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The Spectacle

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The Spectacle · *Mary Caponegro*

ACT I: WHAT IS A HUMAN?

The human is a curious animal, characterized by a constant nervous motion. This one, for instance, stands on his hands and turns as if to make himself a wheel; the spokes that are his arms and legs intend to blind me as he spins. If I lash out in my confusion, he seeks protection in a wooden barrel and rolls before me thus contained. Or if I am about to take a part of him inside my jaws, or grasp him in my paws, to make him just for one moment still, then he leaps away into the well, or uses some tall pole to spring to where I can't reach.

When he himself is not in motion, he waves before me reeds or straw, or this revolving wooden object which when I strike to stop it, makes the audience around me sound a music that is not unlike my roar.

ACT II: WHAT IS IDENTITY?

In the center of this enormous oval space, the venator, no sooner has he met the lion, merges form: his shoulder with its face, and all the rest of him intact. His arm has been consumed, is what we initially believe, but if we'd gotten to our seats in time, we'd know the fierceness of his gesture. We too would have been startled to observe the stolen moment when the beast's jaws opened up to yawn, to roar, that gesture interrupted by an arm plunged down its throat. Now the venator, with the other hand, of his still visible arm, seizes the tender pink tongue; thus paralyzed, the beast's sharp teeth hold no peril.

The Emperor cheers, the Emperor seems to sigh. The Emperor shivers, holds his side, as if by magic, disappears.

I had not meant to swallow this strange projectile, that forced its way into my mouth, and chokes me now, while my only mobile part is gripped with his other hand, strangled by his fist. I do not like the taste of what encloses me: this adversary who assaults me in a delicate cavity for the pleasure of the

crowd. I am surrounded and invaded at once. Hear me, though I be an unexpected orator. More than my teeth and my roar; I too have softer parts. Often I've held the hare in my mouth so gently that it never felt my teeth's serrated edge. And here you, human, do the opposite, you strike instead of stroke. What could caress instead constricts; instead of bid me lick your salty palm, you bind my tongue, the way you bound my limbs when we were introduced far from this place. That was the first time, you'll recall, that you invaded my quite clearly designated space.

We cannot exit unobserved, as can the Emperor; he can choose to be invisible or prominent, depending on his moods, depending on his needs; at one moment brandishing his sword to slay some arbitrary animal, at another slithering down his marble steps to regain his composure or relieve himself, or observe the ones observing.

ACT III: WHAT IS INTIMACY?

The panther and the bull address each other; the distance between them equal to the length of the chain that binds them. They lunge, exchanging mass and speed. But when they try to flee from one another, they are forcibly reminded of what weds them. Who is better suited as the victor: he with teeth or he with horns? The more massive? The more lithe? Sometimes there are answers, ladies and gentlemen, numbers bear out certain patterns, but for the most part nothing is for certain. This is why you're here: to witness the results of the circumstances we've contrived.

ACT IV: MAN AND BEAST

He grips my neck with his knees and when I buck he squeezes all the harder; by my motion and by his grip we try to make a victory, locked together like enemies whose kiss is fierce, whose kiss addicts.

He must desire his prominence. Because of the processions which use us in great numbers; because of the togas all the humans gathered here are wearing; because of the special seat he occupies, the wider for his comfort.

ACT V: WHAT IS INTIMACY?

No one is fooled by it, neither of the participants certainly. They know this is for the stage's sake, that he with his gold-dusted mane after prancing regally to greet his adversary, stands perfectly still, arching his back, thrusting forward his head, offering his cheek to receive the lips of his partner, the same who might have caught him unsuspecting during yawn or roar, this venator instead glances his face against the beast's so softly, his own cheek titillated by the delicate slender filaments no human face possesses, at this moment the only vestige of cage's bars between their forms.

ACT VI: WHAT IS LEVITY?

Did you see the chariot making a figure eight around the amphitheatre?

