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If Animals Could Talk

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IF ANIMALS COULD TALK

by

MATTHEW MOORE

Under the Direction of Constance Thalken

ABSTRACT

This paper is an investigation of the ideas and philosophies that have played a role in the creation of my thesis exhibition entitled *If Animals Could Talk*. While my research into the subject of animals and more specifically human/animal interaction has covered a wide spectrum, this paper focuses on several texts including, "Why Look at Animals," by John Berger and "Simulation and Simulacra" by Jean Baudrillard as being influential in the development of my artwork. This paper also analyzes the work of several artists dealing with human/animal relations. Those artists include Sanna Kannisto, Neeta Madahar and Douglas Gordon.

INDEX WORDS: Human, Animal, Simulation

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INTRODUCTION

My thesis exhibition, entitled *If Animals Could Talk*, is an exploration of the human desire to interact with non-human animals, and an examination of the ways we seek to satisfy that desire by visiting zoos and aquariums. With this paper I will investigate the underlying thoughts and philosophies that have influenced my work, and the ideas contained in my thesis exhibition. *If Animals Could Talk* is comprised of photographs made at zoos and aquariums that have been printed as transparencies and placed in light-boxes. Also included in the exhibition is a video created from streaming web-cam footage broadcast from the Smithsonian National Zoo. By making photographs at zoo and aquariums, where people have sought out animal contact, my work provides a critique of those institutions that form the cornerstone of the ecotourism industry. It is important to note however, that the goal of my work is not to convince people that "zoos are bad," but rather to create an opportunity for viewers to examine their own thoughts on the experiences that zoos provide. Because the exhibition as a whole is an attempt to recontextualize the experience of looking at animals, *If Animals Could Talk* allows viewers to question the authenticity of "the animal," and of our interactions with animals, within the framework of our postmodern world.

THE ABYSS

If Animals Could Talk points directly to our struggle as humans to deal with what John Berger calls the "abyss of non-comprehension."[1] In his seminal essay, "Why Look at

Animals," Berger defines this abyss as the lack of understanding that we share with animals when our gaze encounters theirs.[2] In describing this, Berger points out that "man too is looking across a similar, but not identical, abyss of non-comprehension. And this is so whenever he looks. He is always looking across ignorance and fear."[3] The abyss of non-comprehension is of course a result of our inability (or theirs) to communicate through language. Berger emphasizes this by saying:

> Between two men the two abysses are, in principle, bridged by language. Even if the encounter is hostile and no words are used (even if the two speak different languages), the *existence* of language allows that at least one of them, if not both mutually, is confirmed by the other.[4]

Seeking to explore, or even bridge this "abyss," we often visit zoos or aquariums hoping to experience some level of animal interaction. It is a futile attempt that more often than not leads to disappointment. Berger explains that disappointment by saying:

> The public purpose of zoos is to offer visitors the opportunity of looking at animals. Yet nowhere in a zoo can a stranger encounter the look of an animal. At the most, the animals gaze flickers and passes on. They look sideways. They look blindly beyond. They scan mechanically. They have been immunized to encounter, because nothing can anymore occupy a central place in their attention.[5]

The animals kept in zoos are therefore no longer the animals we had hoped to encounter. They are more like simulations in the Baudrillard meaning of the word. To

use his analogy, if "Disneyland is presented as imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest is real," then the zoo serves the reverse function.[6] Here, animals are presented as real in order to convince us that the wild ones are equally as marginalized. Ursula Heise puts it this way, "if simulations can be shown to fulfill the same functions adequately, the imperative to preserve or protect what is left of the natural world is considerably diminished in importance."[7] The result is that the disappointment people experience at the zoo really makes them less mournful about the loss of animals from their own lives.

In my photographs people are the ones caught in the artificial environment that zoos and aquariums create to enhance the experience of viewing animals. Animals are often behind well lit panes of glass and we, the viewers, are in darkness to create a movie screen effect. We pause in front of each display just long enough to see, or not see the animal, and then move on to the next simulated experience in much the same way a visitor to a museum looks at artworks on a wall. The images in *If Animals Could Talk* are printed on transparencies and presented in light boxes to mimic this effect. The people in the photographs are captured in a state of perplexity, looking at animals that no longer seem real. They now are the ones put within a box to be looked at by the viewer who is now looking at animals, both human and non-human, further blurring the lines of our own "animality."[8] The exhibition thus functions like a re-simulated experience,

taking us even further away from an authentic animal encounter. In this way my images are in dialog with a new genre of artists that represent animals in their work as the thing missing from our human lives. The animal is therefore no longer a symbol of what we control, but a symbol of what we have lost.

