

HOLIDAY IN ARCADIA

BRITISH DESIGNER THOMAS THWAITES IS INTERVIEWED BY PAN, THE PIPER AT THE GATES OF DAWN

Capering through science and philosophy



Tim Bouditch

CAPRICIOUS NATURE. After months of research and prosthetic development, designer Thomas Thwaites spent six days living as a goat in the Swiss Alps.

THE merry bubble and joy, the thin, clear, happy call of distant piping. Such music never dreamed of; it calls many, but only a few will hear.

Thomas Thwaites, a natural philosopher from the Emerald Isle, was suffering from a very modern malaise. Following the success of his previous venture called The Toaster Project — a master’s thesis that turned into a popular book that turned into a television series — Thwaites found himself underemployed and living at his father’s. Consumed by that uniquely human trait, anxiety, Thwaites observed an animal blithely going about its animal existence, anxiety free. So Thwaites decided to become an animal himself. Following a short elephantoid detour, Thwaites made the superlative choice to become a goat.

That decision really warmed the cockles of my Arcadian heart. There was a time not too long ago — and one, I foresee, that will return sooner than expected — when a great portion of humanity wanted to commune with goats. And it was to me, the helper, the healer, that they prayed and made offerings in the hope of winning my favour and guidance.

Thwaites, blinkered by reason as he was, did not call upon me. But the ambition, even the foolhardiness, of his quest caught my attention. He went to extraordinary lengths to pursue his strange vision. First, he sought out a shaman to explore humankind’s spiritual connection, ages old, to the animal world. “People have been trying to bridge the gap between animal and human always. *Always*,” the shaman is quoted as saying in Thwaites’s new book, *GoatMan: How I Took a Holiday from Being Human*. “Really, to want to become a goat is pretty standard,” writes Thwaites. “In fact, historically speaking, it’s almost odder to not want to become a goat.”

Next, he visited a goat shelter to understand the capricious nature of goats. Then he approached a dedicated team of technicians who custom-make prosthetic limbs for disabled humans. They helped craft his goaty appendages so that he could move about on all fours and forage for grass. He even tried, unsuccessfully it turns out, to develop an artificial stomach or rumen so that he might live off grass.

In his book, Thwaites writes engagingly of his discoveries and the characters he met, most of whom were ready to assist the determined explorer, enjoying, like me, the ambition and the folly of it all. (For his efforts, Thwaites

was awarded an Ig Nobel Prize, a satirical version of the Nobel Prize, one that honours achievements “that first make people laugh, and then make them think.”)

The book ends with Thwaites joining a small herd of goats and its family of goat-herders in a remote village in the Swiss Alps, struggling valiantly to keep up with the herd.

I have not confronted such dedication, nor felt such devotion, for aeons. So I summoned him from his human abode in London with music, piping the low, sweet strain that reaches only the ears of a chosen few.

Be not afraid, mortal.
I am not afraid.

What was your favourite discovery from your time living among goats?
It was nice to learn about these animals which I hadn’t really thought about before, to find in this species such lovely animals, so curious, so energetic and busy. It was nice to find this animal I could feel a kind of kinship with.

Yes, those are key traits of goats. But to my horror, you avoided the rutting season on purpose. Sex, and lots of it, is one of the best things about being a goat. I should know.
As I wrote in my book, as a human, I don’t want to have “relations” with a goat. But what if I manage to be a goat so well that I do? This is a conundrum: wanting to be a goat necessarily implies wanting to have sex with other goats; hence the success of my project would be resoundingly demonstrated if such an act were to take place. So I just sidestepped the whole issue.

What an outrage! And that goat number 18 that you wrote about. She was really hot for you. Such a waste. It is the curse of you so-called natural philosophers. Or do you prefer the modern term “scientist”?
I’m a designer. At least that’s what the last educational achievement certificate I got said on it.

