
Bryndís Snæbjörnsdóttir/Mark Wilson
In conversation with Steve Baker and Ross Birrell (04/05/07)

On Animals, Death and Derrida's Cat

Steve Baker: There clearly are at least a small number of artists working with animal themes and animal materials who are very concerned with the way in which dead animals - or dead animal body parts, or animal materials - should be treated, and have a sense that they should be treated with a particular kind of respect; there are certain things that you can do to them that are ok and other things that are not. That issue interests me because, at one level, you are talking at that point simply about material. And it's not to pretend that materials don't carry connotations that are very difficult to prise away from the materials, but it's a very different thing from working with living animals, for example, and the issue of how far we want to hang on to that notion that the fact that at some point this did come from a living animal still means that it can't be treated quite the way that clay would be treated or the way that canvas would be treated.

Mark Wilson: I think with *nanoq* we were very conscious of mobilising some of those very factors. In a sense, superficially at least, treating them or using them in a kind of continuum from the moment that they were captured or killed, or whatever, and all the way through to them being exhibited, or even exchanged between museums, there has been a sort of continuum of function which is about display and so in that sense, by hijacking them for that installation [in Spike Island] - and we're talking specifically about the installation here and not the photographs, I think that is a different issue - that was a kind of continuum of display strategy, just diverted slightly. So I think in that sense we probably felt that we were actually not interfering, we were deliberately not changing them, we were deliberately not messing with them or doing something that they weren't already doing; that very subtle diversion was one of the dynamics of the work.

Bryndís Snæbjörnsdóttir: But I think in the beginning when the project started there was a sense, because we discovered these initial animals in a hidden-away space in the basement, where everything seemed to be rotting away, there was some sense of feeling like, well if you find them all and you make them all visible, some kind of dignity is brought back. But then you learn through the process that that is something that is not important and an impossible task. And when you talk about the skin itself, what is left of the 'animal' is the skin although for many of them, depending on when they were stuffed, there is bone material as well. Does the fact that it has its own skull change how we read the specimen? When handling the specimen is there a different understanding of what it is when there is weight to the object? The recent fibreglass models are very light but also usually more accurate in that they have been measured and replicated in every way from an actual animal.

SB: In a way I think that's a question for you to answer. I mean my answer to it would be, no, I don't personally think that does make a significant difference.

MW: Isn't there something quite particular and special about the skull, inasmuch as the skin has a degree of currency, but the skull actually has more agency than a head stitched over a Styrofoam model?

SB: I don't know if it does. I mean one of the things that interested me talking at the time of the Mike Kelley show at Tate Liverpool, which was called *The Uncanny*, where he's collected this material from a whole variety of sources including some pieces of taxidermy from the Liverpool museum. At one of the talks held around the exhibition, they got the taxidermist who had worked on some of these creatures largely at the level of maintenance, rather than having taxidermied the creatures in the first place. He was just keeping the collection in good order. And I was talking to him about what view museum taxidermists took of what contemporary artists, for example, are doing...

MW: They both worked on our project either directly or indirectly, James and George.

SB: ... I was wondering what they thought about the increasingly widespread use of these polyurethane forms now, as opposed to older methods. And he was saying, 'no they're absolutely fine,' you know, 'they work perfectly well they're just as good as any other method'. And I think the combination of that and the fact that when you read handbooks on taxidermy, that you are always getting this stuff about 'it's the eyes that bring the animals to life' and, of course, there are these huge collections of glass eyes that they very carefully select from to get the right ones and the whole issue of how they're embedded in the head, making sure that they're not sunk too far or they're not too protuberant. In that almost slightly silly sense, it's the bit of completely non-natural external surface, the glass eyes, that are perceived to be the things that bring the creature to life if the taxidermy is working well. So in that sense, what there is inside doesn't seem to me to somehow make the creature more real if there's more of it left. I mean I'm still very struck by that statement that Michelle Henning said in her paper at the conference, and I think it maybe in the essay as well. She talks about these creatures 'that are trying so hard to be polar bears', which wasn't how I read them at all. I mean I don't find it at all odd to think of the fact that you've got a mere skin, as it were, left of the creature over something that is otherwise not an animal. I actually think the fact that there is some material from the creature, whether we're talking about a fur coat or whether we're talking about a piece of taxidermy that makes it very different from other forms of animal representation, I think that link back to the material reality of the living body carries a huge amount of weight. And you were talking Mark about those slight shifts that you made in the course of the *nanoq* project to affect people's perceptions and I think that that's really very important, because the fact that you've got, as it were, in that rather crude sense, the trace of the actual animal, it does open up both the thing that you were specifically interested in about changing perceptions of the history of these creatures and draws attention to their history in a way in which their museum or country house display didn't overtly seem to do, or deliberately didn't try to do.

