

# Heavy Petting at the Cat Café

by Tessa Laird

“...*anyone who likes cats or dogs is a fool...*”

- Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, p. 240 (italics in the original)

Fluffy cushions with bug eyes and lolling tongues render the most upright citizens gibbering fools. A babble of babytalk is unleashed at the sight of a perky pair of ears or kinky tail. In *Love Cushions*, this kind of goofy glossolalia percolates a space which is less a gallery than a cat café on steroids (or acid). Strange structures scrape the ceiling, thrust through thoroughfares, wiggle, pool, and even just poo over the floor. There are bodies, at least bits of bodies, and there are architectural objects, or at least nods toward a provisional architecture. Carpeted perches have morphed into hangman’s gibbets, fluffy bodies into giblets; those viscera so thoughtfully collected, bagged, and stuffed back into the anal cavity of the eviscerated chickens you can buy at the supermarket, possibly to feed your beloved pooch or puss. The question is, as always, who gets to eat, and who gets to be the meat?<sup>1</sup>

Cat cafés are already peculiar assemblages. Humans are disinfected before they are allowed to touch the furry cargo within. No petting sleeping cats. One particular establishment I visited demanded food be covered at all times, with little mesh tents provided with every order. I found this amusing since no cat I know has ever wanted to eat a muffin, but as soon as I removed my cover to take a bite of the café’s mediocre baked goods, marauding cats jumped on the table and scratched at my hands, drawing blood. For a moment, the image of Roy Horn (of Siegfried and Roy) being dragged off a Las Vegas stage by his beloved white tiger Mantacore, flashed before my eyes.<sup>2</sup> Whips, sequins, big hair, animal print – those same key ingredients of that fateful night in 2003 in Vegas – all seem to be present in *Love Cushions*.

The cover of Siegfried and Roy’s 1992 autobiography, *Mastering the Impossible*, features the two magician’s faces squeezed together with a white tiger looking on impassively between them. Perhaps instead they should have mastered “nonmastery”, which Michael Taussig declares to be a preferable tactic in the practices of art and life.<sup>3</sup> For indeed, as much as pets inspire idiocy, they also

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<sup>1</sup> Donna Haraway notes that “companion” is from the Latin *cum panis*, with bread, which has implications both of breaking bread with friends, and eating those same friends, with bread on the side. Haraway, *When Species Meet*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008.

<sup>2</sup> Mantacore is often referred to as Montecore, his nominal instability mirroring his turncoat ways - a leopard who changed his spots, or rather, a tiger who changed his stripes.

<sup>3</sup> “The mastery of nonmastery” is a frequent phrase in various Taussig texts, whose works are increasingly focused on animal politics. In a recent book, he bestows the unlikely donkey with the key to the secrets of the universe. Taussig, *Palma Africana*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018.

provoke the opposite tendency in human-animals: to become petty and punitive disciplinarians, drunk with the power of dictatorial folly.

Deleuze and Guattari had no time for pets but they might have enjoyed the perversity of Siegfried and Roy, who grew up in Nazi (Siegfried) and post-Nazi (Roy) Germany and made a career out of collecting *white* lions and *white* tigers, for their rarity, we hope, rather than any sense of genetic purity. Like Moby Dick, the great white whale, white cats are “anomalous animals”, exceptions to the rule-bound world of domesticated pets.<sup>4</sup> Deleuze and Guattari give pets the insulting term “Oedipal”, lumping them together with Freud and his obsession with the insular, incestuous family unit. The idiotic sentimentality of pets and their owners is enough to make them want to scratch their eyes out, like Oedipus himself.

Donna Haraway has no time for the pet hating philosophers, arguing that despite their desire to dismantle binaries they have in fact entrenched a whopper dichotomy between domestic and wild, as if things were ever that simple. Haraway is a big lover of man’s best friend, in particular Cayenne, an Australian shepherd she calls a “Klingon warrior princess” six times in *When Species Meet*, her paean to the pooch. Apparently, Klingon warrior princesses are renown for their sexual prowess, and Haraway describes Cayenne’s exploits in detail, including calling her “one turned on little bitch”.<sup>5</sup> For Haraway, the wild exists in her everyday encounters with her “domesticated” friend Cayenne. Some might call Haraway’s puppy love excessive, but she’s not alone. The American Kennel Club ran a survey on women’s relationships to their dogs. “If my dog was a man, he’d be my boyfriend”, said one in three respondents.<sup>6</sup> Heavy petting, indeed.

Modrzewski and Nordin eviscerate stifling domesticity with teeth and claws, but also with butt-sniffing, tail-wagging *joy*. In so doing, they enact what Brian Massumi calls an “animal politics” – a politics of play.<sup>7</sup> This is, as Massumi claims elsewhere, in emphatic italics, “*rewilding, not reproduction*”, in other words, a strategy to ward away the sedimentary practices of domestication, not to mention the voracious co-optations of market capitalism.<sup>8</sup> As we desperately squeeze rampant animal energy into canine corsets and feline restraints, Modrzewski and Nordin rewild the space of inter-species encounter, revealing our messy, entangled desires for domination, for naming, taming and shaming, alongside our ineffably goofy delight in simply cuddling something fluffy.

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<sup>4</sup> “...every Animal has its Anomalous...” Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2009, p. 269.

<sup>5</sup> *When Species Meet*, p. 193.

<sup>6</sup> Kelly Oliver, *Animal Lessons: how they teach us to be human*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2009. Oliver’s introduction also intelligently unpacks the story of Roy and Mantacore.

<sup>7</sup> Brian Massumi, *What Animals Teach Us About Politics*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2014.

<sup>8</sup> Brian Massumi, *99 Theses on the Revaluation of Value: A Postcapitalist Manifesto*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2019, p. 117.