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becoming animal in
**contemporary
visual arts**

NATO THOMPSON (ED)

*Becoming Animal: Contemporary Art in the
Animal Kingdom*

MIT Press, Massachusetts, 2005

ISBN 0262201615

RRP US\$25 (hb)

From vivisection to the preservation of endangered species, the tangled web of both competing, and unrelated, discourses in which animals figure, largely in their relations to humans, is the concern of the growing field of 'animal studies.' Just as the 'original' and singular feminism had to come to terms with internal diversity, as have most areas of philosophical and theoretical contemplation in recent decades, in order to explain the endless numbers of specific instances of representation, the growing field of 'animal studies' is comprised of sophisticated negotiations of the complexities. The task for texts with multiple contributors in the growing 'animal studies' field is to take account of this complexity and diversity, without losing the basic level of coherence that makes reading enjoyable rather than uncontextualised or unanchored. *Becoming Animal* achieves this in style.

Becoming Animal is the book of the exhibition of the same name, at Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art, on display from May 2005 to March 2006. The book is divided by artist, thirteen in all, with two essays that come before—the first by the exhibition's curator Nato Thompson, and a slightly longer one by Christopher Cox, Associate Professor in philosophy at Hampshire College. While the two essays do share many of the same issues of discussion—as suggested by the similarity in titles: 'Monstrous Empathy' and 'Of Humans, Animals, and Monsters'—both smoothly and clearly outline the major issues and complexities of animal philosophy at this moment in time. Thompson focuses on contemporary popular cultural representations of 'monstrous'

animality, and the work of the artists within the exhibition, while Cox gives an overview of shifting historical ideas about the relations between humanity and animality, discussing the animal aspects of 'monsters' from early Christian thinking to H.G. Wells' *The Island of Dr Moreau*. The use of the word 'monster' by both essayists sits awkwardly in relation to the exhibition, not because of Thompson and Cox's specific uses of it, but more in terms of relevance because, as Thompson says, the artists featured are generally not focused on the negative and fearful aspects of human/animal connections that occur throughout history and that preoccupy contemporary popular culture in the form of movies like *The Fly*, *Species*, and *Alien*. Thompson identifies that: 'As its conscious point of departure, *Becoming Animal* focuses on empathetic and sympathetic approaches to hybridity rather than those conveniently fear-laden.' (9)

A reader new to the area will find a solid base of knowledge presented in the two essays. They provide an excellent contextualisation of the cultural and philosophical background against which this exhibition was conceived and produced. Thompson and Cox also give detailed discussion of animals in the work of particular theorists, from Descartes and Rousseau to Agamben and Haraway, who provide the potential for further reading in many directions.

Becoming Animal presents artists working across a broad range of media, from video installations to material ones, and from performance art to interactive art, though no traditional painters feature. This is probably a function of the more inherently hybrid nature of newer

forms of (mixed) media, which can effectively reflect issues of hybridity between animal and human.

Viewed altogether, the artists make *Becoming Animal* well-rounded not only in terms of media, but of animal/human issues: there is something here for everyone, as they say, from scientific categorisation and museological preservation (Mark Dion), to extinction (Rachel Berwick, Patricia Piccinini), to artificiality and future biology (Piccinini, Brian Conley), to cross-overs in animal/human experience (Sam Easterson, Kathy High), to specific political/cultural contexts (Jane Alexander). The relations between women and animality, and partial and makeshift ways that both women and animals access in part, or negotiate, subjectivity, with its inherently masculine gendering, are explored by Ann-Sofi Siden and Kathy High.

A major preoccupation seen across the works in *Becoming Animal* is that of where and how technology meets the 'human', in automaton/machinic hybridity. As feminists have argued in relation to understandings of the interactions of race, gender, and sexuality, connection between two axes of identity reflexively undermines other axes, or opens the way for other axes to be crossed. This chiasmic operation in which the destabilising of one apparently stable category affects other apparently stable categories is evident in a disciplinary way also, in the historical development of animal studies. The twentieth century's preoccupation with the binaries of human/machine and man/woman has, in the past several decades, led to intensified examination of the stability of other bordered categories of being, in this case that of 'human'

and 'animal.' Quite rightly, feminists have then argued that human/animal negotiations should not allow the idea of the 'universal' (male) subject to creep back in, as an 'easier' departure-point for considerations of animals. Hence, the complexities of gender are now central to numerous investigations within the field of animal studies. As a result of this historical trajectory, investigations of several identity categories are frequently simultaneous: human and machine, machine and animal, animal and human, woman and human, woman and animal. Where do the boundaries lie, then, between all of these categories of being? Many of the artists in *Becoming Animal*—Natalie Jeremijenko, Nicolas Lampert, Liz Lerman Dance Exchange, Motohiko Odani, and Michael Oatman—show, in very different ways, that the boundaries are constantly shifting, and new formulations, new 'beings' are being created all the time.

