

Antennae

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The Death of the Animal

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EDITORIAL

ANTENNAE ISSUE 5

The 5th issue of *Antennae* is half-humorously titled after Walter Benjamin's famous essay 'The Death of the Author'. Do works of art involving the killing of animals speak about animality or more about the artist who stages the killing? Where do we draw a line? Ethically and morally, that is.

In 2006 the seminal book *Killing Animals*, by 'The Animal Studies Group' explored the ways in which societies past and present manage the concept of animal killings in various cultural arenas. In the essay, 'Animal Death in Contemporary Art' Steve Baker poses a key question: "Can contemporary art productively address the killing of animals?" This issue of *Antennae* partly explores this question focusing on metaphorical and physical killing of animals within the exhibiting space.

In January 2008 we asked H-Animal's (the online-resource website for Animal Studies Scholars) readers to put forward questions for an interview with Marco Evaristti, the controversial artist creator of *Helena*, the art installation involving the liquidizing of live goldfish in the gallery space. We were snowed up with questions as our original request triggered one of the most heated threads the site has hosted to date. In this issue, we publish Evaristti's answers along with extracts from the contributions featured in H-Animal's thread (to read the whole thread please visit <http://www.h-net.org/~animal/>)

You'll also find us exploring the original creations of John Isaacs whose work brings to physical existence the sometimes volatile nature of modern anxieties through the creation of violent imagery involving dying, already dead, and disturbingly disfigured animals. Brian Hill, BAFTA winner filmmaker, takes us through the walls of the slaughterhouse to discover the relationship between the animals that will be killed and their killers. As per usual *Antennae* aims at showcasing some newer talents along with established ones – this time we take a look at the 'beautifully decaying' work of Noelle Allen and the photographic work of Claire Brunner.

Lastly, our conversation with Sue Coe closes the issue. Coe, an artist whose sensitivity for animal and human rights issues is expressed through her breathtaking illustrations, is a legend and inspiration amongst animal rights proponents around the world.

This 5th issue of *Antennae* also marks its first birthday. We'd like to take the opportunity to thank all the artists and writers who have contributed with their hard work to the success of our first year. A warm thank you goes to all our readers around the world. Special thanks to Steve Baker, Jonathan Burt, Garry Marvin, Erica Fudge, Sally Borrell, Dirk Verdonk, Nigel Rothfel, Philip Armstrong and H-Animal for their support.

Giovanni Aloï

Editor in Chief of Antennae Project

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Slaughterhouse: The Task of Blood is a controversial documentary by BAFTA award winning filmmaker Brian Hill. The film shows the process of meat production as animals are killed, butchered, and stored in fridges before being transported to retail outlets; in the process, it reveals the attitudes of the workers to their task, their colleagues and life.

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In January, after securing an interview with Marco Evaristti, we asked H-Animal's readers to send us questions to be put forward to the artist. Whilst achieving its original aim, our request also sparked one of the longest and most intense debates featured on the website so far. Here we have collated the most interesting exchanges – to read the thread in full, please visit <http://www.h-net.org/~animal/>

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The physical presence of the animal in the exhibiting space presents a number of challenges. This article specifically looks at the killing of animals in the gallery, trying to map the paradigmatic set involving the killing for art's sake.

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Sue Coe, one of the most committed activist artists in America, has during her thirty-five-year career charted an idiosyncratic course through an environment that is at best ambivalent toward art with overt socio-political content.

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THE AESTHETIC OF LIVINGNESS

This talk is going to explore a number of issues in relation to animals and aesthetics. Overall, the question I am posing has to do with the place of animal imagery in human-animal relations. One of my suggestions is that images, or rather image making, has the same importance as other forms of practices within the biodynamics of human-animal relations, because of the constraints on inter-species communication.

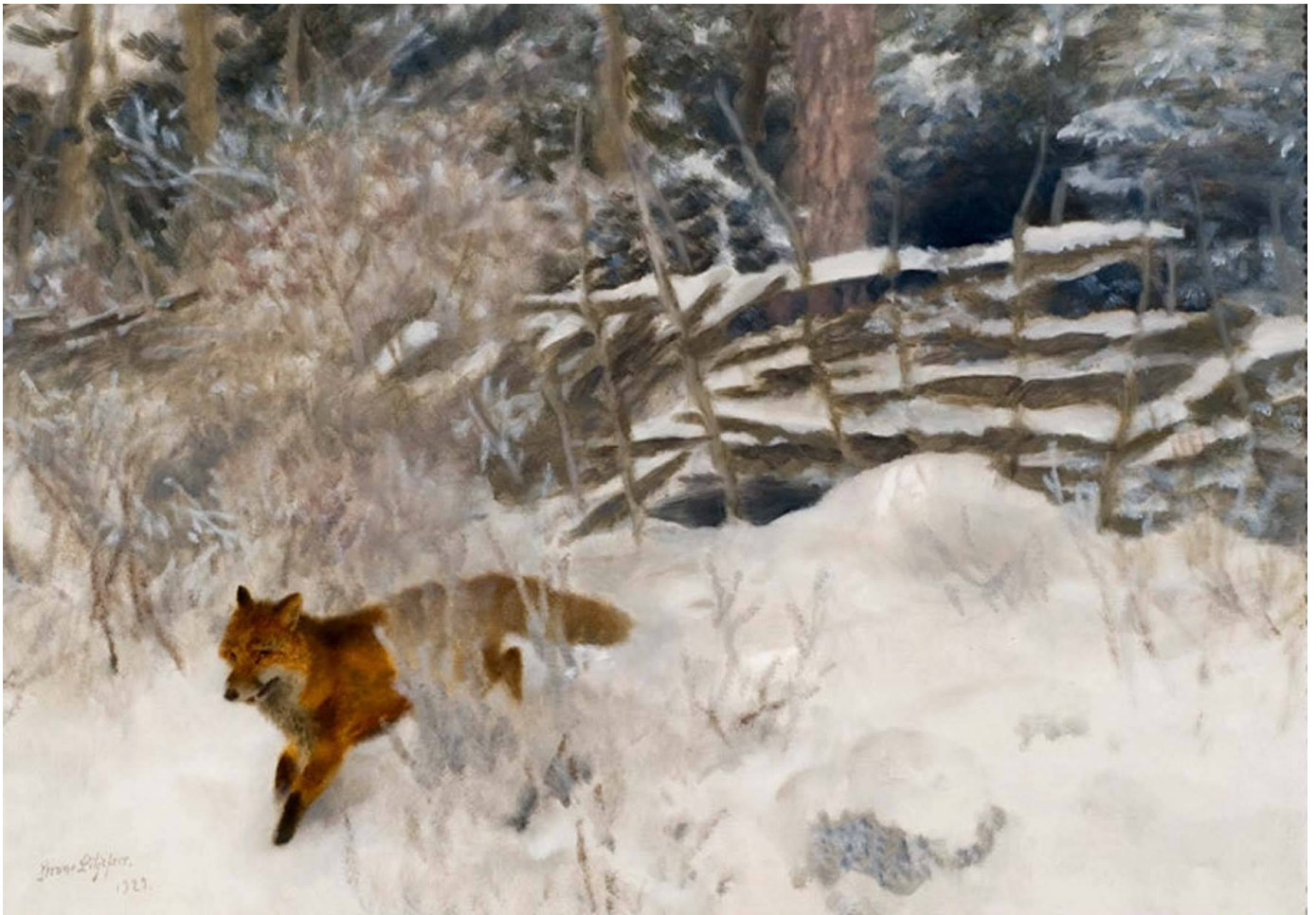
*Text by **Jonathan Burt***

I am going to start with two quotes. The first is from an article by Martin Herbert published in *Art Review* in 2000, which I've put in for Nigel's benefit. It reads, 'sometimes there is nothing to say about a line, but there's always something to say about an elephant.' And the second is from Marc Chagall. 'And so if in a painting I cut off the head of a cow, if I put the head upside down, if I have sometimes worked my paintings the wrong way up, it is not to make literature. It is to give my picture a psychic shock that is always motivated by plastic reasons ... If finally, one nevertheless discovers a symbol in my picture, it was strictly unintentional on my part.' Here are two conditions of response to the animal in art; something to say and nothing to say. Most of what I am talking about today starts out from this conundrum. This problem deepens when we consider the fact that questions of how we address the animal figure, how we speak to it, from it and of it, parallels the question of how we speak of the artwork. How do we meet the challenge of the inadequacy of language before or in the artwork? Furthermore, entangled with these questions are those artists who seek identification with the animal for all manner of reasons: ritual, aesthetic, psychological, sexual, escapist, or political. A short list of these artists would range across the century from Max Ernst and Leonora Carrington to Frieda Kahlo, Joseph Beuys, Toledo, and more recently Oleg Kulik, Zhang Huan, and Tania Bruguera. Apollinaire's words to the effect that 'artists are above all men who want to become inhuman' seem pertinent here, but the fact that the word is 'inhuman' and not 'animal' already opens up a discourse around art, language and identity that pushes towards the edges of human expression and identity. Which sometimes pretty much amounts to the same thing.

On even brief consideration, we can already see how this particular entanglement of the animal with the aesthetic, centres on a problematic relation with language. In fact, this awkward and unstable triad of

animal, art, and language, should be an important consideration in any analysis of twentieth century animal art. However, there is another possible argument here, which implicitly opposes my version of the elision of the animal with the aesthetic. This suggests that the links between the animal and the aesthetic are determined by the fact that art is a thoroughly human activity that freely turns to selected objects and media as it chooses. A history of twentieth century animal art based on this view would be an inventory of artistic genres in which the animal is merely one malleable object amongst many. Here, art epitomises what it is to be human, and perhaps I should add, confidently and unproblematically so. Paul Crowther has argued, in a book entitled *Art and embodiment: from aesthetics to self-consciousness*, published in 1993, that art objects are expressions of 'freedom', available for recognition by others and creating a reciprocal relation between 'our sense of freedom and our species identity.' Crowther believes that, whilst animals share in rudimentary form many of the capacities by which we humans are self-conscious (attention, comprehension, projection), 'mere animal consciousness' lacks a sense of species identity, personal freedom, and reversibility. Reversibility, incidentally, is defined as the capacity to see oneself as part of a broader phenomenological field. However, as Steve Baker has shown on numerous occasions, animal art poses all sorts of challenges to the idea of a coherent species identity, subverting not just the notion of the human but the animal as well.

Now the issue of species identity is not one I particularly want to get into today. Instead, my concern is with the relationship between the animal and the aesthetic, as in turn part of a bigger question about the general status of animal images and the limits of communicability. I believe, as I've written elsewhere, that there are detrimental ways in which the attempt to describe the gap between animal and image has relied too heavily on theories of the sign dominated by linguistics at the expense of the visual. And I will take



Bruno Liljefors
Winterfox, Oil on canvas - 56 x 82cm, 1929 ©

this up in some detail later. In the meantime I want to consider the very fine line between the phrases the animal *in* art, the animal *of* art, and the animal *as* art. For me, this issue is fundamentally a historical one. For instance, to what degree can we talk about the erosion of the borderline between the animal and the aesthetic in the early twentieth century? From the 1960s onwards, things like performance art and environmental art inevitably transformed the animal from art object to living artwork so the borderline between the animal and the aesthetic became much more evidently permeable. This is exemplified, for instance, by Mark Wallinger's *A real work of art* (1993). This painting depicts a racehorse of the same name, which the artist had bought and raced. As a thoroughbred the horse was already an artwork, though Wallinger well understands that this notion of the aesthetic is made up of many strands: 'the thoroughbred is itself an ambivalence ... [it is] instinct become eugenic theory become economics ... they [i.e. the horses] question their own construction as painting/bloodstock/trophy and reflect the desires of the viewer to fill out their missing dimensions.' The animal has the potential to do the work of art before it is ever an object for art; is always an inhabitant within the domain of aesthetics.

But even in the more classically figural artworks of the early twentieth century we find reasons, albeit

different, for this overlapping of the animal with the aesthetic. Wallinger's work on horses echoes Hubert Heseltine's quest to sculpt the ideal horse in 1912, a project, which developed further from 1921 onwards when he began his sculptural series of outstanding animals that had won prizes at British agricultural shows. The wildlife paintings of the Swedish artist Bruno Liljefors in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century offer a different example. What makes Liljefors' work so striking arises from his appreciation of the significance of colour and camouflage in situating creatures in the landscape? As a result, he actively engaged the viewer to search more carefully for the outlines of animals in his canvases, just as one would do as a hunter or an observer outdoors. Because hunting played such an important part in wildlife art, either as a practice or as a provider of animal models in the work of Liljefors, Carl Rungius, Wilhelm Kuhnert, George Lodge, Louis Agassiz Fuertes, and Peter Scott amongst many others, we can see how the production of artworks is integral to some of the practices that dominate human-animal relations; in these instances, agriculture and hunting. There is an interesting contemporary version of this in the work of Olly and Suzi in which animals co-create the artwork. Their work has a sense of grandeur involving expeditions to stunning locations, and is recorded by a



Robert Rauschenberg

Monogram, 1955, Freestanding combine: oil, paper, fabric, printed paper, printed reproductions, metal, wood, rubber shoe heel, and tennis ball on canvas, with oil on Angora goat and rubber tire, on wood platform mounted on four casters; 42 x 63 1/4 x 64 1/2 in. Art © Robert Rauschenberg/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY

spectacular travelogue-style photography. This quest for what I take to be a kind of animal sublime, incorporates its own anti-sublime as the animal ignores, eats, defecates on, or walks across the artwork it is co-creating. We could continue these examples. For instance, we can note the significance of the slaughterhouse, and the centrality of meat in the human diet, for the work of Chaim Soutine, Francis Bacon, Damien Hirst, Carolee Schneeman, and Tania Bruguera.

Once one begins to look at all this artwork, and I am barely scratching the surface here, it begs the question as to why there are no adequate studies of animals in twentieth century art. Indeed, it seems to me that a history of twentieth century art is inadequate without this topic being taken into account. Steve Baker is one exception to this. However, he dismisses the significance of pre-postmodern animal art in his book *The Postmodern Animal*, either because it marks the absence of the animal or, when the animal does appear, it is not really addressed as such. In other words, it appears that the agenda of the artwork has nothing to do with animals but uses animal to point towards something else. This does not seem justified even for the small numbers of earlier artists I have mentioned so far, let alone the many more that I do not have time to

discuss from German expressionism, surrealism, art brut, to the Cobra collective and so on. There are also question marks for me over the adequacy of the term postmodern art as a genre which seems to begin, as the earliest illustrations in Baker's book implicitly suggest, with Picasso's *Bull's Head* of 1942, and Robert Rauschenberg's *Monogram* which dates from 1955-9. In the main, animal art history for the twentieth century is largely scattered through articles, magazines and exhibition catalogues. It is fragmentary and most of it is under-theorised. It is hard to offer more than some sketchy speculations why this is the case so I am going to avoid those. The marginalisation of the animal in academic study has been a longstanding difficulty. But I think one of the problems that is easily identifiable arises from the way that animal studies has derived its theoretical frameworks, not from considerations of the specifics of human-animal relations, from which one could work outwards both theoretically and historically, but has derived its tenets from the domain of human-human relations, and these conceived at quite an abstract level. Baker, for instance, is caught in an old trap of having to elevate his version of postmodernism via a negation of what is in effect a parodic version of what has gone before, rather than taking as a starting



Pablo Picasso

Detail, *Composition Study for Guernica*, (II), 1 May 1937, pencil on blue paper, 21x27cm, Museo Nacional de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid ©

point the specifics and variability of animal art. This also limits the possibilities of assessing the ways in which this highly complicated relation of the animal to the aesthetic has emerged out of particular configurations of human-animal relations in modernity.

However, I am not saying here that animal art is in any simple sense an expression of these relations because it invokes, as I mentioned at the beginning, the question of this double, self-reinforcing inexpressibility that is provoked by the conjunction of the animal *and* the aesthetic, a conjunction that is possibly implicit, or at least present in some form or other, in all human-animal relations. There are many levels to this. For instance, in Picasso's *Guernica*, painted in 1937, Baker conceives of the animals as a 'necessary part of the political symbolism', by which I think he means that they are simply allegorical, and to some extent this would be correct. But one can track these animals, the horse and the bull, through a much richer trajectory that begins with Picasso's first sketch for the painting drawn on the afternoon of the May Day rally in Paris in 1937, in which a million people marched in protest at the *Guernica*

bombing. This depicted a horse, a bull, and a woman. Picasso's passionate interest in bullfighting, which began as a young boy, is well known. "The bulls are in his very soul," Picasso's friend Hélène Parmelin has written. "The bullfighters are his cousins, the bullring is his home." He equated the family with the corrida.' But as the ramifications of the bull multiply, crossing back and forth from autobiography to Spanish culture, to politics to the plight of animals themselves, a matter of language also raises itself. The address to the animal that Baker sees as lacking in what he calls modernism is in fact an impossibility in the first place. Picasso's few, and much quoted statements on the animals in *Guernica* summarise this problem quite neatly, or rather confuse this problem quite neatly. He was, incidentally, notoriously reticent when it came to discussing the meanings of his work. In one response, related at second hand, Picasso denied that the animals in *Guernica* were symbolic as he painted them: 'this bull is a bull and this horse is a horse.' It is up to the public to see as it wishes. For Picasso himself, 'there are animals: these are massacred animals. That is all for me.' On another

occasion, Picasso did offer meanings for the bull, suggesting that it represented darkness and brutality, thus admitting a symbolic, or rather allegorical, function for *Guernica*. Whatever disingenuity there is in these remarks of Picasso, the disavowal and the explanation seem equally appropriate. They are rather like an optical illusion of a double figure, but where one can see both figures at the same time.

Obviously, we cannot be surprised that artworks offer multiple interpretations or prove themselves deeply enigmatic. But what I want to suggest here is that what we are dealing with is more than simply a problem of transparency or address, or for that matter opacity and muteness. Picasso's double answer, whatever the degree of seriousness we wish to attribute to it, also indicates that we are asking the wrong sort of question of an artwork. That we should perhaps take it as read that there would be more than one answer and that, by that peculiar economy of meaning we sometimes find, the over determination of the significance of the bull is precisely what makes it so enigmatic, and what drives us repeatedly to re-view it in order that we can grasp something of its dimensions as an image. Indeed, and this is reinforced by Picasso's personal life trajectory wrapped as it is around the bull, time is integral to the animal image both at the level of content and as a function of a particular structure of attention to the animal necessitated by the absence of language. Here we can begin to consider the implications of the physical postures of looking, the temporal structures of attention, what it means to return repeatedly to a painting, and in this instance through *Guernica* to the past, to one's home culture, and its seasonal, public, rituals of animal death. This in turn is set against a backdrop of a unique, and iconic, moment of mass killing. The layers of different constructs of time implied here are embodied by the famous photographic series that record different versions of *Guernica* as it emerges, the photographs like the skins of an animation. The bull is, incidentally, a constant figure throughout the successive versions of the painting. Furthermore, the question of the timing of the look, and memory, runs throughout discussions by wildlife artists of their craft. How to sketch quickly, key times of day for observation and the influence of different types of light whether daily or seasonal, how to depict a series of movements as an instant, whether photography is a help or a hindrance to the memory of, say, birds in flight. And from early on in the twentieth century the animal sits, or stands, or dies, across different constructs of temporality. Consider the tension between the mythical and the historical as they clash in the apocalyptic optimism of Franz Marc's *The Fate of the Animals* (1913), the time of physics explored in Giacomo Balla's *Dynamism of a dog on a leash* (1912), or the clash between the old world of the horse and the urban industrial future in Umberto Boccioni's painting *The city rises* (1910).

So, what are the implications for human-animal

relations when we consider the time and posture of looking as key elements in the formation of animal images? I want to begin by approaching this question in a slightly roundabout way by looking at what happens when we analyse the animal figure through what I am going to call a morbid perspective and then I am going to consider the paradigm of livingness, which I derive from vitalism.

