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# From Postmodernism to Posthumanism - The Photographed Animal

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## From Postmodernism to Posthumanism: the Photographed Animal

The animal has left the shadowy margins of cultural invisibility and entered the glare of visibility in recent decades, becoming the nexus of a range of concerns around ontologies and ecologies. The vast extent of literature across the disciplines scrutinizing all aspects of the animal that has emerged during this time attests to the detailed attention the animal is receiving and to its increasing significance in Western culture. This too is reflected in art where the animal has become a familiar subject in 'high' as well as in popular culture. In this paper I will look at the how such an explosion of interest has affected art photography and suggest that a paradigm shift has occurred from Postmodernist to Posthumanist photographic practice that reflects a growing desire throughout society to dispense with tactics of domination and instead gain a more symbiotic and situated position in relation to the natural world. Whilst to some extent Posthumanism can be viewed as an evolution of Postmodernism – certainly both share an eclecticism of style and subject matter - and certain areas of thought and modes of practice have passed from one to the other, there are discernible differences in their approach to the natural world, particularly in relation to the nonhuman animal. Is it possible to identify such a thing as posthuman photography? The notion raises many complex questions.

My interest in the subject of the 'animal' began around 1995 with my doctoral research into photographic representation, perhaps drawn by my own experiences of marginalisation and oppression as non-man, non-middle class and living on the margins of city and country, after all, Derrida likens the animal and the woman in their oppression,

“...the beast was often the living thing to be subjected, dominated, domesticated, mastered, like, by a not insignificant analogy, the woman, the slave, or the child.” (Derrida, 2011, 66)

then again, perhaps this is too anthropocentric an explanation for my fascination with the subject; let me instead suggest that the nonhuman animal drew me to it and continues to hold me in its thrall. I was surprised by the lack of serious attention given to animals at the time, a fact recognised by Steve Baker in his first book on animal representation *Picturing the Beast*, “... culture typically deflects our attention from these things, and makes them seem unworthy of analysis.” (Baker, 1993, 8)

And, drawing on Barthes' account of the process of naturalization, he describes how the animal is rendered 'invisible' within our culture, drained of any significance, whilst effectively remaining in plain sight (Berger, 1977, 11). The trivialisation of the animal seemed to me more than a mere discarding of something considered useless, but rather the suppression of a threat posed by something that disturbed the complacent certainties of Western civilisation, something that challenged who we are and how we think of the world, and therefore, something that needed to be contained and controlled. Western culture, argues geographer David Sibley, is based on exclusion and that which is excluded from the dominant culture is somehow dangerous and de-stabilising to that culture. Minorities, he writes, are “imperfect

people” (and this we can apply to the nonhuman animal) who disturb the homogenized and purified topographies of mainstream social space”. (Sibley, 1995, 116).

Back in the 1990s we were Postmodernists (although unbeknownst to us, the period was already approaching its demise), trapped within the web of our human signifying systems – language and photography - which mediated our world, unable even to touch, let alone live, the real, a place of shadows beyond human language and therefore, comprehension. Our main aim through art-making then was to interrogate those representational systems, to understand their workings by turning them upon themselves. Thus, photography explored photography, the producer of meaning.

Animals were relegated to the physical realm, a domain of increasing insignificance as the emerging digital realm promised virtual worlds, where, as Paul Virilio chillingly prophesied, the most important piece of furniture is the seat, perhaps even, the bed “for the infirm voyeur, a divan for being dreamt of without dreaming, a bench for being circulated without circulating.” (Virilio 1989,34) Bodies would decompose as minds, plugged in to virtual-reality apparatus, expanded and travelled in a Transhumanist utopia.

“The human” writes Cary Wolfe, “is achieved by escaping or repressing not just its animal origins in nature, the biological, and the evolutionary, but more generally by transcending the bonds of materiality and embodiment altogether.” (Grant and Jungkunz, 2016, 7).

The nonhuman animal, representing inert matter (a legacy of the mechanistic philosophies of Descartes and Buffon), was excluded from this esoteric realm, except as anthropomorphic representations. With the digital the “irreconcilable split between signified and signifier” (Van Alphen, 1997, 242) is confirmed and artists are free to “recruit animals to symbolize, dramatize, and illuminate aspects of their own experience and fantasies” (Daston and Mitman, 2006, loc. 111) as in Stephen Murphy’s *Self-Portrait as a Rabbit* made in 1992 or Simen Johan’s *Until the Kingdom Comes*, which depicts a ‘natural’ world constructed from multiple photographs taken at different spatial and temporal locations (often in zoos). Curator David E Little, likens the Photoshopped images to the paintings of Joshua Reynolds, “who advocated for art drawn from the best parts of nature. For Reynolds “A mere copier of nature can never produce any thing great, can never raise and enlarge the conceptions, or warm the heart of the spectator.”” (Little, n.d.)