MW: I think that's right because that was a very important instant, because in the installation those histories were available for the respective bears. And it was that frisson between the skins, or 'the real' as Michelle put it, and these specific histories pertaining to their removal from their environment until today. And that relationship was hugely important, absolutely, that individual represented by that skin.

SB: But also there's the very small conceptual jump, that I think at some point you've mentioned to me, and that once I got it in my head seemed quite important to me, that the reality of the material that you were displaying in Spike Island could also prompt a thinking about the fact that there are, or were at that time at least, three living polar bears still in British collections and that the presence of the taxidermic bears indirectly pointed to that, in a way that some painted representation of a polar bear wouldn't have done. Now, how one teases out quite why other forms of representation won't do that quite as compellingly I'm not sure, but my hunch is that the material does make a difference.

MW: It's the relic, it's the sacred relic, it's the saint's bones, it has all those connotations, that it's the real thing.

BS: It's the real thing but it's no longer there and, of course, in that endless circle of knowledge, the very fact it's in front of you know that it's dead basically or it has been killed but there was a point where it used to be alive and is no longer. Whereas when you look at a photograph, you don't think that it might have died the minute the photograph was taken, you don't think about that. You think, this is an animal alive, you know, and you like to imagine it in place in that world, and I think that's the difference. And, therefore, people started to be confronted with this situation, this space between these two things. And I think also later on, it wasn't so much during the Spike Island installation but later on in the project, obviously the whole discussion about polar bears in the world today escalated.

MW: And I've also got a funny feeling that somewhere bound up in that and bound up in the response to the installation of the ten bears, is something to do with that relic and that sense of sanctity, particularly, which is being fed now by this attention and awareness of a fragility and significance to do with an arctic environment. And I think there's something there, which we'll reap. Even three years ago, when it wasn't such a hot topic, I think it still triggered something, some kind of reality about that - even if, perhaps, it was a subliminal thing.

SB: It's a separate point, but it interests me quite a lot that because we're talking about animals that one of the things that seems distinct about this area of contemporary art practice is that it appears to sit rather uncomfortably with contemporary tastes in terms of approaches to art theory and cultural theory, where there's still a considerable disquiet about using words like *real* and *reality*. And your thinking about issues to do with animals or that have any bearing on animal lives, assumes that, actually, questions of the real or of the actual or of the living are crucial issues. I mean one could avoid dealing with them but that would really be to render irrelevant the way in which there could be a discourse about this.

BS: Maybe I'm not quite understanding what you're saying, are you saying that in critical theory today, these are kind of sort of taboo subjects to put it bluntly?

SB: Yes, in that I suppose since, let's say the 70s or 80s onwards, in a post-Baudrillard environment, to talk glibly about notions of reality and notions of the real is assumed to be theoretically naïve.

BS: But if you changed those concepts into the notions of death or living, do they still fit, in your opinion, because I'm thinking about some of Derrida's writing and Agamben's *The Open*, that at this junction of death there is an opening of a space that is about some form of being and living. So, for me, I can't see that this isn't relevant or actually being highly debated in these discussions today.

MW: Surely the problem isn't necessarily discussing the real or the actual, surely it's the issue that these realities or these actualities can be constituted by different things and there isn't a single reality, there isn't a single actuality; but it doesn't preclude us from actually talking about this kind of truth or that kind of truth, and they can co-exist. Wasn't the issue that you were raising there about some kind of absolutism and that we've shifted away from that into a more plural situation? I thought that with that acknowledgement, you simply acknowledge that there are many realities, that's all, and that it didn't preclude you from talking about the real.

SB: One of the things that interests me in how artists are engaging with these issues is that you don't get stuck in some of the circularity of a lot of philosophy. And I say that not in the sense of my being hostile to what philosophers are doing at all. But I think those dimensions of Derrida's work on the animal that are so tied up with issues around death are kind of at the point where I lose interest in what he's doing, and I'm actually far more interested in him reflecting on his relationship with his cat and what that does to how he thinks about philosophy than him using the whole idea of the animal as a way of extending a philosophical discourse about death.

BS: An interesting thing here is what Michelle Henning wrote in the book about the relationship between photography and taxidermy, particularly looking at the history of photography in the early development of the media when these two kinds of exploration could be said to be travelling hand in hand, i.e. the one with the camera and the one with the gun. I see that as some kind of starting point in looking at the notion of the death of the animal, that's where my interest in it comes in because, in a sense, the death of the animal is then manifested on this film, which is then ever living; I mean we don't look at the photographs of these animals thinking that the minute after that photograph was taken this animal lay dead there on the ground. We think about this as an animal at the moment it was captured. And so, in a sense, it goes beyond death - if there is something like death as such - into another way of existing. And it's in that shift that this notion of death interests me in relation to animals. I was also interested in you mentioning Derrida's cat, which Donna Haraway also mentions.