It is difficult to avoid the presence of death, killing, and sacrifice at all levels of enquiry into animal representation. Within this arena of morbidity, the animal symbol or image is understood not so much as a sign of absence, or non-presence, but as a symptom of a deeper and more permanent loss. John Berger has famously exemplified this in his account of the disappearance or radical alienation of animals under capitalism, and these ideas can be found further explored, although in diverse ways, in the writings of Akira Lippit, Randy Malamud, Steve Baker, and Cary Wolfe, amongst many others. The structuring triad here, though it can take different configurations, is animal - sign - death. Furthermore, this is intensified by the fact that the symbolic networks that determine the relative status of living beings find their key dividing lines created and reinforced by the act of sacrifice: killing as the ground of difference. Understood as essential to the structure of subjectivity, culture and law, sacrifice is taken as defining the us and the them, it provides the criteria for the 'noncriminal putting to death', and the identity of those beings that it is acceptable to subject to total control. Sacrifice is the ground of classification for culture: 'we can see how the law of culture arranges its species significations on a kind of grid.' This inextricable linkage of animal symbols and death becomes further manifest in a bond between mourning and language that is somehow foundational to our sense of 'the animal'. In addition, the absence of the possession of 'language' by the animal is woven round with complex terminological strands: sacrifice, shame, redemption, and naming. In other words, terms that have their basis in classical and Biblical accounts. This suggests, in turn, an anachronism in thinking about animal representation in contemporary history at the very least, if not for an even longer period. Jacques Derrida, for instance, draws a direct line between himself and Adam in one of his late essays on the animal. 'I have been wanting to bring myself back to my nudity before the cat, since so long ago, since a previous time, in the Genesis tale, since the time when Adam, alias Ish, called out the animals' names before the fall, still naked but before being ashamed of his nudity.'

Two problems arise from this. One is the way that sacrifice inevitably invokes an ontotheology, thus structuring the idea of the animal around a particular kind of metaphysics. Second, the logic of sacrifice is treated as formative to notions of the animal in the contemporary world when methods of killing are so different. Let us take the first problem where we can see how the 'animal' becomes a writing effect that

piggy-backs on a more generalised, and inflated, concept of otherness. This is a sequential logic that I take again from Derrida. He elides the animal with the 'ahuman' or 'divinanimality', the 'quasi-transcendental referent'. The ahuman is the 'excluded, foreclosed, disavowed, tamed, and sacrificed foundation of what it founds, namely, the symbolic order, the human order, law and justice.' This leads in turn to a grandiose conflation: 'it is so difficult to utter a discourse of mastery or of transcendence with regard to the animal and to simultaneously claim to do it in the name of God, in the name of the Father or in the name of the Law. Must one not recognise Father, Law, Animal, and so on, as being, in the final analysis, the same thing – or, rather, indissociable figures of the same Thing? One could conjoin the Mother within that juncture and it would probably not change anything.' In a sense, yes this does show that sacrifice is fundamentally transformative, as the animal hovers between the status of god/goddess and victim, and that the signs produced by sacrifice are indeed arbitrary as the different components of the grand category of otherness become interchangeable. This is a semiotics of radical alienation, or perhaps it would be better to say deracination, but what happens when we ground it historically?

Derrida notes an unprecedented historical transformation that has taken place over the last 200 years in the treatment of animals, though he qualifies its novelty. 'This new situation can be determined only on the basis of a very *ancient* one.' However, in my opinion there has been a qualitative shift in killing that makes the idea of sacrifice less relevant. The formative, ritual and, above all, visible elements of the act of sacrifice, that give rise to the reinforcement of social and cultural identities, have no place in the contemporary scenes of killing in science, industry, and agriculture. There are, of course, exceptions to this especially in ritual celebrations such as wedding feasts, or the religious slaughter carried out during the Muslim festival of Eid ul-Adha, which commemorates the willingness of Ibrahim to sacrifice his son to God, and the end of the Hajj. However, in general the mass industrial scale of interventions in animal life does not feed the renewal and maintenance of boundaries around notions of 'culture' and the 'law', but applies instead to the maintenance and transformation of bodies. This calls for a very different kind of analysis from one rooted in the ordering of linguistic categories and issues of species identity, and needs rather to account for the ways in which the biosciences fragment, transform, and re-order the identities of all living beings. Second, the anachronistic connotations of the notion of sacrifice leads a constant retreat backwards into issues of language as exemplified by the invention of neologisms, for instance, the use of animot and animetaphor in the writings of Derrida and Lippit.

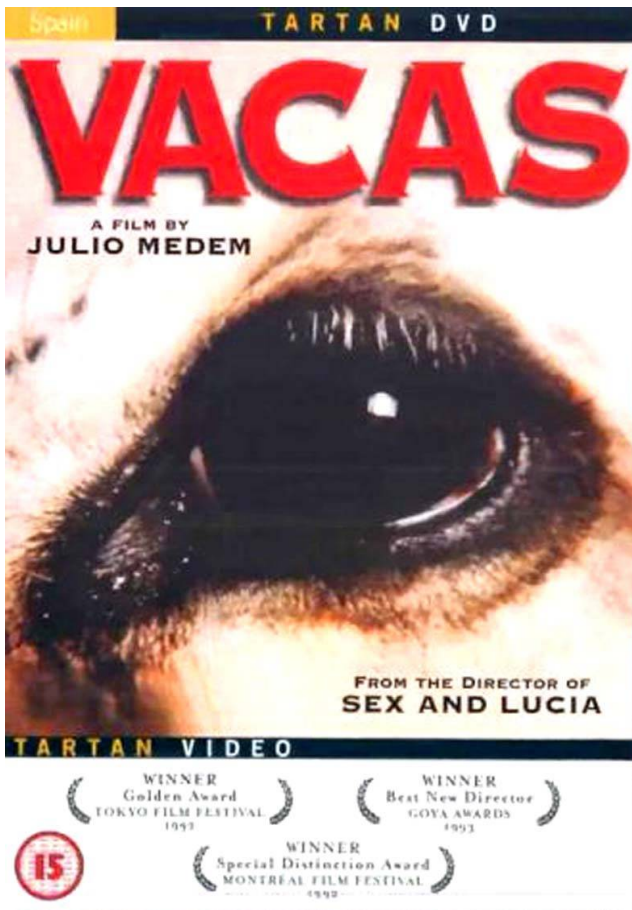
As an aside it needs to be noted here that Derrida is certainly more than concerned about the state of human-animal relations and I don't wish to be

too unsympathetic to his project which I find extremely rewarding in many ways. In the second part of his long essay on the animal, 'L'animal que donc je suis (à suivre)' which is as yet untranslated unfortunately, he returns to the themes of the first part but in a slightly different register. In this section he is, in many ways, more severe in his discussion of the domination of animals as expressed, tacitly or otherwise, in the philosophies of Descartes, Kant, Heidegger and Levinas. In his condemnation of these thinkers he follows the spirit of Adorno's critique that the project to master nature is motivated by hatred, and explores Adorno's equation of animals with Jews, that in turn implies a short path from transcendental idealism to fascism. This is not a war against animals but a true holocaust.

Turning to the notion of life, the animal figure can be interpreted from a very different perspective. I do not wish to counterpose too neatly life and death. But notions of livingness do shape an important series of oppositions between being and becoming, text and image, and, in philosophical terms, between Derrida and Deleuze. Because death is so striking it is easy to overlook the state of livingness.

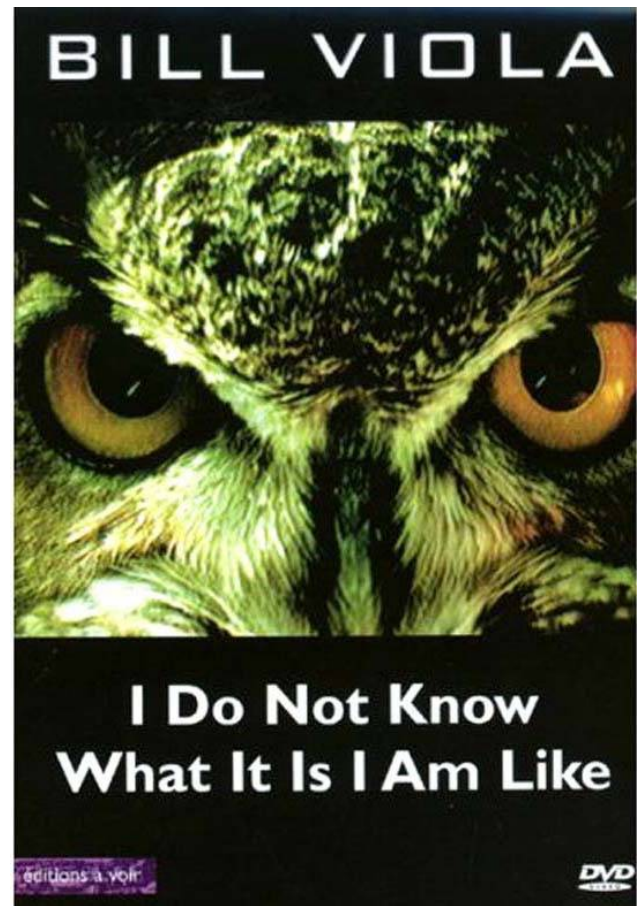
Bergson and Deleuze conceive of the emergence of life, perception, subjectivity, and the brain, within the frame of intervals, passages across a gap. Deviations, holes, cuts, unlinking, within which the positive force of self-differentiation (the '*élan vital*') that actualises so many things, emerges over time. In addition, duration is crucial for attending to life; becoming requires time. Incidentally, the phrase of Bergson's, 'attention to life', was the starting point for much of my thinking on these issues. The philosophical exploration of 'the interval' draws attention to an essential image in the articulation of human-animal relations. The gap, the distance between two beings looking at each other or co-existing within the same sphere of existence, is given a visible form on the cinema screen, for instance, that could be described as being plastic or having a tangible thickness. The gap is just as much an image-object as the image-objects of animal and human.

We can offer two types of bond across the human-animal divide here, both of which are conceived on the basis of particular interruptions or splits. The first is *life*, described at one point by Bergson as the insertion of indetermination into matter, and which binds both human and animal as entities representing moments of the actualisation of the '*élan vital*'. Furthermore, evolution is not achieved by associations but by dissociations. The second is the *livingness* of bodies defined here as the mode of active co-existence whereby an individual's ability to live (or die) depends on the nature of its interaction with others. This co-existence does not require any form of identity between different species as such, but it does require an understanding that organisms in livingness are unavoidably co-constitutive (predator-prey systems, and relationships, domestication, parasites and immune so



Julio Medem

Original DVD cover for 'Vacas', Tartan Video, 1992 ©



Bill Viola

Original DVD cover for 'I Do Not Know What It Is I Am Like', 2006 ©

on, in addition to sociality). This split is exemplified in aesthetic terms by Deleuze's idea of the cinema of the in-between. 'It is the method of BETWEEN, "between two images", which does away with all cinema of the One. It is the method of AND, "this and then that," which does away with all the cinema of Being = is ... The whole undergoes a mutation, because it has ceased to be the One-Being, in order to become the constitutive "and" of things, the constitutive between-two of images.'

When we come to consider the manner in which living beings pay attention to each other on screen as part of a mutual interplay of images, it is Bergson's picture in *Matter and Memory* of living images as constantly reflecting, refracting and projecting light, which leads us to see how the cinematic representation of human-animal relations can be understood as a material and integral part of those relations, and not just as a detached image of them. In Bergson's argument, it is the interest or need of the body image, which governs the selectivity of perceptions. He conceives this on the model of the reception of light. 'Everything thus happens for us as though we reflected back to surfaces the light which emanates from them, the light which, had it passed on unopposed, would

never have been revealed. The images will appear to turn toward our body the side, emphasized by the light upon it, which interests our body.' When objects are interacting, presenting all their sides to each other at once, then there is no conscious perception. Only when a reaction or a need comes into play does perception happen, and thus only certain aspects of an object can ever be perceived. Bergson equates perception as being like the effect of a mirage at this point. However, the model here is not one where perception functions like photography, taking images from a fixed point. What exists instead is a profusion of photographs circulating in the aggregate of images that is the material universe; images which are themselves defined as 'an existence placed half-way between the "thing" and the "representation"'. Mirages and screens are thus key components of this visible universe: '[i]s it not obvious that the photograph, if photograph there be, is already taken, already developed in the very heart of things and at all points of space? ... we can regard the action of all matter as passing through it [i.e. the universe] without resistance and without loss, and the photograph of the whole as translucent: here there is wanting behind the plate the black screen on which the image could be shown. Our 'zones of indetermination' play in some

sort the part of the screen.’ The proliferation of eyes in Julio Medem’s film *Vacas* (1992) with its interest in animal and human eyes, as well as cameras and microscopes, or the many different types of mechanical eye, as well as those of insects, that illuminate the tiny world that is magnified in Claude Nuridsany and Marie Perennou’s *Microcosmos* (1996), are the kinds of film that come to mind when I think of Bergson’s universe of photographs at all points in space.

What I want to suggest here, thinking out of this particular conjunction of Bergson and Deleuze, is that the animal image is not simply an expressive component of human-animal relations, in part because communicability is so problematised. This occurs both in terms of our communication with animals and our communications about animals. Bergson’s world of images illustrates how we might conceive of the animal image as being of the same significance as living animals within the biodynamic networks of human-animal relations, and the animal image has the same kinds of structuring influences on our perceptions and practices. I think of this as being important on two fronts. First, we have seen something of how the animal problematises any possibility of a self-contained aesthetics, where the animal would be simply an art object ‘out there’ in the gallery space. A similar problematisation is seen in film. The same collapsing of the categories of the cinematic world and the real world is something long exemplified particularly in British audiences where there is a tendency to see animal film imagery as somehow exempt from the contrivances of film. Animals on screen are not seen as actors, ironically, but vulnerable to exploitation and, above all they are seen as ‘real’. Even if the imagery is recognised to be contrived, it is still responded to as if these images are living animals, and this is reflected in a strong public sense of what is deemed appropriate and inappropriate in animal representation. Second, vitalism is also an outlook in which the passage of time is a key consideration mainly due to the emphasis on becoming. Different durations in communication is a memorable gloss by Deleuze and Guattari on Bergson’s notion of becoming. I mentioned earlier some of the ways in which time may be addressed in animal art. In conclusion, I want to use a film to intimate what sort of ideal of human-animal relations may be implied by the phrase ‘the aesthetics of livingness.’

Bill Viola’s *I do not know what it is I am like* (1986) is one of the few films (in fact, perhaps the only one), which seriously engages with the time of the animal’s look, and the temporality of attention generally. In the absence of narrative the film requires a certain patience, leading to different kinds of cinematic expectation, something not unlike the attitude required for nature watching. He also explores time in other ways. Most obviously, this is done by speeding up and slowing down the image. For instance, there are the long meditative takes of birds in the section ‘The language of birds’, rapid staccato images in ‘Stunned by

the drum’, and time lapse photography of a decaying fish that closes the film. Amongst other things, the film depicts different living creatures actively attending to and watching a world that is, in effect, shared and thus has to be somehow negotiated by mutually alienated beings. Humans, depicted in states of religious trance or in meditative silence in the dead of night, are equally opaque. One of the questions I take the film to be posing is how might we visualise a world shared, and how should we appreciate this world shared, with extremely limited possibilities of communication across species or mutual understanding? The film makes visible forms of contact without contact, and suggests some thoughts about distancing in human-animal relations that are at present bedevilled by either too much proximity (exploitation) or too much distance (carelessness towards beings remote from our concerns). The implication is that some forms of distance need to be kept in place, that species differences need to be respected rather than have their boundaries blurred.

Viola’s focus on animal eyes takes many forms: the split horizon reflected in the eye of the buffalo; the strangeness of the eyes of birds; or, the long slow zoom onto the eye of the owl that finally frames the reflection of the camera on the tripod on the owl’s pupil. His film has a thick painterly texture that makes all the eyes stand out as particularly iridescent, especially in the wet purple blackness of their pupils. For Viola, we confront the gaze of the animal in the black of its eye ‘with fear, with curiosity, with familiarity, with mystery. We see ourselves in its eyes whilst sensing the irreconcilable otherness of an intelligence ordered round a world we can share in body but not in mind.’ This means also that the time of the look allows relations to form on the basis of an acknowledgement of the movement of surfaces: at the very least decisions can be made whether to engage or disengage. Much is characterised by a watchfulness. Of course, we are limited here to those co-existing species who rely a lot on vision for their contact. However, if we understand or even feel the gap that allows for the experience of an attention to livingness, as an almost physical entity that is profoundly temporal, then that seems to me an important linkage between aesthetics and visual media on the one hand, and human-animal relations on the other. This kind of linkage also indicates the manner in which they are already interconnected, so the question then becomes, where is this leading?

Jonathan Burt studied Palaeolithic archaeology at Cambridge University between 1977 and 1980. After two years as an archaeologist, agricultural contractor, and barman, amongst other miscellaneous jobs between 1980 and 1982, he became a freelance writer and teacher which he has been ever since. Between 1992 and 1995, he co-directed the Unofficial Knowledge project at the Kings College Research Centre, Cambridge University. He began working on animal history full time in 1994 and co-founded the Animal Studies Group (U.K.) in 2000 with Steve Baker, Erica Fudge, Robert McKay, and Garry Marvin. He created and edits the Animal series for Reaktion Books. This series won the U.K. National Book Award for Best Designed New Series in 2004. He is also a review editor for the journal Society & Animals. - ‘The Aesthetics of Livingness’ was delivered on the 2nd of February in Toronto as part of the ‘Envisioning Animals Symposium’ and it is here reprinted with permission of the author. ©

JOHN ISAACS: WOUNDED ANIMALS AND ICON-MAKING

Just underneath the surface of John Isaacs' apparently direct work lays a realm of anxiety that questions our modern way of life. We interviewed the artist to further understand the complex use of animal-imagery that has distinctively marked his career.

Interview by Giovanni Aloï

It could be argued that John Isaac's work brings to physical existence the sometimes volatile nature of modern anxieties. Often, this materialization takes place through the creation of violent imagery involving dying, already dead, and disturbingly disfigured animals. This haunting animal presence semantically functions in a number of ways; yet, the inherent violence captured in the three-dimensional stillness of his sculptures seems to predominantly make us aware of the animal in a different way. The brutality on show is accentuated by the astonishing level of hyperrealism with which the animal is rendered, investing Isaac's creatures with a much stronger signifying charge than that associated with 'perfectly beautiful' animal. Encountering his animals in the gallery space makes for a surreal experience, a sensorial assault to our boundaries of good taste. Overcoming the initial sense of disgust and uneasiness, perhaps lead by the very primordial instinct that guides us to take a second look at something upsetting, we may also identify Isaacs' concerned with animal rights and environmental concerns.

At times, his animals are fragmented, or more crudely chopped up into desolated freshly bleeding parts; at unison, these non human-animal body parts demonstrate the destruction that has already happened whilst referencing a developed organism with skin, muscles and organs, an operating system with innumerable complex interactions, themselves the result of millions of years of evolution. The overall destabilising effect involve with the viewing of the work is deep, making it clear that the objective of de-conditioning is to view things without a pre-determined and predictable reaction. The destabilizing effect in question becomes even more unsettling if the viewer realizes that the disfigurement and fragmentation inflicted to the animal body bears the unmistakable signature of human action.

Where did your interest for animals begun?

Animals have interested me since childhood, originally I studied biology at university, you could say I am one of David Attenborough's children through all the Sunday 'Life on Earth' programmes I watched as a kid, but at university it got more serious. Though I always loved the anthropomorphic projection into animals, I also started to get interested in population dynamics studies, evolution, connections, systems, ecosystems, the whole as a whole, and that is people as part of nature or removed, either way it is there from the view through the binoculars on safari, to the antibiotics to keep bacteria out of the body. I mean nature is always fundamentally there in life, even in cities. I think people who have no interest in animals or their own physical biological nature (and I don't mean cat lovers or health freaks) are dead to the world around them. In my artwork, I use animals as generic stand-ins for subjects, from the Dodo as metaphor to colonialism/globalism, through to the shark for it's obvious signifiers. These creatures all come from life and our mythology, from Alice in wonderland to Jaws.

In 'Everyone is Talking About Jesus' the imposing sculpture of a bloody shark fin severed from the formidable predator serves as cultural icon of fear, terror and irrational belief. What suggests the use of certain animals rather than others in the creation of your original icon-making?

Dodo = icon of not only extinction, but also a rapid disappearance from the world at the hands of man. Shark = terrifying real and imagined beast lurking in water, not our natural element, the fin is enough. Sperm whale = Moby Dick, mythical beast based on reality of whaling industry but representing metaphorically one



John Isaacs

Everyone's Talking About Jesus, 2005, wax, epoxy resin, polystyrene, 200 x 160 x 180 cm, Private Collection ©

man's obsession with not only revenge, but the domination of the forces of nature with the inevitable hubris. Goat = scapegoat, and so it goes on. There are stories and animals used throughout history in mythological stories or real events. Each in its own way

stands in for and embodies certain things.

Your wax sculptures depict animal flesh after it has been subjected to violent intervention. What role does mutilation play in the imagery

presented by your work?

