

# SINGING IN ANIMAL TONGUES

## An Inner Journey

**Jan Harrison**

“**A**nimal tongues” is a language I speak and sing. It acts as a bridge to the world beneath the surface, and it enables me to live and see clearly. It is the voice of the Other—the animal soul, consciousness, and spirit. Animal tongues is not a literal portrayal of animal sounds, but it expresses the animal spirit within human beings and within the world through speaking and singing in tongues. High and low voices, innocent and knowledgeable, interact in a ritual of chanting and singing.

The origins of my speaking in animal tongues can be traced to my earliest memories. All of the events in my life, all of the different forms my art would take, have contributed to and led to this language, which is part of my identity. The animals are within us, within our subconscious. I see a connection with phylogeny, as the beings in animal tongues are re-living all of our collective paths. They remind us of our connections with other animals, with the earth, with ourselves, and with nature.

I have recollections from my childhood of imaginary friends, private worlds, and communication with both domestic and feral animals in the neighborhood where I lived in south Florida in the 1950s. My father left when I was seven, and I was raised by my mother. It was a solitary life, as we were forced to move often because we couldn't afford to pay the rent. Although briefly exposed to traditional religion in my childhood, I was reluctant to connect with it. For instance, when my mother sent me to walk to church on Sundays, I would take a detour, and would go instead to a wild-looking garden, where I could feel empathy with the spiders, lizards, birds, cats, and dogs. This may be the source of my connections with deep ecology and ecotheology, but of course I didn't call it that back then. Feeling great empathy with the natural world, I would disconnect from the dysfunctional events around me enter abandoned houses, and create worlds that often included animals. Narratives would come into being as a result of what I saw and experienced while spending time alone in the houses or the gardens.

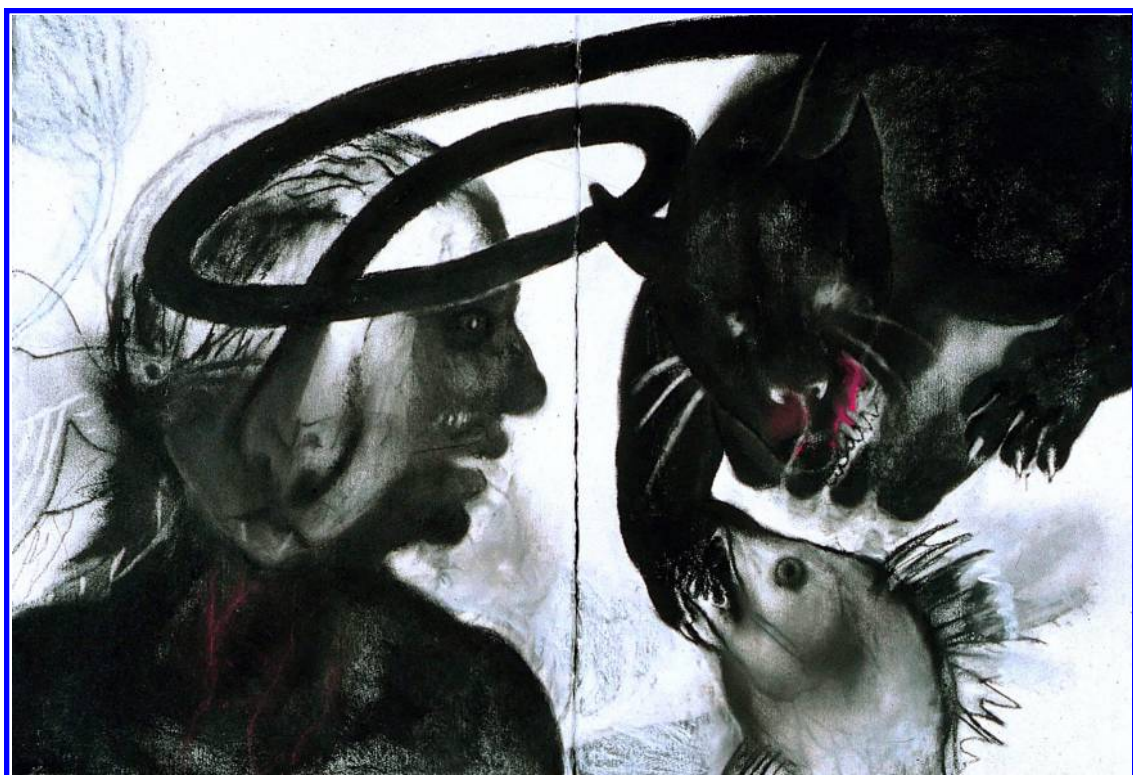
The narratives I told as a child would often involve animals and humans communicating with each other, expressing what they loved and feared in the world. One

