

Exploring the Role of Non-Human Animals in Contemporary Art: As Objects, Matter, and Collaborators

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Abstract From the 1970s onwards, the presence of non-human animals within contemporary art has gradually become stronger. Animals have been involved in creating art installations, considered part of the artwork, or displayed as inanimate objects. This essay aims to describe three ways in which the individual lives and trajectories of non-human animals intersect with the world of contemporary art: as collaborators, objects, or as matter. Furthermore, the case studies presented demonstrate the need for a temporary methodological tripartition based on animals' different positions in the various artworks. Ultimately, this essay sheds light on a largely unexplored history, revealing the complex relationship between non-human animals and contemporary art.

Keywords Non-human animals. Contemporary art. Ecology. Ecomaterialism. Multispecies studies.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 Animals as Objects. – 3 Animals as Matter. – 4 Animals as Collaborators. – 5 Conclusion.

1 Introduction

In her article on the proliferation of animals in contemporary art, Ana Teixeira Pinto ([2015] 2016, 109) argues that animality plays a crucial role in redefining the concept of humanity. According to the scholar, animals have taken centre stage in contemporary art due to their ability to question the ontological and epistemological categories we use to draw a boundary between humans and non-humans. In this sense, for Teixeira Pinto, they play a fundamental role, occupying the place that social and political struggles had left vacant within art. Briefly, Teixeira Pinto highlighted the theoretical connections that united the emergence of these practices with the configuration of new forms of materialist thought, such as 'object-oriented ontology' (Morton 2013; Harman 2018a), speculative realism (Bryant, Srnicek, Harman 2011; Harman 2018a), and interspecies feminisms (Bennett 2010; Braidotti 2013; Haraway 2016).

Significant changes can be observed almost ten years after Texeira Pinto's text. Firstly, several artists have completely absorbed these perspectives, proposing works that can be approached in a detached and critical manner. Secondly, expanding climate-related issues linked to the Anthropocene have led to different ways of interfacing and coexisting with non-human agents (Demos 2020). While animality is still a way of radically rethinking the human, it is also true that this rethinking now takes on forms and urgency that were previously only hinted at. The perspective proposed in this essay arises from these changes. Through some case studies, this essay aims to outline three different modalities of interacting with non-human animals in contemporary art. Specifically, it will be shown how they are involved as *collaborators*, understood as *objects*, or employed as *material*. These three modes correlate to three distinct responses: while material must be *interpreted*, that is, it must be brought back within a plot of knowledge and powers that legitimise its use as a work of art, the object must be *thought*. Uprooted from the ecosystem, the animal understood as an object ceases to be seen as a living being and becomes a speculative element. On the other hand, in collaboration, the relationship with animals finds its point of support in mutual *observation*.

Before presenting this tripartition in detail, a critical premise must be added. This division should not be understood in a value or hierarchical sense. It is not about establishing two opposing poles - materiality on the one hand and involvement on the other - in which the agency of non-humans is denied or granted epistemic recognition. Nor is it a teleological path guided by a greater approach to recognising the rights of animals. Precisely because these issues have a different weight in the artists that will be examined, it would be reductionist to associate the three proposed categories with a nucleus of values and pre-established positions. Observed, interpreted, or thought, the presence of animals in contemporary art bears witness to a longer but not always visible presence within human knowledge and discoveries. As a place where transversal knowledge meet, contemporary art reveals its importance in assembling the invisible traces and signals that animal bodies have left behind as they cross paths with human stories.