SB: Really what he's describing, and the philosophical context in which he's most immediately trying to place it, is to say at the point where - bizarrely, given however many years he's been living with this cat - the point where he first explicitly stopped to acknowledge the fact that his cat did sometimes look at him whether or not he's naked at the time...

BS: ... He was.

SB: One of the things that he was struck by was not only, you know, the John Berger position of 'here's all these humans looking at animals but animals aren't really able to look back in any particular way' or certainly not, as Derrida said, to look back as a form of address back to the human. And one of the things it prompts Derrida to do is to realise that the entire history of philosophy, in his view, is built on the assumption that it's humans who do the active looking, who do the addressing - and that most western philosophers just haven't even countenanced the notion that the animal may be perfectly able to look just as actively.

MW: To direct their gaze.

SB: To direct their gaze, to be addressing their gaze to a human being. And this is, as I understand it, the basis upon which Derrida is saying that he feels that much of the philosophical tradition - and certainly his own contribution to that tradition - needs almost to be thought over again, almost rewritten on the basis of realising that, actually, the animals with which humans interact should have formed a much more active part of philosophical thinking than they have done.

On Methodology

SB: I think methodologically one of the things that's interesting about a number of your projects is the range of negotiations with other people that are involved, not only in terms of those ones that may play quite a significant part in the final outcome, whether in terms of things people are writing for you or in terms of your negotiations with particular galleries and so on, but all the phoning around to find out the location of the polar bears in the first place, or the phone calls to the general public in the *Fly* project - where you're, I presume, at that point essentially trying to negotiate whether you can get access to their houses to take those photographs to talk to them about their pets - through to other quite different kinds of negotiation, like with the copy editors at Black Dog and so on.

MW: In many ways they are fundamental to the practice, that inclusion and inclusiveness and the acknowledgement of not only just the power that people have to enable the smooth running and the project itself actually but also the knowledge the other specialist or the other people in the project have that we just absolutely need. So it's actually the necessity for the inclusion of those other people which I think drives or gives the projects - both in terms of concept but also far more in specific detail - their shape, in terms of the knowledge and the access that they can provide.

SB: In terms of the inclusivity that you're talking about, how did that come into your work? Because it's clearly there in the *Big Mouth* project in terms of the interviews you were doing, for example, that played quite a major part in the gathering of information that was going to be relevant and the interviews themselves playing a part in the exhibiting of the work at Tramway. Did your work develop in that direction when you discovered that you were actually quite good at and quite comfortable with that contact with a lot of other people, or did it start with your thinking well, we want

to do projects of this kind so we'd better actually develop these skills of interaction with a whole range of different people? I'm assuming that part of the answer may lie in work either or both of you were doing before you started working together.

MW: We were both going through a shift in terms of practice. But certainly in terms of your [Bryndis's] experience, you were working very much with socially-engaged practice through teaching and I think increasingly over a period of five or six years we were both looking towards that.

BS: I think we both were at the stage, in different ways, where we felt the practice was becoming quite insular. And so there was a deliberate attempt to reach out, and also just asking questions. For example, I had one year in which I had the Scottish Arts Council Visual Arts Award which I basically used to ask myself a lot of questions about my practice, one of them being not only 'what kind of work do I want to make?' but 'what do I want the work to give me?' Because how do you sustain a practice if there isn't something that comes back that's meaningful to you; so it was to find a way how the practice can also fulfil a desire to inform you in a certain way.

SB: So what kind of work were each of you doing at the point that you started to think that the work wasn't answering the things you wanted it to be doing?

BS: I don't know if that's so important, but I guess what we have brought to it is a shared interest in the environment which we were both working with and I've always been interested also in this notion of territory through colonisation and migration and so on.

MW: And also through language and how experience is constituted and shaped by language. We process ideas of environment through that vehicle and how they become the experience in many cases. And curiously enough, just in respect of that, when we actually began to work together, we'd both recently been working with things which almost had a hybrid use and manipulation of language with a very different outcome or result, but there was that desire, in a sense, to explore what we know as liminal areas, areas of uncertainty, and play with that idea. But in relation to the *Big Mouth* project, which is our first, I guess, full-on project which could be said to be socially engaged, we had an Arts Council Fellowship in Australia and we just needed information basically, and having realised what we wanted to be the focus of our research, it became clear at a very early stage that a lot of people had very, very different sorts of things to say about this single subject which was this thylacine [Tasmanian tiger] and that in itself just seemed absolutely compelling and we just followed it; we interviewed a range of people who each felt equally passionate about this thing for very different reasons.

