

Animals in Symbol and Art

In the beginning before there were people, before there were animals, a lone woman lived in a cave. She lived on the roots and berries of the plants. One night a magical dog crept into her cave and stretched out on her bed beside her. As the night grew long the dog began to change. His body became smooth and almost hairless. His limbs grew long and straight. His features changed into those of a handsome warrior. Nine months later the woman birthed a child. He was the first Chippewa male and through him came the Chippewa peoples.

—CHIPPEWA CREATION MYTH

UP UNTIL NOW, THIS textbook has covered the role that real animals play in human lives and the variety of relationships that have been formed between humans and other animals. But one of the most important ways in which animals play a role in human cultures is through their representations. Animals have been portrayed in the art, literature, folklore, religion, and language of human cultures for millennia. As such, they are important **symbols** that humans use to make sense of our world and ourselves. Biologist Edward Wilson wrote that animals are “agents of nature translated into the symbols of culture” (1984, 97). But how animals are represented by humans is not merely a metaphorical question. The ways in which we paint, worship, and tell stories about animals also shape how we treat them in turn. In addition, for many people, the real relationships that humans once had with animals have been largely supplanted by symbolic representations, with important implications for both people and animals. Finally, as we shall see in this chapter, real animals and metaphorical, artistic, mythic, and virtual animals overlap in many ways.

The Use of Animals in Human Language

Language is more than a system of communication. Language both reflects and shapes how we see the world. On one level, language is just a system of categories. We create words to categorize the world around us—words like “furniture” refer to a class of objects such as tables and chairs that are used in a particular way. Without such linguistic categories, it would be difficult to teach our children about the world in which we live.

Words about animals shape our understanding of them. We have already discussed how terms like “pet” and “livestock” reflect a particular understanding of animals and then shape our treatment of them. Once an animal has been classified as a pet, it would, in our culture, be difficult to turn that animal into meat. Similarly, we don’t think twice about consuming animals that have been classified as livestock.

Language, then, reflects cultural values and practices and shapes those same values and practices. This view is found in a classic anthropological theory known as the **Sapir-Whorf hypothesis**, which states that language helps to define the worldview of a people, and thus the culture, of its speakers (Kay and Kempton 1984). It does so by providing labels for certain kinds of phenomena, which different languages define according to different criteria. In other words, the grammatical categories of different languages might lead their speakers to think about things in particular ways.

So, if language shapes how we see the world and teaches us cultural values and norms, what does it say about how we see the world when we use words like “dog,” “cow,” or “fox” to describe people, or when we call someone bitchy, catty, or chicken?

A number of related issues are at play here. First is the way in which humans so easily draw on animals to make sense of human realities. This is the case both when we call people by animal terms like “bitch” or “sow” and when we use phrases and idioms such as “flog a dead horse” or “skin a dead cat.” Why are we so quick to draw on animals in this way?

Second, we need to look at the implications of using animals for these purposes. What are the implications of calling people by animal names, especially when those names are used as pejoratives? **Animal pejoratives** reinforce attitudes toward marginalized humans by comparing them with another marginalized group: animals. Negative animal imagery is most often used to disparage women and minorities. Words like “bitch,” “cow,” and “sow” almost exclusively refer to women and girls and imply a number of negative traits, such as stupidity, passivity, moodiness, and obesity. Calling a woman a dog or a pig not only implies that the woman is ugly or fat, but it

says something about all women as well: that they are to be judged primarily on the basis of their physical appearance, and that if they fail in achieving the cultural standard of beauty, they deserve to be called an animal. In other words, the huge number of expressions linking negative traits in women with animals demonstrates disdain not just for the animal but for women as well.

Third, there are implications for animals as well. How does using animal idioms and animal pejoratives affect the real-world treatment of animals? Language is never neutral—it shapes behavior. According to Joan Dunayer (2001), animal pejoratives denigrate certain categories of people—women and minorities, primarily—but they denigrate animals as well. Anthropologist Edmund Leach (1964) noted that by creating pejoratives from the names of animals, humans establish distance between themselves and the animals they regularly abuse. The fact that dog, cow, pig, sow, bitch, and chick are thought of as negative terms means that those animals are thought of negatively. A woman who is called a cow is thought to be fat and dull; likewise, the cow is thought of as dull. A dull animal is an animal who ultimately does not deserve to live (Dunayer 2001).

