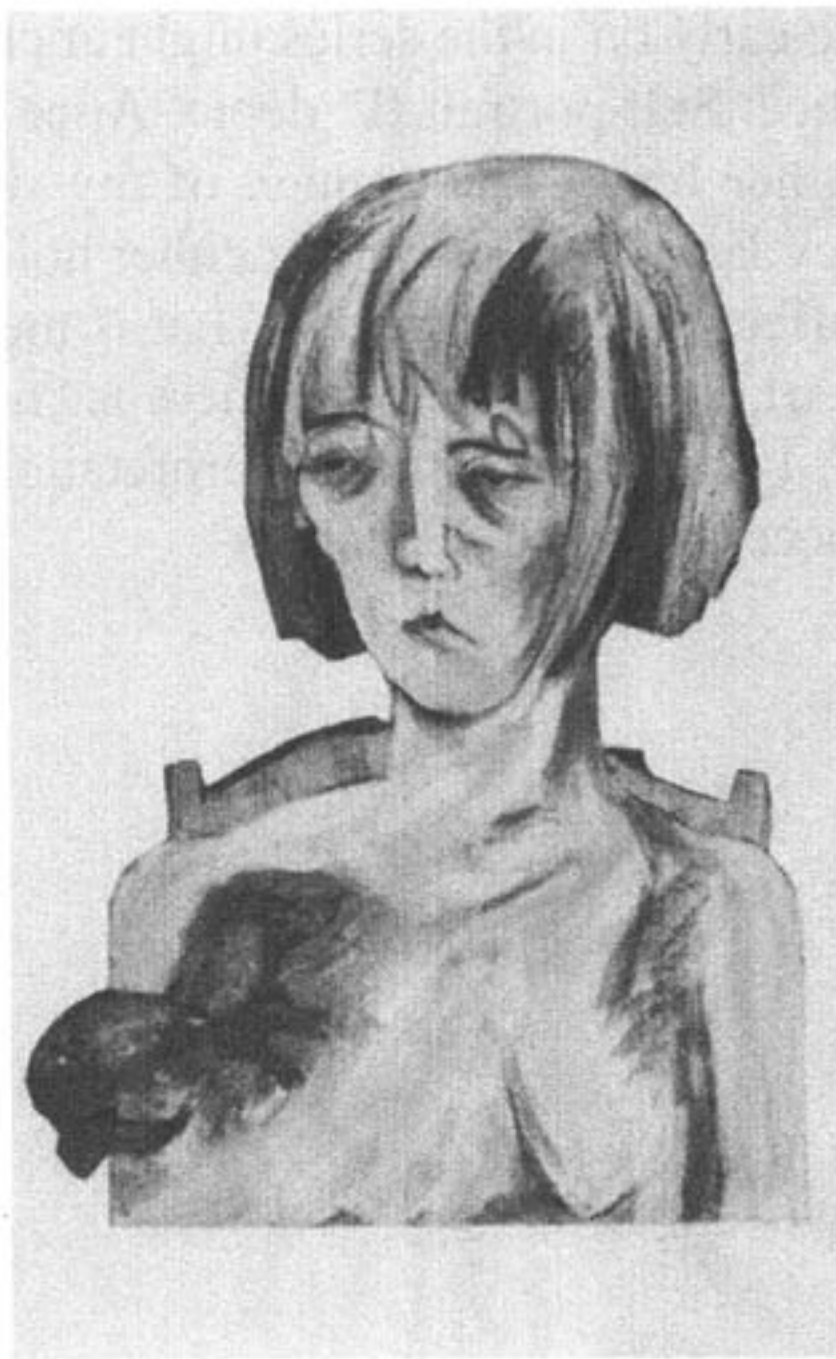
An exhibition of works by Wilma Cruise

Please join us for the opening on Tuesday 24 July 2012 at 6:00 pm

Exhibition runs from 24 July – 25 August 2012 contact the gallery for previews 011 768 4905  
Please note that the date of the exhibition has changed from 26 July to 24 July 2012

