

A Foray Into the Worlds of Animals and Humans at dOCUMENTA (13)

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"Dogs should have voting rights" and "strawberries have political intentions" seem to be the two most cited (and taunted) statements by Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, artistic director of this year's *Documenta*, which has notoriously been nicknamed *dogumenta*. It is certainly not for the first time that animals and nature feature as protagonists of the quinquennial art event. Thinking of Carsten Höller's and Rosemarie Trockel's *A House for Pigs and People* for *Documenta X* (1997) or Joseph Beuys planting his *7000 Oaks* during *Documenta 7* (1982). Indeed Beuys, one of the most important artist in the history of the *Documenta* itself, seems still very present at the current edition of Germany's most reputable state-sponsored art event.

Our first stop and one of the central sites of *Documenta* is the Karlsaue, a baroque landscape garden on the scale of 1.50 km², where more than 50 artworks – or "artpoints" as they are called – are displayed in small individual locations – in tents, booths, gazebos and on boats, with some that still smell of the freshly cut wood and evoke an idea of Thoreau's cabin. Here, **Natascha-Sadr-Haghighian's trail** up a slope at the periphery of the park might go unnoticed for how well it blends in with the scene. To climb up is quite tricky due to the muddy condition of the trail. After a while, sounds emanate from the bushes and trees, bit by bit, these begin to reveal themselves as human voices mimicking those of dogs, cats and birds. These onomatopoeic sounds lure you upwards. These animal voice imitations also bear the local accents of the humans that uttered them. This (sound-)trail is located next to a memorial to the German soldiers who died in World War I and II, a monumental construction of steps, a staircase through which you can enter or exit the garden. Next to this monument Sadr-Haghighian formed her trail, thereby offering a "diversion" to the official route.

Following this foot-trail and treading on the soft soil reveals the rubble on which the monument was built. A quick look at the history of the site reveals that the slope was constructed with debris from World War II, which was put aside to make room for the German Federal Garden Show in 1955, which incidentally made way for the first *Documenta* that year, too. But what role do animals play here? On the accompanying website Sadr-Haghighian shows the relief of a *Tiger* tank displayed at the monument's wall. "Ever since the manufacture of the *Tiger* tank, which Henschel developed in 1937 and produced in Kassel from 1942 until the end of World War II, weapon systems made in Germany have been graced adorned with the names of animals: Leopard, Marten, Weasel, Puma, Cheetah, Lynx, Beaver, Buffalo, Badger, Dingo." As one of the few artist who went to the *Documenta* site in Kabul (one of three outside of Kassel next to Alexandria and Banff) she identified German patrols passing by as *Dingo 2*.

Thus the trail can be described as a collector or accumulator of knowledge and information. It is characteristic for this *Documenta* that a lot of pieces function like these knowledge-tanks or as rabbit holes, passages, providing offers you can accept to follow the stored history and experience patterns of

research. The unobtrusive disclosure of simultaneous histories, hidden links and narrative trails that are left open for exploration is one of the strategies that seem to inform most artworks and the exhibition as a whole. There are quite a few other animal-related artworks, like **Kristina Buch's** garden for butterflies, **Sanja Iveković's** toy donkeys, **Fiona Hall's** lodge of *Threatened Species* or **Pratchaya Phinthong's** pair of dead Tse-Tse-Flies – this review can do no more than give you an impression by describing a select few. Though Christov-Bakargiev long claimed to have “no concept” for *Documenta*, she hesitatingly released something of a leitmotiv: “collapse and reconstruction”. This seems to refer not simply to the destruction and reconstruction of buildings, materials, cities, but also to the cycles, revolutions, demolitions and reconstructions that effect ideologies, science, knowledge, and our ways of making sense of the world.

