

Comments on “Adaptation: Between the Species”  
July 25, 2010  
The Power Plant

I am not an artist and I have no background in interpreting art. Rather than interpret art, I'll talk around some of the pieces, relating them to what I do know about. So, then, the question is what do I know about? I'd like to say that I know a lot about animals, but I'm not sure that I do, even though I work in the horribly named academic field of “animal studies.” I am pretty sure that I know some individual animals fairly well--the two dogs I live with for instance--but I am not sure I know much about animals in general. Part of the reason for this is that I'm not convinced that it is helpful to use the word “animal” at all--I'll explain why I think this shortly. To say that we know what animals are or what animals want is like trying to say that we know what humans are or what humans want--we are able to do this for small, discrete groups of rather homogenous humans (for instance, the group gathered here right now likely wants to hear something about this art exhibit), but our ability to say what large collectives of humans want or are is most likely impossible. This suggests that humans are not a possible object of knowledge. If humans are not a possible object of knowledge and humanity comprises but one species, how can animals be a possible object of knowledge given that what we call “animal” ranges from seagulls to raccoons and rattle snakes to frogs. Animals at the extreme end of the sensible meaning of the word, like molluscs or possibly corals, don't look or act like what we normally think of as animals. So, I'm pretty skeptical as to whether are such things as animals, just as I am skeptical as to whether there are such things as humans.

For the first bit of this presentation, I want to talk a bit about animal studies in general--the connection between moral philosophers interested in animals and social scientists interested in animals; then I'll talk a bit about the relation of humans and animals to one another as

concepts; the last bit will turn to talking about particular pieces in this exhibit, specifically Mark Dion's *Macquettes*, Sandra Meigs' "Ride" series, and all those cats from Fastwurms. If at any point I am not being as clear as I could be, please interrupt.

For very good reasons, animal studies, as an academic discipline, has strong connections to moral philosophy, which with respect to animals, asks about the legitimacy of humans making use of animals. As with any other ethical debate, positions are far ranging, going from those who see absolutely no problem with humans using animals however they want, to those who argue that it is acceptable to make use of animals, so long as that use is done "humanely" (which in this case tends to mean "do whatever it is you want to animal so long as it doesn't suffer too much"), to those who argue that animals should not be used by humans at all. I tend towards the last position: insofar as it is possible, I do not make use of any animal products at all--that means I do not consume animals as food or clothing, I do not treat animals as objects of entertainment (e.g., a zoo or a circus), and I object to their use in consumer product development (e.g, safety testing) and in scientific research. I also think that everyone else ought to act in this way as well. Refraining from using animals is not just right for me, it is also right for everyone. Having said that, like most people I can be inconsistent: I have two dogs and they eat commercial dog food, which contains animal products. And, as you might guess, I'm not too sure how ethical some of the works collected in this exhibit are. Some might say that this makes me a hypocrit, but I do the best I can--which is far more than most people bother to do.

I was talking about animal studies and its connection to moral philosophy. For a long time, animal studies was largely limited to moral philosophy, which was organized around the debate between Peter Singer's welfarist tract *Animal Liberation* and Tom Regan's *The Case for Animal Rights*. As an aside, Peter Singer is often described as an animal rights advocate. He is

noting of the sort. His moral theory is utilitarian and utilitarianism rejects the existence of rights, calling them “nonsense on stilts.” More recently, animal studies has begun to extend itself beyond the narrow ethical debate (although I think this debate remains very important), to embrace topics similar to what might be called “cultural studies of animals” or the “sociology or anthropology of animals.” Here we see how humans relate to animals, be they food animals, pets, pests, wildlife, or something else; these relations may be with fictional animals--like Winnie the Pooh--or they may be with individual animals, like Donna Haraway’s dog Cayenne, who she likes to write about. And, of course, people study how these relationships have changed and varied over time and places; thus, a “history of animals.”

