

NATO THOMPSON MONSTROUS EMPATHY

We are becoming animal in more ways than one. The clues are in the air, the sea, our genes, the TV, and even our breakfast cereal. Somehow, while we were cleaning the house and heading out to work, the separation between human and animal diminished from an absolute biological distinction to an increasingly delicate web of ecological, social, and personal relationships.

In a world where the lives of humans and animals are increasingly interwoven – where the distinction between what we know to be humankind, and what we believe to be animal, is shrinking – the artists of *Becoming Animal* are linked by an intense focus on the philosophical, medical, biological, and ethical connections that bind us to them. Artist Kathy High unveils the biological and surprisingly personal connections between laboratory rats and herself; Rachel Berwick brings to life the effects of humans on animals extinct and nearly so; Natalie Jeremijenko's *For The Birds* (2005) lends voice and sight to the fanciful needs of pigeons; philosopher Peter Singer writes compellingly of animals' legal rights. The once sacred and obvious distinction between humans and their feral counterparts shrinks and, as it does, we are forced to imagine what it might be like to live without this division altogether.



Jeff Goldblum in David Cronenberg's remake of *The Fly*, 1986. Photo: Photofest

Such hybridity cannot help but cause trepidation since it breeches one of the longest standing human boundaries. If we actually are becoming animal, whether our ethical, moral, sacred, and legal systems, let alone our dinner? These questions not only shake the foundations of our relationships with the animal world, but in changing our opinions about the toothed and clawed, they also reformulate what it means to be human.

How do we incorporate the new knowledge that the human genome is only a few strands away from that of a flea? When a human ear is grafted to the back of a mouse, or a human is supposedly cloned by an alien-worshipping cult in Montreal, how should we react? What do we see when we can see – quite

literally – through the eyes of our pets? Do we have an ethical framework nuanced enough to respond to the diminishing degrees of separation from animals? At the beginning of the 21st century these questions offer a perplexing future which contemporary artists are eagerly exploring.

The exhibition *Becoming Animal* takes a cue from the work of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari in their seminal book *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1980). When Deleuze and Guattari write of “becoming animal,” they destabilize the strict (and possibly arbitrary) boundaries modernity established between humanity and the animal kingdom. Their sweeping notion of *becoming* takes on diverse fields such as “becoming geology,” “becoming woman,” and “becoming imperceptible,” but it is at its most acute with animals. Rather than fixed and discreet, for Deleuze and Guattari the individual is an ever-shifting being, a “desiring machine”, that can take on new forms of animal-ness (or an animal capable of taking on forms of human-ness). Similarly, the term “becoming” allows for exchange between otherwise static conceptions of the world: man/nature, man/woman, I/we, human/animal.¹

Be Afraid, Be Very Afraid

“And perhaps even the most luminous sphere of our relations with the divine depends, in some way, on the darker one which separates us from animal.” – Giorgio Agamben, *The Open: Man and Animal*, 2004

“My, what big teeth you have, grandmother,” said Little Red Riding Hood.

While liberating, Deleuze and Guattari's challenge to the Cartesian notion of individuality – I think therefore I am – can produce a tremendous amount of anxiety. The monstrous, the hybrid, the cyborg (to use Donna Haraway's



Brigitte Boisselier and Claude Vorilhon. CNN's "Newsnight with Aaron Brown" in North Miami Beach, Fla., Friday, Dec. 27, 2002. Photo: AP/Wide World Photos

term) have a long paranoid history stretching from the Greek's Chimera to PT Barnum's freak shows. We imagine trans-animals as predators stalking the night. In David Cronenberg's 1986 remake of the 1958 Vincent Price classic *The Fly*, for example, the genius scientist Seth Brundle (Jeff Goldblum) invents a teleporting machine only to accidentally find himself fused with a fly that enters the teleport pod.² Dr. Brundle takes on some particularly grotesque traits such as vomiting on his food and acquiring an indomitable sexual appetite. The film culminates in Brundle's inexorable transformation into a six-foot fly renamed Brundle-fly, and the heroine (Geena Davis) tellingly dreams of giving birth to the most abject embodiment of becoming animal, the larva, referencing Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*. Horror films are a common vehicle by which the monstrous can draw upon latent fears of cross-species hybridity. But what is it that we are afraid of exactly?