story occurred when I entered a large room on the second floor of an unoccupied Spanish-style stucco house similar to many older houses in West Palm Beach, where I lived. There was a very large window, and at the foot of the window were about thirty pairs of childrens' shoes, all lined up on the floor beneath the window. I made up a story that the children had removed their shoes and had flown out of the window, chanting and singing as they flew away. Characters in the stories would perform rituals, which involved dancing and clapping hands, and the animals in my imagination would wave their tails around in a curvilinear motion. The imaginary beings would caress each other while laughing and sobbing. Narratives would include animal ancestors, because I believed our animal forebears were buried beneath the cast concrete statues of lions that had been placed as sentries at the entrance of some of the old houses I visited. Many of the stories involved scenarios of humans being assisted by animals. I spoke and sang of the purity of animals, as well as the plight, persecution, and suffering of animal saints.

When I was eight or nine years old, people said that I had a beautiful voice, and I was occasionally asked to sing at weddings, in school plays, and in performances in the neighborhood for small groups of people. I remember once when singing for a group of people in their garden, someone requested that I sing a particular song. I refused, and at that point made a decision that would remain with me for the rest of my life. I decided against performing as an entertainer, preferring instead to sing with all the beings of the Earth.

I made early drawings as a child, on the sidewalks, alleys, and streets, with the soft white rocks indigenous to south Florida that could be found on the side of the road. The rock drawings were of sea creatures and humans. Sometimes they were mermaids, and sometimes they were abstracted circles and swirls. The drawings were very large, and I would create a ritual with them, standing in parts of the images and chanting. Water became a part of the rockdrawing rituals. I would spray water with high pressure from the garden hose, which would create circular white lines in the mossy surface growth on the concrete sidewalks. The songs included in the sidewalk rituals were celebrating a connection with all of the elements of the Earth. I would lie on top of the chalk-like drawings of the sea creatures, and they would take me to an imaginary underwater universe. The stories were of graceful and clumsy sea beings who would bathe me, swim with me, and offer a new life.

Communicating with animals helped me to realize another kind of intelligence, which was non-linear and more visual. I have dyslexia, and learning to read was difficult. Right and left are confusing to me. I get lost easily. It is hard to retain factual information. Singing in animal tongues enabled me to be in touch with another part of my perception of the world. Its form of circular chanting helped me to communicate with the wisdom of my body, and by extension, with all the world. When I speak and sing in animal tongues, I feel as though the voices are coming from the cells of my body, and through the songs and stories, I can feel the wonder of the universe.





Opposite: Jan Harrison, *Now You See Me*, diptych, 1996, charcoal, pastel and gouache on rag paper, 30.25 x 44.5 inches. Photo: Nancy Donskoj. This page: *Animal Tongues*, 1999, bisque-fired porcelain sculptures on pine needles with, 15 x 37 feet. Photo: Tony Walsh. Courtesy the artist.

The speaking and singing, which began long ago, was abandoned for many years, and virtually forgotten during my “formal” training as an artist. But, after a major life change in the late 1970s, I began to reconnect with the private language and the rituals of my childhood.