In the shark piece, the fin is enough, as it was in the film *Jaws* to let the viewer imagine the sharp gaping mouth, that the creature is hacked to pieces, butchered gives only marginal relief as there are plenty more fish in the sea. This specific sculpture is about fear, belief, and placating that fear, but at what cost, I hope it goes beyond merely “shark.” The whale pieces were cut for different reasons, even aesthetic ones, as whale blubber equates to minimal sculpture in its cubic cutting at the whaling station, that it was *Moby Dick* puts another twist to the story. I have represented humans in this way to.

Sometimes what is absent is as significant as what is there. Sometimes the cutting is vaguely scientific, another metaphor for study, to dissect something involves destroying it, the whole, its integral beauty, but requires a sense of memory, or objective distance. I suppose I criticize this world-view as machine, that troubles me that human beings put so much effort in looking at all the parts in the vague hope of rearranging them, “improving”. Anatomy is a natural progression, an inevitable thing in our evolution from early tool, to the present, but the attitude still lingers – body as machine.

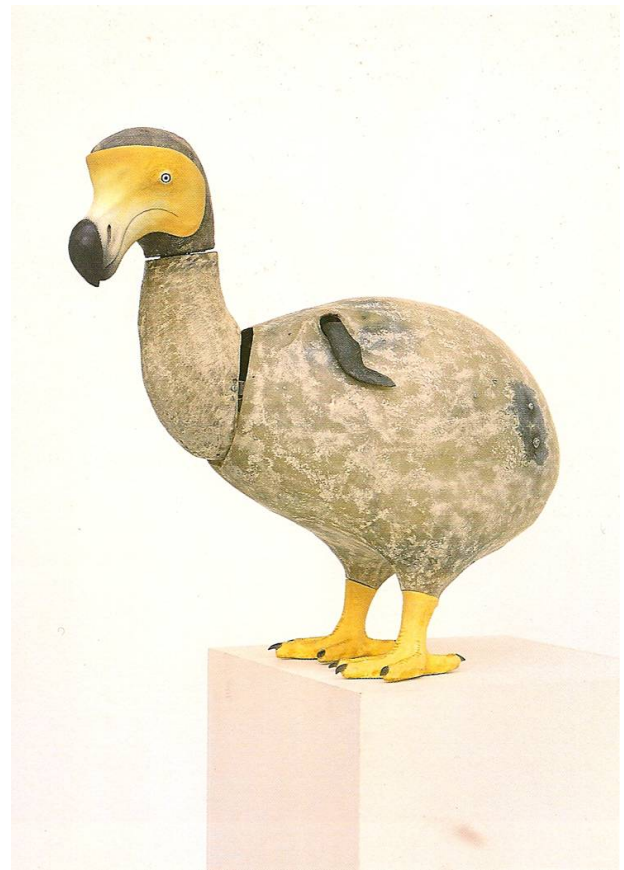
What do you consider to be the most extreme piece involving an animal you have created and why? How did it cross ‘the boundary’?

I heard a story of a busy commuter train driving through some fields and they could see from the window a farmer fucking a goat, now that is definitely crossing some boundaries. Personally I think the fiddler crab millennium study was the most challenging in terms of where it put us in relation to animals, and the way in which science sees this relationship.

Your installations usually involve a number of media where different works can be seen together so to challenge presumptions and ways of thinking. Do animals play a specific role in these installations or are they on the same level of other subjects?

For me there is no hierarchy, it’s all about getting the right sense out of an exhibition, for example with the mammoth I spent a lot of time reproducing this creature, but wanted from the outset this large presence, as in the Natural History museum childhood experience when you enter that large room with the stuffed elephants, or dinosaur bones and it is probably the first time in ones life to really get this feeling of being smaller than something else, humbled. In this instance, the animal is central, as with the other larger pieces.

The look of ‘your animals’ could be paralleled



John Isaacs

Untitled (Dodo), 1994, by John Isaacs. © John Isaacs. Courtesy Arts Council Collection, Hayward Gallery, London

to that of botched taxidermy. Which do you think are the main differences between what botched taxidermy and your ‘uncanningly-real’ artificial creations?

Not sure, I only try to make the thing as convincing as I am able. If they are as in the scapegoat, a little twisted and strange, then I hope, it’s only to help the emotional level, as in the monkey with the human hands, the face is modelled to be more human, more Buddha like. There is a museum in Florence called the Museo de la Specola; they have these stuffed animals from the time when sailors brought back only the skins, no image of the creature for the taxidermist, so of course they are like inflated versions of the animals we know. I like this sense of re-inventing them. When they are this way, as in the Dodo, then it’s also for a reason.

Why did you decide to use a plucked chicken as a head for the scientist in ‘Say it isn’t so’?

I simply couldn’t make the head from clay without it looking too sci-fi rip off. The texture of the chicken skin cast was close to the hands, and in the end it made it more horrifying, closer to home. A year after I made that sculpture the Mad Cow scare surfaced; somewhat prophetic. There was at the time anyway plenty in the



John Isaacs

Other People's Lives, 2003, wax, steel, glass and oil paint
90 x 80 x 120 cm, Private Collection, Verona, Italy ©

media about genetic possibilities, not only in food production, but medicine, also a strange story of a boy who would have a human ear grafted from a genetically compatible hairless mouse onto his body, etc. I think the chicken made the "science" less glamorous than Frankenstein even, and normalized it, like I said brought the repercussions into the less abstract world.

The precision and technical perfection achieved in your figures can be overwhelming. How do you create 'your animals'?

Wax usually. The technique is kind of complicated, though I don't think it is as good as the little sushi models you see in restaurant windows, now they are realistic. I want a kind of semi realism, better to hover in the space of belief and non-belief, a play between eye and mind. As you look at them longer parts become very abstract, not so natural, but then you catch another part which seems real, this I think is the ideal.

Have you ever received any complaints to your installations involved mutilated, deformed or

wounded animals?

No

Are a violent approach or the creation of brutal imagery the only ways in which to view things without a pre-determined and predictable reaction on our side?

I have used violence and humour at times to bring the viewer away from looking at art, to remove that preconception and penetrate straight into the mind. Not sure if it works always, I suppose I don't often much go for the subtle approach. In clichés reside the lowest common denominator and I feel that's not a bad place to start a "communication", keep me away from abstract expressionism, now that stuff is truly violent!!!!

To what extent do you think 'your animals' infringe the tradition of art history where animals are only a vehicle to symbolism of human values?

We are animals.



John Isaacs

The Complete History of Unknown Discovery, 1998, wax, resin, latex, stage blood, polyurethane, 320 x 240 x 160 cm, Murder Me, Collection UK ©

Ironically, your 'Untitled (Dodo)', is the closest we'll ever get to the real thing. How did you come up with it?

It's a sad looking bird with a sad story. The cleaning lady in the Natural History Museum threw away the last whole specimen years ago, now that's even a befitting

end to such a tragedy. While making it I read some articles in which scientists did comparative anatomy studies with some bones of the Dodo and other animals and found, it was not so dumpy, more skinny from the bone thickness/body mass ratio. This piece was shown once in Spain where they just didn't get it, asked me why I had made a large pigeon. I think Alice in

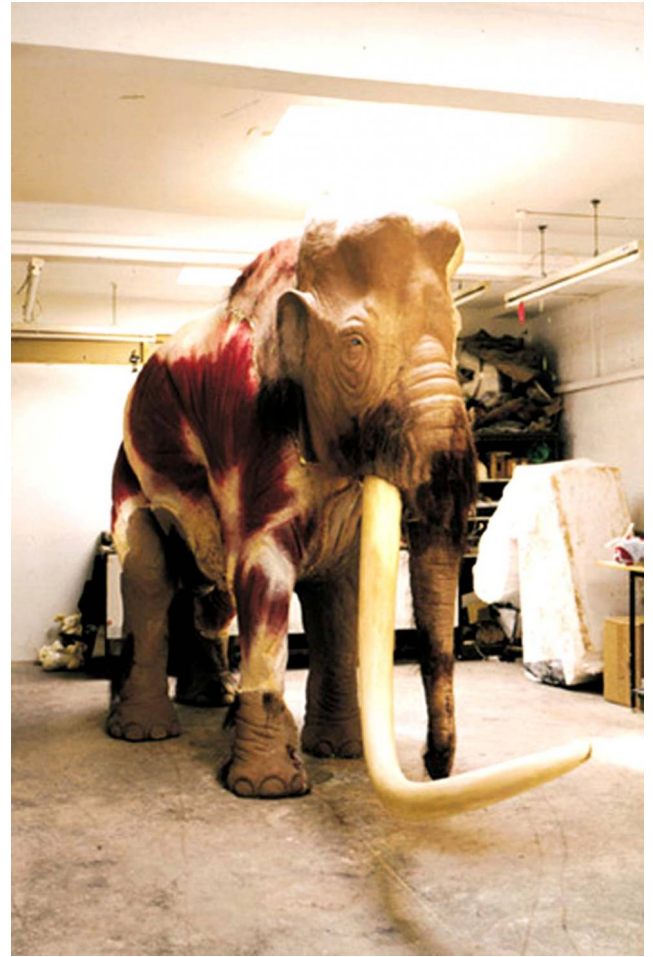
Wonderland has the definitive Dodo image. As I said earlier, the Dodo represents the down side of globalization, one of the first martyrs!

‘Untitled’ (Monkey) is one of your most iconic works. How did that work come about?

A trip to Africa, and the inoculations needed before hand kind of sparked it off, but all these pieces come from more than just one thing, it's a kind of coming together of many different directions, and layers that then show a kind of direction. The sculpture deals with disease, microbiology, behaviour, destiny, control, love, abuse, tourism. The hair on the chimpanzee is from a ski-boot that I bought in a charity shop; there was only one boot, and it would have been too much trouble to cover the whole body, plus some needed details would be lost; this lack of material and effort added to the objects sense of malaise. These things are not set from the start. I make all my own work, and this is important, as the production process involves many other things coming to the surface, also memories sparked off in the studio during the day, things changing, etc. In some sense when the work is really going well it almost feels that the significance of one thing can be replaced by another. I like to believe that though I make a monkey it is not the only thing the viewer sees or feels. Freud called this the “uncanny,” this shift in the familiar, and I hope that a piece like the monkey sculpture opens doors into many perspectives.

What are currently working on?

A series of drawings and five sculptures for an exhibition at the end of the month in Madrid – no Dodo's this time round.



John Isaacs

The Diary of a Loner, 1999, mixed media, dimensions variable
Murder Me, Collection UK ©

John Isaacs has exhibited extensively on an international level over the last 14 years. Exhibitions include Wonderful Life, Lisson Gallery, London, 1993; Young British Artists 6, Saatchi Gallery, London, 1996; Spectacular Bodies, Hayward Gallery, London, 2000; Century City, Tate Modern, 2001; Minimal Maximal, Kyoto National Museum of Art, Japan, 2001; Voices from the ID, Beaconsfield, London, 2002; Mike Kelley - The Uncanny, Tate Liverpool, 2004; Les Grandes Spectacles, Museum der Moderne, Salzburg, 2005; Murdeme Collection, Serpentine Gallery, London, 2006-2007. Isaacs was guest lecturer at The Getty Foundation Los Angeles in 2005 and is currently working on a new book to be published by Other Criteria. He has had his third solo show with Museum 52 in October 2007.

Antennae Interviewed John Isaacs in December 2007 ©

CONTEMPORARY MEMENTO MORI

Noelle Allen's work finds inspiration where the majority of us do not see anything at all. Involving a painstakingly and lengthy procedure, her recent drawings evoke fossilised creatures.

Interview by Chris Hunter



Noelle Allen

Some Things Will Perish, 2005, 30"x42", graphite on mylar ©

In *Powers of Ten*, the film by modernist pioneers Charles and Ray Eames, the camera opens on a picnicker in a Chicago park and then recedes by magnitudes of ten until the edge of the galaxy is reached. The camera then backtracks to its original starting point and continues inward by magnitudes of ten until the picnicker's flesh is abstracted by its own molecular enormity. The film is at once a sweeping and intimate observation of the relativity of time, space and mortality.

In a similar fashion, the recent work of Chicago artist Noelle Allen finds bigness in the small. To create her *Accipiter Studies* series, Allen studied scientific renderings of cellular mitosis and fossil details of an ancient avian predator species to represent rupturing birdlike forms, all intricately captured on Mylar using watercolor and charcoal.

Bringing the notions of time, scale, and corporeal fragmentation into play, the work was a highlight of the Chicago Museum of Contemporary

Art's (MCA) 12x12 Show, an annual exhibition curated to single out best-and-brightest local artists.

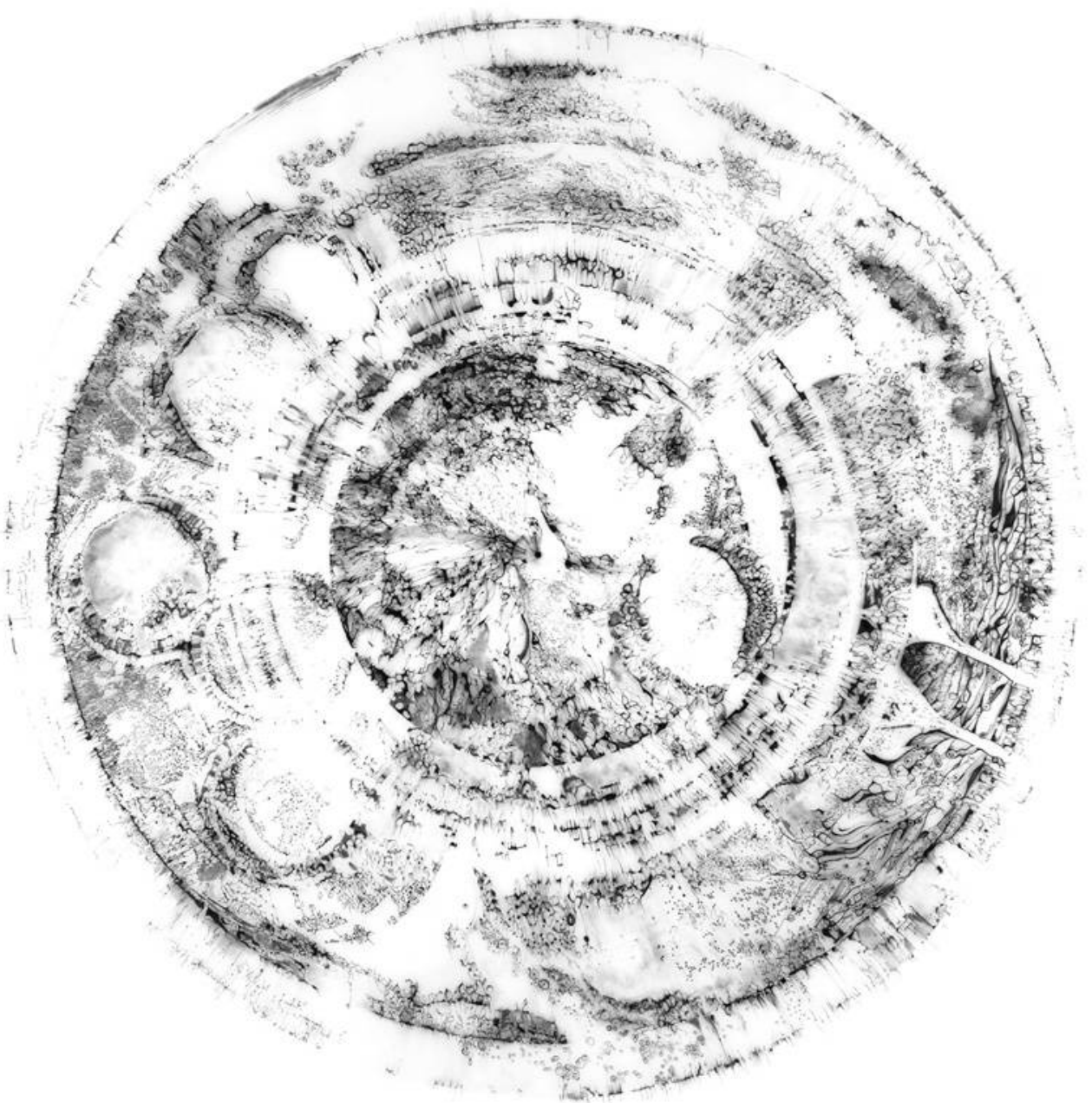
Although these diptychs and triptychs have just begun to make the art world take notice —Allen's work was given a gallery of its own at the MCA's month-long exhibition and she was recently named by CS Magazine as one of five artists rocking the Chicago art scene — the intricacies of death and decay have long been thematic in her work. Here, she discusses the microscopic topography of breakdown, the beauty of mortification, and the flux of states.

So Noelle. You appear to be a young, healthy, happily married person yet your work focuses very much on decay. Why are you so attracted to the unattractive?

Much of my interest in ephemerality is rooted in my struggles with my health and the fragility of my own body. I am following in the footsteps of many artists, Eva Hesse and Andy Goldsworthy, for example, who find beauty in entropy and the tension between physicality and death.

What made you decide to look at mold and rotting tomatoes and find the beauty in them?

At the time, I was eating heirloom tomatoes from the farmer's market. I love all of the markings, tattoos, stitches, and scars that separate heirlooms from the hothouse tomatoes one can find at the grocery store. Over the course of photographing these details with a macro lens on a large format camera, the tomatoes



