

Human Animal relationships: Understanding Species Boundaries.

The complex relationship between the human-animal 'self' and the non-human animal 'other' stimulates interesting discussions about the notions of boundaries, knowledge and power. Representing animals, using animals as materials, or working with animals, artists' work references and challenges conceptions of fixed species identities and notions of clear set human and animal boundaries.

Influences such as Plato, Aristotle and the Bible result in western societies favouring hierarchical models² of species that set clear boundary distinctions between humans and animals. In the 18th century, with the rise of scientific positivism, scientists gathered knowledge about species: categorising, organising and then formalising their findings into taxonomic models such as the Linnean classification system³. These systems, arbitrarily organised knowledge banks, sought to provide scientific explanations of fixed human and animal distinctions thus validating notions of human power and domination. As John Berger (2009) writes: '[animals] are the objects of our ever-extending knowledge. What we know about them is an index of our power, and thus an index of what separates us from them' (Berger, 2009). These classification systems inform people's conceptions of hierarchical categories with fixed boundaries between humans and other species.



Scala Naturae, 1994,
Mark Dion
Stepped plinth, artifacts,
specimens, taxidermic
animals, and bust, 238 x 100
x 297 cm

Illustrating the formalisation of hierarchal systems, Mark Dion uses real animals as objects and materials to create his work *Scala Naturae* (1994). The steps represent a species

- 1 I must recognise Man's animality, indeed many artists address the Human as animal. However, for the purpose of this essay and hence forth I shall use the terms 'human' and 'animal' for species 'human-animal' and 'non-human animal' respectively.
- 2 An example of a popular model is The Great Chain of Being a popular view in medieval Europe, positioning God at the top of the hierarchy followed by other forms with descending value and significance: angels, humans, animals, trees, plants, rocks and more (Lovejoy, 1964).
- 3 The Linnean classification system organizes 'species in a hierarchical scheme based largely on similarities in their forms and other traits' (Roger Harris, Online, 2005).

hierarchy, whilst the placement of individual objects on different steps emphasises categorical distinctions that separate and define species.

To help define species, scientists and explorers acquired animals from around the globe; choosing specimens to visually represent a species. Institutions then used these specimens to educate audiences about the perceived order of the world. Mark Fairnington, working closely with entomologists and Natural History Museums, responds to the history of the specimen: painting large scale images of flora, insects and taxidermy animals of museum displays. Fairnington's paintings point to the tension between the illusion and reality of an animal species with fixed boundaries.



Specimen (7), 2000
Mark Fairnington
Oil on canvas
214 x 189 cm

For the series “Mantidae” and “Membracidae”, Fairnington chose to represent an insect whose mimetic capabilities allow it to camouflage as seeds, thorns and plants (Mark Fairnington, 2008, interviewed by Shelly Stein). Mimetic capabilities of species defies the notion of fixed species boundaries. Fairnington's finished paintings appear as single fixed specimens however knowledge of the artist's methodological process reveals the painting as a montage of photographs taken of the specimen, each emphasising a particularly appealing aspect of the being in question. The camera captures not a single bounded reality but one in continuous flux as the subject changes depending on the environment. The final painting renders a highly subjective representation of the original insect and in doing so challenges scientific correctness.

Whilst Mark Fairnington chooses to represent species, other artists choose to use animals as objects within their work. Indeed, visually representing taxonomy, artists and scientists have used taxidermy animals within their practice for centuries. Giovanni Aloï (2012) argues that: taxidermy presents audiences with close encounters of 'subjugated wilderness' where work delivers themes of human power and domination, knowledge and Orientalist visions.



Hyena, 1976
Hiroshi Sugimoto,
Hyena-Jackal-Vulture,
Gelatin silver print. Edition
1/5.