Dreams have always been important messages to me. The following is a dream from 1979:

I was walking by a river, and I came upon a bird. The bird was very beautiful and very perfect. I wanted to talk to the bird, but I didn't know how. I looked at the bird, and saw that around the bird's neck was a shiny medallion. Then I looked and saw that around my own neck was a shiny medallion. I touched the medallions together. And, at that point, the bird began to sing in a language I understood.

The voices in animal tongues often engage in a dialogue, but it is not always a linear narrative. It is more circular and dreamlike. The voices do not necessarily tell a story; they often describe a place or a state of being. When the characters in animal tongues are singing and talking, the deeper sounding voices seem to be saying, “Look at the world, look at me. Be strong and knowledgeable.” The higher sounding voices seem to say, “I am pure and light. I am innocent. Please don't make me have to die.” When the voices are joyous, they sing about dancing, swimming in clear blue water, and living. When the voices are angry or melancholy, they speak about being forgotten, or being abused, and becoming extinct. When the voices are rhythmic, they sing or chant about mystery and things we don't know. When the voices are sensual, they speak and sing about caressing. When the voices are mischievous, they utter sounds about shadowy things that aren't what they seem to be.

I can remember complete passages from the beginning of the emergence of animal tongues, and the songs have recurred after many years. When singing in animal tongues, my emotional memory transports me to a place, a landscape that seems familiar. I walk by a stream. I put my feet into the water, and it feels pure and cold. My feet feel the smooth rocks in the streambed. Different beings converge there, and they want to speak and sing. The various beings want to “come down” and tell their story. There is a parallel between the beings in my visual art and the characters singing in animal tongues. For instance, the primate who possesses a deep gaze and powerful presence in a specific painting may emerge through the speaking and singing of animal tongues as having a deeply urgent-sounding, empowered voice. The joyous cat in the sculpture may emerge in the singing of animal tongues to be expressing a beautiful and mysterious love song. But the implication is not that the images in the paintings and sculptures are illustrations of the characters singing in animal tongues. Instead they are a manifestation in physical form of the singing beings. Animal tongues does not have direct “translations,” since meanings of individual words or phrases remain abstract. The sounds in animal tongues cannot be translated into codified language, any more than a painting or sculpture can be

completely translated into words. This is not to say that the language is meaningless: I see it as a vocal enactment of beings in the paintings and sculptures, and a paradigm of how we can communicate with living creatures. It is a way to establish contact with the mystery of animals.

In 1979, I consciously began speaking in animal tongues, after having completed *The Tongue Drawing*, a mixed-media collage/drawing installation, on tongue-shaped pieces of paper, waterproofed, and attached to a drinking water fountain. *The Tongue Drawing*, which had to do with animal courtship and sexuality, involved the viewer/participant drinking from the fountain—the water would flow down the attached pieces of paper. When *The Tongue Drawing* was being exhibited at The Contemporary Arts Center in Cincinnati, Ohio, it was periodically installed on a drinking water fountain in a nearby park. While displaying the piece, I began to tape record people's reactions. It was during that time that I began to acknowledge animal tongues as an integral extension of, and complement to, my visual work. It was also then that I realized the connection between the title, *The Tongue Drawing*, and my actual speaking, singing, and later performing in animal tongues.

In 1980, I did a series of very large charcoal works on paper. Then, as I still do, I worked on the floor, and would sit in the middle of the pieces as I drew them. Some, such as *The Abyss Crossing*, are narrative and processional in nature, with one character, “the innocent Bloodhorse,” crossing over to the other character, “the knowledgeable Cat.” While working, I would take a break, look at the images, and sing in animal tongues, sitting in the middle of the drawings. In the resulting songs, the Cat possessed a dark, mysterious voice, as if she knew the secrets of the world. The Bloodhorse, a hybrid of a horse and a dog-like character, sounded innocent and vulnerable, and spoke and sang with a very high child-like voice. In the singing of animal tongues, the two voices intertwined, one blending with the other, and simultaneously, the two visual entities in the large charcoal drawing crossed paths in order to reach the other side. The large drawing, *The Abyss Crossing*, evolved with no pre-planning. As the Bloodhorse emerged in the drawing, I would look at the image and sing in a high voice. As the Cat established her presence in *The Abyss Crossing*, I would sit near her image, in the middle of the drawing, and sing in her mysterious, low voice.

