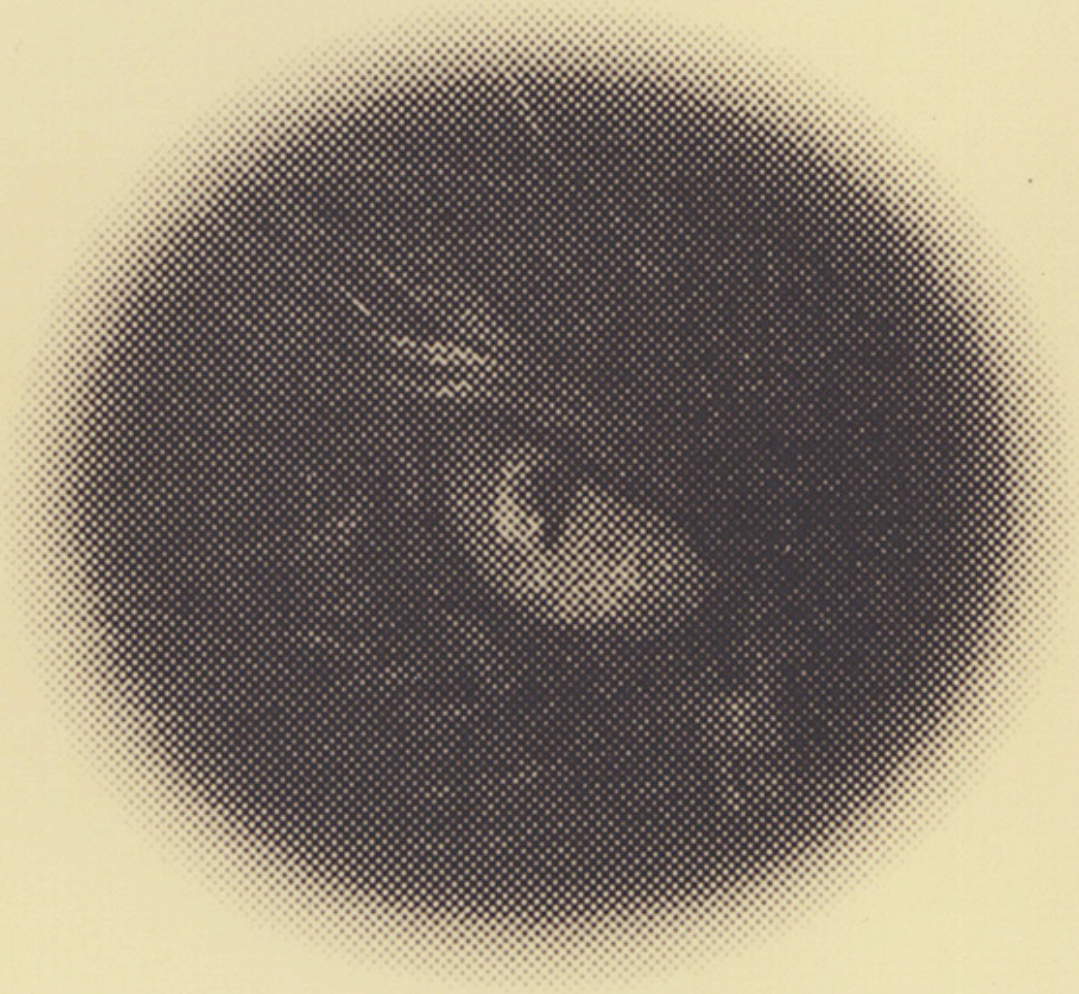
Animal



Animal

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According to philosopher Jacques Derrida, 'the question of the animal' "concerns the ethical and political stakes of human relations with non-human animals, as well as the very possibility of making and sustaining the human/animal distinction."[1] The twentieth century has been called 'the century of the animal,'[2] and the question of the animal has been described as "perhaps the central problematic for contemporary culture and theory."[3]

The increasing prominence of the animal question is made possible through the emergence of posthumanism as a central area of study in philosophy. Posthumanism follows the ideas of poststructuralism, which in critical theory challenges the idea of the human as a universal state. Instead it focuses on human identity as emergent, contingent, and multiple, unsettled tidy distinctions and destabilized traditional thinking around mind/body, self/other, and, by extension, human/nonhuman. Posthumanism has pushed this argument further, destabilizing the human as singular and separate, standing above or against 'nature,' 'technology,' or other ways of being. Hence, rethinking the status of the animal poses a threat to the very status of the human.[4] The task at hand is to re-evaluate the status not only of the animal but also of the human, through the animal, to the posthuman.

