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KINGS

*Madison Pawle*  
WHAT GOOD IS  
REASON TO AN  
ANIMAL?

EMERGING  
WRITERS PROGRAM

*Artist Run*

Established in 2003, KINGS  
Artist-Run provides a location for  
contemporary art practice, supporting  
distinctive experimental projects by  
artists at all stages of their careers.

Open 12-5pm Thursday,  
Friday, Saturday  
69 Capel Street,  
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The email began with a confession: “I am not so into horror”. If I was going to respond to an exhibition centred around horror as a genre, I had to lead with this. This made me a good person to respond to it, I reasoned. It meant I was objective, that I had the aesthetic distance to see the works with clarity. I was pliable but the artists would have to get me on board. The email ended with a demand in the guise of a request: “I hope you may be willing to convince me...could we start with a list of some films you think I should see?”

When Angus and Bryan wrote back there was no list. Instead, there were two films: *All That Heaven Allows* (1955) and *Far From Heaven* (2002). Looking at the Wikipedia page of each film, I was confused. These didn't sound or look like horror films. Wikipedia hyperlinked them as romantic dramas and I tended to agree. If I had watched these films without the artists' provocation perhaps this position would not have changed. But I did and it did. To preface a text with genre is not to insist on singularity. It is to make room for movement and approach. To give the eye/I another vantage point.

Antonin Artaud – another explicit influence for Angus and Bryan's own *All That Heaven Allows*, the evolving screenplay from which *[Sheep]* is taken – believed that words alone were insufficient as a means of expression. His Theatre of Cruelty used another language: one of totems and gestures, both sonic and bodily. The grammar of the psyche. This, he felt, could “subvert thought and logic and shock the spectator into seeing the baseness of his world”. Wake the spectator's nerves and heart. What Artaud named as cruelty had little to do with physical or emotional violence – even if these were the means he used to reveal it. It was larger. Put simply: “We are not free”. This is the horror I saw. This is the horror the artists were showing me, are showing you.

Another thing, this “you”. You are being spoken to here, interpellated. And so you are implicated. I am implicated. We are the dreamer or the dinner-maker, maybe both in turn. Another Artaudian gesture, this closure of aesthetic distance. How else to summon a subconscious out of latency but to demand direct involvement? The artists tell me that they are interested in how horror moves. How “it seeps, infiltrates, hides and lingers between speech, body and structure”. You are told – via screenplay – to sit down on the chair, to bleat, to speak to the other, to leave. If or when you follow these directions, what world are they happening in? Are you a spectator or a subject? You might find that, throughout Angus and Bryan's work, the answer is always both. There is always a boundary being breached.

This goes for language too. Words may be limited in their capacity to express base psychological feeling but they do have economy – they hold and carry. Or: words can be used not to define but to reveal the mechanics of language. How meaning is made and how it moves. In the text below I follow “iconic freak” (Angus McGrath), and one of Artaud's surrealist contemporaries, Georges Bataille and his provocation that “a dictionary should begin from the point when it is no longer concerned with the meaning but only with the use of words”. Sheep, for example, are animals with thick wool that eat grass and are farmed for their wool, skin, and meat. This is not wrong but there is a lot missed. A sheep moves culturally, as both sign and signified. As a dream object, what do two sheep in love represent? What does it mean that the artists' title this exhibition *[Sheep]* and then implicate us directly in the action?

Like a dictionary this text moves alphabetically. But like a dream it also moves associatively. Try both.

## [SHEEP]: A CRITICAL DICTIONARY

**A DREAM.** — “is a trick. What the mind conceals / the soul will out” (Ursula Robinson Shaw). A dream reveals a lack of control— you are a powerless witness to the invisible mechanics of the psyche. A dream makes a farce of knowledge and mastery.

I am somewhere outside of this one, watching two figures on the edge of a desert at dusk. A small lamb-pup is with them. One figure takes a slab of meat – red and wet – from their pocket, ties it to the end of a rope, and begins walking across the sand, the meat dragging behind. The lamb-pup whimpers: to stay or to go? When I tell The Psychoanalyst about this dream he says a person cannot be nowhere. We arrive at a possible answer: I am the lamb-pup. The Psychoanalyst talks about want and need, says they are not so easily parsed. Do I want the meat or need it? The lamb-pup goes.

*See: Thresholds – 1. A door, Psychological yearning.*

**ABJECTION.** — “That which is cast out” (Julia Kristeva). The unbearable excess that the ego frantically rejects in order to remain sovereign, bounded.

I think of the changing room floor at the public pools – slime underfoot, long wet strands of hair between toes, soggy band-aids, the windowless smell of chlorine and piss – and my gut churns. I tense and walk on tiptoes. There my body feels at risk. Of contamination, of infiltration, of warts. There I am permeable. What is most horrific about this is that this permeability isn’t just a sense or a feeling. It is a fact. My body is at risk. The changing room floor – and for you maybe: an undercooked egg, blood, a used tissue, wool-yolk – threatens a breakdown of the boundary between self and other, between subject and object, between inside and outside. Angus McGrath: “The excrement and discharge and husks we lose from our bodies aren’t subjects – we wouldn’t consider a detached fingernail as ‘me’ in a way that we do our attached finger – but they also aren’t objects – the fingernail was once part of me, so where is the line?” Or: rub lanolin between forefinger and thumb and think of sheep, their glands.

