Rachel Rosenthal’s complex and extensive body of performance work, spanning from the mid 70s to the mid 90s, often circulated around the human desire to control nature, and the concomitant quest to maintain a rationalist or masculine position of superiority through that domination of the nonhuman world. Her interest in humans’ ethical relationship to nonhuman animals, and in humans’ own animality, is in perfect keeping with these broader thematic emphases. Rosenthal included live animals and addressed animality most explicitly in her 1982 and 1985 pieces, *Traps* and *The Others*, respectively. Moreover, her 1987 performance *Rachel’s Brain* foregrounds the problem of the human’s constitutive imbalance, or the co-location of high-order cognition and organic, corporeal animality. While critics have discussed Rosenthal’s use of animals on stage with some frequency, there has been almost no scholarly consideration of her unconventional book *Tatti Wattles: A Love Story* (1996). This text’s illustrations in particular suggest that Rosenthal understands her creative process itself to be other than human, to be affectively more linked to animality than to humanity proper. Moreover, the intense animal orientation in the book’s images is accompanied by a powerful tendency to efface the human, thus ‘unmasking’ human creativity as having animal origins. In this respect, the *Tatti* illustrations reveal even more about Rosenthal’s aesthetic engagement with animality than her performances which explicitly address the species boundary.
In the years just before the 1985 piece The Others, Rosenthal included her rat Tatti Wattles in three performances. Those appearances of Rosenthal and Tatti on stage, in addition to the media attention she was garnering in the 1980s as an artistic persona (who carried Tatti with her nearly everywhere), helped to cement the centrality in Rosenthal’s performance work of the human relationship to non-human animals. In subsequent years she has spoken repeatedly about her commitment to animal issues. Moreover, Rosenthal announced upon her retirement from the stage in 2000 that she would dedicate her remaining years to animal rights activism and visual art (mostly painting). One current website wraps up its summary of Rosenthal’s epic career with these lines: ‘Rosenthal’s work centers around the issue of humanity’s place on the planet. She is an animal rights activist, a vegetarian, and companion to two outstanding dogs: a white Siberian hybrid called Sasha, and a puppy of unknown origins called Fanny.’

In a 1994 interview with Alexandra Grilikhes on the topic of ‘taboo subjects’, Rosenthal claims: ‘I’ve always been more identified with animals than with people. The pain of animals was and is so real to me that I feel it physically in my body’ (Grilikhes, 1997, p. 60). Later in the same interview, she discusses her planning for the piece The Others, in which scores of animals and their human companions populate the stage while Rosenthal examines our use and abuse of nonhuman animals. When recollecting her preparations for that performance, Rosenthal explains that she had always sent money to humane organizations but requested they not send her literature because she ‘knew that reading the literature would make me ill’ (p. 75). In order to stage the piece, however, she later realized she had to look at such material:
Finally I decided, ‘I have to look at this.’ For the piece I started to read the literature about the way animals are abused, treated, exploited, totally objectified—as if they are not sentient beings and lack feelings—and it had so strong an effect on me that I contracted myasthenia gravis, a disease which is the result of severe emotional shock. Right now the disease, which I’ve had since 1985, is in remission, thank goodness. Doing the piece was painful and difficult because it not only brought out all the ways we oppress and torture animals, but there is a whole section in which I become the animal. (p. 75)

The affective and identificatory transfer in this interspecies moment of empathy may come as a surprise. Rosenthal had contracted a chronic and semi-permanent disease, ongoing for ten years at the time of the interview, from her extended study of animal suffering. Her physical body seems to have registered or absorbed the trauma that nonhuman animals are subject to in contemporary life, in a kind of somatic exchange. Rosenthal’s corporeal response is an acutely pointed example of what Derrida calls ‘the possibility of sharing the possibility of this nonpower [with animals], the possibility of this impossibility, the anguish of this vulnerability, and the vulnerability of this anguish’ (Derrida, 2008, p. 28). Such a radical affective openness to animal life, in conjunction with Rosenthal’s frequent thematizing of the species boundary in her work, suggests that Rosenthal may be one of the most animal-identified performers on record.

Rosenthal’s performative investigations of the human relationship to other animals have received a modest amount of critical attention, perhaps most notably in H. Peter Steeves’ exquisitely experimental essay ‘Rachel Rosenthal Is an Animal’ (Steeves,
The essay takes the form of a dramatized conversation, where Steeves uses excerpts from Rosenthal’s works and imagined responses by figures like Socrates and Phaedrus to explore the sensibilities in Rosenthal’s oeuvre that frame animality in performance as more than a symbol of the human. While commenting on Robert Rauschenberg’s piece “Monogram,” which featured a taxidermied goat inside a rubber tire, Steeves explicitly argues that, unlike this work, Rosenthal’s work goes beyond a modernist aesthetic that denies ‘that there is a context that comes attached to all production’ (Steeves, 2006, p. 5). ‘The truly postmodern animal’, he continues, ‘is neither paraded on stage as a naïve symbol of some human fable, nor is it placed before us as if it could possibly mean nothing, as if the artist is somehow beyond or outside the web of culture, language, symbol, etc. that makes the appearance of art possible’ (p. 5). As opposed to performance acts like Ralph Oritz’s decapitation of live chickens on stage, Steeves argues that

