



## Fieldworks: Animal Habitats in Contemporary Art

Lewis Glucksman Gallery, Cork  
Francis Halsall

Octopuses are likely to only mate once in their very short lives of two or so years. After the act both males and females give up and start to die. As Richard Schweid puts it: 'this is an odd, extreme dimming of the will to survive until the light just goes out.' (Octopus, 2014) The female tends to her batch of eggs just long enough for them to hatch but whilst doing so stops hunting and eating. She'll live only up to the point when the young emerge and she then fades away. The male's predicament is even bleaker. With no further role in the reproductive process he appears to lose the will to live almost immediately and begins to age quickly.

Likewise he doesn't hunt and begins to starve. The previously astonishing ability to change colour and shape to blend in with the surrounding environment dims. Coordination of those remarkable, labile tentacles also degrades as movement slows and the process of rapid senescence begins. He too will be dead very soon.

It's tempting, of course, to read the condition of octopuses as an allegory for the human condition, especially, perhaps, for people lurching reluctantly away from youth toward their own senescence. Octopuses are, after all, the most intelligent invertebrates in the world, likely to have the cognitive capacity of a 4-year-old human. They have a rich aesthetic life and possess highly developed optical, tactile and (their equivalent of) olfactory systems. Like humans they are known to decorate their living spaces. But it's not that straightforward to map the human onto the animal world. Animals and their environments are radically different to us humans and our environments; and whilst their behaviours and milieus might point toward some strange residual animal core of our own natures, there remains a weirdness to animals' worlds which means they will, at least in part, remain untamed by narratives and metaphor.

There are no octopuses in Fieldworks but it does bring the audience face-to-face with a menagerie of other beasts and their habitats. This smart, witty and handsome show curated by Chris Clarke (senior curator at the Glucksman) is clustered around several well-chosen themes all pertinent to the relationships and acts of reciprocal observation taking place between animals, humans and their respective environments. And it looks great. Clarke has used the architecture to the show's advantage, with many works gesturing through the large windows to the green and leafy grounds of UCC which surround the building. Another benefit of the university setting that's been well used is its ecology of research and education. Here Clarke has also been canny in his

use of a light touch that has resisted didacticism or the heavy-handed illustration of theories. Instead the show is presented in the spirit of fascination with, and playful investigation into, animal worlds. All the work is, thankfully, not too reverential to its subject matter(s) but rather uses creaturely concerns as jumping-off points into speculations on the relationships between animals and their habitats; each other; humans; and, consequently, humans to one another.

Several artists look at those acts of observation that go back and forth between animals and humans. Chris Marker's modest yet beautiful little films show animals in their surroundings, including his own cat lolling on a keyboard, owls and creatures in a zoo. The divide between human and animal observation is underwritten by the quality of both the video and accompanying treated electronic sound, which feel lossy and crummy to today's ears and hence declare their artificiality. Adam Chodzko presents photographs which hint, through the covert surveillance of nocturnal activities, that some sort of unsanctioned behaviour is going on, whilst in Jochen Lempert's black and white documentary images creatures are tiny, almost insignificant specks amidst indistinct, quotidian landscapes. This difficulty in observing natural activities is revisited by Ho Rui An's film in which two filmmakers struggle against annoying human interruptions to film some deer. In this context Ruth van Beek's odd and choppy photo-collages, in which animals are twisted into themselves; Julia Schmid's delicate yet large drawings; and Ciarán Murphy's exquisite painting of birds, beasts and display cabinets, presented through muted palettes and delicate details, all also suggest that acts of observation are going on which may or may not be inhuman. Other artists reflect on the patterns and orders that can be produced through these acts of observation, including Vanessa Safavi's scattering of stuffed birds around a gallery

wall, and Petra Ferianocova's reprinting of colour photos of birds taken by a relative in Africa in the 1970s to produce an off-kilter yet intimate taxonomy. Equally personal is Petrit Halilaj's installation (including a bird sculpted from cow dung, soil and metal, in front of a faded fragment of a diorama) drawn from objects such as inventory cards borrowed from the Natural History Museum of Kosovo. He grew up during the Serbian-Kosovar war and spent time as a refugee in Albania. His work points to the many different histories and borders (personal, national, ethnic) that, whilst traumatic for humans, animals may freely range across.

Other artists find ways to imagine the environments in which these two-way acts of observation might take place. Flo Maak, for instance, uses c-prints and manipulated images to produce impossible spaces in which various beasts sit, somewhat uneasily, in artificial scenarios. Wesley Meuris on the other hand both draws and literally constructs exhibition spaces such as enclosures, tanks, and cages where life might be enclosed and studied, whilst Sonia Shiel has made a crappy, riotous habitat from detritus; it hovers perilously yet comically between constructed and natural worlds.

Nestled within these more overt subject matters and concerns is a tacit theme: nature presents humans with an ontological threat. Our humanity is enfolded within nature and inseparable from it. Hence, easy distinctions such as those between creature / environment; natural / artificial; animal / human become increasingly fluid; untenable even. Inevitably, nature will get us in the end.

As I finish writing this I'm looking over at the dog who's sharing the room with me. Just now she's resolutely and stubbornly refusing to be a metaphor for anything in particular. I don't see anything being signified but rather a shitting bundle of fur, teeth and barks that dozes in the corner occasionally looking up at me

bored and askance. If animals are an allegory for anything, then perhaps it is what I want art to be like. If art is the creation of new things in the world that we don't understand then perhaps art is creaturely and feral. Animals, like the best art, are not reducible to metaphorical meaning; they have lives that sit outside human systems of reference and signification. They are lawless little perverses running amok leaving their fluids and faeces all over the shiny surfaces we spend our lives struggling to keep clean.

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Wesley Meuris: *Cage for Saimiri boliviensis* (2006). Wood, metal, lighting. Image courtesy of the artist and Annie Gentils Gallery, Antwerp.