



# A WORLD OF POSSIBLE REALITIES: CONVERSATION WITH MARCUS COATES

Marcus Coates, a London based artist and amateur naturalist, explores the pragmatism and insight that empathetic perspectives and imagined realities can offer. From his attempts to become animal to his vicarious experiences on behalf of terminally ill patients, he seeks to uncover degrees of understanding and knowing, testing our definitions and boundaries of autonomy.

Marcus has collaborated with people from a wide range of disciplines including anthropologists, ornithologists, wildlife sound recordists, choreographers, politicians, gallerists, curators, psychiatrists, palliative care consultants, musicians, primatologists amongst others. His exhibitions and performances have been featured at venues such as Hauser & Wirth, Somerset, Serpentine Gallery, London and Kunsthalle Zürich, Switzerland.



Marcus Coates. Blue Footed Booby, performance still from Human Report, a film for Channel 9 News, Santa Cruz, Galapagos, Ecuador (2008).

**Salome Kokoladze:** The European Cave Art often depicts herds of bison. Some archaeologists interpret these paintings to be made by humans whose function was similar to that of a shaman. The places where some of the paintings are found generate echoes that resemble sounds of hundreds of bison hoofs. Archaeoacoustician Steven Waller suggests that these echoes might have been heard by early humans as “the voices of spirits” [1]. I am interested in this interpretation of the prehistoric art, because it is a reminder that art as well as shamanism emerge out of a certain physical space that enables communication between multiple worlds. When, for example, you perform a ritual in a crowded mall, a politician’s office or a person’s room, I wonder how these spaces support or feed your practice.

**Marcus Coates:** It is interesting you brought up the cave paintings. I think about them often. When I last visited the Lascaux and Peche Merle caves in France, I started to understand a causal chain of influence that the cave had on the human actions within them. What is difficult to see from photographs is the features of the rocks themselves – the curves, reliefs, and seams jutting out and running across them. These features evoke images. The curved edge of a rock might suggest the back of an auroch (now extinct cattle), a ridge could suggest a horse’s rump and back leg. The rock has made the projection and the ‘seeing’ of the animal possible. In this sense, the rock has given life to the animal, transferring it to the person’s mind. In its manifestation, the mark making on the rock joins and returns the mental image back into the actual reality of the rock/place. The rock, as such, holds life, which is made apparent through human activation, not origination.

Another significant activation in the caves is the use of torchlight and how its flickering influences the shapes and shadows of the rock features; the sight must have been a magical ‘bringing to life’ spectacle. I try to keep this sort of happening in mind when I am working with people in their places. My role is not to create anything original, but to offer new light and forms of connectivity, as well as new narratives and insight. While working in the culturally defined places, I have had to create a disconnect with the dominant way in which reality is presented by place. I achieve this through actions or costume.



Marcus Coates and Henry Montes. *A Question of Movement*, 2011. Photo by Nick David. London, UK. Credit: Courtesy of the artist.



We see various meanings of sound more so now in our technology. The digital world reduces sounds to their most efficient and effective forms (notification beeps, alarm signals, ring tones). This development is similar to the evolutionary process of adapting the calls of animals and birds for millennia. In this sense, we are catching up with the effectiveness of animal songs and calls.

There is also mystery and room for speculation. Beyond functionality, is there music in animal song? It is a world that is wonderfully complex, and I find myself returning to it as a baseline of connectedness to the 'other than human world'. Making the sounds of animals is a skill that must have been with humans as early as we discovered our aptitude for mimicry. For me, it opens up a world of possible sameness.

**SK:** It is interesting to think of mimicry as a skill that creates kinships for unlikely species.

Unfortunately, mimicry very often has pejorative connotations. It can be associated with superficiality, sometimes mockery, or the lack of originality. It was not until encountering Japanese avant-garde dance Butoh and later Gilles Deleuze and Pierre-Félix Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, that I started associating the concept with possible metamorphosis. Can you further discuss how you understand mimicry, especially in the context of your practice?

**MC:** As you say mimicry is a loaded term. I have, in the past, distanced myself from it, feeling that the attempts I made to embody were distinct from the impersonation that mimicry implies. Although now, I am more aware of it as being a stage in a process of relating, or 'an attempt to become in relation to'. Mimicry is important to me as a starting point in accessing radical empathy.

Mimicry is part of the behaviour and physiognomy of so many varied species from birds and insects to octopi. The advantages of mimicry have created an arms race of evolutionary adaptation. As such, mimicry is, as far as I can understand, hardwired into human behaviour. We are compelled to mimic. Moreover, the act of impersonating animals and birds has been suggested as one of the possible origins of spoken language. In many hunter gatherer societies, the calls of animals were mimicked to attract prey or disguise human presence when hunting. These behaviours increased range and diversity of our vocal calls [2]. Mimicry is also fundamental to the way we learn, form attachments, play, seduce, mock, trust and communicate. In many ways, it is not something we only choose to do, it is something on which we rely to make sense of the world.

