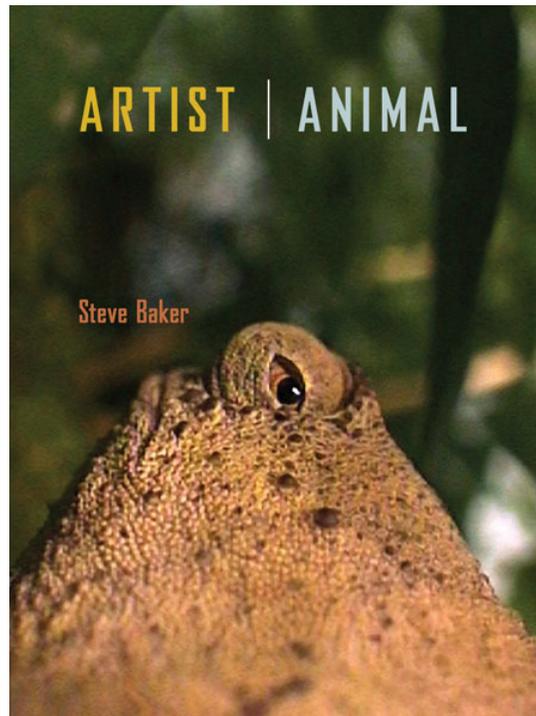


REVIEWS

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**A**nimals/**A**rtists

Steve Baker, *Artist | Animal* (Posthumanities 23). Minneapolis & London: University of Minnesota Press, 2013. 320 pp. \$29.95pb.



Full disclosure: I am mentioned in Steve Baker's book *Artist | Animal*, and I previously have published a dialogue with him about art and animals in my edited book, *Leonardo's Choice: Genetics and Animals*. I know him personally and respect his writing. In fact, Steve's book *The Postmodern Animal* was an inspiration to me, not so much in his particular perspective, but in the fact that it was the first book I had come across that took seriously animal imagery in contemporary art and performance. Perhaps the most important thing I should disclose at the outset is that I believe that animals are sentient, conscious, intelligent, and creative beings who are just as necessary to the world as human animals.

All that being said, *Artist | Animal* is a necessary addition to the growing human-animal studies area. Baker has been a supportive and crucial documenter of a growing body of art involving animals that few others in the art world have taken on as seriously and as carefully. He offers a relatively unique approach to the kind of art and cultural criticism he employs. Baker interviews carefully chosen representatives of a broad spectrum of artists to focus on “the complex interplay of their work and their words” (18) in exploring their practice. This, in itself, is admirable. Few cultural theorists, and Baker may be said to fall under that heading, take seriously the words of visual artists. For many theorists, philosophers, critics and curators, artists often have been asked to be seen, but not heard. As Susan Sontag writes, “interpretation is the revenge of the intellect on art” (7). Critics often disparage or ignore what artists say about their own work, only to inflict their own interests or preoccupations on the work that have nothing to do with the artists’ intentions. Baker completed extensive interviews with the artists included in the book over many years, and these firsthand accounts by artists are invaluable records of this period in art history. One of the most important sections of the book, in my mind, is the chapter entitled “Art and Animal Rights.” The three artists interviewed and discussed in the chapter, Sue Coe, Britta Jaschinski, and Angela Singer have not been easily received by the art world. Coe is probably the best known, having been making work since 1977. But each of these artists’ work deserves more recognition than they have previously received and Baker sensitively and carefully gives us the gift of their own insights on their work and practice. Unlike some of the other artists included in Baker’s book, these three are clear about their purpose and articulate about their practice, and Baker makes a cogent and persuasive case for what art adds to growing questioning surrounding animals. But these three artists, and I would add Mary Britton Clouse, are not only sure of their purpose, but also, none of them use live animals in any detrimental or harmful way, nor do they commission to have animals killed or captured or manipulated for their art. Animals as beings of worth are prioritized in their work.