BS: I think it's also because through all my practice I've always worked with what's relevant to use and work with. So you come to doing things in plaster or ceramics or whatever, not knowing very much about it, and the same applies to talking to zoologists in museums. It is a similar process to making something in a material. You mould your clay and engage in a silent dialogue with it but when it comes to socially-engaged practice, someone is actually speaking back to you.

SB: On that 'speaking back' idea, one of the things I was really struck by and I spoke to a couple of people about it out at Penn State, was that in the long version of your presentation that you were able to do there, where you're talking about the *Big Mouth* project, at one point you showed part of the black and white film, the silent film, and - it was an absolute revelation really, because I'd not seen anything quite like it happen in a presentation of that kind at a symposium before - where previously the audience had been sitting there listening to you and you'd been talking and presenting ideas and presenting images, at the point where the silent film goes up and you stop talking, the audience immediately start talking amongst themselves, trying to identify what kind of animal it is that's being held up in the shot there; essentially a conversation erupted within the audience that was...

MW: ... In direct response to a silent conversation on the screen.

SB: ... Yes, yes.

MW: Yeah it was nice that actually, because it was a sudden real, palpable participation.

SB: Yes - in my experience, of a quite unconventional kind.

BS: I think it was not only important that it was during the silent film that the conversation happened, it was also in relation to these images: it's very much about the relationship between the respective animal specimens and these two people handling them in different ways. Because it was black and white and in slow motion, it worked in a meditative, possibly reflective way on the audience which encouraged them to enter into that space of discussion between themselves. This was a very, very great opportunity because that's in a sense something we didn't have the opportunity to observe in the show in Tramway because this film was amongst other elements in the installation.

One and Three Bears: *nanoq* and Joseph Kosuth

BS: I also think it's quite interesting in terms of the methods we apply to the practice in relation to art history and I keep coming back to a very early piece by Joseph Kosuth called *One and Three Chairs*. I remember the first time I saw it, it had a huge, impact on me. I thought, this is art in a nutshell, it's everything art ever has to be. When you think about our practice today, it has a lot of these components in it, but it's also very different: spatially, over time and over locations; but still, there is the meaning, it's the image and it's the definition.

MW: ... And the object.

BS: Yes.

MW: In relation to the photographs, that was very much that dynamic, because it was always the photograph with the provenance, and so you have the image in the

environment and the text and they can't replace each other: in three very different ways they constitute a whole.

BS: A dialogue, yes.

RB: The Kosuth reference is quite interesting, because I remember seeing reproductions of that work and thinking it was a very dry, academic piece of conceptual art and I'd moved towards not liking it from initially liking it. But when you referred to it again in relationship to *nanog* and this approach of displacement, which maybe brings up the question of overcoming the sense of re-presenting the real in some naïve fashion. Because it's not a kidnapped polar bear from the museum on its own, it's the kidnapped polar bear and the photograph, and not only the photograph, it's the photograph alongside its provenance and the textual history narrating that. For Kosuth I think it's about form and meaning and the structure of how we cannot access reality, whereas I think in the *nanog* piece - although I have to confess this is coming at it through the documentation of the book, and the role that the book plays in all this is another aspect of it - there's something more critically engaged because perhaps the stakes are suddenly shifted in relationship to the animal and the question then of what it reflects back on the understanding of what it is to be human. I don't think that power is evoked through the chair with Kosuth.

BS: I do get what you're saying and I think that is very true, but I don't think we can just take something like a chair for granted. I mean if you look, for example, at the definition of a chair in a dictionary from English, Icelandic, French, German you'll have different definitions of a chair; some have got backs, some have got arms, etc. And if you go in different cultures, a chair can become something completely different. So I don't think it's just a chair, a clearly defined object and maybe more so now.

SB: I was interested when you raised that example as well and one of the things it made me think about is that I'm interested that you, Ross, used the word dry in relation to it, because that was also the word that I had in mind. That although I wouldn't in any sense choose to label the kind of work that you two are doing as conceptual art, it does interest me the way in which some people in recent years have looked at some work from the 1990s onwards as a further phase of conceptual art and it seems one of the key differences from those classic works of the late 60s early 70s is that it isn't so dry and, I don't think it's a particularly useful label to put on something like Damien Hirst, but I mean sometimes that has happened and the actual materials that he's working with, whether it's the shark or anything else, aren't dry in the way that a chair kind of is. I suppose what I'm trying to say is, what happens if we take that level of scrutiny and genuine curiosity that always characterised a lot of the most interesting conceptual art and apply it to issues that appear to more obviously - or more explicitly - matter in the world?

