

CHAPTER 6

Sublime Animal

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Figure 6.1 Embryonic horse, vertical head and legs in jar. Photographed at École Nationale Vétérinaire de Maisons-Alfort. Photo: Maria Whiteman.

As an artist, I am compelled by the ways in which animals are visualized in contemporary art and in the cultural sphere more generally, and by how distinct techniques of representation afford them differing degrees of cultural significance. This is the key dynamic that I have sought to explore in both my recent art practice and my writing on art, animals, and the discourse of animality. Underlying this investigation of the spaces in which animals are present and absent in the social imaginary is an affective presentiment concerning the fate of our co-habitation with animals on this planet; as a consequence, my work cannot help but tarry with empathy and mourning, that is, with the unfortunate evacuating of potentialities of being and belonging never given the appropriate conditions to become actual or practicable.

I evoke affect here at the outset with some hesitation. There's sometimes a tendency for art to too quickly embrace sentiment, feeling, and affect, and to do so in a manner that blunts the critical edge in which artistic investigations also most certainly engage. At the same time, there's a danger in not properly acknowledging how affect shapes artistic production *and* the encounter of viewers with artworks. Affect need not be the other of critical theory or philosophy, both of which inform and shape my work. I follow Eve Sedgwick in recognizing much of what passes for critical thought as a form of paranoid reading that trades in the hermeneutics of disclosure, that is, in the process of demystification or exposé through which the (supposedly) naive are exposed to truth. Sedgwick's point is not that paranoid readings are wrong, but that they constitute one mode or form of knowing, and that by assuming the position of the *only* way to know they have produced a "disarticulation, disavowal, and misrecognition of other ways of knowing."¹ I see my art and writing as crossing back and forth from philosophy to affect, without disavowing the importance of either in constituting knowledge and one's experience of the world—indeed, recognizing the necessity of both in the practice of art, and especially in art that tries to engage with animals: that essential Other against which human epistemologies and ontologies are produced.

Within this larger framing context of my art practice, the pieces I've included here have two broad aims. The first is to offer a record of a mode of visual-scientific practice in order to provide evidence of a form of knowledge production that is quickly becoming consigned to history. The photo series I am presenting records and examines the various modes of the visual in relation to animals placed on display to generate knowledge. I consider how this form of animal display participates in and informs ongoing discussions of animals and post-humanism. My second aim is to think about how contemporary art plays a role in post-humanist discourse. I am thus interested in the connections between animal displays in natural history museums and scientific practice on animal bodies *and* a philosophical inquiry into modes of knowing, which includes a consideration of the epistemic operations—its insights and well as its blindnesses—of the medium of photography.



Figure 6.2 Curled fawn with spots in jar. Photographed in the Zoology Laboratory at University of Alberta. Photo: Maria Whiteman.

The series from which these photos are taken, *Taxonomia*, investigates the archive of animal bodies stuffed in jars, held in place by pins, wrapped up in string, and stuffed, mounted, and displayed in order to reduce the anarchy of the natural world to fit neatly into the strict categories of science. Knowledge of the animal world through biological taxonomy—domain, kingdom, phylum, class, order, family, genus, and finally species—is an ancient practice, with origins in the work of Aristotle (in the ancient world) and Linnaeus (the forefather of modern practices). It is also a practice fast coming to an end, as science shifts from learning about animals through visual display to the invisibility of the double helix of DNA. In place of genus and species, traced out through shifts in the colour of fur or markings of the skin, we get a sequence flashing up on a computer screen: A-C-G-T, for example.

Through the photographs, I am drawing attention to the central role played by animals put on display. These are not documentary records, or not only that. These photos are a form of aesthetico-critical practice. Their aestheticized surface is intended to draw attention to the frame of the visual in relation to animal bodies, something we consider too rarely. They put into play the function of vision in scientific knowing; they also highlight the

difference between these forms of animal display and that which occurs in the other space in which we more commonly now confront animals: displays of taxidermy animals in natural history museums. Over the past quarter century, natural history museums have changed focus, becoming one of the few spaces in which members of the public come into contact with animal bodies and develop attitudes toward other living species. In museums and aquariums, animals are rendered as cute and cuddly as the toys that children long for in museum gift shops: the flesh and animality has been torn away in the effort to generate that ecological empathy that has become the function of the knowledge systems in natural history museums. What is lost when we forget the weight of flesh and the significance of its decay?