Yet the Postmodernist artist was not the romantic genius of Modernist practice (Barthes’ death of the author (Barthes 1997) and Krauss’ (Krauss, 1986, 2) attack on notions of originality had removed the “primacy of the artist’s vision” (Crowther, 2018, 138-139)), the ‘self’ was no longer whole and unified, but ruptured, elusive, multiple and this was reflected in the “the *look* of the postmodern animal” according to Steve Baker, “which seems more likely to be that of a fractured, awkward, ‘wrong’ or wronged thing, which it is hard not to read as a means of addressing what it is to

be human now.” (Baker 2000, loc. 868-870) Baker points out here what I believe to be a significant point in relation to Postmodernist work, even whilst depicting the nonhuman animal, it is predominantly concerned with the human.

My own work *Stray* explored the Postmodern self through the genre of portraiture. With its origins in the Renaissance, the portrait sought to reflect “man’s new-found awareness of himself as an individual” (Aleci, 1998, 67). This civilising process defined the human in opposition to the ‘beast’, as “brute creation provided the most readily-available point of reference for the continuous process of human self-definition,” (Thomas, 1991, loc. 760-761) and in the traditional painted portrait’s ‘idealised’ subject all signs of animality are removed. Photography, in contrast, able to record every minute aspect of the subject’s physical appearance, introduced this animality back into the portrait,

the photographic technique tended to record imperfections and physical idiosyncrasies which were, according to the idealist precepts underlying honorific portraiture, indicative of the accidental and animal elements of humanity. (Woodall, 1997, 7).

Thus providing an unwelcome reminder that the human is in fact animal. When the human in the photographic portrait is replaced by a nonhuman animal, as in the *Monkey Portraits* of Jill Greenberg and in James Mollison’s *James and Other Apes*, this is reversed, and the nonhumans become anthropomorphic human surrogates. William Wegman’s portraits of successive generations of his pet Weimaraner dogs are more effective in conveying the complexities of inter-species relationships, despite frequently being appropriated by popular culture and reduced to cute and funny anthropomorphic clichés. In a selected video work from the early 1970s, Wegman praises Man Ray for spelling the words ‘park’ and ‘out’ correctly, but rebukes him for spelling ‘beach’ as ‘beech’. Man Ray’s rapt attention as he listens to Wegman, his apparent satisfaction at those words that are correct and distress at the one spelled wrongly, are both moving and profound. This is especially poignant since the inability to understand and use (human) language was one of the perceived deficiencies of nonhuman animals that distinguished them from their civilised human superiors. (Thomas, 1991, loc. 571-572) Donald Kuspit describes Wegman’s dogs as more dignified and honest than their human counterparts, as “[h]umans become impostors simply for the camera, but whoever heard of a dishonest dog? (Kuspit, 1991, 100) However, once again, Kuspit sees the canine subject in Wegman’s portraits as a metaphor for the human existing in a fractured, postmodern, media-driven society.

In his essay ‘Why Look at Animals?’ John Berger perceptively describes the extreme marginalisation of animals in the West under industrial capitalism. The intimate contact between man and animal once rooted in the exchanging of looks is now reduced to the ghost of an encounter, diminishing both modern man and modern animal. When considering the animals that have increased in number and now populate the human world, household pets, Berger is dismissive; the ‘pet’ is an animal reduced, both sexually and socially controlled, a creature “of their owner’s way of life” that serves no real purpose except to complete their human (Berger,

1980). Despite the many insights in Berger's essay, Jonathan Burt detects in it a nostalgia for a pre-modern utopia, and a Humanist agenda; Berger is less concerned, writes Burt, with the welfare of animals and more focussed on the "shifts in the psychology of man's self-confirmation as a being in the world." (Burt, 2005, 203).

If the animal could not be found in Postmodern photography, language too proves equally inadequate. Derrida warns, in *The Animal That Therefore I am*, of the inadequacy of the common, general, singular name, 'The Animal',

... as if all nonhuman living things could be grouped within the common sense of this "commonplace", the Animal, whatever the abyssal differences and structural limits that separate, in the very essence of their being, all "animals," a name that we would therefore be advised, to begin with, to keep within quotation marks." (Derrida, 2008, 34).