An example of the way in which animal slurs are not just gendered but feminized is the English language word “cunt”—which, for American speakers of English, is one of the worst things you can call a woman. This term derives from the old English term for rabbit (coney, cunny, which come from the Latin *cuniculus*, which means burrowing; rabbits are thus “burrowing hares” even though, of course they aren’t hares and hares don’t burrow!) and refers not just to a woman but to her genitalia. That’s why it’s the worst thing we can call a woman, because it associates a woman with two things that many societies find distasteful: an animal (and a degraded, feminized animal at that) and female genitalia. This kind of linguistic violence is another way of affirming the “killability” of rabbits (Davis and DeMello 2003). In her analysis of the history and mythology of the turkey, Karen Davis (2001) makes the same claim: when we’re determined to do violence to an animal, we must first turn the victim into a despicable thing that deserves such treatment.

Haslam, Loughnan, and Sun (2011) conducted two surveys about animal slurs and found that one of the reasons these are so offensive to people is that the terms (and the animals behind them) convey stupidity, depravity, and disagreeableness and that, ultimately, by using an animal term to refer to people, they dehumanize the subject. (On the other hand, the authors showed that the offensiveness of these terms is mitigated when the person using the slur and the subject of the slur share the same status, such as women.)

In addition, idioms such as “skin a dead cat” contribute to a permissive social attitude toward the abuse of animals. Language influences the ways in which animals are socially constructed and therefore treated in human society. Negative animal idioms normalize or trivialize violence toward animals. When sayings like “flog a dead horse” become a normal part of our vocabulary, we can no longer see the implications of human violence against animals. These expressions mask the real violence within them and demonstrate human power over animals. Further, what does it mean when we use phrases such as “slaughter,” “butcher,” or “hunt” to discuss the killing of humans? It makes killing humans vivid and awful, yet we don’t consider that when we use those terms to discuss animals; in those cases, it’s normal and happens every day.

In addition, in this text we have discussed the ways in which the language used in animal industries serves to depersonalize and de-animalize them. Terms like “breeding stock,” “meat,” and “research tool” serve as absent referents, hiding the animal underneath the term. We’ve also talked about scientific writing and how the use of third person passive voice (“the animals were euthanized”) makes the animals into objects and removes human culpability for their deaths. Leach (1964) even suggests that our guilt about killing and eating animals can be seen in the way the English language obfuscates the animal origins of certain types of meat (i.e., “beef” instead of “cow” or “pork” instead of “pig”).

Ecological linguist Arran Stubbe, following Leach, focuses his attention on the ways in which English speakers refer to pigs (2003). Although pigs have been eaten by humans since they were domesticated, how they are raised has radically changed, and he links this change to the changes in language used to refer to them. Stubbe suggests that though at one time we felt guilt in eating pigs because they were raised in close proximity to humans (that’s how many of our communicable diseases originated, after all; and that’s what we see in places such as Melanesia, where pigs often share the same homes as humans), we responded by developing a whole host of negative expressions about pigs (which were then used to denigrate humans as well): pigs are greedy, selfish, filthy, and stupid, for example. As pig production and slaughter has moved further from sight in contemporary society, our language has changed as well, and we now primarily refer to pigs through the language of the pork industry, which de-animalizes pigs and sees them as meat-producing machines.

Another example of the use of language to reinforce attitudes surrounding the exploitation of animals are the different terms for describing the killing of humans and nonhumans. We routinely use words such as “murder” or

BOX 14.1

ANIMAL IDIOMS

All of these popular idioms have violence toward animals at their root.

Bleeding like a stuck pig
 Cook someone's goose
 Dead as a dodo
 Got bigger fish to fry
 Killing two birds with one stone
 Like a chicken with its head cut off
 Like a lamb to the slaughter
 More than one way to skin a cat
 Not enough room to swing a cat
 Shooting fish in a barrel
 So hungry I could eat a horse
 Take the bull by the horns
 There's no sense beating a dead horse
 To let the cat out of the bag
 To shoot the bull

“execution” when talking about the killing of a person, but we never use those words when referring to animals. Instead, we use “slaughter” or “euthanize,” both of which have specific meanings and neither of which includes the sense of culpability (or illegality) that “murder” conveys. On the other hand, we often use words intended for animals, like slaughter, to refer to humans. Using slaughter in this way implies a particularly brutal murder, yet when we use it to refer to animals, most of us never think about the brutality of the killings.

Most negative animal idioms about companion animals are about cats. This reflects a long history of mistreatment of cats. At one time, cats were stuffed into bags and drowned, skinned, and swung around. Although we no longer skin cats, they and other pets are routinely abused, neglected, and abandoned. But when we use an expression such as “swing a dead cat,” it seems funny and unreal. Rabbits are another animal that is routinely trivialized

yet subjected to horrific abuse. Terms like “dumb bunny,” “bunny slope,” “snow bunnies,” and “ski bunnies,” all of which are aimed at women, paint both women and rabbits as being dumb and childish. Most terms associated with rabbits are derogatory, including “harebrained” (meaning frivolous or stupid), “rabbity,” (meaning small, cowardly, or rabbit-like), and “rabbit shouldered” (meaning slumped in the shoulders).