There is a curious trend worth pointing out just in passing: the moral philosophers tend not to be particularly fond of animals, even if they argue quite forcefully on the behalf of the interests of animals while the sociologists and anthropologists of animals tend to be rather fond of animals (especially pets), but aren’t too concerned about the morality of using animals. Peter Singer presents a particularly interesting case. In one of the many prefaces to his *Animal Liberation*, he recounts a story about going to some women’s house with his wife. The woman expresses interest in his work and says that she is quite fond of animals, all the while eating a ham and cheese sandwich. The woman says something to the effect of, “I bet you really like animals,” to Singer, to which he replies, “we were not especially 'interested in' animals. Neither of us had ever been inordinately fond of dogs, cats, or horses in the way that many people are. We didn't 'love' animals.” The philosopher most famous for articulating a defense of animals says that he doesn’t particularly ‘love’ animals. (Love is a word that Singer always seems to put in scare quotes--perhaps he doesn’t believe that anyone can love an animal.) Meanwhile, Donna Haraway, one of the most prominent figures in “animal studies,” writes a chapter in her recent

book, *When Species Meet*, from the perspective of a chicken that is okay with being slaughtered. Haraway, in comparison to Singer, does believe that it is possible for humans to love animals and for the animals to love them back.

One problem with all this, however, is the very word “animal.” No one is really too certain what an animal is and, perhaps worse or perhaps not, no one is really too certain on how to distinguish humans and animals from one another. We are pretty certain that we are able to distinguish animals and humans from vegetables and inert matter, but the division between human and animal is increasingly difficult to make. Intuitively, we “know” that a snake is an animal and that a human is a human, but we are unable to articulate this difference in theoretical, philosophical or scientific terms. If we are unable to make judgments as basic as this, it is no wonder that the ability of an animal to be loved is so hotly contested.

Historically, distinguishing animals from humans was very important. It was often understood that not only is there a clear distinction between humans and animals but humans possess certain capacities in excess over animals (language, soul, rationality) and that the possession of this capacity legitimates the domination of animals by humans. Further, it was also often understood that not all beings that looked like humans were, in fact, humans. Aristotle, for instance, understood humans to be rational beings and best the way to know if you were dealing with a rational being was to see if it spoke Greek. If the being did not speak Greek, it could not, by definition, be human. As a result, Aristotle distinguishes between humans, who are Greek, and barbarians, who are not Greek. The barbarian, like the goat, was by nature a slave and thus merited being dominated by Greeks. Such obviously silly notions are not limited to the ancients. It is often recounted that when Europeans arrived in the Americas, they wondered if the natives were humans or animals; the natives, however, wondered if the Europeans were gods or humans.

When two viewpoints as divergent as these confront one another, it is no surprise that Europeans ended up treating the natives as though they were animals. During the 1930s and 1940s, in Germany, it was a standard element of anti-Semitic propaganda to compare Jews to rats, thus legitimating the treatment of Jews as though they were rats; i.e., fit for extermination without a second thought. Finally, as recently as last year, in an editorial cartoon, the New York Post depicted Barack Obama as a gorrilla being shot by police with the caption, “They’ll have to find someone else to write the next stimulus bill.”

While dominant groups continue to “animalize” their enemies, the differences between actual animals and actual humans has become increasingly thin and the boundaries between the two have become increasingly porous. This, in turn, has led to a great deal of uncertainty regarding not only the differences between humans and animals, but also the meaning of each. When the differences between humans and animals begin to slip away, we are longer able to clearly say what we mean by each term: not only do we not know what an animal is, but we also don’t know what a human is. Afterall, over the past few decades, a number of discoveries has brought this conceptual confusion into greater relief: nearly all of the capacities that were once thought to be exclusive to humans have been found to exist in other species--for instance, rats display empathy, dogs and wolves have a sense of fair play, chimps seem to make art, and whales have incredibly complex systems of communication. For all of these to be true it means that not only do animals have capabilities that extend far beyond what we once thought, but it also means that their minds are far more complex than we once thought. Not only can animals do amazing things, but it would seem that they can also thing amazing things. Thus, those elements which we once thought exclusive to our species--morality, play, creativity and language among others--are found beyond our own species if we look hard enough.

