

Transformational Strategies: The Margiela Rabbit and the Gecko Girl.

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Link to video of performance: <https://vimeo.com/108731422>

Abstract

Elizabeth Costello, the elderly fiction writer in J.M Coetzee's novel of the same name, discusses the possibility of how a human being can feel what it is like to be a bat. She believes that to feel thus, one does not need to experience bat life through the sense modalities of being a bat but rather "to be a living bat is to be full of being: being fully a bat is like being fully human, which is also to be full of being" (Coetzee, 2004, p. 69). Elizabeth Costello isn't interested in clothing but she does believe that to feel what it is like to be a bat one needs the sensations of fullness and embodiedness; the sensation of being a body with limbs that have an extension in space, of being alive to the world.

Wearing a dress with more than two sleeves gives me the sense of having more than two arms and in a dress with a tail I have a tail. The feeling of being in certain clothes offers me the potential to "become" something else and to feel expansive. This paper/performance presents findings from the work of two artists and designers who are both using the distinctively cultural form of clothing to explore the human/non-human animal divide. Both artists are putting into practice Deleuzian theories of "becoming other" as a transformational strategy to shift our relationship to our environment and our fellow non-human creatures using clothing, performance, photography and video to do this.

The questions we both ask are: in this moment of complexity and uncertainty that the world is currently in, what is the role of imagination in inventing new possible worlds? How can the transformative nature of clothing offer new modes of experience that

are possibly more sensual and slower than what we usually give value to and can clothing help to shift our relationship with the environment and other living creatures? Kate Soper argues that if we want to maintain a sustainable world that both humans and non-humans can happily and healthily continue to live in, we need alternative outlets for “transcendence” that are not provided by Western industrialist consumerist culture which removes us from a natural simplicity or immanence, rather than returns us to it. (Soper, 1999) Considering these ideas we are interested in attempting to refigure a world where we are the ‘animal’. Two women, possibly wearing tails, will present this paper as a scripted performance.

Keywords: transformative clothing, Elizabeth Costello, transformational strategies, becoming animal

Setting the scene.

Two women are sitting next to each other on the pine needles under the trees in Wellington city’s town belt. There is a slight chill in the air. It is an afternoon with the soft light of late summer and the magpies and tuis are calling. One of the women is dressed as a Gecko in a fully sequined lizard skin that she has spent hours stitching. The sequins are sparkling and flashing blues and greens in the light. The other woman is dressed as a Rabbit, to be more exact, a long tailed animal with soft ears in an outfit she has also made, and she is wearing her Margiela boots. The following is a conversation that takes place between the women/creatures.

Gecko Girl speaks and begins with a story

The rabbit was not really a rabbit at all; she was a human who could turn into something rabbit-like when she wore her Margiela boots. She grew silky pink ears and when they had reached a certain length embroidered them with dots. She had a tail, but it was not a cottontail as a rabbit has but a long tail with a tuft. Now, Margiela Rabbit didn’t know if other humans could turn into a different animal like she could. She thought the small humans seemed to do it easily but the older ones seemed to be stuck most of the time. She certainly didn’t know anyone else who could turn into something resembling a rabbit like she did.

One day Margiela Rabbit met a remarkable specimen of a human being whose eyes flashed like sequins. Margiela Rabbit showed the curious human being how she could transform using clothing and imagination. The glitter human sewed herself a sequined lizard skin and became a Gecko Girl. The two of them explored being in their habitat as newly transformed creatures. They walked through the trees and looked down on their city and wondered about what kind of creatures they already were and might be able to become by growing their new skins to be as beautiful and strange as other animals seemed to be. Margiela Rabbit and Gecko Girl worried that if other people couldn't or didn't want to transform as they did, humans might forget how to use the animal part of themselves.



Figure 1. Gecko Girl and Margiela Rabbit, (video still). Bagnall & Collier. (2014).



Figure 2. Margiela boots, (video still). Bagnall & Collier. (2014).