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Invitation to *The Alice Diaries*

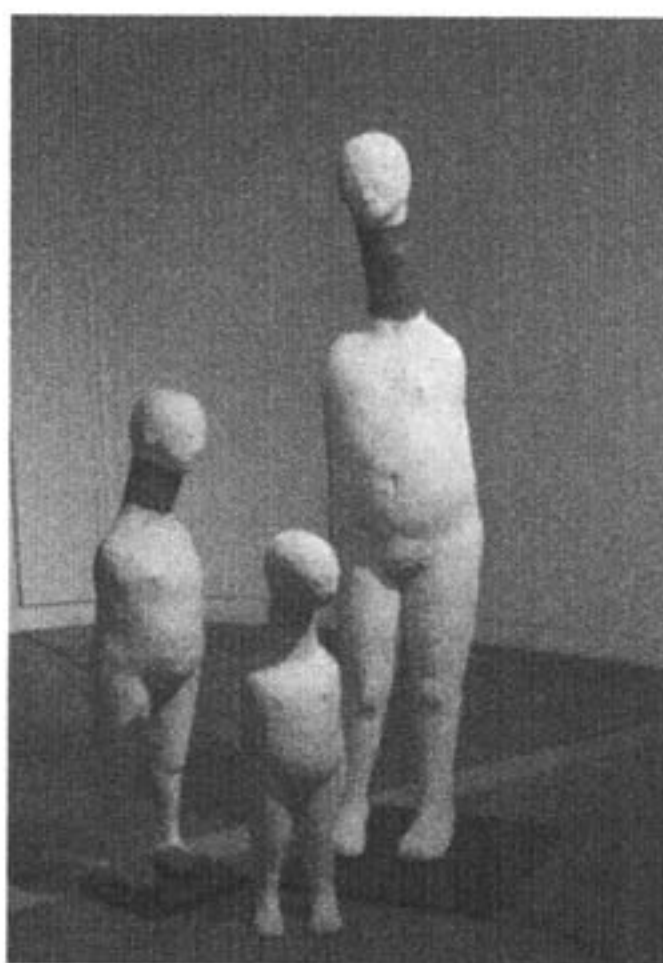


Alice: Self-Portrait I





Alice: Self-Portrait II <sup>10</sup>



Alice: Bigger, Big, Biggest <sup>11</sup>

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10. Alice: Self-Portrait I 2011. Mixed media drawing on paper. Paper size  $\pm$  200 x 100 cm. Alice: Self-Portrait II 2011. Mixed media drawing on paper. Paper size  $\pm$  200 x 100cm.
11. Big (Alice) 2012. Ceramic on steel base. Ht 94 cm.  
Bigger (Alice) 2012. Ceramic on steel base. Ht 124 cm.  
Biggest (Alice) 2012. Ceramic on steel base. Ht 182 cm.

One of the remarkable things about Carroll's text is that the animals in the tales seem to have a consciousness. They are not used symbolically to stand for something else, nor are they animal representations of human traits that Berger has termed "moral metaphors" (in Kalof & Fitzgerald 2007: 258). As Tully maintains, "Carroll's speaking animals exhibit an unusually keen force of their own that resists the customary outcome of the anthropomorphic representation (in word and image) of animal beings, namely to figuratively reference human attributes and circumstances" (Tully 2013: 8). Just such a creature is the Cheshire Cat who (I use the word "who" advisedly), seems more real in his disembodied form than many fictional characters in literature. In *Alice in Wonderland*, the Cheshire Cat appears and disappears, sometimes leaving only his enigmatic smile behind. He knows, but just what he knows remains unclear. Like Derrida's cat, before whom the philosopher stood naked and ashamed (Derrida 2008: 4), the Cheshire Cat has the power to unsettle certainty. His god-like presence and his ironic smile confuse more than they elucidate. Cats more than any other creatures have the ability to stare down the human gaze. Derrida's cat shamed him. The philosopher Michel de Montaigne was not sure whether he was playing with his cat or whether she was toying with him. What do they know? both philosophers pondered (de Montaigne 2007: 58).

