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Animal Influence II

Merritt Johnson – This Was Never a Knife Fight / Marten Sims – Seal Sees the Sea / Giovanni Aloï – Animal-Human-Machine-Plant / Sandra Semchuck – Bison Crossing / Deke Weaver interviewed by Maria Lux – The Unreliable Bestiary / Karolle Wall – Mollusks / G.A. Bradshaw – Pas De Deux / Myron Campbell – Distant Air / Carol Gigliotti and Marc Bekoff – In Conversation / Paolo Pennuti – Rubbernecking / Julie O’Neill – A Compassionate 2012

THE UNRELIABLE BESTIARY

Deke Weaver is an artist whose work is often realized as multi-media performances. Driven by narrative, the pieces employ strange and surprising fiction, and sometimes even more surprising facts, intertwined through Deke's presence as an actor and storyteller. Using everything from video projections, retro TV footage, and claymation, to puppets, costumes, and sound, he creates unexpected relationships that are often described by audience members as both "disturbing" and "hilarious." While his work touches on a surprising variety of topics, animals are central.

Interview Questions by Maria Lux

A resident at Yaddo, HERE, Ucross, and MacDowell, and a Creative Capital grantee, his interdisciplinary performance/video work has been presented at The Sundance Film Festival, South By Southwest, The New York Video Festival, The Berlin Video Festival, The Museum of Contemporary Art (LA), The Edinburgh Festival Fringe, and many others.

He also teaches in the School of Art & Design's New Media Department at the University of Illinois, which is how I know him. As an art graduate student, I have the fortune of having Deke as one of my advisors. Because we share an interest in animals (though our work takes very different forms), we both found ourselves at the Vancouver conference. And for a wonderful and refreshing change of pace, I finally got to talk to him about his work.

Maria Lux: Your early work included animals in some odd and interesting ways, but it wasn't specifically focused on animals. Now, you are in the midst of an ongoing project called *The Unreliable Bestiary* that will amount to, as you describe it, an "ark of stories about animals, our relationships with them, and the worlds they inhabit." Can you talk about how animals became so central in your work?

Text Deke Weaver: Animals have always been part of my work, but you're right, it never was specifically about animals. However, even the earlier stories pivoted on some event involving a non-human creature. That being said, even with *The Bestiary* as a frame, the stories often boil down to what we learn about ourselves through the animals. It comes back to humans. The project became a way to frame the animals, our lives with them and our shared habitats in a way that illuminated just how deep these relationships are entrenched.

Maria Lux: And how did you start to connect with animal studies people?

Deke Weaver: Through Una Chaudhuri. I met Una in New York. I was hunting down audience members for a show I was doing by trolling through the websites of university departments/classes/professors that might be interested. Una was teaching a class about experimental performance so I invited her to bring her class to the show. We kept in touch after that. She told me about the animal-studies thing, so I started poking around.

Maria Lux: What do you think your unique blend



Deke Weaver

Self-portrait as a Dog © Weaver

of approaches can bring to this field in particular?

Deke Weaver: I'm still unfamiliar with the field. I guess what I have to offer is what live performance can offer to any situation – if it's done right, it can split you wide open. As an audience member there is so much that is possible when you're vulnerable. Artists see big-picture connections that other people don't. You have to be strategic and you have to trust that the little time bombs that you're planting in imaginations will eventually go off.

Maria Lux: Can you talk about why you chose MONKEY in particular to present at the conference?

Deke Weaver: Carol [Gigliotti] suggested MONKEY after looking at some of my video clips online. In some ways it was a practical decision. I could do a solo version of MONKEY that was under 50 minutes, it didn't take a lot of set-up time, and it had hints of what the conference was about: animals and new media.

Maria Lux: You've performed MONKEY, or

variations of it, before. How was it different performing it for an audience of people specifically interested in animal issues and new media art?

Deke Weaver: Going into it, I was nervous that it wasn't going to be "animally" enough or "new media"-ish enough. While listening to the various presenters I started worrying about whether it would be too "theatrical" for the conference audience. Some of the stuff I do is usually considered funny. But if an audience is uncomfortable - even if something's funny - they won't laugh. They're not sure what to expect, they're not sure what's expected of them. They need permission to laugh. So, this audience, needed permission. Nobody laughed. Or maybe it just wasn't funny that night?

