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Attending to Artists' Voices: A Review of *Artist/Animal* by Steve Baker

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Artist/Animal. By Steve Baker. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013, 278 pp. Paperback, \$29.95. ISBN 978-0-8166-8067-2.)

Steve Baker's Artist/Animal focuses on a collection of interviews with contemporary artists whose work engages with nonhuman animal life. The text centralizes artists' voices regarding their interpretations and interactions with animals and their art. Through a mix of both interviews and posthumanist theory, Baker provides context for artists who use animals in their work, either figuratively or literally, or both. Against reactivity and moralizing, Baker's thesis concentrates on the key importance of attention in relation to art.

KEY WORDS: art, contemporary art, animals, posthumanism, artists, attention

Steve Baker's *Artist/Animal* offers an eclectic collection of interviews with, and meditations on, contemporary artists whose work centrally engages with nonhuman animal life. The text, so saturated with affect and presence, reads at times like a scholar's love letter to those wrestling with human-animal relations through various artistic media, regularly including nonhuman animals themselves. Baker has often closely followed the artists for years: Such layered and accumulative understanding infuses the book with richness that would likely otherwise be lacking in a more peripheral observer.

As there is a definite sense of both deep admiration and respect for the artists Baker highlights, there is also a sense that Baker chose his subjects not simply because they are major and/or controversial figures in relation to animals in art. Although we learn little about his selection process, these artists are obviously fascinating and worthy of examination. For Baker, their work has something particularly valuable to say about *how* and *why* artists interact with literal and figurative animals. In tandem, he argues that artists specifically have something valuable to say. Each adds a unique contribution to the

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conversation. His careful contemplation of their work is inflected with genuine affection and—at times—endearment, even as he lightly dusts the text with critique.

In part, Baker is preoccupied with providing a platform for artists to represent themselves as a remediation for the absence (or distortion) of their voices within much art discourse. The sophisticated and personable interviews Baker conducted for the book and the longitudinal observations of the art lend an intimacy to the prose that betray a profound (and well-earned) rapport with his subjects. This tonal quality and orientation shifts slightly toward the end of the text when he takes a more distinctly critical tack and also integrates his own artistic experiments.

Baker, an esteemed academic and art historian, has long grappled with questions of animal ethics, art, and activism. His depth of knowledge permeates each chapter, while his writing remains surprisingly accessible. In this way, the text presents finely crafted lenses through which to consider snapshots of current artists' work. As the 25th volume of the University of Minnesota Press Posthumanities Series, *Artist/Animal* is clearly geared toward those interested in art theory and posthumanism, but the prose is so highly readable that its appeal stretches well beyond the academy, including to nonscholars and anyone interested in (or troubled by) questions of animals in art.

The remainder of this review teases out the specifics of why, in the end, *Artist/Animal* is a book that one might not necessarily like but one might greatly appreciate, as I did. Indeed, the distinction between *liking* and *appreciating* is foundational to Baker's timely theoretical intervention, which primarily revolves around how we ought to pay attention to art involving animals. More precisely, in this particular social media—and heavily visual—moment, where we are encouraged to “like” things with the click of a button, and there is a certain cultivated ease of parsing the world into things we “like” and those we . . . well, the option is not there to “dislike.” We might leave a negative remark or constructive critique in the world of Facebook, for example, but liking is terribly easy; not liking, through vote abstention, is just as easy. The digital feed encourages skimming, and largely we do, distributing our “likes” like electronic seeds of support, populating the Internet with our little nods of approval.

In such contexts, we are inundated with images that we are invited to judge, and to do so in a snapping, reactive way. Maybe that is all we feel we can muster in the face of such deluge. As author Leo Babauta (2009) remarks, “We are drinking from a fire hose of information, with no idea how to reduce the flow” (p. vii). We might confidently say that Baker's *Artist/Animal* moves in exactly the opposite direction. If there is one practice in the text that we are asked to cultivate, and one that the text itself enacts, it is attention. Or, perhaps more accurately, we might say the text beckons us to the process and practice of attending.

The necessary point of departure, one that Baker argues for both obliquely and directly, is the reservation or bracketing of judgment, or moralizing, for the much more difficult but much more generative task of open engagement, which is necessary for attention. The reader is tested immediately, as Baker tackles the disturbing works by one artist who burned rats alive and another who placed goldfish in blenders. In place

of moralizing, which is figured in the text as a simple overlaying of rules onto various contexts that might actually demand something more than carbon copying our judgments onto art (with little actual consideration of the work itself), Baker calls for responsibility and to trust artists to act responsibly.