Rosenthal and her nonhuman performing partners are always and utterly different. Tatti Wattles was not a trained rat doing tricks. Tatti Wattles was not put on stage as a sign for human disgust or fear. Tatti Wattles was not presented as meaning nothing, as a thing, as ‘a rat.’ Instead, Tatti Wattles was acknowledged as animal, as human, as vermin, as rodent, as friend, as lover, as a ham, as feared, as fearful, as brave, as creative, as Rachel, as Tatti, as performer (p. 6).

The final moments of Traps (1982) help to clarify Steeves’ claims here. As Rosenthal circles the stage with Tatti on her shoulder, projected images of her caressing and combing him appear on the screen behind her. The two creatures proceed around the
stage as Rosenthal picks imagined fruit for her and Tatti to eat, a symbol of possible hope based on ‘untapped sources of tenderness and affection in the world’ (Rosenthal, 1982, p. 92). Rosenthal’s mocking of evolutionary progress in the piece, and such claims that she is ‘nothing but a dance of particles . . . mysteriously connected to every other particle in the universe’ (91) combine to emphasize Tatti’s status as a companion or co-participant in the moment of the performance, rather than as an overly manipulated symbol of Rosenthal’s theemtics.

Tatti has already functioned as a kind of fulcrum for discussions of Rosenthal’s relationship to animals in performance. Despite those discussions, however, Rosenthal’s book Tatti Wattles: A Love Story has received almost no critical attention in performance studies, animal studies or feminist studies. I want to examine this book in part because of the contrast it provides to Rosenthal’s experience of becoming ill after reading about animal suffering. In fact, this text (published in 1996) seems to function in a curative manner. Rosenthal’s production of the illustrations for the Tatti book appears to have served as a healing mechanism that also produced an exploration of her general relationship to what I would call aesthetic animality. Thus, Tatti Wattles helps me to address the question of Rosenthal’s aesthetics as such in relation to animality, rather than addressing the contours of specific performances or specific Tatti appearances on stage. In other words, while Steeves has powerfully drawn attention to the ‘posthuman’ stage presence of Tatti as an individual, in his singularity, I want to examine Rosenthal’s aesthetic practice itself in relation to animality. The book devoted to Tatti helps me do that.
Tatti Wattles is an unconventional, esoteric text that functions as part memoir, part elegy, and part didactic reflection on the contemporary plight of nonhuman animals in a postcapitalist culture. The book’s written text constitutes a fascinating and intense description of Rosenthal’s emotional connection to her rat companion. Early in the book, Rosenthal recalls Tatti: ‘You were a beautiful little creature, Tatti Wattles. I want to tell this to the world. For the world knows your kind as enemy, vermin, anonymous flesh pool used in abominable laboratory experiments, or as food for snakes. I have known you as an individual and I want to open people’s eyes to you as an individual—for it is only when we see others as unique, precious, and irreplaceable that we will be ready to assume our full humanity’ (Rosenthal, 1996, p. 8). The written text is characterized by such commentary, and by a tender retelling of Tatti’s life with Rosenthal. On the other hand, the illustrations, all drawn by Rosenthal, speak to a much broader vision of Rosenthal as artist, and to questions of aesthetic inspiration, specifically. The illustrations are also incredibly bizarre and surreal. In one, Rosenthal’s evacuated heart or breast area is occupied by a large rat; in another, rats enjoy a traditional picnic just outside a ‘tunnel’ that looks like the entrance to a large stomach. But many of these curious depictions suggest that Rosenthal views her performative practices as being deeply connected to the inhuman. Thus, I want to consider how the pictorial component of Rosenthal’s unusual book may address the relationship between animality and aesthetics in a way that was not necessarily the ‘focus’, or intentional topic, of the book.

The ‘disjunction’ or productive tension between the written text and the visual components might best be understood through the work of Julia Kristeva on the semiotic. That is, the drawings in the book appear to express a choric quality that ‘precedes
evidence, verisimilitude, spatiality, and temporality’ (Kristeva, 1986, p. 94). They don’t ‘make sense’ in terms of the signifying economies to which we are accustomed. The drawings seem outrageous and fantastical, to be sure, and I want to emphasize their pre-verbal or extra-verbal, supplementary relationship to the written text. Rosenthal explains near the end of the book that these drawings are based on visions she had during shamanic workshops in which she was involved after Tatti died. The shamanic seems perfectly aligned with the semiotic on some level, because it deals with the ‘other than rational’ or the pre-rational, the mythic, the animist.

