

#### ENDORSEMENT AND SCEPTICISM

In *What is Nature?*, Kate Soper addresses a distinction in contemporary thinking about 'nature' between the apparently practical concerns of ecology on the one hand, and the more theoretical emphases of postmodernism on the other. The former is concerned primarily with 'the "nature" that we are destroying, wasting and polluting'; the latter with 'the ways in which relations to the non-human world are always historically mediated'. Since in her view both perspectives may have necessary and complementary roles 'in shaping a particular political outlook' on nature, she proposes 'to speak of a contrast between what might be termed "nature-endorsing" and "nature-sceptical" arguments with no presumption being made that these reflect some simple antithesis between a "green" and a "postmodernist" politics'.<sup>5</sup>

This promises to be a fruitful basis from which to begin to think more specifically about the diverse ways in which post-modern art has dealt with the animal across a spectrum ranging from the *animal-endorsing* to the *animal-sceptical*. These terms, clumsier than Soper's, nevertheless point to the complexity of what it is that is called 'animal' here. Animal-endorsing art will tend to endorse animal life itself (and may therefore align itself with the work of conservationists, or perhaps of animal advocacy), rather than endorsing cultural constructions of the animal. Animal-sceptical art, on the contrary, is likely to be sceptical not of animals themselves (as if the very existence of non-human life was in question), but rather of culture's means of constructing and classifying the animal in order to make it meaningful to the human.

A comparison of the use of animal imagery in the work of the American artist Mark Dion, and in that of the British artists Olly and Suzi, will help to clarify matters. All three artists admittedly share certain ecological and environmental concerns, but aside from this, their approaches appear to have little in common. Their differing perspectives are evident even in their exhibition titles: Dion's first major British exhibition, in 1997, was called *Natural History and Other Fictions*; Olly and Suzi's, in 1998, was called *Raw*.<sup>6</sup>

Dion is in many respects a typical postmodern artist – the epitome of what the philosopher Richard Rorty has called the postmodern 'ironist theorist', whose responsibility is to call received wisdom into question.<sup>7</sup> Dion engages directly with theoretical perspectives. His interest in nature as 'a constantly reinvented rhetorical construction', and in how such constructions have 'articulated cultural anxieties about difference that separated *Homo sapiens* from other living creatures', is shaped in part by commentators on science such as Stephen Jay Gould and Donna Haraway.<sup>8</sup> He has also expressed particular interest in the social anthropologist Tim Ingold's important book, *What is an Animal?*<sup>9</sup>

The subject common to many of his installations is not so much the animal itself, but rather the attempts of science and philosophy to devise secure hierarchies and taxonomies in which to place it. A typically complex (if visually concise) example of his work, from 1990, is *Taxonomy of Non-Endangered Species* (illus. 2). It places Georges Cuvier, the founder of comparative anatomy, halfway up a ladder in the guise of



2 Mark Dion,  
*Taxonomy of Non-Endangered Species*,  
1990, toy animals in alcohol, animated Mickey Mouse figurine, ladder, shelves, glass containers, audiotape.

Mickey Mouse. The subject of his monologue – the animated speaking body is activated by a floor button – is to be the two orderly shelves of preserving jars, labelled in Latin, into which have been stuffed the whole and perfect bodies of Pluto, the Pink Panther, Babar the elephant and others.