How elegantly it delineates, how perfectly precise. The driver is so clever, yes?

The driver, did you notice, darling, is an ape! Those poor wretches in the rafters never get the joke, they can't see that far.

Sea lions, all present, bark to their respective names, as the Emperor calls attendance: Vespasian, Hadrian, Maximilian. He's named them after predecessors; how the Emperor is amused by their antics and his own clever joke, so amused he feels stitches in his side and will excuse himself before too long.

But what can stitch a rent flesh mantle, a gaping wide enough to expose all internal organs?

And what if there were nothing to cling to but the smooth marble that allows no grip; its slick voluptuous surface, making humans slip and slip and slip until they find themselves inside a pit of those whom they have gathered for their pleasure: the circumstance their criminals encounter.

OVERHEARD

The elephant is kneeling, do you see?

The dwarf must have ordered him to, just like last time. The games, you see, become redundant after years. It takes so much wealth and whimsy to make them always more exciting. Perhaps it's just as well to be in these less coveted seats, leaves more to the imagination.

Just as now you imagined the dwarf; he isn't here this time.

Then why is the elephant kneeling, you fool? He looks like a baby first learning to crawl.

If all of you weren't separated by protective moats and scaffolding and nets that obstruct even the closest view, you'd be able to see the single javelin between each toe of the elephant's foot: metal flowers humans planted. You think he has such thick skin he cannot even feel. Indeed the crowd thinks this a charming skit, some brilliant sacerdotal wit: an elephant who genuflects before his adversaries, then comes begging for their mercy. But ladies and gentlemen, there's no mercy to be had. If you stop laughing and keep looking, looking closely at the scene that is before you and much more than it appears, you'll observe this massive beast even thus reduced come charging, directly toward his foes, juggling shields as he goes, and straight toward us, oh my. And this I can assure you is not written in the script. He has intention to obliterate.

INTERMISSION

The glories of human engineering designed this stadium, this stage, these props, these protective measures and this ritual. Do not dare discredit the overwhelming grandeur of human engineering, whose transport took you across the sea and gave your life a purpose, to let you be a part of the most improbable, impressive of all spectacles.

ACT VII: WHAT IS MERCY?

The creature who never forgets knows that humans remember. He is contrite, now, as he kneels before the Emperor, not so much the worse for

wear for the bruises inflicted by the rhinoceros he killed, admittedly provoked by flaming darts to goad him. Before he was annihilated the rhino threw a bear into the air and killed a bull as well. Will elephant be pardoned? There's no telling; mercy here is arbitrary. For instance deer, behind him, next in line who kneels before the Emperor seeking supplication—or a momentary staying of the hounds that chase her—might receive a pardon, or she might receive two arrows in her head to simulate the horns she'd sport were she the stronger male.

IMPROVISATION

And the Emperor, who has been made a fool of by this massive interruption and is perhaps tired of being focal only in the audience, takes center stage, so no one can mistake his presence. He takes the role of gladiator, venator, and with his crescent sword, locates the longest neck of all performers present: even the slaves, even the women in the rafters could have guessed it would be ostrich. One can hear their collective sigh from the top tier, at what one would presume is hardly visible, but the Emperor, standing, arm raised, possesses better than front row view of the exotic bird, one of three hundred who paraded for him earlier. Her vermilion tinted feathers now sport more than festive decoration, as her uncrowned trunk gallops back and forth unnavigated. Scooping up the ball that was the head and lifting high in front of him the stained, gleaming sword, the Emperor finds the senators' box, perhaps the ones who crossed him in assembly, and brandishes his trophies, as if to say: you could be next.

It does not disorient the Emperor to perform; he is accustomed to display, and is not bothered by the crowds he has assembled to observe us, and can choose at any moment to retire.

But what if the Emperor's open mouth, when cheering, yawning, what if it, like lion's, were violated, while he gasped for air? Would the outcry of the crowd be deafening? Or would what sounds like outrage be in fact resounding cheer?