While the primary subject of Tatti Wattles is the undeniably meaningful and personally potent companionship Rosenthal experienced with Tatti, I want to suggest that the sub-text of the book circulates around the way that animality subtends Rosenthal’s self-identification as an artist as such. This sub-text is presented performatively, through the book’s illustrations, both the major, color illustrations and the more minor black and white drawings. The images are also marked by Rosenthal’s ‘auto-graphy’ as a mover or dancer, by alimentary motifs, by the concept of mediation, and by the taming of human exceptionalism. These elements in Rosenthal’s ‘vision’ of her artistic practice, self, and process are repeatedly aligned with animality, specifically with the rat (as individual) and rats (in general).

CREATIVE BECOMINGS

The cover image of Tatti Wattles sets the stage for these inhuman markers of animality (dancing and the alimentary, for instance) in Rosenthal’s aesthetics. Most striking and unconventional are this cover illustration’s two main figures, occupying both
the upper left and lower right quadrants of the cover and thus dominating the visual space. In the upper left floats a large and traditionally drawn heart shape that in its formal outline could be taken straight off a Hallmark greeting card, and in the lower right is a dancing Rosenthal figure. The heart shape is even made to radiate or shine like a hyper-conventional children’s graphic might, with white beams emanating from its lower portion. But the viewer is immediately struck by the fact that the grey colored heart is composed of a mass or swarm of rats. It’s a startling juxtaposition, as the pastel pinks, purples and greens in the illustration’s other clusters of images suggest an almost cotton-candy, dreamlike world of play or fairytales. The grey rats floating in their buoyant, solar heart shape, seem to shed light on the rest of the scene’s objects. Despite this centrality and planetary benevolence, the viewer is never quite able to resolve the rat motif with the elfin pastels that define the rest of the illustration. If one were to try counting the rat bodies in the grey heart motif, they would surely number near a hundred.

The swarm of undifferentiated rodents in the book’s cover image enacts precisely the pack, multiplicity, or proliferation that Deleuze and Guattari identify as central to becomings-animal. Indeed, their discussion in ‘1730: Becoming-Intense, Becoming-Animal, Becoming-Imperceptible’ begins with an analysis of becoming-rat in the film Willard, and they go as far as claiming that ‘every animal is fundamentally a band, a pack’ (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, p. 239). This Rosenthal figure on the book’s cover can thus be understood as highlighting a ‘becoming-animal’ of the performing body. Rosenthal seems to be dancing an artistic overcoming of the human in the image. That is, through its depiction of Rosenthal’s relation to a rat multiplicity, as I will continue to describe, the illustration suggests that her performative identity is more animal than
human. While Rosenthal has said she is personally more identified with animals than humans, as I noted earlier, these illustrations reveal a similar posthumanist quality within her creative practice.

The instability of the species boundary in the image is further highlighted by the analogous movement of the rat tails and Rosenthal’s scarf. The emphasis on movement is crucial here, since the dancing body itself would have a privileged relation to Deleuze and Guattari’s becomings imperceptible, animal, and intense, because movement is ‘by nature imperceptible’ and thus signals transformation or metamorphosis (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, p. 280). Rosenthal’s dancerly images also give us a particular purchase on Deleuze and Guattari’s insistence that ‘becoming is a verb with a consistency all its own; it does not reduce to, or lead back to, “appearing,” “being,” “equaling,” or “producing”’ (239; my emphasis).

Rosenthal not only crafts this autobiographical figure through an unmistakable image of dancing, but she also emphasizes mediation or channeling. Standing on one foot with the other leg raised in an anterior sagittal, parallel attitude, the Rosenthal figure looks toward the heart as her pink scarf flutters back and upward. While the figure’s face is turned toward the rat-heart, her arms and hands are outstretched like the scarf in an ecstatic and energetic line that moves away from the rats and toward the viewer. One of the more fascinating elements of the illustration is that this torsion or tension seems to signal precisely how the relation to animality is not only elegiac in this text, but it is also a relation that manifests itself through Rosenthal’s artistic praxis. That is, Rosenthal figures herself as a kind of aesthetic medium in this image, torqueing an inhuman artistic message toward the viewer.
This notion of functioning as an aesthetic medium is central to an understanding of art as more than human, and has a particular charge in relation to performance art. Grosz reminds us of the way Deleuze understands the vibratory as a common force that is infectious, almost viral across the arts: ‘This is precisely vibratory force—perhaps the vibratory structure of subatomic particles themselves?—that constructs sensations as neural reactions to inhuman forces. Perhaps it is the consequence of vibration and its resonating effects that generates a universe in which living beings are impelled to become, to change from within, to seek sensations, affects, and percepts that intensify and extend them to further transformations’ (Grosz, 2008, p. 83). Indeed, the experimental German composer Karlheinz Stockhausen in his wildly unconventional 1968 ‘score’ for musicians Aus Den Sieben Tagen (From the Seven Days) writes to the player in his section ‘Litany’:

I do not make MY music, but only relay the vibrations I receive; that I function like a translator, that I am a radio.