As the title of both the exhibition and this book suggests, the anchoring theoretical, philosophical framework behind contemporary art engaged with animal/human issues is Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's 'becoming-animal', from their *A Thousand Plateaus*. Whether or not the individual artists here are explicitly engaged with, or are aware of, Deleuze and Guattari, it would be fair to say that the influence of the French theorists' thought permeates articulations of human/animal relations in the contemporary moment. As Thompson acknowledges in his essay, there is the potential for an exhibition/collection like this to miss the mark. Thompson quotes from Critical Art Ensemble's *The Molecular Invasion* (2002), about the poten-

tial for art projects to result in superficial engagements with the relations between humans and animals, because of their movement into 'the disempowering realm of the abstract'. (11) It is easy to imagine that an exhibition based on Deleuze and Guattari's 'becoming animal' concept would be in danger of just this kind of superficial engagement. The complexity of the actual text of Deleuze and Guattari's 'becoming animal' combined with its simultaneous glib quotability makes it a tricky departure point for a collection.

However, I think *Becoming Animal* negotiates brilliantly this rocky terrain of using a Big Idea that has become dispersed through cultural quotation, and productively breathes life into Deleuze and Guattari's philosophy. Basically, this is due to the quality of the introductory essays in situating the art, but most importantly, to the standard of the art itself. The artists here are astounding in the sheer sophistication and depth of their considerations. In their works the cerebral meditations of the philosophers grow into living manifestations in which these issues actually play out, in works that are moving, affecting, beautiful and very challenging all at once.

The interviews with the artist that follow the summary of each artist's work are instrumental in the excellence of the book, with the artists frequently expanding upon the theoretical ideas presented in the essays, but in their own voices, and organically, at the points at which such ideas motivate and explicate their work.

I read the book in one sitting, and felt compelled to do so again several times subsequently. Reading the whole book like this, there

is a real sense of the range, intelligence and power of these artists and their explorations.

In terms of the Australian contribution to *Becoming Animal*, Patricia Piccinini features, and her work is discussed thoughtfully. She is one representative of a very active field of Australian artists making intensive examinations into human-animal relations in recent years. Lisa Roet's obsession with primates has led her to produce captivating and disturbing art about them for over ten years now. Roet has a strong international profile, but is not included in this exhibition. Another world-famous Australian artist, Ricky Swallow, has also engaged with animality and like Roet has done so specifically in relation to the film *Planet of the Apes*. His works range from watercolour 'drawings' alluding to the film, as well as his sculptures—the human-to-primate-to-The Terminator-and-back-again row of cast-resin skulls. Then there's Ben Quilty's recent compelling paintings of the Australian icon that is budgerigars, but with a postmodern twist—these budgies are 'Americans', bred in the States to an American aesthetic.

Given the standards of Australian art related to animals, even though *Becoming Animal* is an excellent overview for art students and interested humanities scholars who want to learn about contemporary artists focusing on animal issues, for Australian readers there is the problem of the American bias. For a book that challenges many other assumptions, it does not challenge the nationalist assumption of American centrality—eight of the thirteen artists are American, and only two overall don't live and work in America. It's only a small point, but the book's American-ness certainly renders it less

useful for, say, Australian academics' teaching purposes.

The only—unfortunately major—problem that I experienced with *Becoming Animal* stares the reader in the face: design. While the written words and the images in the book work together to inform one another, this overall 'work' of the text is actively undermined by the production design. Inside it looks like one of those 'visual guide to the space-ships in *Star Trek*', with a pastel-pink shade 'splashed' onto every artist-summary page and around the edges of the pages with the art on them. I kept feeling like I'd spilt something and needed to wipe it off. The effect of this is to distract and detract, to confuse rather than elucidate the nuances of the project. One example of the diminishment of the issues that the book's design effects, is that of the 'decoration' on the summary page for Rachel Berwick. Her work, *Lonesome George*, features a video installation of George—the last surviving turtle of his particular species, from the island of Pinta, north of the Galapagos Islands. Exploring uniqueness, time, and extinction, *Lonesome George* is poignant and sad. However, on the summary page that faces off against the video-still of George staring into the camera, directly below the description of Berwick's work there is a 'shadow' turtle—a miniaturised outline of the turtle-shape in Berwick's still—bunded in as a design decoration. The whole point of Berwick's work is that George is the only one left—the force of the image is defined by its singularity.

Another unfortunate way in which the design undermines the content in *Becoming Animal* is in the cover. Like the inside, a completely

other genre is suggested by the cover, which is a choice of art-work that fails to give an initial impression of 'animal' art: the cover photo is from Ann-Sofi Siden's *QM, I Call Her QM*, otherwise an extraordinary and hauntingly intelligent performance piece/video art-work that has been ongoing for years, in which Siden performs as 'QM', a naked, mud-covered 'creature' whose wanderings into public spaces (such as when she visited the cosmetics counters of a department store) disturb viewers by throwing into relief assumptions about the boundaries of the human. However, reduced to this one shot and placed on the cover without contextualisation, it resembles a horror-movie shot, which in *this* context again bespeaks a confusion of genre. Combined with a title font that looks like someone went silly with gold and silver pens, the overall effect produced is that of a children's book on witchcraft. Also, I couldn't help but feel it ironic that the 'speciesism' that is the name for the centrality of the human throughout history and that this book explicitly challenges, is evident here in the insistence on a representation of a human, however 'monstrous', for the cover. Thankfully, the artists inside the book show that sustained consideration of animal/human relations is possible and rewarding. For the sake of the content, try not to judge this book by its design ... or its cover.

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