

SHADE IN THE GLADE

On pretending to be an animal, and the anxiety of trying to get to know non-human creatures.

Journalist Ben Knight's take on the piece *GLADE* by the interdisciplinary performance group WILD ACCESS, performed at Dock 11, Berlin as part of Soundance festival in June 2024.

Text first released on Ben Knight's substack: *Four Square Meals From Ruin*



Image: Chrysanthi Ha

Maybe the most frightening part of trying to imagine yourself as a non-primate animal (not that I would ever do this — I like having Wi-Fi and never use my poo to send messages to my neighbours) is having your face ahead of your body all the time. It's the one thing that birds, cetaceans, four-legged mammals, and fish all have in common: You've got no choice but to thrust your face out into the world.

Animals use their faces as hands. Deprived of language and arms, they have to sniff and lick stuff and hope they don't get smacked in the nose. It must be terrifying. Do animals realize how close they are to death at any given moment? People say that livestock can sense the approaching slaughter (though there doesn't appear to be any proof of this), but what about wild ones? And even though there's some pretty sound evidence that animals feel grief, does that mean they understand death?

These are some of the things I was thinking about while I was watching Glade, a show performed by the interdisciplinary performance group WILD ACCESS at the Soundance festival in Berlin. I am very unqualified to write about contemporary dance, seeing as I almost never do anything very challenging with my own body. This particular sack of meat has to make do with few desultory stretches in the morning, a few wheezing trudges along a damp canal twice a week, before settling gratefully back into the temperate, padded box I call my flat. I never climb trees. Hardly ever hit or kick things. And my poo is completely devoid of signals. It just disappears — I send it away for someone else to deal with.

Nevertheless, I do quite like watching dance as art — something in the abstraction of it is profoundly relaxing. Unfortunately for me and my commitment to a sedentary life, there was a little "audience participation" in this performance — something I always dread. We stood outside in the courtyard and were invited to listen to the sounds of the courtyard (mainly a very noisy blackbird), and then it emerged that the three performers were already standing among us, and were sniffing at us.



Image: Dieter Hartwig

There followed at least eight stressful minutes in which the audience had no choice but to consider each other's awkwardness — standing there stiffly in a courtyard while we were sniffed at, had our hair touched, our legs crawled between, and our rucksacks bitten and pulled around. I wasn't spared: One performer stared straight at my face from two inches away, and I felt my face freeze into the stupid, slightly puzzled grin I do when I don't know what to do. It's intensely unrelaxing to have a performer stare you in the face. It's not what you normally want from an evening's entertainment. But then again, anxiety is an accurate description of the barrier between human and animal. Anxiety is just a way of dealing with the unknowability of other creatures.



Image: Dieter Hartwig

And, by no coincidence, anxiety is also the main way that many people feel about the ecological crisis we are living through: Maybe eco-anxiety is really nothing but the realization that there are other non-human creatures out there that we have to live with, that they too have consciousnesses, and that we don't matter any more than they do.

That bit outside was the more challenging part of the show, especially for a shut-in like me. After that we were thankfully allowed inside the normal theatre and away from the squalling blackbird and to sit in the comforting darkness and be quiet and watch. Back in the bourgeois world, we got the show: Which did indeed appear to represent some of the dangers of the animal cycle — hunting and dying and looking for somewhere to be safe. But the performers were safely trapped in the stage lights, not staring me in the face from two inches away. It was quite an experience.



Image: Chrysanthi Ha