2 Animals as Objects

In his work, *The Postmodern Animal*, Steve Baker (2000) argues that the presence of animals in art was not a question that arose in modern art. By this, of course, it is not meant that there were no representations of animals, but rather that the animals encountered in nineteenth-century art appear as symbols of something that exceeds their presence (19-20). Beyond the historical and artistic accuracy of this strong claim, what is essential for this research is to focus on the use of animals as symbols. In Peirce's classical definition of a symbol, the latter is understood as

a sign which refers to the Object that it denotes by virtue of a law, usually an association of general ideas, which operates to cause the Symbol to be interpreted as referring to that Object. (Peirce 1992, 292)

This association of general ideas, or convention, acts as an interpretive and evaluative intermediary between the object and its interpretant. It is

easy to understand how this mechanism involves animals in art. As symbols of a meaning that exceeds their presence, they lose their traits to become representatives of anthropomorphic conceptions, knowledge, and values. Shielded by these attributions, animals, even if placed at the centre of the scene, are separated from any possible encounter. As *Guernica's* dying horse or Brancusi's birds, they are part of historical and artistic movements that involve them only metaphorically (Baker 2000, 21). During the performance *Coyote: I Like America and America Likes Me*, which took place in New York, Joseph Beuys engages with the coyote he cohabited with for several days using symbolic language (Beuys 2008). The artist involves the inhuman guest in a collective work that concerns its connection to Native American mythologies (Beuys 2017, 89-90). Baker (2000, 46) suggests that the performance's unpredictability undermines the idea of human control, implying that the animal's actions were beyond human influence. As such, it is equally reasonable to contend that the symbolic depiction of the animal can indirectly represent any manifestation of independence. The coyote, in this instance, alludes to the metaphorical 'other' – the mythology and knowledge of Native Americans – which is always in flux and viewed as an independent agent. If the conditions of the existence of Native Americans and their cultural identity do not cease to change because of historical, political, and economic processes, the coyote, considered in its animal specificity, would seem to remain an entity without history and relationships (Haraway 2004b; Teixeira Pinto [2015] 2016, 107). In this sense, animals appear as objects for reflection, starting points for speculation on the limits and potential of art.

This process occurs also when they are not intended as symbols but as alienating presences. The twelve horses that Kounellis brought into the spaces of the Roman gallery L'Attico in 1969 caused a stir because of the sense of estrangement they aroused in the spectators (Kounellis 2003, 102-11). The significance of Kounellis' work lies not in the symbolism of the animals, but rather in the way it fits into the larger reconsideration of materials in Arte Povera. Even when the animal is present as a living being, it does not automatically become an entity endowed with its singularity. In Kounellis's work, certain aspects related to the living presence of animals, such as their scent and the noises they could produce (Aloi 2012, 9), certainly take centre stage. However, when placed within a theoretical framework in which they challenged the invisible rules governing art galleries¹ (Petican 2012, 187-8), their singularity as living and autonomous entities diminished, functioning as a surrogate for a generic other: The Nature, The Other, The Organic (Baker 2000, 95). The horses become a generic singular² (Derrida 2008) that does not permit an exchange of gazes between spectators and animals:

¹ This perspective is also underlined by the art critic Alberto Boatto's commentary, who described Kounellis's artwork as "a challenge to the established order of the art market" for its ability to "turn the dealer into a stable boy" (La Berge 2019, 135).

² The concept of generic singular, or collective singular, denotes the specist tendency to encapsulate individual non-human animal entities within a broad and abstract term through the use of the singular form. The concept of 'Animal' serves a dual purpose: it creates a unified and unchanging framework within which to aggregate diverse forms of non-human life and existence, while also generating, through contrast and exclusion, an equally abstract and collective notion for the 'Human'. The normative connotation implicit in this latter concept plays a pivotal role in engendering discriminations and power dynamics. On this extensive topic, see Agamben 2004; Castricano 2008; Derrida 2009; Filippi 2017.