MW: I think Kosuth was establishing a baseline in a sense and as much investigative definition as anything. And in that sense, the academic feel or you know the dryness is absolutely appropriate and strategic in essence. And through the very different reference or mobilisation of perhaps some of that triangulation, which is absolutely integral in relation to *nanog*, it's not about establishing the definition. By using a number of different kinds of methods of representation, but insisting and privileging

none of them, something happens as a consequence of those three things sparking in the imagination of the viewer.

SB: Two things come to me there, one is that a key difference between your work and Kosuth's position back then is of course that he's the person who quite explicitly comes out and says 'why should art need an audience, any more than science needs an audience, or mathematics needs an audience?' And the whole success of your work, in a way, is about engaging an audience and getting people to actually think about issues, not just an audience in the sense of looking at the work but actually taking those ideas away and seeing what happens as a result. But there was a second thing, and I was interested Mark in what you were saying about these different aspects to the work and you're not privileging any of them over the other, I think one of the difficulties that I have, and it's my difficulty rather than your difficulty, with the *nanoq* project is that I can never quite get over thinking that, in the end, the installation at Spike Island was the real centre of that project because the bears were actually there. It wasn't the various interesting photographic projects and juxtapositions in natural history collections and so on, it wasn't the book which holds the whole thing together. Those are interesting in their own way but there was something with the presence of the bears at the Spike Island, their actual presence, that for me absolutely is the centre of that project. And yet I think I'm trying to cling on to something there that you, more interestingly, have let go of.

RB: I wasn't at Spike Island but there seems to me, as an outsider, that that would be one of the most enigmatic experiences of the project, and that would be the bit that I would really want to see that - in the word that was used in the publication - that 'community' or, to pick up on Agamben, the community to come. So that might have a physical impact beyond the photographic or the textual, and the physical and the real are again vital and pertinent to that experience so that would be perhaps why for you it would be the fulcrum around which the rest of the project unfolds. I completely agree that you know that a chair is not just a chair and that it's a baseline retreat from the transparency of communication. But I still would think that there's maybe an important distinction between Kosuth's chair and the variations of the *nanoq* project, in that Kosuth is dealing in the present tense of representation and doesn't necessarily invite narratives, cultural narratives, about the differences between how a chair is used whether it's the chair that Glenn Gould sat on that his father made for his performances or whether it's a throne that somebody sat on that was then beheaded, etc., the narrative is not necessarily at stake, whereas I think the narrative in history of each of these objects as it moves through time and I think what's also interesting is that these things go back to their museums and that the book is where these things actually are all held in suspension and that I think it's the importance of narrative which then leads you into the more politicised engagements with the real if you like, which still enable us to question the role of photography or the role of the object or the role of text. The narrative of how you as artists undertake the research project to bring all the material together, the narratives which you encountered, the photographic images of the bears being captured I think all that material is, to me, significantly different from Kosuth.

SB: If I can add one element to it, I think that at a certain level the issue here is not language, but attention to form in both cases. I mean Kosuth's chair has been quite

carefully chosen insofar as the chair can be neutral, I mean it's not a chair that through over-ornamentation or whatever...

MW: It's not a Baroque chair...

SB: ... It's not a Baroque chair, so it's really only readable as chair. And one of the things about the whole *nanog* project and the bringing together either photographically or physically of the different bears is that whereas in many other contexts we are kind of invited to read polar bear as polar bear...

MW: Generic...

SB: ... With the *nanog* project you can't do that because there they all are, either they're photographs or bears themselves in a taxidermy form, and their difference and their variety is one of the things that's immediately presented to the viewer.

MW: One of the things that actually happened when we were able to show either all or almost all of the photographs in various institutions we showed them, was that you could read it in the way that we've been invited to read it, in that this *might* be the same polar bear in each of these photographs and that was the first reading, but then the history absolutely nailed that idea on the head and, of course, it's an absurd idea anyway. But, nevertheless, if you stood back and looked at these things, you could almost see this sort of character appearing in a way that we're trained to do seeing cartoons or something. So it was cropping up and it looked similar just enough for a moment, and then that's reaffirmed and then contradicted.

BS: But is it not also saying something about the way we read images and about how you read the specimens differently when standing in front of them to how you would read images. When I made the reference to Kosuth it's in the strategy or methodology. I also think there's something else in there that in all the projects that we've been doing we are not really changing anything, well we change things by removing things in and out of place, but we're not actually changing the polar bear. It is what it is – we just highlight what is already there.