... Now comes the difficult leap: no longer to transmit man-made signals, music, tintinnabulation, but rather vibrations which come from a higher sphere, directly effective; not higher above us, outside of us, but higher IN US AND OUTSIDE.

(Stockhausen, 1968, p. 25)

This fragment from Stockhausen surely functions as an artists’ statement in the most catholic sense, and also in the most Deleuzian sense.
Mediation, in Stockhausen’s sense, undergoes a radical transvaluation via animality in Rosenthal’s cover image. While Stockhausen seems to locate the source in the air, or the ‘spheres’ in a more traditional sense, he insists that the source is ‘in’ us, reinforcing Grosz’s notion of the vibratory. He suggests further that the ‘higher sphere’ is not ‘higher above us’, thus calling into question certain hierarchies of being often associated with the cultural. But Rosenthal goes further, for the ‘source’ in the cover image is clearly animal. Rosenthal is depicted as transmitting, passing along, the vibratory power of this source through her aesthetic practice. Moreover, I want to suggest that the practice of performance art itself may present a particularly rich case of the self-transformation that Grosz associates with the affective, with the way that the human ‘overcomes itself’ through certain non-human becomeings (Grosz, 2008, p. 77). Grosz is interested in the ‘virtual conditions by which man surpasses himself and celebrates this surpassing . . . by making himself a work of art, by his own self-conversion into a being of sensation. Affects are man’s becoming-other, the creation of zones of proximity between the human and those animal and microscopic/cosmic becomeings the human can pass through. Affects signal that border between the human and the animal from which it has come’ (p. 77; emphasis added). While Stockhausen to some degree makes himself a work of art, he nonetheless uses external instruments for his channeling.

Rosenthal’s practice has been described by Bonnie Marranca as ‘autobiology’, and Marranca is quick to point out that ‘performance art is primarily a solo form made on the body of the performer’ (Marranca, 1997, p. 79; emphasis added). Marranca’s concept of the autobiological clarifies why Rosenthal has figured herself as a dancer throughout Tatti Wattles. In other words, for the dancer, the body itself is the medium, the body itself
or biology itself inhabits the sensations, the vibratory, the forces of the earth and the
cosmos, the affective. And if affects link us to the animal from which we ‘have come’, as
Grosz puts it, then Rosenthal’s attribution of aesthetics to the animal in its specificity
confirms her performance practice as a kind of autopoesis of the post-Darwinian human,
the human that experiences and negotiates the episodic resurgence of the animal ‘within’

This kind of celestial de-bunking in the cover image of Tatti Wattles happens not
only through the ratty nature of the solar ‘source’ of aesthetic inspiration, but also in a
much less overt image, the purple clouds. Rosenthal’s clouds are in fact so intestinal in
their appearance that the viewer must work very diligently to recognize that they are
meant to represent clouds in this psychic landscape. What they clearly resemble is, again,
intestines. Thus the cover signals an alimentary motif at the heart of her aesthetic
dynamic. Moreover, the flapping scarf only intensifies the delineation of movement in
this figure. It seems to function as a tail, as Rosenthal’s tail. Indeed, the images appear to
posit a central connection between tails and movement, creativity, and the intestinal. I
will return to the tail later in this discussion. For now, I want to focus on the alimentary in
Rosenthal’s iconography, a theme which functions as a ‘reminder’ of the human’s own
animality in her work.

Food has been a principle question in Rosenthal’s performance work. Moira Roth
notes that throughout much of her adult life, Rosenthal was aware of ‘her weight problem
and her obsession with food’ (Roth, 1997, p. 15). For her piece Soldier of Fortune,
Rosenthal was photographed eating seven-course meals at seven high-end L.A.
restaurants (Tatti joined her for some of these meals). Una Chaudhuri, in her critical
commentaries on Rosenthal’s work, skillfully turns her attention to carrots, eggs, and cake as they have been put to use on stage in various pieces, also highlighting the importance of food to Rosenthal’s work. Perhaps Rosenthal’s most piquant treatment of the alimentary occurs in *Rachel’s Brain* (1987). This iconic piece features as its central prop the head of cauliflower as brain. And it is the irreconcilability of rational and animal that constitutes the cauliflower’s traversing emblematic power in this performance work. The opening scene of the piece, in which Rosenthal plays Marie Antoinette, evokes the image of the severed or isolated head in order to emphasize a specifically Cartesian disavowal of that which is not cerebral. The lengthy monologue in this scene begins with the line ‘I am the flower of the Enlightenment!’ (Rosenthal, 2001, p. 116). The disavowal of animality in its specificity is not far behind as Rosenthal croons, ‘My head, hovering over a cloud of talcum powder, is neatly severed from the beast. I am a higher human! . . . I am a thought machine! / Je pense donc je suis. / La tête c’est moi. / My head is me’ (p. 116). She goes on to gloss the body as ‘the others below’ (p. 116), a phrase that cleverly references her own earlier piece *The Others*, which has as its overt theme the violent disavowal of animals and animality at the center of human culture.