Noelle Allen

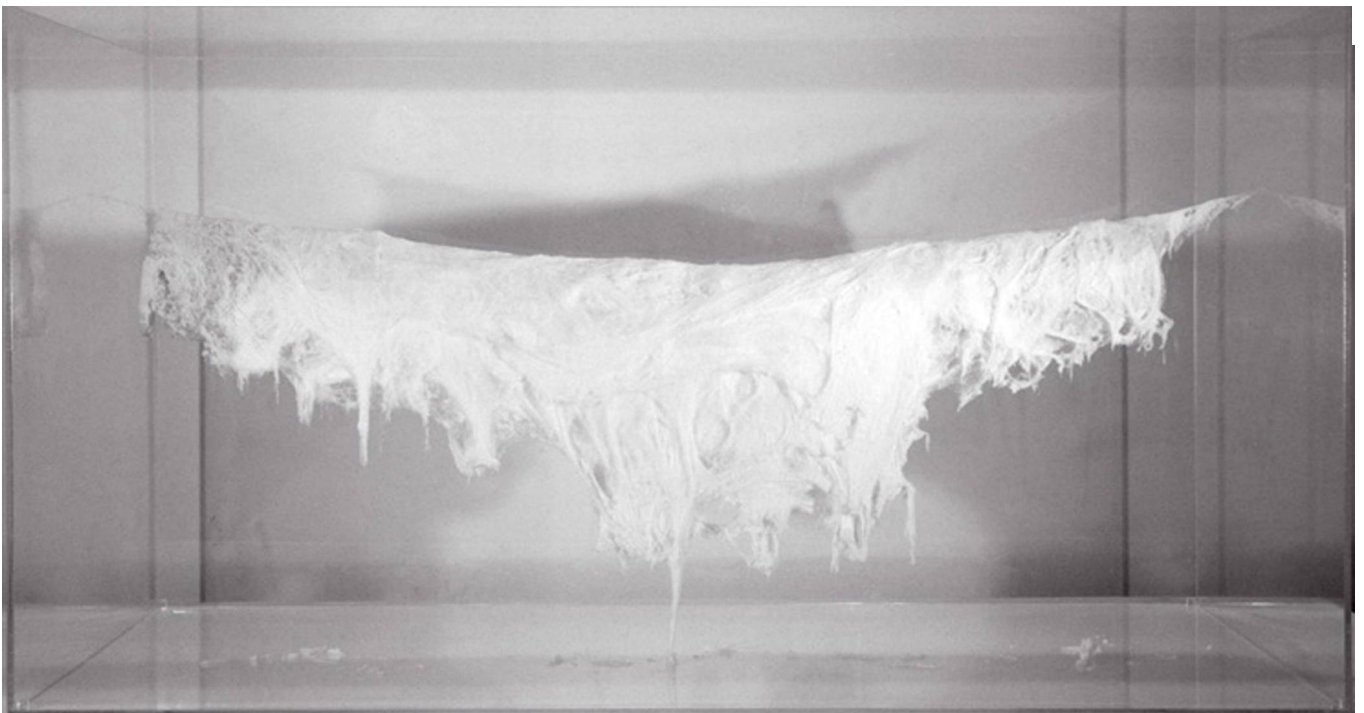
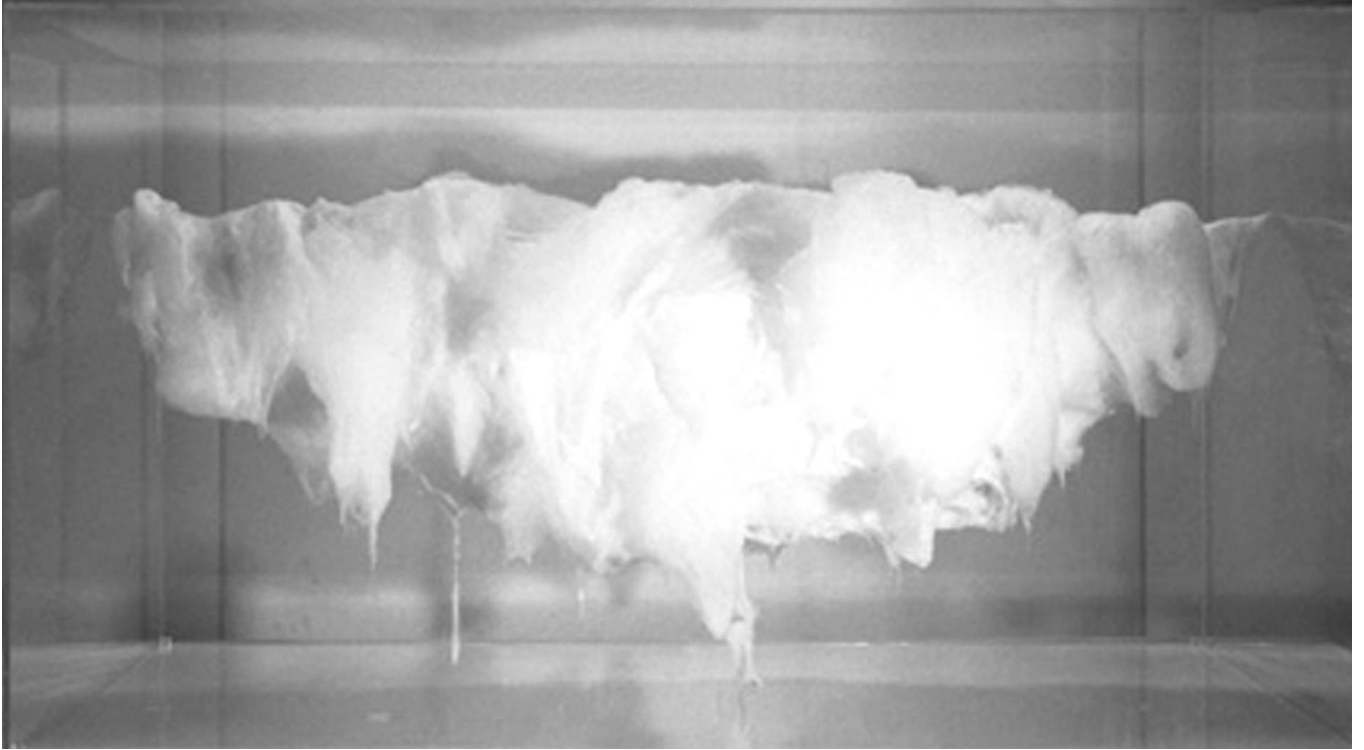
This Is How We Are Rejoined, 2004, 30x42", graphite on mylar ©

started to disintegrate and mould in the summer heat. Naturally, as an artist who has worked with unorthodox materials that don't (and thank God!) always behave, I welcomed the decomposition.

Americans spend \$16 billion every year to clean up mold and mildew. It seems many of the things that define civilized life in the West are about keeping rot at bay, from deodorants that keep bacteria from living in our sweat to a

funeral industry that seals chemical-soaked corpses inside waterproof boxes. What does this say about the average American's acceptance of their humanity and the inevitable?

Appearance is more important than reality. The old puritan idiom: cleanliness is next godliness. And I 100% subscribe to this philosophy. I clean endlessly and I love to clean.



Noelle Allen

Husk Day 1, 2006, 30X60X30", Spun Sugar, Acrylic, and Steel

Husk Day 2 ©

You've been known to string up huge amounts of cotton candy and then document what happens over time in photographs. One could read so many subtexts into this: the disappearance of childhood; the superficiality of modern life; the fragility of dreams. What was your objective?

The project was ultimately intended as a memento mori, speaking to the ephemeral qualities of life. In its sculptural form *Husk*, the original cloud of spun sugar is mounted in an acrylic vitrine on a steel stand. Over the course of time, the fantastical cloud dissipates and entropy sets in. As the cloud begins to resemble a cowhide or dried membrane, this ephemeral piece explores the conflation of the abject and the beautiful. The spun cloud eventually becomes formless, resulting in granules of sugar on the floor.

The back-story is my husband gave me a cotton candy machine on my 21st birthday. I have a notorious sweet tooth and naturally started making work with the machine and with sugar. Over the course of time, the projects developed more fully, culminating in *Husk*. During all this time, of course, I continued to eat my work. Today I have had serious dental work, 5 root canals and, sadly, can no longer tolerate the taste of cotton candy.

In your more recent work, you present your subject matter using a very meticulous process. How time consuming was the creation of your pieces for the 12x12 exhibit at Chicago's MCA?

I have estimated that I worked around 960 hours over the course of three months, which is the length of time the MCA allotted for the creation of the work.

You spend hours staring at tiny details. Does looking at your subject for so long create a dissociative affect? Is that your point, to take decay out of context and trick the viewer into thinking they're seeing something lovely when, in fact, they're looking at putridity?

On the macro level, there is an element of fantasy that I do immerse myself in while working. It is not about tricking or fooling a viewer. The aesthetic of beauty is part and parcel of transformation and mutation, natural processes of decay.

Some might describe your work as beautiful but almost clinical in its definitiveness. We tend to think of nature as wild, loose, rough. However, when you examine it as closely as you do, it turns out to be quite precise. Does being so exacting require a bit of obsessiveness on your part?

Although nature is often wild, rough or untameable,

symmetry is everywhere in nature. The circle, regular curves, straight lines, and the principle of bilateralism, although often roughly, figure quite prominently in the animal and plant world. Therefore, I seek to recreate this tension in my own work. Some of the processes, such as the recent addition of watercolor to the drawing, break the obsessive qualities of the work and introduces an element of flux. And I would definitely characterize myself as having an anal-retentive, obsessive personality. Although because there is no tooth to Mylar and graphite is so slippery on the substrate, I have definitely had to train myself to be very cautious and precise.

How do people respond to your work?

When people first see the drawings, they tend to do this funny dance back and forth from the macro to the micro perspective. I have also noticed that scientists and people in the medical field seem particularly drawn to the work.

So much of what you do is achieved in watercolors and charcoal. Delicate materials. Ever consider preserving the degeneration in something more permanent? Like oils or marble?

When I first started working with unorthodox materials, I wasted many hours attempting to preserve or lengthen the life of the work. For example, I did try to deoxygenize *Husk*. Eventually I came to the realization that the natural shifts and decays in the materials was the reason I was using them in the first place. The drawings, on the other hand, are delicate but archival.

How has your work affected your own outlook on death?

Still uncertain.

Casket or cremation?

Casket but not embalmed.

Noelle Allen holds an MFA in sculpture from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. This year her work has appeared or is upcoming in Mike Kelley Selects, juried by Mike Kelley, at the Detroit Artists Market in Detroit, MI, and the Evanston Biennial, juried by Dominic Molon and Monique Meloche, at the Evanston Art Center in Evanston, IL. You can visit her on the web at <http://www.noelleallen.com>

Noelle Allen was interviewed by Antennae in Autumn 2007 ©

THE FLESH HOUSE

*Shot in a flesh house of a working hunt, the series of images by **Claire Brunner**, with their immediate aesthetic appeal and evident references to 16th and 17th century painting, raise issues of our detachment from animals as meat and in turn our own existence and mortality*

*Text by **Claire Brunner***



Pieter Aertsen

A Meatstall with the Holy Family Giving Alms, 1551, Oil on panel, 45 1/2 x 66 1/2 in. (115.5 x 169.0 cm.) ©

The series originated from the visual impact of the flesh house. I was aware of the site and had previously shot a roll of film there as a matter of personal interest due to the nature of the subject and the immediately striking aesthetic. The series developed through practice, with evaluation of images resulting in the expansion and ongoing improvement of the work. Making work and evaluating it in this way meant that careful consideration was taken over each aspect including composition, vantage point, and depth of field.

My key research has been classical painting and in particular 16th and 17th century paintings of market stalls. I was interested in the subject of the slaughtered animals in these paintings and in turn the reasons for their portrayal. I combined contemporary artist's interpretation of similar subjects including Marc Quinn, Damien Hirst, and Herman Nitsch. Quinn's work has informed my own, illustrating that such a subject can provoke a sense of power, grandeur and quiet dignity rather than horror and disgust.



Claire Brunner
From *The Flesh House* series 2007, ©

With a similar subject using animals, Hirst has explored the issues of the fragility of life, creating controversial pieces provoking both strong negative and positive reactions. By this response it is clear that such subjects provoke passionate debate proving that my chosen subject is a compelling one in representation alone. As humans, we have an unexplainable interest in death. This psychological fascination extends through history and is what draws us to images of death and related subjects. This may be due to our search for answers regarding mortality and our acknowledgment of the vulnerability of life.

After initial research, I found it evident that our attitude towards meat and flesh has changed dramatically over the years. Animals are no longer celebrated as meat or food and therefore images of such subjects are often seen as morbid. Our detachment from animals as meat may be due to us treating meat as something that comes wrapped in plastic purchased from the supermarket. These issues inevitably become political and in my research it is evident that although I avoided the subject's clear connection to the hunt, the killing and skinning of animals alone is fraught with issues of legislation. I consciously kept the connection with the hunt unknown as although an interesting and topical issue it does not

add to the ideas presented by my work. My images do not reference to a specific time-period conferring a timeless quality. There are no human figures, no text, and no modern equipment in view.

Throughout the work, I have referenced painting both in technique and in theory. The quality of a painting offers stillness and silence. Photography's known ability to capture the moving objects has meant that a photograph freezes a moment in time, giving it the ability to capture fragments of chaos and disorder. Traditionally paintings have been known for their quality in capturing beauty in tranquil and motionless subjects. Often tension in hanging objects or slight movement is suggested but never with the frenetic inevitability of a photograph. My research into this subject led me to use the transferable qualities of a painting in my images, in the composition, surface and colour. Producing photographs with painterly aesthetics forces the viewer to consider their reaction towards the imaginary and reality. The work produced by Simon Norfolk illustrates the moments when the chaos of war has subsided, and using photography as his medium, he has captured the essence of conflict but illustrating a sense of calm and stillness in the aftermath. Seemingly the series portrays the silent resignation of skins and carcasses piled up to be disposed of or systematically



Claire Brunner
From *The Flesh House* series, 2007, ©

stored.

The photographs seem documentaristic in genre, illustrating different areas of an architectural subject, however such consideration of layout and composition indicate the conscious decision making in the production of each image. I intentionally gave the subject matter main focus in the center of the frame causing the surrounding walls to become a stage for the subject.

What animal has made the prints? And where has the blood come from? This draws the viewer into the next image to reveal another piece of the puzzle. Not all of the questions about the space have been revealed compelling the viewer to think further about the flesh house and its purpose.

The meat and skins shown in the photographs are part of a scene that is likely to be found all over the country - however rarely looked for or celebrated in this way. Each working hunt has what is called a 'Flesh House' where dead or injured animals are collected from local farmers for a fee, and the hunt will in turn skin and hang the meat for the hounds. The extraordinary pile of skins illustrated in the images are all collected, preserved with salt and sent to the 'Skin man' earning the hunt roughly 50p up to £7 for each skin.

The flesh house is similar to a slaughterhouse in that animals are skinned and hung, this links to associated sounds and sights of revulsion and horror. These connotations of flesh have been removed in my images to capture the calm in the aftermath. They present a stillness, as if the butchery has subsided only to leave traces and clues as to the conduct of the space.

Claire Brunner is a contemporary art photographer based in Wiltshire. A recent graduate from the Arts Institute at Bournemouth, her photography explores issues such as identity memory and nostalgia is present throughout much of the work with contemporary ideas developed often using traditional skills and techniques. www.clairebrunner.co.uk

SLAUGHTERHOUSE: THE TASK OF BLOOD

*Slaughterhouse: The Task of Blood is a controversial documentary by BAFTA award winning filmmaker **Brian Hill**. The film shows the process of meat production as animals are killed, butchered, and stored in fridges before being transported to retail outlets; in the process, it reveals the attitudes of the workers to their task, their colleagues and life.*
*Questions by **Giovanni Aloï and Chris Hunter***

Somebody once said that if slaughterhouses had glass walls everyone would be a vegetarian. Slaughterhouse - The Task of Blood is that glass wall, filmed in a small, family-run abattoir in Oldham, Greater Manchester that is struggling to survive.

The process of meat production is shown in graphic detail - the animals arrive healthy and whole and are then killed, skinned, eviscerated, and butchered. The film illustrates the procedures involved with the use of brilliant filmic techniques, but the film is not only about an industrial process involving animals, it is also about the men with the sharp knives, the killers, and cutters. 'Slaughterhouse' is as much about pigs and sheep as it is about white, working class men. The abattoir and the men who work are contextualised within the reality of the town in which they consume their lives - Oldham was once a cotton town but nothing much gets produced there any more. The town has a large immigrant population, mainly Muslims from India and Pakistan, and Oldham has been the scene of racial disturbances in recent years. The film explores the sometimes disturbing attitudes of the abattoir workers towards various social subjects, including race and immigration. The facilities of the abattoir are used by both Jewish and Muslim slaughter men for kosher and halal killing – their attitudes to work and the world outside contrast with those of the other abattoir workers. We interviewed Brian Hill to discuss 'Slaughterhouse'.

For 'Slaughterhouse', you spent 6 months in a slaughterhouse in Manchester. What inspired the project?

I was looking for a way to explore white, working class culture, particularly in the North of England. It seems to me that this is an area of society that is not particularly well covered by contemporary

documentary. So my initial interest was not particularly to do with the slaughter of animals, I was more concerned with the men who did the slaughtering and their views about their world. Once I spent time in the abattoir and discovered that it was also used by Muslims and Jews I was interested in the idea of Jews, Muslims and Christians all spilling blood under one roof. I also became keen to show the process of meat production and was keen that viewers who happily consume meat should see where that meat comes from.

Compared to films with shrill agendas, yours comes across as more measured and nuanced. How do you compare this project to Fast-food Nation and its ilk?

I suppose I didn't really have an agenda. I don't have a position on whether it is right or wrong to eat meat and my primary concern was with the workers rather than the product. I think films like Super Size Me and Fast Food Nation are often more about the filmmaker than the subject they say they are exploring. SSM in particular was much more about the director of the film than anything else. It's an unfortunate trend in filmmaking.

"Think of this film as your window on the slaughter house and when it's over ask yourself: do I want to eat meat again?" These words are included in the introduction to 'Slaughterhouse'. Was the documentary designed to put people off eating meat?

Absolutely not. I genuinely don't have a position on what people eat. Nor do I have a moral or ethical problem with eating animals, although I do think it is important to treat animals well and in a humane fashion. The question at the start of the film was, I suppose, an



Brian Hill
Still from *Slaughterhouse: The Task of Blood*, Century Films, 2005, ©

invitation for people to consider their own position regarding meat and to think about where meat comes from and how it is produced. In a more general sense I think it would be healthy and good for people to have more regard about what they consume (not just meat) and where those goods come from and how they are produced.

Are you vegetarian?

No. I have been a vegetarian many years ago but I am a confirmed meat eater. The experience of working in the abattoir did dampen my enthusiasm for pork for some time but I am happily eating pork again now.

It seems that vegans and greens no longer have the market cornered when it comes to outrage over the processing of animals. 'Slaughterhouse' helped bring awareness of factory-efficient butchery to the mainstream.

Have life-long animal activists embraced the film?

I don't know whether they have or not. I think that in a meat eating society it is important that animals are slaughtered efficiently and in hygienic conditions and with as little suffering as possible.

At one point you interview a cleaner stricken with cystic fibrosis who speaks frankly about the early expiration date nature has given him while surrounded by animals whose expiration dates were man-made. Are the killing rooms rife with such ironies?

They are full of such ironies but they mostly go unnoticed by the people working there. It takes an outside eye to see them.



Brian Hill
Still from *Slaughterhouse: The Task of Blood*, Century Films, 2005, ©

This same cleaner, when asked about the gore of his working conditions, said it was a lot better than, say, a firefighter finding a burnt human corpse. He was thankful that, in the slaughterhouse, “we only have to deal with dead animals”. Do you foresee a day when the word ‘only’ will stop preceding the word ‘animals’ when describing their rights or ethical treatment?

I don't think so, particularly when comparing the death of an animal to that of a human. We're increasingly divorced from any kind of meaningful relationship with animals, except as things to eat or as things to gawk at in a zoo. Certain animals achieve an iconic status, dolphins and polar bears come to mind, but the vast majority of animals are seen as food or entertainment.

Do you have the impression that, men who spill blood for a living value human life differently than, say, your average accountant or stockbroker?

No I don't think so. I don't think it is anything to do with what people do for a living. The way we value human life is, I think, more to do with education and upbringing than occupation.

Horror films, video games, and even newscasts have been accused of normalizing human violence by showing so much of it. However, when it comes to the death of these animals, our means of normalizing it is achieved by concealing it. Do you hope that, by attaching the cow back to the hamburger, your film will make people rethink the consequences of their Quarterpounders?

That was one of my intentions with the film. I wasn't trying to put people off meat but to think about where that meat comes from and what it once was. I think there is very little discussion or thought about how we are connected to the land in a very broad sense.

The documentary employs a sophisticated alternation of colour and black and white sequences softening the crudeness of graphic imagery and bringing to life the personalities of the people working in the slaughterhouse. Where in the editing suit did you draw a line with regards to what was going to be included and what was going to be left out of the final cut and why?

My intention was primarily to make a film about the



Brian Hill
Still from 'Slaughterhouse: The Task of Blood', Century Films, 2005, ©

men working in the abattoir and how they saw their changing world and their futures. Of course we had to have footage of the killing as well. One of the reasons for shooting some sequences in Black and white was to lessen the amount of blood that viewers had to see flowing in technicolour detail. Also, I think that B and W often makes a viewer look at a sequence more carefully. Having said that we didn't flinch from being very graphic with the footage.

There is a sinister and profoundly disturbing beauty in the filming of some killing scenes. What are the ethical concerns at play in the representation of killing in your work?

My concern was not to provide a kind of pornography of death but to properly show what happened in the slaughterhouse. The ethical considerations were mainly to do with representing the views of people accurately.

You call the modern slaughterhouse a 'disassembly line'. The visual of steam rising off the organs in some of the scenes illustrates the ghastly speed at which a complex living creature can be sorted into a pile of usable pieces and 'by-products'. What surprised you

most about modern methods of processing meat?

Exactly that – the speed at which a living animal was turned into so many cuts of meat and piles of discarded offal. I suppose this was particularly the case with the cattle, because of their size.

Was it difficult to bring cameras in a slaughterhouse? Were there things you were not allowed to film?

No, it wasn't difficult at all. Access was good. Some people were wary about us filming some things and there was a degree of self-censorship in some of the interviews. For example, a couple of the men expressed violently racist sentiments in private but were unwilling to share these on camera.

What technical difficulties did you face during the filming of the documentary?

The main difficulty, not necessarily a technical one, was dealing with the horrendous smell in the abattoir. Apart from that, it was just difficult filming in an environment with slippery floors, swinging chains,



Brian Hill
Still from 'Slaughterhouse: The Task of Blood', Century Films, 2005, ©

animals and sharp knives. More health and safety issues than technical ones.

What in your opinion was the hardest thing to film for the documentary and why?

It was often difficult to be around people who had such racist and homophobic attitudes. Filming death was not a problem.

What are you currently working on?

A cinema release environmental documentary.

Brian Hill is one of Britain's most innovative documentary makers. From 'Drinking for England' to 'Songbirds' (2005) via his BAFTA-winning masterpiece 'Feltham Sings' (2002) he has pioneered the musical documentary. In collaboration with Simon Armitage, Brian has also led the way in creating documentary poems like 'Killing Time' (2000). In subject matter, Brian and his company, Century Films have never shied away from the hard-hitting with powerful documentaries like 'Slaughterhouse' (2005) 'Rude Girls' (2004) and 'The Not Dead' (2007) - screening at Doc/Fest. But he also explored the complexity of celebrity in his Robbie Williams cinema documentary 'Nobody Someday' (2002) and more recently moved into drama.