Margiela Rabbit speaks:

Yes Gecko Girl the animal part of our selves is what we are exploring. I certainly have not grown ears or fur as beautiful as a rabbit but I like trying. For me becoming animal all started with my Margiela boots. I was finally given a pair, after staring at them for a year in the shop, I put them on and looked down at my feet and I had become a cloven hooved animal. I pranced off very excited with this transformation.



Figure 3. Gecko Girl and Margiela Rabbit, (video still). Bagnall & Collier. (2014).

About the same time that I got my boots I was deep in a book by Haruki Murakami. Being lost in a Murakami book may be a very appropriate point for this conversation because, in the novels of his that I have read, there are themes of parallel worlds and possibilities for humans to be in more than one place at the same time, and the potential for humans to be more than what we think we can be, for example, to be able to talk to cats. It is all possible. I find his books heady and convincing and when I am reading them I feel extremely alive and waiting ... and look ... colours appear different.

And to draw on another work of fiction, the character Elizabeth Costello, the elderly famous fiction writer, in J.M Coetzee's novel of the same name, discusses the possibility of how a human being can feel what it is like to be a bat. She believes that to feel like a bat, one does not need to experience bat life

through the sense modalities of *actually* being a bat. Rather to feel what it is like to be a living bat is simply to be full of being, an embodiedness, based not on thought and reason but the sensations of “being a body with limbs that have an extension in space”, she describes this sensation as being “alive to the world” (Coetzee, 1999, p. 169).

We are two women (one is young and one is older) who both make clothing with scales, ears and tails to enable an entry in to, I am not sure if it is a parallel world, but rather a different way of being in this world. Undertaken in order to achieve a heightened sense of just being alive and being part of an extraordinary environment where other creatures, plants, the wind, sound and smells are more present more important even? Immanence, maybe we need to be more articulate than this and the book you found *Gecko Girl, Surface Encounters*, is useful to help understand what that blurring or bumping up of clothing and an animal other could be.

Ron Broglio proposes that art can call us to consider and negotiate the space of this animal other. His argument is that if animals live on the mere surface of things where Western thought has condemned them then animals have something to tell us about the world of becoming. Staying on the surface with animals means pursuing the unthought of thought. (Broglio, 2011) I understand this means to feel what is impossible to think.

Gecko Girl speaks:

Yes, although Broglio admits that animals exist not only on the surface, he also locates the surfaces to be a site of bordering – a limit to human knowledge, as, all we can recognize is the surface of the other animal’s world; he describes that the potential of depth is “necessarily closed off to us” (Broglio, 2011). He doesn’t intend for this to be taken in a negative way at all, rather that the very impossibility of knowing answers makes it a productive imaginary space.

Margiela Rabbit speaks:

Do you think that the impossibility of knowing answers about what it means to be another type of living creature offers up the importance that feelings, sensations and embodiedness play in any understanding of our animal other and of other animals? Does he mean that reasoned and rational thought is very limiting when trying to understand what it means to be another creature? Both the experience of being another creature, and having cognition of what another creature might think. All we can do is to attribute human characteristics on to animals from a human-centred world view. So it is quite liberating isn't it, the impossibility of knowing answers about the other from a rational point of view? It opens up a space where we can make up new stories, where feeling, sensory experience and the imagination are important for an understanding of a different way of being in the world.

Broglia writes that all we can do is bump up against the animal other. He calls this the "event of encounter" and argues it is "not a question of what animals are up to in their worlds, but are they up to anything at all" (Broglia, 2011, p. xxiv). What happens in the meeting between human and animal worldlings? Something about this "not up to anything" at all resonates with me. It makes me think about all the hours, I as a woman not a Margiela Rabbit, spent sitting with my cat, and what I learnt from my cat, specifically from sitting with my cat in the late sun at the end of the day. I learnt about slowness, about being in the moment, about the feeling of the softest breeze on my face and ears. I learnt to pause, to look at one spot for a long time, to listen for small changes in the air. Sitting on our front step in the late afternoon sun with my cat, I felt connected to her and through her, connected to the step, the space where we both sat and the ants and the rambled hedge we both looked at. Sometimes when I came home or waking in the morning and I looked at her furry body and yellow squinting eyes looking back at me, I got a blast of amazement, a blast of her very aliveness, a wonder at her aliveness, her furriness, her whiskers; an almost overwhelming feeling at the wonder of her and myself being alive, us two, both so different, and us two in that moment so the same; both alive creatures both breathing on the front step, breathing and being.