Maria Lux: Your last answer points to another issue: your work can be hard to categorize – it defies some people's expectations of theatre, performance art, storytelling, new media, etc. How have you dealt with trying to find where your work fits in?

Deke Weaver: Honestly, not very well. It's a problem. When I'm feeling optimistic, I like the old punk credo: do it yourself. I hate waiting for people's permission to show something or do something - but this impulse has got its limitations. Of course, if I do happen to stumble into a situation where someone is producing my work and taking care of all the nudgey details, and the facility is good, and the equipment works, and there's actually an audience, and there's support, and maybe I'm even getting paid – oh my God, that's amazing. When I'm feeling pessimistic, I think the lack of "pigeonhole-ability" has hurt me – but this is my own fault for not packaging my work in a marketable way. I'm trying to expand my ideas of where I could put my work up – let go of the art/theater-venue thing – but still keep in mind that to really nail the experience I want people to get watching the work; it often requires the kind of facility or support that art-venues have (lights, sound, technicians).

Maria Lux: You mentioned that people tell you your work would be great for kids. Much of the content of your work is SO not for children, yet there is a reason you get that. Animal work in general, as other presenters mentioned during the conference, runs into the danger of not being taken seriously. How can artists and scholars combat this issue and get people to consider animals more critically?



Deke Weaver

Monkey, 2009. Photo by Valerio Oliveira © Weaver

Deke Weaver: It's a great question. It feels like there are plenty of people trying to figure out the answer. The conference was really nice that way – such a relief hearing that other people deal with this.

Maria Lux: One of the surprises during the conference, I think for both of us, was the inclusion of discussions about more spiritual ways of knowing (Lisa Jevbratt's conversation about shamanic practice intersecting with her animal perception work, for instance). This type of conversation is often taboo in academic or scientific, and even in art, contexts. What are your thoughts on this?

Deke Weaver: I like how you phrased that: "spiritual ways of knowing." I love that Lisa brought this up. It felt very brave and I admire her for it. How do you talk about these things (that have always been part of being human) and still maintain your credibility? The academic white woman going into the heart of native cultures — what she was talking about—was

taboo on so many levels. She spoke about this part of her work with a lot of integrity. She was listening, not judging.

I see it like this—there are experiences that have been repeated for thousands of years but, at this point, are still too complex to be mapped out by scientific method. So, as science and technology improve, many things that artists and poets and old-wives-telling-tales have always known or intuited are being "scientifically proven." And, suddenly, the experience is removed from the "New Age Bullshit" category and enshrined in the "Validated by Science" category. Until then, if you want to keep speaking to most scientists and academics, you keep your mouth shut about visions and dreams and hunches and coincidences and trances.

Maria Lux: In your work, there are so many different approaches to representation - take ELEPHANT for example. One of the issues that emerged from the discussion at the conference, to me, is what the artist's responsibility is towards how animals are represented. It seemed that