Brian Hill was interviewed by Antennae in autumn 2008 ©

MARCO EVARISTTI: HELENA

In 2000 Marco Evaristti first exhibited Helena, an installation featuring functioning blenders each containing a live goldfish. The work caused unprecedented controversy and still raises a number of key questions about the use of animals in contemporary art.

Interview by Eric Frank and H-Animals Readers



Marco Evaristti
Helena, 2000, ©

In 2000 Marc Dion published 'Some notes towards a manifesto for artists working with or about the living world'. Point 4 of these notes reads as follows: 'Artists working with living organisms must know what they are doing. They must take responsibility for the plants' or animals' welfare. If an organism dies during an

exhibition, the viewer should assume the death to be the intention of the artist.'¹

The publishing of Dion's notes highlighted the necessity to establish a set of parameters within which to deal with the presence of living creatures in the

¹ *The Greenhouse Effect, Exhibition Catalogue*, published by the Serpentine Gallery in 2000, London, p. 66

² This article includes references to 'Marco Evaristti and the Open Work'



Marco Evaristti
Helena destroyed in 2006, photograph by Matthias Bildstein, ©

exhibiting space. It also coincided with the first staging of 'Helena' by Marco Evaristti; one of the most controversial works of art of the past twenty years involving live animals. *Helena* consists of ten Moulinex Optiblend 2000 liquidisers positioned on an ordinary kitchen table; each liquidiser filled with water and housing a gold fish. The liquidisers are visibly connected to the mains as they are plugged in a multi-socket making the rules of the game implicitly set out from the start: anyone is allowed to press the 'on' button which will result in the liquidising a live fish.

It could be argued that the work questions our moral/ethical approach to animal life in general and that it does so in a quite violent way. Upon entering the gallery space, the viewer is invested with the power (or implicit authorization) to kill a living animal in front of other gallery visitors. From this angle, 'Helena' is an installation involving performative elements: a stage; an impromptu actor; and a casual audience from which actors can randomly arise.

The moral/ethical questions generated by this setting are many, and revolve around a complex paradigmatic set. Of course, the button was pushed, not just once... *Helena* has since been staged a number of times in different countries generating each time the same level of curiosity and controversy. In May 2007, Evaristti was once again charged with cruelty to animals

in Austria just as it happened when he first exhibited the piece at Trapholt art gallery in Denmark. In 2006, *Helena* briefly appeared in a show titled 'Destroyed Utopia of Reconstruction'; here it was 'ironically' destroyed on the opening night by intruders— the fish were freed as the blenders were all smashed to the floor.

It has been suggested that the work engages with ethical issues in contemporary art, but animal activist cannot justify the testing of these boundaries when this happens at the expenses of animal life. Evaristti, who is himself not a stranger to controversy, sees the installation as a social experiment. His idea was to divide visitors to the museum into three groups: "The idiot, who pushes the button; the voyeur, who loves to watch; and the moralist, who will judge the action."²

We asked H-Animal Network readers to ask Mr Evaristti some questions for our interview. Our request sparked a thread of discussion on the website that once again highlighting the highly controversial nature of the work. Here we publish the interview to the artist followed by a selection of contributions featured in the original discussion thread.

² This article includes references to 'Marco Evaristti and the Open Work' essay by Anna Karina Hofbauer, 2007 in Marco Evaristti's website: <http://www.evaristti.com>

Where did the idea from Helena come from?

I have always been very fascinated by mythology; *Helena* is inspired by the Trojan War – the goldfish symbolizing the beautiful Helena and the mixer being the killer machine of war. Another source of inspiration is what happens all around me in society. How do we act and interact, how do we regard morality? I like to challenge audiences by revealing social mechanism that I find out of balance, or a taboo or a manifestation of double standards.

How many fish were liquidised through the show at Trapholt art gallery in Denmark back in 2000?

I believe only one fish was liquidised before the police came to cut the electricity off.

Is it ethical to use live animal in art?

I believe that sometimes it can be necessary to sacrifice one means for the sake of another. In this case, it was the lives of fishes that were at stake. To be honest people's harsh reactions surprised me as we, in my opinion, are surrounded by problems that are so much more serious that we encounter every evening watching the news. It worries me that we are passive in front of these news and that my art piece created such a stir instead. If people find that my use of live goldfish in my art piece is unethical, I would invite them to have a closer look at themselves and the world we live in.

When do you consider a piece of artwork that involves the death or cruelty to animals, not art?

I do not have an opinion on that. I am not for censorship.

Would you consider liquefying other animals?

No. And for the record – I have never liquefied a fish. I gave the possibility to do it and thereby saw how we fall into one of three categories: the sadist who presses the button, the voyeuristic who enjoys to watch the actions of other people, and the moralist that tell us all that we are mistaken. In that way the piece also has a sociological side to it.

The work caused uproar in Europe as well as in America. How in trouble were you by the end of the show?

At the end of the show, there was a trial where the ruling stated that the most humane way to kill a fish is to decapitate it very quickly. So as for the legal trouble they soon faded. As for the public trouble, it is still very

present in people's conscience, which I do not find troubling. It was a piece that invited the museum guests to intervene in the art piece, which was surprising and new and apparently had an impact on people.

Most recently, Helena was re-staged in Austria in 2006 for the exhibition 'Destroyed Worlds and the utopia of reconstruction'. Intruders on the opening night destroyed the work. Do you know who they were? How do you feel about it and would you consider re-staging Helena in the future?

I don't know who they were. I was very worried to hear of their reaction as I found it extreme.

You are Buddhist, how does Helena reflect Buddhist beliefs?

-No answer was given to the above question-

Why did you decided to use identical fish (as in one species) and why specifically gold fish?

I chose the goldfish for the same reason people choose them for their aquarium: for its beauty and for the minimum of demand of care...

What do you think of Damien Hirst' use of animals in his work?

Interesting. The pieces I have seen I have liked.

What are currently working on?

I just completed four years of work on the concept of territory that I began in 2004 when I painted a Greenlandic iceberg red. On March the 1st an exhibition of my work opens at Kunsthalle Krems in Austria including this piece and the two other projects: *The Mont Rouge Project* from 2007 where I transformed the summit of Mont Blanc to Mont Rouge and now finally in January this year *The Arido Rosso Project* in the Sahara. My next art project is about capital punishment, the death row and the lives or non-lives there.

Marco Evaristti, born 1963 in Santiago, Chile has lived in Denmark since the 1980s. After studying at the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts, Evaristti gained notoriety for a museum display entitled Helena in 2000 that featured ten functional blenders containing live goldfish. Evaristti's major work, in 2004, entitled Ice Cube Project, was to paint the exposed tip of a small iceberg red. On January 13, 2007, Evaristti hosted a dinner party for his most intimate friends. The main meal was agnolotti pasta that was topped with a meatball made with the artist's own fat, removed earlier in the year in a liposuction operation. On June 8, 2007, Evaristti draped the peak of Mont Blanc in France with red fabric, along with a 20 foot pole with a flag reading "Pink State". He was arrested and detained on June 6 for attempting to paint the peak red. His aim is to raise awareness of environmental degradation.

Special thanks to Malou Erritzøe for helping with the interview. Marco Evaristti was interviewed by Antennae in January 2008 ©

THE GOLDFISH THREAD

*In January, after securing an interview with **Marco Evaristti**, we asked **H-Animal**'s readers to send us questions to be put forward to the artist. Whilst achieving its original aim, our request also sparked one of the longest and most intense debates featured on the website so far. Here we have collated the most interesting exchanges – to read the thread in full, please visit <http://www.h-net.org/~animal/>*



Bryndís Snæbjörnsdóttir and Mark Wilson
Nanoq, Installation view at Spike Island Bristol, ©

Date Posted: Tue, 15 Jan 2008

My, my,
Yes, I'd like to suggest a question." Is it ethical to use animals in art?" You might want to ask Mr Evaristti to consider the kind of animal, and whether the creature comes to harm in the process.

Cheers, Bill

William S. Lynn, PhD
Senior Ethics Advisor
Practical Ethics
Center for Animals and Public Policy
Tufts University

Date Posted: Thu, 24 Jan 2008

This is in response to Bill Lynn and his question for Marco Evaristti "Is it ethical to use animals in art?" I am an artist completing a practice based PhD that amongst other explores the removal of the animal from the 'frame' (the picture) in order to make it significance to humans apparent.

I am interested in the opinion of Bill Lynn as a senior ethic advisor and or anyone else who likes to contribute on how the context of art might have a different bearing on the use of animals to for example biology, natural history, zoological gardens, or farm adventure parks.

With a more specific reference to Marco Evaristti and his work in the Trapholt Museum of Art in Denmark where he gave the visitors the choice to switch on 10 water-filled kitchen blenders with a living goldfish swimming in each one. How does this ethically differ from for example recent campaign by chefs in the UK to make visitors aware of where the food they are eating is from killing animals on TV in front of millions of viewers? [<http://tinyurl.com/ypppcr>]

There is no doubt that animals have been used and abused in the name of art since the early development of caves drawings. There is also no doubt either that lens based media is responsible for what Akira Lippit calls the 'death' of the animal, as through our attempts to control it, we have lost the connection to the 'real' living being. In one of our art projects "Nanoq: Flat Out and Bluesome" we brought a number of stuffed polar bears on loan from public and private collections together in an art space. During the installation it became apparent that the more perfect or seamless the process of taxidermy was the more likely the audience was to respond to it as a truthful representation of a living polar bear. The more crude the taxidermy the more able the audience was to imagine a life that ones was.

For me and many other artists that work with socially engaged art practice, art is a serious tool of investigation and a powerful lever to instigate social change. It is therefore impossible to read the question "Is it ethical to use animals in art?" without thinking "Is it ethical to use animals in science?" "Is it ethical to use animals in cooking?"

Bryndís Snæbjörnsdóttir

Artist and Researcher
Faculty of Fine Art
Gothenburg University
www.snaebjornsdottirwilson.com

Date Posted: Mon, 28 Jan 2008

Bryndís and everyone,
Thanks for an intriguing question. You write, "It is therefore impossible to read the question 'Is it ethical to use animals in art?' without thinking 'Is it ethical to use animals in science?' 'Is it ethical to use animals in cooking?'" For that matter, is it ethical to use animals in Animal Studies? Every time we teach a course or write an article in Animal Studies, we are using animals.

Well, my own answer in every case is, "Yes." I am concerned that if we become too fastidious about using animals, we will push them ever further from our daily lives, greatly impoverishing ourselves culturally and driving them ever more of them to extinction.

In the natural world, forms of life use one another constantly, and our use is a way of participating in the natural cycles. True, in most cases the use has become very asymmetrical, though not in all.

Rats and white tailed deer may take as much from us as we do from them, and their populations would probably be much smaller without human beings. In the case of, say, the AIDS virus, our relation is asymmetrical but in another way. It uses us, but we don't use it in the least. We may be relatively high on the proverbial "food chain," but it is certainly higher. We can never emancipate ourselves fully from the interdependence of living things, and I think we do best to integrate ourselves into it more fully instead of less so.

This does not mean that any use of animals is okay, in art or in any other area. Some uses, such as bear-baiting, are clearly repulsive, and many others are ambiguous. One question to ask, I think, is how our use may be made reciprocal. Personally, I have no problem, for example, with the Native Americans who sell buffalo burgers in order to help preserve populations of American bison. One may certainly argue over whether one or another use is justified, but I have no problem about using animals in general.

Boria Sax, PhD

Berkely College
Adjunct Faculty Member – Humanities and English

Date Posted: Mon, 28 Jan 2008

This post - and particularly the last few questions - got me thinking. I'm not sure I'm at any real conclusion here but here are some thoughts:

* Animal use in science is usually done behind closed doors (not that this makes it right) and is usually justified by the discourse of human superiority and human gain - is this the same for those using animals in art? Sticking with the goldfish example it seems to hold for the former (human superiority) but I can't see it for the latter (human gain)? I'm also unconvinced that allowing people to choose to blend fish leads to any kind of impetus for social change, and certainly not social change for the betterment of animals. It simply cannot do this as it is based upon the very notion that humans are able to abuse animals, in this case fish (i.e. human superiority). I also wonder if the artist entertained using animals whose sentence is less contested.

* I would imagine that the vast majority of those who object to the abuse of animals in art, are those who would answer 'no' to your final three questions.

* I do, however, find it interesting - if we follow this argument through - that the public vivisection of animals (lets call this 'use of animals in science' as it pertains to your email below) was abolished some time ago, whilst the public abuse of animals for food preparation (use of animals in cooking) is not at all banned and is, to the contrary, celebrated through the media etc. This leaves



Marco Evaristti

Helena, viewer about to push the button, ©

me wondering where the abuse of animals in art fits between these two? [I do realise that not all animal use in art is necessarily abuse but I am sticking with this term when discussing the blending of goldfish].

* I do think that art is often a useful social-investigatory tool and that it can also be a tool for social change. I just don't think this applies in the case of the goldfish if the social change we are wishing to see is an improvement in the lives of animals.

Dr Nik Taylor,
Senior Lecturer, Sociology,
CQU Rockhampton,
Queensland,
Australia
www.criticalanimalstudies.org

Date Posted: Mon, 28 Jan 2008

Dear Bryndís:

As someone who has written at length about this very question, I would like to respond from the point of

view of someone who is not only an artist, but an art educator and a writer. Let me start with your last excellent statement first, as I think it is the most pressing and most valuable for this discussion. The connection between the uses of animals in art, science and cooking is not a trivial one. It links three of the most prevalent uses of animals: use as food, use as tools and use as metaphor or cultural mirror. The operative word in all three instances is "use." And herein lies the need for the question of ethics. Certainly, I know and support many artists engaged in a serious art practice, and believe strongly in art as a "powerful lever to instigate social change" and that is why, in answer to your question, does Evaristti's goldfish piece differ ethically from UK chefs' killing animals on TV? I would answer a resounding No. It does not differ either to the goldfish being blended in the name of art or to the chicken who the chef stunned, "cut an artery inside its throat, and let it bleed to death, all in accordance with British standards for humane slaughter" whether they were killed, in the Evaristti case, to engage the viewer in a moral choice, or in the case of the chefs' desire to show audiences ostensibly how chicken are killed for food (and not coincidentally, to show the audience how



Marco Evaristti 1963 Dansk
Helena 2001
Helena
Blender med gulfisk konserveret med
formaldehyd og indstøbt i plast
Erhvervet 2004 KMS8334

Marco Evaristti

Helena, non functional installation sample, 2004 ©

expensive that might be). In neither case was the animal used in an ethical way.

In my mind, that is the central point. Ethically it is up to us, as artists, and scientists and people who eat, to begin to see that "using" animals is itself one of, if not the primary, obstacle to those shifts in social, economic, political, environmental and cultural change we need to make.

Carol Gigliotti, PhD

Associate Professor
Emily Carr Institute,
ART + DESIGN + MEDIA
1399 Johnston Street
Vancouver, BC V6H 3R9
Canada
<http://www.carolgigliotti.net>

Date Posted: Mon, 28 Jan 2008

Boria wrote:

"I am concerned that if we become too fastidious about using animals, we will push them ever further from our

daily lives, greatly impoverishing ourselves culturally and driving them ever more of them to extinction"

If given a choice between exploiting nonhuman animals against not having any contact with nonhuman animals in my day-to-day life I'd choose the latter. I'm fine with an ethics of leaving nonhumans alone. It's the non-fastidious approach to animal use, I would suggest, that is implicated in their extinction, not vice versa. Then:

"In the natural world, forms of life use one another constantly, and our use is a way of participating in the natural cycles"

I don't remember seeing ads for slaughterhouse workers saying 'your chance to earn pittance and partake in interspecies natural cycles'. (come to think of it, I don't remember seeing ads for slaughterhouse workers per se). It's simplistic - to be polite - to use arbitrary constructions of 'nature' to guide human behaviour, is it not?

Cheers,
Richard

Date Posted: Mon, 28 Jan 2008

This question is a good example of "have you quit beating your wife?" USE is the culprit. Do we USE animals when we depict them? Do cave paintings USE animals? Possibly, but to what end? To ensure good hunting? To embody their characteristics? To merge with their spirits?

Ever watch a pre-teen obsessively draw horses, over and over and over, the same horse? They are USING the horse somehow (not that the horse knows it or even is a real horse) in some emotional internal way, becoming the horse? Mastering the horse? It's inchoate, dreamlike, but somehow "useful."

Mary Scriver
Writer

Date Posted: Tue, 29 Jan 2008

From a utilitarian standpoint, it might very well be ethical to blend a goldfish or slaughter a chicken: if neither suffered, and the public deaths of each were able to act as deterrents to the countless acts of painful or unwitnessed acts of animal destruction and slaughter. I can't say I necessarily endorse a utilitarian view, but it seems we sometimes need to ask "whose ethics?" or whether "the ethical" is a universal.

Kari Weil
College of Letters
Wesleyan University
Middletown, CT

Date Posted: January 28, 2008

I have a simple question that I can't seem to find an answer to on the web. Did anyone ever push the button on the blender? I can't help but wonder whether there is a difference between a work of art which asks people to ask themselves a very serious question about whether they should push a button on a blender and kill a goldfish, and a work of art (I recognize that some will dispute the term) through which people kill goldfish in a blender. So, a second question, does it matter to this discussion at all if a goldfish is actually killed by some person in an audience at a gallery?

Nigel Rothfels
Director, Edison Initiative
Adjunct Associate Professor, History
University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee
Milwaukee, WI

Date Posted: February 4, 2008

For Nigel and others,

About the goldfish in the blender: in the local Danish media it was clear that somebody pushed the button and a fish was blended (it happened twice as far as I remember). But it seems that the first button was pushed due to a journalist that asked a visitor at the exhibition to do it. Therefore, it is not simply a question about what the artist or the audience is intended to do but also whether the media can make a good story for the news. During the trial that followed the exhibition experts stated that the quickest and most humane way to kill a goldfish was to blend it – but of course that doesn't in any way answer the question whether it is ethical to kill it in the first place.

Denmark has just seen another example of animals in art: an artist and activist for cheap organic products killed a pig at a large art exhibit (and poured its blood on a naked woman artist) and claimed that the pig had been killed for the greater good - that is to convince people that organic products shouldn't be subjected to the same 25% tax as all other product in Denmark. The logic in the argument hasn't been made clear to me yet.

Best

Anne Katrine Gjerløff
post.doc. Ph.D.
dept. of history
SAXO Institute
University of Copenhagen

Date Posted: February 4, 2008

In answer to Nigel's question, according to the BBC News at least one person did push the button. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/3040891.stm> and in answer to your second question, yes it matters very much to me that a gold fish was killed "by some person in an audience at a gallery?" An animal's death is a death, and I argue against our causing that for any reason, whether to eat, wear, use in research or to make a point in art or elsewhere.

Carol Gigliotti

Date Posted: February 4, 2008

Whether or not someone has chosen the option, the fact that the option is not only there but encouraged seems to me the basis of ethical concern (Unless, of course, the blender really won't work even if activated or is somehow programmed to challenge and not enact the viewer's choice). Certainly some people will think caring about a goldfish's life and death silly. Millions float belly-up in aquariums world wide daily. But to deliberately choose its violent death seems to me an important distinction and one I'd prefer art spoke against rather than facilitated. I guess when you come

right down to it, I prefer art for animals' sakes rather than for art's sake. --Marion "Ronnie" Copeland.

Date Posted: February 5, 2008

Thanks to all who responded to my queries about the goldfish. I am still trying to figure out why we should question the artist in this case. I have no problem holding up the person who pushes the button to some moral scrutiny, especially perhaps someone who gets talk in to doing so by a journalist, but the artist did not push the button (as far as I know) and clearly posed an important and provocative series of questions to his audience. I think one could argue, in fact, that as a result of this work, Evaristti's viewers were forced to think more carefully about the decisions they make everyday about animals. Ronnie points to all the goldfish floating belly-up in aquariums, but what about all the others who are flushed down toilets alive? Doesn't the very starkness (or brutality) of this exhibit ask people to examine all the ways they have trivialized the lives of animals? Can't this work also be conceptualized as "art for animals' sakes"? I take Carol's point, that to the goldfish being blended (and to those who care about the goldfish being blended), my more utilitarian argument is utterly inadequate. I should also say, that I do not believe that a measure of good art is simply how much people talk about it, nor do I believe that demonstrations of brutality are desirable way to educate people about brutality. With all that said, though, I somehow still think it matters that Evaristti neither pushed a button nor, as far as I can see, encouraged (as I understand that term) anyone else to do so.