For example, can we understand the 1976 work of Kim Jones's *Rat Piece* as something beyond pure sadistic cruelty? Baker diligently builds space around the small and rigid judgments we might be tempted to make about a work of art without first meditating on its contexts: While in Vietnam, Jones and other American soldiers regularly burned rats alive out of boredom; such hidden practices, contextualized by the larger horror of war—horrors that are also obscured—were arguably made visible through his art piece. In war, not art galleries, the smell of burning flesh can be inescapable. And what of the audience, as Jones set three rats ablaze in a cage? *No one* intervened, while many condemned the work. How is this so? What might this say about our complicity in horrors that are also hidden in plain view, which many of us enable through inaction and refusal of responsibility? “[Intervention] would not have stopped the performance—it merely would have changed it . . . They said I was cruel, yet none of them tried to prevent it when they could’ve,” Jones later reflected (Baker, 2013, p. 6).

Jones's piece lands squarely in the realm of those acts dominant Western society is accustomed to decrying, as his rat immolation was deemed an individual act of animal cruelty (for which he was convicted and lightly punished), and his actions were thus implicitly judged as “unnecessary,” while the extermination of rats for other purposes in other contexts, say in the laboratory or an infested home, would illicit scant societal concern. However, Baker does not suggest a kind of wishy-washy relativism, wherein since various evils are routinely conducted, nothing is considered beyond reproach: He instead shows us that what can appear initially as valueless (or even dangerous, as somehow condoning it simply through our regard) might have something important to say to us if we are willing to attend to even seemingly irremediable and repugnant works. Certainly not an apologist for animal cruelty—Baker sincerely wrestles with responsibilities to animals in relation to art—he primarily presses for engagement, while he also critically notes how the import of Jones's work ultimately folded back into human subjectivity and experience.

I mention Jones's performance here because Baker's discussion of that work in the introduction of *Artist/Animal* and his handling of that particular piece effectively sets up a specific orientation engaged throughout the book. By presenting the reader with an extreme example, alongside the goldfish one, Baker attempts to pry open space for us to pause and resist hair-trigger dismissal. For me, Baker's curated contemplation of *Rat Piece* suggests a threshold for the reader that makes the rest of the book seem almost mild in comparison, and perhaps even more palatable, as none of the artists to whom the chapters are dedicated enact such direct and immediate violence toward animals.

In *Artist/Animal*, we are invited to deeply contemplate a series of artworks, mostly by visual artists who are engaged with animals, and to sit with a prolonged but hopefully productive unsettledness, if not unease. Specifically, Baker aims to centralize the voices of artists, those who largely exhibit a “conscious and immediate concern for questions

of animal life” into their art (p. 17). The book is largely structured around a series of provocative conversations between Baker and a number of contemporary artists. Within the lattice of their words and Baker’s theory, the certainty and, arguably, disengagement, of predetermined ethical frames and judgments gives way to closer examinations of the messy and often contradictory entanglements of human-animal relations and representations in art. Baker presses for more nuanced thinking about the roles of animals in art than some forms of animal ethics and politics allow and for increased humility about the kinds of embodied and theoretical spaces both artists and animals occupy in making art. Against tying it all up and battenning down the ethical hatches, we are called to the expansive possibility of attention, even if we do not particularly agree with the art or enjoy it. Those regular sentiments, the “liking” or not liking that I noted above, which we are used to and encouraged to enact, are mostly irrelevant to Baker’s thesis.

While I appreciate the general import of *Artist/Animal* and found myself gripped by its fascinating content, lucid writing, and Baker’s undoubted achievement in giving us pause, it seems the text succeeds more in emphasizing the voices of artists and less in emphasizing the voices of other animals. In this way, the title, *Artist/Animal* is apt, as there is a sense reflected in the word order that, indeed, “the artist” comes first, while “the animal” follows; they are somehow slashed together and forced apart at the same time. Perhaps this is exactly the point, and a testament to the texture of human-animal relations, of the ways we are both simultaneously bound and divided.

As we are called to attention and spurred to thoughtfully engage, perhaps molting our rote morality for something fresher and more rigorous, there is also a way the text’s commitment to *not judging* (p. 9) can gloss important ethical and political debates. These are gestured toward but not fully accounted for throughout the book. Specifically, as the text seemingly attempts to sidestep the welfare versus abolition debate that mires large swatches of animal advocacy and associated ethics and instead addresses a different set of questions about art and human-animal relations, it is nonetheless difficult to avoid the implicit welfarism that murmurs throughout the text, the very ethical orientation that makes possible the kind of human-animal relations necessary for much of the art.