Also included in *If Animals Could Talk* is a video entitled *Night Zoo*. The video is a collection of downloaded web cam footage, broadcast from the Smithsonian National Zoo's web-site during the night, while the zoo is closed to visitors. The clips of various animals' enclosures have then been put together in a grid format to allow viewers to experience the zoo from the perspective of a voyeur, watching the animals even as they sleep, in much the same way a security guard would watch over the zoo after hours. Several views do not reveal the presence of an inhabitant, while others show only fuzzy images of a sleeping ferret or the nocturnal kiwi roaming its pen. This, of course, adds another layer of simulation because, as we know, many times our expectations at the zoo are met with disappointment when certain animals choose not to be seen, or are sleeping under a rock, leading to the typical "is it dead?" remarks. *Night Zoo* highlights the power we possess as humans to constantly watch over creatures that are unaware they are being watched. The act of watching these animals as they sleep appeals to our voyeuristic desires and, at the same time, conjures up suspicions about who may be watching us as we sleep.

ANIMAL INFLUENCE

In developing my thesis exhibition several artists who have incorporated animals into their artwork have had a significant influence on the creation of my work. Chief among them is the Finnish photographer Sanna Kannisto. Kannisto's body of work, entitled *Private Collection* [fig. 1] is comprised of images made while researching animals in the South American rain forest. Included are a number of photographs that show animals removed from their natural environment and placed in a clean scientific space for study. Snakes and birds are often perched on a branch that is supported by technical devices with measuring units attached. The backgrounds are often stark white but with black curtains on either side, suggesting still lifes from the Baroque period, when creatures functioned as religious motifs, rather than scientific documentation. Kannisto herself is included in some of the images, looking at the camera as if to say "look at what I found." The result is a series of images that leaves the viewer puzzled about the role of the artist (is she scientist or photographer?) but which simultaneously speaks to the peculiarity of our efforts as humans to discover, categorize and label every animal on the planet. It is as if the artist is producing a visual diary of her efforts to deal with the inevitable loss of the exotic animals on our planet.

Unlike Kannisto, Neeta Madahar has worked from the confines of her suburban Boston apartment to create a body of work, entitled *Sustenance,* that captures the birds, and the

occasional squirrel that gather at a collection of colorful bird feeders [fig. 2]. By placing a view camera on her balcony and triggering the shutter with a cable release, Madahar records the animals attracted to the feeders at an unusually close proximity. The flash attached to the camera gives the images a "hyper-real" look, highlighting the artificial plastic bird feeders and contrived landscape.[9] For Madahar, the behavior of the birds at the feeders is a metaphor for our own forms of socializing. She says, "they are so similar to us in the way they feed and socialize, in their patterns of behavior, that they became perfect symbols…as a natural extension of ourselves."[10] What is important to me about Madahar's *Sustenance Series* is that she has found a way to point out our desire to commune with nature and, at the same time, expose how awkward our attempts really are.

As with photography, there is also growing number of contemporary video artists creating work that explore issues related to animals. Douglas Gordon in particular has along with a professional elephant trainer. With the trainer positioned off camera Gordon recorded the elephant as it preformed a number of tricks in the seemingly empty gallery space. The massive animal is shown sitting down, rolling over, and of

Figure 1: Sanna Kannisto, Leptophis Ahaetulla, 2006

Figure 2: Neeta Madahar, *Sustenance 51*, 2003

course, playing dead. The footage Gordon captured was then shown on two large white screens and two small monitors spread out around the gallery. While the two white screens show different angles of the entire elephant, the small television monitors placed on the floor show only the elephant's eye looking back at the viewer. The piece can seem at first comic or even absurd. However, the work also has the power of eliciting sympathy from the viewer as the elephant exerts great effort to perform ridiculous tricks. For me, *Play Dead: Real Time* is especially significant in the way it plays on the idea of simulation to create an emotionally charged atmosphere. Because Gordon brought the elephant into the gallery to create the work, the viewer of the piece has the sensation of actually watching the elephant perform. The overwhelming presence of the elephant can be felt because it is clear that the elephant actually stood in the very room the viewer now stands. While my video, *Night Zoo*, [fig. 3] employs a very different strategy it is, at the same time, another attempt to simulate the simulated. The animals in *Night Zoo* have the eerie effect of being broadcast as a live feed, so viewers actually feel like they are spying on animals as they sleep in real time.

CONCLUSION

As an installation, *If Animals Could Talk* [fig. 4] works to complicate the viewers' perspective of their own past zoo experiences as well as highlight the artificial way that human-animal interaction has been packaged and controlled. The title of the exhibition

refers to a famous statement by Austrian philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein who said that "if a lion could talk, we could not understand him."[11] It is a statement that has puzzled and frustrated those who seek to find the meaning of Wittgenstein's words. For me, that phrase perfectly exemplifies the major stumbling block in our attempts to commune with non-human animals. Jean Baudrillard echoes a similar thought in his essay "The Animals."

