Exposing Animals

ANTENNAE
The Journal of Nature in Visual Culture

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Antennae (founded in 2006) is the international, peer reviewed, academic journal on the subject of nature in contemporary art. Its format and contents are inspired by the concepts of ‘knowledge transfer’ and ‘widening participation’. On a quarterly basis the Journal brings academic knowledge within a broader arena, one including practitioners and a readership that may not regularly engage in academic discussion. Ultimately, Antennae encourages communication and crossovers of knowledge amongst artists, scientists, scholars, activists, curators, and students. In January 2009, the establishment of Antennae’s Senior Academic Board, Advisory Board, and Network of Global Contributors has affirmed the journal as an indispensable research tool for the subject, now recommended by leading scholars around the world and searchable through EBSCO.

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Front cover image: Sara Angelucci, Aviary (Sage Thrasher/endangered), 2013, C-print, 22 x 33.5 inches
Back Cover image: Fleur Alston, ‘Pigeon’ and ‘Fox’, from the Kit and Caboodle series, C-type
CONTENTS

ANTENNAE ISSUE 41

p.5 TOM DENLINGER’S MORE-T HAN-HUMAN PHOTOGRAPHY
The following conversation with photographer Tom Denlinger considers those issues that most clearly underscore the emergence in his work of a more-than-human landscape, a landscape that Tom captures as material urban nature, as powerful and agentic mesh or grid.

Interviewer: Cecilia Novero
Interviewee: Tom Denlinger

p.25 IN FOCUS: ANIMALIA
Photographs of animals have circulated since the early history of the medium, initially focusing on those that were tame, captive, or dead. Advancements in camera and film technologies enabled precise recordings of beasts in motion and, eventually, in their natural habitats. During the summer of 2015, In Focus: Animalia, a photographic exhibition curated by Arpad Kovacs, held at the J. Paul Getty Museum in LA, examined the expanding tradition of animal representation through the works of artists such as Horatio Ross, Alfred Stieglitz, William Wegman, Pieter Hugo, and Taryn Simon, among others.

Interviewer: Matthew Brower
Interviewee: Arpad Kovacs

p.36 DOMESTIC INTIMACIES: DOCUMENTING AN INTERSPECIES COMMUNITY
In the photographic series, Domestic Intimacies, I explore the lived experience of cohabitating with a group of companion animals. The resulting photographs examine issues relating to domesticity, tending and care taking, the changing needs of aging pet animals, my own aging body and domestic hygiene.

Text by Julia Schlosser

p.41 TO NEVER KNOW YOU: ARCHIVAL PHOTOS OF RUSSI AND FRANZ MARC
This essay examines photographs of the German Expressionist artist, writer, and Tierliebhaber Franz Marc and his dog, Russi, taking the position that one of the most obvious characteristics of Marc’s life — his affectionate and respectful relationship with Russi — has been largely overlooked, though its documentation is clear. I exist the value of what are normally categorized as snapshots in reconstructing animal and human biographies.

Text by Jean Marie Carey

p.49 URBAN CO-HABITATION IN EXPOSURE
Recognizing the urban wildlife of stray animals as the invisible residents, this paper addresses the relationship between visualization of street cats and urban renewal through examining a set of photographic images taken in Hong Kong by photographer Micros Yip.

Text by Fiona Yuk-wa Law

p.73 HORSES AND LENSES
Horses at the Museum is part of a long-term multi-media art project In Your Dreams [Horses] exploring horse personality and individuality, sensory processing and proprioception, concepts of invitation, initiation, and trespass, and shared thresholds of experience between horse and human. Invited by the artist to visit a “living museum”, young horses Gus and Deuce stand at the door deciding whether to enter and explore.

Text by Lee Deigaard

p.80 25FT
25FT is an installation of video and still photographs appropriated from Israeli army surveillance cameras monitoring activity along the separation wall with Palestine. The work simulates the position of the soldier controlling the camera, focusing only on animals and the landscape in the occupied West Bank. The appearance of these animals throws the border, its function, and what it stands for into question for both the soldier who survey it, and the viewer in front of the work.

