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## BOOK REVIEWS

### *Surface Encounters: Thinking with Animals and Art*

Ron Broglio, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011. 176 pages. ISBN: 978-0-8166-7297-4 (paperback); 978-0-8166-7296-7 (hardback)

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### **Animal Zeitgeist in Contemporary Art**



Over the past decade numerous books have surfaced that pose questions about our relationship to the animal. As with any trend, one can't help but pose the question of why this is the case. What is happening in the world of animals that has triggered this explosion of critical examinations of the place of animals on our planet and in our daily lives? We've always inhabited the world alongside animals; indeed, the full-blown arrival of the animal on the critical scene seems to have come at the moment when we are, in many ways, the furthest away from direct contact with animals on a day-to-day basis. So why now? There are all manner of problems and crises besetting the planet. The reality of a global market organized around the dictates of a hyper-capitalism means that limited resources of energy continue to be consumed at a feverish pace and with paradigm-altering consequences for the environment. The green movement continues its brave fight to push individuals and states to behave more rationally and ethically, but despite minor victories, the planet's eco-system continues to get worse. We see suffering in all parts of the world at a magnitude that is at times incomprehensible. So who cares about animals! Then again, precisely because of the challenges facing us today, how can one not? In his superb *Surface Encounters: Thinking with Animals and Art*, Ron Broglio examines forms of contemporary art practice that focus on animals. He does so as a way of exploring human-animal relations in a manner that contributes not only to the ongoing theorization of animals, but which positions the fractured and hitherto largely missed encounter with the animal as lying at the heart of the pre-apocalyptic landscape we inhabit today. It is an inventive and original book that should find its way onto the bookshelves of not only those interested in animal studies and contemporary visual arts, but in the study of politics and culture more generally.

The human-animal relationship in our contemporary world has been probed in a range of discourses challenging a myriad of systems already in place—politics, ethics, morality, science, theory, and philosophy. Notably absent (or, when present, usually so only to a minor degree) has been a view of the ways in which art has explored and challenged this relationship. The aim of *Surface Encounters* is to attend to this gap by looking at how art and theory inflect one

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another in naming and claiming the animal body. Images of animals index the relationship we have to them in a provocative way. The great paintings of the Renaissance were decorated with dead animals ready to be butchered and lifelike animals licking the remnants of their brethren up of the floor, and the utopic fantasies of seventeenth century art included larger than life landscapes of a plentitude of wild and domestic animals. One couldn't see a still life without seeing the tied-up body of a dead hare or goose stuck in it in order to make a compelling composition. As Broglio points out, the historical genealogy of animals in art is as long as that of animals in philosophy. Aristotle begins *De Anima* by stating that "life is said in many ways." And just as in philosophy, art, too, establishes distinctions between the genus of man and animal in an effort to place the two species into distinct epistemologies and ontologies—a conceptual separation and hierarchization with which we continue to work and against which we continue to struggle.

Embracing phenomenology, Broglio moves back and forth between philosophy (including concepts developed in the work of Hegel, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Derrida, Agamben, and Donna Haraway) and art, and in the process opens up a different vantage point on an old problem: the foundational divide between human and animal. One of the specific contributions that art can make to theories and philosophies of the animal is an understanding of encounters with surfaces. This is the key point of intervention taken by all of the artists that Broglio examines. For example, Bryndis Snaejorndottir and Mark Wilson's work explores secondary status of animal life in relation to humans. Broglio shows how Snaejorndottir and Wilson look closely at the manner in which distinct techniques of representation have afforded animals different degrees of cultural significance throughout history. They also compare the wild and the domestic, and the spaces (beds) and places (next to our beds) occupied by humans and animals that produce physical imprints of this key relationship within the confines of our own homes.

In the chapters on Damien Hirst and Carolee Schneemann, Broglio examines the ways in which these artists try to overcome the human–animal division through extreme or risky behavior—from Hirst's infamous animal dissections (displays of halves of entire large mammals) to Schneemann's equally infamous "Meat Joy," which finds her swimming around on the floor in raw flesh that she touches with her body, in order to encounter the surfaces of other bodies as intimately as possible. For Broglio, "where 'Meat Joy' develops a liberation through contact with surfaces, in his early work, *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche uses Dionysus to much the same ends. Schneemann's flesh as material for art and Nietzsche's reading of Dionysus myth both trouble a sense of humans as unique apart from the world of things" (p. 31). For both artists, the encounter with the flesh and exteriority of the animal body is not unlike Hegel's claim that animal organism or the "power of digestion" functions not only as a metaphor, but also as a literal reading of the powers and functions of digestion—a reading that sutures conceptual thought to flesh of necessity, and in a way that Western philosophy has tended to sidestep or disavow.

Broglio also insightfully examines Olly Williams and Suzi Winstanley's practice of examining the surfaces on which live animals leave traces of their existence, as in the path left behind by a snake that creeps across a sheet of paper. Broglio writes that through the act of "crossing and marking ... the artists' bodies cross into the animal's world and become carriers of significance in that world. The privileged interiority of the human subject unfolds, unravels, becoming more like paper spread out than a selfhood and more like an element than a person" (p. 96). This is evident by the marks left on the artist's bodies as

the artists turn their artworks into the subject of the animal and its environment as they themselves cross over into the animal world; for Broglio, “surfaces are shown to have a power of production by leveraging their negative place in philosophy to think outside of typical philosophical architecture, which privileges human interiority over and against objects of inquiry” (p. 98).