RB: I think the reference to Kosuth is illuminating, it really opens up the work, but there was a sense that Kosuth is indifferent, be it this chair or that chair as the work changes and shifts, you know it's a different chair or a different installation or whatever. But the definition doesn't change and the kind of process doesn't change, but there's a kind of sense where he's indifferent to difference within language and within the different strategies of representation.

MW: That's interesting, I'd see that completely differently, I'd say that he was actually acknowledging that and inviting the viewer either to acknowledge or not acknowledge it, to get it or not get it. The definition didn't change but the chair was mutable. It could have been replaced with another chair and, and almost invites that. Do you not think?

RB: But I think there remains a relationship of indifference to the viewer. But the animal victim that's held in a photographic image is not interchangeable with any other and there's something that really asks questions about us as individuals in

multitudes. The question maybe is about that strategy of indifference; I was suggesting that Kosuth is almost right to be indifferent because we're kind of suspended within these different processes of representation, but I don't get the sense that you know one bear can be interchanged with another bear as you move through geography or where they were captured, because each of those different fragments of narratives that can ricochet when you find the object in a museum, the narratives that open up speak to other conflicts: class, colonialism, etc. Even though the process of how we experience it might be one that has an air of indifference, in that it's not emotive or politicised in its representation, nonetheless I don't think we can see them as expendable or erasable ultimately. Even though it seems to mirror a strategy of indifference, I don't necessarily read it as indifferent to the history at stake.

MW: It talks about our habit to do that.

On Animal History

RB: Something you said earlier about animals and history struck me in relation to what Bataille says, because he something different about it. Bataille says:

Profane life is easy to distinguish from mere animal life; it is very different from the latter. Taking it as a whole, animal life is nonetheless the model of life without history.¹

And I suppose one of the ways that people or philosophers have thought about the difference between animals and humans is that animals have no history.

SB: That's what Hegel said about the east as opposed to the west of course, that it has no history.

RB: Well this brings us back to colonialism as well but I think that *nanoq* suggests animals do have a history but not maybe in the sense that Bataille is thinking about it.

BS: No they don't have a history as such because what we have termed as history is something that is a documentation and, you know, documentation that we normally accept as a historical document is not something animals could carry with them in a sense. I mean we haven't found the way to understand animals' history, we can't say that they don't have a history because they might. It's just that in our understanding of what history is they, in a sense, don't have it, they only have it at the moment of an encounter with a human being. In the *nanoq* project they do have a history and it begins when they meet man and either die or are captured.

SB: In a different way, much of the work that the historian Erica Fudge is doing on animals is explicitly about this issue of 'do animals have a history?' and how one deals with that issue. Her point is to devise forms of practice, whether that practice be the writing of history or the making of art, that don't effectively erase animals from the human perception of history.

¹ Georges Bataille, *The Accursed Share, Volumes II & III*, translated by Robert Hurley (New York: Zone Books, 1991), p. 94.

MW: In a way, really relatively recently, the colonial settlers in Australia simply asked the Aboriginals to produce proof that they owned the land and, of course, that was erased, their right to land was erased because they had no conveniently measurable or understandable form, they had no documented history. And in some senses that is just the juggernaut of a very fixed way of looking at the world, and under those circumstances, in the face of that kind of juggernaut approach, all sorts of histories are erased, daily I guess. How does Erica Fudge redress that?

SB: It's in the essay called 'A Left Handed Blow'.

BS: Doesn't she talk about that it's the history *with* animals? She talks about the history of our relationship with animals as the beginning of a construction of a possible history of animals.

Framing and Un-Framing: (a) fly / flug(a)

SB: Could I go back for a minute to something that Ross was saying about chairs and differentiation as a way perhaps of bridging the *nanoq* project across to the *Fly* project? Because I think one of the things that the photographs of domestic animal habitats in the *Fly* project does, I think what's so telling about those far from empty photographs - but photographs in which the animal happens to be absent at the moment of the photograph - is that our sense of there being something missing in those images is interestingly different from how we would often read photographs of rooms, whether we were seeing them in furniture catalogues or whether we were seeing them in design history books where you usually focus on the piece of furniture or the interior arrangement itself. And what's weird, very often I used to think when I was more actively involved with design history, in seeing all those photographs of modernist chairs and so on, is you never actually got a photograph of somebody sitting in Rietveld's *Red Blue Chair* or whatever and that was what was really kind of amazing. And I was thinking about this in relation to the *Fly* photographs and the sense of there being something missing, and I couldn't quite figure out why it was that we wanted the animal to be there in a way that we didn't necessarily need a human to be in other interior photographs. And I haven't got this resolved in my mind at all, but I think it does have something to do with questions about whether any animal there would do and us not knowing in some of those instances at least even what the animal would be, whether it would be a dog or a cat - it's by no means always clear - or in one place what kind of bird, I take it, should have been on a particular perch in one photograph. And so there is a kind of a curiosity for this that seemed distinct from the curiosity we would have as to what kind of person would be sitting in it.

