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**Review: *The House of Beasts'* Symposium: Enquiries into the human and the animal. Darwin Festival, Shropshire Wildlife Trust, Shrewsbury 18th February 2012.**

**Introduction.** The symposium was a part of the new exhibition of contemporary art, *House of Beasts*, celebrating the history of animal-human relations, organized by Meadow Arts and funded by the Arts Council. It took place from July 2011-July 2012 in the stables, mansion, and parkland of Attingham Park in Shropshire, a National Trust property. The exhibition includes work inspired by Attingham's history and highlights the importance of its animal population, both past and present, and the role they have played in the history of the estate. The contemporary art works explore our interactions with animals—domestic, wild, or tamed—living alongside us or sharing our living space. These relationships can range from highly emotional ties, as in the case of pets or horses, to purely economical ones, as in industrial farming. They can also be symbolically complex, as in decisions about which animals are eaten and how they are eaten. They can be based on esteem and curiosity, as in decorative artefacts, portraits of prize cattle, or naturalists' collections. Equally, they can prove overtly hostile, as in the case of pests such as moles, insects, or rats. At Attingham, distinct personages throughout the centuries have illustrated aspects of these relationships through the art works and artefacts collected and displayed there.

The symposium reviewed here was a public event organized as part of Shrewsbury's Darwin Festival. It brought the curator and four of the artists involved in the exhibition into conversation with scientists and leading academics on human-animal relations. Disciplines represented ranged from human geography to evolutionary biology, the humanities, and sociology. The symposium explored the cultural, philosophical, and ethical significance of ideas about the human and the animal (including the difficulty of thinking of humans as animals), as well as of human-animal relations, such as those portrayed in the exhibition. The symposium examined how the art show and its placement in the house and grounds provokes surprise. The speakers evoked, and provoked, reflection on the social, ethical, and cultural significance of human and non-human animals' interactions, as these are embedded in the collections and history of Attingham and in our own day-to-day lives.

The aim of the symposium was to engage with emerging sensibilities and to question human and nonhuman animal relations as these involve issues of ecology and sustainability. The organizers' objective was to offer complementary perspectives to scientific (often Darwinian) views on nonhuman animals. A video-recording of the symposium can be accessed at: <http://vimeo.com/channels/beasts2012>. There were question and answer sessions throughout the day and, at the end, we three summed up the papers and posed questions to each of the speakers present. In what follows, we present these summaries and comment on their significance for understanding human and non-human animal relations and for thinking with the human and the animal.

**Human-animal relationships, human-animal relatedness and questioning the essence of human nature.** Professor David Kipling from the Cardiff University School of Medicine opened with an exploration of “Genetics, Evolutionary Biology and Human-Animal Relations.” As an integral part of the “tree of life” animals, he pointed out, share a surprisingly large amount of biology with “non human animals,” and homo sapiens are consequently not so different from their non-human counterparts. Kipling discussed a number of the different ways in which humans view non-humans—as food, as beasts of burden, as companions, as objects of curiosity and wonder, and finally as agents of pestilence and disease. These are the kinds of relations, Kipling observed, that have been variously depicted in the art showcased in the exhibition. Kipling noted that we tend to privilege humans over other animals, and that we tend to privilege certain animals over other kinds, judgments that are often distant from our biological relatedness and are indeed based upon quite other factors. Kipling explained how the high value of our biological relatedness to animals to biomedical research affects his own work. Because fruit flies are biologically very similar to humans, scientists can begin to make inferences about humans from research using the flies.

In the second talk of the day Sophie Molins, an artist and photographer based in London, presented her photography to the audience, including a collection entitled “Zoo,” which consists of photos of animals in window reflections in New York City. The inspirations for this collection are in the notion of human oppression of primal instincts. Molins raised the question of whether we humans are constrained by our humanity, which we perhaps wear as a mask. Molins's piece “A Sundial in Moonlight” is a commissioned work of interactive video art and is displayed as part of the *House of Beasts* exhibition. Visitors are invited to witness the tale of the second Lord Berwick's overzealous affections for his wife, Sophia, upon whom he bestowed an extravagant music box. The artwork depicts this music box—shaped as a monkey playing a harp—

suffused by the sentiment, as described by Molins, that “a man overwhelmed by mood is like a sundial in moonlight telling the wrong time.” Molins’s piece also depicts the division of male and female halves of the house by a great staircase.

