



Guy Ben-Ner

KONRAD FISCHER GALERIE

The charm of Guy Ben-Ner's videos derives in large part from his unusual choice of actors—often the artist himself, his wife, and their child. True to form, Ben-Ner continued to avoid professional actors in his most recent video, *Second Nature*, made for the Liverpool Biennial in 2008. But this time, a fox and a crow are the stars, reenacting Aesop's ancient fable of the fox and the raven with help from their trainers. And while "nurture" was an oft-repeated theme in his family films, *Second Nature* is an overtly behavioral experiment, in which the entire focus is on the conditioning of all participants—the trainers as well as the animals.

Ben-Ner films the trainers during the painstaking process of attempting to coach their animals with food and rewards to act out the fable's plot. The artist also repeatedly appears on film in his role as director, interrupting the trainers to dispense directions and cryptic commentary in verse. Their confused faces and bewildered reactions indicate that they have only been partially informed as to the exact nature of the game Ben-Ner is playing with them. Little by little, the relationship between trainer and animal comes to seem more like that between director and trainers, with the latter increasingly becoming the

Guy Ben-Ner, *Second Nature*, 2008, still from a high-definition video, 10 minutes 12 seconds.

work's true protagonists. Toward the end of the film, Ben-Ner has the trainers reenact, and then read directly from the script, that central sequence from Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* in which Vladimir and Estragon amuse themselves with the senselessness of trying to hang themselves from the brittle branch of a tree, and instead one placates the other with something to eat. The absurd amalgamation of narrative levels is perfect.

The boundaries between man and animal, acted and spontaneous behavior, representation and life, are broken down bit by bit: The irritated trainers playact in an attempt to make sense of their director's opaque, rhymed directions. Whether the video's focus is a "first nature" or an artificially produced "second nature" becomes almost unimportant. And thus Ben-Ner's video, shown here together with "The Making of Second Nature," a 2009 series of sketches in felt-tip pen on paper, also endows the very concept of "second nature" with its own complexity. In his visible accentuation of the setting's artificiality, he demonstrates that any identity is constructed and is thus only a role, but also that no "freedom" can be derived from this insight—the hierarchically structured rules of behavior maintain their force. Life itself appears as an impenetrable, absurd theater in which all are bound to fulfill their prescribed roles as best they can without the slightest deviation from their "nature."

That alone could suffice as the proverbial "moral of the story," but one can push the game further. The trainers visibly carry out the arbitrary measures of their director. Why do they do so, and thus let themselves be thoroughly tamed? Like the fox and the crow, they are also rewarded for the work they perform—not in the form of a sweet treat, but with a promised fee. These are the real rules of the game. The video itself doesn't show that end point, instead concluding with the successful filming of the fable—the complete work, as it were. But what remains, as the undiscussed and necessarily invisible framework, is the hard-and-fast logic of economics.

—Dominikus Müller

Translated from German by Emily Speers Mears.