**MOVE TO CATS DISPLAY**      Looking around here and at the recent and similarly themed “Just Act Natural” exhibit in Kingston, it is clear that artists like cats. For whatever reason, artists like cats; academics--especially sociologists and philosophers--seem to prefer dogs. I’m not sure why, but it is clearly the case. Further, the cats that artists like tend to be--and admittedly this is rather small sample taken from two exhibits--feral or semi-feral. The cats in these pictures are all barn cats. Barn cats recognize and accept humans to a certain extent, but it would be a foolish human who brought a barn cat into their house. There are two exceptions to this: the videos of cats walking on pianos set to a piece by Schoenberg over there in the corner and the cat condo highrise right. But, setting those aside, what is going on with all the cats?

Cats, like dogs, are the archetypical modern pet, but cats tend to be more abused and neglected than dogs (this isn’t to say that dogs aren’t treated terribly all the time) and cats tend to be more likely to be feral or only semi-domesticated. In North American cities, as well as the countryside, cats are more likely than dogs to thrive without a human family. Even cats living in houses tend to be far less domesticated than dogs. Cats seem to be happy to live with you, but they aren’t so keen on giving up their wild tendencies.

Thinking a bit more generally, what is going with pets? Earlier I talked about the differences between humans and animals, but spoke in rather abstract and general terms as though there were humans on the one side and animals on the other. Pets present a rather interesting challenge to this dichotomy: pets are the only animals that live inside human houses that serve no utilitarian purpose. They are also the only animals brought into the house which are not consumed or intended for consumption--being unconsummable, pets more resemble humans than animals; the cannibalism taboo appears to be extended to pets. For centuries animals, both invited and uninvited, have lived inside human houses. The uninvited were then what they are

today: unwelcome pests--rats, mice, bugs, bats, raccoons, squirrels, and the like. The invited animals were, in the past, somewhat different than they are today. In addition to cats and dogs, it would not have been uncommon through much of human history to have--assuming the family was wealthy enough--a menagerie of animals living inside their house: maybe a cow and a couple of chickens; or a donkey; or a pig or two. All these animals would serve a purpose: the cow would provide milk and, eventually, meat; the chickens would provide eggs and, eventually, meat; the donkey would pull carts; and the pigs would provide a lot of meat. Cats and dogs were likewise common in these households and, like what we think of as farm animals, they would provide a service in exchange for their keep: the cats would take care of the unwanted pests and the dogs would help hunt and pull carts. In this context, pets did not exist because we don't think of pets as providing utilitarian services of these sorts to us. Certainly, pets provide some sort of service, often understood as some sort of emotional service, but we don't tend to expect our dogs to pull our baby's stroller or the cat to kill mice in the walls. Regardless of whether a cat is a good mouser or not, we tend to let the cat live with us. We don't have an expectation that they do anything for use, beyond observe basic house manners: dogs should poo and pee outside; cats should poo and pee in their litter box. So, the point of all this is that a pet is not simply an animal that lives in our house at our invitation; a pet is also an animal that does not perform any economic function. Pets, like children, do not have to earn their keep.

Because pets are, in essence, economically useless--which is, by the way, recognized in the legal systems of North America and Europe; a pet only has a replacement value; it does not have any intrinsic value--this has led to them being insulted by philosophers, sociologists and others. As a result, for thinkers of this sort, pets cannot be considered animals. Animals, as the quotation from Alice Walker on the wall points out, "exist for their own reasons." By this

definition, we cannot consider a cat or a dog an animal because they exist for our reasons: in the best case, they are purposefully bred by “reputable breeders” to be sold as pets and, in the worst case, they are the unwanted result of a negligent pet owner having not neutered or spayed their pet. When we no longer want our pets, they have three possible outcomes, all of which will more likely than not end up in the death of the former pet: dumped at a pound or shelter, taken to the vet to be “euthanized,” or taken to a field and let go. Pets, like the vast majority of the animals we rely upon to live, are not, by any standard, animals.