The exhibition, *Animal*, proposes a variety of ways that we can think about animals through representations. What is the animal? What are the affinities and discrepancies between the species? What kinds of philosophies has the human animal laid onto the natural world, to what end, and to what future? What connections exist in our multiple ways of being? These are some the questions that arise here.

While the works in the exhibition each speak for themselves (and narrate both particular and open stories) a general trajectory can be read in the sequence of works presented: Lyndal Osborne's

installation *Darwin & the Arc of Time: From Barnacles to Volcanoes* introduces ideas of evolution, specimen collection, naturalist interests of the nineteenth century, as well as Charles Darwin himself. He was the first to suggest that animals and humans are different in degrees rather than in kind. Since the eighteenth century, humans have contrived to understand, classify, and control the natural world. Osborne's collection of beautiful and diverse objects, some organized precisely, others seemingly haphazardly, illustrates the abundance of variation, proliferation and transformation that together signal the open-ended evolutionary process of life. Her work dialogues with Arnaud Maggs' *Werner's Nomenclature of Colours*, the book photographed by Maggs that offers a nineteenth century classification system encapsulating the entire natural world; a book that Darwin owned and likely used as a pocket guide during his own travels.[5] The narrative magic that Osborne invokes is represented on each page that Maggs has photographed, where animal, vegetable and mineral are listed by colour; for instance under 'greys' (and there are at least eight) we find *No. 15: Name: Greenish Grey*, a colour swab, *Animal: Quill feathers of the Robin; Vegetable: Bark of Ash Tree; Mineral: Clay Slate Wacke*. Writing about early naturalists—such as Darwin, George and Elizabeth Peckham, and Jean Henri Fabre—Eileen Crist demonstrates that their methods of observation and description presents subjectivity as directly witnessable in animal life.[6] Whereas classical ethnology laid the way for generic language and speculative deductions, (in essence disembodying the animal), the naturalists' use of episodic description and sequential narration shows the natural world to be organizationally connected; and acknowledges the fullness, complexity and temporal extendedness of being; importantly, it discloses the nature of animal life with the power and cohesion that real worlds possess.[7] *Werner's Nomenclature of Colours* is based on careful collecting and observation resulting in both a 'field guide' and a lyrical rendering of the natural world. Osborne's installation also amasses objects that appear similar in colour or form. They stem from the natural world, but, under scrutiny, reveal themselves to be both found ('natural') objects, and crafted ones. The blurring between science and poetry found in *Werner's Nomenclature of Colours* is thus mirrored in Osborne's work, and further brought into play in Dagmar Dahle's installation *Rare-Common-Extinct*.

The title of Dahle's installation mimics the terminology generally used to document the status of species, as the accompanying panel mimics that of museums. A series of slip cast ceramics are arranged on a variety of packing crates. The ceramics are made from commercial hobby craft moulds from the 1950s and 60s, which have been cut into while still wet, and left in their original neutral colour. In addition to

birds, we see mermaids, unicorns, Snow White, and broken shards dispersed among Victorian 'ladies' and one Native Indian Chief. The collection of objects appears in the transitional state between being uncrated in the museum vaults and being readied for display: they address ideas of collection, display, value, and representation. They pose questions such as, what can objects tell us? Why have certain images gained importance over others? What is authentic and what is merely a copy? Where do the intersections of natural history and cultural history, museum practices and popular culture, occur? By presenting unicorns alongside extinct birds, Dahle challenges conventional hierarchies; by placing the figurine of an Indian Chief within the context of cultural and natural objects that are imagined, extinct, or from the past, she exposes the flaws in a history that privileges some events over others, and cultural practices that result in the extinction not only of animal species but also of cultural communities.