You can understand, then, why the abject is generative as a concept. Pan away from the personal body and we find that the abject has to do with all that “disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite” (Julia Kristeva). You watch the sheep being brutalised: crack of bone and furious bleating. Eyes stretched wide. The hammer swings again and again. Bleating turns to screaming. The bone splinters, pierces the skin. Dark blood all over the wool. In order to distance yourself from this visceral scene – in order to swallow that mouthful of Shepherd’s Pie – you draw a hard line between nature and culture. You are the superior animal. It is just a sheep. Dominance and submission: for this to remain the principal element of the social order, some bodies must be excluded. “The wretched population, exploited for production and cut off from life by a prohibition on contact,” writes Bataille, “represented from the outside with disgust as the dregs of the people, populace and gutter”. Or: to have a heaven there must be a hell.

*See: Horror, Thresholds, All That Heaven Allows, Far From Heaven.*

**ALL THAT HEAVEN ALLOWS (1955).** — dir. Douglas Sirk, “a German-American filmmaker who influenced other filmmakers like Fassbinder and Todd Haynes, whose films were quite queer, feminine, coded, etc.” (Bryan Foong). An affluent New England widow falls in love with her young, working class gardener. Her kids and friends do not approve – the age gap, the cross class contamination – and coerce her into breaking up with him. Sirk didn’t want a happy ending, “but he had to make his films for the big capital machine that is the American film studio” (Foong) and romance melodramas were selling tickets. So Sirk had codes. An Artaudian gesture: the language is a surface. For one, the title. Sirk: “The studio loved the title *All That Heaven Allows*. They thought it meant you could have everything you wanted. I meant it exactly the other way round. As far as I am concerned, heaven is stingy”. This heaven has boundaries. To have this heaven you must have a hell. Another code – the gardener, played by Rock Hudson: Hollywood heartthrob and “closeted” gay man. Hudson speaks in double-entendres that ventriloquise his real life desires. He says “he can’t shoot straight” and he means it. Murk the boundary between fiction and reality and suddenly you can critique either and both.

**A QUESTION & AN ANSWER.** — A small hole in the knee of my jeans. I like to play with it. I stick my finger in it, make circles. The denim softens, frays. The hole widens. Outside things come in: the wind, your bedroom carpet. The hole widens. Like a question, it makes a change of temperature possible.

An answer is a new pair of jeans. The hole is gone and so too the contact. Anne Carson: “Answering makes the thinking stop”. Done in the right way, though, an answer can negate its given logic – the closing of a circuit. Todd Haynes: “The answer always lies in what is missing”. What is a hole made of but itself?

*See: Thresholds.*

**AN EYE.** — Look up. The window somewhere above you, like a pair of eyes.

Q: Are we inside or outside?

Q: Are you looking or being looked at?

Q: Did you know that sheep have almost 360 degree vision? This is because their eyes are on each side of the head and their pupils are square like these windows. They have only two blind spots: right in front of them and right behind them. I have often wished to be sheep-like in my human life, to have someone lead me. But what an exercise in trust.

*See: Sheep.*

**FAR FROM HEAVEN (2002).** — dir. Todd Haynes. A remake of *All That Heaven Allows*. Hartford, Connecticut, 1957: Julianne Moore and Dennis Quaid are “Mr & Mrs Magnatech”. He’s a top salesman, she’s a tense but perfect housewife. All the surfaces are lush and teeming, the palette kitsch and saturated. In the nighttime scenes there is barely any real darkness, just thick slices of blue and purple and green like a souring bruise. An eerie self-reflexivity permeates the mood and movement of the film: it is as if the characters know that they are characters and are stuck in a recital of their own life. Mr Magnatech is in the closet. Mrs Magnatech is clueless until she’s not. She falls in love with her gardener Raymond, a black man. Hartford trembles and spits. “The love and pain depicted is almost too big for any single character to contain,” Haynes writes, “so it spills. Where it spills into is where it arises from, something impersonal, relational, nonverbal” – the swell of music, the surfaces, the shadows, the gaze pouring back and forth between two pairs of eyes. In a review of the film for Artforum, Geoffrey O’Brien writes: “[Julianne Moore] plays her part as someone who reads the lines she’s been given as if she senses their falseness but can’t come up with an alternative”.

*See: Melodrama.*

**HORROR.** — That confession: “I am not so into horror”. I tense and sweat, cover my eyes, block my ears.

Q: What am I trying to keep out?

Q: What am I trying to make still?

Q: What latent psychological baseness is trying to emerge?