They were in this sense a “poor art” and a material of poverty; as such, the horses represented certain labors including those of craft, of farming, of the field. The horses present, then, as similar to material found in Kounellis’s other works, which have included masonry, live birds, coffee beans, and wood cuts. The fact that his works are often untitled only draws more attention to how the material instantiation overrides any description or articulation of itself. (La Berge 2019, 134-5)

Considered as objects, the bodies of animals become reflective surfaces, that is, tools for self-reflection. As Baker (2000, 53) writes about Rauschenberg’s *Monogram*, it is only the physical presence of the spectator, in a sense, that completes the artwork. The goat and the tire at the centre of this installation become an obstacle, a speculative punch for the spectators. The weird that stimulates reflection is not the animal nor the other objects that make up *Monogram* (Steinberg, Rauschenberg 2000), but a third additional element, namely the space that allows the encounter between the taxidermied body of the goat and the living gaze of the spectators.

The artist who more than anyone else has taken to the extreme consequences of the process of objectification of animals is undoubtedly Damien Hirst. In works such as *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living* and *This Little Piggy Went to Market, This Little Piggy Stayed Home*, what is enclosed in the boxes is immediately recognised as an animal, but it does not stop producing a strange sensation of incompatibility. Although exposing the insides of these animals and therefore employing the physicality of animal organs and tissues, Hirst’s works return the animals to the spectators in the fixedness of their presence (Kent 2003). The dynamism of their bodies is obstructed from the outset by the stereotypical poses in which they are preserved. The importance of these works lies precisely in this ability to show the process that transforms animals into meat, into organic matter (Broglia 2011, 1), but still blocking the dynamics at a previous stage, the moment when the animal is still recognised as such, but no longer as a living being.

Suspended in a limbo of formaldehyde, they find themselves in a middle position: too material for living beings, too close to living beings to become meat. This middle position makes objective scientific knowledge of animal bodies possible. By transforming the interior into the exterior, operating on their skin and muscle tissues, Hirst’s works expose the animal body to an anatomical interrogation. Protected by glass, visitors are involved in this operation only as detached observers, witnesses to the norms by which living beings become means of appropriation and epistemic knowledge (Berger 2009, 10-13; Broglia 2011, 8). To take up how Hirst has described his operations, it is a matter of knowing the world by abstracting, isolating its different elements, and fixing the dynamism of the living to observe and know them (Baker 2000, 129-30; Hirst 2005, 279). In this sense, his works present themselves as postmodern reenactments of the anthropocentric division of living beings into taxonomies.

It is important to emphasise that the described perspective does not necessarily entail adherence to anthropocentric positions. While presenting animals in objectified forms, the works by Mark Dion, Rosemarie Trockel, Carsten Höller, and Snæbjörnsdóttir/Wilson can be analysed as important critical examples. The human skeleton at the centre of Mark Dion’s *Theatrum Mundi: Armarium* visually expresses the epistemological paradigm

that emerged in the late seventeenth century (Foucault 2007; 2010), formed through the joint separation of human nature and nature itself (Aloi 2018, 101). The role that the use of man as the measure and unit of the world played in this dynamic is succinctly summarised by Philippe Descola:

If the idea of nature acquired such importance in the seventeenth century, it was certainly not because the powerful vibration of the life of the world was suddenly perceived by eyes now unsealed that would in future never cease to endeavor to fathom its mysteries and define its limitations. For that notion of nature was indissociable from another, namely that of human nature, which the former had engendered through a kind of fission when, in order to determine a place in which the mechanisms and regularities of nature could be discerned, a tiny portion of being was detached to serve as a fixed point. (Descola 2014, 45)

Thus, the gap established in parallel with the invention of Nature only becomes operational when it clears the space for a methodological transcendence (Agamben 2004).