The ideas and questions posed by these installations include: How can stories extend our understanding? How do cultural objects complement 'natural' ones? Is it possible to draw a distinction between them? Rebecca Diederichs' work investigates metaphoric and real framing devices for cultural constructions. Working with found and taken images, we see a flock of pelicans, her studio with piles of boxes, slides and other materials, images of dense, bright green foliage, and cars parked at the edge of green dominated by a dramatic sky. Juxtaposed in different configurations and orientations, the images create fluid and multiple narratives that address both image making and representation itself. Variations of pelicans taking off in flight encapsulate what we imagine a perfect moment in nature to be. When placed alongside lush bush plants that have been pruned and carefully nurtured to be perfect specimens of a cultivated nature, the areas of pelican-being and human-being begin to blur. Just as the large expanse of a stormy sky looming over small cars parked at the edge of a field overturns cultural domination, the stacks of research material in the studio point to a human drive to pursue philosophical and scientific ideas in order to make sense of being. Just as Dahle's installation inverts hierarchies and thwarts easy associations, Diederichs also references ideas of nature only to disengage with it, asking us to reflect both on the way these ideas impact us, how we are a part of the natural world, and where we set ourselves apart from it in order to be identified as human.

Alongside these installations, and in a particular dialogue with Maggs' work, two books are included in *Animal*: Lois Andison's *look me in the eye*, and Dahle's *A Chronology of Gowns and Bird Extinctions from 1500 to the Present*. The former is a collection of photographs presented in an accordion book: each

image captures a single eye of an animal so that what we see is both disembodied and highly subjective. The eye is traditionally the window to the soul. But here, isolated and rendered equal in scale and framing, it becomes something strange, elusive and alive. Dahle's book presents drawings of every bird that has become extinct since 1500, in chronological order, with each chapter heading presenting drawings of dresses. The final pages of the book list the Latin name for each bird in numerical order. The artist's drawings are reminiscent of early field drawings, and the juxtaposition of fashion with feathered animals draws parallels between historical and ecological time, between ways of being, and cessation of being; particularly human and non-human.

There is no real possibility that the human animal can enter into the being of the non-human. We are intimately tied to our own psyches and worlds, and forced to project from that space onto the world inhabited by both us and others. While Diederichs and Dahle consider how natural stories are constructed in order to reveal something about both ourselves and that world, other works in the exhibition, including An Whitlock's *Crow(d)*, John McEwen's *Teko with Broken Base*, and Tom Dean's *Bitch Pack* present sculptures that challenge us to consider the animal itself. In Whitlock's crowd of (about 100) crow's heads, installed densely across the wall, each bird is carefully rendered and made to scale. The installation pushes past issues of representation by being insistently, physically, present. The sheer mass of heads, some silent, others in full call, some arched upwards, others down, silently bombards us with the caw of crows and noise of flight. Crows are considered vermin, they eat road kill and corn, they also make tools, and a flock is referred to as a 'murder.' The documentary *A Murder of Crows*[8] tells us that crows reason, problem-solve, and have long and dependable memories. Crows display complex social interactions including group play, hunting, gang-style killings and funerals. Also, that they closely observe humans, whose environments they often share, and hence, know quite a lot about them.[9] Still, crows are considered pests and so often driven out of rural and urban spaces with guns or sirens. When inconvenienced by nature, humans tend to overlook points of affinity between others, and us, and attack another systematically. As Carol Adams and Josephine Donovan write, "traditional Western ethical positions about animals are reflected in laws that categorize animals by the circumstances under which they may be killed: either they may never be killed, or they may be killed at specific times, or they may be killed at random."[10]

Like crows, brown bears are ubiquitous and a nuisance. Su Rynard's installation, simply entitled *Bear*, is a diorama that imitates natural history displays. On a rear-screen projection, embedded at the back, we see bears, through the constructed foliage, foraging at a garbage dump where vans and SUVs pull up almost continuously to fling their bags of litter onto the pile from which the bears are scavenging. *Bear* links the cultural constructs of museums to the lived reality of animals. It ultimately points not simply to the impoverished living enforced onto this wildlife, but to the manufactured romance of natural history displays that avoid any discussion of how human requirements overlook the needs and lives of others. Lured by the beauty of the diorama, we are drawn to the figure of the bear only to be thwarted because of the insistent vehicles and large amounts of waste thrown ceaselessly onto the dump from which the bear finally limps away painfully at the end of the day, presumably having cut himself on some sharp edge of waste. The potential moment of seeing an animal in the wild is held at bay by the fact that there is no real wild left, and that whereas cottage properties might be cultivated into a beautiful 'bush' getaway, attitudes of care do not extend to the habitat beyond.