You researched and developed your prosthetics for many months, then lived as a goat for just under a week. What was the most disappointing failure you faced?
On projects like these I have to make compromises. But then there are those compromises

that are forced upon me. So the rumen, that was difficult. I really wanted to digest grass and live like other goats. I had this idea of using the bacteria and fungi from inside a goat and cultivating that for use in my own stomach. I thought that was going to be pretty fun, that, wow, maybe this could be a new sort of technology. When I’m in a project my vision kind of narrows significantly, everything is like, “Ya, that’s a brilliant brilliant idea.” Then being told that I really shouldn’t do it, that was difficult. I didn’t want to be going to the doctor for the next six years with a stomach problem. Another compromise I had forced upon me was not being able to gallop. That was just kind of impossible to make happen. I spent a lot of time trying to work out this way of running along on four legs.

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What was the most surprising success?
I got really interested in the history of it. Before visiting the shaman, I didn’t really make the connection between what I was doing and the history of what humans have been doing in the past, so I didn’t make that kind of spiritual connection before. I was pleased that the project widened out a bit with more of a philosophical edge.

How does GoatMan fit into your approach to design?
I did a strange design course at the Royal College of Art which explored this newish area of design, one that recognizes the downfall of modernism that’s reflected in other spheres. Design is usually thought of as making stuff to solve problems. This new approach involves a recognition that, maybe, designing something new or developing a new technology isn’t always going to solve a problem, it might be the problem itself. So I started looking for problems. With The Toaster Project, where I built a toaster from scratch, I wanted to look at all the stuff we have and open our eyes to how incredible and

advanced even the most mundane thing is, how much energy and thought and time goes into it. It was a reaction against a position common in some ecological circles that the answer lies in localism and retreat and going back to primitive times and making our own stuff. And I suppose with the goats, it was the the opposite. GoatMan was a reaction against the post-human, advanced technological perspective, where someone could expect to become a more primitive animal with the help of technological wizardry. The fact that I wasn’t able to make a successful prosthetic rumen just shows how far away we are from being as intricate and advanced as aspects of the natural world. I’m definitely arguing against extremes.

What are you working on now?
I’m making films on sustainability for the Design Museum in London. It starts off with two rocks discussing the rise of mammals over the course of a billion years. So I’m just working on what rocks would say to each other, if they could talk about the problem of mammals over the course a billion years, the problem of life.

Aha. I must tell Hades. That old chthonic god loves anything about rocks. But that project sounds so ambitious. You started GoatMan to escape the pressures of your limited human existence. It seems you’re back to your old ways.
Yes, I need to get back to the goats and refresh. I’ve redone the back legs using what I learnt from being in the Alps, so it’s improving. Maybe I’ll get to gallop still.

Why did you end your book enigmatically? You are wandering alone as a goat across the Swiss Alps, then you write, “I trip-trap, trip-trap across the bridge from the real world into fantasy.”
I guess I could have gone further, and then hurt myself. I remember thinking maybe it would be a good ending if I broke my leg or something. But I’m just not about that sort

of endurance art. I was trying to forget myself not hurt myself. I mean, an animal would have needed to be driven to do something like that, driven by force, or by running away from some predator or something. The only predator I had was an idea, the idea of doing the project, a kind of social predator. In the end, walking across the Alps was just not feasible, so ultimately it was a fairy-tale ending.

A fairy tale? But I was there. As then, so now. For this is the last best gift that a kindly demigod is careful to bestow on those to whom he has revealed himself in their helping: the gift of forgetfulness. Lest the awful remembrance should remain and grow, and overshadow mirth and pleasure, and the great haunting memory should spoil all the after-lives of little animals helped out of difficulties, in order that they should be happy and light-hearted as before. For your song-dream is very dear to me, Master Thwaites. Can you hear it, playing just across the bridge? “Lest the awe should dwell/ And turn your frolic to fret/ You shall look on my power at the helping hour/ But then you shall forget!” □

Goatman: How I Took a Holiday from Being Human. By Thomas Thwaites. Princeton Architectural Press. 2016. thomasthwaites.com.

DESIGN FOR LIVING. Thwaites’s books explore two extremes in design thought: that you can design your way out of any problem, and that design itself might be the problem.

