Portraying Animals (Prague, 15 May 15)

National Gallery Prague / Veletržní palác, Dukelských hrdinů 47, 170 00 Prague 7 - Holešovice, May 15, 2015

Stefan Aue

Portraying Animals. On the Role of Animals in Pictorial Representations

Contemporary art loves the beast. Non-human animals are increasingly prominent in works of visual art, photography, film, sculpture, and performance. Why? Where does this need for new images of animals stem from? Perhaps because we currently do not exactly know what an animal actually is. Our notions are out of joint.

The one-day conference "Portraying Animals" explores the role of animals in contemporary art. The genre of the animal portrait is of particular importance here: the portrait does not simply show an animal, but always this one animal. Lending its motif both face and figure, an individual aura, the portrait invites the viewer to speculate about the subject's biography, character, emotions, and passions. In short: the portrait lends the animal subjectivity.

Moreover, the animal portrait also poses questions: what role does the model play in its depiction? Wherein lies the practical contribution of the real animals, the creatures of flesh and blood, in how they are pictorially rendered? What influence do they have on the outcome? And consequently: are animals merely material for or rather active collaborators in the process of artistic work?

Six experts from different fields of science and culture will discuss these questions. The British art historian Steve Baker, author of influential books such as "The Postmodern Animal", "Picturing the Beast" and "Artist Animal", confronts the aesthetic and political demands regarding the portrayal of animals in contemporary art. His Italian colleague Giovanni Aloi, editor of "Antennae - The Journal of Nature in Visual Culture" and author of "Art and Animals", discusses the relationship between photography and taxidermy (the art of preparing, stuffing, and mounting the skins of animals for display) focusing on works by the American photographer and visual artist Roni Horn. The anthropologist Marco Stella recounts the uncanny entanglement of legendary Giant Salamanders and Czech culture in the 20th century - both populating the basement of Prague's Faculty of Science and the cultural imaginary as in Karel Čapek's dystopic novel "War with the Newts" (1936). Cord Riechelmann, biologist and cultural theorist based in Berlin, will shift the focus to moving images and discuss the role of animals in art films by Romuald Karmakar, Ken Wardrop and Chen Sheinberg. Riechelmann has written about the invasion of our cities by new settlers such as marten, beaver, jaybird, and owl, and the cultural history of crows. Jana Horáková from Brno is an expert in the philosophy of Donna Haraway, one of the key figures in Animal Studies. She discusses the fantastic, hyperreal, parahuman animal works of Patricia Piccinini, an Aus-

tralian artist who has also inspired Haraway. The curator and writer Oleysa Turkina form St. Petersburg turns towards popular culture and reflects on the ideological role and media presence of the Soviet space dogs who explored outer space way before their human cosmonaut colleagues.

The conference Portraying Animals is the first part of "Why Talk to Animals", a trilogy on human-animal relations in Prague and Pilsen, the European Capital of Culture 2015. It will be followed by a live event in September in Pilsen: a casting and photo shooting for a second Noah´s Ark - this time with inter-species couples. The resulting portraits serve as motifs for a number of consumer items which will be on sale in different showrooms in Pilsen and Prague for the rest of the year.

The initiative European Capital of Culture obviously relies on a categorical distinction between nature and culture that is historically worn out. We need another name, we need another attitude, we are looking for new friends. Therefore we declare: Pilsen is the first NatureCultural Capital of Europe.

Portraying Animals is a project of the Mobile Academy Berlin and the Goethe Institut Prague. The conference is curated by Maximilian Haas and Hannah Hurtzig in collaboration with Marco Stella.
Production: Stefan Aue and Cristina Navarro

Programme

11:00 Welcome by Maximilian Haas & Hannah Hurtzig

11:30 Giovanni Aloi: Roni Horn. Taxidermy, Photography and Ontological Mobility

12:30 Marco Stella: The Meaning of the Salamander. Andrias scheuchzeri in Czech science and culture in the 20th century

13:30 Lunchbreak

15:00 Olesya Turkina: Portraying Ideology. About images of Soviet Space Dogs
Jana Horáková: Into the ZOO with Patricia Piccinini

16:00 Coffee talks

17:00 Cord Riechelmann: Could we portray an animal without mythological or shakespearean subtexts? Remarks on three animal short film portrays from Romuald Karmakar, Ken Wardrop and Chen Sheinberg

18:00 Steve Baker: The contemporary animal

Reference:
CONF: Portraying Animals (Prague, 15 May 15). In: ArtHist.net, Apr 2, 2015 (accessed Nov 10, 2026), <https://arthist.net/archive/9897>.