When Rosenthal proffers a cauliflower ‘brain’ as edible human flesh in *Rachel’s Brain*, the ironic play on symbolic cannibalism proliferates in a nearly uncontrollable refraction of meanings and their dismantling. Eating brain itself gives the lie, in a radically superlative manner, to the notion of the *cogito* as disembodied human presence, and it does so in a supremely materialized and abjected register. Rosenthal’s performance soon makes it clear that the oh-so-precious brain is not only edible, in her performative universe, but it is also passable as excrement. Indeed, Rachel’s highlighting of the
‘passage’ of brain into waste product suggests that the highest of human functions is ‘shit’. In other words, she casts profound suspicion on the humanized subject through this particular alimentary segment of the performance.

It is not uncommon for artists to frame their creative practices in scatological terms. James Joyce may be most famous for such tropes of creativity. While the passages in Rachel’s Brain aren’t necessarily focused on the creative process itself as scatological, the intestinal image on the cover of Tatti Wattles does suggest a certain centrality of the alimentary in Rosenthal’s vision of her creative life. Perhaps what compels in Rosenthal’s case is the way that the alimentary cannot be cordoned off from an ethical re-casting of our relation to other animals. Her performance work suggests a link between recognizing our own bodily vulnerability and recognizing the need to respect the bodily integrity, fragility, and suffering of nonhuman animals. Thus Rosenthal’s commitment to vegetarianism and her animal rights activism seem relevant here, within the framework of her general recalibration of humanist values.

FACES, TAILS AND FOOTPRINTS

A clear ethical recasting of human preeminence is represented in the illustration ‘Reunion with Tatti in the Lower World’ [p. 6]. In the ‘Reunion’ illustration, the human is dwarfed by a giant rat, and the dwarfing does not partake of any seeming distortion, miscommunication, disciplinarity or redirection. Rather, the dwarfing of the human is figured as an enriching and even ennobling moment that takes on spiritual overtones. This image accompanies the very first page of Rosenthal’s written text in which nearly every sentence begins with ‘I loved’ and goes on to describe some quality or element of
Tatti or Tatti’s behavior. The image is, again, startling in its extremely unconventional depiction of the rat, who is historically viewed as a pest or an instrument in scientific experimentation - an object to be killed or subjected to testing. Indeed, on page seventeen of *Tatti Wattles*, Rosenthal writes a mock-up of the horrified reaction her reader might have to this rat memorial. It reads, in part, ‘Rats are dirty. / Rats are mean. / Rats bite. / Rats bring on the PLAGUE! / Rats are pests. / Rats are vermin. / Rats eat babies. / RATS! / Rats are to be exterminated!’ (p. 17). And despite this conventional view of rats, we have the ‘Reunion’ image in which an enormous Tatti stands towering over Rosenthal in what can only be described as an attitude of benign munificence.

As is typical of these images (and which I will discuss further), the Rosenthal figure in the ‘Reunion’ image is only visible from the back, so we see the profile of her famously bald head, an adorned ear, and no real facial features. Indeed, Rosenthal’s head is more figurative than literal, with an abstract ear but no other details that would give it individuated form. Tatti, however, who stands with his front visible, is drawn in great detail, comparatively. His white belly shows, his large eye peers down at Rosenthal, his facial features are clear, with nose and whiskers specifically rendered. In other words, the effacement of the human in this image is directly correlated to the excessively detailed facial presence of the rat. There can be no doubt that this rat is depicted as some sort of muse, an inspirational figure, a kind of beatific presence. Tatti is clearly portrayed as imparting something valuable to the receptive Rosenthal figure, whose arms are outstretched in a receptive partial embrace.