Masks and mask-like shapes have been a part of my art from the very beginning. Masks enable me to get beneath the surface. Instead of concealing, the mask reveals the true nature of the character or being, a reversal of the usual understanding of the term. Often the mask-like shapes are organic extensions of the animals or humans in the visual art. An essential part of the creation of my work has to do with caressing the surface of the painting or sculpture. As the surface is rubbed and caressed, the animals go through a metamorphosis. They grow mask-like shapes as the work progresses. An early example is *The Cruel Eclipse* (1986, pastel on rag paper). During the creation of the work, the beings began to sing in their own voices. They became anthropomorphic characters in a play. At that time in my life I had become active

in the animal rights movement, and my work expressed what I had learned about abuse to animals, and how that reflects our relationship with the world. The drawing was created in layers, changing many times as I worked. As I sang in animal tongues, the characters in the songs acted out and evolved. The voice of the human blended and intertwined with the voice of the primate, and, at the same time, the primate in the painting developed a mask.

In addition to the early works on paper, in the 1980s I also did a series of very large paintings on wood panels, on doors, which had edges that were angled and attached together to create large semi-circular spaces. Images of interacting humans and animals were painted on the front and back. These paintings, *The Serpentine Wall Series*, were narrative in content, and the semi-circular shape gave the viewer a feeling of being embraced by the space. They were not flat paintings on a wall; instead, viewers experienced being within a painted diorama. The figures in the paintings looked out and invited the viewer to join them and to participate in a ritual of the reunion between animal and human. *The Serpentine Wall Series* told the story of humans and animals converging on a wall of steps positioned along a river. The human and animal beings were all holding a green cord, which I called “the life-line.” They were witnessing a coming together, and they reached out, inviting the viewers to enter their world. I had not yet performed in animal tongues for an audience. However, there was now an implied performance, as the figures in the paintings were standing on a series of steps in a stage-like composition, as if the creatures were participating in a play. I was living in Cincinnati at the time, which is home to the Serpentine Wall, along the embankment of the Ohio River. The geometry of the Serpentine Wall forms an amphitheatre, where performances regularly occur and are encouraged.

During the following years, I continued my interest in creating spaces. *Divining House* was a 1986 collaboration with my partner, architect Alan Baer. It was a site-specific structure in The Federal Reserve Plaza, at the former site of The Contemporary Arts Center, Cincinnati. The name *Divining House* implies tapping subconscious and unconscious resources. When the participants entered, they could sit on benches, which were an integral part of the structure. The participants would view a frieze and murals painted on the walls, which contained small glazed organic-shaped windows. The walls were wood, and the roof was canvas to let light inside. The canvas roof was supported by painted telephone poles, with the ends carved into hooves. *Divining House* included a frieze depicting primates, cows, horses, and humans interacting. The painted frieze told the story of animal abuse and rescue. Masks in the frieze paintings emerged in unusual places, with masks coming from the back of the head of a sleeping human, instead of being attached to the face. Also, in the frieze painting, a bandaged research primate looked out at the viewer. There were no right angles inside the structure, which gave the participant a feeling of being inside something alive and organic. Inside, sitting and viewing the frieze and murals, I was inspired to sing in animal tongues. By that time, I had also recorded the language

in conjunction with various animal sounds of whales, wolves, cats, and birds, and I began to sing with the voices of wild and domestic animals.