Professor Henry Buller, a “non-human” geographer from Exeter University, closed the first session of the morning with a discussion of the way humans relate to non-humans through movement. Animal movement, the potential of animal movement, motility, and the resultant agency have provided foci for both philosophical and representational accounts of the non-human animal. In contrast to some of the ideas presented by Kipling, this opens up a way of seeing animals that is less hierarchical and more ethical. Buller drew upon a rather charming example of a chimpanzee that sheltered itself from the rain using its hands.

The three talks of the first session each approached notions of an inherent “human nature” differently. Are humans distinct from other animals? Or is the human/ animal distinction in need of reconsideration? On the one hand, Kipling identified the biological similarities, yet both Kipling and Molins indicated that in some situations there is a relationship between humans and animals that can be distinguished from the way that animals relate to other animals. Buller, by contrast, highlighted some of the social similarities shared by human and non-human animals, making a careful attempt to use the human/non-human distinction as opposed to the human/animal distinction.

**Animal death and troubling the human-animal dichotomy.** This disruption of the human-animal dichotomy, and whether we must revisit and renovate our current conventions, was a theme continued in the second cluster of the Symposium, which included presentations by Dr. Mara Miele, a Senior Fellow in the City and Regional Planning Department at Cardiff University, and Daphne Wright, an artist living and working in Bristol. Deviating somewhat from the introductory session with regard to the subject of animal death, the presenters discussed the symbolically complex relationship between human and animal in very different sets of circumstances: food production and art. Miele’s opening presentation directed attention to the former. She invited audience members to join her on a journey through a slaughterhouse, an institution devoted to the “choreography” of killing animals. Miele described the constellation of techniques, technologies, and tools that help qualify the killing as “humane.” From hairnets and uniforms to equipment bleakly bearing the label *Poultry Processing Solutions*, such technologies are valuable for our understanding the humane, and thus concurrently the non-humane, practice of killing animals. Following a dissection of the obscure concept of “care” applied during slaughter, Miele concluded

that distinguishing animal slaughter as “humane,” the end point of which results in bird-dom being reimaged as food-dom, is always fragile and disputed. By inviting the audience into an invisible and often hidden world, Miele helped the audience to think through the suffering of, and human relationships with, certain animals. Through her analysis of the chicken death production line, we see how slaughter is at once an ideological, ethical, cultural, economic, scientific, and technical practice. For Miele perhaps the most significant relationship between the human and animal is the one between food and an acceptable kill.

Artist Daphne Wright continued the theme of animal death by explicating how animal imagery is used in her artistic practice. Stating her own intention to celebrate animals following death, Wright engrossed the audience with a slideshow of her diverse artworks, including *Looking for the Home of the Sickness*, *Domestic Shrubbery*, and *Where Do Broken Hearts Go*. Wright’s animal sculptures were initially inspired by the desire to underscore the difficulty of securing access to animal bodies intended solely for artistic purposes. This was illustrated most profoundly in Wright’s story of *Primate*—a cast of a euthanized monkey—which elicited hostility and opposition from scientific professionals. Wright sketched out the strange quality of the “death mask” worn by her sculptures, particularly in *Primate* and also *Stallion*, a full size cast of a dead horse. For Wright, far from creating a more realistic representation of animality, the porcelain death mask, that is, “painting death back into the face,” brings the animal, paradoxically, to life, and endows the animal with more human characteristics than it was perhaps afforded whilst alive. In this exploration of the history of still life and the beauty of death, Wright intended to highlight the hinterland between human and non-human, and to question whether the human is there or not there. Wright views the death mask as lying somewhere in between, in the other-worldly.

Wright’s and Miele’s presentations shared similar yet distinct means of thinking through animal death. Whilst Miele discussed animal death in relation to slaughterhouses and “humane” killing, Wright honored animal death by endowing each sculpture, or work, with a death mask. The common ground established involves not only encountering complexity in accessing the animal body, but also raises issues surrounding our (acceptable) treatment of—and interactions with—animals, or rather animals of a specific kind.