Nigel

Date Posted: February 6, 2008

Hi, Nigel! Well, to the extent that we think taking the life of a goldfish is trivial, the art based on this, or at least the prospect of it, must be trivial too. If, however, taking the life of a goldfish is important, the art becomes significant. The life of the goldfish, in other words, lends its significance to the work of art. What all of this comes down to, in my opinion, is blood sacrifice. This is practiced even today in Sanatoria and voodoo, but many people find the idea profoundly disturbing. The goldfish is a sacrificial offering on the altar of art.

Boria

p.s.

And just for the record, I don't think there is any remotely objective answer to the question of how important the life of a goldfish is.

Date Posted: February 7, 2008

The simple answer for why we should question the artists is that they are creating an attractive nuisance, like an unfenced swimming pool.

Rick Bogle

Date Posted: February 7, 2008

Well, then, unfenced swimming pools are illegal most places because human children drown in them, as well as the occasional pet. Where was all this discussion when pet stores were charging children 50 cents to feed a white mouse to a boa constrictor? (No charge for the other kids to watch.)

Mary Sriver

Date Posted: February 8, 2008

Hello Everyone,

This entire thread has been fascinating for me, and raised quite a few interesting ideas about the nature of art, the value of animals, and how one might ethically think about the two. I want to gently make several brief observations on themes in the conversation. I mean these comments to be suggestive not conclusive.

1. Mr. Evaristti is culpable for the blender-based harms to animals. So too were the button pushers in the audience. The legal concepts of negligence and being an accomplice are ideas that can help us clarify this culpability.

2. I think we resolved the questions of animals and intrinsic value long ago. Yes, to the degree that a goldfish can be sentient or sapient (aware or self-aware), he/she has intrinsic value. Sentience or sapience is not the gold standard for intrinsic value (forgive the pun). They are however two properties intrinsic to some creatures (including ourselves), and indispensable in moral reasoning about such creatures. We routinely think and talk about the intrinsic value of human beings in moral, political and social discourse. There is no reason we should not do so with animals.

3. Ethical and aesthetic questions (like all questions in the humanities and science) are neither objective nor subjective. They are interpretive. This is the key insight in the turn away from empiricist and positivist paradigms of scholarship. While this has many implications, one pertaining to ethics is that there may be a range of morally responsible answers to an issue like using animals in art. It also means we do have contingent criteria to distinguish better and worse



Marco Evaristi

Helena destroyed in 2006, photograph by Matthias Bildstein, ©

answers. We should not mistake intellectual pluralism for moral relativism.

4. Comparisons of animals harmed in art to other harms for animals (e.g. factory farming or fishing) should be made with caution. Asking how a man in Europe liquidizing goldfish is different from an indigenous person catching salmon in a stream can be an important and ethically clarifying question to ask. But such questions are misplaced when they are rhetorical devices for moral relativism.

5. Ethics is indispensable to art. I do not mean to imply that art must meet some standard of a hectoring moralism. Rather art is produced with morally relevant presuppositions and intentions, and it can have consequences for the well being of human and non-human others. It is thus both reasonable and requisite to submit art to moral scrutiny. This is especially true when harm is done to others in the fashioning of art. By way of analogy, we would not accept the claim that science is value-neutral and thus human subjects research cannot be subject to ethical oversight. So too with art.

6. This thread also informs two prior threads about defining human-animal studies (HAS), and the role of

activism in the academy. To state my presuppositions, I believe there are reasonable differences over what defines HAS. I also believe advocates and academics have differing roles and functions in society.

Yet I do not read the posts of activists on H-Animal as wanting to erase such distinctions. Rather they are calling to account representations of scholarship that endorse an acritical, value-neutral, and/or ethics-free vision of HAS. I think we need to listen to their caution. An acritical HAS is both intellectually untenable and morally irresponsible. Sometimes we must speak with a moral voice, or legitimate through silence the harm done others. To bracket ethical questions at times is entirely appropriate. To avoid them altogether is a serious error. I want HAS to make a welcoming space for individual scholars who bracket ethics in their research. I mean them no disrespect. Yet I do not want an acritical HAS. Ethics needs a reserved seat at the table. I think this conversation over animals, art, and ethics provides insight into why this should be so.

7. Finally, is it ethical to use animals in art? This is a complex question, and I do not pretend to have the answer. As a practical ethicist, my answers would be rooted in concrete situations. Amongst other things, I would look at the point of view, intentions, and actions

of the artist, as well as the consequences of the art itself. To my mind, Mr. Evaristti's work can be an easy mark, given the harm it does to animals and nature, and the meritless justifications of his theorizations. Other art, however, incorporates animals in fascinating, nuanced, and well-theorized ways. Simply view the work of Rob Hite, Catherine McIntyre, and others on the Practical Ethics Gallery, and you can see what I mean (www.practicaethics.net). Like many of you, I am unwilling to offer a blanket condemnation. Even so, we can and should make discriminating judgments about using animals and nature in art.

Bill

Date Posted: February 8, 2008

The issue was mentioned whether, in effect, morality is binding on art(ists). I don't see how it can't be. If artists are allowed to suspend ethics for the sake of aesthetics, then in short order we should not be surprised to find many/most transgressors excusing their misdeeds as instances of performance art. Practically (and indeed conceptually) morality is an all-or-none proposition. If anybody is outside its purview, then everybody has to be--otherwise, nobody would rationally submit to its norms; and, while a wholesale retreat from ethics (a.k.a. amorism) is not unthinkable or irrational, I'd wager most of us (with the rare exception of truly radical anarchists) would not want to live in any society under its sway.

Ralph Acampora,
Philosophy Dept.
Hofstra University,
Hempstead, NY, U.S.A.

Date Posted: February 9, 2008

Consider, too, that if we substitute "pornography" for blending goldfish, the morality/ethical gage goes up a few degrees in the minds of many humans.

MWCopeland

Date Posted: February 9, 2008

First of all, I think Bill Lynn has given us a beautiful summation of the issues involved. I would just like to add that the reason why I find Evaristti objectionable is not because it "uses" animals but, rather, because it does not. While not many people subscribe openly to the idea of "art for art's sake" today, the special ambience of art consists in being placed apart from at least the more everyday sorts of utility. By virtue of being placed in a gallery, the urinal loses its utility and becomes a work of art. Artists today may rationalize

their work with claims to inspire social change, but we pretty well have to take these of faith. They can almost never tell us, except in the vaguest terms, what the social change is, or how their role can be verified.

The killing of the goldfish would not be objectionable if it were eaten, whether by people or animals, or otherwise put to use. Then the goldfish have a part in natural cycles, and the dignity that comes from that participation. What is objectionable here is that the killing of the goldfish appears entirely gratuitous, apart from highly abstract and speculative ideas about some higher cultural purpose. The artist may not be making a claim to be above all morality, but there seems to be an implicit claim that he/she follows only some exalted morality that is above everyday concerns.

It is in this arbitrary nature that the killing of the goldfish reminds me so of blood sacrifice. The word "Holocaust" literally means "burning of the whole," a sacrifice in which nothing is used of the victim. The offering is, in other words, deliberately deprived of all utility so that it can serve a presumably higher purpose. The life force of the goldfish, it seems to me, is intended to exalt the work of art.

Boria Sax

Date Posted: February 12, 2008

Boria Sax wrote, in part: "The killing of the goldfish would not be objectionable if it were eaten, whether by people or animals, or otherwise put to use." Animal rightists find statements like this as objectionable as statements that seek to justify violations of human animals' rights, for the same reasons.

Rick Bogle
Primate Freedom Project

Date Posted: February 16, 2008

As a lawyer, I will stand back from that use [Rick Bogle's, ed.] of the term "rights." But as an American Indian who grew up a little differently than you, apparently, I have to wonder at privileging goldfish life over carrot life and how I could have missed it when some living thing learned to live without consuming other living things?

I'll shut up now as I'm sure savage ideas don't fit here. In my language, "vegetarian" would translate to "poor hunter" but taking an animal without asking permission first and giving thanks afterward would lead to dire consequences. Some people know that. Not as many know of similar beliefs about Grandmother Corn.

Steve Russell



Marco Evaristti
Helena destroyed in 2006, photograph by Matthias Bildstein, ©

Date Posted: February 23, 2008

Dear colleagues,

As someone who considers himself an animal rights advocate, what I find problematic (let's put the word 'objectionable' aside for a moment) about Boria Sax's argument is that it seems to imply that morality is democratic, inasmuch as it conflates a majority view (the killing of goldfish for human food is morally acceptable) with a universal statement ('it would not be objectionable'). But it seems to me that we're at cross purposes here. If I understand/interpret correctly, Sax argues that it is hypocritical for those who believe in the morality of 'pragmatic' 'use' (in this case, killing) of a goldfish or other animals, to object to the same actions carried out in the name of art. Rick Bogle replies that this argument has no purchase on those who believe that the killing of goldfish is always wrong, and who practice that belief in their day-to-day existence. These two positions, then, are not conflictual. In regard to Steve Russell's point, it seems to me that two separate issues are being addressed. One is whether we should apply different standards to different cultural groups as regards the morality of using and killing animals. This is a problematic issue which inquires as to whether we

believe in situational or absolute morality; it also demands inquiry as to the specific circumstances of any such group vis-a-vis sustenance, survival, and the animal and human worlds. The fact that something is a cultural practice of a minority or oppressed group (or indeed, the fact that something is traditional per se) does not in itself make it either a necessity, or necessarily moral; but it needs to be understood in a context in which the entire cultural practices of such a group are under threat. This argument has also played out in debates over such practices as kosher and halal slaughter.

However, the argument that, in eating carrots while decrying the eating of goldfish, we privilege goldfish over carrots, seems to me highly problematic. We have ample evidence of the sentience and ability to feel pain of (many) animals, including fish, while we have no evidence of this in plants. It may be argued that scientific rationality of the kind which attributes sentience, the ability to feel pain, etc should not be privileged above other discourses, and argued also that this discourse has caused more harm than good in terms of human actions toward animals. However, even putting this scientific-rational discourse aside, on a very basic level of everyday observation, (most) animals have the ability to evade pain and death and will generally do so if it is possible, whereas plants have no such abilities,

which would seem to indicate a qualitative difference between violence toward plants and toward animals.

Furthermore, for at least some plants, being eaten has clear survival benefits in that it is thus that propagation occurs, whereas this is never the case for animals.

Finally, as Steve Russell notes, living things (though photosynthesising plants do not fall into this category) generally do need to consume other living things; but this is by no means an argument that it is morally acceptable to do so under any circumstances of human choosing, or that there is no moral difference between what living things we consume (after all, the same argument would morally justify cannibalism). For example, there are few (though not none) who would argue that it was morally wrong for a hunter-gatherer people, before the rise of agriculture or in its absence, to kill and consume animals; but this is not to say that in our present-day society it is acceptable to kill and consume animals (in any circumstances) in a situation in which the possibilities of our relationship to sources of sustenance, and our relationship to the animals we consume and to their carcasses, are so vastly different.

Rowan Savage

Doctoral Candidate

Department of Sociology and Social Policy

University of Sydney

Sydney

Australia

Date Posted: February 23, 2008

Howdy folks,

I agree with Steve Russell's point. And I have never heard an ethicist or anyone else convincingly explain to me how animals and plants are different--from a philosophical point of view. And I would be very open to having this settled once and for all. Some say that a vegetarian or vegan lifestyle is more ethical than an omnivorous one because one should not use animals. And some say that the argument "animals should not be destroyed/used because they feel pain/can suffer" is not sufficient to prevent animal use since an animal could be made to feel no pain through genetic manipulation or use of analgesics, for instance. Thus, some say, animals should not be destroyed/used simply because they have a right to exist (pain & sentience, or no).

So how can we use any life at all? Plants also grow and change, they inhabited the planet before humans did, and maybe have a "right" to exist, even if they feel no pain and cannot suffer (as far as we know). Is it possible for humans to exist without being necessarily unethical?

Which brings me back to my earlier questions, which were met with a suspicious silence from the subscribers to this list:

Is it ethical for me to take my dog to the veterinarian knowing her tools, drugs, and training were developed through animal use and experimentation?

*Is it ethical for me to feed my dog the processed flesh of other animals, i.e.: dog chow?

*Is my dog really a "companion animal," or in actuality a prisoner in my house subject to me legally and physically in every way?

*Is pet/companion animal keeping a form of "animal use"?

*Why is pet/companion animal keeping exempted from most debates around the ethics of animal use?

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The 'Goldfish Thread' was printed by permission of H-Animal Moderator Brett Mizelle. 2008

THE DEATH OF THE ANIMAL

The physical presence of the animal in the exhibiting space presents a number of challenges. This article specifically looks at the killing of animals in the gallery, attempting to map the paradigmatic set involving the killing for art's sake.

Text by Giovanni Aloï

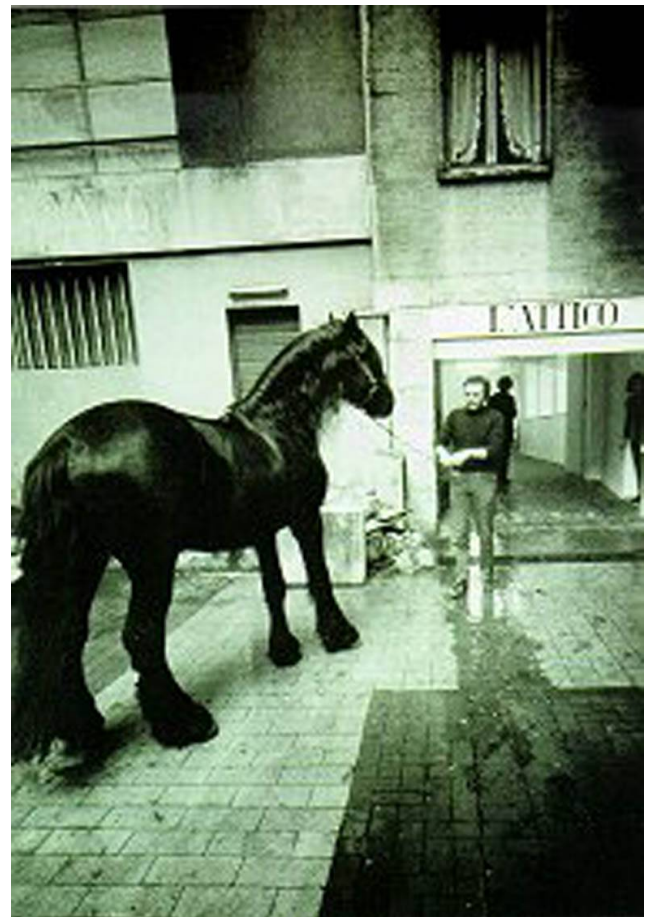
"The killing of animals is a structural feature of all human-animal relations. It reflects human power over animals at its most extreme and yet also at its most commonplace."

-From the introduction of Killing Animals-

The moral and ethical issues bound to the killing of an animal for human consumption have been an integral part of our modern social and cultural development; the killing of an animal for artistic purposes, a relatively novel issue, appears to share similar moral and ethical grounds whilst also bordering on a less defined area of instability that often leads to heated debate.

Since animals have come to, physically and not just symbolically inhabit the gallery space, the problematic of dealing with a living being in a place not specifically designed for its survival has been source of disagreement. Art galleries are not zoos; the ergonomics of the white cube do not take the physiological needs of animals into consideration. This usually is one of the main causes of concern brought forward by animal rights activists: the deterritorialization of the animal within the gallery space can indeed be fatal or at least traumatic.

One question arises: is it acceptable to inflict pain to animals for the sake of art? When circuses employing animals in their spectacles have to defend their act, they claim that no suffering is involved in their performative work. We are told that animals enjoy performing as a form of exercise and mental activity alike. Doubts have been cast on this anthropomorphised interpretation of induced animal behaviour; jumping through a hoop or dancing on a ball can, by human standards, correspond to an idea of fun, but may not necessarily be source of pleasure to animals. It has many times been argued that the training involved in the learning and perfecting of these tricks requires lengthy and far from natural repetition of mechanical actions not belonging to the behavioural range displayed by species in the wild.



Jannis Kounellis

Horse entering L'Attico gallery in Rome for the 1969 staging of 'Untitled Horses' ©

The type of spectacle the animal is required to enact in the gallery space is very different from the one expected to be seen under the circus tent. In the white



Thomas Edison
Electrocuting an Elephant, still from the film, 1903 ©

cube, the live animal is not trained to perform tricks but it is expected to be itself. In compliance with the paradigmatic set of postmodern art, the animal in the gallery space must be the real thing, not a referent, and as such, it should display its 'thingness': the one 'shocking' element that even the vivid representation of Stubbs' 'Whistlejacket' could not ever evoke.

Kounellis' 'Untitled Horses' (1969) involved a certain level of shock-factor generated by the physical presence of the animal in the exhibiting space. The smell of excrement and urine; the odour of the horse's body; the sound of the horse shoes shuffling on the tiled gallery floor; the presence of the familiar (the idealised horse) presented as unfamiliar (the physical horse), granted the work its iconic ground-breaking aura.

A sense of awe and wonder triggered by the encounter with the real thing, fuelled by the paradoxical distancing caused by centuries of beautified and polished representations of horses in painting and sculpture, was at play. For a long while, the presence of the animal in the gallery space stood as a metaphorical oxymoron; the unexpected encounter, an encounter with an irrational being within a rationalised space.

Did Kounellis' horses dislike being chained to the walls of a gallery for a day? Maybe they could have done without the journey from the stables to the gallery. When Whitechapel Art Gallery re-staged 'Untitled Horses' in 2002, much preoccupation was taken in assuring that the horses were going to spend a very comfortable time at the gallery. Yet, Whitechapel was very wary of the possible animal-rights campaigners discontent with the show, and announced the introduction of the work in their programme with a slightly unusual delay to intentionally avoid clamour and controversy.

It could be argued that since the original staging

of the piece, the encounter with the live animal in the white cube per se has set the bar for the expected thrill involved with the experience. The novelty of encountering 'the other' wore off relatively quickly creating a desire for surpassing the experience of the simple encounter. As a consequence, artists began to work in two different ways: on the one hand, some undertook further research in the realm of representation by identifying new ways of 'capturing' animals through new and old media with the aid of new philosophical thought (i.e.: becoming animal); whilst on the other, some tried to further explore the dynamics of the encounter with the animal, aiming to heighten the thrill by introducing the element of death.

The spectacle of killing animals has been used to powerful effect in modern times. In 1903, Edison famously filmed the electrocution of Topsy the elephant. The aim of the one-minute film was to create evidence against the AC electric current in order to promote Edison's own DC system. The shock factor involved in the killing of an animal synonymous with strength and gigantic size, played a pivotal role in the fascination that audiences found in the footage. Based on similar ideas of spectacle, recent contemporary art practice has seen a number of contributions capitalising on the fascination involved with the killing of animals inside the white cube.

The San Francisco Art Institute has just opened (19th of March 2008) an exhibition titled 'Don't Trust Me' by artist Adel Abdessemed. In this case, like for Topsy, the killing of animals is mediated by film. 'Don't Trust Me' portrays six animals—a sheep, a horse, an ox, a pig, a goat, and a doe—being struck and killed by a hammer. Each killing occurs so quickly that it is difficult to determine definitively what has happened. The museum presents the show proposing the following questions: 'Do these incidents represent slaughter or sacrifice? What are their social, cultural, moral, and political implications? Or are such questions now verging on irrelevance, as if something else altogether were taking place (or about to), something wholly other, unforeseen, and unexpected?' ²

Akira Mizuta Lippit has argued: "There is no proper death of the animal and no death as such in cinema. [...] The death of animal on film is an impossible spectacle-speculative and spectral, linked to cinema through the magical process of animation. Against the impossibility of animal death, cinema provides artificial life, anima, animation, and the possibility of reanimation. Film, perhaps the emblematic technology of the late nineteenth century, keeps animals from ever truly dying by reproducing each individual animal death in a fantastic crypt. It multiplies and repeats each unique death until its singular has been erased, its beginning and end fused into a spectral loop."