So, if pets are not animals, what are they? The logical conclusion, if we accept the dichotomy of animal/human, is that they are humans. But this too doesn't ring *entirely* true. No one suggests that pets are actually human. Rather, what is suggested is that pets are the former animals that take on the roles formerly occupied by humans. Pets are animals that are accepted into a family as surrogate family members. There is no shortage of people who call their pets “fur babies” or young couples who get a dog to “practice for kids” (no one, as far as I know, gets a kid to practice for a dog) or older couples who get a dog to replace their grown children who have moved out. Because of this, some have suggested that pets are being used as surrogate humans: due to the conditions of modernity, people are no longer in close contact with one another--the family is not the core of an individual's social life; living in cities and suburbs is alienating to the point that you don't know your neighbours and most likely don't want to know your neighbours. But, at the same time, people seem to want intimate contact. If you can't have intimate contact with a human, might as well go with the next best thing. Robot friends are not yet available, so pets it is.

The result of all this is that pets are not animals and they aren't humans either. Pets are a challenge to the idea of animals and they are also a challenge to the idea of humans. I don't buy

into either version of what I've said about pets: I don't think that dogs or cats are inferior or degraded animals nor do I think that they are surrogate humans. Pets certainly take on human characteristics, we don't eat them or wear their fur--they are given proper names, they eat foods resembling our own--but they'll also shit on the floor when you leave them home alone. It isn't so much that pets are either not-entirely-animal or not-entirely-human, but that they are both at once: they are both not-human and not-animal.

**MOVE TO STRANGE PICTURES**      With this in mind, that pets are at once not-human and not-animal, let's move over to Sandra Meigs' "Ride" series. My comments for these pieces are comparatively brief. Seeing these images, my immediate thought turns to the sixteenth century essayist, Michel de Montaigne, who wrote in his essay, "An Apology Raymond Sebond," "When I play with my cat, how do I know that she is not passing time with me rather than I with her?" There are three answers to this question, each of which points to a different interpretation of how animals and humans can relate to one another. The first answer is that the cat is using me as a plaything, thus treating me as an object no different from a mouse, a twig or a piece of string. The second answer is that I am using the cat as a plaything, thus treating it as an object no different from a Wii or a deck of cards. The third answer is that the cat and I are playing together, thus treating it as two humans playing.

The first answer resembles the philosopher Thomas Nagle's strange essay, "What is it like to be a bat?" For Nagel, it isn't sufficient for a human to *imagine* what it is like to be a bat, he wants to know if humans can actually experience what it is like for a bat to be a bat. That is, to live upside down in the dark, to navigate by sonar, to have poor vision, to fly, and the like. Batman imagines that he is bat, but he isn't actually a bat and, more to the point for Nagel, Batman can never know what it is to be a bat: all that Batman can do is dress in black, make a

cape that looks like wings, and devise a bunch of bat-like gadgets. Whatever animals are--be they bats, cats or chickens--humans just cannot know what it is *like* to be that animal or any animal at all. The same, obviously, holds in reverse: the bat or the cat can never know what it is like to be a human. Indeed, the bat or the cat may not even have the ability to recognize the human as a human; that is, as something distinct from a mouse or a ball of yarn. For Nagel, the cat can play with us, but we cannot play *with* the cat.