Deke Weaver

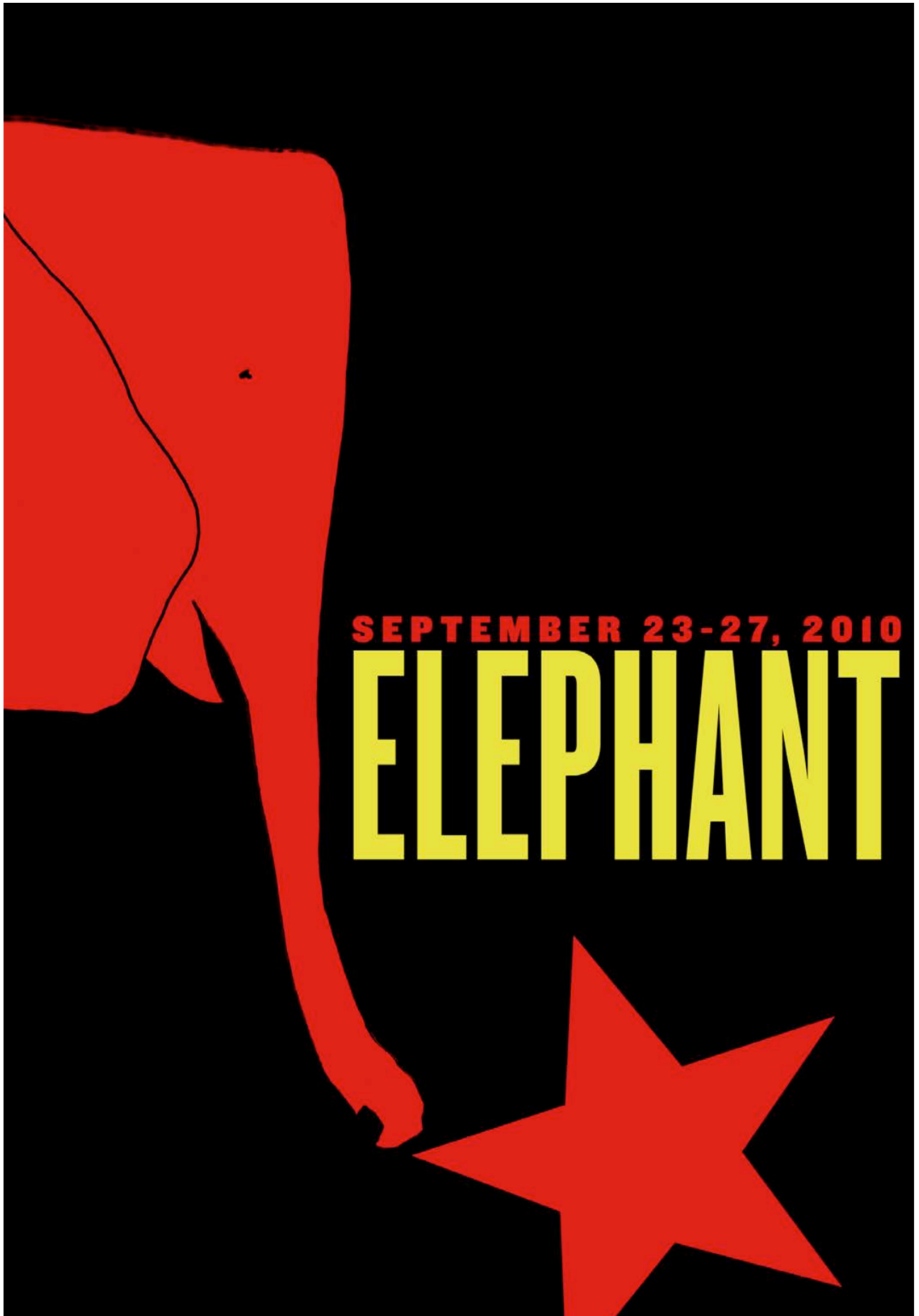
Elephant, 2010. Photo by Valerio Oliveira © Weaver

some people felt that artists have an obligation toward “accurate” or “truthful” representations, and others see room for more artistic liberty. What do you think about that?

Deke Weaver: OK, yes, with *ELEPHANT* there was the claymation, the 12-foot tall mechanical elephant puppet (run by 5 dancers, one in each leg, one underneath), and other representations – me in goofy elephant costumes, an animated Muybridge elephant sequence, stories about elephants, photographs and drawings of elephants, video of elephants in Thailand, zoos, and the old Flaherty documentary *Elephant Boy*. In putting these pieces together I wonder what it will be like when these animals are gone. We’re going to be left with these fragments, shards, whispers and cartoons of what the animal must have been like. As far as “accurate” and “truthful” representations, it’s always always going to fall short of the real thing. So I’m more interested in the failure of representation, as a way to point out the absence of the real animal.

Maria Lux: I really like that way of thinking about representation – I don’t think I’ve heard it articulated in quite that way before.

Deke Weaver: In some ways, this idea of representation connects with cloning projects or “DNA arks” – saving frozen DNA of endangered species. While a clone is genetically identical, it’s still only going to be a representation of the real thing. There are very strong arguments supporting the idea that the teaching and learning and socialization that happen within families and packs is as important to the individual animal as its raw, inherited DNA. Nature and Nurture go hand-in-hand, you can’t have one without the other. A snow leopard needs to be taught how to be a snow leopard. If they get around to cloning a mammoth, gestating in an Asian elephant - the creature that is born will probably be more elephant than mammoth (and a captive elephant at that) – there won’t be any mammoths around to teach it how to be a mammoth. But, I suppose if I put some geologist or astro-biologist



Deke Weaver
Elephant, poster, 2010 © Weaver

goggles on, a “species” is a moving target. It’s never fixed. It’s changing all the time.