The treatment of animals is shaped by another linguistic practice as well. A linguistic convention in popular media is to refer to animals as “it” unless the writer or speaker knows that the animal in question is male or female. Even then, animals still might be referred to as “it.” I once wrote an article about rabbits for a well-known rabbit publication and was shocked when the magazine came out and all of my “he or she” and “his or her” were transformed into “it” and “its.” I complained loudly to the editor of the magazine, but she told me that it was standard practice in the publication. I was shocked that in a magazine about animals, ostensibly for animal lovers, this could be the case. Likewise, addressing an animal directly in print is almost

never done. The introduction to Dave Aftandilian's *What Are the Animals to Us?* (2007) stated that the book was devoted to animals: "it is *you* that we have written this book about and for" (xvii; emphasis mine). Although I have dedicated a couple of my books, at least in part, to the animals in my life, seeing this statement was still somewhat shocking, as rarely is it the case that animals are directly addressed as subjects.

Animals as Symbols

Throughout history and around the world, various cultures have used animals as symbols. Symbols are things to which people give meaning that stand for, or represent, something else. The meaning of symbols depends on the cultural context in which they appear and shape how we think about things. The cross, a nation's flag, and the swastika are all symbols that are imbued with different meanings in different cultural contexts. There is no inherent meaning in the symbols themselves. Many symbols are also **polyvocalic**; that is, they can signify multiple abstract concepts simultaneously, not all of which can be easily articulated in words.

Animals are used to symbolize a whole host of characteristics that we see in ourselves, or want to project onto others, but that might be dangerous or foreign to us (Rowland 1973). Thus, animals can be lustful, deceitful, murderous, or promiscuous. They can also symbolize more positive qualities, such as love, altruism, and sacrifice. The second-century Roman writer Aelian's book, *On the Nature of Animals*, a collection of stories about animals, tells us that the octopus is sneaky, fish are well behaved, and owls are wily like a sorceress. This type of part-scientific, part-fanciful discussion of animals would remain popular through the classical world and into the Middle Ages. medieval bestiaries were filled with images of animals, a bit about their natural history, and what the animals symbolized, accompanied by a moral lesson (McCulloch 2017).

Animals are *like us* but also *unlike us*. Because of this ambiguity, they are a perfect vehicle for expressing information about ourselves to ourselves. As we've noted, we both bestialize people (who we call bitches, cows, or foxes or, in the case of whole groups of people, beasts or vermin) and humanize animals (who we anthropomorphize). And although we can use animals to highlight a person's good qualities (brave like a lion), we more commonly use animals negatively (cunning like a fox) and especially to denigrate racial minorities. (See chapter 13 for more on this.)

In cultures around the world, zodiacs, too, feature animals. The term *zodiac*, in fact, is Greek for “circle of little animals.” Zodiacs use animals to predict the future and tell stories about the present and the past. In Western astrology, for example, a person’s personality can be predicted from the relationship at the time of their birth between the planets and constellations, most of which are named after animals. So, a person who was born when the Sun was in the constellation Taurus will have the characteristics associated with the bull: steady, stubborn, and stable (Baigent 1994; Curry 1989). Like the Western zodiac, the Chinese zodiac consists of twelve signs, all of which are represented by animals. But these animals do not represent the constellations; rather, they represent the year in which a person is born. Thus, a person who was born in the year of the rabbit is thought to share qualities with that animal; they are articulate, talented, and ambitious (Wang 2017).

Why are animals so commonly used as symbols? Anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, in his work on totemism (1963), said that animals are chosen as totems not because they are good to eat but because they are “good to think (with).” In other words, animals have great metaphorical potential, and, for Lévi-Strauss, they are especially useful for representing social classifications such as clans and other aspects of kinship systems. Ancient and traditional cultures viewed animals as closely related to humans, so it made sense that they would be incorporated into human symbolic orders and used to represent human behaviors, desires, and dreams.

But why do we choose *some* animals to symbolize specific things? On the one hand, symbols are arbitrary—there’s nothing in the stars and stripes of the American flag that indicates freedom or democracy. But because of the flag’s history, it has been imbued with those symbolic associations so that today, they seem natural. In the case of animals, there is generally some kernel of truth at the root of the animal’s symbolic association—some aspect of its biology or behavior that makes people interpret it in a particular way.

Cats, for instance, can be symbolic of bad luck, evil, or witchcraft in Western cultures (Lawrence 2003). Why the cat was chosen and not, for example, the dog tells us something about both cats (who famously see in the dark, are solitary, and have a blood-curdling cry when fighting) and the people in the cultures that use cats in this way. (For a chilling look at the reality of cats’ lives in eighteenth century France, see Darnton 2009.) Often what we see in an individual animal is obvious: ants often symbolize teamwork and discipline; the deer, grace and sensitivity; the snake, because of its ability to shed its skin, regeneration; and the rabbit, quickness. Some animals are especially thought to represent sexuality because of their sexual

behavior or the size of their genitals, such as bulls, goats, and apes, whereas rabbits and hares represent female sexuality (because of their well-known fertility).