We can turn to the macabre and richly detailed paintings of the great Flemish painter Hieronymus Bosch (c. 1450-1516) whose stunning triptych, *Garden of Earthly Delights* (circa 1500), details not only the dreadfulness of the conjoined animal/human world, but in particular Bosch's Protestant conception of hybridity. Riddled with parading unicorns, goats, canaries and insectal lizard-men, both the Garden of Eden and hell resemble a playground for the monstrous. And at the same time that Bosch's painting seems to condemn the evils of the flesh, it also reveals Bosch's own imaginative obsessions. One can't help believe that Bosch's freakish hell was more enjoyable to paint than the sterile work of his contemporaries, which is to say that ever since Eve engaged in small talk with the serpent at the tree of wisdom, animal/human relations have been ensconced in the repulsive longing of taboo.

It should not surprise us that fear plays such a strong role in our conceptions of becoming animal. For at the center of the discussion is the question of where humanity ends and, more dramatically, how we construct human subjectivity altogether. In his 2004 book *The Open: Man and Animal*, philosopher Giorgio Agamben tracks the lengthy historic discussion of what is animal versus what is human. As he weaves this story from prophecies of animals and humans becoming one in the Hebrew Bible, to definitions of human versus animals in Aristotle, to the origins of taxonomy in Carl Linnaeus (1707-1778), and to the lectures of Alexandre Kojève (1902-1968), he outlines how central the definition of "non-human animals" is to our own existence. In short, what makes us human is simply that we are not animals, but what that means has changed dramatically over the course of history.

Kind-ness – the acceptance that we are all of one kind...

However, *Becoming Animal* charts a path more kind than alarming. As its conscious point of departure, *Becoming Animal* focuses on empathetic and sympathetic approaches to hybridity rather than those conveniently fear-laden. The artists in *Becoming Animal* do not see the animal as a canvas on which to subject their anxieties, but rather refractive beings through which we can consider new forms of existence. Often in the work of this exhibit, we see ourselves looking out from the great expanse of animality. Such gestures feel counterintuitive as they butt up against the long-standing definition of what constitutes human. However, radically sympathizing with the animal has had some of its strongest historical advocates in both art and zoology.

As Giorgio Agamben traces animal theories of the great philosophers, he often focuses on the perspective of famed zoologist Jakob von Uexküll. Von



Hieronymus Bosch (c. 1450-1516). *Garden of Earthly Delights*. detail of hell, lower right panel (circa 1500). Photo: Erich Lessing/Art Resource. New York

Uexküll proposed that in order to understand animals, we must recognize their *umwelt*; that is, their environment world. As Agamben surmises, "The first task of the researcher observing an animal is to recognize the carriers of significance which constitute its environment."³ Uexküll clarifies by providing a grueling example of *umwelt* – whose richness is worth quoting at length – through the small yet poetic needs of a tick.

The eyeless animal finds the way to her watch post with the help of only her skin's general sensitivity to light. The approach of her prey becomes apparent to this blind and deaf bandit only through her sense of smell. The odor of butyric acid, which emanates from the sebaceous follicles of all mammals, works on the tick as a signal that causes her to abandon her post and fall blindly downward toward her prey. If she is fortunate enough to fall on some-thing warm (which she perceives by means of an organ sensible to a precise temperature) then she has attained her prey, the warm-blooded animal, and thereafter needs only the help of her sense of touch to find the least hairy space possible and embed herself up to her head in the cutaneous tissue of her prey. She can now slowly suck up a stream of warm blood.⁴

This gross explanation provides a tangible example of *umwelt*, and the underlying empathy feels more in cahoots with the art in this exhibition than with science. The corporeal sensibility of von Uexküll recalls artists' attempts to throw off the artifice of civilization to reveal something more fundamental, more true to animal nature. These include the ketchup-strewn performances of Paul McCarthy in animal masks, the orgiastic rituals of Herman Nitsch and the animal-sacrifice performances of Ana Mendieta.