Unlike Kounellis' horses, *A House for Pigs and People* by Rosemarie Trockel and Carsten Höller brings the visitors' gaze into contact with that of the pigs that occupy a specific section of the exhibition space, separated by a dividing glass (Höller, Trockel 1997). This screened observation of the animals proposes the functional objective detachment in making them objects of thought. The cultural transformation of living beings is even more evident in Bryndís Snæbjörnsdóttir and Mark Wilson's work, *nanoq: flat out and bluesome*. Starting from a photographic investigation of polar bears taxidermied in the United Kingdom, the two artists exhibited ten specimens in a show at Spike Island, Bristol, attempting to reconstruct the history of their capture, death, and preservation (Snæbjörnsdóttir 2006). From this work, it is possible to derive two other critical functions of animals exhibited as objects. Firstly, highlighting the postures in which they are conserved reveals the uncertain cultural standing that they are associated with, even in their living state. On the one hand, they are presented as fierce creatures, entities potentially dangerous to order and safety, but also as challenges to human rationality (Haraway 2004a, 151-98). As objects of study or trophies, they never cease to refer to their difference in the natural order, to the wild and untamable side. On the other hand, they can also be ascribed in the opposite process by attributing anthropomorphic traits, which Broglio (2011, 74) defines as a Disneyfication of their characteristics. Secondly, as Giovanni Aloi writes, Snæbjörnsdóttir and Wilson show the intricate relationship of knowledge and power that presides over taxidermy practices (Aloi 2018, 67-8). Taken from salons and natural history museums, bears are called to perform a different function. They become traces of sociological, cultural, and economic processes allowing their commodification and objectification.

3 Animals as Matter

Jordan Baseman's *The Cat and The Dog* and Berlinde De Bruyckere's *K 36 (The Black Horse)* seem to create friction with the description of animals used as objects provided in the previous paragraph. In Baseman's work, the skinned furs of a cat and a dog are exhibited accompanied by their respective remodeled heads (Baker 2006, 87-9). In *K 36 (The Black Horse)*, instead, De Bruyckere used the body of a dead horse repositioned in enigmatic forms (Aloi 2018, 214-17). In both cases, the bodies of dead animals are used as artistic objects. However, in these works, another aspect emerges, namely the materiality of animal bodies. The fur, the epidermal surfaces, and the limbs are separated from the rest of the animal's body to be used as individual expressive means or recombined in new forms. From this point of view, Thomas Grünfeld's *Misfits* series and Dorothy Cross' *Vaulting Horse* accentuate two important characteristics only hinted at in *The Cat and The Dog* and *K 36 (The Black Horse)*. *Misfits* consists of invented blended creatures by Grünfeld, incorporating parts of different animals (Wilson 2003, 107-8). Thus, the new species invite the viewer to deconstruct the individual pieces visually and relate them to their natural owners. *Vaulting Horse* employs the skin and udders of a cow to cover a horse's saddle, creating a strange surrealist object. In both works, transforming animals into organic materials allows for developing other possible uses of their bodies. In this sense, it is only through a process of interpretation that the divided materiality can be traced back to the original living body. While the animal exhibited as an object requires a distance that allows for objective analysis, i.e. to classify and hypostatise it, the use of animal materiality occurs from within the animal itself. Although these two processes are similar, they show meaningful differences. In both cases, what is lost is the living aspect of the animal. Here, however, not through a methodological distancing but through an opposite movement of approaching the organic and physical nature of the animal:

Meat makes the animal's insides visible, and the animal's body becomes knowable through sight. Moreover, while meat serves as a means for us to take in the animal visually and intellectually, it also marks the moment when the animal becomes physically consumable. (Broglia 2011, 1)

In the performance-rituals of Hermann Nitsch, it is precisely this process of dismemberment and reduction to matter that is placed as a central element (Timofeeva 2018, 34-6). Unlike the orgiastic and dynamic use of animal elements in these actions, the leather dress (*Vanitas: Flesh Dress for an Albino Anorectic*) created by Jana Sterbak (Broglia, Hatry 2021, 119-20) presents itself as a monument to the concealment of the animal in flesh. Used as a dress, the flesh no longer refers to the living being to which it belongs but also displaces the association of flesh with meat. Worn as a garment, meat not only ceases to evoke the living being to which it belongs but also displaces the association that links it to food.³ The only reference to consumption remains the physical deterioration of the meat and the allusion to the artistic *vanitas* to which the title refers.