Text by Netta Laufer

p.88 SARA ANGELUCCI’S AVIARY
This interview focuses on Sara Angelucci’s photographic series Aviary (2013). Aviary marks the emergence of an engagement with environmentalism and species loss in the artist’s work. The interview explores the origins of the series and the links it suggests between birds and photography. Thus, the artist’s engagement with 19th Century photographic practice provides a backdrop for discussing the histories of collecting, photographic albums, spirit photography, taxidermy and the bourgeois parlour that the work touches upon.

Interviewer: Matthew Brower
Interviewee: Sara Angelucci

p.102 PHOTOGRAPHING THE LAST ANIMAL
This essay discusses the visual history of the extinction event of the bison. Photography taken on the plains of North America in the 1880s provided the first real-time visual documentation of an extinction event as it was happening. The bison decimation can be seen today as initiating a new conception of extinction, as the end of the species was publicly debated and encouraged or discouraged as a national conversation.

Text by Joshua Schuster

p.123 KIT AND CADOODLE
My work is concerned with our relationship with the natural world and the objects used in my photo collages are heavily symbolic of life and death. I also draw influence from Carl Gustav Jung, the renowned psychiatrist, and psychotherapist. The motif of the Mandala is a spiritual and ritual symbol in Hinduism and Buddhism that represents the universe. Jung’s idea of the urge to produce Mandalas at times of intense personal growth and as a way of rebalancing the psyche, the result is said to be a more complex and integrated personality.

Text by Fleur Alston
TO NEVER KNOW YOU: ARCHIVAL PHOTOS OF RUSSI AND FRANZ MARC

This essay examines photographs of the German Expressionist artist, writer, and Tierliebhaber Franz Marc and his dog, Russi, taking the position that one of the most obvious characteristics of Marc’s life—his affectionate and respectful relationship with Russi—has been largely overlooked, though its documentation is clear. I extol the value of what are normally categorized as snapshots in reconstructing animal and human biographies. This raises questions about what photographs are valuable to such research, and why some are used repeatedly and others ignored. Significantly, a previously unknown photograph of Marc taken by his brother Paul in 1914 is published for the first time.

Text by Jean Marie Carey

I will never look into the eyes of someone who used them to see Franz Marc and Russi Marc. This is an absolute fact of biographical research focused upon the long dead. But this reality does not absolve the committed researcher from trying to reconstruct the past. To this end, I have found archival photographs of Marc, Russi, and their family and friends immensely valuable in imagining their lives. There are a relatively small number of photographs of Marc, and these have been repeatedly published, to the point of exhaustion. Thus, I was very surprised to find a photo of Marc in Nürnberg’s Bundesarchiv that had never been published (now published here). The discovery caused me to reflect on how Marc’s biography, which is emphatically the story of a life informed by the love of animals, had itself been circumscribed and neatly entombed, a situation that demands correction.

Background

Some years ago, the Städtische Galerie im Lenbachhaus published a three-volume catalogue raisonné of the work of Franz Marc. The massive books are packed with lustrous reproductions of Marc’s paintings, prints, sculptures, and pencil sketches, an overwhelming testament to the artist’s experimental disposition toward rethinking the Tierbild. Interspersed through the more than 2,500 pages are a few grainy photographs of Marc, from the time of his first trip to Paris in 1904 until just before his death near Verdun, France in March 1916 at the age of 36. Of the small number of photos—fewer than a dozen—circulated repeatedly through a century’s worth of literature on Marc, about half show the dark-haired Bavarian in the company of “ein junger Eisbär, sein Hund, der treue weiße Russi, “ a contrasting vitality on shades of grey.

During the course of giving research presentations at seminars, conferences, and to students, an unexpected phenomenon became very noticeable to me. Whether confronted with either large projections or smaller printed images, people were attracted by Marc’s colorful and empathic representations of animals, of course, but they were truly riveted by the photos of Marc and his dog Russi. People would ask me to pause the PowerPoint slide show and just gaze, or sometimes raise printed copies of the paper toward their eyes in the vain hope that this action would allow them to see more—more than there actually was to see. Almost always the same questions cropped up: Do you have more photographs of the artist and the dog? Can we see them?

This was despite the fact most of the photos on offer at the time were taken in spontaneous circumstances
in the early days of personal photography, were poor in quality, and showed little detail. It seems that photos of people and pets gone and lost have a power all their own, even though it may be tantalizingly meager.