They also bring to mind the shamanistic rituals of Joseph Beuys. In addition to being the founder of the first political party for animals (he claimed over one billion members), Beuys's two most notable performance pieces – *I Like America and America likes Me* (1974) and *How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare* (1965) – were specifically intended as exercises in connecting with the animal world. In his *How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare*, Beuys cradled a dead rabbit in his arms and talked to it, Beuys' own head covered in honey

and gold leaf. While the rabbit may not have understood his human-centric words, dead or alive, one feels that the dead rabbit-spirit might respond to the gold leaf and honey. In posing the riddle, "How does one explain pictures to a dead hare?" Beuys may be offering a form of being ensconced in the richness of materials, smell, texture, and symbolism. The fact that the hare was dead is all the more important because for Beuys the hare was a symbol of productivity and border-crossing. The distinctions between death/life, human/animal were, to Beuys, barriers to pass through. This meant adopting and creating new forms of language and being not dissimilar from von Uexküll's. Von Uexküll and Beuys provide a simple lesson that is familiar to

many artists: in order to understand animals we must learn to think like them.



Joseph Beuys, *How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare*, 1965.
Photo: © Walter Vogel

Leaving behind traditional categories for understanding the "other," we enter a radical space of empathy. Artist Kathy High evokes this territory well with her autobiographic project aptly titled *Embracing Animal* (2004). Over the telephone, Kathy High ordered a pair of laboratory test rats whom she named Echo and Flowers. The rats had been previously micro-injected with human DNA that caused their autoimmune systems to be weakened. Their incapacitated immune systems are biologically re-engineered to make them susceptible to diseases such as reactive arthritis, psoriasis, and inflammatory bowel disease. In the normal course of science, the rats would be used as test subjects for drugs to treat humans.

High, suffering from a chronic illness herself, understood that these rats were being used to find cures for people. Echo and Flowers were not simply becoming human, they had become integrally locked in a genetic relationship with humanity. As part of the project High cares for the pair of rats, treating them with homeopathic medicines.⁵ Her installation consists of a lovely home for Echo and Flowers as well as elongated test tubes outfitted with LCD monitors displaying images of fear and anxiety that pervade physical crossovers between human and animal: footage of werewolves, vampires, and bestiality flickers at the bottom of the tubes. In High's impassioned and much less frightful take on animal/human relations, becoming animal is not an abstraction but an evolving condition which

requires a measured approach, and even a sympathetic response. Perhaps it was this condition that Friedrich Nietzsche grappled with in his last purported moment of sanity as he lurched at a horse being beaten, held onto its neck, and wept uncontrollably.

Destroying Nature

"Indeed nature is the chief obstacle that has always hampered the development of public discourse." – Bruno Latour, *Politics of Nature: How to Bring the Sciences into Democracy*, 2004

Of course, we are most commonly engaged with animals as food. From the horrors of mad cow disease to the recent explosion of genetic modification, the animal kingdom takes shape on the dinner plate. In his 1975 book *Animal Liberation*, Peter Singer, distinguished professor of philosophy at Princeton, laid out the theoretical foundations for the modern animal rights movement. Singer postulates that to differentiate between human and animal for arbitrary reasons is akin to racism, or to use his term, speciesism (the bias based on species). Singer takes to task the artificial boundaries between humans and animals, and uses instead the category of suffering from which to evaluate ethical basis. In particular, he asks, "Do animals feel pain?" In using pain as the focal point for discussing access to rights, Singer develops a compelling theoretical basis from which to evaluate the becoming animal.