> They, the animals, do not speak. In a universe of increasing speech of the constraint to confess and to speak, only they remain mute, and for this reason they seem to retreat far from us, behind the horizon of truth. But it is what makes us intimate with them. It is not the ecological problem of their survival that is important, but still and always that of their silence. In a world bent on doing nothing but making one speak, in a world assembled under the hegemony of signs and discourse, their silence weighs more and more heavily on our organization of meaning.[12]

What I believe both Baudrillard and Wittgenstein are pointing out is that as humans, we try again and again to understand and commune with animals on a strictly human level. We anthropomorphize them to the point of replacing the actual animal with the simulated version we have created in our minds. *If Animals Could Talk* creates an environment that highlights this effect by reproducing it. In this way, viewers may become more aware, even if only subconsciously, of the way our society filters the connection between man and animal. Of course, in the end, I hope that this awareness will inspire people to reconsider the way in which we as a society think about animals and our relationship to them. If my work is able to offer a response to Wittgenstein's

quip about a lion, I hope it would sound similar to the response given by Stephen Budiansky who said, "if a lion could talk, we probably could understand him. He just would not be a lion any more."[13]

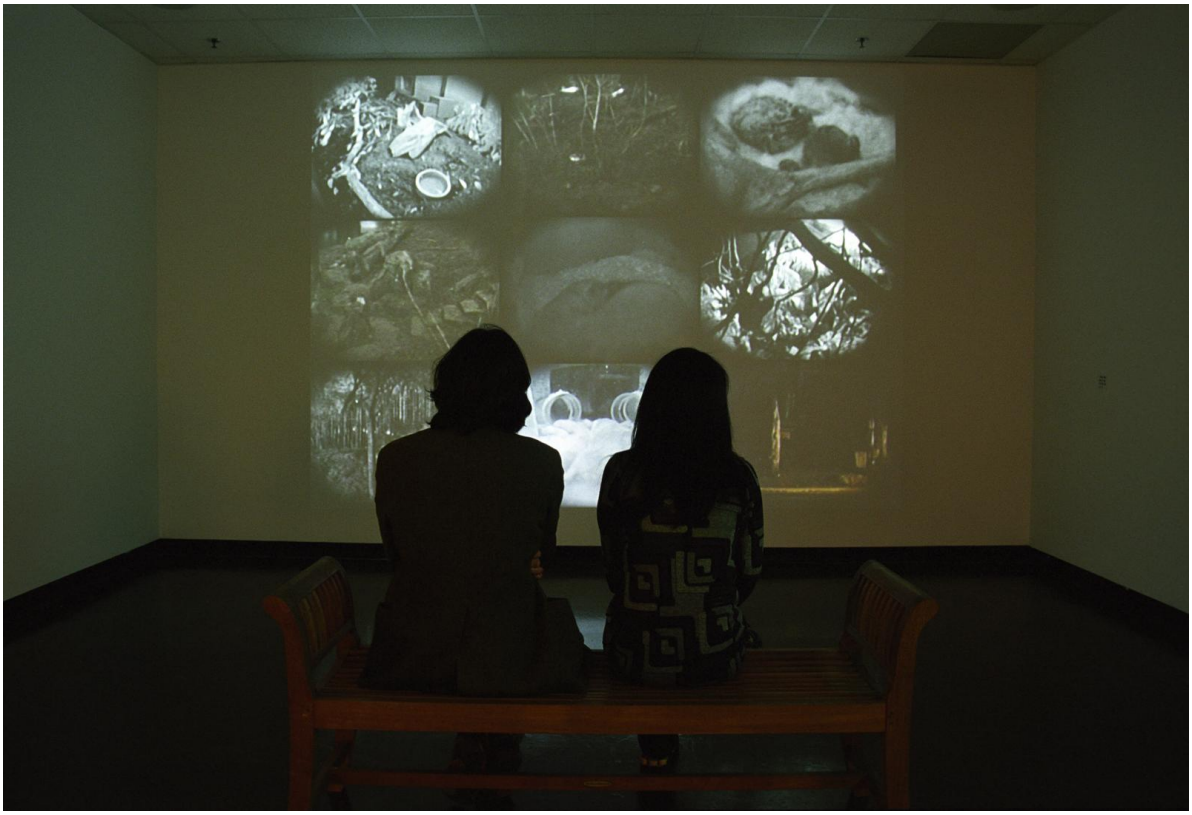

Figure 3: *Night Zoo*, installation view, 2009

Figure 4: *If Animals Could Talk*, installation view, 2009

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