And this is another of the reasons for this article. I became curious to learn if there were more photos of Russi and Marc than the handful that seemed endlessly circulated and indeed if there were more images of the artist at all. If so, why had so few made their way into canonical art historical documents? While I am not able, at least not yet, to answer that question, I was excited to learn that indeed there were yet photos of Franz Marc that had not yet been seen in a century. Most are housed in the Marc estate papers at the Deutsches Kunstoffarchiv (DKA) im Germanischen Nationalmuseum in Nürnberg, Germany.

The stunning snapshot of Franz Marc reproduced here was taken in spring 1914 by his brother Paul Marc. Here we also find images that are far less satisfactory in quality. They are all from the turn of the 20th Century when only black and white photography was available to amateur users, and in an age when we have become so accustomed to high-resolution color images, these photos from Germany in the early 1900s can be construed as disappointing. But despite this, as receivers’ reactions seemed to indicate, these photos are evocative and moving records. Conceptualized and projected, they offer information and stimulation; as objects, they are close enough to touch.

**Indexicality and Animal Studies**

This raises questions about how, as scholars, we should approach these photographs, and about what purpose such a close examination of a single family’s interactions with a small group of family pets can yield to animal studies and its connected disciplines. My oblique answer is that this is a personal passion that nonetheless informs the broader issue. Methodologically speaking, a consideration of indexicality is useful in thinking about photography in general.

The term “indexicality” has been inherited by contemporary studies of photography from postmodernist critical theory. The concept posits a construal of photography, particularly vernacular photography, as a type of sign created by cause and effect – an index, or simple sign, of the catalytic event. The drawings on the walls of the Lascaux Caves, in other words, are indexes of the people who made them. Under this construction, a conventional photograph could be understood as a trace of light reflected from an object and fixed in a material chemical process. Thus indexicality is a sort of guarantee of a material connection between the seen image and the real world. But indexicality also underscores how photography “indicates” the world outside of itself; it makes a photograph contingent upon something external or absent from it. A criticism of this tautology has been that it ignores the relationships between the photographer, camera, the beholder, and the image itself. To counter this and to add a layer of functionality that moves toward an inclusion of
time, interspeciesism, subjectivity, and emotion, I reject the reduction of the photographic image to a symptom of the anti-aesthetics of a postmodernism that eschews expression and originality in favor of critique. Thus, my formulation of indexicality, using the Lascaux Caves as an example, includes the images, the makers of the drawings, and the animals depicted in them as traces of the real world, filtered through time, but burned in our retinas nonetheless.

Another way to find a place for these photos in a framework that addresses issues concerned with the animal – mourning, imagination, trauma, and, and recovery – is through the work of Hal Foster, specifically his The Return of the Real. Of course, writing more than 20 years ago Foster did not anticipate or account for the proliferation of the image world we know today. But noting that “some recoveries are fast and furious,” Foster offers a novel reading of the process of Nachträglichkeit. Foster’s main idea from the chapter “Who’s Afraid of the Avant Garde” provides a cogent tactical formula for addressing the incompletely completed mission of the art movements that disappeared in the first third of the 20th Century. I use Foster’s “deferred action” in a more specific and also broader application than has been done before, considering not just the work but the biography of the artist.

In the case of most early snapshots, the photographer had no way of knowing just what the camera had caught. Immediate inspection, something we take for granted now, was out of the question. At the time they were taken, no one had any idea how important these photos would become. In 1914, as Marc gazed uncertainly into the middle distance past his sibling, Paul Marc could never have imagined he would outlive his baby brother through the coming four decades.

The specificity of the Marc photos separates them to some extent from notions of simultaneity and the regime of historicity. Do they comment at all on the private methods of
the contemporary viewer of marking and engaging with time? Though in the later part of his life he certainly thought otherwise, Marc was far from the sight of modern disillusionment, a person of utopian visions.

Against Theory

It could be tempting to think that Marc, who had many times declared his faith in the technologies of the future to challenge the hidebound nature of the arts culture of early 20th Century Germany (“Diese Kunst gibt es heute nicht und kann es nicht geben.”), had some kind of disruptive intention in mind with respect to photography, especially given the hermetic nature of the vogue for recovery-via-theory of vernacular and family photography. Yet they do touch upon reassessments of the limitations of biography – animal and human – and on the idea of recovering the past.