While not everyone's favorite dinner table debate, the questions posed by vegetarians, vegans, macro-dietitians, and raw foodists gained political momentum during the mad cow scare. Whether or not people agreed with the rights of animals, they definitely felt something was awry at the stockyard. In a globalized world, meat production is simply not what it used to be. Meat production in the United States alone grew from 18 million metric tons in 1963 to 43 million metric tons in 2003.⁶ No longer the bucolic home of a few country animals, the modern cattle ranch is a rigorous assembly line of beef, chicken, pork, and turkey. As the production of meat increases, its visibility conversely decreases, making only brief plastic-wrapped appearances at the market.

Current mapping of the elaborate webs of biodiversity has drawn humans and animals into compelling symbiosis. Sheep in the Andes suffering from cataracts provide clues about the shrinking ozone layer, for example. Increases in mercury levels show themselves in trout before eventually affecting those

drinking the water. The fate of animals and humans is not so separate from each other.

Artist Rachel Berwick makes this point poignantly evident in her installation *Lonesome George* (2005). Why is George lonely? George, an 80 year old tortoise, is lonely because he is the last remaining member of his species from the small island of Pinta, located just north of the Galapagos archipelago. Now under the care of the Charles Darwin Research Station, George was discovered in 1971 by National Park wardens. His species had been considered extinct due to the intense hunting in the 19th century and the introduction of goats to the island in the 1950s. The goats, brought to the island to develop an alternate food source, ate all the available vegetation, destroying the turtle's habitat. In her installation, Berwick dramatizes the sense of loss that accompanies the extinction of this magnificent species. Fourteen-foot sails rhythmically fill with air while a video of George plays. Each time the tortoise retracts into his shell, the sails billow. The viewer becomes aware of the limited life of Lonesome George against the backdrop of sails that have entered its waters. Berwick's thorough research of the story of George presents us with a more complicated view of nature. It is no accident that Lonesome George's home is the Galapagos Islands, site of Charles Darwin's first visits. The Galapagos tortoises became a major influence on Darwin's development of evolutionary theory. Noting from the local fishermen that one could designate the origin of each tortoise by the shape of its shell, Darwin began to surmise the evolutionary development necessary to connect these creatures with the particulars of their environment. Strange, then, that the creature that connected the dots of evolution for Darwin has now been reduced to a single individual standing at the end of its species' evolutionary journey.

Transgenics

"Artists forming life itself to make a statement about life – what a concept! And what a great sleight of hand – mundane cookbook recipes of science that have a profound effect on knowledge, methodology, and material culture are transformed into transcendental voodoo. Such activity is mystification on an intolerable scale that directs viewers away from an understanding of their world in general and away from an understanding of the flesh machine in particular; rather, it redirects discourse into the disempowering realm of the abstract."

– Critical Art Ensemble, *The Molecular Invasion*, 2002

On June 26, 2000, President Clinton announced that a rough draft of the human genome had been mapped. The conclusion of this long-sought human Rosetta Stone elicited responses both paranoiac and utopian. Claims of tracking down the "death" gene appeared alongside horror stories of genetic warfare and governmental eugenics. Hyperbole notwithstanding, these claims were fed by the radical implications of possessing the map to human development. Over the last decade the sci-fi-like spin-offs of biotechnology have begun to emerge. In the fall of 1999, porn industry mogul Ron Harris developed Ron's Angels, a website where consumers could purchase the eggs of models for prices ranging from \$15,000 to \$150,000. Harris calls the process "evolving upward." On December 27, 2002, the Montreal-based Raelians announced they had cloned the first human being. Adorned in white robes, advocating "free love" and worshiping their alien leader Rael, the Raelians were many Americans' worst nightmare of a transgenic future. The Raelians' claim proved to be an elaborate hoax and Ron Harris has had few customers, but the strange possibility became suddenly immediate.