In dialogue with the bear, we have a wolf. *Teko with Broken Base* shows two long narrow planks separated by a gap; a wolf stands silent and alert on one, facing the empty space of the other. The gap signals an interrupted space, a severed connection, between one side and the other, between animal metaphor and live animal, between constructs and realities. From a distance, the wolf appears to be 'there': a three-dimensional familiar animal, but as the viewer moves the wolf becomes a line, the animal turns to steel, and resists us. The scale, and steel, insistently block our path and yet remind the viewer of the physicality of the animal and the reality of its existence. The poetic dimension of *Teko* is dramatically countered with McEwen's most recent sculpture, *Shunt (X)*, which references a 'shuttle box' used to experiment on dogs by Harvard psychologists R. Solomon, L. Kamin and L. Wynne starting in 1953 and continuing some thirty years. The box consisted of two compartments separated by a barrier. An electric shock transmitted through the floor caused the dog to jump over the barrier to the other side where, however, he was shocked again. After each shock, the jump became more difficult because the barrier would gradually be raised. The experiment would end when the dog was exhausted, in agony, yelping, defecating and urinating on the floor of the box. After 10-12 days, the dog ceased to resist the shock.[11] *Shunt (X)* features a large skull made of laser cut stars facing a flattened 'box' made of the matrix of the skull (the material from which stars are cut out). Fourteen neon tubes on each side flash in a sequence

that drives from one end to the centre, capturing the intensity of the pain that pushed the animal over the barrier only to find himself encountering the same agony on the other side. Stars are abstract forms that reference time (that vast expanse from 'star dust to us') and thought, which in this case, is disembodied. Like Rynard's *Bear*, McEwen's box reminds us both that animals are embodied beings with very real lives; lives that are romanticized in culture but that can be abused, irreparably harmed, and terminated by human quests resulting in cruelty. In 1789 Jeremy Bentham wrote that the important question regarding animals was not whether they could reason or talk, but whether they could suffer. Referring to the shuttle box experiments, which, after thirty years did not after all provide a scientific model that could stand up to careful scrutiny, Mark Rowlands writes that what we find here is "an instructive distillation of human evil."[12]

Where McEwen exposes the horror of experimentation on real animals, Tom Dean proposes to empower his canines. The bronze dogs of Dean's *Bitch Pack* have long tails and many fertile teats. The dogs oscillate between real and mythical: demonstrating alertness, fertility, ability to protect their offspring, and wildness. *Bitch Pack* is situated somewhere between the power of Whitlock's 'murder' and the silent presence of McEwen's wolf. The large and heavy bronze sculpture takes on material presence and exudes a powerful being, for this is no domestic dog. Each canine has an element of the uncanny, a beast that is hybridized, or has adapted to become more than it is. *Bitch Pack* challenges our notions of the animal as object, obedient and complacent. Instead it asserts the pack as an independent and fully embodied subject. It reaches into ideas of the posthuman, where technology becomes intertwined with the natural or, where natural abilities are incorporated into technologies. This idea leads to the work of Lois Andison: her sculpture addresses the posthuman as a kind of hybridization of human and animal capabilities: made from Queen Anne's Lace, *camouflage I* is a dress form that sits supremely beautiful; it relates to Dahle's drawings, and Darwin's plant specimens, as well as practices of naturalization (Queen Anne's Lace was brought to North America from Europe where it is now considered a pest). The weed offers a template for lace makers; its red dot culturally signifies the blood of the queen when she pricked her finger making the lace, and acts in nature to attract insects. Andison's piece, when approached, raises its lace collar in order to camouflage and resist attack. The sculpture has the form of a human figure and demonstrates abilities found in the natural world; it has adapted and metamorphosed, like Dean's dogs, to be highly functional in self-preservation. It mimics ways of attracting, repelling and resisting. The figure of the human, armed with abilities of insects and other species, link back to Darwin's ideas of evolution.