In many Native American cultures, bears are thought to most closely represent man, because they walk on two feet and are said to have uncontrolled emotions, as do humans. Bears are also used in Native American cultures to symbolize introspection because they are solitary and hibernate alone in the winter (Black 1998; Berres, Stothers, and Mather 2004). Other animals who are significant for Native peoples gained symbolic importance because of their economic importance. For instance, the bison was used by Plains Indians for food, shelter, clothing, trade items, and other objects and thus represented life to them (Lawrence 1993).

Sociologist Colin Jerolmack, in a discussion of the metaphorical qualities of the pigeon (2013), notes that pigeons tend to mate for life. This makes pigeons an excellent symbol of monogamy and enduring love; thus, they are popular for use in fertility magic. Pigeons or doves (which are really the same bird) once represented Aphrodite, the Greek goddess of love, and Kamadeva, the Hindu goddess of love. Pigeons and doves have been used to deliver messages for thousands of years. For this reason, the biblical story of the flood told in the Book of Genesis has a dove delivering the message to Noah (in the form of an olive branch) that the flood is over and that dry land has appeared. As a result, the dove has represented deliverance and God's forgiveness to Christians. Because of their gentle natures and white plumage, they also are used to symbolize peace. Ironically, Jerolmack points out that today, doves have inherited the positive symbolic associations mentioned here, whereas pigeons now represent filth because of their tendency to live in cities and eat people's leftovers.

Another bird, the sparrow, has been subject to a great deal of symbolic associations. The English sparrow was imported to the East coast of the United States in the mid- to late nineteenth century in order to control a species of worm that had begun infesting American trees. The sparrows were so successful that they began to out-compete some local birds and were perceived as a menace by some scientists, while being defended by bird lovers. A number of jurisdictions passed laws encouraging the killing of the sparrows and even establishing bounty programs, which encouraged children to kill them in great numbers. Sociologists Gary Alan Fine and Lazaros Christoforides (1991) claim in their article on what were called the "great sparrow wars" that one reason that the issue became so important was that it occurred during a time when Americans were growing increasingly concerned about high rates of immigrants arriving in America from southern



Figure 14.1. Black cats like Sniffles are often considered to be bad luck in the United States. (Photograph courtesy of Anita Carswell.)

and eastern Europe and from Asia. These new immigrants threatened native-born Americans, and the anti-immigrant rhetoric of the time was used to fuel anti-sparrow sentiment, with the sparrows acting as stand-ins for foreign and unruly outlaws.

Like pigeons and doves, rabbits (and hares) are used to represent fertility and sexuality, but certainly not monogamy. Rabbits are linked to sexuality—and particularly female sexuality and fertility—in the rituals, myths, and symbols of Ancient Greece and Rome, as well as Diana, goddess of childbirth. In addition, rabbits were often used in love spells, as aphrodisiacs, and to aid in fertility. In Eastern cultures as well as in Meso-America, ancient Europe, the Arab cultures, and Africa, the rabbit is

also linked to the moon, which itself is linked to fertility and childbearing, with lunar goddesses commonly represented with or dressed as a rabbit or hare. Finally, because of the rabbit's fertility, these animals are used in myths and rituals to signify rebirth, which explains the rabbit's role in the symbols of Easter (Davis and DeMello 2003).

Animals in Artwork

Animals' symbolic attributes make them fine subjects for artistic representation. They have been used by artists as a decorative motif, to represent the real place of animals in society, and also symbolically—to represent the same qualities that they represent elsewhere in the culture (Werness 2006). Artwork involving animals dates from the earliest forms of art from the Paleolithic era as predators and prey. The European cave paintings from 30,000 years ago featured animals more than they did humans and included large animals that played a major role in human lives (Morphy 2014; Mithen 1988). Later, with the rise of agriculture in the Neolithic and the domestication of animals, domesticated animals began to displace wild animals as subjects in art. Cattle, for instance, were important in terms of labor, food, and religious ritual and were found on jewelry, musical instruments, pottery, and the walls of homes, tombs, and temples in the great classical civilizations.



Figure 14.2. This sculpture of a monkey from the Chinese Zodiac is on display in Moganshan National Park in China. (Photograph courtesy of Jakub Halun from Wikimedia Commons.)