³ On this central issue for anti-speciesism, see Rifkin 1993; Foer 2010; Filippi 2017; Gruen, Probyn-Rapsey 2019; Herzog 2021.

The works of South African artist Nandipha Mntambo also inscribe themselves into this critical use of materiality. In her works, animal skin becomes a means to rethink how corporeality and female desire are represented (Mntambo [2018] 2021). In *Umfanekiso wesibuko (Mirror Image)*, two cowhides are arranged in a way that recalls female figures, without heads, crawling on the floor. Following the analyses that Giovanni Aloï dedicates to the work, Mntambo highlights the connection between the reduction of female bodies to only sexual parts and the removal of the animal from the meat (Aloï 2018, 213-14). To interpret the use of these materials in a critical sense, that is, to retrace this imaginative dismemberment process in reverse, means to bring out the ideological and social presuppositions through which female and animal bodies are conceived as passive and, therefore, potentially consumable (Adams 2017).

4 Animals as Collaborators

The works of the English artists Olly and Suzi are often cited as examples of artistic collaboration with animals (Olly, Suzi 2003). By allowing a shark to bite into their canvas, letting an anaconda slither across their painting, or exposing their artwork to a curious group of cheetahs, the two artists not only included animals in their art but made them the protagonists. These forms of animal involvement do not exhaust the range of collaborative forms developed in contemporary artistic experiments. The reindeer of Carsten Höller (Zyman, Ebersberger 2020, 422-31), the chickens of Petrit Halilaj (Halilaj, Scardi 2021), the spiders of Tomás Saraceno (Saraceno 2020), and the hermit crab of Pierre Huyghe are just a few examples of very diverse interspecies interactions. Treated as collaborators, animals are included in the artistic process based on their singularity, that is, by observing their different ways of operating, reworking, and moving in their surrounding environments. Unburdened by heavy symbolism, nor immobilised within mere physical materiality, the animal here positions itself as the subject of an encounter, as an agent whose presence cannot be entirely reduced to familiar patterns and behaviors. It is within this framework that the concept of agency assumes a key role. Considered in their singularity - meaning their ability to organise and experience the world around them as subjects capable of positively interacting with the environment and other entities that are part of it - each individual animal is potentially encountered based on the form of agency that characterises it (Hribal 2007; Colling 2020). Artworks thus become forms of reaction and exchange in response to this exercise of observation.

In his works, the French artist Hubert Duprat relies on Trichoptera's constructive and artistic abilities (Wilson 2003, 116-17). In their larval stage, these freshwater insects create a protective cocoon with surrounding materials held together by a filamentous substance secreted from a gland near the mouth. By placing the Trichoptera in aquariums containing fragments of gold and precious stones, Duprat creates golden shells with their collaboration. Thus, aquatic creatures become co-producers of the artwork.

Certainly, in these operations and in the works of Olly and Suzi, it is difficult to conceal the naive aspect that animates the need to involve animals (Broglio 2011, 94). Visiting these animals' natural habitats lends itself to a double reading. On the one hand, it highlights the importance that

the two artists attribute to the wild and untamed nature of animals, indirectly showing the ecological relationships that link animals to the environments in which they live. On the other hand, this need to elicit reactions from animals that can be documented in the artwork as if they were authentic signatures raises doubts. In other words, the traces of animal presence become pivotal. These imprints are evidence of their passage and creative contribution.