The transition from surface to interiority shifts the viewer's perception by encountering the artist's impression of the “spiritual powers” of the animal world, as Broglio discusses the work of Marcus Coates, who performs shamanistic calls and sounds by becoming animal, overcoding semblance to the animal and its behavior. Coates' performances are carried out to such a degree of intensity that viewers can't help but wonder what is really happening to him as he transforms his body into an animalistic trance. This becoming animal includes a nonhuman language and movement in the performance, which works the border between humor and profundity, but also leaves no trace of division in the process of merging species “spiritually,” “becoming” animal, or more animal than usual.

*Surface Encounters* is an excellent read for those of us who feel a sense of wonder and bewilderment when it comes to our connection to animals. Whatever one thinks about animals—that is, whether one appreciates their very existence, ponders their sovereignty, or feels anxious about the poverty of their lives—the fact is that many large mammals are disappearing and that, as a consequence, our own place in an ecosystem on which we necessarily depend is in jeopardy. The investigations of animals in contemporary art offer an important site for the study of, and reflection about, these unprecedented changes. To visualize what we eat in a context outside the meat market (as in the work of Damien Hirst) generates a distinct and critically effective view of our relationship to bodies other than our own. Through his critical examination of the work of a number of artists, Broglio draws attention to the inevitable violence that appears at the center of the human–animal dyad. His movement back and forth from art to philosophy in relation to this dyad opens up new perspectives on the latter. Working through Derrida's question “does the animal suffer?,” for example, Broglio uses suffering as it appears in theory as well as art as the basis for a new ontology of life that would undo the secondary function that “animal” has played in relation to “human” throughout the history of philosophy.

As the discourse on the universal rights of man intersects with growing concern about the fate of the natural world, it has become increasingly important to investigate and to assess the relation of man to the radically other which we have given the name “animal.” The critical aim of such investigations is to highlight issues that lie at the heart of discourses about the human–animal relation, in an effort to challenge and oppose older and stubbornly established ideas about our relationship to animals and nature. The unbridgeable gap suggested by this dyad is not one that can be easily collapsed or passed over in favor of a more ethically and politically astute view of life. But it can be re-theorized in a way that points to new possibilities. As Broglio (following Agamben's *The Open*), seeing the human–animal divide not as a blunt statement of ontological principles to which we are condemned by the history of ideas (as much as by the social and material practices we have built in conjunction with it), but an opening—a space in which complex relations are framed and organized in equally complex ways. We share our planet with animals—and are embedded and embodied ecologically in the social relationship we have with them—and so need to attend to the “unequal forces which one day be reversed, between those who violate not the animal life but even and also the sentiment of compassion and, on the other hand, those who appeal to an irrefutable testimony to this pity”

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(Derrida 2008, p. 397). *Surface Encounters* is not only a major contribution to the on-going theorization of human–animal relations, but an important step in showing the role played by contemporary art in visualizing (in Mary Midgley’s words) that “humans are not just like animals but we ARE animals.”

### Reference

Derrida, J. 2008. *The Animal That Therefore I Am*. Trans. D. Wells. Fordham, NY: Fordham University Press.

### Wolf

Garry Marvin. Reaktion Books, 2012. 199 pages. ISBN: 978 1 86189 879 1 (paperback)

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As Garry Marvin explains, in this latest volume from the truly superb Reaktion Animal series, the wolf’s fate was largely sealed when Linnaeus decided in 1758 to prefix the animal’s classificatory name *lupus* with the word *Canis*. From that point on, the wolf became formally the literal “underdog.” No more, the “uberdog” of legend and folk-tale, nor the light bearing *lykos* of Ancient Greek mythology, but rather a mere dog “gone wrong.” Between *Canis familiaris* and *Canis lupus* lies almost the entire paradoxical and complex history of human–animal relations; from the domestic to the archetypal “other,” from the savage to the tame, from the sovereign to the beast. This quintessential “otherness” (which, like all “othernesses” that really matter contains enough elements of recognizable “sameness” to make us uncomfortable) lies at the center of humankind’s historic *lupophobia*, the first of Marvin’s sequence of three wolf-moments that structure the book. If that phobia developed initially out of simple competition from a “worthy rival” over natural and then domesticated resources, it soon became something else, a moral trope for a distinctively humanist narrative and a dark reminder of the possibilities of our own inherent animality: “werewolves of London, again.”

Accompanying the epistemic re-ordering of the animal world that the Enlightenment ushered in, *lupicide* replaced *lupophobia* and the hunt, or rather, the licensed extermination, was on. Wild “dogs gone-wrong” had no place in the species eugenics of the modern world or the newly acquired spaces of “civilization.” Here, Marvin traces the inexhaustible pursuit of the wolf as a “criminal animal,” particularly during the colonization of America by European settlers. As he points out, although their fur did become a prized commodity in itself, it was not initially the presence of the wolves per se that prompted their decimation but their predatory co-presence amongst first the buffalo and later the openly grazed livestock upon which these nascent frontier economies were being built. Thus, the criminalization of the wolf followed the appropriation of these other wild species into the possessive human realm.

Of course, throughout human history, there has also been a certain veneration for the wolf. “The wolf has not always been feared,” writes Marvin, opening a section on *lupophilia*. Wolves have been much revered, particularly in indigenous North American cultures, albeit often for those qualities they either share with humans or that humans would wish to have, whether they be their strength, cunning, maternal instincts or hunting skills. The Indian wolf (*Canis lupus pallipes*) has a somewhat different cultural history that was not only entirely re-written under