Margiela Rabbit continues to speak:

Broglia argues that the very impossibility of understanding the animal as other serves as a site of productive fiction where new thinking (and art) is produced. I guess as we sit here filming ourselves dressed as a gecko and a rabbit we are doing exactly that, making a story, and I know once I said to you as soon as the camera turns on I feel like this project is all fake and pretend, trying to become other, but you said Gecko, that you do believe in the power of fiction and I do believe it too. I mean I know that I could have never fully understood my cat but the bumping up of the two of us did create for me a new way of feeling, of being, as I sat on the front step “not up to anything at all”; to be exact an embracement of idleness and the slowness of doing nothing.

Surface encounters and borders are certainly sites of productive fiction. The borders we are working with, clothing and the edge of knowledge that is the non-human being, are taking us into a place or space where there is room to think about or actually embody a different way of being in this world. Gecko Girl, is it simply a question of immanence?



Figure 4. Gecko Girl and Margiela Rabbit, (video still). Bagnall & Collier. (2014).

Gecko Girl speaks:

Mostly, I think that is the only thing that we can be sure of, but that is also something only we can feel. I think, or maybe I hope, there could be some kind

of effect on the people who encounter someone dressed or behaving as if they were a different species of animal. I am interested in the point of encounter between animals and how direct interaction can defy representation in a way that is difficult to achieve with image or language. I most recently experienced this swimming in a river at night time; I was being still, admiring the water, and I felt a tickly light touch on my arm. It was an eel. I won't pretend that the eel and I shared a moment of mutual understanding. What really happened is that I shrieked and jumped out of the water. Despite my retreat, I was confronted by the discrepancy between my previous ideas about eels and how I felt when I met one for real. Before this I had thought of eels as slimy and scary and quick, with sharp teeth. The eel I met was none of these things. It had blue eyes, translucent fins and no visible teeth. I don't think the eel had any preconceived ideas about me, it was really just curious but I was too on edge to meet it. I am now wondering whether a human body can become strange in a way that might create new questions about what it is to be human. A potential way of unlearning what we think we already know about being.

Broglio's book also talks about this kind of encounter, and surveys how artists have addressed the problematic relationship between humans and our fellow creatures. Broglio describes animal worlds as being of surfaces. This speaks of the preference for bodily perception of non-human animals and the common understanding of animals other than humans to be "living on the surface without cultural or individual depth" (Broglio, 2011). What struck me was that the majority of the artists featured seemed to display ideas less open to possibility than Broglio's. The common approach of artists and theorists alike has strong moral overtones and is entirely too didactic for a subject area so elusive. Many of the artists are using animals as material, alive or dead, and this falls easily into representation. We need to be outside of our preconceived ideas about animals and what it means to be animal to experience the full potential within the human-animal divide. Because all humans can have about non-human creatures is an idea of an animal, it is important that such ideas are not too fixed.



Figure 5. Gecko Girl and Margiela Rabbit, (video still). Bagnall & Collier. (2014).

Margiela Rabbit speaks:

Do you think clothing or dressing up can play a role in keeping these ideas unfixed or fluid?

Gecko Girl speaks:

Clothing is a signifier, and can play a part in emphasizing and enforcing ideas about being human as being rational but it also has the potential to subvert these notions. I think that something about dressing differently allows you to then be different and think differently also. My outfit, my lizard skin, helps me to become something outside of my limited human way of understanding, becoming part of the world instead of merely existing in it. It is partly because my skin looks scaly and strange that I can allow myself to be still and become more absorbed than usual by my surroundings. I am unusually aware of the sounds of the grass and the wind, people's voices and car doors slamming, the scent of the earth and my own movements. I let go of all awareness of all the things that I am supposed to be as an adult human and become fully embodied in the immediate present. I associate this feeling with the idea of becoming animal.