Dealing with themes of power, knowledge and human domination whilst referencing the rich history of taxidermy, Hiroshi Sugimoto photographs animals in Natural History Museum dioramas. The dioramas' stage stuffed animals and the painted backdrops depict the animals in their natural habitat. The photograph tricks the viewer into thinking that the camera captures the alive animal in its natural environment. Sugimoto's photo's capture the poignancy of the human and animal power dynamics. The illusion of the painted backdrop serves to deny humans' brutal role in killing and preserving animal species. The artist successfully draws our attention to the animate quality of taxidermy which suggest humans' power to subjugate animals in their life, death and apparent resurrection. Sugimoto's work draws upon the animal made as object through taxidermy whilst his photographs represent the animal and its role in scientific tradition.

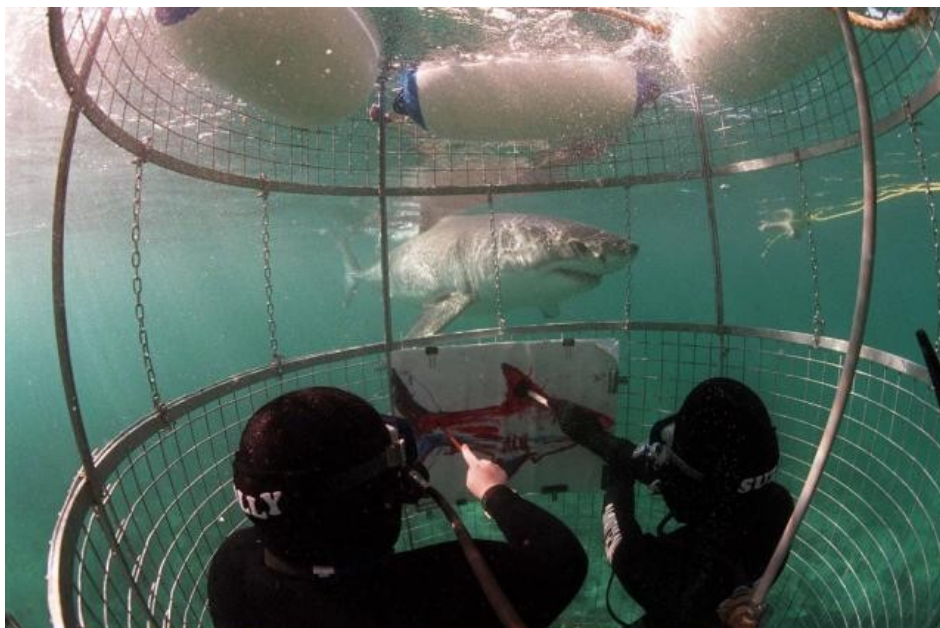
Also representing the heritage of scientific enquiry, power and knowledge, Damien Hirst uses the whole animal as object and material within his work. Set in formaldehyde, a classic technique used in natural-history preservation, Hirst suspends animals allowing audiences to walk around the vitrines- transforming the site into a spectacle.



*The Physical Impossibility of
Death in the Mind of Someone
Living*, 1991
Damien Hirst
Glass, painted steel, silicone,
monofilament, shark and
formaldehyde solution
217 x 542 x 180 cm

Notably the Shark, in Hirst's *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living* (1991), embodies the specimen and it acts like a hunting trophy⁴ representing the authority of man and the power of the artist himself. An owner of a trophy presents the animal as a conquered subject, thus transforming it into an inanimate object, as he claims power and authority over its species.

The transformation of animal to object indicates human power and authority whilst the animal object itself, as a distinct item, emphasises boundary distinctions and separation between species. Alternatively artists whom choose to work with living animals recognise their lack of control or power over the animals' agency and the engagement between animal and artist can challenge notions of human distinction and hierarchy.