Baker implores us to trust artists to act responsibly, yet the question of what justifies the use of animals in art in the first place is largely neglected. What is in some ways a radical or at least unconventional move—to focus on different sets of ideas adjacent to now typical and arguably stagnating forms of certain animal ethics—seems to reproduce the humanist tendency to assume that animals can be used and what we owe them is our self-determined notions of welfare. For me, to raise these concerns in light of Baker’s thesis, though, feels almost like stodgy hand wringing, smacking of the kind of “rule-bound or unduly judgmental notion of ethics” (p. 18) that the text deplores. The dullness of the “What is art?” question, deemed irrelevant early in the text, feels supplanted by the perhaps equally bland one that I found myself asking: “How can we justify the use of animals in art *at all*?”

Consider, for example, Baker’s provocative and disturbing chapter “Almost Posthuman: Catherine Bell’s Handling of Squid,” which emerges midway in the text. The chapter

details Bell's performance piece (and later gallery installation) that involved sucking and squeezing the ink of forty dead squid onto her body and a suit that belonged to her recently deceased father. Later in the performance, the squid were also (spontaneously) scooped up and stuffed into the suit as Bell slides backward into the darkness of the stage, leaving streaky black crescents, like windshield wipers through crude oil.

Through Baker's visceral recounting of the performance and subsequent description of the installation, we are privileged to learn about Bell's process and witness some of the deep grief that inspired the work and its evolution. We peer under the hood, or in this case, suit, of the artist's experience and conceptualization of the piece. We are implicitly called to see Bell as a subject, and thus the text again moves against any impulse to deal in surface interpretation. Given the opportunity to consider some of Bell's larger context and process, which Baker provides, it seems unproductive to immediately condemn Bell for her causing these animals' deaths (even though they were killed expressly for the project), as it would be to *simply* pass judgment on those who routinely kill and eat squid. (Of note, the squid were later consumed, though that had not been Bell's original intention.) Throughout the text, we are unable to wipe our hands clean, as if we are unstained. Part of the discomfort of witnessing Bell's piece is not only the anthropocentric and metaphorical qualities surrounding it, including the potentially partial or total eclipse of the animals' subjectivities or even the work's abject corporeality, but the decontextualization of animal death and animal bodies.

To briefly digress, Elder, Wolch, and Emel (1998) lucidly describe the centrality of *place* in determining dominant social and cultural interpretations of animal practices. When "place-based animal practices" are decontextualized from their original sites, such as when new immigrants bring certain animal practices to the United States or Europe (or elsewhere), these activities may be subjected to "animal-linked racialization" (p. 72). This process marks immigrants as "savage," exacerbates existing tensions, dehumanizes them, and delegitimizes them as subject-citizens, and consequently helps deny them certain material benefits. The authors note five main contexts that are important for determining the human-animal borderline in relation to animal practices: species (whether taboo or not), site of harm, "necessity" of the practice, methods of harm (such as the tools of butchery), and social location of the perpetrator (such as laboratory workers). Dominant groups define what are appropriate contexts, and when subordinate immigrants do not ascribe to these, they are understood as transgressing the human-animal divide and slipping into the domain of the animal.

To return to Bell's 2006 "Felt is the Past Tense of Feel," although outside of the dominant group/subordinate immigrant configuration Elder et al. theorize, part of the abjection and even grotesqueness of the performance might be elucidated through their analysis of place-based animal practices and the conflicts that can arise when those practices are decontextualized. Further, had Bell herself been a nonwhite subject, for example, perhaps she would have risked and experienced the kind of animal-linked racialization that the authors detail. (Indeed, commentary on race, gender, and class of the artists is rarely remarked upon throughout *Artist/Animal*.) At least part of what is disturbing about the

performance (and later installation) of Bell's work is that the squids' bodies are used in contexts that are socially atypical.

Although the killing is hidden, their dead bodies are displayed and manipulated in a way and in a place that is foreign to dominant norms. Of course, this is not the only dynamic at play, but it is relevant to Baker's point about opening a space of *not judging*. Recognizing that the decontextualization of animal practices bears on how they are interpreted (e.g., squid might appear as calamari or in fishing boats or processing plants, but not in art galleries, smeared on a woman), it is less easy to just reject or castigate Bell or her work as morally reprehensible.

