

# Why are contemporary artists obsessed with animals?

An interview with Giovanni Aloï

Interview questions by Julie Ackerman for *Les Inrockuptibles*

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**Contemporary artists seem more than ever preoccupied with animals. How can explain this focus? What ethical issues arise from animal representation? How do artists treat animals in art? We interviewed Giovanni Aloï, Art Historian at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and specialist in animal representation to find out more.**

**Julie Ackerman: Last month, the video *Spring* by the artist Adel Abdessemed, featuring chickens on fire is a scandal. Social networks ignited and pushed the artist to remove his video exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Lyon. What do you think this controversy reveals?**

**Giovanni Aloï:** Abdel Abdessemed has a long history of representing violence on animals in his work. In 2008, his work *Don't Trust Me*, a video loop in which six farm animals were swiftly killed by a sledgehammer blow caused plenty of controversy around the world. The backlash led to the piece being taken down from the exhibition at the San Francisco Art Institute, and the Glasgow International Festival the same year. The year after, his exhibition in Turin was postponed because of complaints against animal violence.

There are two substantial problems with Abdessemed's work with animals. The first is that his use of violence is essentially sadistic and voyeuristic. He exploits violence in order to attract attention and disturb the viewer as a form of attention seeking. There are many sophisticated ways in which a good artist can express what Abdessemed tries to express without having to kill or torture animals.

The second issue is that Abdessemed persists in using animals as a symbol of something else. According to the artist, the animals killed in *Don't Trust Me* referenced the Chinese calendar and the work symbolized the expansion of China's development and the violence the population which propels such development is subjected to. From this perspective, the hammer that kills the animals signified the Communist regime.

In using animals as purely symbolic vehicles for human affairs, Abdessemed demonstrates a substantial disconnect with any contemporary theory of art and philosophy and a total lack of sophistication in his ability to express ideas about politics and ethics. He's after publicity, not art.

*Printemps* is another desperate cry for attention. The 2013 screening of the video in Qatar did actually cause quite a bit of controversy on social media, but as it most often perhaps, not all news from non-western parts of the world catches the attention of the west. I agree with you that this latest controversy was more resonant. Much of it might be because social media have developed dramatically since 2013. They are more and more present in our everyday lives and we are most likely constantly refining our ability to use social media for causes that might be worthy of attention. Social media enable us to protest from the comfort of our homes and offices without having to actually take to the streets, and they also enable likeminded people to find each other, thus gathering strength around specific points of view.

But there is also another aspect at play. Most recently, conversation on social media have been taking a dark turn in which we all seem interested in condemning others and elevating

ourselves to a higher moral ground. Visibly protesting about something on social media empowers certain groups and individuals, not so much because they are actually making any difference, but because they care to show the world that they are better than the rest. This is a new psychological profile that requires some studying.

Lastly, with the increasing threat posed by climate change and the rise of interest in responsible food consumption, it is very likely that more and more people have an active interest in animal and environmental subjects—and this is indeed a good thing!

**Ackerman: This is not the first time that a form of censorship of works of art involving animals has taken place. For example, in September 2017, the Guggenheim Museum in New York was caught up in major controversy because of the works of artist Huang Yong Ping.**

**Aloi:** Huang Yong Ping is another artist who infers violence on animals in order to communicate very simple ideas that could be executed in more interesting and creative ways. *Theatre of the World* consists of a caged arena in which insects, serpents, and lizards battle each other to the death. The set-up is meant to tell us that the world is a place in which the most powerful wins over the weaker. Besides the unnecessary killing of animals, I am left wondering if this is actually a message anyone needs to consider in a gallery space. Works of art such as these are just poor in meaning and lack any kind of serious conceptual dimension, never mind skills. Personally, I see them as a double loss, animal life on one side and artistic intelligence on the other.

The problem with both artists, Abdessemed and Yong Ping, is that they essentially pander at the spirit of the ancient Romans who gathered in the Colosseum to see humans being devoured by exotic animals, or medieval villagers gathering for the spectacle of the scaffold. These are regressive works of art that appeal to the lowest common denominator of cultural pasts in order to provide gory entertainment, not art.

