

*Peanut's
Lighthouse*



Ren Ebel

*Peanut's
Lighthouse
by
Ren Ebel*

black tent press





Members of the Board:

The school was built upon fifteen cliffside acres of what was previously Torrey Pines golf course before an earthquake delivered its back nine over the edge, burying Blacks Beach nudists below like citizens of Pompeii.

Despite efforts, campus life could not be called natural, and so came the challenge of preserving any important behavior denied or otherwise inhibited by the necessary environmental constraints. Chiefly among these was the practice of grooming, a cornerstone of healthy primate socialization which promotes conflict resolution, alliance formation and general hygiene. A hermetically controlled ecological system, campus was virtually pest-free, so the catalyzing fruits of this practice (lice, ticks and other sought-after morsels) had to be simulated in some way.

Our solution was simple yet incredibly effective. By hiding the finely rendered crumbs of common snack cookies (Nutter Butters) within the pelts of sleeping or tranquilized artists, we were able to not only maintain social grooming, but to control it as a means of positive reinforcement during group critique. An artist demonstrating some promising development or breakthrough during one crit

would receive a corresponding rise in crumb disbursement resulting in prolonged and enthusiastic peer grooming during the following crit. Attending faculty would also sometimes groom the students as a purely symbolic gesture.

The only adverse effect of the disbursement schedule was that it produced a kind of critical dissonance whereby an artist who was successful one week, but who flopped the next, might receive undue praise during the second week based upon the merits of the first (the reverse, curiously, was never observed or recorded).

Participants in crit discussed work using simplified ASL or by operating the lexigram keyboard. Adapted from the artificial language designed for studies at the Yerkes National Primate Research Lab in the early 1970s, our keyboard was modified with words and phrases aimed to serve students in the context of contemporary art discourse. The language was agrammatical, based on rote memorization of the board's unique symbols. Some of these appeared to illustrate their concept (*halation*, a sunbeam of diagonal wands; *ecology*, a teardrop inside a teal orb), while others were somewhat more oblique (a hand clasping a protracted tan lozenge denoted *confessional*). Pressing a symbol's key would activate a voice recording of the intended word. This voice was in fact my own—a point I had insisted upon during the keyboard's construction, citing a relevant study on the correlation between vocal timbre and group loyalty in marmosets, as well as my own background hosting a moderately successful Peter Gabriel fan podcast.

It was the role of attending faculty to help students elaborate their thoughts, propose questions, mediate aggression and in severe cases evacuate and call in a code 10-28 (“forced recess” [seven watchtowers lined the perimeter of

campus, each equipped with a mounted 50 caliber long range tranquilizer rifle and manned by ex-zookeepers of the notorious open-air Parque Safari in Buenos Aires]). While on campus, staff wore the requisite escape harness, a nylon vest secured by 200 feet of rappelling rope to a spring-loaded winch at the end of a telescoping metal arm attached to the faculty lounge. By pulling the pink ripcord on the left breast, wearers could safely extricate themselves from any potentially dangerous situation within a few seconds.

The most prolific students were often those who made work primarily for and about the cohort itself. I recall Flossey, a post-menopausal bonobo who temporarily dismantled the cohort's dominance hierarchy by adorning herself in prosthetic sex swellings fashioned from modeling clay and then aggressively pursuing and copulating with each of the males (and several females). Or Captain Jack, a long-haired Tapanuli orangutan who mastered acute control of his pheromonal scent glands, allowing him to deploy various chemical secretions in harmony with urine, feces and saliva to compose elaborate odiferous symphonies which faculty could only partly experience by the aid of specialized equipment.

Given the stubbornly anthropocentric state of the market however, faculty had the thankless duty of shepherding the apes—delicately, without jeopardizing integrity or vision—away from such subcultural niche work as this, and toward a more accommodating style.

Naturally, Peanut became the model for success. Not only was she our most high-profile “graduate” and the first ever non-human primate to achieve blue-chip gallery representation, but as you will likely recall it was Peanut's

sudden stardom and subsequent investor interest which buoyed the program during a period of financial loss sustained after the widely publicized scandal surrounding the late Dr. Sven Nyberg.¹

¹ Without venturing too far into the proverbial tall grass, I will say only that what happened to Sven was the result of willful ongoing negligence against the better judgement of his own colleagues.

Sven was hardheaded. He had what I considered to be the incredibly annoying habit of derailing conversations with elliptical improvised “ponderings” that leaned heavily upon pop philosophy and a horizonless relativism capable of sapping counterfeit meaning out of even the most inane and regrettable student attempts, leaving his impressionable victims convinced of their own undervalued genius. (I doubt very much whether Sven had any taste of his own, but you’d be surprised how seldom such virtues are acknowledged in the warped criteria of your average hiring committee).

One megalomaniac loose among the core faculty of any art program is to be expected, however a megalomaniac endorsed by a gang of elated chimps becomes a liability. With growing concern, I moved to petition for an investigatory probe into the unorthodox pedagogical practices of Mr. Nyberg. I received in response a curt and anonymous reply scrawled on a cocktail napkin pinned to the windshield of my car: *Parn, fuck off or die.*

He spent an enormous amount of time studying and imitating student behavior. In addition to acquiring a pair of hydraulic forearm stilts, which took some practice to handle gracefully, he forwent the use of sign language and taught himself a number of convincing rudimentary vocalizations. It was not uncommon for a junior professor to be fooled into thinking a fight had broken out among the artists, only to find them napping peacefully and Sven before the mirror of the faculty bathroom rehearsing pant-hoots into a voice recorder.