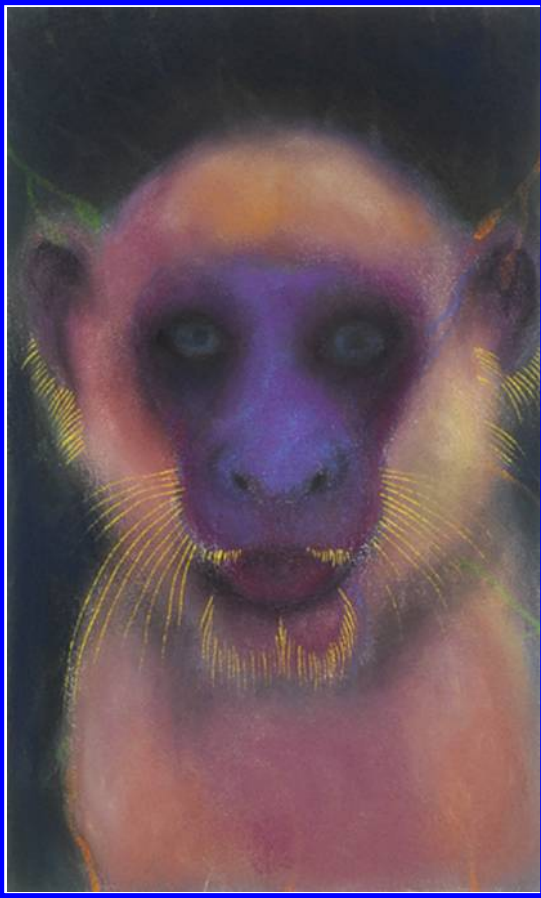
In 1989, Alan Baer and I moved to Ulster County, in upstate New York. The move was a perfect plateau for realizing the potential of all of my work, including animal tongues, because there is a spirit in the area of being close to nature. My studio, the second floor of our house, an 1869 three-story brick Victorian, which is covered in vines, is a fitting location for the animal voice to find and express itself. Our backyard, while small, contains a microcosm of the forest complete with groundhogs, squirrels, opossums, skunks, and snakes. We go on hikes in the Catskills often and walk along streams very similar to the ones envisioned in my early childhood stories and songs.

I created a series of charcoal and pastel diptych works on rag paper in the 1990s, in which beings, both animal and human, would travel from one side to the other, with the figures merging together. The quasi-animated actions within these works were not pre-planned, but instead happened through the physical act of doing them. During this time the voices in animal tongues began to include a number of distinct sounds, which intersected and merged together. The sounds ranged from high-pitched pleading to low murmuring whispers. The merging of animal and human images involved transformations coming from a great struggle. In *Now You See Me* (1996; diptych; charcoal, pastel, and gouache on rag paper), the characters changed and evolved as though they were acting in a play. I sang in the various voices of the different characters in the painting as the work came into being. Although I was not yet presenting animal tongues as a performance, I introduced speaking and singing in the language within lectures about my art. Simultaneously, I was beginning to respond to the sequential nature of my visual work, incorporating the characters moving in space, and noting that the movement was happening over time. I began to include recordings of animal tongues with exhibitions of the visual art.

In the 1990s I began doing porcelain sculptures of animals and hybrids, such as *Tendril Birdfish*. This led to a large installation, *Animal Tongues*, which was exhibited for the first time in 1998, in *Animal.Anima.Animus*, an exhibition curated by Linda Weintraub and Marketta Seppälä at Porin Taidemuseo in Finland. It was also shown at the Museum voor Moderne Kunst, Arnhem, Holland, and in a solo exhibition, *Arcana Mundi*, at the Weston Art Gallery in Cincinnati. *Animal Tongues* included numerous sculptures of animals, on the wall, and on the floor on a deep bed of dried pine needles. A tape recording of my speaking and singing in the language was included with the installation. I performed in *Animal Tongues* in Finland in conjunction with the exhibition.