Baker, with some light-handed finessing, allows artists to speak, and thus we must reckon not only with the art, but also with its *contexts*. Consequently, he gestures toward ecofeminist forms of animal ethics, which run contra to the one-size-fits-all "calculus-based" approaches to animal rights that Donna Haraway (2008) staunchly critiques. Although *Artist/Animal* is not primarily a meditation on ethics per se, the subject is never far, hovering always in or adjacent to the conversation. Granted, while few animal ecofeminists would approve of Bell's use of the squid, they would nonetheless agree that contexts are important for making sense of human-animal relations, including our ethical understandings of them.

Despite Baker's deft illumination of various contexts surrounding the art, and thus the art itself, where the text sometimes falters is in its lack of context for the animals: They too have stories to tell; they too provide contexts for which we must account. In the case of Bell's work, for example, we learn that the squid were specifically, and carefully, caught for the project upon Bell's request: Their bodies needed to be as intact as possible, whereas within commercial squid fishing it is common for their delicate bodies to tear while being captured. In this way, the squid perhaps met less violent deaths than they typically would, yet it is clear through Bell's reflections on her piece that her ultimate aim was less animal welfare and more aesthetic and metaphorical choice. Speaking of her father, she stated, "And I just thought why can't they put him out of his misery? Why are they making us be exposed to this horrible death?" (p. 135). Regarding the piece, she remarked, "I wanted the viewer to be exposed to that prolonged death, for an hour they have to watch this performance before they see an end to it" (p. 135). As such, the forty squids' lives are wholly appropriated as meditation on human loss, grief, and death. This is something Bell acknowledges in part, describing the animals in the work as a "substitute" for an absent human (p. 127).

Maybe it is reasonable in Bell's work, and in Baker's interview and his related theory, to hear little about the squid, as their own subjectivities are secondary to the main show. Perhaps, some would argue, we do not need to learn of their lives, complexity, experiences, or any description of their deaths, although we learn of the pain and discomfort experienced by Bell. For example, she recalls, "Because the first time I did it I sucked too much [ink] in and it actually took my breath away because it went right down my throat, and I thought, I'm going to vomit, and it's going to ruin the performance" (p. 133). We also learn that the ink burned like acid. Reflecting on the performance as a whole,

she muses, “At the end it was like there was no differentiation, I felt like I had become the animal. I know that sounds really corny, but I didn’t have to see the footage to know that” (p. 133).

What appears as some version of posthumanism—as Bell claims to become the animal—seems deeply humanist in other regards. If, for example, Bell had squeezed the blood of 40 dead cats onto her body, animals who were killed specifically for her performance, it would change the experience for both artist and audience. And what if she had used humans? Of course, this would have never been allowed. What, then, makes the squid useable while humans not? How do we account for this beyond speciesism? Baker acknowledges the contradictions of Bell’s work, in what he calls shifts between registers of humanism and posthumanism in the piece, as Bell speaks of needing to put her own hurt and ego aside for the performance, which she figures as a kind of shamanistic ritual. As she elaborated in a conference paper about her art,

In my performance practice I work with dead and living animals to create primordial rituals that enact the catharsis of suppressed human drives and emotions . . . As the performance continues the human-animal encounter is somatically shared. What I experience is a shift from the subjectivity of human to animal. . . Performing with the animal makes it possible for me to critique . . . social taboos. (p. 127)

These statements highlight why analyses of *power* should be included in theories of human-animal relations, such as Baker’s, including how those relations unfold in art making and the art itself. We need analyses of power in respect to humans’ myriad uses of animals without hair-trigger moralizing and sweeping everything away, as if we already know what it all means and our attention is not required. In Bell’s description, animals are strangely silenced at the same time that we read of encounter and somatic sharing, as their own lives are abandoned in service of elucidation of social taboos.

Bell’s language of the “human-animal encounter,” for instance, obscures the unequal distribution of power between living humans and dead animals in such contexts: Such dynamics are worthy of naming and exploration, and they would greatly enhance posthumanist art theory, where human-animal relations are rightfully figured as complex. That is, attention to relations and encounters, including the agency of animals, should not be traded for attention to exploitation and use, which are predicated upon hierarchical power. Posthumanist theory should attend to, and be responsible for, human and other animals’ subjectivities. In other words, what would Bell’s work look like if we attempted to develop a listening practice that attends to the voices of animals, no matter how compromised and inadequate that might inevitably be? Could this help account for, or at least begin to address, the power relations that are sometimes too glossed in art involving animals and also in a text that seeks to centralize artists’ voices? Could this be part of a practice of posthumanism, to more fully and richly decenter human subjectivities (while not calling for their erasure) and therefore to allow animal subjectivities to make a stronger appearance?