Deleuze and Guattari are usually credited for the concept of becoming-animal, which is described as a literal transformation, but it is not a physical

transformation into a different species of animal, rather it is becoming “no longer man or animal”. These philosophers describe becoming-animal as a deterritorialization, a move away from fixed territory and truth, to a world of things fundamentally in motion, which “admits of no stable entities” (Bogue cited in Baker, 2000). In becoming-animal the deterritorialization is of the human self, it is the undoing of signification and individuality and consequently withstands representation. Deleuze and Guattari believe that animals are always becoming, “everything in the animal is a metamorphosis”, but the hybrid nature of humans prevents us from always becoming. Deleuze and Guattari also stipulate that becomings are reversible, fluid rather than a stable change. This means human beings can slip in and out of becoming, and though becomings are supposed to “represent nothing” and produce nothing, I think the experience itself as a radically different way of being could have the potential to create a more comfortably animal human.

Clothing is one of the most visible ways in which humans mark their separation from other creatures and yet I find that wearing some types of garment can allow me feelings of full embodiedness that I imagine to be the experience of being animal. I think we both explore how clothing can enhance, rather than hinder a connection to the environment and facilitate a physical understanding of being in the world. It is in the clothing I make that I most feel I can express the ideas I have about being and animality. Clothing that blurs the lines between the civilized and creaturely in the human form.

Margiela Rabbit speaks:

Yes clothing as transformation. This idea of other, of transformation, of an excess of being, is part of a literature canon dating back to Ovid’s great poem *Metamorphoses*. Marina Warner suggests that this tradition of fiction is integral to not only feeding our imaginations but also functions as part of our understanding of theories of self and models of consciousness. She explains, using the example of the double or monstrous alter ego, that such metamorphosing potential works paradoxically as not only a threat to personality, but the double “also solicits hope and dreams for yourself, of a possible

becoming different while remaining the same person, of escaping the bounds of self" (Warner, 2002, pp. 164-165). Warner further suggests that metamorphoses happen at points of intersections, between boundaries. I am not sure that we are working with the idea of a complete metamorphosis but rather the importance of fiction and the role of clothing in becoming-animal. Clothing after all is a point of intersection or a boundary between ourselves and the outside world.

The characters' clothes in Murakami's novels also help to blur the line between the civilized and creaturely in human form. The clothes are always described in exact detail as if they also make visible or become catalysts for creatures and substances to slip between the human and non-human. In *Kafka on the Shore*, the substance that slides between worlds takes form through the clothing of Johnnie Walker, and every outfit that Miss Saeki wears as she sits between two worlds is described very thoughtfully as if they also give her the agency to slide between worlds. Cats that have the brown stripy coats are harder to talk to than black-coated cats or grey-coated cats. Clothing has power and a potential to aid transformations both ways.

I don't think Elizabeth Costello is interested in clothing at all, but she does make a stand about being responsible for looking at animals in a way that makes them no less than us, the complexity of actually sharing the world with them and the responsibility that we need to be able to do this; something I don't think that we as a species are doing well at all.

In *Kafka on the Shore*, Oshima (who is a man in a woman's body) leaves a handwritten note in a book that the boy Kafka finds, and it reads: "It's all a question of imagination. Our responsibility begins with the power to imagine. It is just as Yeats said: In dreams begin responsibility. Turn this on its head and you could say that where there's no power to imagine, no responsibility can arise ..." (Murakami, 2002, p. 141). It is a quote that I think about a lot – in dreams begin responsibility. Fiction, like some clothing, can provide the agency for feeling and

becoming different beings; a point from which one is able to step into our world in a different form and maybe learn to become more responsible as a result of this. Imagine what this world would be – a place where the environment is not continually ruined for progress and economics.