These real and fictional cats, de Montaigne's, Carroll's and Derrida's, appear to have an awareness, a subjectivity, and a recognition of us as the other. The tables are turned and the habitually observed becomes the observer. The object gazing back is an uncomfortable feeling, as Derrida discovered. The King in *Alice in Wonderland* felt the same on being confronted by the grinning gaze of the disembodied Cheshire Cat.

"[D]on't look at me like that," he said ...

"A cat may look at a king," said Alice ....

"Well it must be removed," said the King very decidedly: and he called to the Queen .... The Queen had only one way of settling all difficulties great or small.

"Off with his head!" she said ...

"I'll fetch the executioner myself," said the King eagerly.

(Carroll 1983: 81)

The thorny question of animal subjectivity is central to the question of the animal and the ethics surrounding the interface with humankind. The utilitarian philosopher Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832) attempted to bypass the issue by maintaining that "the question is not can they reason? Nor can they talk? But, Can they suffer?" (2007: 8). This position allowed contemporary utilitarian philosophers such as Peter Singer (2007: 14) to adopt a stance in which ethical treatment of animals can be exercised without necessarily raising the uncomfortable question of consciousness. By introducing the concept of speciesism, which, like racism and sexism, is a prejudice against



the other, Singer argues for an equality of consideration. Although he makes a subtle distinction between “equality based on rights” and “equality of consideration” (2007: 14-22) he makes a cogent case for the rights of animals and as such has been enormously influential in the animal rights movement.