Shark Bite (In progress)
1997
Olly Williams and Suzi Winstanley
Acrylic and blood on paper
Photograph by Greg Williams

Olly and Suzi, an art duo, collaborate with living animals in their performative art pieces. In 1997 *Shark Bite*, South Africa the duo performed under water creating an image of a shark. The sharks, circling them and attacking their cages, finally bit a chunk out of the paper. In this piece the cage: first defines a boundary that is able to be transgressed by both: the sharks (they poke their noses through the chains) and the artists (they reach out with artwork). Second, it signifies the vulnerability and animality of the human as the physical barrier acts as Man's one protection from the dominant predator. A more authentic interaction occurs as Man acknowledges an alternative hierarchical order where he admits his own species lack of strength and in this case his inferior adaptation to surviving in this environment. Witnessing their inferiority, the artists have a heightened sense of danger and vulnerability. Importantly, Olly and Suzi focus on producing work in collaboration with another species through human and animal interactions.

Equally, Joseph Beuys emphasises human-animal interactions and the role of the animal in creation of his artworks. In his political⁵ piece *Coyote: I like America and America likes me* (1974) Beuys creates an atmosphere of tension and danger whilst being enclosed in a

4 The hunting trophy was popularised in the 18th c where the killed animal would be stuffed and serve as a souvenir of the successful hunt.

5 Joseph Beuys' analysis of his 1974 piece focuses on the interaction between himself and the coyote as addressing 'the 'unworked trauma' of the modern American's relation to the American Indian" (Steve Baker referencing Beuys, 2000)

small space with a coyote. Arriving in New York, Beuys concealed in felt⁶, spent a week with a coyote; a chain link barrier separated audience from artists. The chain marks the boundary between the audience and the 'other', as onlookers stand back and watch the two creatures continuously interacting. Through ritualised and shamanic performance, Beuys transcends his social identity embracing otherness in a space of shared subjectivity between himself and the coyote. As Beuys' identity becomes interlinked with that of the coyote and the props, he challenges the notion of fixed species boundaries.



*I Like America And
America Likes Me,*
1974
Joseph Beuys
©DACS 1999

Metaphorically, the Coyote challenges human systems and hierarchies as the animal urinates on and shredded copies of *the Wall Street Journal* – a symbol of contemporary capitalism and wealth- man's measure of power. Additionally the coyote as a dog symbolises a species that straddles human and animal realms, it is 'an interstitial creature neither person nor beast, forever oscillating uncomfortably between the role of high status animal and low status person'. (Serpell cited by Giovanni Aloisio 2012). Beuys' formative interactions with animal challenges notions of distinct species boundaries and the symbol of the coyote works to subvert notions of species hierarchy.

Similarly, Marcus Coates uses shamanic ritual and emphasises his intuitive engagement with the animal world. In *Journey to the Lower World*, Coates adorns himself with animal skin and adopts the identity of the animal through mimetic processes. Like Beuys, Coates promotes the idea that one can engage, communicate and learn from animals. By taking on the role of the shaman, Coates challenges the popular western paradigm of species by referencing cultures with different ontological structures.



Journey to the Lower World,2004
Marus Coates,
Photo by Nick David

⁶ Iconic material used by Beuys linked to an early traumatic experience where the story goes: Following a plane crash in which the pilot died, Tatars found a 19 year old Beuys lying in the snow and wrapped him in felt and animal fat to keep warm and alive. (Gompertz 2009)

Ontological structures inform popular understandings of hierarchical human and animal relationships. Formalising these relationships, taxonomical systems and taxidermy, indicate the rich history of animal subjugation. In relation to art, the ways in which the artist engages with the animal subject (through: representation, the use of animal as material or interacting with the living animal) significantly orientates the ways in which audiences interpret the work. Drawing from a historical backdrop the themes of power, knowledge and boundaries, serve as an analytical tool when interpreting artworks. The representation of animals in art often reflects the artist or author whom created the image: the authors subjectivity decides how to represent an animal creating a mediated image. Mark Fairington's work highlights this selective process. On the other hand, Sugimoto and Hirst work with the animal as object. The inanimate animal, objectified and encased indexes the separation and ultimate subjugation of non-human species. Alternatively, using living animals within artistic practice allows the animal to exist in their own right, with artists witnessing the animals individuality and often alluding to an alternative narrative of species coexistence and the importance of engaging, communicating and learning from them, transforming animal species from object of knowledge to source of knowledges.

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