Maria Lux: Your work is sometimes described as “magic realism” with your vivid, fictional stories, but you also incorporate a lot of factual information. I’m wondering how you think about giving information, or how much you prioritize educating the audience in some way. It seems very tricky – to not become some kind of edutainment, but that sometimes the best stories also just happen to be true.

Deke Weaver: One simple reason I incorporate a lot of factual information in some of my work (definitely not all of my work) is that certain facts are jaw-dropping amazing and hard to believe. Sometimes those facts can be great building blocks for stories. Some of the information is so incredible that it almost serves as a bridge into magic realism. . . but, it’s not magic realism. As you said, the best stories are often true. Ah – and this: facts change. In Pliny the Elder’s Book “On Terrestrial Animals” (a kind of medieval field guide), he wrote a long detailed description of elephants and their mighty enemy, the dragon. It was the truth in his day.

Maria Lux: Yeah, the difference to me is really the WAY you use the facts that makes them something different than “educational material.” I often use your monologue about polar bears as an example of how visual or performative means of communicating information can be so much more compelling than simple facts. To me, your analogy of the size of a polar bear’s home in a zoo compared to its natural range being like you spending your whole life on top of a handkerchief was memorable in a way that other things I’ve read weren’t. Do you have an idea to communicate in mind and then seek out the metaphors or stories that illustrate it, or do you gravitate towards certain stories and then figure out what they could mean? Or perhaps neither, or both?

Deke Weaver: Probably neither and both. It is about finding the right story/metaphor, but I don’t think it’s about illustration. Well. Maybe not. I think it just depends on the story. Sometimes it’s all there and nothing else matters. It feels like the performances and stories have different seeds and different ways of growing. Sometimes a piece will grow out of a visual image. Sometimes it will start with a news article or story that I hear or read, or maybe

I’ll get an idea for the way a story will end. Endings can be hard, so if one falls in your lap, it’s hard to send it away. In the past, the real ah-ha moments have come in realizing connections between unlikely sources. The full “Polar Bear God” monolog parallels the polar bear in the Central Park Zoo with an office worker stuck in a dead-end job, and a friend’s autistic child – all three creatures full of enormous possibility, but all trapped in different ways. On the evangelizing-for-animals-and-their-habitats level, finding these kinds of unusual connections are incredibly important (by the way, I don’t like evangelists). Most of my audience will never see any of these creatures in the wild. Out of sight, out of mind. If these animals aren’t in your backyard, why does it matter if they go extinct? I feel like I have to keep finding answers to this question – visual answers, storytelling answers. For many people it’s going to come down to a basic question like; “what’s in it for me?,” or “how can I find connections to people that never go outside?” So, if I don’t want to be an evangelist, how can I create experiences that are moving, immersive, pensive, funny, shocking, and unforgettable – stories that connect directly to people’s lives? Because it’s about people. I imagine the animals would be fine without us. But in some ways I wonder what I’m really contributing to the conversation at all. Legislation, policy, science or bigger forms of storytelling (television or film) would be more effective. And that’s where I circle back to my first identity: I’m an artist that likes live performance as a form. Yeah, there’s a lot of bad live theater/performance – I think that’s why it often has such a terrible reputation. But, of course, I’m trying to make good live performances.

Maria Lux: That brings us to the question of activism. As I think you might agree, activism seems really difficult to do in a way that doesn’t compromise the creative power or potential in the work. Can you talk more about the role of advocacy in what you do?

Deke Weaver: It’s a tightrope, isn’t it? Rick Bass wrote a book called “The Brown Dog of the Yaak: Essays On Art and Activism.” It’s brilliant. The picture he paints in the book, I think, is about time. Art can have tremendous long-term effects if it burrows into somebody’s imagination, like a seed growing into an oak tree. But, if the chain saws are whining and the bulldozers are moving – a poem might not save the last acre of old-growth forest ... but a human-chain might. On the other hand, activism can eat people alive. The issues are bottomless.