The censorship point is a complex one. Generally speaking, I am against institutional censorship. We are all aware of the serious dangers of censorship and its relationships with dictatorships. However, a number of people protesting an exhibition is not quite the same as censorship. In all cases, it is not the people who take down the show, but the institutions who set them up in the first place. They seemingly cannot deal with the pressure or cannot justify their poor ethical stance and end up making it look as if they were forced to take the work down in the end. So, I see the problem with the institutions as much as I see it with the artists. During the last century, museums had important educational missions and their ethical values laid at the core of the exhibiting programs. Today, museums are too concerned with publicity and money. This results in bad and sensationalist choices that eventually end up backfiring. The Guggenheim Museum in NY has seriously damaged its reputation with the Huang Yong Ping scandal and they dug an even deeper hole for themselves when they responded to the attacks.

I think we are at a point where we seriously need to reconsider the role of shock, violence, and trauma in our everyday culture. I am not advocating that we should censor but do we need to surround ourselves with more gratuitous and unnecessary instances of it? To what end?

**Ackerman: Art is no longer considered an autonomous sphere. We are paying more and more attention to the conditions of production of works of art. However, we can hardly remove a work of art from a museum under the pretext that the conditions of production are not acceptable. What is the limit?**

**Aloi:** I guess it depends on what the conditions of production are. So, we have to wonder, as you rightly say, what are the limits and who imposes the limits. Some of my colleagues are intolerant of the presence of any animals in the gallery space be they alive or dead. They argue that a gallery

space is no place for animals and in some cases, they are right. I personally don't have a problem with either as long as the living animals are not made to suffer, and the dead ones have not been killed especially for the exhibition in question.

In 2014 I wrote an essay to remind art historians and artists that the history of western art is filled with processed animals in the form of glues, pigments, and brushes. The Renaissance paintings everyone loves so much are the graves of many animals who had to die in order for the painting to be made. But no one protests outside the Louvre about those dead animals because they have become invisible through the process. In contemporary art, we are more likely to see death and suffering and that becomes a trigger. Activists protest outside a Damien Hirst exhibition where the same two cows sliced in half have been exhibited for twenty years, while they should really picket outside every McDonald's in the world, where millions of cows and chicken are turned into burgers every day. That's where animal rights lose its relevance. But from an ethical standpoint can we really demonize contemporary art and still enjoy classical art? One has to find a realist middle ground. Ultimately, I think we should not show works of art that incite violence and sadism. And this is not because I believe that art should always be beautiful or that it should always teach us to be better humans. But because we should also be able to question the ethics of artists and institutions—they are not omnipotent gods who should be allowed the power to unleash upon us whatever they wish in the name of art. Or should they? That's where the notion of art as freedom becomes problematic—freedom to do what and for whom?

**Ackerman: I believe that today we are witnessing a turning point in the way artists represent and use animals. How does this manifest itself and how to explain it?**

Aloi: Yes, you are very right about this, and this is also why the approach of Abdessemed and Yong Ping looks thoroughly outdated and gratuitous—they are disconnected from the current discourses of classical art and spend time re-enacting games of patriarchal power. The turn of the millennium has witnessed a heightened interest in animals, and now also plants, because more than ever, it appears clear that we have seriously messed up. It is obvious that the problem between us and our planet is not just our inability to keep things clean and sustainable, but that our conception on nature and the way in which we relate to nature is the root of the problem.

Over millennia of cultural development, we have progressively alienated ourselves from nature and animals and have defined ourselves as the opposite of animals, despite Darwin showing us we are monkeys. This separation has enabled us to exploit and destroy everything in the name of personal gain, with no respect or compassion for anything in our way. We can try to clean our rivers and seas as much as we like, but until we really learn to see ourselves as part of nature, things are not going to change. That's also why contemporary philosophers like Timothy Morton and Slavoj Žižek are arguing that we should forget about our romantic idea of nature since, as a concept, it is borne of a separation between us and the rest of the planet.