One of the poignancies of the photographs of Marc and Russi together is that they died within just a few weeks of each other, Russi first, so news of his death reached Marc in France. Interpreting the emotional impact of these photographs in this way asks us not just to grieve now, in the present, for a death in the past (of a person who, born in 1880, would be long dead), but also to imagine what would have happened if this tragic event had not taken place. Would we have other photos of Marc as an old man? Would we respond to the same way to Russi’s presence? The future that Marc did not have would have included other animals, different dogs. This imaginative introjection and sadness calls for a layering of temporal sensitivity, a broad phenomenon which Roland Barthes is often called upon to announce: “By giving me the absolute past of the pose… the photograph tells me death in the future… I shudder… over a catastrophe which has already occurred.”

Part of Barthes’ continued ubiquity in the study of photography is the elegance of prose such as that above, which was spurred by the universal experience of coming to terms with the loss of a parent. To reformat the place of this type of grief and memory vis a vis photography within animals studies, for precisely this reason, other voices and other approaches are needed. For grief for animals as family members is not ubiquitous, nor is mourning the death of beings – animals and people – we have a connection to outside of linear time.

Jean-François Lyotard identifies the will to emotionally organize a time which is not chronological with Nachträglichkeit in the sense of a twice-experienced trauma. In considering the Marc photos, this rubric demands of course that we know something about the subject of the photos. The actual traumatic event – in this case Marc’s death – comes as shock unaccompanied by affect, then, as an affect, but without the shock, because this is the second time nothing has happened; there is only the affect of anxiety. Whatever is now happening, Lyotard says, to produce this affect “…does not come forth; it comes back from the first blow, from the shock, from the ‘initial’ excess that remained outside the scene, even unconscious, deposited outside representation.”

The photographs as visual cues require someone to specify this type of reaction formation as refracted through the experience of looking. Here that person is Foster, who has written with understanding and compassion about Marc and puts forward an ambitious application of Nachträglichkeit as an active practice:

One event is only registered through another that recodes it; we come to be who we are only in deferred action (Nachträglichkeit)... a complex relay of anticipated futures and reconstructed pasts – in short, a deferred action that throws over any simple scheme of before and after, cause and effect, origin a repetition.
Foster’s agenda in his most important work *The Return of the Real* from 1996, was in refuting Peter Bürger’s complaints in 1974’s *Theorie der Avantgarde*. Foster makes the attractive argument that the mission of the historical avant-garde is still in progress:

Once repressed in part, the avant-garde did return and it continues to return, but it returns from the future, such is its paradoxical temporality... thus the need for new genealogies of the avant-garde that complicate its past and support its future.  

This examination and approach would have greatly pleased Marc – who so wished to come from the future himself – to have this second, or next, chance:

It worries me that not one of them [my paintings] is clear enough to allow my wish to be read unambiguously; my wish for a religion that isn’t there, but you cannot give up on painting just because you have arrived on the planet 50 or 100 years too early. If only you could put your head under a blanket for 100 years and then start all over again.  

But just as Barthes cannot be deployed to address all aspects of contemporary uses and receptions of photography in the digital age, neither does the set of evaluations and expectations of digital photography, and its mass dispersion via online media and internet repositories, interfere with or impede our appreciation of these photographs of Marc and Russi, a view supported by Hughes, whose work treads between and amid contemporary and traditional concerns:

I don’t think any viewer of vintage photographs mentally compares them to the appearance and image quality of our photos today. As home by your experience when discussing the photos with audiences who want to know more about their subjects, the relative appearance without regard to resolution, color profile, etc., is completely irrelevant. Viewers are connecting to the stories and the relationships of the subjects in the photos. Especially pet parents. We all see ourselves in these photos.

In fact (even though some images of the artist are widely available online), these family photos have been marginalized in the best possible way, in that they are only intriguing to people who are already interested Marc as an artist and his specific, personal relationship to the animals in his life. (In other words, the curiosity about Marc’s animal pictures would come first, followed, in a small percentage of people exposed to them, in further curiosity about the artist’s motivations and background.) The presence of the dog in so many of the photos returns us to Marc’s body of work of animals, reinforcing their importance and their specific individual identities to Marc.