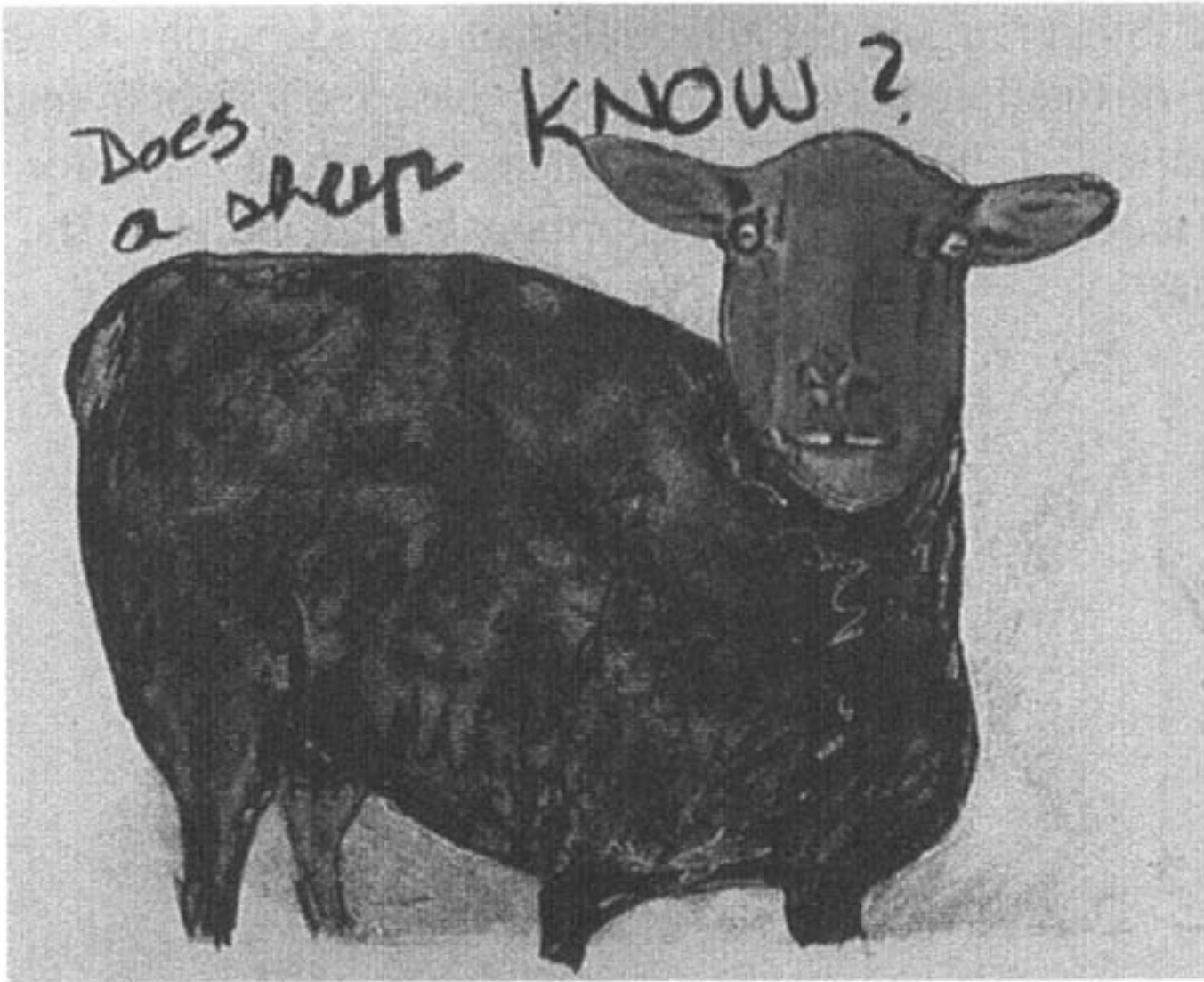


The Cheshire Cat from The Travellers

In 2003 I consciously articulated one of the core ontological questions in relation to animals. Do they think? From “Aristotle to Descartes, from Descartes especially to Heidegger, Levinas and Lacan, and this question determines so many others ...” (Derrida 2008: 27) the assumption has been that because animals lack the power of speech they have no capacity to reason.<sup>12</sup> “Does a sheep think?” I asked in one of two digital prints that form part of the “Dolly Suite” (2003-2006). In the second print I raised the query whether a sheep “knows” and if she does not, whether the inverse of *Cogito ergo sum* is true. That is, if she does not think she is not – a negation. By this I query whether the sheep Dolly or her cipher, is an absent being, is she a mechanomorphic object to be used and abused at human will?

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12. According to Descartes (1596-1650), the faculty of language and the capacity to reason is exclusive to the human condition. He argued that because animals do not have the capacity for speech they neither think nor do they have souls. They are reduced to the status of “automata” (in Kalof & Fitzgerald 2007: 60-61).



I think therefore I am<sup>13</sup>

The dualism between body and soul that is Descartes's bequest to Western thought, found extreme expression in the mid-twentieth century in "scientific" behaviourism. In terms of this approach, to even ask the question whether an animal thinks was regarded as irrational and derogatorily labelled "anthropomorphic". Behaviour was filtered through the lens of conditioning – either Pavlovian (reflexive) or Skinnerian (learned). These were observable and measurable in terms of stimulus and response. Added into the mix were the then new ideas of Konrad Lorenz in the embryonic field of ethology, who wrote inter alia about the imperatives of instinct. In addition, influential at the time were the philosophical ideas of Karl Popper, whose rejection of psychoanalysis (and therefore the unconscious) amongst others reinforced a materialist, rationalist view of psychology as a branch of science.

While the behaviourist model provides a useful tool for the training of animals, its philosophical rationale made no room for the concept of subjectivity either in animals or humans. Yet, by not allowing projection of (human) emotion onto animals arguably opened the space for the huge cruelty that is perpetrated in the name of production and research.

Yet, post-behaviourism, more and more scientists are embracing the notion of an appropriate anthropomorphism. Sanders and Arluke hold that anthropomorphism is a useful heuristic device (2007: 63) while Bekoff argues for a biocentric approach that supports the animal's point of view while still acknowledging that we, of necessity, are still human (2007: 73).