**Human-animal relationship(s), hierarchical comprehensions, and what it is to be human.** Beyond animal death, the dislocation of the seemingly rigid human-animal

dichotomy was further explored in the third cluster, which welcomed Professor Erica Fudge, from the English department at University of Strathclyde, Robert Davies, a photographer and artist based in Worcestershire, and Tessa Farmer, an artist based in London. Each speaker offered perspectives for thinking through the social, cultural, philosophical, historical, and ethical significance of how human and (non-human) animals interact. This byzantine affiliation, bound up in intricate symbolic meaning, and potentially eliciting both fascination and antagonism, was discussed in relation to economic and emotional relationships, how we view the human when examining Other animals, and how animals contribute to human understanding and the *making*, and *unmaking*, of the world.

Fudge began with an absorbing discussion of cow-hood in the seventeenth century. She outlined two problems associated with contemplating animals of the past: i) animal minds are ultimately inaccessible to humans, and ii) animals in the past do not leave us many records of their lives. Exploring the problems and potentials of attempting to recover animal lives of the past, Fudge chronicled the story of Elizabeth Elsing of Topsfield, a “woman of idle and disorderly life, a milker of other men’s beasts, and a hedge-broker.” While affirming that we can never penetrate the secret internal stirring of animals, Fudge called for “imagining in historical writing” and hoped to achieve it by beginning to imagine what it might be like to perceive as a cow. Such creative thinking, not fixed by the limitations of human physiology or the observable realities of the world, might also, for Fudge, allow us to tend to our imperfections. Not only may imagining help us understand the past and write fuller histories, it may remind us that we are, essentially, limited beings. Fudge identified the economic and nutritional importance of dairy cows in the 17th century, the value of milk to a family, and how a stranger entering a cow’s space, and milking it, would have been a disruptive event. For Fudge, this indicated that one of Elsing’s offences may have been her illicit and unsettling approach to the animal. The sociological value of considering cow life was debated later, with a particular focus on the notion of gift exchange—the cow as both giver and gift—, and gendered interpretations of Elsing’s offences, particularly the “milking of other men’s beasts.” Fudge concluded by proposing that the case of Elizabeth Elsing and a distinct engagement with a world the cow occupies can be read not only as social, political, and criminal history, but also of animal history, prompting us to acknowledge the necessity of engaging with other ways of being in the world, both animal and human.

The dialogue surrounding the relationship(s) formulated between the human and the animal was continued by artist Robert Davies. Davies began by discussing his work

entitled *Insects*, for which he collected dead insects in his studio as artistic material. He then introduced the audience to his recent work, *Animals*, which engages the differences between representing the animals we encounter as food, as pets, and in leisure. Distinguishing two separate groups of animals, racehorses and farm animals, Davies urged the audience to acknowledge the hierarchical distinctions inherent in our understanding. Davies used his exemplary groups to draw contrasts between the famous and invisible animal, animals held in high esteem and animals identified in terms of food production, and animals endowed with human-like traits (such as strength, bravery, spiritedness, intelligence) and animals belonging to the world of the beast (measured by productivity and conversion). His magnificently detailed portraits concentrate on the small fry, that is, the ignored, relegated, and lowly-prized animals.

Throughout his work, Davies strives to re-imagine and restructure our thinking by viewing all animals equally. This is best epitomized in “Buttercup,” an imposing drawing that depicts a cow in the very same way horses were represented in early-century equestrian portraits. This traditional rendition of animals of a less desirable kind intends to capture and question our disparate responses to different animal types, particularly those used in food production. Playfully referring to himself as the “militant of the slaughterhouse,” Davies outlined his main goals for the graphic series, namely to show the majesty of all animals and to make people aware of what they do when they sit at the dinner table. Davies’s passionate reinterpretation of the human-animal relationship has broader implications for this inherent, taken-for-granted distinction. The use of names for titling his work, for example, disrupts the relationship by humanizing an entity formerly distinguished as Other. What is more, Davies shows that even by looking at the animal, whether the racehorse or the cow, we look, in chorus, at the human and what the human values.