Again thinking of Broglio's ideas and I will quote him:

By recognising the impossibility of knowing from the fur of the Other, animal phenomenology asks us to think of our own fragility. The problem announces in advance that our world view has limits that prevent our pursuits (and our claims arising from them) from being all-encompassing. Instead, in what could be a profound ecological gesture, this question that inscribes within itself its own failure or impossibility allows us to think of animal fragility. (Broglio, 2011, p. xxii)

Imagination, fragility, responsibility and transformation these also seem to be ideas we are both grappling with.

I am starting to understand how we are relating all of these things to each other. Fragility and imagination are things that are needed in order to be open to the transformative experience of becoming. Some idea of responsibility is necessary alongside such openness, but I think becoming like a rabbit, or a gecko, might give a different perspective on what constitutes responsibility. This notion of responsibility can be perceived as certain. Often the responsible route is seen as indisputable but I wonder from what perspective are we defining responsibility? Responsibility without a foundation of definite knowing would possibly require a radical reworking, to allow for multiple ways of being.

Gecko Girl, what do you feel like as a gecko, a fragile gecko that cats like to eat, and why do you chose to be a gecko and not a magpie?

Gecko Girl speaks:

You know, being a gecko makes me more able to admit to being fragile, and allows me to understand that being fragile doesn't have to mean a weakness.

Thinking about being eaten by cats is interesting; that kind of fragility really scares me when I consider being an animal or especially, being an insect. The susceptibility to being stomped on is terrifying, but then I do wonder are other animals more fragile than humans really? And what is to be gained from the pretence of being infallible? I am thinking it could be a relief and kind of exhilarating to accept being fragile. There is also a notion of responsibility that comes with animal fragility, maybe a responsibility not to exploit the fragility of other things, and also an opportunity to recognize a shared existence.

I have no logical reason to explain why I chose to become a gecko. I am using the word gecko as a vague concept of an animal, the specifics are not really important, I could be turning into anything but for some reason I think it needs to be less commonplace than a cat but not so radical as a rock or tree. Gecko seems to be about the limit to which my imagination will go. I can't be a magpie or a fish because I know too well that I am not able to fly or breathe underwater. I also can't move as quickly as a gecko but somehow it seems more feasible. I am also envious of other kinds of animals, their beauty and strangeness and imagined contentment. When I wear my lizard suit it can incite a myriad of different feelings, mostly dependant on the situation. In a private way I take pleasure in wearing it; I like to watch my legs walking and the way my breathing makes the sequins glint. I do think it can shift my relationship with my surroundings from internal to external and in a way it makes me feel more like myself than other clothes can. When I am in public, my feelings become more complicated. It can be easy to hide behind more conventional or appropriate clothing but I can't hide behind this outfit; sometimes I feel exposed and vulnerable. What I often experience is a heightened sense of being. It is difficult to describe, everything seems more surreal but also I am more aware so it is in a way more real. I don't really ever think that I have become a gecko or that I know what it feels like to be a gecko but the association with an idea of a lizard being helps me to counteract my ingrained human ways of behaving. Gecko seemed like the right degree of strange.

Margiela Rabbit speaks:

Gecko why is it that you have spent so many hours sewing sequins onto your second skin?

Gecko Girl speaks:

When I started out on making my lizard suit I hadn't fully realized what I was getting into by choosing to make something by hand that was so painstaking and slow. The way I make clothing is always obsessive and usually involves hand stitching. I now understand that this is a reaction to the problems I see with commercially mass produced clothing. Clothing produced this way is very standardized and to me always seems compromised in some way. It can be difficult to have relationships with clothing made this way. When we wear clothing it does in a way become part of our being, so I wanted to make something that could emerge and change as it was being made. Because I am not making clothing to sell, I don't have such a high concern for economics driving my decisions. I think it brings about interesting questions about notions of value, spending a vast amount of time making something for no conventional "profit". The process of stitching itself is relaxing, the rhythm becomes meditative, an escape from constant thinking and communication. Slow making helps me learn to slow down in general.