In 2005 the video, *My Other Tongue—Jan Harrison*, was created by Jenny Fox, and included my singing while working in the studio. During that time I created sculptures of animal heads, in both porcelain and beeswax. After completing a series





Top: Jan Harrison, *The Corridor Series Primate #31*, 2009, pastel and ink on rag paper, 30.25 x 22.5 inches. Bottom: *Cat With Raw Nose*, 2006, sculpture: beeswax, damar resin and encaustic, 6.25 x 6 x 8 inches. Exhibited as a sculpture, and also presented by the artist as a mask being in performance. This sculpture is included in *Animal Tongues—2009*, a video of performance with animal sculpture heads. Photos: Nancy Donskoj. Courtesy the artist.



of the mask-like heads, I began to hold them up and speak/sing through them, discovering that each sculpture has a different voice. Although I sing through the sculpture heads, they are not actually masks in the traditional sense of the word. They have their own innate quality and voice, and when I sing through them, it is through their voices. The first performance of *Animal Tongues*, using the animal sculpture heads while speaking and singing, was presented in conjunction with a solo exhibition, *Bestial Beings*, in 2007, at Cabaret Voltaire Art Center, Poughkeepsie, New York. A video was made of the live performance, *Jan Harrison, Bestial Beings—Mask Performance*.

In 2009, I performed and had dialogues in animal tongues in an evening of multiple interactive performances and videos by poets, visual artists, and musicians, including George Quasha, Gary Hill, Charles Stein, and David Arner, in *Talking Tongues and Other Organs*, at The Kleinert James Art Center, Woodstock, New York. The key premise of the event was: “no English was spoken”—that communication has as much, or more, to do with intonation (and theatrics) as direct translation or traditional understanding of words. The participants had lively conversations and sometimes long discussions in tongue-like languages. The entire event melded unknown spoken “foreign” languages with visual art, including sculpture, musical performance, video, and a performance creating visual art onstage. *Talking Tongues and Other Organs* made the transition from visual to literary, and extended into the realm of experimental poetry, as well as improvisational interaction with other participants. While there was a loose framework established for the entire event, the extemporaneous components came together to create a form of theatre.

*The Corridor Series*, a series of pastel and ink iconic works on paper of primates, dogs, cats, birds, and other animals, is a project I began in 2009. The series is ongoing, and has grown to more than seventy works. As the work developed, I discovered that when viewing one after the other, the images of the animals appear to move in progression, like an animation. Simplifying the recent paintings and sculptures to portrait-like heads has revealed their essence as an intimate connection. In *The Corridor Series*, animals exist in both ecological and psychological corridors. They are taking a stand, vanishing, and returning. They are on the outside, inviting you either to join them, or to invite them into the viewing realm. *The Corridor Series* is both autobiographical and universal, having to do with personal feelings of various states of empowerment and expressing the similar states and plight of the animal nature. Some of the animals in the series express humor, some are calmly meditative, some are dark and wild, some are anxious and fearful, and some express love and empathy towards the viewer. They seem to express a willingness to share their mystery. I have sung in animal tongues while creating this series and have discovered that each being in the portraits has its own voice. I am currently working to create a video of the images transitioning and moving in progression that will include my speaking and singing in animal tongues.

We live with five cats, all rescued strays, and one feral cat. They have influenced my art, and they respond when I am singing in animal tongues. I have performed in the

forest, with birds as well as with other animals. Each time there is interaction the language repertoire grows. If the beings in my visual art could speak, this is what they would be saying. For me, animal tongues is their voice, and an integral part of my complete body of work. It is the voice of the animal.

---

JAN HARRISON's work has been seen in more than one hundred solo and group exhibitions throughout the United States and internationally, including *Animal.Anima.Animus* and at P.S. 1, in Long Island City, New York. *Arcana Mundi*, a book spanning twenty years of her work, was published in 2001 by Station Hill. An early recording of animal tongues was released on the album, *On Record*, which included audio art and music by artists, and an example of singing in animal tongues was included in the video documentary, *Jan Harrison—Painter*. The video *My Other Tongue—Jan Harrison* features the artist speaking and singing while creating art in the studio. In the video, *Jan Harrison—Animal Tongues* the artist performs with the animal sculpture heads.