Moreover, the two visual extensions that one notices coming away from the circular frame of this particular illustration mark out a space of animality. First, on the
lower left, what begin as flowers seem to morph into animal tracks, rendering the trace of animal footprints just below the Rosenthal figure’s own shod feet. Since Tatti’s foot-paws are bare, the image suggests that Rosenthal’s artistic signature is rather what I will call a ‘poditure’, more animal than human, more of the foot than the hand. In other words, Rosenthal’s mark is subtly realigned away from Heidegger’s handedness, with all of its troubling humanist presumptions. Cary Wolfe, in his ongoing attention to Heidegger’s affair with the hand (and Derrida’s troubling of that affair), reminds us just how profound this mythology is. Wolfe explains that for Heidegger, ‘the meaning of the hand, properly understood, is determined not by biological or utilitarian function’, such as grasping or clutching, ‘but by its expression of the geschlecht or species being of humanity, which, in opposition to the rest of creation, rests on the human possession of speech and thought’ (Wolfe, 2010, p. 204). The human hand, handedness, handiness, are all figures for the elevated status of the human in its evolutionary ‘distance’ from the animal. That animal is perceived as mute and tool-less, ‘poor in world’ and without the handed capacity for world-making. Tom Tyler further theorizes this handedness in ways that challenge human exceptionalism throughout Cifarae: A Bestiary in Five Fingers. In Rosenthal’s image, the identifying mark is disassociated from the hand and redirected toward a more ‘bestial’ and ‘anti-human’ footprint as artistic autograph. Second, the very large tail that extends off Tatti’s body carries the snaking, alimentary energy that we have already seen in the cover image. This tail turns the entire circular illustration into a kind of primordial ‘amoebae’ figure that is propelled or moved by Tatti’s tail. Even though the two figures in the illustration are standing still, the overall image is characterized by movement because of the placement of the tail. We might even want to link the intestinal
and the tail-like in these two early images in *Tatti Wattles*. In very broad terms, Rosenthal’s artistic and ethical project seems to be partly premised upon the recuperation of animality as it is signaled by the alimentary and an affinity for the tail, all of which suggest that her performative aesthetics are characterized by a Deleuzian becoming-animal.

**STRANGE PROSTHETICS**

In what is nearly the physical center of Rosenthal’s book, there is a kind of centerfold, the only two color illustrations that are exhibited side by side, so that the text is exclusively visual. The two drawings featured here may arguably be the most visually pleasing, from a traditional pictorial viewpoint. For my purposes, they are the most compelling in terms of the question of aesthetics and animality.

When considering the two central illustrations side-by-side, it is important to notice that they seem to represent Rosenthal in two complementary moments of creative practice. In the first, which I won’t discuss here, she seems to be planting ‘seeds’ of artistic knowledge. In the second, she appears to be interacting with that knowledge. In this sense the Rosenthal figure is slightly more passive in the first image, and then becomes more agential in the second.

Rosenthal names the second illustration ‘Catching Gold Rings with a Rat, on Top of a Needle Formation Made of Rats’ [p. 39]. It has a Seussian quality with its giant sun in the background, ‘needle’ mountains as landscape, and quirky figuration of Rosenthal. Shaped here, once again, as a dancer with one leg lifted, this Rosenthal figure is balancing on a demi-pointe relevé. The precarious balancing on top of the needle
suggests risk, and a kind of poise in moving beyond the conventional or expected. It should also be linked to the idea of transferability, which I will come to in a moment.

One of the most remarkable facets of this central illustration is the fact that Rosenthal’s extended right arm and hand ‘catch’ a gold ring not through their own powers, but through the powers of the rat that she holds. Indeed, the rat in her right hand takes on a prosthetic quality, and at first glance it genuinely appears to be an extension of her reaching arm. There are more than a few noteworthy points about this prosthetic rat/hand. While recent work on the prosthetic often forgets the distinction, it is nonetheless true that a classic prosthesis is an artificial substitute for the original organ. In this case, we have a living animal acting as ‘hand’ or ‘reaching appendage’ for/with Rosenthal. Interestingly, then, the fact that this ‘substitute’ is also a living, discreet creature would seem to make the human-animal boundary even more porous in Rosenthal’s supplementary iconography.

David Wills reminds us that prosthesis in a broad sense ‘treats of whatever arises out of that relation, and of the relation itself, of the sense and functioning of articulations between matters of two putatively distinct orders: father/son, flesh/steel, theory/fiction, translation/quotation . . . nature/artifice, public/private, straight/limping, and so on’ (Wills, 1995, p. 10). In this case, the ostensibly distinct orders are animal and human. Rosenthal’s reaching rat/hand obviously troubles our received ideas about the unbreachability of the species barrier. Moreover, Wills’ discussion of both the grammatical and anatomical prosthetic and its emphasis on transfer gives us a way to further understand Rosenthal’s tipping posture in this image:
The significance and effect of transfer is not something subsequent to a
given prosthesis but rather what occurs at its beginning, as its beginning.
Prosthesis occurs as a rapid transfer. . . . One could posit for it another
type of beginning in the conjugational disjunction—the dysfunctional
syntagmatic transfer—of a peculiarly irregular Latin verb, *ferre* (to bear;
past participle *latum*), doing double duty in a hermeneutic gesture that
relates and refers everything back to a series of shifts, bringing discourse
back to a fact of being borne, to a point of weight transfer. . . . from leg of
flesh to leg of steel, it is necessarily a transfer into otherness, articulated
through the radical alterity of ablation as loss of integrity. And this
otherness is mediated through the body, works through the operation of a
transitive verb - *movere, ferre* - signifying first of all something carried by
the body. (pp. 12-13)