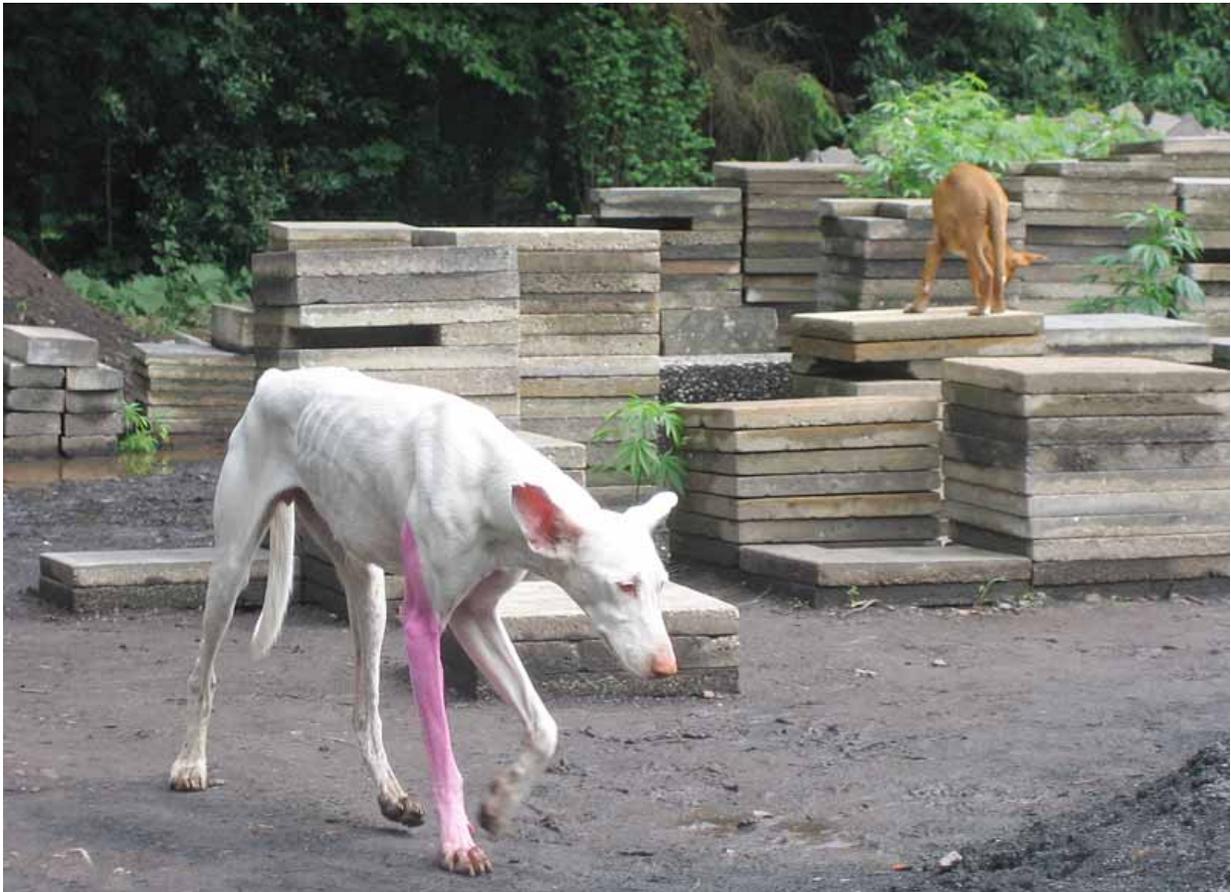


Pierre Huyghe
Untilled (2012), photo: Katja Kynast

Possibly the central piece in this year's *Documenta* is **Pierre Huyghe's** *Untilled*, located inconspicuously at the composting plant of Karlsaue-Park. Huyghe transformed the area into a space distinctly different from the rest of the surrounding landscape, yet it is hard to tell of what his intervention consists of. There are piles of park-refuse, chaff, rubble, seemingly sorted, some may have been already there, some may have been added, then an anthill, whose inhabitants quietly go about their business of building and piling. The whole area is overgrown with weeds, small trails lead the way through this orchestrated “wilderness”. Huyghe planted flowers, installed a mosquito-tank, a trail leads to a den, stone plates piled upon each other, one of Beuys' iconic oaks lies around. In a puddle, there's a

school of tadpoles and the hum of insects drowns out any human sounds that may pierce through the surrounding greenery.