So while there is much in Baker’s book to recommend it, I still feel a level of frustration with other parts of the book. What I find disheartening in *Artist | Animal* is Baker’s ambiguity about where he stands on the ways in which animals are used in art. And throughout the book there is a heavy reliance on the words “ambiguity” and “messiness,” not only as descriptions of the included artists’ practice, but at times as

justifications of artistic practices that involve animals, even when it means the animal does not outlive the inclusion in those practices. Admittedly, those words have been used consistently in art criticism and art practice. Having taught art for 30 years, I have used them myself in working with students, writing about others' art, and thinking about my own. But Baker uses these terms and "openness," all garnering entries in the index, and others like "botched" and "flawed" so often that one begins to wonder if the repetition of these phrases are constructing the very thing he is critiquing, a rule-bound aesthetic — and ethics, but we will come back to that — that contemporary artists must follow or be ignored. After all, those words describe a particular kind of value when used to talk about art practice. Granted, the artists included in the book describe their processes, and sometimes the works themselves, as having these qualities, but my problem is that in a number of works described in the book and in works included in the book, animals pay for these qualities with their well-being or even having their agency compromised by an artist, sometimes up to and including being killed.

I realize one of Baker's goals is to let us as readers make up our own minds, and there are many moments when he makes himself clearer, as in a short section entitled, "On Ethics." He sees "how artists think and work" (65) as having a relevance for something other than a calculable ethics as envisioned, or at least hoped for, by philosophers such as Alain Badiou and Jacques Derrida. I do not disagree with him about the problems of an ethics that is forced, or calculative, such as utilitarianism, but there are other alternatives. If one is concerned, however, with a new ethics that includes animals in that concern, then their agency and worth seems to me to be the place to start. After all, we have already witnessed the results of the opposite for millennia. For instance, I greatly appreciate the book's "Afterword: Art in a Post-Animal Era?," a rereading and disagreement — though Baker finds that hard to admit — with Cary Wolfe's well-known essay juxtaposing the work of Sue Coe and Eduardo Kac (*What is Posthumanism?* 145-168). Up until the last paragraph, that is, when in the last words of the book Baker appears to mesh work having real commitment to actual animals and their lives, such as that practiced by Sue Coe, with Kac's transgenic work, which does not.

This is not to say that Baker is *for* animals being killed in art. In probably his most unambiguous sentence in the book, he states: "This is not intended as a defense of either *Rat Piece* or *Helena*" (17). The first is a 1976 performance piece in which rats were burned alive by the artist, Kim Jones, and the second is a 2000 piece called *Helena* by Marcus

Evaristti that placed goldfish in blenders which gallery audience members were free to turn on (they did). He goes on to say:

The book's contention — which it may or may not be able persuasively to demonstrate — is that artists working in this field are well placed to devise forms of responsible practice: critical and improvisatory and material forms that side-step a rule-bound or unduly judgmental notion of ethics. (18)

Baker describes and discusses a number of pieces in the book that instead persuade me a “responsible practice” is something that needs questioning when animals are used by artists. Further, how do animals fare when artists side-step an “unduly judgmental notion of ethics?” At the very least, it is counter-productive to separate ethics from aesthetic judgment while at the same judging artist's work on the basis of a particular aesthetic also based on value judgments, as both aesthetics and ethics are. Catherine Bell's performance piece, *Felt Is the Past Tense of Feel*, in which she squirts the ink of 40 dead squid, recently caught specifically for this performance, into her mouth, does not in my mind fit with what I would call a responsible practice concerning animals. But, Baker's comments about watching the performance, “Nothing (to this viewer, at least) seems ugly or repellent about this performance: it's caring, attentive, beautiful” (20) make me even more concerned about justifying artists' sidestepping ethics for the sake of a truth that seemingly only art can fathom. These squid were killed for this performance. True, killing animals is a widely practiced activity, but Baker is willing to call this performance “almost posthuman”(39). For those that need a refresher, posthumanism questions our anthropocentrically structured “dogma that insists on an ontological difference — and the ethical consequences that follow from that difference — between homo sapiens and every other life form on the planet” (Wolfe). Killing squid does little to question that dogma in any consequential way.

