Exhibiting Animals: Curatorial Strategies and Narratives (Warsaw, 18-19 Nov 22)

Warsaw, Nov 18–19, 2022
Deadline: Jun 15, 2022

Magdalena Wróblewska

International Conference and Monograph: Exhibiting Animals: Curatorial Strategies and Narratives
University of Warsaw and via Zoom worldwide

Organized by The project “Non-anthropocentric Cultural Subjectivity” realized as part of the “Excellence Initiative – Research University” programmeat the University of Warsaw and Faculty of “Artes Liberales”, University of Warsaw.

The “Exhibiting Animals” project consists of the conference and monographic book on the topic of presenting and representing animals in exhibitions, in various types of museums and cultural institutions. We would like to reflect on the different forms of the presence of non-human animals in the exhibition spaces and analyze curatorial strategies that result in different modes of exhibiting animals. We are interested in how the narratives of exhibitions present the relations between humans and other animals, how they situate viewers in relation to non-human animals, and whether and how they introduce viewers to the discourse of animal studies.

“Exhibiting Animals” title may at first be associated with animal shows, as purebred dog and cat shows organized by cynology and felinology associations, but such practices do not fall within the scope of our project due to their different nature, professional and amateur community and institutional background. We are interested in exhibitionary practices of cultural institutions such as art museums and galleries, historical and natural history museums, hunting, archeological, ethnographic, and other types of museums and galleries. We shall not ignore local initiatives, projects of a smaller scale, carried out in cultural, scientific, as well as educational centers that conduct regular or occasional exhibition activities.

We would like to pose a question about the ways of the presence of animals at exhibitions, direct and mediated by visual representations. The first category includes living animals as exhibits, or animal remains (taxidermy, parts of animal bodies and products made of them), while the second covers various artistic and documentary practices, created with the use of different media (such as photography, film, drawing, painting, sculpture, installation, etc.), and objects intended for animals, including those related to the processes of their domestication, use and abuse in the history of civilization.

The subject of the analysis is expected to be mostly exhibitions in contemporary cultural institutions, but we would also like to include a historical perspective, starting from the 19th century,

when museum institutions were being developed intensively, in the frame of imperial and colonial politics. Main questions relate to the strategies of animals' representations in the past, e.g. at world exhibitions or in museum spaces, and to significant changes in the ways of exhibiting animals historically and nowadays. How the old (e.g. 19th century) strategies of representing animals at exhibitions were modified, and under what circumstances and conditions are they continued? We also wish to consider the possibilities of shaping new narratives about animals through the exhibition practices. Do the narratives of exhibitions just reproduce the existing discourses on animals and the relationships between humans and other animals, or do they actively participate in shaping it?

We would like to encourage you to reflect on the various dimensions of the representation of nonhuman animals at exhibitions, its ideological and political conditions, e.g. who is representing whom, who has a voice and power, if and how the change of power in the relationship of human and other animals in the space of the exhibition is possible? What power relations were realized at the exhibitions in the past and have they changed by today? To what extent and how do the exhibition narratives express the political and ethical engagement in the animal question? In what contexts do they place the animal issues, such as the history of mankind or the context of building an interspecies community in the time of an ecological crisis? Do the exhibitions offer alternatives to reproducing harmful attitudes towards nonhuman animals and do they include postulates to build a better future? What are the curatorial strategies for combining the displayed objects with knowledge and postulates? Do the curators try to speak up or remain neutral, and thus reproduce the attitudes towards nonhuman animals that have been dominant so far?

Each exhibition implies a certain aesthetics that participates in building the environment for the presented objects, may suggest their meanings, and influence the viewer's intellectual and emotional perception. We would like to pose a question about the role of aesthetics in shaping the narrative of the exhibition and its reception, as well as its relationship with the ethical problems related to exhibiting nonhuman animals. How the aesthetic dimension of the exhibition corresponds with problems such as: ignoring the subjectivity of animals, ignoring their suffering, victimization, infantilization, and the use of animal bodies and remains.

Another question that we want to raise is about the roles of animal exhibitions in the context of museums as educational and research institutions. What are the tasks and challenges of museums as places for transmitting knowledge about animals and human-animal relations? What is the educational role of exhibitions in shaping people's attitudes towards other animals? Are museums open to various fields of both science and non-academic knowledge (e.g. the experience of work with animals, observations conducted by local communities, art, and in particular art-based research)? How do exhibitions select and problematize this knowledge, and how could they do it differently?

The main goal of the project is to map the problems of exhibiting animals in the form of an open-access monographic book. The purpose of the conference preceding the publication is to exchange perspectives and discuss drafts of texts that will be included in the book:
"Exhibiting Animals: Curatorial Strategies and Narratives" edited by Dorota Łagodzka and Magdalena Wróblewska, in the series "Culture – Environment – Society: Humanities and beyond" edited by Joanna Godlewicz-Adamiec and Paweł Piszczatowski (Publishing House: Vandenhoeck &

Ruprecht Verlag, Imprint of BRILL Deutschland).

Proposals for contributions in English with title, abstract (400 words), and short biographical note (100 words) should be sent by 15 June 2022 to dorota.lagodzka@al.uw.edu.pl and m.wroblewska@al.uw.edu.pl. Please, use the online form to send your proposal: https://nonanthro.uw.edu.pl/en/exhibiting-animals-curatorial-strategies-and-narratives-en/
You will receive information about the acceptance or rejection of the proposal by 15 July 2022. Deadline for submitting the completed manuscripts (6000-8000 words): 20 December 2022. The book is expected to be published in Autumn 2023.

Project is funded by “Non-Anthropocentric Cultural Subjectivity” Research Centre as part of the “Excellence Initiative – Research University” and by the Faculty of “Artes Liberales” at the University of Warsaw.

Dr. Dorota Łagodzka is an art historian, assistant professor at the Faculty of “Artes Liberales,”, University of Warsaw, the co-author and coordinator of the Anthropozoology studies program. Her doctoral dissertation in Cultural Studies was focused on the animal as an art participant and material and relations between artists and animals from the mid-20th century to the present day. Dorota is a recipient of two research grants about animals in art and culture awarded by the Polish National Science Centre (NCN) and has served as a curator for art exhibitions.

Dr. Magdalena Wróblewska is an art historian, assistant professor at the Faculty of „Artes Liberales”, University of Warsaw, and former Head of Research in Museum of Warsaw (2015-2021), where she also joined a team of curators of new permanent exhibition. As a postdoc fellow of Kusthistorisches Institut in Florenz- Max-Planck-Institut (2012-2014) she developed her research in the areas of museum studies and postcolonial studies. Her recent publications include „Practicing Decoloniality in Museums: A Guide with Global Examples” (with C.Ariese, ed. by Amsterdam University Press, 2021).

Reference:
CFP: Exhibiting Animals: Curatorial Strategies and Narratives (Warsaw, 18-19 Nov 22). In: ArtHist.net, Mar 26, 2022 (accessed Nov 11, 2026), <https://arthist.net/archive/36229>.