We have both made hand stitched outfits to help experience becoming animal, I see how this could seem contradictory. Sewing and creativity seem like very human pursuits but somehow this feels like the right way to go about it. I think the sensory aspect of both the making process and the wearing of the clothing are the important link –an engagement with surfaces. I often think of birds making their beautiful woven nests as a non-human comparison; there seems as if there could be a similar obsessive and instinctual drive to create. When we make things we are acting on the imaginary, it is one way to try and bridge the gap between the world of our minds and the physical world. One way, but not the only way; when we engage with fiction there are things we can learn from the imaginary about being in reality.

Margiela Rabbit speaks:

Yes, experience –sensory experiences, our clothing, my rabbit dress and your lizard skin help to shift us from being outside of our preconceived ideas about non-human animals and what it means to be another animal into feeling such and seeing ourselves as such. When I see myself dressed as a rabbit or an animal with a long tail for that matter – looking down at myself I see a flash of myself with a tail and I do become that animal if only for a minute. This becoming also happens in the documentation, in the film we are making, the photos taken – there is my tail; it is dragging in the moss – I do see it and I can feel it dragging in the moss and it is part of me. In this story you are certainly a gecko, a blue and green and pink sparkly gecko.

Gecko Girl speaks:

I think this exploration of ways of being is also about coexisting. When I talk about coexisting I mean multiple ways of being, human and non-human. This can be a challenging concept to fathom, as Cora Diamond so beautifully writes:

Feeling how powerfully strange it is that they and we should share as much as we do, and yet also not share; that they (non-human animals) should be capable of incomparable beauty and delicacy and terrible ferocity; that some among them should be so mind-bogglingly weird or repulsive in their forms or in their lives. (Diamond, 2003, p. 61)

Margiela Rabbit speaks:

And I look across at my Gecko Girl friend and she looks so shiny and glittery in the sun, not mind boggling weird or repulsive but certainly scaly, and I think she is enjoying the green and blue reflections bouncing off her own skin.

I think this mode of slowness, of being in the moment, plays a part in what Kate Soper calls for - an Alternative Hedonism – a different way of being in the world. She calls for a necessary return to pleasure, to immanence, and when I think about the core abstract values of her ideas, a way of living that does not

privilege consumption but other modes of fulfillment based on a self-interest, I think about picnics. About lying in the sunshine. Birds calling. The leafy taste of a cold clear stream and back to that “whether we are doing anything at all”. Or rather whether “we have to be doing anything at all”. Slowness.

Rolling in the warm grass on my back and licking my long soft ears, I feel pleasure in doing nothing, in simply being.

Wearing my brown spotty hood with ears and the pink dress with a tail attached, I stretch out and I feel the breeze ruffling through my fur. I know that I cannot completely share the stretching out sensations of a rabbit in the grass, but my dress does allow me to inhabit at least a notion of myself as a rabbit. A process that entails a deterritorialization of myself to become- other, to find pleasure in feeling rabbit-like, an escaping the bounds of my usual self to perhaps, most importantly, find a different way of being human. My nose twitches as I sniff in the scent of pine needles and earth. I lick my front paws and then, rolling over, flatten myself belly down into the grass. The air hums and something crackles. With my eyes lightly closed and brimming with flickering light, I drift through thoughts about what I will make next. It will be grey and thick and long with smaller ears with lilac insides. I will wear it in the winter on a mountain track and it will make me skip in the cold air.

Here, in the trees and covered in sequins Gecko Girl feels more content than she usually allows herself to feel. She doesn't know how others perceive her dressed like a lizard. But sitting here next to a rabbit creature whose soft pink surface is covered by embroidered trees and moths, she feels none of those concerns. It is this simple experience of being in the forest, up to nothing, dressed as a creature she knows nothing about; it is this exercise in wondering and sensory engagement that changes her perspective on everything else.

A breath of wind blows through the trees and ruffles Margiela Rabbit's coat, Girl's skin glitters. A tui calls. Gecko is still and dreams of a greenness.

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