

-----ANTENNAE BOOK REVIEW-----

Spaces of Encounter

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Bryndís Snaebjörnsdóttir & Mark Wilson have, over the past ten years, consistently contributed to the animal studies debate through the realization of complex, witty and thought provoking projects. Their collaborative practice directly questions our relationship with animals in ways that much owe to the socio historic-geographical understanding of territories. Their interest for the liminal in the human/animal space has materialized in a number of projects where the grand ambitions of imperialism and the simplicity of the garden-door threshold are treated with the same attention to detail and investigative depth.

Spaces of Encounter, an adaptation of Snaebjörnsdóttir's PhD thesis, discuss most of the duo's installation projects revolving around the subject of taxidermy and animal dwellings. The book is an engaging read for those new to the animal studies field as well as for those who have solid knowledge on the subject and would like to further their understanding on how art can effectively contribute to academic debates, rather than just illustrate key concepts. This is indeed Snaebjörnsdóttir and Wilson's strength, as the use of artistic practice as an effective tool of research also crosses the boundaries of academia to reach wider audiences in museums around the world. This is no easy task.

The book focuses on three different projects which all centre on the subject of animal encounters and human/animal relationships. The first project discussed is *Nanoq: flatout and bluesome* which aimed at unveiling the cultural intricacies involved in our historical relationship with polar bears. Over three years, the artists located 34 specimen of polar bear housed in private and public UK collections. They then proceeded to photograph each specimen in what had become its 'unnatural habitat': private homes, museum displays, storage rooms, or undergoing restoration. It was of paramount importance to the artists to also gather as much information as possible about the provenance of each bear and how and when it arrived in the UK. The last stage involved curating an itinerant exhibition that gathered a selection of relevant documentation and images along with some of the catalogued specimens.

This ambitious project not only addressed our complex relationship with wildlife and museum display but it simultaneously addressed a complex layering of historical, moral and ethical sets of issues which all resounded with rather disturbing contemporary echoes. To the artists, the project addresses the troubled 200 years through which bears were killed, whilst simultaneously offering the opportunity for a different reading and contextualization of the taxidermied specimens.

In *(a)Fly* the artists turned their attention to pets and the relationship with the spaces they inhabit. Through an extremely imaginative methodological approach to surveys, and simultaneously re-defining the concept of randomness (through shooting at a map), they selected a number of households in Reykjavik that they eventually visited in order to take images of pets' dwellings. Snaebjörnsdóttir simply took images of where the pet lived, they did not want to focus on the beautiful and "official" parts of the house, but wanted to capture the favourite places of the pets, where it sleeps, plays, sits, etc...

In doing so they subverted a tradition of photographic 'interest' through the creation of a series of utterly deadpan images. The punctum is here entirely absent, or at least, we could say, the punctum as

understood in human terms is entirely devoided of human interest. What the artists tried to capture was the spaces through which the umwelt, the interest the animal has in these places could take centre stage. These humble and seemingly irrelevant domestic spaces are therefore captured in a state of desolation that pushes us to think about the relational modes established between us, the animal and these spaces.

The third project which was a work in progress at the time the book was written, focused on seals and more specifically attempted to separate the 'representational' animal from the 'living' animal through a re-interpretation of Joseph Kosuth theorized representational approach as seen through Mary Kelly's feminist perspective.

The artists' practice has consistently focused on questioning our anthropocentric relationship to nature and at that, it has paradoxically appropriated large part of the hunting traditional relational mode to animals. They prepare in order to set out to find their animals, map their journey and then shoot, most regularly with a photographic camera and/or a video camera. The camera, as Donna Haraway claims, allows anyway for a different kind of shooting, but one that dynamically is not too dissimilar from its hunting counterpart. Therefore, in keeping with their artistic approach, the book is structured over seven chapters contextualizing their work as different stage of the hunting ritual.

Through the delivery of precious and detailed insight of very complex art projects, the book also covers a wide range of 'key animal topics' and as such it makes for a great introductory reading to the field itself. The volume also comes with a complementary DVD which includes images from all three projects as well as video footage. Ultimately, the projects created by Snæbjörnsdóttir and Wilson, effectively define an original blueprint for other artists interested in using their art as a genuine research tool.