The new philosophies of the Anthropocene point towards the idea that everything on this planet is interconnected and that our life on it strictly depends on how we can respectfully and considerably integrate ourselves with other non-human beings and ecosystems instead of continuing to tell ourselves that we are dominating everything. Soon there will be nothing to dominate and conquer. The ghosts of our colonialist state of mind are haunting our present more than we are ready to acknowledge.

Serious contemporary artists are responding to these cultural imperatives. They are keen to explore new registers of criticality and mobilize their efforts on two fronts: the conceptual and the methodological. Conceptually, artists think more carefully about their local reality and the connections between their specific situation (political and ecological) and those that are broader and further afield. They aim to push their thinking, and the viewers' own, toward under-scrutinized areas of discourse and practice in order to configure new connections. Sometimes these configurations

reveal the absurdity of naturalized systems of knowledge, discourses, and practices; at other times they propose new alternatives.

Methodologically, artists like Pierre Huyghe, Jonathon Keats, Suzanne Anker, Diana Thater, Olafur Eliasson, Mark Dion, Marcus Coates, Carsten Holler, Brandon Ballengée, and many others are committed to rethinking our relationship with the non-human and are not interested in shock tactics or unnecessary theatricalities. Attention to their medium of choice is, in all instances, paramount, since it solidifies relationships that are developed over time, slowly, and meditatively. Thus, the process becomes an intrinsic part of the artwork—sometimes this is visible in the works; at other times, it is embedded in the layers of complexity that characterize them.

The general tendency, however, seems to revolve around time and slow consumption and production. This methodological choice implies that the speed at which our lives are consumed nowadays is one of the main factors that has led to the current climatic situation. Contemporary art thus becomes a place to experience a different rhythm in the hope of transposing that model to at least part of our chaotic everyday existence.

**Ackerman: Animals are also more present in contemporary art than in the past. How can you explain it?**

**Aloi:** I trace the rise of animals in contemporary art in my 2011 book *Art & Animals*. The reasons why animals have surfaced in contemporary art more insistently than ever are grounded in many factors. John Berger's essay 'Why Look at Animals?' was the first to critically identify animals as part of a visual discourse not as symbols or objects but as symptoms of our inability to relate to nature. Thereafter, in 1997, Jacques Derrida focussed on animals in his talk 'The Animal that Therefore I Am?' in which he addresses western philosophy's inability to see, understand, and meaningfully talk about animals. This was a watershed moment.

This growing interest in the philosophical question of the animal also happened to coincide with the worsening of climatic conditions and environmental degradation on the planet. Animals began to haunt the gallery space as witnesses and reminders of our wrongdoings towards them and nature in general.

Simultaneously, postmodernism nurtured a deep interest in new materiality and destabilizing aesthetics—something animals enabled to explore further. The rise of BioArt then opened up new frontiers for what it means to make art in the new millennium altogether. Most recently, the 2012 edition of (d)OCUMENTA curated by Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev more firmly placed on the artworld's map the importance of animals and plants in contemporary art from a philosophical perspective. Modern and contemporary art have predominantly been firmly anthropocentric tools through which to consider the human condition in a disconnected and narcissistic way. Statements as powerful as those staged at (d)OCUMENTA 13 are capable of changing the mindset of the artworld in very useful and productive ways.

Donna Haraway's work has also largely contributed to the visibility of the subject in art. According to last year's *ArtReview* list of the most powerful 100 individuals in the artworld, Donna Haraway ranks 3<sup>rd</sup> and Bruno Latour, another major voice in the field of the Anthropocene and environmentalism made a new entry at number 9. These are all symptoms of an important shift in the arts. The increasing presence of animals in contemporary art is the result of these different ideas and circumstances coinciding and producing a moment of change.

Art can be a very powerful tool for change and it is certainly positive that museums and gallery-goers who don't necessarily engage with animals and nature in their lives can have the opportunity to think about these subjects beyond the cultural conventions of natural history. The gallery space can become a place in which new forms of knowledge and understanding of nature and animals can emerge – a place where we can reinvent nature and our place within it. But the possibility of this power to unleash change rests on the artists and curators. Institutions and artists must consider ethical dimension much more carefully than they have done in the past. We are

currently witnessing a moment in which museums are under mounting pressure not to overlook issues of race and gender representation anymore. With great power comes great responsibility to engage with viewers in mature and productive ways rather than waste opportunities for the sake of publicity.