The geometric order of the park seems already very far removed – blotted out by the “untilled” Baroque of a different sort – when *Human*, a skinny white greyhound with a patch of neon paint on his paw, strolls his way into sight. It is clear that this is more her territory than that of the few hesitant visitors who struggle to climb the few low mounds. Here, *Human* is sovereign, no “beast in the boudoir” but a rare apparition – the enactment is flawless. In a bend there is a reclining female figure, the head of the sculpture is covered in a live beehive. Supposedly, the bees pollinate aphrodisiac and psychotropic plants. “There is repetition, chemical reaction, reproduction, formation, and vitality”, writes Huyghe in his catalogue text, “but the existence of a system is uncertain.” Also: “Plants, animals, humans, bacteria are left without culture”. Of that we are not convinced. Tapping this knowledge-container can lead you to inquiries about mosquitoes or plants, dogs, composting or the reason for and effects of the disappearance of bees. You can also think of the first dog known by name, Argos, who waited on a compost heap for Odysseus’ return.



Pierre Huyghe
Untilled (2012), photo: Katja Kynast

The wooden house with its surrounding garden and fence of **Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook** looks rather chunky. It has the title "**Village and Elsewhere: In this circumstance the sole object of attention should be the treachery of the moon**". Visitors approach the shed directly towards the front door, tall metal bars block the way. Next to the bars there is a small painting, showing a dog with

bandages and a funnel-shaped neck brace sitting on green grass under a blue sky. In front of the house is a wooden bench, the lawn is decorated with flower pots. A window serves as a screen that shows videos of stray dogs. The whole installation appears to be uninviting. Surrounding the wooden shed and approaching the back of it, one realizes that someone must live inside. Tracks lead out of the rear entrance trailing away on the lawn. But you don't hear anything and there is no movement behind any of the windows. One learns from the catalogue that Rasdjarmrearnsook lived for three weeks in this house, together with her dog. In the catalogue Radsfjarmrearnsook tells her tale about an art professor finding a stray dog that had been hit by a car. She aids his recovery and finally both of them travel to Kassel to live together in Karlsaue-Park.

From the outside, the next venue looks like a place in a fairy tale theme park – actually, the Brothers Grimm, whose stories about human-animal metamorphoses and animal collaborations are part of the Western canon, lived and worked in Kassel. Across a small wooden bridge you approach an old black wooden hut surrounded by water, it's the former shed of the black swans. The animals are long gone and the shack now houses **Tue Greenfort's *Wordly House***, notably "An Archive Inspired by Donna Haraway's Writings on Multispecies Co-Evolution", equipped with a research library, digital archive and database, all sorts of documentations and a host of artist's projects all concerned with animals and human-animal collaboration. The hand-written work ***Some Notes Towards a Manifesto for Artists Working With or About the Living World*** by artist **Mark Dion** alongside the photographs from his series titled ***Bureau of Remote Wildlife Surveillance*** are on display within carefully crafted, handmade books. Visitors are welcome to sit on the wooden benches and leaf through the publications, it's a place where one could spend hours – the idea of a research facility seems sincere. While watching **Francis Alÿs' *El Gringo*** on the bigger screen, a duckling swims from beneath it, taking a peek inside. Nothing interesting there.

Greenfort also designed the so called ***Multispecies-Tours***, guided tours with humans and dogs, in which the ways of walking through this (or any) art event are supposed to be negotiated between the two species, thereby troubling our notion of perception or even of what art could be to a dog, thereby either mocking or redefining the question of what art is, a question which is raised by each *Documenta* anew since its inception in 1955.

Brian Jungens "DogRun" is an artwork explicitly devised for animals but it is probably one of the more disappointing pieces on show. Although the idea of reflecting the human-built environment of some animals seems compelling, it is rather a design-hell for ergonomic-fans. Jungen realized in 2004 another related work, ***Cats Radiant City Habitat 04***, a wooden cat-condo for stray cats whom would have been euthanized otherwise. I don't know what the cats thought of it, but we like it!