In medieval art, animals were represented in different ways. They were commonly used in jewelry, paintings, and utilitarian objects and to illustrate Bibles and other religious texts. When lambs were used, they generally represented purity and Jesus's sacrifice for the sake of humanity; doves were used to show love; and griffins were depicted as guardians of the dead. Medieval English coins were often decorated with animals whose symbolic meaning would have been clear to those using the coins. English artists depicted animals—like lions or peacocks—that were unknown in England except through artwork and fable, but common animals were included as well, such as chickens or doves. Hens were used to represent the Mother Church, and the peacock represented immortality and the resurrection of Christ. Lions, which were often depicted fantastically, given that the artists had never before seen one, symbolized both Jesus and the watchfulness of God. Snakes in the Christian tradition represented evil, but they were also seen as having protec-

tive capabilities, which was probably their function on medieval coins (Klingender 2019).

With the rise of the Renaissance in Europe, animals began to be represented more naturalistically and less symbolically than in the Middle Ages. Artists such as Leonardo Da Vinci and Albrecht Dürer drew very realistic portraits of animals, and other artists showed dead animals as food surrounded by fruits, vegetables, wine, and bread. As in earlier times, hunting remained a prominent theme of Renaissance paintings (Cohen 2008, 2014).

The Japanese have used animals in their artwork for centuries. In ancient Japanese art, noblemen and warriors enjoyed images of hawks and eagles, which represented power and strength. Japanese carp, or koi, who live a great many years, symbolized persistence and longevity, and peacocks, because of their beautiful, extravagant tails, were used to represent pride

and service to the gods. Cranes have long represented good luck and are used in both artwork and functional objects such as screens that divide rooms in the house. Today, a gift of a thousand paper origami cranes is a gesture of good luck, or healing in the case of illness. Other animals often represented in Japanese art, which borrowed heavily from Chinese art due to the strong influence of China until the ninth century, are the twelve animals of the Chinese zodiac, all of which share their symbolic qualities with people born in the year of that animal. For example, the horse is thought to be intelligent, independent, and free-spirited, and those qualities are shared by people who were born in the year of the horse (Volker 1975; Von Krenner and Jeremiah 2016).

One of the most popular animals in Japanese art is the monkey. Monkeys are sometimes depicted realistically but are often shown in human clothing and engaged in human activities. Monkeys are particularly useful for representing human characteristics because, unlike horses or cranes or carp, they really do look—and often behave—like humans (Ohnuki-Tierney 1989). For that reason, Japanese macaques are a frequent subject in Japanese art and myth. They are thought to be messengers of the Shinto gods and are thus revered. Foxes, too, were associated with the gods. In particular, the fox was considered to be the messenger of the goddess of the harvest, Inari, because foxes killed mice who destroyed the rice crops. Later, foxes took on a darker symbolism and became cunning tricksters who could bewitch humans and even shapeshift into human form.

African traditional art has used animals for years in paintings, sculpture, masks, jewelry, and even rock art (Roberts and Thompson 1995; Ben-Amos 1976). As in other cultures, in African art, animals are chosen for their symbolic qualities as well as their beauty or distinctive appearance, sound, or behavior. For instance, the sankofa bird is known for its odd habit of looking backwards; the Fante use the in art to symbolize wisdom and learning from the past (Bastos 2009). The spider is a popular African trickster animal, symbolizing cleverness in Akan art. Animals such as tortoises and snails are important food sources for many African tribes, and because they are gathered by hand rather than shot with a weapon, they represent peace when depicted in artwork. As in other cultures, the snake, because of its ability to shed its skin, is a symbol of transformation. In African art, the pattern of a snakeskin can be used to decorate an item, with the same symbolic connotation as when the snake itself is used.

In contemporary art, animals, if they appear, are used in very different ways than was found in the past. In particular, it is rare to see animals depicted as symbols anymore, or sentimentally. In the 1990s, British artist

Damien Hirst created pieces that don't just represent animals but are composed of the parts of dead animals (Huang 2015). His first major "animal installation" was called *A Thousand Years* (1990) and consisted of a cow's head rotting inside a glass case, complete with flies and maggots. Another piece, entitled *Mother and Child Divided* (1993), consisted of a bisected and pickled cow and her calf. His work has been controversial among gallery owners (who have been concerned about patrons vomiting when seeing his work), and some art critics who considered his work overrated, and among animal rights activists, who deplored the use of dead animals. "Meat art" is also a popular art form in some circles today. In 2010, singer Lady Gaga famously wore a dress made of meat for the MTV Video Music Awards, saying that she wore it to show that she is not a "piece of meat" and that if people don't stand up for their rights, they will soon have as much rights as the "meat on our bones." Meat as metaphor is also the foundation for artists who make pieces out of meat or, like artist Nicolas Lampert, whose art represents meat (but doesn't use it.)