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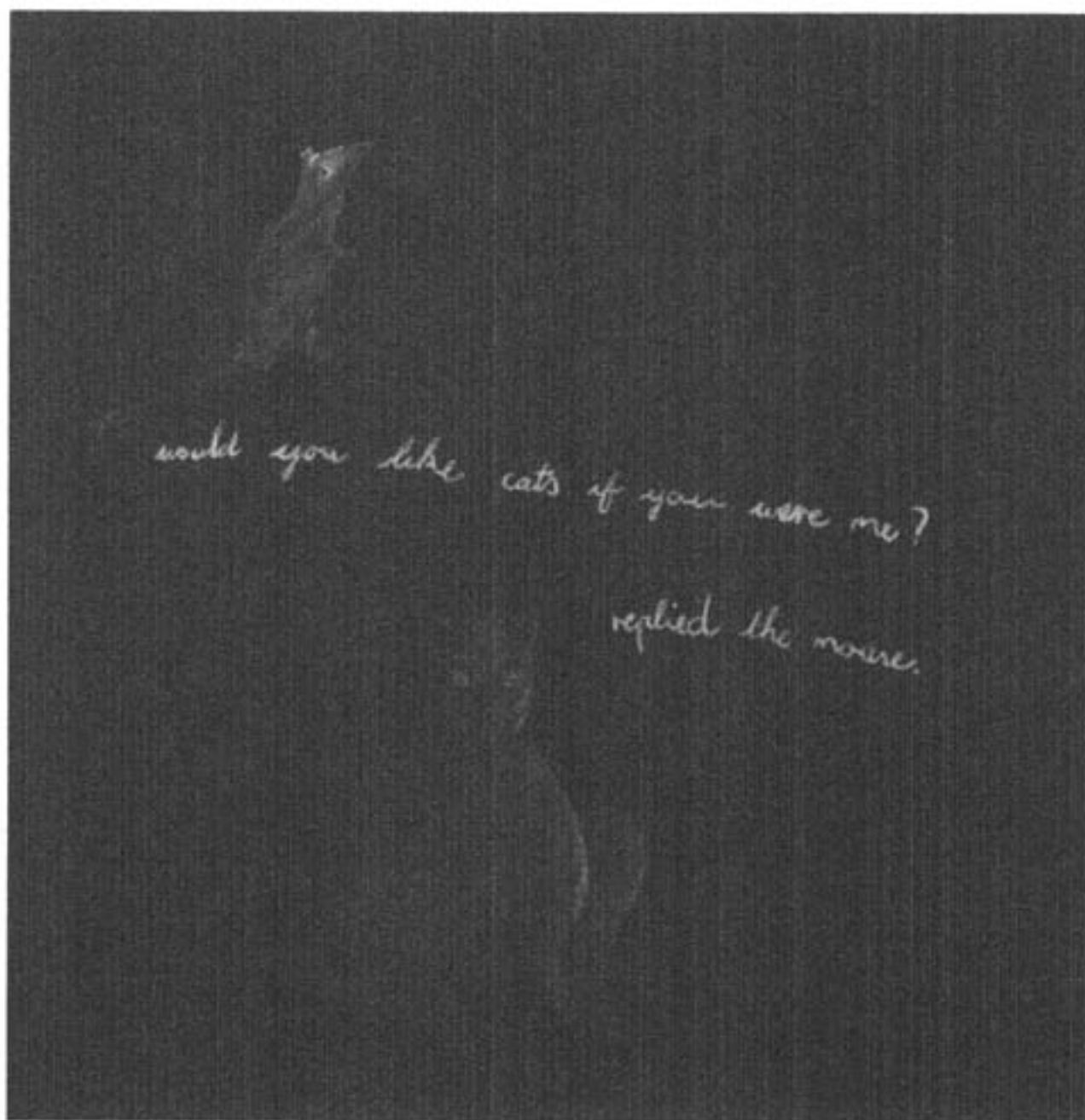
13. I think therefore I am c. 2003. The Dolly Suite. Digital Print. Approx. 60 x 40 cm.



Wendy Woodward proposes using Carol J. Adam's concept of "relational epistemologies", a useful tool that avoids the trap of sentimental anthropomorphism (2008: 3).