You may guess that the danger of Sven’s experiment lie in the potential that he become confused about his identity and begin to demonstrate ape behaviors or think ape thoughts. This is what he would have had you believe, eager as he was to reinvent himself as some Beuys by-way-of Francis of Assisi, hunched forward on the stilts, leading his little cadre (a seldom-promising few beta males) beneath the artificial canopies, diddling in the shallows of his solipsistic lectures. Imagine half a dozen apes in reclining goddess pose, Indian ragas playing from a bluetooth speaker, Sven pacing slowly over the rise and fall of hairy chests while dictating aloud in second person some exotic mental scene: the jungle, the herbaceous slope, pursued by tiger, pursued by poacher, always with the intent of stirring some primal response which might be usefully converted into praxis.

A handful of commentators now speculate that Sven’s fanatical investigations into the essence of spirit agitated his students to the point of metaphysical rapture, and, becoming increasingly frustrated by the limitations of surface, they aimed to investigate their teacher’s body in the same way we had once witnessed Betti, a 300-pound Eastern Lowland gorilla, investigate an early prototype of the lexigram keyboard before it was necessarily replaced by a more durable model. This theory is supported by evidence of the grisly meticulousness taken in Sven’s mortal undoing (not to mention the astonishing egalitarianism by which the segments were cleaned and distributed during the so-called “cannibalistic ritual”).

Orphaned following the federal raid of an exotic pet ring in Arlington, Texas, Peanut was auctioned to the San Antonio Zoo where she was trained to paint portraits for an animal talent show attraction called "Apes Got Talent." When Peanut's act eventually grew stale, she was retrained to perform magic (a routine which incorporated her craft when, blindfolded, she would paint the portrait of a handler posing as a randomly selected member of the audience). Although Peanut's magic was popular, she was forced into early retirement after unintentionally dislocating the thumb of an eight-year-old volunteer during the card trick portion of her act. Peanut was then sold to Vanity Fur, a Las Vegas booking agency and kennel where, by the advantage of her docile nature and prior training, she was offered supporting roles in several family blockbusters including *Monkey's Uncle Returns* and *Monkey's Uncle 3: Escaped Apes Caper!*

As a young actor Peanut came to know and briefly work with Manis the Orangutan, known internationally as celebrity ape-chef Tio O'Tang, who suffered a cerebral hemorrhage at the hands of a grinning disciplinarian whose unfortunate training method involved a length of iron pipe wrapped in newspaper. Peanut would later become an outspoken proponent of animal labor reform, and any mention of the animal entertainment industry, during crit for example, would send her into a disturbed fervor lasting up to several weeks. I vividly remember one afternoon, driving with Peanut along the 101 (in those days we were encouraged to organize weekly field trips, and Peanut enjoyed little more than sticking her head out of the passenger window to let the sea salt whisper of the afternoon warm her cheek). At that time, the final installment of a recent *Planet of the Apes* reboot was being heavily advertised around the city, and upon seeing a billboard featuring the bloodied face of a

morose chimp warrior, Peanut suddenly gasped and grew quiet. Immediately sensing what had perturbed her, I pulled over and tried to explain that most contemporary films no longer used live animals, signing *fake-ape* and *computer-puppet*. Unconsoled, Peanut simply shrugged, looked up at me and signed somberly: *fake-ape-is-ape*. Words I will not soon forget.

Peanut is currently based in Spain where she holds the distinction of permanent artist-in-residence at the Heinz & Löwensenf Illa de la Quarantena art center off the coast of Menorca. I urge you to visit when possible. Once a sanitarium for plague victims, the decommissioned naval hospital is now host to a spacious live/work enclosure for Peanut which integrates surrounding edible flora and a restored eighteenth century lighthouse. On summer evenings, from the cantilevered “floating cantina,” visitors can sip regional gin and watch Peanut at work as the beacon light gleams lonely over the Balearic Sea.

To those who would dismiss our project outright, let me remind you that, historically speaking, studies which have appeared most useless at the time of their undertaking have later proven entirely critical in the light of a new study. This is the essence of discovery.

Then, there are some so lacking in imagination that they are content to regurgitate the colorless Chomskyian bilge that great apes somehow lack the cognitive maturity required of legitimate art, or that any purported non-human art practice is merely Pavlovian response swaddled in clever PR and deluded sentimentality—tired arguments hung upon the observation that apes do not ask questions. Obviously, to pervert so small-mindedly this minor linguistic quirk

in the name of homo sap supremacy reflects a shameful misconception of both ape and art.

Despite our malignant compulsion to justify every trifling stir of the creative act, it is often said that the value of certain cultural touchstones is simply “beyond question” (the encore performances of Peter Gabriel’s 1994 *Secret World* tour come to mind, as do Monet’s lilies). Apes understand not by incessant inquiry, but by spontaneous action and prudent reappraisal. For the ape, all things are beyond question.

With gratitude,

Parnassus B.M. Leakey
Chair of Fine Arts, SCALPA



























Ren Ebel, 2021

SCALPA logo designed by Riley Ebel

BPT017

First Edition of /100



black tent press

po box 862302 los angeles, ca



black tent press