Deke Weaver

Elephant, 2010. Photo by Valerio Oliveira © Weaver

It seems like what's needed are lots of voices. Lots of approaches. I'm never going to be bold or committed enough to live in the branches of a redwood tree for months on end. But maybe some of my work will sink into one or more people who might carry the idea somewhere else. Like I've got this little flame that I'm carrying in my cupped hands and I'm passing it along to other people that care about keeping it alive. I suppose that's romantic and naïve, but if I started being practical – I'd probably shoot myself. It's pretty depressing out there. And there it is: nobody wants to sit and be told how terrible and awful things are. People will walk out, turn the channel, click on another link. So, you wind ideas into stories, you use humor, you make something beautiful, you seduce, cajole, surprise, you take your audience for a walk in someone else's shoes. Or maybe you just find a way of telling a truth so elegantly and honestly, that it sails beyond reproach.

Maria Lux: Marc Bekoff, in his keynote, said that

there are a lot of people who write about animals without spending any time with them, resulting in a lack of understanding. You have traveled to observe wild animals and have face-to-face interactions with them. How did these kinds of interactions change your projects or your understanding of the animals you have focused on?

Deke Weaver: I love how no-bullshit Marc seems to be. He's a realist. One of my favorite moments is when he said something about how an "accumulation of anecdotes is called data." I admire non-fiction writers and journalists. Experiencing something for yourself is always going to be different than reading about it or watching it on YouTube. Journalists don't sit at home. They go to the place, they listen to what's going on, they talk to people. I wish I had more of this in me. Going to see it for yourself will start to change the assumptions you have about the situation – or animal. Maybe all the mythic attributes of wolves will drop away if you spend

more time where they live – more time than reading about talking wolves, tricky wolves, hungry wolves, horny wolves. But even when face-to-face, the cultural stuff is still pounding away.

I took this wolf-management workshop in Yellowstone. We drove out to an old wolf den. On the way, we kept seeing a grizzly bear in the distance. Sometimes he would run – like he had an appointment. From our distant vantage point we could see antelope getting nervous, elk looking around, even bison were paying attention to the approaching bear. We followed the bear from one pull-out to the next, watching him with binoculars and spotting scopes. He always seemed to be sniffing something, nose up. Finally we saw him go up into the treeline, up into the treeline where the old wolf den is. The wolf den that we were going to be walking up to. We lost sight of the bear, assuming that, if he kept moving at the same speed, we'd be fine.

Watching the grizzly run made me think about this whole weird mix. These animals are living their lives out there, a lot of it in full view of all of the tourists on the Lamar Valley highway. Why is the bear running? What makes it run now, trot later, run faster – what is it trying to catch? Time. Space. Perception. Food is there now. Food moves. Catch the food before it moves too far.

When we finally made it to the den there was no grizzly bear. No wolves. It was a hole in the ground, a former home for wolves. We started to relax. With the charms of the den absorbed, we started to drift down the hill. One of our number walked up the ridge. He comes back. Very fast. "There's an elk fawn, over that bump – right there! It's laying flat, completely still. It looks like a pile of sticks. I almost stepped on it." We don't want to disturb the fawn - the mother must be nearby. Jon, the leader, says it's ok for us to go look at the fawn. So we walk up 30 yards, and look down on the baby elk with our binoculars, about 20 yards away. Sure enough, you can barely see it. It's absolutely flat, motionless. I wonder why it's so still?

Then Jon is saying, with alarm, "Grizzly. Back away. Don't run. Move quickly." I turn. I look. And, yes, 25 yards away (Jon said 20 – but I'm not giving in to any fish-that-got-away exaggeration) was a grizzly bear eating another elk fawn. He looked right at us. A mouth full of leg. If the fawn that we were looking at was at 3 o'clock, the bear was at noon. If you have a minute, mark a spot, walk 20 paces – that's how far we were from this bear.