I point this out because Baker often invokes posthumanists Deleuze and Guattari, and postmodernist Donna Haraway, in his iterations of both posthumanist and postmodern work. I see both, however, as limited in their real commitment to dismantle that ontological difference and then to act on the ethical consequences. These theorists are intellectually and linguistically gifted, offering us creatively articulate concepts, but do

they walk the walk? Nicole Shukin, in her brilliant book *Animal Capital*, says of Deleuze and Guattari's "becoming" and "affects":

In the context of animal capital, there is a great deal at stake in romanticizing affect as a rogue portion of pure energy linked to animality as a state of virtual rather than actual embodiment.... At the very least, affect as an authentic animal alterity is impossible to distinguish from the intensities unleashed by capitalism. (32)

In other words, what is at stake for actual animals in the midst of an unrelenting global capitalism is a virtuality that has become a fact of life: as a factory-farm unit hidden from view, as a mere repository for experimental drugs, as a mere clone or a genetic data vat, as a member of a vanishing species, among other unvirtuously virtual existences.

Richard Iveson makes clear that the politics underlying Deleuze and Guattari's enforced division between the categories of the wild and the tame are familiar structures of oppression — both traditional and contemporary.

By way of the wild-tame dichotomy, Deleuze and Guattari reserve for humanity alone the possibility of encountering the timeless immediacy of "true Nature" at and as the limit of language. Moreover, they posit an undying and undifferentiated preoriginary domain of animality — an essential dissolution of Life which renders as senseless the singular deaths of nonhuman animals. And finally, Deleuze and Guattari exclude from the "truth" of "Nature" all of the nonhuman beings improperly contaminated by the anthropological machine of human recognition. (12)

One cannot help but see the merging of individual animals into a mass of undifferentiated animality by Deleuze and Guattari as a typical colonizing move, one that historically does not bode well for the colonized.

Haraway, too, can be downright obstructive when it comes to inspiration for relationships with animals that do not rely on the same anthropocentric and chauvinist aspects of modern humanism she has critiqued throughout her career. Zipporah Weisberg's brilliant critique of Haraway's theory of companion species, "The Broken Promises of Monsters: Haraway, Animals and the Humanist Legacy," helps us to understand how this theory,

not only falls far short of any real challenge to the most problematic aspects of humanism outlined by Haraway, but reveals a disturbing collusion with the very structures of domination she purports to oppose.

(2)

I have space to offer only one example Weisberg explores in her essay. It concerns the word “curiosity” that Baker uses in an early discussion about whether art is beyond moral criticism, something that I think is central to my problems with *Art | Animal*. Baker specifically says, “that sort of question, binding together aesthetic and ethical value judgments is one that artists of Jones’ [the maker of *Rat Piece* described above] generation had already had moved beyond” (11). What he does not say is that artists returned to that question, if they ever really abandoned it, in the 80’s and 90’s. Witness, also, that we are still arguing about the possibility or impossibility of separating the two, whether we call it aesthetics and ethics or art and morality (Gigliotti, “Aesthetics of a Virtual World”; Gigliotti, *Leonardo’s Choice*).

Quoting John Cage in 1968 as succinctly offering a more “contemporary” perspective when he said to artists, “Value judgments are destructive to your business, which is curiosity and awareness,” Baker also offers a quote from Haraway’s *When Species Meet*: “Curiosity is not a nice virtue, but it does have the power to defeat one’s favorite certainties.” (The word “curiosity” also demands an entry in the index.) As Weisberg points out, Haraway’s use of the word “curiosity” to justify animal experimentation undermines her claim that animal experimenters are somehow not part of the Western humanist project of instrumental domination of animals” — and of the earth, I might add — but “of a relentlessly historical and contingent kind” (77) of inequality. And if that reason seems not to work for you, Haraway explains why there are a number of benefits to animal experimentation: “Curiosity, not just functional benefit, may warrant the risk of ‘wicked action’” (70). One cannot help but see in this quote a parallel with Baker’s use of the word “curiosity” for justifying, or at least not judging or limiting, artists’ use of animals. Is it not clear that artists using animals in ways that treat them as objects of curiosity, placing their welfare and their agency, perhaps even their lives, and as only secondary to the art practice itself, is just another way of enforcing anthropocentrism, the superiority of human needs and desires above all else? By all means read this book. There is much to be gained in the discussions within which it is

involved. But, perhaps try reading it with the order of the title inverted, with the word animal preceding the word artist: *Animal | Artist*.

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