Objects Made by Subjects

We should see the scratches, spots, burns, and piercings in the photos of Marc and Russi as sigils of this mode of interpretation. The scrapes and imperfections, like old radio signals interrupted by static, are holes in the fabric of time that lend a tactile quality to the photos and invite imagining them in three dimensions, spaces and textures to probe, like St. Thomas, with our persons as well as our eyes, to test the depth of the puncture and bind to the memory as well.

“The snapshot has meaning only insofar as it is viewed, touched, framed, exchanged, discussed, remembered, collected, and, on certain occasions, defaced,” notes Catherine Zoromskie. Marc and expressionist painter, Gabriele Münter had their own cameras and Münster, in particular, was quite an accomplished photographer. But it was Paul Marc (1877-1949) who often documented the three-years-younger, Franz, from nude portraits curious in their naive intimacy to travel snapshots of the then-struggling painter accompanying the Byzantinist on a research trip to monasteries in Saloniki and Mount Athos in 1906.  

In this photograph of Marc (Fig.1), shot as the brothers waited for someone to film them together, Franz Marc stands
outside in what looks to be an innercourtyard at Ludwig Maximilians Universität in München, where Paul worked, a brick wall with a parapet behind him. Taken in the late morning or early afternoon, the sun is full and the shadows short. There is a dusting of snow on the ground and a scrim of ice shoveled to the edge of a walkway; a late spring snow – by autumn, Marc would be in France with the Bayerischen Feldartillerie- Regiment. A maple tree over Marc’s left shoulder is beginning to bud – and we know for sure this is spring. The photo is framed by a ragged white border in the fashion of the day. We know from subsequent photos of the brothers together that Marc is wearing hiking boots with his suit, but this photo is three-quarters length, taken from the thighs up, so Paul was standing close to Franz. Marc’s three-piece suit seems ill fitting, which it probably was. A club collar is startling white. The silver chains of Marc’s Charivari are tangled over a matching vest, charms tucked away in a pocket until Oktoberfest. Marc holds a walking stick in his left hand and lightly to the rear, his right hand flexed at his side; trademark Pelzmütze slightly askew. Though Marc avoids smiling at the camera, he seems content enough.

The contrast and saturation of the photograph and its developing technique blurs details yet while white and black dominate there is an abundance of subtle shadings from the mortar between the bricks to some little cuts and bruises on Marc’s hands. The photo itself is speckled with spots, scratches, pitted with age. The other photographs shown here are of less precision (and no
effort has been made to digitally “improve” them). The photograph of Marc (Fig. 2) kneeling to be at eye level with both the massive Russi and the small terrier Schlick, who is seated on a chair, is hardly a masterpiece of photography but in its own way is full of atmosphere and poignancy. The dogs lift their eyes and turn their faces toward the unknown photographer, gazing back confidently. It is Marc who looks down and away, reaching around to hold Russi’s right leg as much for reassurance as to keep the dog still. Like any photograph that pricks our senses through punctum and aura, the image has a timeless quality that makes it read as contemporary and immediate.

In the known photos of Marc, there is a silence of grand moments such as weddings or births, and an emphasis on the quotidian inclusion of Russi. We can extrapolate further, for example, that the elevated status of dogs was something that Marc had learned from his parents, who seemed also to document the doings of their own dog, Schlick, and to bring him with them to visit their son and Russi.

The circumstances under which the photos were taken are often interesting or curious, although of course sometimes little or nothing is known beyond the fact of their existence. There are no known photos of Marc at work making art in his studio. Most, in fact, were taken outdoors. The photographs of Marc with animals are restricted to mammals – horses, dogs, and deer, though Marc’s cat, Rudi, who appears in many paintings, seems never have been filmed. Meanwhile, there are several images shot through a curtain of horizontal snow in a mountain blizzard, of Marc tending to the orphaned fawns he had adopted. Even the more organized indoor
compositions of Marc with his wife Maria have a spontaneous, snapshot-y quality to them, newspapers, cigarettes, and the remains of breakfasts often scattered through the frames.