The themes outlined above, namely how our understanding of the human-animal distinction has been blurred, was explored further by artist Tessa Farmer. Farmer closed the third session with a description of her work with “skeleton fairies”: half-human, half-insect creatures. Farmer’s art, self-described as “fantastical but grounded in reality,” translates myth into nightmare by depicting fairies, perceived popularly as genial and good-natured beings often with supernatural powers, as a dark, mischievous, and threatening species. Farmer’s creations inhabit a temporary state somewhere between the beautiful and the uncanny, life and death, human and animal. Farmer walked the audience through the details of her designs, including the process of minimizing the height of the fairies (many are barely 1cm tall), collecting the necessary

insects for artistic material, and how the pieces became more visual and violent as work progressed. Farmer's depictions of, in her words, "the alien" presented images of fairy-on-pest, or rather pest-on-pest, chaos and chaotic relations. Farmer followed with a screening of her visual installation "The Den of Iniquity," an animation series communicating the stories of these skeleton fairies. Enigmatic and amusing, Farmer's creatures are part of a dark mythology of creatures engaging in torturous practices on other beastly forms, reminding of the cruel realities of life cycles.

Farmer's cryptic creations could be interpreted as allegories of the human race that kills, dominates, and captures the world. "The Den of Inequity," in particular, can represent a tale of human endeavor. Weaving a fantasy drawn from literature, legends and imagination, Farmer's quirky and macabre artwork uncovers the world of competition often overlooked in depictions of the natural world. Such creations, ultimately, portray the powerful supremacy exercised by the human, as tormentors, over the animal.

**Being *with* animals as a way of understanding past, present and future.** In the third and last cluster of the symposium Professors Terry Mardsen and Joanna Latimer began to piece together responses to the call for reimagining the complex network of human-animal relationships through examinations of their embodied structures, namely agriculture and dwelling. For both, processes of embodiment (breeding, milking, eating, riding, living with) through ordered economic, social, cultural practices were taken for granted, and then became disembodied.

Professor Terry Mardsen, director of Sustainable Places Research Institute at Cardiff University, spoke of his work tracing animal, place, and people as closely connected, interwoven, and complex systems. These systems, Mardsen argued, are of crucial importance in new sustainable agriculture: one that places an animal in it. Mardsen listed vulnerabilities and instabilities within the agri-food systems, which have far reaching yet immediate consequences in terms of food security, food scarcity, inherited ecological crises, inequalities between animals as well as between human-animals, etc. Many responses to these problems — for example genetic modification of pigs to reduce phosphorus in manure — are being presented as sustainable, without serious enquiry into the meaning and quality of sustainability. According to Mardsen, it is rare nowadays for questions to be raised about the ways in which "greening" is being achieved, which is precisely why it needs to be examined. Mardsen offered as a model the Yakutian Cow, which is cherished and praised for what she is, gives to, and co-creates with the Yakutian people. The ensuing discussion raised the problem of what to

do with already existing breeds and practices if new relations like the Yakutian Cow are made the norm.

Professor Joanna Latimer, an ethnographer of scientific and medical practices, took the audience on a virtual tour in and around Attingham House, and the *House of Beasts* exhibition itself, identifying the original cultural *ordering* of domains — human, domestic animal, wild animal, food animal, etc. — that Latimer, the artists, the curator, and the speakers *dis-ordered* for the audience and the visitors to the Attingham House. Latimer introduced the concept of an “art of dwelling” derived from the works of Heidegger, Weber, and Strathern.

Latimer began her tour through the *House of Beasts* with a short video by Kathleen Herbert entitled “Stables,” in which four horses roam freely in Gloucester Cathedral. From stables to the kitchen, from the entrance to the drawing rooms, from the masculine to the feminine side of the house, from gardens to the fields, from the upstairs to downstairs, in each space Latimer uncovered an animal within the human-animal dwelling. She detailed how the artists of the exhibition provoked a disorientation of cultural categories of animal *place* (for example: a fox in the woods) by siting animals *out-of-place* (a fox hidden in a deformed chair by a fireplace) in the *House of Beasts*.

The strength of this event was in the creative way it merged art and science, feelings and thoughts, in order to explore human-animal relationships. The success of the symposium suggests the need for more events organized in such way, and for opening new chapters in the academic literature as well as in everyday life.

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