But I am also taken by the ontological demands made by these photos. Indeed, I feel as if my critical practice is driven by some need to capture what I have come to term the “sublime animal.” The Kantian sublime names an experience of awe in the face of an otherness that it is intended only to domesticate in the end—an extreme difference whose extremity is only meant to highlight the power of human cognition to manage any experience that comes its way. The aesthetic plays a role in this game of superior knowledge in the dynamically sublime, which restrains imagination through the force of a cognition that can never be surprised or second-guessed. The origin of the zoology museum obeys this process. Bodies are captured whose very existence and otherness should be uncontainable in one’s imagination—a mode of being that should be as alien to us as those creatures we imagine we might encounter among the stars, but whose physical preservation in quasi-embryonic fluid makes them sites at which knowledge is produced and organized in a matter that transforms Being into being. My photos are meant to challenge this fantasy of Enlightenment knowledge, cutting away at scientific taxonomy in order to reawaken the dissonance and wonder that comes from these suspended moments of Being; these photos are full of tenderness and dreamy with affect for a never-to-be-actualized life and possibility.

The concept of the sublime animal applies not only to what I see (or think I see) at the moment I am taking the photograph but also to a consideration of what the photographs themselves make possible in their representation of the animal. The photographs capture details: claws, paws, eyes, face, and even expressions. As I try to reveal or uncover a thing-in-itself, something beyond what is representable, what I understand myself to be doing is to assert Edmund Burke’s idea of the sublime against its Kantian counterpart. For Kant, Burke’s idea of the sublime as that which is “productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling”² constituted a danger to philosophical systems of knowledge. It is for this reason that Kant argues—or rather, asserts—there to be a second moment in the experience of the sublime, which he describes as “the feeling of a momentary inhibition of the vital forces



Figure 6.3 Frog hand and body in jar. Photographed in the Zoology Laboratory at University of Alberta. Photo: Maria Whiteman.

followed immediately by an outpouring of them that is all the stronger.”³ My photographs show the altered figurations in which the animal continues to function in the spatiotemporal world it shares with us: the lifeless life that goes on living even in its complete deadness. By capturing the dynamics of this space between stasis and growth—pickled animals that are preserved for science, but that are also placed in a quasi-embryonic fluid that positions the animal as a figure of fetal growth—my aim is to extend the “momentary inhibition of the vital forces” in a way that makes us experience and reflect on the practices and forces that have resulted in our encounter with animals to follow the pattern of Kant’s sublime, rather than Burke’s.

There is another way in which these photographs—and perhaps even more strongly, the videos that I’ve included in *Taxonomia*—participate in this undoing of existing ethical, aesthetic, and epistemological relations. The images capture the fixed gaze of animals lost in time and space. In “The Animal that Therefore I Am,” Jacques Derrida explores the significance of the gaze of his

cat, watching him as he undresses. Derrida is attentive to the depth of the unspoken drama of possession, ethics, and signification that is played out in this quotidian moment. I hope to have captured some of the energy of this disconcerting and displacing question of what it means to be figured in the animal's gaze. As the animal watches you and you look back at her gaze, my images generate a feeling of suspension of difference and the emergence of a (potential) sameness that is almost always undone by the presumptions with which we frame our relation to animals. This is repeated in the touch and caress of the hand on the bodies of wild animals—possible only because their death has made them available for me to engage them safely, less as others than as objects whose very existence confirms that these animals have been entered into a system in which they make possible the strengthening (à la Kant) of our “vital forces.” I want viewers to take note of how we conceptualize animal Being in comparison with our own when we view them, as well as when we are viewed by them.

I am engaging with Burke and Kant not to separate out art and nature into the same categories that they do (the former, art, being always already beautiful, while nature is always already sublime). As I hope is clear, one of the aims of my pieces is to challenge these divisions, which continue to inform how we constitute knowledge—knowledge of animals, and in relation to the practice of art and our sense of what it means to be in the world at this time.



Figure 6.4 Embryonic sibling fawns wrapped together in jar. Photographed in the Zoology Laboratory at University of Alberta. Photo: Maria Whiteman.

Notes

- 1 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You’re so Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay Is about You,” in *Touching, Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 143.
- 2 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, translated by Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987), 36.
- 3 *Ibid.*, 98.