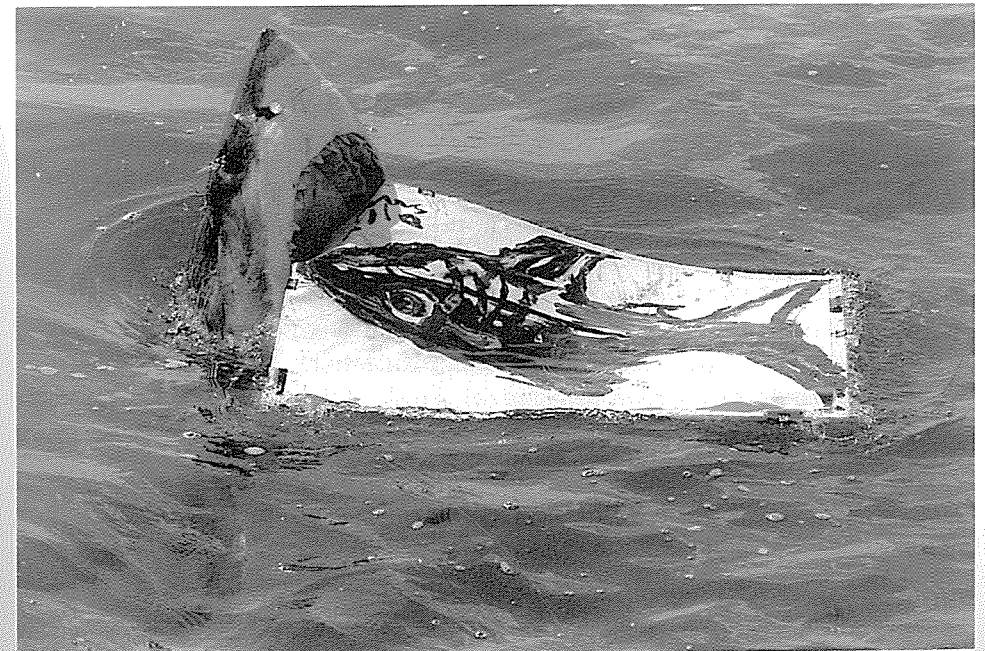
Conceived in response to the development of the Euro-Disney complex, and exhibited in Paris to coincide with its opening, the piece has been described as 'appropriating Cuvier's theories to expose the authoritarian world of Disney', whose theme parks include their own tableaux in which 'animal characters proselytize about "truths"' concerning the natural world.<sup>10</sup> For Dion the role of the artist as environmental activist is to employ 'the rich set of tools, like irony, allegory and humour', which are less readily or imaginatively employed by the institutions which seek to promote particular 'truths', such as science or the entertainment industry.<sup>11</sup>

Olly and Suzi's work, which principally takes the form of paintings and drawings of wild animals in their natural

habitat, could hardly be more different. They intend their paintings of endangered predators to convey a simple and direct message which is entirely free of postmodern irony: 'the animals are here now, they just might not be for much longer'.<sup>12</sup> Their images attempt to express directly their sense of the beauty and perfection of these animals. This approach, which is perhaps unusually straightforward in the context of contemporary art, undoubtedly prompts the question of whether the naturalistic representation of animals can really be called postmodern. There are compelling reasons for saying that it can.

Since 1993 the artists have sought to make pieces which reflect their immediate encounters and interactions with animals in the wild. The *Raw* exhibition, of work made since 1995, included paintings of lions, zebra, wild dogs and rhinoceros in the African bush, polar bears in the Arctic tundra, tigers and elephants in Nepal, leopards and tigers in India, white sharks in the ocean off South Africa, and ravens, wolves and deer in Minnesota. Often operating in difficult or dangerous circumstances, as close as they can get to these animals, and 'reacting to everything that's around us', they typically work on white or cream paper with materials such

3 Olly and Suzi  
with Greg Williams,  
*Shark Bite*, 1997,  
acrylic and blood  
on paper.



as natural pigments, soil, plant colourings, blood, inks and dyes. The two of them work simultaneously on each image, 'hand over hand'.

Aside from an absence of sentimentality or 'prettifying' in their work, two further features distinguish them from more traditional 'wildlife' artists. One is that the making of the pieces is extensively documented, 'as a performance', by the photographer Greg Williams, who travels with them. The other is that whenever possible the depicted animals are encouraged, without manipulation or coercion, to 'interact' with the work and mark it further themselves. This may take the form of bears or elephants leaving prints or urine stains on the image, or of chunks being bitten off a piece by a wolf or a shark (illus. 3). Exceptional cases, where the 'artistic interaction' did not go entirely to plan, include a leopard dragging a painting away and destroying it, and a rhinoceros eating a whole piece.

#### COMMON GROUND: TRUTH AND AUTHORSHIP

The comparison of Dion with Olly and Suzi indicates something of the range of serious contemporary art employing animal imagery. Beyond some level of ecological engagement and an interest in animals themselves, there are, however, surprising areas and issues of common concern in their attitudes to art and to the responsibilities of the artist.

The question of truth is one such issue. Postmodern scepticism about the operation of truth and knowledge has undoubtedly complicated any thinking about animals: about what counts as 'authentic' experience, about the experience of wonder or fear as antidotes to anthropocentrism, and about the extent to which it is possible to shed what Olly and Suzi call the 'baggage' of their Western thought. Dion has explained his interest 'in pre-Enlightenment collections like curiosity cabinets and *wunderkammern*' in terms of the way they 'tested reason' and attested to the marvellous. Questioned as to how he might provoke a contemporary sense of the marvellous, he replied: 'One thing is to tell the truth, which is by far more astounding than any fiction. (I cringe as the word "truth" passes my lips, but I always mean it with a lower case "t".)'<sup>13</sup> Olly and Suzi, when specifically asked whether their work sought to communicate a 'truth'

about animals, have been similarly cautious about the word: 'Our way of working aims to express our view of the world, which is our "truth" . . . We can't really say that there is one truth and we're aiming to get at that.'