My point about the image, therefore, is that Rosenthal’s specific bodily position in
this illustration -- balanced on demi-pointe, one leg in the air, precariously leaning off the
tip of the ‘needle’ into space -- serves precisely to accentuate the idea of transfer inherent
in the prosthetic as such. The image suggests that a cross-species transference is at the
heart of Rosenthal’s aesthetic vision. Rosenthal’s creative agency is not merely
augmented by the rat, but the rapid transfer of ‘catching’ is both hers and the rats. They
function as coeval. And as in the ‘Reunion’ image discussed earlier, the rat here as
extension and ‘first’ feeler suggests an animal primacy in the affective register for artistic
work or perception.
Cary Wolfe addresses animality and the prosthetic in his discussion of the potential interlocking concerns of animal studies and disability studies. The most well-known example of this line of inquiry is Wolfe’s discussion of the blind person with a guide dog. This prosthetic relation between human and nonhuman animal has historically framed the animal as a mere object that ‘ables’ the blind person. But Wolfe counters that we might better understand this relationship as constituting ‘a shared trans-species being-in-the-world constituted by complex relations of trust, respect, dependence, and communication’ (Wolfe, 2010, p. 141). In his larger discussion of trends in disability studies, Wolfe emphasizes the problematic critical focus on ability, activity and agency, while countering that we are obliged to address the shared finitiude and passivity of the living in general, what Derrida discusses repeatedly in his later work on the suffering and passion of the animal. Susan McHugh elaborates upon these claims in her extended discussion of the guide dog and ‘power sharing among differently embodied agents’ (McHugh, 2011, p. 64).

The ‘Rings’ illustration posits a shared creative agency between Rosenthal and the rat, so that the complex relations of trust and dependence that Wolfe and McHugh theorize would clearly apply here, albeit in an artistic and performative register. Wolfe analyzes the prosthetics of subjectivity itself at some length in his work What is Posthumanism? (2010)11, and I want to suggest that Rosenthal’s image thematizes the prosthetics of creativity itself. This creative prosthetics involves the human being off-balance and reaching beyond itself, across the species barrier. What can the rings represent if not aesthetic projects, fulfillments, inspirational cues or insights? Rosenthal shares this creative reaching and dancerly negotiation of artistic process with the rat.
The combination of eulogy in the text with biopoetic images also provides a commentary on one of the central theoretical debates in animal theory at this moment: the emphasis on thanatos versus bios. The book as a whole was written as a kind of elegy to Tatti after his death. Indeed the first several pages are a blow-by-blow recollection of Tatti’s death and Rosenthal’s own feelings of guilt and anguish at his passing. On the other hand, the illustrations speak to his power or agency in the artist’s creative life. Rosenthal’s book can therefore be said to acknowledge that we share with animals both our mortality and our vitalistic becoming-other through creative and artistic life forces.

ORNAMENTAL ANIMALITY

I want to end by considering one of the black and white sketches in Tatti Wattles. This sketch most clearly illustrates what I have identified as the hallmark effacement or erosion of the human and the concomitant visual plenitude of the rat throughout the book. Specifically, the outline of Rosenthal’s head, characteristically viewed from the back, is absolutely sparse. A single line is traced from right shoulder all the way around, demarcating a bald head, hint of brow and cheek bone, chin. The left ear is similarly minimalist, given no additional features other than what makes it most sparingly recognizable as abstract ‘ear’. Attached to this effaced figure of the human head through the earlobe is Tatti, the rat figure. Tatti is illustrated with comparatively immense detail. His fur is depicted, his eyes and nose, his whiskers— all these features are meticulously rendered. Indeed, the whiskers around Tatti’s eyes are drawn to provide a sense of his individual character or disposition. Rather than illustrate human specularity in this text, Rosenthal elides human looking and repeatedly highlights animal vision. In fact, in the image that accompanies the title page of the book, ‘Rats Approve the Tatti Book During
the *Snakes in the Eyes* Journey,’ Rosenthal’s own eye sockets are occupied by two snakes that emerge and intertwine just in front of her forehead. In the upper left corner of this picture, a large rat peers down toward Rosenthal, and other rats scrutinize small versions of the Tatti book itself. The animal gaze seems to replace or coincide with the human gaze in some of Rosenthal’s images. This shared vision is usefully contrasted with Derrida’s staging of his confrontational and shameful being-seen by an animal, ‘caught naked, in silence, by the gaze of the animal . . . I have trouble repressing a reflex of shame’ (Derrida, 2008, pp. 3-4). Rosenthal surely experiences the animal’s gaze as a self-illuminating force in these images, but perhaps the ‘laying bare’ of the human is experienced without the emphasis on shame for her.