ACT VIII: MAN AND BEAST

Elevated from the bowels of the amphitheatre arrives the lion in his box. A door clamps shut behind him, while the door before him opens to expose him to the crowd, and to the man, who stands without a weapon, probably a criminal. The former can't retreat; the latter can't defend himself. This won't take long.

But when paw and palm come together, touch is catalyst: remember that sharp thorn that only the dexterity of grasping fingers could remove? Can animals feel gratitude?

ACT IX: WHAT IS MEMORY?

The audience's eye cannot help but follow the severed head, now tossed away by the human who's lost interest in it. We thrust our intact necks and strain our ears before the oddest sight: a tiger nuzzling it, possibly trying to heal with his tongue, in a gesture of unscripted tenderness. Stationary for the longest time, is he attempting to communicate or listening? Tell us tiger, what you hear? If memory could speak, what would it say?

I had never felt it before: the sensation of being held like that, enveloped, protected, not since I was inside my mother's egg. My soft plump body in his arms so much kinder than ropes. I am fondled, and indulged. Our legs work together and he is careful never to place his shod foot on my two toes. He is leading me, I thought, he's teaching me the way that humans dance—though human had been until then a foreign species—clutching a wing in his hand to give me balance and steady my gait. My long legs I thought at last were matched, by our equal heights despite sinuous deviations, for he was straight where I would curve, so sometimes his chest brushed against my throat.

Venator, take this prop away, it makes the Emperor squeamish now. Why else would he be rushing to his seat? Is this too brutal for his gentle eyes: the act that he himself performed? The Emperor for all his ostentation is occasionally a bit withdrawn. He virtually melts away into the crowd, blending subtly in his seat, like an animal who has received from nature the

privilege of camouflage—although it’s true, the Emperor’s enemies cannot hide from him.

But what rises now under the tunic of the Emperor? Where is his other hand, which usually conducts the spectacle like an orchestra of carnage? The curtain of his tunic subtly rises from the pressure of this surreptitious magic wand.

ACT X: WHAT IS DELICACY?

It is the rare performer, the elephant, who has not been seen since the games in '79, but today seems ubiquitous, more often than not on his knees. The one we've seen already twice at last has respite; his colleagues carry him on a palanquin, as if he were a pregnant woman. Then one dances while the other smashes cymbals to make music. He appears to do a pirouette as she takes her place at the banquet table he's just set. How daintily he pats the ludicrous pink skirt as he sits his bulk upon the bench with delicacy beyond a human's capability. If there is the least displacement, if one plate or vessel is disturbed, he coils it in his trunk to place it elsewhere with great care. And when the banquet is complete, she becomes scribe, and scratches with an implement on paper. Show your lessons to the Emperor, how the Greek and Latin characters are formed as by an artist's hand. But make certain what you say is what your tutor showed you. πᾶν γὰρ ἐρπετὸν πληγῇ νέμεται. Every creature is driven to pasture with a blow? That can't be right. Fortunately, it's growing dark.

ACT XI: WHAT IS EROS?

And the lion in the twilight shadows takes the hare between his jaws. He's running off with his prey, we, watching, think, but look how the hare's ears and legs extend as gracefully as a dancer's limbs, and notice that he does not yelp at all. Should he so much as twitch, the former, stronger one immediately adjusts his transport. For from the corner of his eye, the lion who makes his mouth both carriage and cradle slackens still more the tension of his jaw. He will not rest until each time he gently scoops the smaller creature, he can truly make his tongue its bed.

And I say to the vestal lady beside me, Imperial woman though I am, with every privilege, including this proximity, this coveted closeness to all aspects of the spectacle of which few women can boast, I cannot help but harbor secrets, wishes, such as this: O that my husband could cradle me so tenderly when my essence rests inside his mouth.

ACT XII: WHAT IS GRAVITY?