In the incorporation of marks made by animals in some of their finished pieces, however, there is a very specific attempt to overcome viewers' postmodern sense of not knowing or believing what they are seeing. A work such as *Shark Bite* (illus. 3), exhibited along with the ragged corner ripped off by the shark, spat out and subsequently recovered, attests to the presence or existence of the living animal. The photographic documentation of the event, also exhibited in *Raw*, offers an important but somehow *lesser* – or at least more conventional, familiar, and thus more easily ignored – record of its existence. It is only the painting as object, as thing, marked by the animal itself, which can indelibly record the immediacy and 'truth' of the encounter.

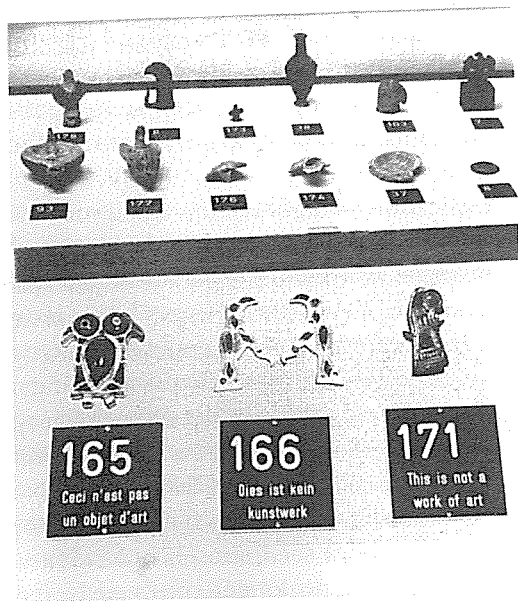
In this respect, as far as the artists' environmental message (as opposed to their aesthetic sensibility) is concerned, it could be said that it hardly matters what the painting looks like. The key thing is its status as the mark of the real, the wound, the touch: 'by the end of the trip this paper's been transformed from its clinical state into a document, it's like a piece of parchment, a genuine artifact of the event'. While an artist like Dion might question the feasibility of any such unmediated communication with the viewer, hedged around as it is by the institutional trappings of its display, he would at least be sympathetic to the attempt to overcome the typically deadening effect of galleries and museums, in which 'the viewer is always passive'.<sup>14</sup>

In addition to the question of truth, there is significant common ground between Dion and Olly and Suzi in terms of how they position themselves as artists. They share an interest not only in Joseph Beuys's use of animals in his art, but in how he drew together the roles of artist, environmental activist and educator. The title of one of Olly and Suzi's paintings, *Deer for Beuys* (illus. 26), is a direct tribute to the artist they see as 'the foremost environmentalist in the art world'. In the educational dimension of their work, and in their field trips, both they and Dion necessarily work closely and cooperatively with individuals who do not see themselves as artists. Dion has said that 'making art is no longer confined to the

institutional spaces that we've created for such activity. It's more in the "field" now. The focus is on relations and processes – an ecology of art if you will'.<sup>15</sup> Much the same could be said of Olly and Suzi's approach: they abandoned studio work in 1993.

Such working procedures are by no means wholly new, of course. In addition to Beuys, Dion is conscious of other influences on his own disruption of 'the notion of an originating author'. They include the activist aesthetics of his former teacher, Hans Haacke, and the example of Marcel Broodthaers's subversion of the authority of both artist and museum in his *Musée d'Art Moderne, Département des Aigles* in the early 1970s.<sup>16</sup> Broodthaers's provocative project included labelling each eagle exhibit with the caption 'This is not a work of art' (illus. 4).

New or not, the kind of unassuming 'complex authorship' responsible for the production of these contemporary artists' work – most strikingly evident not only in Olly and Suzi's collaborative 'hand over hand' technique, but in the occasional participation of animals themselves in the mark-making – has recently been characterized specifically as 'a strategy for the times'.<sup>17</sup>



4 Detail of Marcel Broodthaers, *Musée d'Art Moderne, Département des Aigles, Section des Figures*, 1972, mixed media.



5 Mark Dion, *Library for the Birds of Antwerp*, 1993, birds of African origin, tree, ceramic tiles, pool, books, mixed media.