We moved quickly down, away from the bear. Jon was excited and a little freaked out. I was too much of a greenhorn to know how dangerous this was. I did not feel a rush of adrenaline. I did not feel euphoric. The main reason I knew I should be alarmed was because Jon has the résumé of a guy who does not get freaked out (worked in Air Force intelligence, for a long time, trained pilots survival skills, now works as an EMT and mountain rescue worker, last email I got from him had him fighting a wildfire in Georgia) ... and Jon was freaked out. I looked once, saw the bear – just a quick snapshot - his face full of blood and sinew – then I moved, looked one more time and then moved down with everyone else, maybe 250 yards away from the bear. We all turned to watch him with our binoculars.

The bear buried the fawn, built a small hill of earth over it, lay down on it and seemed to fall asleep. All of this 40 yards from where the other fawn lay flat, stock still. The fawn that we had been looking at. Here are some elk calf facts: when they are born they have no smell. Even so, bears eat 60% of all elk calves born in a year.

We watched the sleeping bear for a little while. And finally, we left. The bear slept. The elk fawn that still lived, lay flat, and would continue to lay flat until its mother came and touched it. I thought about fear. These two small elk were – at most – a day old. Not a whole lot of time to "learn" anything. The elk fawn laying flat was doing this entirely on instinct, reflex, primitive elk genetic survival hardwiring. Did it feel fear? If it did sense something that you or I might understand as "fear" – is it entirely chemical? The smell of a big stinky grizzly bear equals fear?

Why didn't I feel any fear? A couple of days later, I was sitting on the back porch in Champaign, Illinois. I had gone out there to write about this thing that happened in Yellowstone National Park. As I sat down, in the warm sun, I heard a loud buzzing – FUCK! HUGE! BUMBLE BEE! I bolted up, dodging, lurching, running. Fight or flight. Because, you know, hell... it's a bee! A huge surge of adrenaline.

I don't think bumblebees sting. But, damn. I was scared. I DO know that grizzly bears eat meat. I could very well be meat. But I don't think of myself as meat. Ever. My experience with grizzly bears has been entirely on screen or through lenses. A bee is real. A bear, well, it's an actor, a puppet, a Satanic Creature fighting Alec Baldwin and Anthony Hopkins. That thing 25 yards away that I only got two quick glances at before I was 250 yards away, looking at it through a pair of lenses – well ... c'mon.

There is a gap between domestic and wild, myth and science, fear and comfort – but the gap is probably all in our heads and differs with every person. With our escalating population, “wild” space is managed to reduce human/animal conflict. So, in many ways, we end up with artificial spaces – gardens without fences, zoos without cages. The time on the wolf-management workshop’s bus didn’t feel that far removed from a safe, controlled theme park tour. The time we spent watching these animals through spotting scopes felt like watching a disappointing show on Animal Planet - disappointing because the animals were smaller, there wasn’t a soundtrack and then they would disappear into the trees.

So what do you do with something that doesn’t fit into a Narrative? Something that doesn’t fit with your idea of the world? I imagine the adrenaline would have kicked in if the bear wasn’t happy with its delicious baby elk. I imagine if he’d chased us and we’d lived, I would fit it into my big important Story.

Maria Lux: You moved to Illinois (where there is no shortage of domesticated/agricultural animals) but the animals you have focused on so far tend to live in more far-reaching places. Is there a particular reason that you choose animals that aren’t necessarily within easy reach?

Deke Weaver: For *The Unreliable Bestiary* project I’m focusing on endangered species. One of the reasons endangered species are not within easy reach is because there aren’t very many of them – even if I didn’t live in Illinois. Of course you can get into all sorts of political shoving matches about what “endangered” means, what “species” means ... but I think most people get what “extinct” means. So when there are connections with domestic/ag animals, it comes up as comparisons with wild animals. This has been interesting for both elephants and wolves. In Thailand elephants are classified like cattle and horses – livestock. When you talk to someone at the Thai Elephant Conservation Center about elephants being endangered, they’re talking about domestic elephants. Wild elephants in Thailand are like ghosts. Another split that’s interesting is between “domestic” and “wild.” In the U.S., “wild” seems to have wolves as its poster animal. People pour all kinds of fantasies onto what “wild” means – pure, free, unfettered, direct, etc. Just Google “wolf t-shirt” and look at the pictures - you’ll get the whole thing – the menacing snarl on one,

the beautiful holy Native American maiden in the snow surrounded by wolves on another.