Finally, Kenn Bass's *Fugue*, a 3-channel DVD projection that shows fleeting images of a coyote, a polar bear, bees in a hive, and briefly, pine trees, as well as text that pulses in a rhythm that elucidates bat echo location, and is designed so that the viewer can barely read the words before they vanish. The fugue state is one in which an individual suddenly loses time, sometimes weeks and months, during which s/he can travel extensive distances without later recollection. The text, "evading obstacles without conscious observation," "feeling drawn toward a particular place without explanation," or "being accused of lying when one is telling the truth" reflects this state and connects the alien experience of a fugue journey with the complex being of an animal that we can never fully know. The 'visual pulse' of the text is the echo location metaphor Bass uses as a way to address a different form of being in the world, but one which can be cross-referenced within a cultural framework. The metaphor addresses the 'signal to noise' problem: the interference experienced when moving through a world of images and sounds. Bass both imagines what it might be like to be inside the head of a bat, and how this might translate to a deeper understanding between species all of whom (us) are interrelated. Here we may experience what Crist terms sharing a "common universe of significations, although not on the same ontological plane."[13] If, as Mary Midgley states, much of the world is pre-verbally determined, and concepts and understanding are not limited to linguistics,[14] Bass might be offering us a way to understanding not only animal being in the world, but how the human animal is connected with others. The fact that the viewer can only either watch the images or read the text further complicates the relationship between human and non-human being: the former wanting to reflect on and contextualize life while the latter simply moves through it with skills and awareness that are not available to us. This work then links back to animal abilities of knowing and navigating the world with human experiences that defy rational explanation. Like Andison, Bass suggests that human and non-human animals share experiences; like Darwin, that evolution ties us all together and like Diederichs, that we make sense of the world with stories and while experience and beings are certainly real (like dogs, and wolves and crows), we can examine equivalences and discrepancies by investigating animals imaginatively.

NOTES

1. Matthew Calarco and Steven DeCaroli, eds., *Giorgio Agamben: Sovereignty & Life*. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), p. 272.

2. Marc Bekhoff and Jessica Pierce, *Wild Justice: The Moral Lives of Animals*. (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2009), p. x.

3. Cary Wolfe, ed., *Zoontologies: The Question of the Animal*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), p.ix.

4. Erika Fudge, *Animal* (London: Reaktion Books, 2002), p. 9.

5. Linda Jansma, "Introduction." *Arnaud Maggs Nomenclature*. (Oshawa: The Robert McLaughlin Gallery, 2006), p. 10.

6. Eileen Crist, *Images of Animals: Anthropomorphism and the Animal Mind*. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1999), p. 33f.

7. Ibid., p. 7.

8. Susan Fleming, Director, *A Murder of Crows*. The Nature of Things. CBC Television, air date: January 14, 2010.

9. http://www.cbc.ca/documentaries/nature of things/2009/murderofcrows/index.html, February 19,2011.

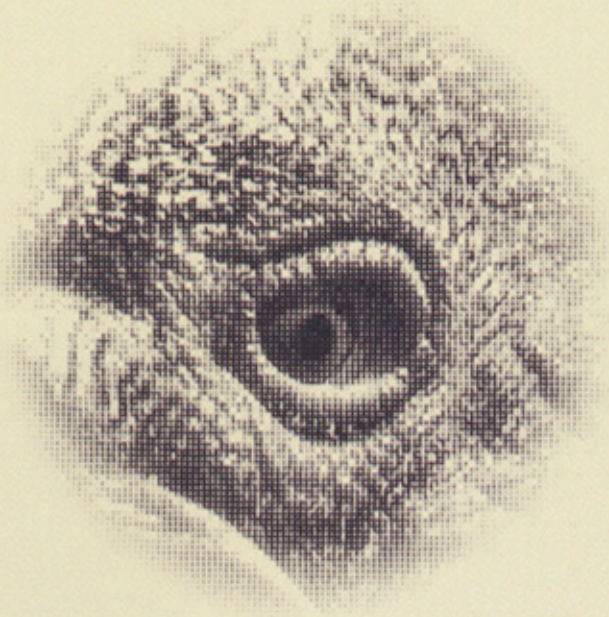
10. Carol Adams and Josephine Donovan, eds., *Animals and Women: Feminist Theoretical Explorations*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995).

11. Mark Rowlands, *The Philosopher and the Wolf*. (London: Granta, 2008), p. 91.

12. Ibid., p. 92.

13. Crist, p. 200.

14. Mary Midgley, *Animals and Why They Matter*. (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1983), p. 56.



Lois Andison, *rooster* from *look me in the eye*, 1998, Courtesy of the Artist

Lois Andison, *horse* from *look me in the eye*, 1998, Courtesy of the Artist

Lois Andison, *camouflage 1*, 1998, Photo: Peter MacCallum