Early on in Alice's adventures down the rabbit hole she finds her diminutive self swimming in a pool of her own tears. She is accompanied by a mouse. Alice, not sure what the proper way is to address such a creature, remembers seeing a Latin declension in her sister's schoolbook: "A mouse – of a mouse – to a mouse ..." (Carroll 1982: 29). "O Mouse!" she says but gets no response. Racking her brains Alice remembers a French phrase from her schoolbook, "Où est ma Chatte?" (Where is my cat?). The poor mouse nearly levitates to Alice's distress.

"Would you like cats if you were me?" he squeaks.



Would you like cats if you were me?<sup>14</sup>

Alice, failing to understand the mouse's point of view, compounds the error by saying, "[D]on't be angry about it. And yet I wish I could show you our cat Dinah. I think you'd take a fancy to cats if only you could see her. She is such a dear quiet thing ..." (Carroll 1982: 29-30). In this scene, Alice seems to accord respect to the mouse as a worthy other. She is at pains to be polite even though she fails to understand the mouse's world view. Woodward's deployment of the concept of "relational epistemologies" is useful here in describing the disjunction between two points of view. A human's concept

14. Would you like cats if you were me? 2012. Oil on Canvas, 200 x 200 cm.

of “cat” clearly differs from a mouse’s. Understanding this allows one to project feelings onto the animal appropriately while avoiding the trap of sentimental anthropomorphism (2008: 3).

In a parallel scene, the diminutive Alice is terrified by the large boisterous puppy and retreats beneath a thistle waiting for an opportunity to make her escape. “And yet what a dear little puppy it was!” said Alice (Carroll 1983: 46). It is clear that the small Alice’s viewpoint differs from that of her larger self, suggesting that the concept of relational viewpoints can shift within an individual.



The Caucus – Puppy<sup>15</sup>

The role of language also plays a part in the analysis of the human animal divide. How we speak *about* the animals is as important as how we speak *to* them. “The animal that I am (following), does it speak?” asks Derrida (2002: 401). Derrida’s question is intimately intertwined with the notion of animal subjectivity. Language with its slippery, tenuous relationship to meaning and logic is central to the Alice tales. After all, Charles Dodgson (alias Lewis Carroll) was a logician as well as a mathematician. The games he plays with language is best illustrated in Alice’s encounter with the nursery-rhyme

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15. The Caucus – Puppy 2012. Bronze. Edition 12, 45 x 84 x 33 cm.



character Humpty Dumpty, a fanciful creature, half man, half egg, who appears in her daydream in *Alice through the Looking Glass*. Alice always finds herself at the losing end of Humpty Dumpty's arguments. She has no riposte to his form of irrational logic.

"Why do you sit out here all alone?" asked Alice, not wishing to begin an argument.

"Why, because there's nobody with me!" cried Humpty Dumpty. "Did you think I didn't know the answer to *that*?"

(Carroll 1982: 180)

There is no answer to that!

"I don't know what you mean by 'glory'," Alice said. Humpty Dumpty smiled contemptuously. "Of course you don't – till I tell you. I meant 'there's a nice knock-down argument' for you!"

"But 'glory' doesn't mean 'a nice knock-down argument,'" Alice objected.

"When *I* use a word ... it means just what I choose it to mean – neither more nor less."

"The question is," said Alice, "whether you *can* make words mean so many different things."

"The question is," said Humpty Dumpty, "which is to be master – that's all." Alice was too much puzzled to say anything ....

(Carroll 1982: 184)

Humpty Dumpty veers between insisting on the literal meaning of words to claiming that they can mean anything he wants them to mean. The irony is that his haughty assertion does contain a seed of truth. Words do mean only what the master says they mean at any one time, as Derrida demonstrated nearly a century after Lewis Carroll wrote this.