The second answer resembles how animals have traditionally been taken to be. From the mid-seventeenth century up to the present, animals have been taken to be mere objects. Rene Descartes argued that all animal behaviour could be explained without reference to consciousness; that animals were automata created by God in the same way that machines are automata created by humans. The only difference between God's automatons and our own is that God, being infinitely powerful, can make machines of far greater perfection and complexity than we can. Part of Descartes argument here is that if animal behavior can be explained without recourse to consciousness then it is reasonable to assume that animals do not possess consciousness--humans, however, do clearly possess consciousness and this must in turn relate to their having a soul. Humans, then, have consciousness and a soul while animals have neither. In other words, animals are no different than mere matter. An animal on a vivisectionists table, Descartes and his followers would have it, is screaming in the same way that rusty gears scream: we would be foolish to think that the engine is in pain; it is just not working right. Likewise, we would be foolish to think that the animal is in pain; it is just not working right. If an animal, then, does not have consciousness, it is not possible for the animal to play anything at all. The cat does not play with the human; the human plays with the cat.

The final answer is one that we only get more recently: the cat is playing with the human and the human is playing with the cat. While cats and humans are clearly different from one another and that they might even inhabit completely different worlds, they can nonetheless interact with one another, not only intentionally, but also with the goal of deriving pleasure. This is the answer that I hope is correct and it is the one that research seems to be confirmed by recent research.

**MOVE TO GARBAGE PIECE** The last piece that I want to discuss, only in passing and only for a little bit, is Mark Dion's "Maquette's." Specifically the strange heap of garbage with the wolf exploring it. I don't know if it is supposed to be a wolf, but I imagine that it is. Garbage brings together animals and humans in rather interesting ways. It is likely the case that early domestication of animals involved permanent human settlements with trash heaps: the trash would bring mice and rats in to the village, but it would also bring the ancestors of dogs and cats into the village. The dogs and cats would be allowed to stay around the garbage on the condition that they took care of the mice and the rats. Over time this relationship would become ever stronger and the ancestors would turn into actual dogs and cats. While this was going on, the wolves and other predatory felines would either be domesticated or pushed further and further away from the village. This, in turn, would allow large herbivores to live more or less safe from the threat of wolves and cougars--and within the protection of the ever increasingly domesticated dogs. As the large herbivores became familiar with humans, dogs and cats, they would slowly evolve into cows, pigs, sheep and goats. The point of all this is twofold. First, it is likely the case that at no point in human history did someone say, "Hey, I'm going to domesticate a herd of giant wild cows--this would let me have milk all the time and easy access to meat that I did not have to hunt." Under ideal controlled conditions--with writing, record keeping, established fields

and fences--it can take over thirty generations to domesticate a species: the Russians did this once with foxes. For foxes which reach maturity quickly, this can take a couple decades, but for much larger animals that mature much more slowly, like horses or cows, this could take hundreds of years. That is, at no point did humans set out dominate animals; it just kind of happened. Second, garbage is far more important than we ordinarily think. It is here that I want to start wrapping up my comments. Those of us living on the outskirts of major cities have noticed in the past few years increasing numbers of wolves and coyotes. The animals, in part because of warm winters which makes survival easier, are doing what the ancestors of our dogs and cats did thousands and thousands of years ago: they are attracted to our garbage, they are becoming more and more familiar with us. Rather than recognizing them for what they are--contemporary versions of the ancestors of our pets--many of us would rather mercilessly kill them: a man, near Ottawa last winter, purposefully hit a coyote with his snowmobile, he then chased it down on foot and killed the coyote with his hands. He then tied the coyote to the back of his snowmobile and proudly dragged the corpse to his grandchildren's hockey game. Thinking he was a hero, he also sent his story and a photo of the poor animal to the *Ottawa Citizen*, which happily printed both. If we don't want to this to happen to our dogs, we shouldn't want this to happen to coyotes and, really, there is no difference between how we treat a coyote and how we treat a cow: if you find the desecration of a coyote repulsive, you should give some thought to the animals you wear and eat and use to develop medicines and toothpastes and perfumes.