There is no spotlight, only moon, by whose illumination we can fortunately see a single figure, bulky though he be, perform gymnastics and then dance. When all other creatures sleep, and humans too, he instead repeats a gesture many times: stand, leap, roll; one, two, three, he does not miss a beat, and then rises, puts one leg aloft to find a slender rope suspended, and I can scarcely believe my eyes, he walks across it, though the bottoms of his feet are wide as saucers.

It's true, I can confirm, you do not dream, unless we dream in tandem: he climbs the proscenium in moonlight and balances himself upon the rope suspended many meters above the amphitheatre floor. First he walked across the ground as if it were air instead of earth, each foot placed carefully and deftly, and then it seemed he turned the air to earth. Only when he finds himself across this precarious void, does he lay down his immense weary body, and rest, his breath slow, so we who think we may be sleeping, see its rise and fall.

We think we are dreaming him? We're only here because we've come the night before tomorrow's games to get a better seat, or any seat. We are poor, you see. We fasten our ragged cloaks with tarnished brooches and our gaping shoes the same. But we have had a gift today, that no one *not* forced to wait on line would have. Even the Emperor who sees so clearly from his unobstructed seat, whose width is greater for his comfort, whose podium allows him to exit unobserved should he find himself bored, fatigued, aroused or squeamish, has not had this privilege of witnessing a dream behind the scenes: the animals' voluntary dress rehearsal, their own incessant practicing until perfect.

ACT XIII: WHAT IS EROS?

The cranes now do their mating dance, chase each other round the amphitheatre. The females prod the males; the males respond, or vice versa. They'll make a show of lust, appear to lose their heads lest they be taken literally, like ostrich. And in the midst of all their antics, the venator, perhaps eager for variety, seals his face to the tiger's in a gesture of affection. But the tiger is less cooperative than in the past. The beast is still distracted by the rolling ball now separate from the walking neck that carries forward frantic, unimpeded. It seems that he is coy, flirts with the lips that seek his cheek; the audience, enchanted, sees a mating dance between two species: man and beast. And finally their heads reside together, minutes it would seem, as if the tiger had confided something, as if he'd whispered in the hunter's ear:

As you trapped me do you recall the crystal ball you tossed upon the ground to furnish my diminutive reflection, so all that was maternal and protective in me thought I saw an embryo of my own flesh and blood, thought my cub lay trapped yet in my reach, so every instinct bid me lick to heal the poor abandoned newborn? But while my tongue made contact with the surprise of cold smooth surface I anticipated would be warm and yielding and familiar, you surprised me in much grander style. You closed in on me and I had no defenses. You kicked away your trick, your crystal ball and made me march.

Hastily the venator removes himself; it must be time to set the stage for closure, the grand finale.

ACT XIV: WHAT IS ALCHEMY?

Even stranger than the mating dance of cranes is the gait of a human clothed in flame. It's surely better to be a citizen and wear a toga in honor of the Emperor, than to run ten meters in a toga that is specially constructed to erupt in flame, to earn one's daily bread. The clothing, then, that makes one civilized, can be illusion. And flesh can also be a cloak, as when physicians

educate themselves in ways they can do nowhere else, to see so much exposed of what still breathes.

ACT XV: WHAT IS IDENTITY?

As if the ocean overwhelmed the shore, the sandy amphitheatre floor is inundated to make a giant oval pool, within which bulls and horses romp together, splashing, swimming, pulling boats behind them. A shepherd stands atop the grandest vehicle. A violent motion jerks away the hood atop his cloak to show this shepherd's whiskered face is not a human's, but a lion's.

Is it a trick of light? The Mediterranean sun dances on the sudden liquid skin of the arena. Gaze well, ladies and gentlemen. Gaze until the sun makes you squint to see beyond the surface shimmer. What you fix your gaze upon with indefatigable fascination is itself a kind of mirror. This oval frame contains a portrait you have painted. But there's no need to sign a portrait titled "Self."