**Ackerman: What strategies do artists use to convey their new perspectives about animals and nature?**

**Aloi:** Artists engage with animals and plants for different reasons, so it is hard to draw a general assumption of what drives them to explore this subject. Some do so for publicity, as we have seen. Others, like Damien Hirst, are interested in using animals to make us think about life and death. But many artists who work with animals are interested in empathy and in reconsidering the hierarchies that have defined our relationship with them and nature. Ultimately, it is our conception of ourselves as superior beings that makes us neglect the natural world. The positivism of the enlightenment has, in fact, impoverished our world. As science produced more and more knowledge about nature, it also stripped animals and plants of all mystery and magic, constantly casting them as replaceable machines and negating their cognitive abilities. Many artists are interested in changing this approach because much of the terrible environmental situation we are in derives from these mindsets we take for granted.

My recently published book *Antennae 10: A Decade of Art and the Non-Human: 07-17* gathers many examples of contemporary artists who have been reinventing the representation of nature in the gallery space in order to cast animals and plants as active agents instead of objects. Many of the strategies they employ in fact revolve around the need to allow audiences to rethink the non-human beyond the representations of the past. This is also why the animal turn in art is so interesting – because not only it revolutionizes the way in which we think about animals, but it also brings artists to think about what art can achieve and how old and new media can be used in new and creative ways.

Artists like Cole Swanson and Nandipha Mntambo, whose work I discuss in another recent book of mine, *Speculative Taxidermy: Natural History, Animal Surfaces, and Art in the Anthropocene* reconfigure taxidermy skins in order to rethink our power over animals and how we can rethink past and present histories of human-animal relationships in ways. Recontextualizing preserved animal skins and manipulating them to generate new symbolic forms is one of the most recurring strategies to reconsider the anthropocentric and patriarchal knowledge we have inherited. Others, like Céleste Boursier-Mougenot and Pierre Huyghe, strike collaborations with animals in order to establish a creative dialogue that transcends the classical conception of the god-like artist as the author in control of everything. Others are more interested in communication, behavior, and perception...

**Ackerman: In the end, the challenge is not so much to rethink our relationships only with the animal but with all non-humans, plants, bacteria ...**

**Aloi:** The field of animal-studies started to gain traction at the beginning of the millennium. It was an exciting moment. Likeminded scholars began to map the philosophical shortcomings that have led us to where we are today. But it soon appeared clear that the main focus of this inquiry was mainly cantered around pets, farm animals, or primates. So, animal-studies professed a desire to move beyond anthropocentrism, but the animals it chose to focus on revealed an inability to really think out of the anthropocentric box beyond a certain point. Its reliance on post-structuralism almost 20 years on is becoming embarrassing. Personally, I don't care anymore about what Heidegger thought of lizards, Agamben of spiders, and Deleuze of wolves, as they all knew very little about these animals. Most often than not, in their work, animals become abstracted and generalized pictures of inferiority. These philosophers wrote about animals in transcendental terms and with next to no scientific knowledge about the animals they wrote about.

20 years ago, it was interesting to recover these animal conceptions from the thought of continental philosophers. It was necessary to validate the subject of scrutiny for the academic field, and to lay its foundations—but we should be done with that phase, now! I understand animal studies to be an important component of posthumanism, but I like to think of myself as a “grumpy dissident” within the system. Some of my colleagues also share my views. More recently, the rise of plant-studies and multispecies ethnographies is opening up new opportunities for us to think more holistically about our relationship with nature. Meanwhile, the resonance of the Anthropocene in philosophical discourses imposes on all of us the need to think more broadly about the interconnection between beings and environments. So, yes. Ultimately, a sole focus on animals or human-animal relations will not suffice to change our mindset in a consistent way.