Dunn and McDonald identify Humpty Dumpty's arguments as a form of eristic logic, which they define as follows: "Eristic logic turns its back on the intellectual virtue of honest inquiry and uses thought to fend off reality and paper over facts rather than open them up for exploration" (2010: 73). Although the physical world in Wonderland and through the looking glass is absurd and nonsensical, it is still subject to the laws of possibility and logic. As Dunn and McDonald, quoting Hume point out, "The contrary of every matter of fact is still possible" (2010: 73). If you eat one side of the mushroom you grow bigger and if you eat the other side you shrink. That is, although things might be improbable they are still logically possible: like a baby turning into a pig as it does in the "Pig and Pepper" chapter in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (Carroll 1982: 62). But what is forever impossible and cannot be imagined is something like a square circle – (or a sensible response to Humpty Dumpty).

Much like the recognition that the languages we use to communicate with animals are not logocentric and reasoned,<sup>16</sup> so too does my visual language occupy a parallel universe. It aims to embody truths that lie beyond reason and words. My aim is to make the inchoate and barely apprehended visible in some way. Like Carroll I use words to illustrate the failure of words to convey truths.

“Twas brillig, and the slithy toves did gyre and gimble in the wabe: All mimsy were the borogoves, and the mome raths outgrabe” (Carroll 1982: 133). This is the most famous example of nonsense, but Carroll’s texts are littered with conundrums. “Do cats eat bats? Do bats eat cats?” (p. 19) or “What is the difference between flamingo and mustard?” (Both bite except mustard isn’t a bird) (p. 84). In a discussion on arithmetic, the Mock Turtle enumerates its different branches: Ambition, Distraction, Uglification and Derision (p. 90).

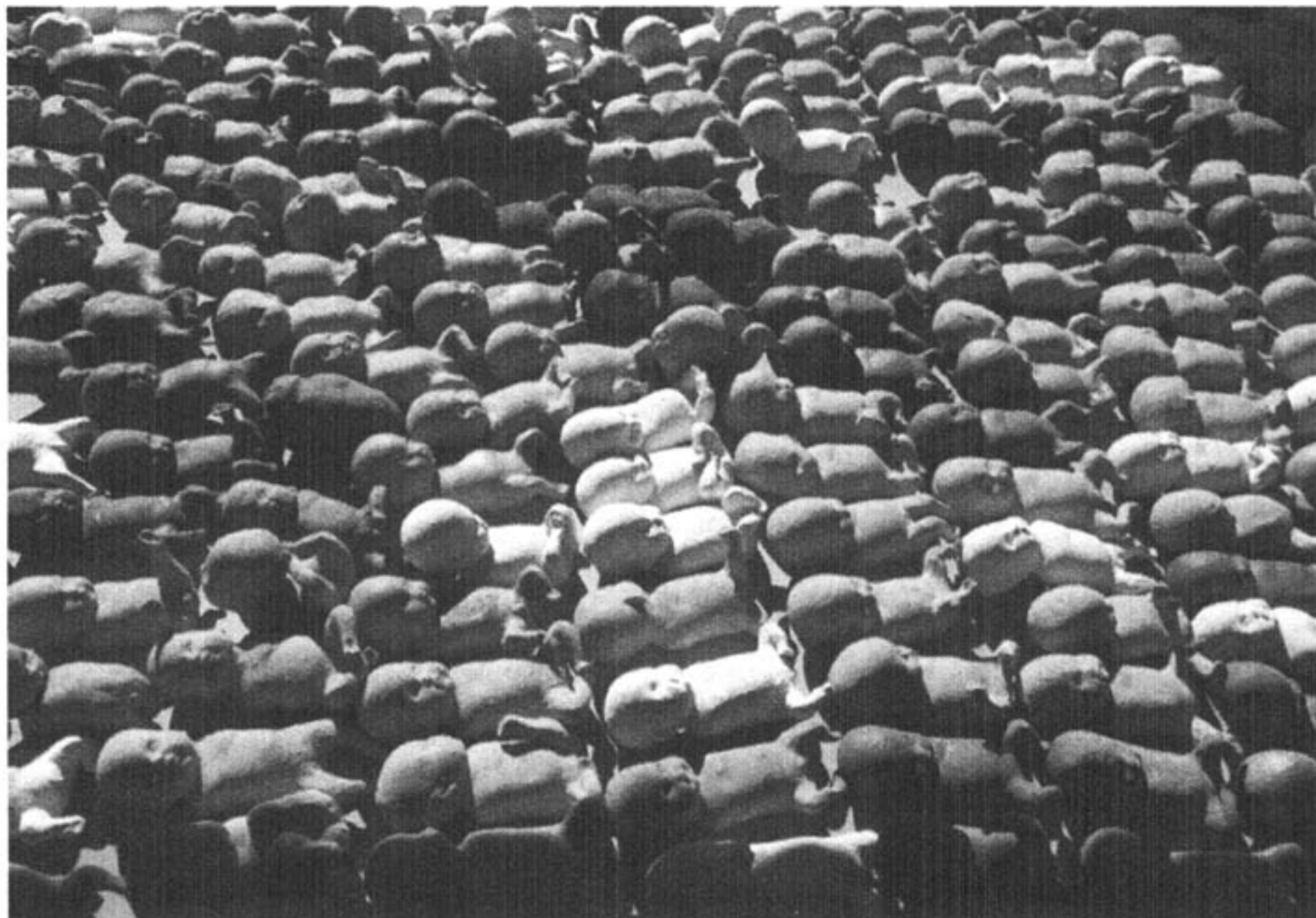
To date I have used the absurdities and aphorisms in *Alice in Wonderland* and *Alice through the Looking Glass* in prints, the diary pages and paintings. I have also scrawled text on the walls of the galleries, providing a link between the images in the frames, the sculptures on the floor and the original tales. The words do not explain the images nor do they make (logical) sense, suggesting the failure of language in the face of animal-human interaction. Nicole Lindeque says of the scrawled excerpts: “Instead of being just whimsical nonsense, the quotes written on the gallery wall make visible a threatening madness” (2012: 85).