The concerns of some animal activists and critical animal studies scholars for more distinct ethical lines to be drawn is well borne out in Bell’s and Baker’s handling of the

work, which largely drains the squid of their own perspectives regarding subjective encounters with humans, other animals, and the environment more generally. For example, the squid's embodied and lived experiences unfold in worlds of water, while their own sensory organs share similarities and differences with our own. What might we have learned of them by attending more closely to their lives? Further, although it might not have been their only encounter with humans, certainly their deaths would have been the most powerful and traumatizing of these encounters. An elaboration on the squid's existences outside of the immediacy of the performance—which also crucially makes the performance possible—would have added to the chapter. The work is haunted by a lack of deep rumination on animal subjectivities and remains a missed opportunity here and at times elsewhere in the text. Yet, such attention remains a badly needed remediation to Bell's and others artists' humanism.

Animal subjectivities are not entirely absent, though, and we gain both a greater sense of theirs and Baker's voice in other chapters, especially in the latter portion of the book. In one of the most provocative and thoughtful chapters, Baker takes on the role of the artist himself. In "The Twisted Animals Have No Land Beneath Them," Baker moves from the descriptive to what he calls a "more speculative" (p. 182) approach, which considers how animals do and do not (and might) figure in contemporary art, particularly in light of observations made in relation to previously discussed artwork. Of the most memorable contributions of the chapter, Baker photographs roadkill he encounters while cycling and later juxtaposes these difficult images with those that temper the graphic visuals. We gain intimate perspective into Baker's own struggle to make strange, and to do the artist's work of encouraging us to pay attention *differently*, against the sentimental, against the obvious, against certainty, which is a main, if not central, goal of all the artists discussed in the text. It is through his thoroughly thoughtful and embodied grappling that we see Baker personally face responsibility—a key theme throughout *Artist/Animal*—that artists have in making art. Here he most directly enacts the orientations illuminated earlier. To this end, he quotes Sue Coe, who people may (incorrectly) assume does not make nuanced art that resists easy interpretations: "before art can be a tool for change, it has to be art" (as cited in Baker, 2013, p. 188).

The authenticity of Baker's text culminates in his humble, tentative, and honest attempt to be responsible in his art. His dealings in relation to his own work and that of others are in the entanglements, difficulties, and awareness. It is for this reason, and other reasons already discussed, that I maintain my appreciation for *Artist/Animal*, while I was nonetheless aghast by aspects of the text, including descriptions of Eduardo Kac's commissioning of a transgenic rabbit (engineered to glow green) as art and the kind of pass that Baker seems to provide because Kac expressed genuine concern for Alba's welfare. (As noted in the text, Kac "pursued a determined yet fruitless campaign" [p. 71] to adopt the transgenic animal, which is an utterly unsurprising outcome. The rabbit, of course, stayed in the laboratory.)

Notably, Baker addresses work that would be recognized as animal rights or liberation-oriented, such as that by Mary Britton Clouse and Sue Coe. Baker's critique of Cary

Wolfe's overly simplistic interpretation of Coe's art as humanist (supposedly focused on the face, for example), reveals Baker at his most astute. Contra to Wolfe's rendering of Coe, Baker adroitly recognizes her much more complicated contributions. There is a continued sense that Baker is *with* Coe's art, in a broad and deep way, which refuses castigation and the assumption that its meanings are obvious and markedly humanist.

Baker's text emerges in the midst of tensions about the compatibility of posthumanism and animal rights, including their potential as complementary or antagonistic approaches, never resting on a fixed position on the continuum or set point in the matrix. While some might be frustrated by his endeavor, I would venture a guess that Baker would be validated by the discomfort, perhaps nudging us further to discover for ourselves if that unease might be productive, if we might learn something valuable from it. I did.

If I had the opportunity to collage Baker's text into my own unique work, I would have included some commentary on the economics of animals in art and how capitalist relations facilitate the making of these works. I would also rearrange things to draw out more observations on race, gender, sexuality, not to mention species, which strongly bear on the work but are rarely mentioned. I would call my book *Animal/Artist* and start from there. Yet, I might only imagine such a work because Baker created his.

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