BS: Don't you think this is something also to do with the way the medium is applied when taking these images, the fact that the point of eye contact, basically where the camera is placed, is 'not quite right'. And because we see so many images we have a certain way of reading them. Most of the time when I see images of interiors where there is really nothing else going on, I read them in a certain way which is purely about the interiors themselves. This is because they've been taken in a way which is quite clinical, quite kind of design-y, but these images don't have that, they have a certain awkwardness about them. And I think that's also maybe possibly where this notion that we discussed, and that came up in Penn State, of the haunted thing in the image and it comes in through the awkwardness I think.

MW: In the interior photographs that you were talking about Steve there is actually an invitation in those photographs to place yourself in them and imagine yourself in that environment in the design of the clinical interiors and so that's the invitation in those photos. In these photographs there's an invitation too but this is, by and large, a human environment. And the name of the animal is a human attribute. So it's been given a human name and so again in this space you have something which isn't human but which is constituted by things which are human, which is kind of strange. That's the kind of tension I think

SB: One of the things I was struck by again, looking through this on the train on the way up here - with the exception of the one's where you've clearly got a cat basket or a dog basket - was that we're talking about human-shaped environments where the only bit of decision-making that the particular domestic animal has been able to do is to decide where in a particular room they're going to bed down or whatever, and I think those photographs do point up that limited choice really very well. The one I was particularly struck by in relation to this was one that's rather kind of symmetrical; the animal's name is *Kolli* and you've got this very organised, structured, decorative symmetrical display at one end of the room that has rather little to do with whatever kind of animal it would be. And well all we can say is that, for whatever reason, the cat or dog has decided that, yeah, that'll do.

MW: That's its best option.

SB: Yeah, given the choices available for me, I guess I'll go for that one, possibly just because it's the only one where there's a rug over bare floorboards at that point in the room.

RB: I think the reference to the ghostly quality of the image is I suppose spot on in that way and I think there is the sense that the awkwardness of the angle confronts you, it keeps you out of the room. What I want to ask is about the use of the text, the use of the animal name to inhabit the space, to demarcate the image as a dwelling or as a populated image in some respect, because I can imagine that with no signposts at all in the way would maybe make it more enigmatic or more ambiguous as to what you're looking at. It is to do with the relationship of 'enframing' and 'unframing' and I think Heidegger says in 'The origin of work of art' that art is a kind of 'enframing' and that seems to be something that you're critiquing in *nanoq* perhaps. But here the enframing is vital and maybe it's different from the un-framing process of *nanoq*, that you referred to in the opening out. Ok, these works might be related in terms of animals, but maybe the *Fly* project and *nanoq* project are actually very different in their relationship to enframing and unframing.

MW: One of the ways that people have looked at this, and it came up in Penn State, is was that there was a suggestion that they were like photographs that might be taken at the scene of a forensic investigation and, in that sense, the framing of them also becomes very important because it's the demarcated area where you're invited to scrutinise; for example, the cat hairs on the chair.

BS: But that's assuming we've been led into these areas of investigation - we hardly ever are. I mean they are marked off and we're talking about the feelings you have

when you look in, because you become compelled to look into areas which have been marked off and where some kind of investigation is going on.

MW: Because it's actually denied to you.

BS: Yes, because there is something denied to you in that image, that's where the similarity is. I think that's it, we didn't set out to photograph the scene of an event, that was not part of the work.

MW: But maybe the event was 'something has happened' or 'something happens'.

BS: Not an event I would say. Well it's an event that has been.

MW: An event of something passing through.

SB: I think that's actually where the captioning helps to pull this open as a space rather than as the record of an event because it's almost a naming of, and indeed it is the naming of *whose* space this is, of whose space this is a photograph of and maps out as it were the gap that the animal fits in.

BS: I think that's what we were intending with it but, in some sense, travelling with this work through different cultures you become aware of different emphases and now I'm not so sure if the name needs to be there, having taken the work to Sweden and people don't understand these names at all, they're just utterly foreign, whereas in Icelandic we know that these names are human names.