Moreover, Tatti metaphorized as earring gets to the heart of this discussion of animality and the artistic. Tatti in this portrayal is ornamental embellishment and aesthetic adornment, but in a radically atypical manner. The use of *dead* animals, animal skins, animal bones, and animal furs is highly conventional across cultures, and rehearses what Derrida would call the logic of sacrifice at the core of human practices of adornment.\(^{13}\) Wearing fur, for instance, is charged with the violent and erotic message of dominance and of the destruction of another being for the sake of fashion.\(^{14}\) In Rosenthal’s drawing, the rat is living and sniffing the air, investigating: the rat is agential and appears to be acting out his own desires. This rat is far from Bataille’s subject-turned-object in order to calm human fears about our own objectification.\(^{15}\) Indeed, the particular mechanism of attachment between rat and human is fascinating in this illustration. Tatti’s tail is looped through Rosenthal’s ear, just as the post of an earring would be. The tail, an appendage that induces intense ambivalence in the human, moves
through Rosenthal’s own flesh and then comes back around to ‘close’ the loop. In other words, there is no part of the tail left ‘hanging’ or open in the illustration; the somatic connection or inter-imbrication is rendered as whole or complete, suggesting corporeal unity. Rat and human seem inseparable, with their flesh intermingled. Indeed, the tail is the more agential force in this arrangement, as it pierces through passive human flesh and forms its interlocking loop. Moreover, the overt inclusion of Tatti as embellishment tends to emphasize Grosz’s claim that adornment, display and excesses of the body are artistic impulses that humans share with nonhuman actants. While a first impulse might be to read this image as Rosenthal ‘using’ Tatti as a mere tool of adornment, the illustration has an opposing effect. Especially given its effacement of the Rosenthal figure, this sketch seems to place the human ‘in its properly inhuman context’ (Grosz, 2011, p. 21). This final image in my discussion reinforces how Rosenthal imagines or understands her creative powers as more animal than human. She effaces the aesthetic force of the conventionally human artistic ‘vision’ and elaborates animality’s role in creative and performative practice.

**Bibliography**


[http://www.usaproductions.org/user/rachelrosenthalcompany](http://www.usaproductions.org/user/rachelrosenthalcompany), date accessed July 1 2013.

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2 For a broad examination of the “ethic of care” tradition in feminist animal philosophy, see Donovan and Adams, *The Feminist Care Tradition in Animal Ethics*.

3 Myasthenia gravis is an autoimmune neuromuscular disease that is characterized by weakness, fatigue, and reduced functionality of the muscles.

4 Phaedrus was an Athenian aristocrat depicted in Plato’s texts as one of Socrates’s primary interlocutors.

5 Considered by many to be Rauschenberg’s most famous work, this piece was one of his “Combines” from the 50s and early 60s. “Combines” featured surprising combinations of found objects, clothing, debris and traditional artistic materials such as paint, and taxidermied animals.

6 Compare also Steve Baker’s recent discussion in *Artist/Animal* of Kim Jones’ performance piece from 1976, in which he burned living rats on stage.

7 I want to thank Robert McKay for alerting me to Rosenthal’s text a few years ago in a discussion about animality and performance.

8 The written text deserves its own critical glossing, particularly given the pitched discussions of the affective in recent feminist animal studies work. For a discussion of the role of affect in feminist/animal studies see *Hypatia: A Journal of Feminist Philosophy*, Special Issue: ‘Animal Others,’ vol. 27, no. 3, July, 2012.

9 See Derek Ryan’s discussion of strains of skepticism toward Deleuze and Guattari’s ‘becoming-animal’ in animal studies, where he argues that rather than remaining primarily a too-sublime framework, Deleuzian becoming allows us to ‘enter into a zone or territory of proximity or indeterminacy, the shared event of becoming different, of becoming entangled with the other in a de- and then re-making of traditional ontological categories of human and animal’ (Ryan, 2013, p. 539). I clearly agree with the view of becoming as a productive concept for animal studies, though I want to remain alert to the tendency in Deleuze to associate animality proper with a form of packness, and to thus reinforce the notion that animals are not ‘individuals’ or do not experience a form of self or ‘subjectivity.’ As Rosenthal’s text implies, animals ought to be considered in their singularities and their multiplicities.

See especially chapter seven in Wolfe, *What is Posthumanism?*

12 This illustration can be found on p. 29 of *Tatti Wattles.*

13 See Derrida’s discussion of ‘carnophallogocentrism’ in ‘Eating Well.’

14 For further discussion of the fur industry, see chapter four in Williams and DeMello, *Why Animals Matter.*

15 See especially Part One of Bataille’s *Theory of Religion.*