The near absurd and even sculptural implications of this research naturally attracted the attention of contemporary artists. Hungry for novelty and ready to shock audiences, many artists have eagerly seized the tools of biotechnology. Yet, as Critical Art Ensemble argues, it's one thing to redeploy the tools of technology, and quite another to provide thoughtful responses. What contemporary artists can offer instead is a measured and complex perspective in this arena beyond the animal.

For over ten years, Australian artist Patricia Piccinini has interrogated transgenics – the transfer of genes using recombinant DNA technology – in sculpture, video, and photography. Using a silicone-based sculptural technique, Piccinini and her crew of fabricators are able to bring a devastating three-dimensional verisimilitude to a hybridity that is typically only theorized. In her *Still Life with Stem Cells* (2002), a child sits calmly on a rug grasping nub-like blobs of flesh. Somewhere between a series of toes and an amorphous potato bug, these stem cell creations shock us. Is this alive? What

is absolutely so uncanny about Piccinini's sculptures (and uncanny must be the right word) is the manner in which a world barely envisioned is suddenly placed in front of us. If the mythic proportions of a transgenic future are hard to imagine, just take a look at Piccinini's sculptures. Rigorously sculpted to the level of each and every hair follicle, Piccinini's sculptures act as gestalts of flesh. Still reeling from the transgressive shock that accompanies this

vision, we encounter the glowing eyes of a child. Instead of horror, the child giddily embraces one lump and stares fondly at another. These lumps too can be loved.

Them

"I believe the result of a liberating science of animal groups would better express who the animals are as well: we might free nature in freeing ourselves." Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women*, 1991

"...both feminism and the causes of animals must share a concern with the ways that the Other become subordinate." – Lynda Birke and Luciana Parisi, "Animals, Becoming," 1999

Transgenics offers a biologic terrain to observe the becoming animal; feminism and post-colonialism, however, provide a semiotic perspective: that "animal" and "other" have a long-standing

history. Theorists like Donna Haraway have used this analysis to interrogate both these scientific, as well as language-based, distinctions. In her groundbreaking *Cyborg Manifesto*, Haraway sews together critical theory and science with a deft warning: "The degree to which the principle of domination is deeply embedded in our natural sciences, especially in these disciplines that seek to explain social groups and behavior, must not be underestimated."⁷ Arguing that one cannot trust the claim of pure empiricism in science, she outlines a complex method for allowing hybridity between animal, machine, human and social politics in general – the cyborg. The cyborg stands mutably between distinct boundaries and in many respects embodies the "becoming" animal.

Perhaps this malleability is, in part, what motivates artist Ann-Sofi Sidén to produce her complex work, the *QM Museum*. A museum within a museum,



Patricia Piccinini, *Still Life with Stem Cells*, 2002

the *QM Museum* spotlights – and presents in museological form – one of Sidén’s longest running projects, *the Queen of Mud*. Originally conceived as a performance character, *the Queen of Mud* was basically Sidén covered in mud. This ur-creature operated in various spheres, including a talk show and an appearance at a Chanel perfume counter in Stockholm. Sidén took on the guise of an ultimate “other” (possibly beyond animal). By physically becoming “other” in such a dramatic form, Sidén brought these tensions into the real world. Particularly by testing the relation between smell and class, Sidén zeroed in on a topic where consumers attempted to become something very far away from animal. What is most compelling about the complicated work of Sidén is that she approaches this question in multiple forms with varying degrees of the mythic, the fictitious, the factual, and historic.

In an entirely different line of work, she takes on clinical psychology. In *Would a Course of Deprol Have Saved Van Gogh’s Ear* (1996), Sidén created a grid of pharmaceutical advertisements. Presented side by side, the methods for creating (as opposed to curing) anxiety, as well as the targeting of gender, becomes evident. How long before you become *the Queen of Mud*?