SB: But I think in English, and evidently in Swedish as well, what's useful about that is to point out the thing that we too easily forget about which is that there are significant cultural differences in attitudes to domestic animals in different parts of the world that are part of their history and what was so interesting hearing you talk about this project at Penn State was talking about the kinds of legal restrictions on pet ownership in Iceland that are quite distinct from what they are in this country, for example. I mean, that is part of writing the history of animals, if you like, because it's a pointing to the non-taken-for-granted-ness of stuff that most of the time we do take for granted, that there is a cultural specificity to the whole set of attitudes that we very often just think about as being, not necessarily self evident, but we take as part of our immediate experience; that you've got cats around the house here and dogs around the house and those of us who have (or have had) pets assume that our relationship with those animals and our affection for them is something relatively straightforward: it's not that we don't know that pet keeping has a history, but we assume, as presumably Derrida did up to the point where he suddenly spots his cat looking at him...

BS: ... Naked.

SB: ... thought that he was having a perfectly ordinary relationship with the cat with which he shared a living space.

BS: I was just trying to understand what you were saying about framing and unframing and the differences in these images, I don't think I quite understood.

RB: It was not so much from the photographic to the photographic, it was something that really I think was mentioned in your essay, Steve. It was the sense that maybe the encounter in a museum or zoo is framed for us in a particular way but in the *Nanoq* installation we encounter the exhibition context not actually as a space of framing, as we would traditionally understand it, but essentially a space of ‘unframing’, because we’re not being told how to read this collection of objects and images.

SB: Certainly Guattari talks about art as an ‘activity of unframing’.

RB: Which is a kind of completely different way of thinking art from Heidegger and maybe with *Fly* framing is pivotal to the experience, whereas actually in a kind of slightly different way unframing is pivotal to *nanoq*.

SB: I think like you, for all the bears having to be put into these standardised glass cases for the Spike Island display, nevertheless their having been moved there and their being presented there was a kind of rupturing of the way in which they had been framed by their museum or country house displays, where there is a fairly precise, distinct in both of those instances, but a fairly precise set of expectations of the work that they do, either in private country house or in a natural history museum and it’s almost as though you’re being told, here is a particular form of knowledge which you’re invited to consume in this way. Whereas, the quite radical gesture, to my mind, of the Spike Island exhibition was, well here they are again, do what you like with them almost, see what happens.

RB: There was something I wanted to ask that refers to that ‘see what happens’ in relation to different spaces of knowledge, the knowledge framed in the museum and the unframing of experience in art, that’s potentially illuminated by these projects. One of the things I wanted to talk about in this context of animals, has to do with the research process and artistic knowledge and the role that intuition or instinct plays, and it’s in relation to something mentioned in the introduction to *Fly*:

the irony is that what we’re ultimately trying to access may not actually be found at all in the physical world, but that we will discover it by accessing something within ourselves and in our intuitive response through perhaps the unravelling of a reflex²

And I thought this actually puts us in a domain of the kind of conclusion to *The Postmodern Animal* - which you kind of step away from at the end of the conclusion - that is to say, that the postmodern artists is in proximity to the postmodern animal in that there’s a degree of animality about how we would describe the experience of artistic knowledge as intuitive response or unravelling of a reflex:

so notwithstanding this the attempt to find some other direct way and it is about the direct kind of experience, to continue by using what is around us as opposed to what is far away as artists we began to consider in what other places or situations such related reflexes could reside.³

² Snæbjörnsdóttir/Wilson, (*a/fly/flug(a)*) (National Museum of Iceland, 2006), p. 6.

³ Ibid.

So this kind of emphasis upon the latent quality of the reflex, this is speaking to what it means to be an artist or the potential contribution that art can make in this context. So how does the intuitive or the reflexive relate to questions of research, larger questions of research, methodology and to the establishment of knowledge? how does the intuitive and the reflexive meet the kind of openness of the work to embrace specialist knowledge, contributions from other specialists?

BS: I just think it's something which is very much part of a certain stage of the practice that doesn't mean that you just enter into that stage and you are just permanently engaged there throughout the whole project, I think there are just times when it is more important to be able to access that.

MW: But then I think part of its importance is to do with the capacity the work has to unlock that or make that moment accessible to an audience as well by the way the work is configured. And in all the cases, in these three projects there's a pivotal absence, and it's where there isn't the symbol, there isn't the abbreviation, there isn't the language, the gap has to be filled and I think that's the mechanism, the attempt, that should be pivotal in these works, that's where it is I think, to create a space.

SB: It's attention to form again isn't it? It's to my mind non-linguistic, it's the articulation of a non-linguistic form or shape or space and it's why you're doing this as an art project rather than as a sociology project.

END