There’s all kinds of awkward ethical problems about spending time with these “not within easy reach” animals. A lot of wolf biologists will go out of their way to *not* see the wolves – they don’t want to disturb their habits or habitat. They’ll study them completely from scat, DNA from their fur, etc. Honestly, working on this project about multiple animals, you very quickly run into scientists who are involved with life-long studies of a single species. So while I might be lucky enough to work at a school that supports me going to these distant places, I’m still only spending a tiny, tiny, tiny bit of time with the creatures. I’m a tourist. David Mech with wolves, Cynthia Moss, Joyce Poole, Katy Payne with elephants – they are spending their entire lives with these animals – every waking moment. It seems that for many of these workers it’s becoming less about science and more and more about fund-raising and activism. I’m not sure if “pure science” exists when it comes to wild animals and habitat. It’s incredibly complicated. There are too many of us wanting water and land. Scientists are constantly thrown into political arenas, right into human-animal conflicts, right into class and economics and land-ownership and government policy. Who would think that wolf biologist Ed Bangs would actually need to have more skill at conflict resolution (ranchers vs. environmentalists/NPS) than wolf knowledge? It’s almost like the biologists don’t have a choice. With the on-again, off-again ivory policy, it seems that if elephant biologists don’t become activists, the elephant families that they’ve studied for 50 years will literally be shot out from under them.

But, on the other hand, if you put yourself in the shoes of a human family where one single tusk will bring the equivalent of 12 years of income – well, as an activist, as a policy-maker, as a biologist, as a community organizer – you better come up with a pretty compelling reason, an incredibly compelling story to convince people why it’s a good idea to not kill the elephants. Anybody that’s working with these big animals and their habitats will tell you that you have to connect with the local people – they’re the ones living with the animals. It can’t be top-down policy. For policy to be sustainable it has to be made from the roots on up. If someone wants to shoot a wolf in Wyoming, it doesn’t matter what someone in Washington says.

Maria Lux: What are you reading or working on right now that you are excited about?

Deke Weaver: The ELEPHANT piece took a lot out of me. The well is finally filling. I'm editing the DVD video documentation of ELEPHANT, designing the limited edition books for MONKEY and ELEPHANT. I hope to have all of these ready by Summer 2012. And then there's the researching, writing, building and dreaming about WOLF, which we're planning on putting up in the Fall of 2013.

Maria Lux: What do animals offer you that strictly human stories don't?

Deke Weaver: For me it's about truth and clarity. I want to make work about being alive – about dreams and coincidence, about moments where you know there's something bigger going on - bigger than email and Facebook, coolness and hipness, bigger than shopping, bigger than politics, bigger than power struggles, bigger than your career or your family. These are spiritual concerns and it feels like animals are so present, so tapped in ... no, they're not even tapped in, they're it. My friend Laurie Hugin put it like this: "Animals are not worried about being fat." Maybe that's where the frustration about animal-work being for kids comes in. The spiritual stuff, for me, opens up during times that don't jibe with what our culture feels is "good for kids:" during sex, during a fight, during times of high stress, or hard-to-pin-down moments like meditation, or moments out of nowhere that are really hard to describe. It's not cute and fuzzy. It doesn't have a high voice and it doesn't like to add and subtract with big colorful numbers. It's complex. It's simple. It's about the big questions.

Deke Weaver is a writer, performer, and media artist. Experimental theater, film/video, dance, and solo performance venues have presented his interdisciplinary performances and videos in Australia, Brazil, Canada, Russia, Europe and the United States. A three-time recipient of NEA regional grants in film/video making, a resident at Yaddo and Ucross and a four-time fellow at the MacDowell Colony, his work has been supported by commissions, fellowships, and grants from Creative Capital, the City of San Francisco, New York State, the University of Illinois (Urbana-Champaign) and other public and private foundations. He also contributes film and video to dance and theater works in the U.S. and abroad. He is currently an associate professor in the School of Art and Design at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign. unreliablebestiary.org

Maria Lux will earn her MFA in studio art from the University of Illinois in the spring of 2012. Her work can be viewed at <http://marialuxart.wordpress.com>.