Connecting the “animal” to that of the feminist and post-colonialist “other” can easily lead to ridiculous conclusions. However, cultural moments of debasement and exploitation have often found resonance in the phrase, “We were treated like animals.” This refrain positions the becoming animal as the lowest form of human existence. But what does it mean to treat someone like an animal? In political terms it would mean to revoke a person’s basic human rights.

Giorgio Agamben refers to this political position as a “state of exception” in his book of the same name. Investigating the creation of camps for those deemed not part of society (such as concentration camps or the camps developed in 1896 by the Spanish in Cuba), Agamben locates and analyzes separated territories that delineate a population outside the usual rules of governance. A current corollary might be Abu Ghraib or Guantanamo Bay where political prisoners are no longer offered common access to the law.

Imagine the photograph from Abu Ghraib of Private Lynndie England with an Iraqi prisoner on a leash or the caged enclosures of war prisoners reminiscent of a zoo.

In her photographic and sculptural works, artist Jane Alexander depicts the status of a country recovering from its infamy as a state of exception. Apartheid South Africa (apartheid is an Afrikaans term meaning separation or literally “aparthood”) was institutionalized in 1948 and continued until 1990. Designed to systematically discriminate against blacks and non-white citizens, apartheid became a global example of this radical, institutionalized form of exception.



Ann-Sofi Sidén, film still, *The Art Fair*, 1990.

Alexander takes apartheid as the abandonment of reason, making it the subject of her haunting black and white photomontages. What pervades her works so dramatically is the absolutely terrifying sense of silence. If anything stands out as the most durable explanation of the difference between human and animal, it is the ability to speak. In Alexander’s works, the children and adults appear muted with their heads covered in masks, their mouths melded over, or their eyes vacant. These children stare out, suffocated by masks of animality. Unlike the kind post-human eyes of Piccinini’s sculptures, the blank eyes of Alexander’s children give us nothing. They become traces of incommunicability.

In her photomontage series *African Adventure* (2000), Alexander’s masked children haunt the landscape of Cape Town. Whether a drive through the industrial sector, or the littered streets of Long Street, her childlike characters look abandoned, interchangeable with the emaciated scavenging dogs. Most tellingly, Alexander has a series of three photomontages titled *Adventure Centre* that depict her characters in front of tourist bureaus in Cape Town. Acting as witnesses to the tourist’s gaze, these children (whether adorned in an ill-fitted bunny hood or blindfolded) meld with vagrants who squat along these thoroughfares. They appear as strangers in a strange land, a visual analogue to the alienation felt by Franz Kafka’s Gregor who suddenly finds himself transformed into an insect in his bed.