In contrast, in Pierre Huyghe's works, involvement with animals takes the form of their presence in the artworks themselves. To the point where once disappeared from the scene, the artwork ceases to function as such. *Untilled*, presented by Huyghe at Karlsae Park (Kassel) for Documenta 13, places a reclining female statue with her face covered by a beehive at the centre of the scene (Documenta 13, 2012). The bees, attracted by the medicinal and hallucinogenic plants the artist had placed nearby, create circular trajectories attracted by different chemical stimuli. Sporadically, Human and Señor, specimens of *Podenco ibicenco* that move freely near the installation, make their appearance. Completing *Untilled* is an uprooted oak tree from Beuys work *700 Eichen*, presented at Documenta 7, and a bench, taken from the work that Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster had created for Documenta 11. The involved bees and dogs make this work an open and continually evolving construction site (Huyghe 2018). Their movements show a different sense of timing in contrast to the works of Olly and Suzy. The two English artists aim to stage an encounter with animals, transforming the artwork into the surface where the contingent presence of animal bodies is inscribed. As they stated in an interview, this mode of operation helps to understand the precarious situation of these creatures' lives: "the animals are here now, they just might not be for much longer" (Baker 2000, 13). In contrast, in *Untilled*, the real encounter with animals is fundamental for the hybrid ecosystem they are called to be part of. What is created is a cohabitation zone between biological elements and inorganic entities, but also signs and references to the history of art itself.⁴ In these environments of heterogeneous elements, the movements of living beings pose as dynamic factors, making the entire composition unpredictable. What is at stake is multiple perspectives: the chance to examine various ecosystems through the unique modes of existence that shape them. Observing and reciprocating the gaze with the actors who constitute this network of relationships allows for the transformation of installations into thresholds of passage, places where one can potentially encounter "a narrow abyss of non-comprehension" (Berger 2009, 3) stemming from the complicity of familiarity and estrangement of animal gazes. Therefore, the artwork ceases to be the sign of collaboration with animals and instead becomes the environment, the physical space in which the collaboration occurs.

⁴ What emerges in this way is what the curator and art critic Nicolas Bourriaud has defined as an aesthetics of the Capitocene. This entails the ability of contemporary artists to operate inside a broader semiotic system in which animal signals, vegetal inscriptions, and mineral elements also participate. For Bourriaud, collaborations with non-human entities are not in themselves a novelty. What marks a radical shift is the different conception underlying these artistic operations. Industrial artifacts, vegetative entities, and non-human beings are understood, although in their differences, in a dialectic relationship, showing themselves as a part of the same semiotic ecosystem. See in this regard the chapter "Portrait of the Artist as a Butterfly" in Bourriaud 2022, 81-95.

5 Conclusion

In the preceding three paragraphs, I have attempted to define the characteristics and processes that lead animals to be conceived as objects, matter, or collaborators in contemporary art. In conclusion, it is worth highlighting some issues that have only been touched upon. As can be inferred, this division was not made to provide rigid categories. Instead, it has allowed for perspectives that complicate readings on the use of animals in art. In this sense, rather than being read as a completed work, it should be understood as a sketch, a first draft that should be completed by providing further case studies and counter-arguments. For example, a more focused analysis on the agency of non-human beings, as could be a perspective deriving from critical animal studies and anti-speciesism, could undoubtedly show the limits that the critical use of animal materials could bring.

Similarly, a study highlighting the freedom of movement, actions, and, above all, the degree of the welfare of the animals involved in what have been brought up as examples of forms of collaboration could undoubtedly impact the arguments put forward. Starting from the awareness of these limits, this research was deliberately carried out by limiting the field of observation and the theoretical tools put into play, in order to define a plan for possible future development. At the same time, it may be necessary to broaden further the analysis of the contact zones between these three different uses. Some case studies reported present themselves as places where the three forms intersect. Furthermore, it is precisely in these blurred zones, where the overall framework proposed invites further explorations, that the most exciting aspects of the proposed formulation can be seen. “Like the productions of a decadent gardener who cannot keep good distinctions between natures and cultures straight”, to quote a decisive passage by Haraway (2003, 9), the proposed distinctions do not stand as artistic taxonomies, but as “trellis or an esplanade” elements that show their importance in knowing how to trespass into each other without losing objectivity.

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