Other artists have used, and sometimes killed, animals in order to provoke reactions from the public. In 2003, for example, Chilean artist Marco Evarisitti created a piece that involved live goldfish swimming in blenders full of water. Patrons were given the opportunity to press the buttons on any of the blenders, killing the goldfish, which the artist said was an invitation for the public to "do battle with their conscience." More controversial was Swedish photographer Nathalia Edenmont, whose work involved actually killing rabbits, mice, chickens, and cats and then photographing their chopped-up bodies alongside flowers, fruit, and other objects. Like Evarisitti, Edenmont has said that her work was intended to challenge the public, and she claimed that those who opposed it were hypocrites for not opposing the killing of animals for makeup or food. (For a discussion about the ethics of using live animals in art, see Wallis 2012.)

In one of the earliest art pieces involving live animals, Greek artist Jannis Kounellis's 1969 *Untitled (12 Horses)* was an installation in a Roman art gallery of twelve live horses. In 1974, performance artist Joseph Beuys created a piece called *I Like America and America Likes Me*, in which he lived in a room with a live coyote for three days; Beuys said that the piece demonstrated Euro-America's relationship both with coyotes and the indigenous peoples of America. In 2007, Costa Rican artist Guillermo Vargas displayed a starving dog tied to a gallery wall, in a piece he called *Expo Exposición N° 1*. On the wall behind the dog was written "*eres lo que lees*" (you are what you read) in dog food. It was alleged (but never proven) that the dog starved to death in the course of the gallery show. Vargas later said that the show was



Figure 14.3. Ruth Burke, *Trough*, 2016. Performance. From the artist's statement: "This performance reverses the typical power structures engaged in by humans and cows. Rather than the human consuming from the body of the cow, my bovine collaborator consumes from an appendage on my body. I am on my knees in a blue costume that features a large cone around my most vulnerable corporeal parts, the neck and the head. The dark blue color is a play on cow's dichromatic vision and the cone is filled with treats. The relationship between birth, death, and consumption is one perpetually unfinished." (Photograph by Emily Schiffer.)

intended to reveal the public's hypocrisy, as dogs starve all the time on the street and no one takes an interest. In 2000, American artist Eduardo Kac commissioned the National Institute of Agronomic Research in Paris to create a glowing rabbit, made by splicing a rabbit's DNA with that of a jellyfish, as a conceptual art piece. Kac claims he and the INRA had an agreement that Alba would go home and live with Kac's family in Chicago, but the INRA claims that no such agreement ever existed. Even though Kac never brought the rabbit home, the image of the glowing green bunny that he created became one of Kac's most popular works (Kac 2003). Another artist who famously uses live animals in his work is Mark Dion, whose installations often include live birds in a museum context, and whose intent is to sensitize the public about birds.



Figure 14.4. *Miriam* from Offering Series #2 by Yvette Watt. The image of *Miriam* was painted in the author's own blood. (Photograph courtesy of Yvette Watt.)

Other artists today use their work to directly challenge cultural views about animals and take a strong position in favor of animal rights. For example, Tasmanian artist Yvette Watt creates paintings of animals, as well as animal-human hybrids, as commentary on the changing relationships between humans and (other) animals and on the objectification of animals in society. She also depicts farm animals in unusual situations in order to force the viewer to think about our close (we eat them) and yet distant (they are kept far from us) relationship with them. In addition, her work reflects an interest in the relationship between how nonhuman animals are depicted and what this might have to say about how these animals are thought about and treated (Watt 2009). Photographer Jo-Ann McArthur, in a project titled *We Animals*, photographs animals in human environments to demonstrate that “humans are as much animal as the sentient beings

we use for food, clothing, research, experimentation, work, entertainment, slavery and companionship” (McArthur 2013). Her aim is to challenge the human-animal border, which allows for so much exploitation of nonhuman animals. Britta Jaschinski is another photographer whose work focuses on animals and animal suffering. Her project *Zoo* depicted animals in captivity, capturing their boredom, frustration, and unhappiness (Jaschinski 1996). Sue Coe is an American artist whose etchings, paintings, and lithographs to document graphic animal (and human) suffering in places like factory farms and meatpacking plants (Coe 1995; Kuzniar 2011).

British artists Olly and Suzy travel around the world painting and drawing endangered animals in the wild, getting as close as possible to the animals. They often let the animals interact with their work, as they did in 1997, when they painted great white sharks underwater and then photographed one shark taking a bite out of their painting. They then use their work to educate the public about the tenuous status of the animals they paint (Baker 1993).