³ Lippit's perspective is deeply fascinating but the philosophical visions contained in the text do not suffice to, in the eyes of animal rights activists, justify the physical death of a real animal. What Lippit's conception



Abdel Abdessemed

Don't Trust Me, 2008, video still, Abdel Abdessemed and David Zwirner Gallery ©

of cinematic space brings to the surface is that the death of the animal, once filmed, is multiplied and repeated; its shock value delivered to a new audience with each re-play. Yet, it is the physical killing of the one animal used for the filming of the footage that is problematic; the multiplication of it is a 'cost-effective' product of a brutal act. The killing of these animals does not comply with the regulations imposed to slaughterhouses but seems reminiscent of small and isolated rural realities. It clearly isn't acceptable to kill an animal in such way, hitting it with a sledgehammer, but is it morally acceptable to film it and then repeat the killing in the arena of the contemporary exhibiting space?

Underneath its extremely violent content, the work references the seemingly out of control expansion of China's development and the violence to which the population which propels such development is subjected to. The hidden reference to this system surfaces as we realise that the choice of animals presented in the short films is not random but that it instead references the traditional calendar of China. From this perspective, the hammer that kills the animals signifies the Communist regime. The significance of the

work, with its current-affairs grounded focus, still makes one wonder if contemporary art practice has completely abandoned the quest for sophisticated ways of conveying meaning. From an animal rights perspective, the preoccupation also lies with the fact that the work may send out the message that killing animals in a brutal way is accepted.

In *Killing Animals*, the seminal book discussing the problematic complexity of the ultimate expression of human power over animals, Steve Baker asks: 'Can contemporary art productively address the killing of animals?'⁴ Baker's question seems to propose a resolute approach: if contemporary art is not able to productively address the killing of animals, the killing of animals involved is hollow and unnecessary. From this perspective contemporary art would be not only missing the opportunity to address key elements of our relationship with animals, but would also fail animals once again by 'using them', instead of trying to understand them from different and new perspectives.

At this stage, it could be argued that there are predominantly two categories of physical animal killing that take place in contemporary art practice. One involves the presence of the already dead animal,



Abdel Abdessemed
'Don't Trust Me', 2008, video still, Abdel Abdessemed
and David Zwirner Gallery ©

taxidermised or in formaldehyde; the animal is presented to the viewer as an 'art object' of some description, usually constituting integral part of a broader installation piece. The second category, involves the presence of live animals in the gallery space, this time preferably shadowed by the imminent possibility or unavoidable contingency of death. Here animals still constitute integral part of a broader installation piece with the difference that in this case, the installation piece in question contains the elemental part that will kill the animal. Here, the killing is physical, not mediated or metaphorical and it takes place in front of the eyes of the viewer; at times, this happens by the hand of the viewer.

Within this framework, it could be productive to also consider that controversy, when amplified by the media, equals to free publicity. The shock value featured in the work of art is very likely to reverberate into profitable value for the artist; this should not be underestimated. In a society oversaturated by the cult of celebrity, some attention-seeking artists focus on achieving fame, rather than on the art itself.

The trend for killing animals in the gallery space was perhaps set in 1971, when American artist Newton Harrison planned to electrocute catfish, oysters and shrimps as part of his *Portable Fish Farm* installation at the Hayward Gallery in London. Harrison filled tanks with 135 catfish, 96 oysters, 11 lobsters, 2 crayfish, and innumerable tiny brine shrimp to demonstrate how man might live in a polluted environment by harvesting fish. On the opening night, 35 of the catfish were scheduled to be electrocuted, and served up to specially invited guests along with hush puppies and salad. In that occasion, Harrison explained, "My piece is about the cycle of life."⁵

The exhibit was extensively covered by the media, not only because of its unusual content, but also because it angered comedian Spike Milligan to such degree that he took a hammer to the Hayward Gallery

and smashed one of its windows in protest. The RSPCA eventually stepped in, demanding that the catfish be killed in private, rather than within the spectacle arena set up at the Hayward. The fact that RSPCA identified the public killing of the animals, rather than the killing per se, as the real unacceptable feature in the work, is a detail of great relevance. The animals in Harrison's tanks belong to what we culturally understand as edible species and as such, the killing of these, which happens on mass scale every day, is not to be considered unacceptable. Instead, it is the entertainment value of the killing, which echoes a morbid fascination for the spectacle of the animal hunts and executions that dates back to the performances staged at the Roman Coliseum, that seems to constitute the real problem. Contemporary Spanish corridas can here be brought as controversial example of a still practiced formula of entertainment involving the public suffering and killing of an animal. Seeing it happening in front of your own very eyes seems to trigger a primordial sense of excitement, one that we find particularly difficult to explain, but also one that continuously operates as an overwhelming attractor.

Here Steve Baker's original question surfaces once more. "Can contemporary art productively address the killing of animals?" Baker's question can be further explored by introducing another question, one Roland Barthes poses at the beginning of his seminal essay 'The Death of the Author' (1977): "Who is speaking thus?" Here it could be productive to examine this double-question with concern to artists who stage the killing of animals within the exhibiting space. Barthes brings to surface the problematic related to the traditional critical approach to creative work: how can we detect precisely what the author, in this case the artist, intended? His answer is that we cannot. He introduces this notion in the epigraph to the essay, taken from Honoré de Balzac's story *Sarrasine* in which a male protagonist mistakes a castrato for a woman and falls in love with her. When, in the passage, the character dotes over her perceived womanliness, Barthes challenges his own readers to determine who is speaking in the text.⁶ Similarly, we could ask if, in the work of art involving the killing of an animal: is it the author who speaks? The animal involved? Literary ideas on the animal? Universal ideas about animals?

It has been extensively argued that the 'use' of the animal in pre-postmodern art has been characterised by the 'metaphorical silencing' of the animal, where, in other words, the animal is contextualised in order to speak about a broad range of human affairs rather than animality. In other words, the animal is always object, never subject. Does the killing of animals in the white cube contribute, in any way to the breaking down of this or other paradigmatic sets? Alternatively, is the animal simply ventriloquising human concerns and the artist's own set of preoccupations and anxieties?

In 2004, the work Nathalia Edenmont caused



Nathalia Edenmont

Star, Chromogenic print mounted on Perspex, 2002, courtesy of Wetterling Gallery ©

controversy because of her treatment of animals in her work. Edenmont's photographic work includes the use of animals that the artists herself killed. The animals in her images look seemingly alive as she takes care to photograph them not later than fifteen minutes after the killing has happened. In one of her works, we see five little white mice that have been hollowed to become finger puppets. Of course, the killing of the animals does not happen in front of us, but our knowledge that the artist has killed the animals herself for the purpose of inclusion in her work plays a key role in our understanding of it. She explains that the five mice on the fingers of a human hand represent the five stars of the former Soviet Union, where her mother was murdered. As we are informed of this, the work ceases to be about the animal, and it acquires the features of the traditional treatment reserved to animals in the history of painting. Interestingly, a large number of Edenmont's work directly references the tradition of 17th century paintings with freshly killed animals wearing collars reminiscing of Dutch masters' portraits. The killing is justified by the gallery representing the artist as follows: "due to the fact that

they have been freshly killed, Edenmont's animals are caught in a moment frozen in time that suspends the borders between life and death." 7

In 1992, Katarzyna Kozyra was an art student with active Hodgkins Disease, who decided to do her graduate project about her death and the food chain. While her professor suggested she create a sculpture, she chose instead to turn to taxidermies a horse, a dog, a cat, and a rooster, each displaying red coat or plumage, in order to match her own hair. For visual appeal, she too required that the animals appeared undamaged. Of this project the artist said that the starting point was the fairy tale of the Brothers Grimm, which explains the final pyramid composition where one animal stands on top of the other (Bremen Town Musicians inspired). "What was intriguing about this sculpture," she says, "was that it could be made using ready-made materials, i.e. animals."

This statement clearly reveals the understanding of animals in the mind of the artist. Her second concern was the killing of the animals as she decided to kill them herself instead of using already dead ones. She says: "I was balancing on the edge of accepted ethical norms,



Nathalia Edenmont
'Charles', Chromogenic print mounted on Perspex, 2002,
courtesy of Wetterling Gallery ©

while at the same time I was touching that difficult thing called the death of a living creature. All of these animals were basically destined to die, however, using them for the sculpture generated ethical problems. And yet animals are murdered everyday and used for everyday purposes, or for consumption. My personal participation in the act of death and using their carcasses to realize an idea changes the point of view, it has evoked and continues to evoke various reactions.”^{8,9}

For unclear reasons Kozyra decided to film the killing of the horse so that the act would be featured in the finished work. As she claims this was the most shocking and provoking feature of the work; the one that the audience found unacceptable. This also became a problematic stage for the artist: “I began to question whether to be consistent in the process of realizing this piece, whether the killing of the horse was to be followed by the killing of other animals.” In an interview she explains that she has not partaken in the killing of other animals: “Eventually I got a dog, which had been put to sleep some fifteen minutes earlier at the request of its owner. I had six cats to choose from, and I killed two cocks, as I didn't know which one would be better, the big one or a little one. But I had a problem - shouldn't I in the name of consistency, have bought live dogs and cats and killed them? What stopped me? The emotions. I couldn't have done it. At least not then.”¹⁰

Here, once again, we witness the killing of the animal through a video installation, in this case showing the first-hand involvement of the artist in the process. The video shows the horse entering the stable, being killed and then being skinned. What the work says about animals or death remains unclear, whilst a caption



Katarzyna Kozyra
'Life-size' sculpture video', still from, 1993 ©

on the home page of her website clarifies that “Kozyra's notoriety and controversial status in Poland is legendary and her works, never sensational for the sake of publicity, continue to elicit extreme responses and heated public discussions.”¹¹ As Steve Baker warns in his essay 'Animal Death in Contemporary Art': “When artist's statements about their own work are taken seriously, an answer to the question [...] - Can contemporary art productively address the killing of animals? – seems to become more elusive than ever.”¹²

In 1990 Damien Hirst, brought back the live killing of animals in the gallery space; in this case, insects. He focused his attention on flies. According to Hirst, the work is a 'self-contained life cycle'. In a large bi-parted glass case, maggots hatch inside a white minimalist box, they metamorph into adult flies and feed on a bloody severed cow's head. Hanging from the upper part of the glass cabinet an insect electrocutor means the end for the majority of the insects housed in the piece.

The work stirred a media frenzy making 'A Thousand Years' one of the most famous artworks of contemporary art. It was noted that over its first installation period, at least sixty generations of flies had come and gone.¹³ In Hirst's conception, flies are like people and the closed system of 'A Thousand Years' mirrors our world with its mechanistic functioning exposed to the bone. We come to life, become sexually mature, feed, mate and eventually die. Hirst stages the death of an animal whose cultural common significance is confined to the understanding of pest, a disease propagator that needs to be killed. Do any moral or ethical grounds apply to the systematic killing of an animal culturally considered a pest? Fly killers are available in supermarkets around the world and are used daily with no apparent remorse. Killing insects seem much more appropriate and excusable than killing a horse, and not just when the killing is carried out in the name of art. Once again, it has to be recognised that the killing is not mediated but staged in front of our eyes and that it is in this case highlighted by the buzzy



Damien Hirst

A Thousand Years 1990, steel, glass, flies, maggots, MDF, insect-o-cutor, cow's head, sugar, water. 213x427x213 cm, Charles Saatchi ©

noise made by the electrocutor. Wherever you are in the gallery where 'A Thousand Years' is exhibited, whatever work by another artist you are looking at, you will be attracted to investigate the buzzing noise and will discover the system that produces it. The head of the cow, lying on the floor of the cabinet, also functions as a reminder of death but it is in fact a simulacrum. When Hirst first devised the piece he wanted to use a real head; this proved problematic for a number of reasons. First because the head would have rotted producing a terrible smell, too unbearable for an exhibiting space open to the public; secondly because it would have required regular frequent replacements, making it difficult to maintain the self-contained nature of the piece intact. For this purpose Hirst asked taxidermist artist Emily Mayer to produce a permanent fake head.

In 1991, Damien Hirst's first solo show at Woodstock Street in London, 'In and Out of Love' continued his experimentations with insects including the presence of live tropical butterflies. The show was installed on two floors of a vacant shop in central London. The upstairs room contained flowers, bowls of sugar water and white canvases with pupae attached from which exotic butterflies hatched, mated, laid eggs and died in a cyclical rehearsal of biological function. Downstairs the canvases held dead butterflies embedded into monochromatic fields of viscous household gloss paint, fulfilling a static aesthetic role. The exhibition stood as a challenge to the art connoisseur who sees art history as a series of collectable masterpieces, proposing instead that works of art are occasional manifestations of a continuous

culture.¹⁴

Tropical butterflies are particularly delicate insects requiring relatively high temperatures and stable levels of humidity in order to live. The exhibiting space is the antithesis of the 'butterfly house' environment in which butterflies can still thrive and reproduce. In a cold environment with not enough light and heat, the butterflies will not feed nor fly and will eventually die. Hirst, who had spent the previous two years setting up a pupae hatching room in his bedroom was aware of these technical requirements, and installed heaters and humidifiers in the exhibiting space to assure that the butterflies would 'function' within the piece. It has been argued that, from a critical perspective, in 'In and Out of Love', living creatures are physically brought in contact with the traditional representational plane onto which they were once only depicted: the canvas. From this angle the work comments on the postmodernist dislike for referential representation.

In this work, unlike in *A Thousand Years*, the killing does not happen in the gallery space but it is simulated by the simultaneous presence of live fluttering butterflies and those stuck to the canvasses. Here the encounter with butterflies, one of the most culturally celebrated insects, is different from the traditional pinned encounter provided by the entomology cabinet. Viewers invited to the opening of the show found the presence of the butterflies to be highly contrasting with the idealised beauty associated with the colourful and complex patterns of the wings. Some viewers reported the disgust they felt in noticing that the hairy bodies of the insects were far from elegant and shuddered at the



Damien Hirst
 'Butterfly Painting' from 'In and Out of Love', 1991 ©

thought one would land on them. Although Hirst fitted the gallery with heaters and humidifiers to create a friendly environment for the butterflies, visitors squashed many of them by accident and all insects had to endure cigarette smoke that at the time was not banned from closed public spaces. In this instance, rather than an edible species, Hirst chose the epitome of beauty in the animal world, an insect loved for its aesthetic quality and one continuously killed for this very quality.

Of the work Hirst says: "It is like a butterfly has flown around and died horribly in the paint. The death of an insect that still has this really optimistic beauty of a wonderful thing." ¹⁵ In our western scale of ethical and moral judgment, killing insects is a far less serious matter than killing a mammal. It could be argued that in the 'irrational hierarchy of animal killing', fish stand somewhere in between the two extremes, as our biological distance from some groups allows us to disengage with their behaviour and consequently with their pain. It can therefore be argued that the shock factor also involved in the killing of an animal in the

gallery space involves the operating of a variable value that changes according to the group and species to which the animal belongs. Another factor in the equation is the geographical location of the exhibit in questions as this will challenge or comply with the local laws on animal welfare.

In recent years, the controversy surrounding the killing of animals in the gallery space was re-ignited by Marco Evaristti, an artist whose art never ceases to generate heightened levels of debate. His most controversial work to date, *Helena*, stirred animal rights campaigners and public like no other work had previously done; it also got Evaristti charged with cruelty on animals more than one time and in more than one country around the world. According to the artist, the installation, comprising of ten Moulinex Optiblend 2000 liquidisers, each containing water and a gold fish, is a social experiment. Unlike the works previously discussed, 'Helena' does not involve the systematic killing of the animal on display. The opportunity to kill the animal is given to a member of the audience but it is not necessary for it to take place



Marco Evaristti
'Helena', non functional installation sample, 2004 ©

in order to fully comprehend the social commentary involved in the work. The death of the animal is here constantly imminent but also potentially absent. What makes the work charged with its attractive/repulsive moral set of preoccupation is the tension it instantly creates in its viewers. Suddenly, and not necessarily willingly, in front of *Helena*, we are simultaneously passive voyeuristic viewer, potential killer and inevitable moralist; which of the three we already are or we are to become whilst exposed to the work is not a predictable factor. Evaristti contends that "Here one sees evil, sadism, our animal instinct, because we know that if we push the button, there is a chance that it could work." In her essay 'Marco Evaristti and the Open Work', Anna Karina Hofbauer argues that: "The participatory element in this otherwise sculptural work leads to a modification of reality, in which it is not Evaristti who comes over as irresponsible, but where he passes on the ethical and moral issues to the observer." ¹⁶

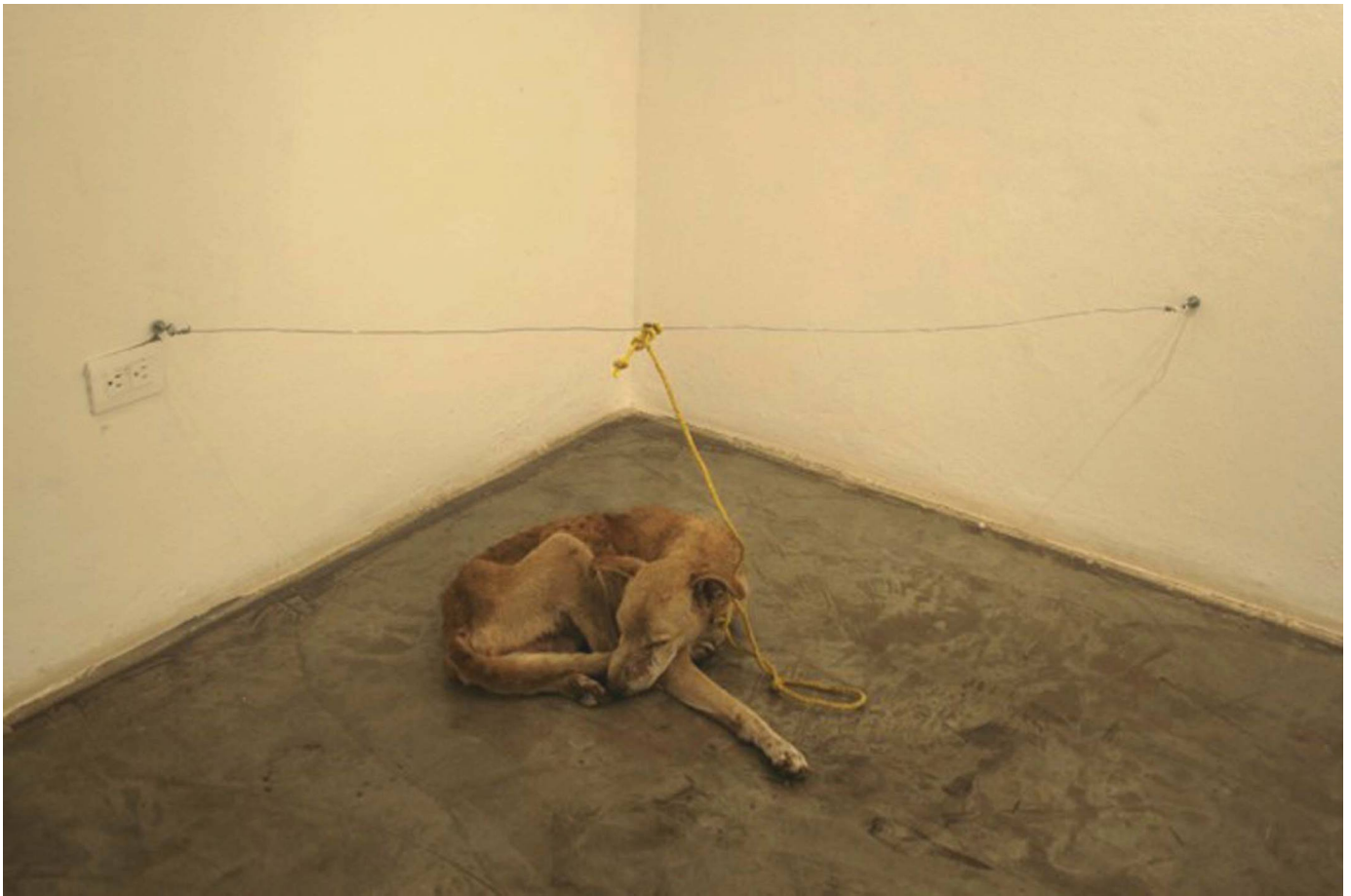
Of course, the button was pushed more than once generating controversy that landed Evaristti in the hands of the law. Recently, a court in Denmark ruled that the fish were not treated cruelly, as they had not faced prolonged suffering. The fish were killed "instantly" and "humanely," said Judge Preben Bagger. The court had earlier heard from an expert witness of the blenders' maker, Moulinex that the fish had probably died within one second of the blender being

switched on. A vet also told the court that the fish would have died painlessly. ¹⁷

The verdict reassess the notion that, as long as killing happens without pain, it can be tolerated, and excused/justified. It has to be mentioned that the case went to court only because Peter Meyer Trapholt Art Museum in Kolding, where *Helena* was first exhibited in 2000, refused to pay the 2.000 kroner (£180.00) originally imposed by Danish Police. He argued, "It's a question of principle. An artist has the right to create works which defy our concept of what is right and what is wrong." It has extensively been argued that exhibits like 'Helena' can be justified if they provide the viewer with an experience that challenges our understanding of social norms and structures; yet, this may not constitute an umbrella under which anything can be presented to an audience as art. Furthermore, should we extend the level of responsibility from the artist that creates works that include the death of an animal to the gallery spaces that exhibit the works?