Thinking about mimicry and its role in play, learning and communication drew me into using forms of vocalisation and movement as relational tools. To translate what is heard or to attempt to make the same sound necessitates using human physiognomy, which is most likely inadequate. Although we can only approximate sounds, the sound making is itself an experience, which corresponds to that of the animal when it too makes the sound. For instance, in its most basic form, we both are pushing air out in modulated ways. The attempt creates a territory of sameness. This degree of similarity or knowing, although often slender and tenuous, feels like a connection.

I think this movement between worlds, a way to initiate a manifestation of our interiority in relation to another, is a vital social tool. In my work, I am looking at this impact on how we, in an extractivist and neo colonial culture, relate to the natural world and the need for diverse relationships to redefine values.

**SK:** Speaking of an extractivist and neo colonial culture, there has been so much irreversible harm done already to humans, animals, environments at large. Reconciling with or simply thinking of the irreversibility can be taxing to say the least. Your piece *Extinct Animals, 2018* addresses this impasse in a particularly moving way. The animal bodies are lost, gone extinct, but we also experience the absence of images of these animals. The composition of multiple hand sculptures also reminds me of Picasso's *Guernica*, depicting a pile of shapes, body parts coming together in a monotone space, blending into one another. To withhold an image, a sophisticated shape or diverse colors, is this action an invocation for spirits, for intense emotions, or more of a path to forgetting and hopelessness?

**MC:** It is a path from one to the other (from the idea of a living animal to the hopelessness of its loss) that lots of us find ourselves trying to reconcile. The objects are like archeological remnants, dismembered classical sculptures. There is a museumness about them, as if they are off the past already, like bleached bones that cannot be identified. In this way, they have passed into history and need to be dragged back to life if we are to relate to them.



Marcus Coates. *Extinct Animals*, 2018 (Group of 16 casts, plaster). Credit: Courtesy of the artist.

It is this resurrection that interests me. The sculptures were made as a kind of summoning, to bring to life what cannot now be seen or known, a futile, pathetic gesture. In creating a 'shadow' shape with my hands and casting it in white plaster, I am offering the viewer the opportunity to imagine the shadow of the extinct animal for themselves. I am supplying the source of this imaginative leap, it being as close to anything that exists of these species. Is this enough to scaffold an imagined reality/being onto? It is 'inviting' you as the viewer to try. This act could be an evocation of sorts, there is a potential magic to this process, but a hopelessness too. The imagination is the only place the extinct animals can exist.

**SK:** *Extinct Animals*, 2018 shows well that remembrance is an important social tool and that it is not as simple or apparent of a process. At times, forgetting is an inevitable consequence of using various technologies. For instance, in *Phaedrus* Socrates warns us that writing will become a form of forgetting [3]. Entrenched in the oral traditions of philosophy and storytelling, he saw the reality of not needing to remember stories that are preserved on paper. In short, paper retains information instead of our brains. We often depend on images in this same way. However, images you create resist forgetfulness, focusing on a conscious effort to embody history and diverse daily experiences. Can you talk about how you utilize images, for instance, in your piece *Ritual for Reconciliation Series*?

**MC:** *Ritual for Reconciliation Series* was created out of a need to confront the fetishistic appeal of wildlife photography and my own obsession with it. I see these images as alluring, and in some ways pornographic, a form of idealizing and commodifying the animal as an aesthetic experience. Is it the animal or the image we are appreciating? The animal is captured, a trophy which has been 'shot'. These are all the verbs a hunter would use. The increased intimacy that the telephoto lens promises, is literally an illusion, in many ways it serves to create distance.



Marcus Coates. Ritual for Reconciliation Series, 2013. Pigment on rice paper digital prints, 60 × 48 × 9 cm (framed). Credit: Courtesy of the artist.

My response was to use my 'best' wildlife photography in a manner that would attempt to reconcile the distance I perceived between the image and an experience of the animal. By compressing the printed image as small as possible into my hand, I both ruined the image and brought the idea of the animal into actuality through action and physical contact. The engagement with the animal is now as an activated symbol, the image is not necessary. The animal is now held in the hand, the ball of paper is its proxy. The value of the image, to me, is not in its likeness, but its symbolic and material presence and connection through sensation (touch is more intimate than sight?). The absence of the image opens up the possibility to reimagine the animal, to see its essence or 'spirit' in the paper ball. I am closer to the actual animal now that the image is denied. This is the theory anyhow. The uncrumpled images are evidence of these attempts. In this way, the images are used, rather than 'appreciated'. They are in association with a need and a purpose that they enable or facilitate. In this way they are ritualistic.