**Animals: Documents of Contemporary Art**


Animal studies has emerged over the past 25 years as an academic field whose interdisciplinary nature has afforded exponential growth, with contemporary art as one of its principal points of interest. This very mobility leaves open the question of what, in the 21st Century, “animal art” is, as the theme of disenfranchised sentiency is one that is easily subsumed by strictly human interpretations of gender, race, disability, and the post-colonial.

Thus *Animals*, the most recent in the collaborative series published by the MIT Press and Whitechapel Gallery, is a welcome tonic in decluttering the conversation. Editor Filipa Ramos, in an accessible introduction geared toward all readers, explains her rationale in selecting essays and artworks for inclusion that, while subtle and complex enough to stimulate a range of associations, focus on the expression and experience of the animal.

Though an excellent primer on foundational animal studies readings such as Donna J. Harraway’s *Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People, and Significant Otherness* (2003) and John Berger’s *Why Look at Animals?* (1977), the book is also much more, inclusive of Walter Benjamin’s charming radio play for children, *True Dog Stories* (1930) and reflections on how pets have informed her work in *Some Animals* (2016) by Joan Jonas. Of course Gilles Deleuze’s and Félix Guattari’s *Percept, Affect, Concept* is as impenetrably post-modern as when it was first published in 1991. This fortunately points up another of the compact volume’s strengths, in that no one essay is overly long, with many only two to four pages.

Especially delightful is artist Marcel Coates’ 2014 text-art representation of Thomas Nagel’s 1974 essay *What is It Like to Be a Bat?*, which suggests:

Sit down.
Can you breathe?
Can you detect temperature?
Can you detect light?
Can you hear?
Can you make a vocal sound?

If yes to any of the above then you have more in common with a bat than you might have thought.
Coates then goes on to give instructions (putting on a blindfold, making a high-pitched noise) on how to more fully realise this proposition, offering a meditation on difference and ability that is amusing…and just a bit melancholy.

– Jean Marie Carey (http://www.germanmodernism.org)