We are all animal now

Charles Green

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If there seems to be a sudden spate of exhibitions about animals and art, then there are good reasons that have been simmering on the cultural backburner for a long time. Like climate change, the need to reformulate our ideas about animals has arrived very quickly in the wider public consciousness. But like climate change, the theories, the ethics and the research surrounding the reformulation of our relationship to animals have been emerging for a much longer time. As good early warning systems, artists have been fast to pick up on this. We are, all of us artists, involved in catch-up.

There are several things that this exhibition is not. ‘Voiceless: I Feel Therefore I Am’ is not an advertisement for the noble work of Voiceless; each work is drawn directly from the artists’ ongoing projects and is not motivated by this occasion. It is not a collective artistic indictment of the lack of compassion with which animals are treated, including by most artists, as part of the so-called food chain; that task is better managed by the legislative and educational work that Voiceless empowers. Even so, particular artists, especially painter Peter Booth, have been dedicated voices against cruelty to animals for decades. But quite deliberately, there are no protest images of slaughterhouses here. It is not an investigation of ourselves (whoever that collective Australian ‘we’ might now be after a grim decade of eroded institutions and entropic ethics) through the relationships we have with animals, though inevitably those relationships (pets, private totems, tokens of exchange) are depicted in the exhibition, as in Chayni Henry’s confessional panels. This young artist’s quite wily self-representation as feckless pet owner is effective precisely because she has already profiled her middle-class viewers’ own moral inconsistency, just as Simon Cooper’s half-human, half-animal votive figures, best hand-held, are deceptively ingenuous. At least one work in the exhibition contains no animal imagery at all, suffused with the same Darwinian
perspective as Madeleine Kelly’s painting of a herd of humans. That same trompe l’oeil work, Sam Jinks’s double portrait of himself and his father, shows the underlying continuity between human and animal existence (which is, of course, death and the condition of the body as meat, a condition much examined by philosophers).

‘Voiceless: I Feel Therefore I Am’ has been assembled as both a tribute to the work of the Voiceless organisation and as an index of the artists’ reconsidered ideas about animals. These centre on reflections about the connections between us and other species in the light of the widespread human use of animals and the cruelty surrounding our dealings with them. They come with an immediate corollary: the half-guilty desire to distinguish between cross-species empathy and anthropomorphic sentimentality – a tension evident in both Madeleine Kelly’s paintings (even when animals do not appear in her works, the liminal human figures slide into atavism) and Zhang Huan’s photographic documentation of human-animal physical contact. The difference is very blurry; sentimental anthropomorphism may never have existed except on the neo-liberal, Scrooge-ruled side of the brain. We are coming to understand the concept of a far more developed animal capacity for pleasure and creativity than could ever have been imagined, as Darwinian theory is updated and artists such as Cassandra Laing read Nature as willingly as Artforum. Ornithological fieldwork suggests that art and music may ultimately prove to be the tie that binds the species of planet earth together rather than distinguishing us from our avian and animal cousins. Second, we are beginning to accept that we might comprehend animals as more than projections of our desires and feelings, however primal or conditioned, compulsive or freely chosen, these may be. Kate Rohde’s crazed fake-fur beasts in creaky, faux-Victorian display cases are far from inconsistent with her belief that: ‘One thing I know about my work is that it comes from believing in nature’s power and beauty.’ Animals are more than instruments or machines. They might be communicated with, though we think we can understand other humans better (that pet owners would disagree is not as frivolous as it sounds). This involves the simultaneous acceptance of commensurability and difference, rather than the privileging of either, which is as troublesome across cultures as it is across species. Lynne Roberts-Goodwin’s Middle Eastern goat doesn’t quite fit any obvious photographic genre. It is not exactly National Geographic photojournalism, nor Thomas Ruff-like false index, nor straightforward archival recording, though it impersonates each of these so precisely it holds the artistic function at a simultaneously symbolic and forensic distance. Janet Laurence’s animal images are layered, archival and formally
beautiful; their indecipherability is familiar to any scientist, or, more particularly, zoologist and ornithologist, which is why her semi-transparent panels have been so genuinely welcomed in natural-history museums. At the risk of sounding like an academic cultural theorist (which I am not) I want to suggest that one of the things that artists do well is to manage the simultaneous acceptance of commensurability and difference, and, in the process, to unmask ideology. To parse this in less clunky fashion, many artists worldwide are unpacking the self-serving obliviousness that humanity accepts in its dealings with animals and the environment. To make this sound even less of a mystification, take Philip Brophy’s eloquent statement about The Kingpins – ‘woman as vessel, container, well and vial, ready to take any culture jism going and able to expel it back as a reconverted figure’ – and substitute the word ‘animal’ for ‘woman’.6 In a similar substitution, Louise Weaver’s ultra-feminised crocheting and embroidery over animal objects amounts to a renunciation of metaphor, which is overrun by creeping texture and monochromatic dematerialisation.

Obliviousness is not sustainable. First, it is blinding. It elides our own affective contribution (and hence accumulating, complicit indebtedness within a moral ecology that tends towards entropy) to the Hobbesian ferocity of existence, whose churning is encompassed in the image of a Wheel of Life by Buddhists. It elides that we are as much subject to that Wheel as animals, and as subject to the laws of its dynamic equilibrium and re-adjustment. This accumulative, neo-Darwinian logic underpins the otherwise Magic Realism of James Morrison’s acid-gentle National Parks panoramas, Lyndell Brown’s & Charles Green’s hyper-allegorised Painter’s Family, and Guan Wei’s polyptych panels.7 The late French philosopher, Jacques Derrida, described obliviousness to the cruel subjection of animals in the following way:

No one can deny seriously, or for very long, that men do all they can in order to dissimulate this cruelty or to hide it from themselves, in order to organise on a global scale the forgetting or misunderstanding of this violence.8

Second, this blindness is corrupting. In The Lives of Animals, J. M. Coetzee’s fictional writer Elizabeth Costello replies to a sceptic:

You say that death does not matter to an animal because the animal does not understand death. I am reminded of one of the academic philosophers I read in
preparing for yesterday’s lecture. It was a depressing experience. It woke in me a quite Swiftian response. If this is the best that human philosophy can offer, I said to myself, then I would rather go and live among horses.\textsuperscript{9}

We might polish an animal mirror to look for ourselves, as body theorist Donna Haraway once observed, but even this is no longer enough.\textsuperscript{10}


\textsuperscript{2} Booth was a driving force behind the encyclopaedic exhibition, ‘100 Artists against animal experimentation’, Deutscher Brunswick Street Gallery, Melbourne, 1990.


\textsuperscript{4} For an overview of extraordinary ornithological research into birdsong and creativity, see David Rothenberg, \textit{Why Birds Sing: A Journey Into the Mystery of Bird Song}, Basic Books, New York, 2005.

\textsuperscript{5} Kate Rohde, artist statement, in \textit{Some Kind of Empire}, Gertrude Contemporary Art Spaces, Melbourne, 2006.


\textsuperscript{7} James Morrison notes, ‘By reworking and labouring over the surfaces, the original stories get pushed to the back but still resonate or taint the final product’; see ‘Excerpt from a conversation between James Morrison and Sandra Bridie’, in \textit{James Morrison: Port Davey, Tasmania}, Gertrude Contemporary Art Spaces, Melbourne, 2002.


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