This view is apparent in a key work in “The Alice Sequence”, “Cradle” (2011-2012) consisting of a thousand diminutive ceramic infants placed in a configuration that references either a field, a river or as Lindeque will have it “an ocean of dead, deformed, aborted or discarded babies” (Lindeque 2012: 85). The size of the small fetish fertility figures (30 cm), their vitrified surfaces and anatomical deformities imply a thwarted fecundity, a helplessness in the face of their proliferation of themselves as the ultimate cause of environmental degradation. It is, in the words of Lindeque, “a raw wasteland ... of near apocalyptic imagery ... consistent with an activist stance” (2012: 85).

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16. Jacques Lacan (1901-1981), in his radical rereading of Freud, links language to the workings of the unconscious. The rupture between word and image and word and manifest content emphasises a break between signifier and signified. It opens up the space between as a place in which the unconscious is made manifest. The result is that words are no longer secure in their meaning; things are not as they appear and meaning shifts according to subconscious precepts (Cruise 1997: 8).



Cradle<sup>17</sup>

## Conclusion

The philosophical luminary, Jacques Derrida, rails against industrialised farming practices evoking the metaphor of the Holocaust (Derrida 2008: 26). In this respect his ideological position is hardly distinguishable from Singer's activism. Both philosophers appear to be driven by the same ethical impulse, but in style and indeed content Derrida is far removed from Singer's propagandistic advocacy. I would argue that this is a distinction of approach, not a distinction of kind. The end result is the same – it is a protest; whether a shout or a whimper – the animal must move to centre stage in our post-humanist world. Thus, although “The Alice Sequence” is not intended as a didactic animal rights manifesto, protest might well be its subtext. Like the scribbles on my diary pages, the exhibitions are a way of making sense of an increasingly confusing and seemingly dangerous world. Life can be dream or nightmare. Our task is to try and make sense of our place in it as we tumble through time together with our co-travellers, the animals, whose planet we share.

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17. Cradle 2011-2012. Ceramic. 1000+ forms each approx. 30 cm. Installation size variable.

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**Wilma Cruise**  
University of Stellenbosch (US)  
wcruise@global.co.za