

The Urban Animal

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Autumn 2009

We conceived this exhibition as being a possible contribution to the growing debates about animal studies and animal rights in contemporary culture. Comprehensive networks of debate have been activated between former imperial and Post-colonial countries with regard to this discourse; most notably researching the impact of animal migration and changing social cultural attitudes. However, in South Africa this field of study is still emerging, most notably on the academic front, by Professor Wendy Woodward who has co-developed a postgraduate course in Human-Animal studies in literature.

This of course does not mean that visual artists have not investigated this interspecies relationship as practice; Deleuze and Guattari state that 'art is continually haunted by the animal' while John Berger believes that 'animal was the first metaphor'. These statements could be viewed either as reductive; 'haunting' refers to absence and 'metaphor' to disappearance into textuality, or as a Derridian trope for responsible thinking; a 'spectre' which 'disadjusts identity by frustrating the latter's closure'. The selected artists were asked to respond to the discursive animal from their individual understandings of this complex discourse; there has been no attempt to present a combined ethical understanding of the issue, but rather to open up a field for awareness, presentation and debate.

These findings can also inform and be informed by Animal Rights strategies; although animal abuse and the creation of awareness regarding the plight of animals in society have traditionally been associated with animal rights movements this highly contested arena is closely aligned to cultural representation. Much can be gained by the establishment of a closer relationship between the political, cultural and social factors shared by these institutions; certainly the Animal Rights movement has historically been closely aligned with other liberationist movements.

In her 2002 seminal essay on the possibility of constructing a history of animals, Erica Fudge states that this field of study aims not to document the history of animals -as that would be an impossibility, but can only reflect human attitudes towards animals (Fudge 2002:6). This is an important distinction to draw as it emphasizes not only the constructedness of historical interpretation but also points to the danger of the material animal disappearing into pure textuality. Fudge is in favor of what she terms a 'holistic' history, positing that the latter regards the animal as 'sites for social change' and actors in human/animal exchanges. Such an approach has a direct bearing on how human animals view themselves and their relationship with other species. (2002:9). This view challenges the impact of human dominion and instead recognizes the 'centrality of the animal in our own understanding of ourselves as



Jacki McInnes

Trophy I 2009, Pigmented acrylic resin and wood. Cast, hand tooled and coloured.
450 x 350 x 300mm © the artist

human' (2002:10-11).

Urbanism has been chosen as the theme for this exhibition since arguably it is a site, which most clearly reflects the coming together of differing ideologies and cultural practices. It also acts as backdrop to the dramatic changes inflicted upon animals from the nineteenth century to today. The growth of cities and technology brought on by the Industrial revolution led to domesticated animals gradually disappearing from everyday life and being polarized as either pure commodity or human companions. Notably wild animals have consistently been regarded as 'exotic' although this did not exclude them from being commodified. Certain animals, for example rats, traditionally regarded as vermin and associated with disease may have escaped re-classification. However, animals not historically regarded as vermin, for example the African Wild Dog, have now joined this category being seen as a threat to livestock. Ironically, even pets have not escaped the association of animals with health factors as these are often barred from certain public spaces on the basis of being a risk to children or victuals.

Urban animals are ubiquitous and our attitudes towards them often contradictory and reductive. The problematic complexities underlying human responses to urban animals are



Rosemarie Mariott and Gavin Younge/Wilma Cruise (floor piece)

Gebot (Blossomed, Blossomed), Animal skin and resin, 1320 x 970mm

Cesium, 137 2007, Taxidermied sheep, resin-cast fish, 1100 x 950 x 350mm, State Veterinary Certificate supplied.
Taxidermist: Jacques © the artists



Wilma Cruise

Poor Horace: (watching the hours), 2009 Acrylic Resin and mixed media
2 670 x 1 550 x 800mm © the artist

embedded in a host of attitudes, perceptions and assumptions regarding their place and function in various cultural arenas. However, it may be of interest to isolate certain tropes of representation which are typical of urban animal existence:

Animal as spectacle

Ever since the Imperial era of the Great Museums zoos have featured as national showcases, also in Post-colonial countries. Zoos are problematically positioned with regard to museums as they could be described as 'natural' museums for the edification of knowledge and the protection of species, but are also seen as anachronistic remnants of human dominion; animals kept alive in unnatural surroundings for the benefit of human entertainment under the guise of scientific knowledge and education.

Family pet

Although often regarded as members of the family, pet keeping raises problematic issues with regard to responsibility and expendability. In some circles the term 'pet' is regarded as demeaning and being replaced by 'companion' species emphasizing the responsibility of the owner; while pets are killed at human will on a daily basis, as matters of convenience or for the purposes of 'humane' killing

Virtual animal

Animal imagery in the media proliferates. Akira Mizuta Lippit makes the point that as 'animals began to disappear from the phenomenal world, they became increasingly the subjects of nineteenth and twentieth-century reproductive media' (2002:123) and that technology 'came to determine a vast mausoleum for animal being' (2002:125). The media have opened up a new discursive space for animals; the question that needs to be asked is what effect does such representation have on speciesism?

Animal as disease

The association with certain animals as potential carriers of disease in cities has a long history. Outbreaks of plague, cholera and more recently 'mad cow' disease are some examples of this phenomenon. As a result, strict legislation governs the movement of animals and the spaces they are allowed to inhabit. Although mostly seen as practical considerations cultural and religious views strongly influence animal mobility.

Invisible animals

In Upton Sinclair's 1906 novel *The Jungle* the dreadful conditions of the Chicago stockyards, which can be regarded as the beginnings of the modern meat producing plants, were revealed. As he commented 'I aimed at the public's heart, and by accident I hit it in the stomach' (2000). Animal slaughter is unseen and unheard; contemporary abattoirs are usually located on the outskirts of cities or towns and few civilians, certainly not children, visit these. As a result certain blindness is created which segregates a central social/industrial and technological activity from the mainstream of life. Instead, meat appears in supermarkets wrapped in cling-film.

**THE URBAN ANIMAL
ABSA BANK
JOHANNESBURG
7 – 30 OCTOBER 2009**