Only Guillermo Vargas' work *Exhibit No. 1* at the Galería Códice on August 16, 2007 generated more controversy than *Helena* did, and that is because this time, it involved the killing of a dog by starvation. The exhibit featured a captured starving street dog tied to one corner of the room, a burning large censer filled with 175 rocks of crack cocaine and marijuana, a stereo playing an anthem in reverse and a few photographs on a sparse wall. The artist from Costa Rica, allegedly asked two local children to capture a stray dog. The animal was then exhibited in the gallery space where a wall, within view of the starving animal read 'Eres lo che lees' (You are what you read). An undisputable level of cruelty arises when the viewer realizes that the words are written with dry dog food. The staying of the dog within the gallery space is well documented by a number of images published on Internet blogs. In these, we can see the animal confined to a corner of the gallery and tied with a short rope that only allows to walk the quarter of a radius of about one meter. As visitors were instructed not to feed or give water to the dog, the animal died. In this case, the will to cause pain to the animal is undeniable.

Vargas, currently under mounting pressure, released a number of statements concerning the installation, some of which contradict his previous. The most recent statement dating October 2007 explained that: "The purpose of the work was not to cause any type of infliction on the poor, innocent creature, but rather to illustrate a point. In my home city of San Jose, Costa Rica, tens of thousands of stray dogs starve and die of illness each year in the streets and no one pays them a second thought. Now, if you publicly display one of these starving creatures, such as the case with Natividad (the name of the dog means Nativity in English), it creates a backlash that brings out a bit of hypocrisy in all of us. Natividad was a very sick creature and would have died in the streets anyway." Currently,



Guillermo Vargas
Exhibit 1, detail, as exhibited at Galleria Codice on August 16, 2007 ©

more than 350.000 signatures have been collected worldwide to prevent Vargas from representing his country at the 'Bienal Centroamericana Honduras 2008' to which he has been invited on the merits of *Exhibit 1*.¹⁸

It could be argued that in a way Vargas' installation has crossed the line of ethical and moral concern to a degree that it makes it rather impossible to discuss the work within artistic parameters without finding the task hollow and cynical. The most evident difference between the killings that takes place in the other works discussed here and this one lies in the fact that the animal in question is a dog. In 'Animal', Erica Fudge argues: "A pet, simply put, is an animal that enters our (human) domestic space. It is different from other non-tame or wild-animals, because it lives with us in our homes. On this basis, it is possible to see pets as making up a different class of creatures. They are both human and animal; they live with us, but are not us, they have names like us, but cannot call us by our names."¹⁹

It is possible that by killing a dog in a gallery space Vargas has crossed a very specific line, one that could only be surpassed by the killing of, say, a primate. This at least would make the future killing of any other animal that belongs to a lower rank of the 'irrational hierarchy of animal killing' resulting in a diluted, already seen and therefore redundant exhibit.



Guillermo Vargas
'Exhibit 1', detail, as exhibited at Galleria Codice on August 16, 2007 ©

1 The Animal Studies Group, *Killing Animals*, University of Illinois Press, Urbana and Chicago, 2006, p. 4

2 San Francisco Art Institute, 'Don't Trust Me' press release, March 2008, curated by Hou Hanru

3 Akira Mizuta Lippit, *The Death of an Animal*, in *Film Quarterly*, Vol.56, No.1. Autumn, 2002, pp. 9-22

4 *Killing Animals*, p. 79

5 Author not specified, *Suffering Catfish*, article in *Time*, website accessed on 20th of January 2008
<http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,903152,00.html>

6 Roland Barthes, *The Death of the Author*, in *Image Music Text*, Fontana Press, 1977, p.142

7 <http://www.friendsofanimals.org/actionline/spring-2004/killing-for-art.html> Killing (accessed in January 2008)

8 Katarzyna Kozyra, *Pyramid of Animals*, text exhibited with the installation, 1992

9 Artur Zmijewski, Carrying Buckets, Trotting Like Pigs, interview with Katarzyna Kozyra, Gzegorz Kowalski, O dyplomie Katarzyny Kozyry [About KK's Diploma Work], *Czereja* no 4, 1993, p. 27-28: reprinted in catalogue: Kowalski, Bydgoszcz 1998, translated by Grażyna Brzezińska, at
http://www.katarzynakozyra.com.pl/pyramid_txt.html, as accessed on 21st of January 2008

10 (*ibid*)

11 <http://www.katarzynakozyra.com.pl/> (accessed in February 2008)

12 *Killing Animals*, p87

13 Jerry Saltz, *More Life: the Work of Damien Hirst' Art* in *America*, vol. 83, no6, 1995, p.84

14 <http://tate.org.uk>

15 Damien Hirst, *The Agony and the Ecstasy: Selected Works from 1989 to 2004*, Electa Napoli, 2005, p.83

16 Anna Karina Hofbauer, *Marco Evaristti and the Open Work*, 2007, at <http://www.evaristti.com/defaultF.html>, as accessed on 1st of February 2008

17 Story from BBC NEWS, *Liquidising Goldfish 'not a crime'*
<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/3040891.stm>, Last Updated: Monday, 19 May

18
<http://www.blogtalkradio.com/ayoung73/blog/2007/12/03/Petition-to-stop-Guillermo-Habacuc-Vargas-from-representing-Costa-Rica-at-the-Bienal-Centroamericana>

19 Erica Fudge, *Animal*, Reaktion Books, London, 2002, pp.27-28

Giovanni Aloi was born in Milan, Italy. In 1995 he obtained his first degree in Fine Art – Theory and Practice and moved to London in 1997 where he went on to study Visual Culture (MA) at Goldsmiths College. From 1999 to 2004 he worked at Whitechapel Art Gallery and as a film programmer at Prince Charles Cinema in London whilst continuing to work as freelance photographer. Today he is a lecturer of Art History and Media Studies and Editor in Chief of *Antennae*, the online *Journal of Nature in Visual Culture*. He also lectures at Tate Modern and Tate Britain on the subject of the galleries' collections. He Joined Queen Mary in September 2006 working for the History and Modern Languages Departments and is now teaching a range of art history courses. His main research areas involve modern and contemporary art with a strong interest for the representation/presence of animals in the exhibiting space.

IN CONVERSATION WITH SUE COE

Sue Coe, one of the most committed activist artists in America, has during her thirty-five-year career charted an idiosyncratic course through an environment that is at best ambivalent toward art with overt socio-political content.

Interview by Giovanni Aloï



Sue Coe

Man Followed by the Ghosts of His Meat, 1990. Photo-etching on white heavyweight Rives paper.

Copyright ©1990 Sue Coe. Courtesy Galerie St. Etienne, New York ©

Recently, Anita Guerrini, Professor of Environmental Studies and History at University of California stirred up a range of reactions in response to a thread she launched on H-Animal (the online-resource website for Animal Studies Scholars). Her question was: “does Animal Studies necessarily imply animal advocacy?”

The point of Animal Studies seems to be to advocate a certain political point of view, and this influences the kinds of work that have appeared thus far. Is there room in Animal Studies for people who, say, think eating meat is not wrong? Or that experimentation on animals in some circumstances is somehow justified? As someone who has written about animal

experimentation quite a lot, but who has not unreservedly condemned it, I am not sure that I have a place in Animal Studies as it is currently defined.”

What is your take on this subject?

As one revolutionary in the times of South African apartheid stated “ I agree blacks and whites should co-exist, but first blacks have to actually exist.” People have to do what they believe to be right – I am a vegan, and am against all animal exploitation, and choose to be with humans of my own kind in my personal life, just to take a break from the larger world out there, that we animal activists are forced to witness and engage with nearly 24/7. I remember that I was a meat eater once, we all have different levels of awareness, and need to have patience with others, but on the other hand its important to create a sanctuary from all the suffering to refuel and get inspired to continue the struggle. Am not sure that answers your question, but I tried!

A number of your works revolve around animal rights activism. When and why did you become involved in animal rights?

I grew up in the time of huge media attention to animal cruelty, and lived a block away from a slaughterhouse, and next door to a hog farm. The animals lived in tin sheds, and I could see what happened to them, and could not ignore it. As children we would rescue the animals from the school labs, and try and hide animals we knew were going to be slaughtered. It was an ongoing race to outwit those who would kill animals.

How do you feel about animal rights at present?

I feel good about our progress, proud that so many people are involved, around the world, and it helps to look at historical social justice struggles, to realize how long it takes, how the resistance to change increases exponentially as progress is made, and then eventually turns into acceptance, just when one has despair of anything every changing – it all changes! All the people I know, are involved in animal issues, from stopping the horse carriage trade in central park, to being active in changing legislation to stop factory farming, to spay and neuter bills in California, or rescuing horses from killer buyers, the whole gamut of activism. I particularly respect Patty Mark of Animal Liberation Victoria (Australia) and Kim Stallwood in England, and all the staff at Farm Sanctuary USA. Then there are the small groups of activists on the front lines in countries that are desperately poor and in war zones, and they too are making a massive difference for animals, with very little money. It’s really an amazing thing that in the last 30 years, there are groups all over the planet that have a shared mission. I am an optimist.

In the past, Newspaper and magazine editors have restricted your freedom of expression because of the overt and political content involved with your work. Do you have a story that may not be yet published because deemed ‘too strong’?

Some time ago, I stopped negotiating for crumbs with the mass media, and decided to publish my work in the form I intended, I can come up with my own dumb ideas, I do not need editors to tell me their dumb ideas. This does not mean that one should not continue to try to negotiate and learn from that process, but I did that for 30 odd years, and made the choice of a much smaller audience with a stronger content. Generally magazines do not want any images that contradict their advertising, which could be for fur or ‘meat’.

‘Sheep of Fools’ originated from brief news clipping about the sinking of a ship full of sheep bound from Australia to Jordan. The instance involved the death of 60.000 sheep and that of one man. Are you more sensitive to farmed animals issues or those related to wild animals?

As I live in rural America, I am close to both farmed and wild animals. I can see men with guns shoot down animals only a few hundred yards away from me, I have seen deer shot but not killed, go to some secret place to die, I have seen hundreds of deer carcasses just dumped, murdered just for the joy of killing, this subsistence argument is generally a lie, and farms that chain replacement heifers down the road from where I live. From my experience of human beings, I know exactly why deer hunters, take the testicles of deer, and hang them from spiked branches – its so they can come back at night, and get a clear shot of coyotes. I can see the calves torn from their mothers and kept in bitter cold, with no licks or warmth of hay. It’s all right in front of my eyes, both the suffering and imprisonment of animals, and their freedom and beauty. Its taken much learning on my part, to take what I see and re-traumatize other people. It takes a real artist to re-traumatize people!

What role does ‘beauty’ play in your work?

Its in the craft, the form, it entices people to look at the content.

Which artists have influenced your work, both formally and contextually?

Formally, it is Goya and Rembrandt – at heart, I am a medievalist, the ancient Bestiary’s and manuscripts, the carvings of animals in cathedrals, just the wonder of an artisan describing an elephant in the 12th century, despite having never seen one.



Sue Coe

Meat Flies, 1991 Photo-etching on white heavyweight Rives paper. Copyright ©1991 Sue Coe. Courtesy Galerie St. Etienne, New York ©

Is there space for animal rights in the contemporary art scene?

I make a historical connection to the artwork/poetry/journalism that came about in response to the slave trade, and then abolition of that trade, and the emancipation of slaves – same with other social justice movements. Art does not exist in a vacuum, it travels alongside political struggles. I was amazed to find a history of visual protest against animal exploitation that existed long before our movement became so popular. Of course as the art scene, is essentially bourgeois and controlled by that dominant class, they are unlikely to give space to any work that questions the status quo – its up to us, to make space, and there does exist within the art world, people of ethics and conscience. It's a strange thing, but human beings, even those who are aware, still want to see themselves as the centre of attention in a painting holding the viewers gaze. It's an uphill fight to make non-human animals the star of their own reality that have their own emotions and own lives. We always look to ourselves for the reaction shot, and never leave breathing room for any other creatures.

What do you think of Damien Hirst's use of animals in his work?

Post modernist critique is not my forte! His work reminds of visiting a seaside resort as a child, and seeing those sea horses suspended in snow globes, and trying to fathom why someone would do that – what was once alive is now a thing to be turned upside down and manipulated. In 1886, P.T. Barnum displayed the dead body of Jumbo; he got more money travelling a stuffed elephant than the living Jumbo. It's Carnival, with millions of dollars in swag at stake.

Would it educate the wealthy gallery goers, to have victims of genocide in Darfur or Kenya, suspended in tanks floating around 57th St? For Barnum and Hagenbeck of Germany, it was nothing new to have indigenous peoples and animals in the same display case. Hirst's work is a double-edged sword, it cuts both ways - on the one hand he reveals the normalcy when death becomes a thing, on the other the decadence of constantly striving to be new and different.

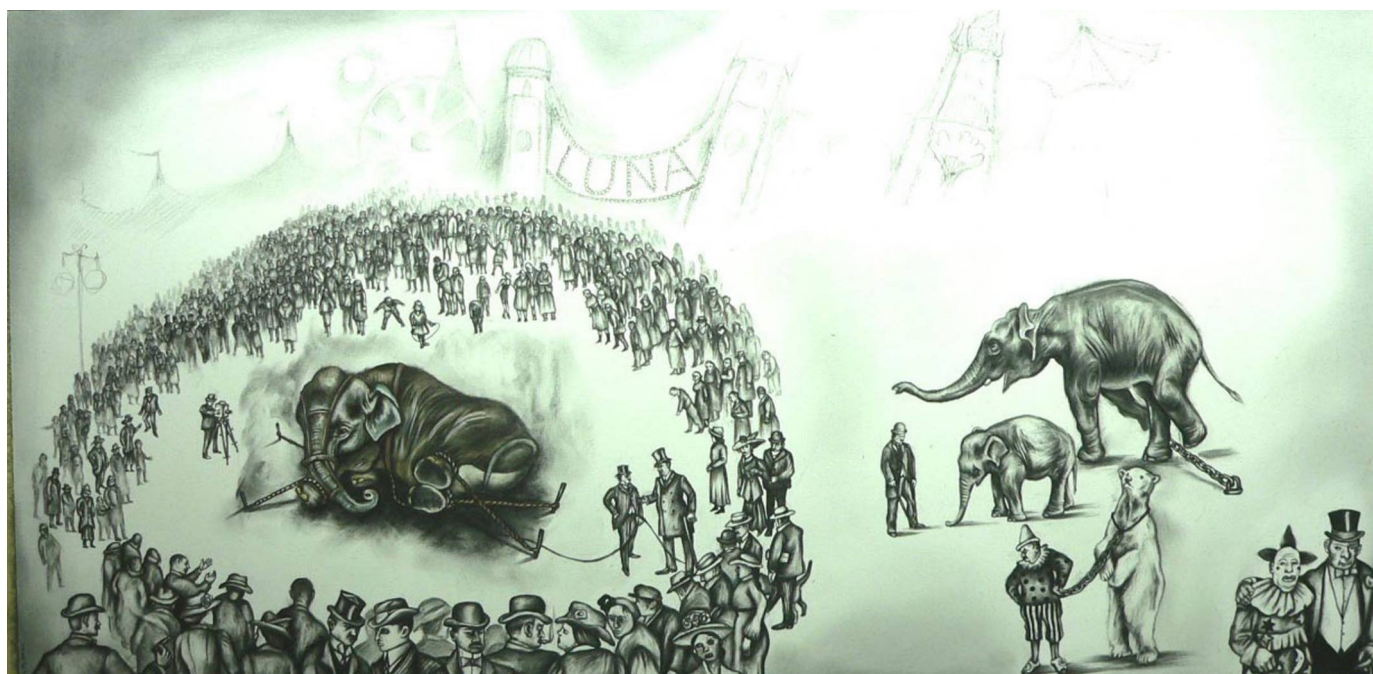


Sue Coe

Selection for the Slaughter, 1991 Photo-etching on white heavyweight Rives paper. Copyright ©1991 Sue Coe.
 Courtesy Galerie St. Etienne, New York ©

Your work springs from lengthy and difficult investigations. You said: "In art, I believe that technique is the test of sincerity, so for art to become a weapon, it first has to be art. Slaughter has been normalised by being concealed, and we need the light of day to spotlight these places. When I draw, there is

also time that is spent with the subject, there is an intimacy in drawing. The meat packers could see what I was drawing, it was being drawn on the kill floor, and was the truth, it was not my 'taking' a photo, and 'taking' it away from them.... if they wanted the drawing they could have it."



Sue Coe

Thomas Edison Kills Topsy the Elephant to Promote the Electric Chair, 2007 Photo-etching on white heavyweight Rives paper. Copyright ©2007 Sue Coe. Courtesy Galerie St. Etienne, New York ©

“They say an elephant never forgets. But there is one elephant who we should always remember every time we turn on the light. Her name was Topsy. She was electrocuted by Thomas Edison in New York in 1903 before a crowd of 1,500 spectators who each paid 10 cents to watch. Why electrocute an elephant? Edison wanted to win the “Battle of the Currents” against George Westinghouse and feed America’s industry with power. Topsy was an Asian elephant who became a dangerous embarrassment to one of America’s first amusement parks on Coney Island. She killed people through no fault of her own. Topsy was murdered when expediency and spectacle conspired with power and profit.”

Text by Kim Stallwood from Coe and Stallwood’s new project

Traditionally, photography or film (as in documentary) hold the false pretence of representing reality. How does ‘drawing something’ become more truthful than ‘photographing something’ in your work?

It’s more truthful to me because I am spending time with the subject, and they can see what I am doing. There are some amazing photographers, the work of Sebastiao Salgado, he is a Rembrandt of the camera. When I started the Sheep of Fools series, I felt that I knew nothing about sheep, I knew what they looked like, that was all – so I went to draw them at Farm Sanctuary, all of them had been rescued, had escaped slaughterhouses, or had been found frozen into the sides of trucks, or just abandoned and left to starve. At dusk, the sheep went into the barn. There were around 90 sheep, I sat near Bronwyn, who feels he is the alpha guard sheep, and he felt I should be observed. Darkness came, and the stars came out, as well as some snow – this was the first snow of the season, and the sheep all went to the barn door to watch it fall out of

the sky, and see the last of the cows, walk down the mountain to their barns – the sheep had such a full concentration and silence at the watching of snow, and then they went back to chewing on the hay, and settled in their nests for the night. It was such a feeling of complete unity and connection with all things, the rustle of the hay, the soft snow, the sweet smell of sheep’s breath, and I was drawing, even though it was too dark to see. I felt that sheep think as one being, that their security resides with the flock.

Generally, who do you think is the target audience of your work?

Oh, I don’t know, once the art is done, it’s gone away from me, on its own journey, it ends up in places I never expect. What is in my mind, is this the truthful depiction of the animals life, represented in a way that can change things for the better.

‘Modern Man Followed by the Ghosts of his Meat’ is a great piece that makes you laugh



Sue Coe

The Killing of Dumbo, 2007 Photo-etching on white heavyweight Rives paper. Copyright ©2007 Sue Coe. Courtesy Galerie St. Etienne, New York ©

In addition, chills you to the bone at the same time. How did the idea come about?

Its been so many years.....I was thinking of the hidden consequences of our actions, and how would it be if we were always followed by the creatures we have harmed, that they were never out of our sight.

What are currently working on?

I am working on Topsy the elephant that was electrocuted by Edison in 1903, to entertain and prove that DC power was preferable to AC power, to get the contract for the electric chair. Kim Stallwood is working with me on this project.

Born in Tamworth, Staffordshire, England, Sue Coe, who had studied at the Royal College of Art in London, emigrated to the United States in 1972. She settled in New York City from where she has established a reputation as a socio-political artist, mostly doing charcoal drawings. Her work references a wide range of 'not-easy-on-the-eyes' issues including the Ku Klux Klan, sweatshop conditions, animal rights, petroleum industry violations, apartheid, women's rights and AIDS.

Sue Coe was interviewed by Antennae in February 2008 ©



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