#### THE LIVING ANIMAL AS POSTMODERN ANIMAL

A further word must be said about the significance of the living animal for these artists, and the 'use' they make of it. In 1993 Dion made a complex installation entitled *Library for the Birds of Antwerp*, which incorporated eighteen living African finches (illus. 5). The installation was sited in the city's Museum of Contemporary Art, and during the exhibition the finches flew freely around the gallery space, perching on the tree-like structure at its centre. Like much of Dion's work, the piece was both a site-specific response to local history and a commentary on broader ecological issues such as the extinction of bird species.

As Norman Bryson explains in a thoughtful essay on this piece, the birds were purchased in Antwerp's Vogelmarkt, which continues a trade in exotic birds that began in the sixteenth century. The installation included signs of this trade, such as wooden cages, metal traps and cartridges of birdshot, as part of a wider set of references to extinction (the image of

a dodo, books on extinct bird species from the Americas), all wedged into or hung from the branches of the apparently diseased tree. Bryson reads the tree as a 'by now ironic image of man's place at the pinnacle of the evolutionary hierarchy'.

It is the living birds, however, that do the real work of the piece. 'Through the conceit that birds are readers', Bryson writes, the book-laden tree stages an encounter between 'man-made systems of knowledge on one side, and on the other side a realm beyond those systems, a Nature whose properties remain radically unknown and unknowable.' This seems a fair assessment of Dion's approach, which seeks to demystify human blinkeredness rather than human fascination with the non-human world. As Bryson puts it, the birds in the piece mark a reality which exists 'as an excess lying beyond the scope of representation, as a reserve which the production of truth draws upon, but cannot exhaust or contain'.<sup>18</sup>

For Olly and Suzi too, the animal is a reminder of the limits of human understanding and influence, but also of the value of working *at those limits*. The very existence of dangerous wild animals 'keeps us in check', they state, and serves to warn that humans (including artists) are 'not the boss of everything'. The reality of the animals' existence, and the artists' physical proximity to those animals, is central to their work. Whatever else happens, 'we have to have an experience in the bush', and the work emerges directly from that experience. They recognize that the benefits of their experiences and interactions with animals 'are, in the short term at least, in our favour, despite our long-term objectives of helping the animals' predicament',<sup>19</sup> but their work, like Dion's, stands as a marker – a concise encapsulation – of what they perceive as the interdependence of humans and animals in the contemporary world.

The comparison of these artists' work was introduced with Soper's modification of the distinction between 'green' and postmodern priorities. Rather like Soper, though across a wider range of cultural, scientific and political issues, Wendy Wheeler has also recently stressed the common ground here. She describes the postmodern not only in terms of a calling into question of earlier certainties about 'the value of science, rationality and progress' (a familiar enough description), but also as a new sensibility: 'the cartesian dualism which has so

fundamentally structured the modern world is in the process of being replaced by what is, in the broadest possible sense, an ecological sensibility'. In this 'more holistic' new perspective, notions of order, reason and the body are, she contends, being expanded 'through a growing understanding of the creative complexity of the world, and of the creatures amongst whom we move and in whom we have our being – as do they in us'.<sup>20</sup>

Although the implications of this last phrase are not drawn out in detail by Wheeler, it is striking to find an account of the postmodern which alludes so directly to animals, and which proposes that the future of the human in the postmodern world is so intimately and creatively bound up with that of the animal. From this perspective, the classic dualism of human and animal is not so much erased as *rendered uninteresting* as a way of thinking about being in the world.

#### ART AND PHILOSOPHY

*A postmodern artist or writer is in the position of a philosopher . . .*  
JEAN-FRANÇOIS LYOTARD<sup>21</sup>

Some of the most adventurous and influential developments in recent Western art and philosophy have taken a deeply sceptical view of what has come to be seen as the divisive and defensive 'common-sense' account of identity. Whether described in terms of the heritage of Enlightenment rationalism or liberal humanism, this account of the privileged and empowered individual, often epitomized by the figure of the creative artist or author, has for several decades been the object of a destabilizing rhetoric. In 1966 Foucault had envisaged the possibility of circumstances arising in which 'man's mode of being as constituted in modern thought' might 'crumble'. By the 1990s the rhetoric (not always backed by sound historical argument) proposed that the postmodern should also be considered a *posthuman* condition.<sup>22</sup>

It is in the culture's art forms that the evidence of this changed condition has often been sought. It has been plausibly suggested, for example, that Ted Hughes's poem 'Wodwo' – in which a creature, strange to itself, searches for clues to its possible identity – 'inhabits a world beyond humanism, in which the human can no longer be taken for granted, but must be rediscovered anew in each encounter