New Zealand artist Angela Singer uses old taxidermied animals to show how animals are abused not just by hunting and taxidermy but by society as

a whole (Baker 2014, 2016). She noted in an interview that she was always shocked at how dead animal heads could decorate the walls of homes and businesses and that their presence typically elicits no commentary at all. Her work confronts and makes public the violence that was done to these animals and asks the viewer to question human superiority over animals. In addition, she intends to honor animals whose lives have been taken from them for a trophy. Art critic John Berger notes that animals are already becoming lost to the contemporary world and that much of today's art involving animals can be seen as a sort of memorial to their loss. Certainly, the work of artists like Olly and Suzy, who focus primarily on endangered animals, or Britta Jaschinski, whose latest work features disappearing wildlife, is not just a memorial to this loss but a cry to stop it.

Watt writes of the way in which other artists use animals as symbols or metaphors for the human condition:

I propose that this results in the animals becoming marginalised, allowing the artists to avoid addressing the broader ethical issues surrounding the ways humans interact with animals. This avoidance of the politics of animal representation in the visual arts is at odds with a rethinking of animals and human-animal relationships in other disciplines where there is an increasing emphasis on the importance of foregrounding the ethical and political issues surrounding human-animal relationships. (2009, iii)

Mirrors for Human Identities

What animals ultimately do, whether used in art, language, or literature (which we will discuss in chapter 16), is enable humans to express ideas about human identity. What does our depiction of animals, as well as our use of animals, tell us about ourselves?

Anthropologists have long analyzed cultural practices involving animals as being at least in part, a commentary about human culture, values, and practices. For instance, anthropologist Garry Marvin (1994) argues that bullfighting is symbolic of the opposition between nature and civilization on the one hand and force and intelligence on the other. The bullfighter (who represents culture) conquers the bull (who signifies untamed nature) in the ring (a cultural space) by using his intelligence to overcome the bull's raw force. Anthropologist Clifford Geertz, in his classic interpretation of the Balinese cockfight (1973), says that the cockfight is a "metasocial commentary" about the human relationships in Balinese society. Geertz suggests



Figure 14.5. Installation of *Eat, Drink, and Be Merry* by Maria Lux, at Upfor Gallery, Portland, Oregon, 2016. From the artist's statement: "The three parts of this project tell intertwining stories of vultures, fruit bats, and viruses connected by contemporary disease spillovers from animal hosts into humans. The installations view recent outbreaks of the Nipah and rabies viruses in Bangladesh and India through the historical and problematic golden ages of two European countries with global reach, combining symbolic Dutch and Victorian decorative arts with patterns derived from scientific knowledge." (Photographs courtesy of Upfor Gallery, image credit Mario Gallucci).

that Balinese cockfighters see their birds as the symbolic representation of the men, such that it is really the men fighting for their own honor in the ring. For Geertz, the cockfight is a story the Balinese “tell themselves about themselves.” And veterinarian and rodeo scholar Elizabeth Lawrence called rodeos “ritual events” that serve to “express, reaffirm, and perpetuate certain values and attitudes characteristic of the cattle herders’ way of life” (1984, 211). Emiko Ohnuki-Tierney’s 1989 discussion of the monkey as metaphor in Japanese society addresses that animal’s closeness to humans and the various implications of that closeness, including the monkey as a deity or mediator between the gods and humans as well as its use as a scapegoat, mocked for its attempts at being human. Ultimately, as with the other works mentioned here, the monkey serves to help the Japanese understand themselves and Japanese culture. As Japanese culture changes in the modern era, so do interpretations of the monkey.

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Website Links

Muybridge's Horse: <http://muybridgeshorse.com/>

Art as a Way of Knowing (and Not Knowing) Animals

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I consider myself a research-based artist, and the subject of that research is animals. For me, being research based means two things. The first is that my work is derived from, builds on, and engages with existing research from many fields. I might base a project on writings such as The Velveteen Rabbit or Alfred Russell Wallace's field notes; films like Bladerunner and Clockwork Orange; scientific studies such as John Lilly's ill-fated dolphin language experiments of the 1960s or the chemical analysis of types of tears; a TED talk about an innovative microscope made of folded paper or Carol J. Adams's Sexual Politics of Meat; or discussions with practitioners from outside academia, like a veterinarian or the swine barn manager at the Illinois State Fair.

Second, being a research-based artist means that I view artmaking itself as a research practice, with something particular to contribute to discussions about animals. Animal studies, as a nexus of many fields, allows one to see more clearly what his or her "home discipline" has to offer. Unlike some forms of written scholarship, the format of my work, which is usually composed of many different but related objects, images, and texts installed together, allows for the parts to be experienced simultaneously and nonlinearly, in whatever order the viewer moves through the room. And there is an immediacy in visual, auditory, and experiential work that takes an amount of time to develop different from the time required in other disciplinary forms. Though I still have a commitment to representing my source material truthfully, being an artist means being able to share that material using strategies that are sometimes off-limits to other fields—things like fiction and speculation, sentimentality and sadness, humor and satire, darkness and horror, absurdity and the outlier, insincerity and sarcasm, or the illogical and the unresolved. Thus, a group of handmade button-eyed fabric prairie dogs sitting on fake rust-colored Mars rocks listening to a broadcast of War of the Worlds on an antique radio, and a series of painted wooden scenes depicting those prairie dogs being rocketed into space by the Russian space program, can convey real stories about invasive species management, animal language, and the genre of invasion literature through humor, absurdity, surprise, and cuteness.