The Zoo/The Ooz

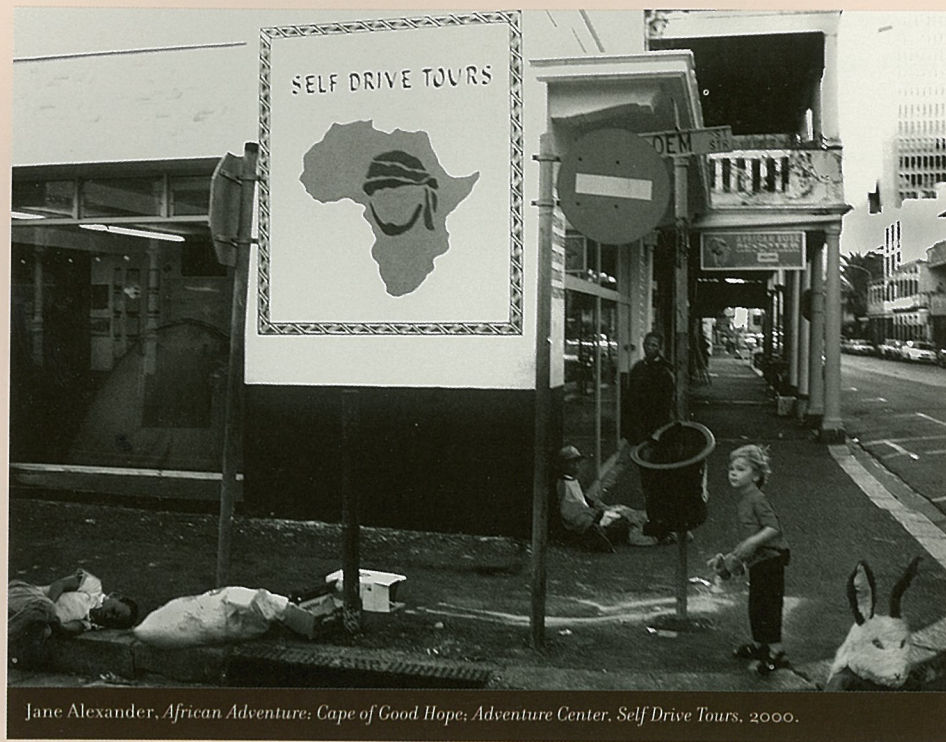
"In going back to the seventeenth century, I'm trying to imagine how things could have been different, to follow branches on the tree of knowledge that died of dry rot." – Mark Dion, 1996

"Public zoos came into existence at the beginning of the period which was to see the disappearance of animals from daily life. The zoo to which people go to meet animals, to observe them, to see them, is, in fact, a monument to the impossibility of such encounters. Modern zoos are an epitaph to a relationship which was as old as man. They are not seen as such because the wrong questions have been addressed to zoos."

– John Berger, *Why Look at Animals*, 1980

In a globalized world where well-healed tourists can travel to foreign lands to glimpse at exotic people, how far are we from an elaborate human safari? Being "on view" is not relegated to animals alone; indeed, the idea is as old as the Babylonian menageries of Nebuchadrezzar II and the Turkish harems. Although the history is far too lengthy to explore in this essay, it does provide an interesting framework through which to explore the *Becoming*

Animal exhibition. As we track the evolving institution of the zoo, we must also bear in mind the parallel tale of the art and natural history museum. Neil Harris, in his book *Cultural Excursions*, writes of the foundation of American museums, "The function of our urban culture, in the eighteenth century, was to transcend the limitations of time and place which the uncultivated wilderness of the New World had established."⁸ The style and content of what was deemed culturally sophisticated found its way into most civic institutions, including libraries and department stores. In response, some of the artists in the exhibition such as Mark Dion and Natalie Jeremijenko implicitly ask: How do we reorganize the problematic civic institutions derived from the legacy of the enlightenment?



Jane Alexander, *African Adventure: Cape of Good Hope: Adventure Center. Self Drive Tours*, 2000.

Consider the birth of the modern zoo under the entrepreneurship of Carl Hagenbeck (1844-1913). Hagenbeck began his zoos in the early 1860s in Hamburg, Germany. During the 1870s, his visitorship began to decline due in large part to the lagging German economy. In order to spice up the attractions, Hagenbeck took the advice of an old friend, Heinrich Leutemann, and included a family of Laplanders.⁹ "On the deck, three male members of the troupe – small yellow-brown, fur-clad people – strutted about beside their reindeer. On a lower deck, however, we were offered a simply delightful view! A mother with her infant, whom she pressed delicately to her breast, and a sweet four-year old girl."¹⁰ The exhibition drew massive crowds,

and Hagenbeck went on to display families of Sudanese, Sri Lankens, and Somalians. The display of these families quickly caught the attention of the Berlin Anthropological Society, which began measuring them and using the displays for research.

After the decline of the "people shows," the natural setting displays were redirected to animals. To repeat, the display of non-human animals originated in Hagenbeck's initial forays in the display of humans. For Hagenbeck, the

distinction between human and animal meant little in comparison to the gap between attendance figures. "Becoming animal" was scrapped for the more pertinent "becoming spectacle." This logic finds all the more relevance in Hagenbeck's contemporary P.T. Barnum.