Leaving behind the park and its many micro-venues, and sparing out the bustle of *Documenta's* three main indoor-sites, *Fridericianum*, *Documenta-Halle*, and *Neue Galerie* for now, we find that the *Ottoneum*, which was built in 1606 as the first theatre-building in Germany and now serves as Kassel's Natural History Museum, *in nuclei* wraps up a lot of the ideas we find intriguing in this show. All the works here take a clearly "ecological" approach in the range of subject matters. On the ground floor **Claire Pentecost** shows her ***When you step inside you see that it is filled with seeds*** that deals with questions of agriculture, offering a bulky compost-based currency as a "sustainable alternative to the petro-dollar". **Christian Philipp Müller's** documentary of his 2010 project at the Baroque garden of a Benedictine Abbey titled ***The New World*** shows his attempt at producing a living, "self-renewing" sculpture made of soil and plants.

The emergence of new ways of looking at the world, "to explore how thinking emerges and lies at the heart of reimagining the world", as Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev puts it in one of her accompanying texts, seems to be one of the broader concerns of *dOCUMENTA 13*. This may also explain the repeated interest in the "animal-perspective", which generally serves as a challenge to anthropocentrism. Edouardo Viveiros de Castro's idea of perspectivism and multinaturalism turns up more than once during the exhibition and the Brazilian anthropologist is also contributor to the series of *Documenta*-publications *100 Notes – 100 Thoughts* (in the essay, de Castro defends Claude Lévy-Strauss against the reproach of Dualism). Inherent in de Castro's thought is the idea derived from indigenous Amazonian cosmologies, that the interaction of humans with the non-human world is one of social relation rather than distinction. Walking up the stairs to the second floor in the *Ottoneum*, one passes the cosmologies

of the past applied to poster boards, part of the museum's permanent exhibition. On the ground level, it starts with concentric incisions brought to the face of a rock in Bohuslän, Sweden, around three thousand years ago. We learn that already these precocious cosmologists knew of the fact that 235 moon-orbits correspond to 19 orbits of the sun. Halfway up to the first floor we are still dealing with a geocentric worldview and a few flights of stairs later there is the hierarchical cosmos of alchemist Robert Fludd, with "Man" at its centre. When, towards the second floor we reach the Post-Copernican world view, it is time to re-join the course of the *Documenta*-part of the exhibition, and one is left to wonder what could follow on floor three or four. Cosmologies are written and rewritten, collapsed and rebuilt, and human's precarious status within that system ever more speculative and open for debate.

Just a few steps into the exhibition space on this floor, there is **Marc Dion's** presentation of another exploration of natural sciences, which draws also from Kassel's local history and that of the *Ottoneum*: a nicely crafted shelving system designed by the artist now houses the *Schildbach Xylotheque* from the late 18th century, an encyclopaedia of 441 local trees with samples of the bark and leaves – an example for that era's preoccupation with getting a grasp of the natural phenomena by means of classification and documentation. Dion expanded the collection with 5 books from each continent missing in the collection and a 6th one made out of oak-wood from Kassel – another reference to Beuys.

Turning back, we are distracted from our pursuit of *Documenta*-art by another curiosity of Natural History. Displayed in an enormous glass-cabinet, there is an eerie-looking skeleton, the *Goethe-Elephant*. This elephant lived in Kassel for almost a decade during the city's 18th century heyday, when he was part of the menagerie of Landgrave Friedrich II. After the elephant's death in an accident in Kassel's Karlsaue-Park, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe borrowed the elephant's skull from Samuel von Soemmering (an anatomist who gained notoriety for his attempts to prove an morphological or "species-difference between Europeans and Africans" – yet another tap into the often unhappy history of Western science). Goethe wanted the skull for his studies about the premaxilla bone, a cranial bone located on the upper jaw that was part of an important debate during the time. Its absence in humans was believed to serve as proof for the fundamental difference between human and animal. In the late 18th century the bone was discovered in human embryos and thus became evidence of a common phylogenesis of humans and animals – another conviction shattered.

The *dOCUMENTA (13)* was on view for 100 days, 9th June - 16th September 2012 in Kassel (Germany)