For me, artwork is successful when the dialogue between the individual components generates new ideas that were not possible without those visual stimuli. For instance, when the Dutch lace tablecloth laser-cut from Tyvek with stylized patterns of Nipah virus, the Victorian-inspired wallpaper of elegant dead vultures, a chandelier with crystals that look like upside-down fruit bats, and quotes from Ernest Becker's Denial of Death inscribed on a fake marble plinth

reveals a connection between colonialism and zoonotic diseases, or the relationship between celebration and the knowledge of impending death. This is what I mean by contributing something to research: that the objects, images, and texts in an installation come together to form an argument of sorts, suggest a new interpretation, bring disparate ideas together, analyze and critique, take a position, and raise further questions or invite response.

My transition to this kind of artmaking corresponds with my “discovery” of animal studies itself. And my pathway to animal studies follows a story familiar to many other scholars of animals: I was convinced that my early graduate school paintings of piles of stuffed animals in IKEA bins, or of dogs swimming in a pool, could be about something more than consumer culture or pet portraits, but no one else seemed to agree. And then a professor led to me some readings, which opened the door to an amazing seminar and coincided with a campuswide lecture series and a deluge of books and conferences and eventually colleagues, and the field of animal studies materialized before me like when one opens the doors of boring metal cabinets to reveal the treasures of a natural history museum storeroom.

One of the best descriptions I’ve heard for the discipline of animal studies is that it takes animals seriously as a subject, and it gave me permission and a framework to pursue animals through artmaking in a serious way (even when my projects, like fake raccoons riding around on Roomba vacuum cleaners, or a flower-covered parade float of giant sheep wearing life vests, might seem not very serious at all). Animal studies felt like a home that I had been looking for, a place of scholarly rigor that made room for unconventional ways of producing knowledge. In other words, by virtue of making space for the otherness of animal bodies and animal minds, it felt welcoming to artistic ways of making and knowing as well.

Though the specific topics of each project can vary widely, at the center is an interest in the relationship of animals to knowledge itself. How have we in the past, and how do we even now, rely on animals to understand the world around us and to understand ourselves? In a way, my artwork does that, too—continuing to look to animals as a subject in order to reveal new knowledge about animals and ourselves.

For example, my most recent work recasts the pitiful and lonesome “endlings” (the last remaining individuals of a nearly extinct species) as zombies returned from the dead to attack people in an outdoor recreation store. The project uses a comic book format, references to zombie films and Jurassic Park, and horror-punk lyrics combined with 1950s romance comics and love ballads to reflect on the ways our attitudes and discourses (of pity and mourning, or fear and disgust) actually affect animals on the brink of extinction. And it explores what all this

says about us—our sense of guilt, reliance on technological answers to fix past mistakes, and fear of being alone, both as a species and as individuals.

Nonetheless, as much as animals might help us know things, they also often resist our truly knowing them. Our attempts—to discern animal languages or to communicate with them; to interrogate their bodies through scientific experiments or behavioral study; to live like, or move like, or be like animals—often fall short. As Ken Shapiro (cofounder and president of the board of the Animals & Society Institute, among other things) said at a conference, the center of our work with animals will always remain somewhat opaque to us. Or, said another way, John Berger’s “narrow abyss of non-comprehension” persists, ever between us, even though we, too, are animals.

*I think it is partly this tension—our deep desire to know animals somehow, and the promise that we never will—that drives my work. And there is perhaps something valuable in not knowing. The pursuit of knowledge is, of course, not always benign. Colonialism and exploitation, extractive science and presumptive use are embedded in many kinds of knowledge-seeking. The egoistic need to display expertise and mastery often limits our imagination, flexibility, or generosity. And frequently, in order to really understand something, we must destroy it. Resistance to being fully known, then, can be an opposition to this violence as well. Artmaking, too, relishes in things that are hard to grasp, verbalize, quantify, or articulate. I might even call it a magical quality, as Berger does in *Why Look at Animals?* Even as a practitioner who knows that creativity is not a miraculous visitation from a muse but, rather, the product of time-honored strategies, practices, and simple hard work, I still find that the whole of an artwork is more than the sum of the parts—that something intangible and perhaps even beyond the control of the maker emerges. This is why, though my intellectual interests reside squarely with the animal, I root myself in artmaking—it allows me to think things that I can’t otherwise.*