His own variant of animal is "the *animot*; a strategic neologism meant to identify that historic "confusion of all nonhuman living creatures within the general and common category of the animal." (Bezan and Tink, 2017, x) The term designates the failure or bafflement of Western culture to account for what it means by animal life, both in terms of the creature or a more general condition of animality." (Bezan and Tink, 2017, xi) Perhaps the most authentic way to represent these beings is as Martin Pover does in *Carceri*, by their absence. In his poignant, formally elegant photographs of contemporary zoo cages from Europe, America and China, Pover reveals the man-made environments of concrete and steel that imprison 'wild' animals, whilst metaphorically his photographs reveal the irony that humans have never really possessed these beings who continue to elude us. Pover's work, writes Liz Wells, exposes us to a "double layering of Western aesthetics – that of the camera, and that of the set design." (Wells, n.d.) The romantic painted backdrops and 'naturalistic' props which 'frame' (Berger, 1980, 23) each animal attest to human visual culture, to pastoral idylls and imaginary landscapes, denying any sensory 'animalistic' engagement, particularly through the nose and mouth. The dejected creatures in Britta Jaschinski's *Zoo* are, unlike Pover's, made visible in her photographs but rarely do they appear at the centre of the frame or are clearly delineated, instead appearing as shadowy, uncanny (Royle, 2003, 1-2) creatures in soulless dystopian detention centres. Berger describes them as "the living monument to their own disappearance" (Berger, 1980, 26) and argues that their marginalisation has rendered any look between human and animal meaningless. We can reflect on the use of animals as performers, providing entertainment for humans – in the case the Japanese practice of 'monkey dancing' - on viewing the formal photographic portraiture of Hiroshi Watanabe's *Suo Sarumawashi*. Whilst Watanabe explains that he chose to make formal portraits to "portray the monkeys with great dignity and respect", Peterson and Goodall (2000), describe these relationships as that of master-slave. Encounters such as these, writes Edward Said (2003, 32), produce a 'colonial' knowledge of the oppressed, denying 'its' autonomy, and allowing the oppressor to exercise their authority over it.

Today we are Posthumanist, or many of us strive to be so, spurred on by the promise

of a future without hierarchies, without dualisms, without fixed 'molar' identities, without rigid moral codes. To achieve this we must "liberate ourselves" from being human, or more specifically the painstakingly constructed humanist subject. Through our becomings our bodies become the locus of transformations and resistance to the oppressive demands of normalized subjectivity and conventional morality as we create new ways of living (Cunniff Gilson, 2011). Attitudes to the animal have changed (certainly within academia and the art world), in the last few decades, perhaps in response to the pressing ecological, demographic, geographical, and economic challenges faced by contemporary society. (Coole and Frost, 2010). The inert matter of the animal is now "vibrant matter" (Bennett, 2010) within new materialism, giving agential force to things once considered passive and "creating new concepts and images of nature that affirm matter's immanent vitality." (Coole and Frost, 2010, 8).

Kari Weil eloquently summarises the challenges ahead,

...how to understand and give voice to others or to experiences that seem impervious to our means of understanding; how to attend to difference without appropriating or distorting it; how to hear and acknowledge what it may not be possible to say. (Weil, 2012, 4).

Rather than a Posthuman photography, it makes more sense to talk of strands of Posthumanist thought and practice permeating contemporary photographic art practice. Rather than distancing ourselves from the nonhuman animal, Posthumanism offers potential synergies and connections through entanglements, intra-actions and encounters which are 'ethical', because in the process of becoming we engage with others and become responsive to them, thereby assuming a response-ability and accountability for the "lively relationalities of becoming of which we are a part." (Barad, 2007, 393) Spinoza suggests an ethical approach which opens the capacity for the other to express... (Barad, 2007). In Sally Mann's *What Remains* this, inspired by her intense emotional connection, is evident in her series of photographs which document her dead pet greyhound Eva's decomposing body after death. "Passing is a matter of transformation, transition and transience. At the precarious and indeterminate borderlands of being and non-being, people, places and things are in motion across dubious, interstitial states of existence." (Bjerregaard, Rasmussen and Sorensen 2016, 1), which conveys a sense of the processual nature of Posthumanist practice, where an openness to the future allows for the possibility of change. The return of photographers after digital to large-format camera's and traditional processing and printing techniques is a reflection of the desire for the sensuousness of their physicality and materiality and a move away from the purely cerebral.

An attentiveness to others (nonhuman and human alike) requires a deeper understanding of the world and this can be seen in work by artists that have made a commitment to spending time with their subject, to researching them in detail, to achieving some sense of what it would be like to be that being. For Martin Usborne's work *Where Hunting Dogs Rest* the photographer spent two years living

with, helping to rescue, blogging about, researching and photographing the hunting dogs of Spain; he describes it as an emotionally exhausting and obsessive labour of love. Donna Haraway writes that, “the relationships of dogs and people are not ones of imitation of Oedipal, familial ties but ones of *significant otherness*: ‘co-constitutive relationships in which none of the partners pre-exists the relating, and the relating is never done once and for all’.” (Haraway, 2003, 12) My own work in dog rescue centres in Cyprus, *Sensing the Familiar* (Wells, 2018), a testament to actual lives lived is supported by a method of Critical Realism (Baetens, 2007, 9), a committed investigative practice involving rigorous research with the aim of understanding and challenging a ‘pre-existing social reality’.

Ultimately, Posthuman photography can be used to generate affects. Erin Manning writes that art as process is ‘not yet about an object, about a form, or a content’ (Manning, 2015, 45) but through affect which can make others feel and change, it is about ‘the intuitive potential to activate the future’ (Manning, 2015, 46).

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