*See: Abjection.*

**LANOLIN.** — A small lilac tube stolen from work (a hospital) by my mum (a nurse). The tube reads: “For breastfeeding mothers”. When Walter Benjamin was walking the arcades of Paris he was thinking about value and abstraction. Abstract a thing far enough from the labour that produces it and the value of the object becomes innate. Clean of origin, somehow pure. This is, in part, how capitalism rushes forward, sustaining itself as our collective human mise en scène. A naturalised container. When the “breastfeeding mother” rubs sticky amber into the bleeding fissures of her nipples she isn’t thinking about the sebaceous glands of sheep.

On YouTube the sheep’s ankles are crossed, crucifix-like. The man pushes the blade’s teeth through the wool. A voiceover tells me that lanolin – or: wool yolk, wool wax, wool grease – makes up fifteen to twenty percent of the wool’s weight. The camera zooms in on the wool being washed: more teeth pushing down into a swirl of soapy brown “removing the dirt, sweat salts, debris, and whatever shit they’ve been rolling around in” the voiceover says.

**MELODRAMA.** — An aesthetics of the impossible situation, “where ‘*of*’ means both derived from and representing” (Jonathon Goldberg). In its cultural and linguistic etymology, the word comes from the Greek: μέλος “song, strain” + δράμα “theatrical plot” and so signals a genre of dramatic narrative punctuated by music, how it swells and falls. The music makes the psyche move. You feel. You swell, you fall, you leak. You roll your eyes.

This may strike you as a loose definition, that I am tracing around the hole rather than poking it through. But this is precisely my point: excess cannot be contained. When we use this word (and its variation: melodramatic) pejoratively, as we often do, – here: rub your finger and thumb together to invoke a tiny violin – what we are criticising is excess, “an exaggerated rise-and-fall pattern in human actions and emotional responses, a from-the-sublime-to-the-ridiculous movement” (Thomas Elsaesser). But what excess reveals is a limit, that which is not contained within the boundary of “the acceptable”. Melodrama uses the mechanics of excess – heightened gesture, wild situational and temporal compressions – to glimpse another world, like desire or a dream. This glimpse is often an uneasy one, irresolute. Dignity trumps desire and nobody gets what they want. You wake up. In another world no sheep dies, but this is a possibility only seen from inside the impossible situation. Chris Kraus: “Desire isn’t lack, it’s surplus energy – a claustrophobia inside your skin”. This is what you are left with.

**PSYCHOLOGICAL YEARNING.** — What is the sonic shape of desire?

Somebody once told me to think of the unconscious as a register, one that can be felt but not held, a formless form. “When you are in analysis,” she said, “you sometimes feel yourself brushing up against it like a ghost in a hallway”. The Psychoanalyst picks up on a tendency to preface an otherwise direct statement with “I suppose” or “I guess” – a psychological lean toward indeterminacy or uncertainty. I’m not sure. Even while language seeks to groom and sanitise sound, still the psyche slips through. Your mouth opens wide. You bleat. It may be that a phoneme without signification is the purest expression of drive, of yearning. Or: a linguistically meaningless sound is always psychologically charged. It is a piece of the inside flung out. A sheep bleats and who am I to say if it’s pleasure or pain? A sheep is a mystery like all animals are mysteries. You bleat like a sheep. Tell me, pleasure or pain?

**SHEEP.** — 1. *Two sheep in love.* Standing in the far corner of the field in the right angle made by the fence wood. The ground slopes downward behind them. In this screenplay, we don’t know whether the two sheep are:

1) a ram and a ewe

2) two rams (those “in the know” will tell you that many rams – an average of eight to ten percent in a domestic flock – exhibit homosexual tendencies) OR

3) a freemartin (a behaviourally masculine ewe that lacks functioning ovaries) and a ram/ewe.

It doesn’t matter which. The point is that they are in love. In the corner of the field they stand in a V shape, faces close to one another and to the fence, bodies angling out. This way they see only the sky, sloping green, and each other. No flock, no farmer, no fence. They stand smelling the other’s sweat and piss, grazing easily and communicating in a coded language of soft low bleats. Standing this way they fill each other’s blind spots.

*See: An eye.*

**THE IMPOSSIBLE SITUATION.** — You are sheep number one. The farmer raises his hammer. A sudden bleat. Any sudden sonic interruption signals wait, the farmer understands this. He pauses at the top of his upward swing. This bleat is wet with hurt and sacrifice. It means “kill me instead” – your lover is offering themselves up. If you get up, you are ruined. If you don’t, you die. Douglas Sirk: “It is an impossible situation”. Which do you choose? Really.

*See: Melodrama.*

**THRESHOLDS.** — 1. *A door.* Just before when you entered this gallery there was a moment when you were neither here nor there and, in that same moment, you were both here and there. When a door is propped open with, say, a brick or a shoe, is it to let in or let out? No matter: a door is not a door until it is used as one.

2. *The mouth.* I stick my tongue in your mouth and now the outside is in and the inside is out. The relation between abjection and the threshold is an intimate one, just like pleasure and pain or human and animal. I leave with your saliva and you leave with mine. After rupture, what?

**Madison Pawle** is a writer living on unceded Wurundjeri Country.