The zoo (animal), the natural history museum (nature) and the art museum (culture) share a common ethnographic legacy of displacing and displaying the exotic "other." Often artists interrogate what happens when an institution acknowledges this legacy and scrupulously interrogate its colonialist forms of representation. These questions become all the more important as institutions founded on these relationships begin to reform themselves. It has also been the bedrock of artist Mark Dion's work for over fifteen years.

An ardent student of natural history, Dion has developed numerous projects interrogating the foundations of scientific evaluation and display. He has been a major contributor to what is now a common genre in contemporary art, that of the exploded *wunderkammern*, the hybrid zoo, and the experimental travel log.¹¹ Borrowing as much from early naturalists such as the taxonomist Carl Linnaeus (1707-1778) and underrated evolutionist Alfred Russel Wallace (1823-1913) as from artists Robert Smithson and Martha Rosler, Dion uses the techniques of "truth" display more commonly found in science museums to imply a more complex system of contestation.

In *Collectors Collected* (1994), Dion investigated the history of the Spanish collectors who participated in the *Expedicion Al Pacifico* (1862-66) and how they transformed the numerous collections of Madrid. His reverse investigation highlighted the collector versus the collected, and Dion hoped to "exhibit these figures as they would have exhibited people of another culture in the ethnographic systems of their time."¹² *Collectors Collected* exposes the underlying ideologies that tie human and animal together in our civic institutions. Dion's tactical use of the diorama, vitrine, (19th-century) study tables, and diagrams all play into his aesthetic reversal.

For *Becoming Animal*, Dion has produced an aviary titled *Library for the Birds of Massachusetts* (2005). Replete with zebra finches and a towering dead tree with books, bird cages, and a tar-like substance piled on its branches, *the Library* becomes a transitional social space where visitors can re-imagine the direction of the zoo and art and natural history museums. Most notably the tree (of knowledge) is dead, and encyclopedic books littering the installation seem to matter little to the chirping birds.

However, if we imagine a "becoming animal" zoo, what would it look like? This question is not easily answered, but artist/scientist Natalie Jeremijenko has a modest proposal in her ongoing *Ooz* project. *Ooz* is "zoo" spelled backwards or, as Jeremijenko states, "it is a reverse-engineered zoo." The *Ooz* projects provide simple interfaces for humans and animals to communicate and exist in contexts where the animals choose to stay (such as a pond where birds come and go at their leisure). For a commission in Zeewolde, the Netherlands, Jeremijenko produced a robotic goose that swims in a pond. Visitors sit in an interactive chair on the side of the pond and move their bodies to manipulate the gestures of the robot. These interactions facilitate communication between the robot goose and the live geese swimming in the pond. If the robot goose ruffles its feathers, the live geese react in one way;

if it stretches its neck, they react in another. As opposed to a voyeuristic relationship, the *Ooz* projects encourage reciprocity and facilitate becoming: becoming goose, for example.

Becoming Animal

Giorgio Agamben's book *The Open* commences with a description of a thirteenth-century Hebrew bible illustration depicting the messianic dinner of the righteous on the last day. Rather than possessing the heads of humans, the righteous are a motley assemblage of animals: leopard, eagle, fox, donkey, and lion. In the end, the Hebrew Bible appears to indicate, animals and humans will be one. Whether or not this messianic prophecy holds true, it will serve as the ending to this story.

As we head into that obscurity that is the future, the artists featured in *Becoming Animal* provide clues into the unforeseen and, at times, destabilizing moments that await us. Whether they are focusing on the "other," the natural, the ecological, or the zoo, the artists provide a critical lens to witness how far we have traveled down the path of becoming. Although we can cling to the distinctions that separate us from nature, animals, or beauty, we can alternatively let go, relax, and become something altogether more complex.