Sometimes, even when the figures within them are well known, it is surprisingly difficult to discover who actually took these photographs, or when and where they were shot. For example, the horizontal lineup (from left) (Fig.5) of Marc, Maria Marc and her parents, Helene and Philipp Franck (looking none too pleased), Paul Marc, the artists Alfred Kubin and Heinrich Campendonk, and the dogs Russi and Schlick as flanking chorus bears no date or notation as to who the photographer might be. Yet upon close study, this photo gives us a glimpse of the relationship between Marc and Russi: They make eye contact with each other, not the photographer. Kubin wraps his arms tightly around Schlick. Russi seems about to leap across several laps to be closer to Marc, who is just beginning to make the “quelling an exuberant dog” gesture familiar to anyone who has ever had one.

Pressed for provenance, this image has so far remained quiet, though it was likely taken before Marc and August Macke met, so, in 1909. But even well-documented photographs from scholarly books and reputable archives sometimes promote conflicting information. The Internet is particularly open to misleading claims. For example, one photo from the summer of 1911 (Fig.5) which has been published in several collections of Marc’s correspondence and exhibition catalogues about Marc and the Blaue Reiter of Marc, Maria, and Russi occurs under a variety of attributions from various sources all of who seem willing to take credit for it.
though this authorship is by no means certain. In this photo, again Marc and Russi demonstrate a strong primary relationship. As Maria Marc shades her eyes in the bright midday sun, Russi engages Marc with a canine play-bow, as Marc turns his face and body toward the dog, extending an arm in recognition of Russi’s gesture.

There are glaring gaps in the photographic record, and people and animals one might hope to see – for example, there are no photographs to be found of Franz and August together, none of Russi as a puppy, though the dog’s youthful antics are recorded by many – remain unrepresented. But as is the case with the long-missing 1910 Marc painting *Pferde in Landschaft*, found right down the street from the Lenbachhaus as part of Cornelius Gurlitt’s “Munich art hoard,” more of the truth may still be out there.\[xvi\]

The Archive

“…[A]nimals are caught in the gaze of the world,”\[xvii\] Foster, yet “… even as the gaze may trap the subject, the subject may tame the gaze. While the gaze is characterized as predatory and violent, I propose the archivist approaches the images in an entirely different frame.”\[xvi\]

These types of photographs – indexical images from the archive that can greatly enhance our knowledge of a life informed by animals – offer several avenues of engagement that subtly challenge animal studies conventions and also are simply “logical operators.” For one thing, the fundamental research skill set that respects archival and antiquarian objects, including letters, documents, realia, and photographs as data are enjoying a resurgence and a useful counterpoint to pure theory.\[xvi\]
Photography is important to animal studies in this way since in the absence of language, sometimes photographs are all we have. The same goes for reconstructing biographies, whether of animals or people. A cultural biography of the most important animal painter of the avant-garde whose life was fully informed by the presence of live animals does not exist, despite this most obvious framing device. So, one has to be created using the evidence that remains at hand. [6]

These photographs of Marc and Russi allow us to close some of the distance created by differences in time, gender roles, geography, culture, nationality, and species. Photography stands as the figure of an ideal relation to the past in this sense; it provides access to real people and animals while leaving the history they occupy untouched. The conception of the world of animals as a space from which humans were excluded was rejected by Marc, and his art often directly addresses this notion. (See for example the collaborative mural made with August Macke, titled Paradies, from 1912 (Fig. 7). Here Marc and Macke visually collapse the idea of the Garden of Eden that positions nature as innocent, and humans as guilty and fallen. Contact between humans and animals is affirming, not corrupting.

Though Marc worked interpretively, fusing imagination with observations, most of his paintings and sketches are set in the place where many of these photographs were taken, the dwellings in Oberbayern around Kochel, Sindelsdorf, Murnau, and Ried. Looking at these photographs allows us to experience the immense auralic effect of "Das Blaue Land," from where these images emanated, and which exists much unchanged 100 years after Marc’s death, and to celebrate them at their place of origination.

After the Second World War Marc’s works were greeted as welcome ambassadors of a Modernism whose traditions and origins had been demolished by more than a decade of prolonged ostracism during the Third Reich. Marc’s art offered, in its rediscovered formal language and seemingly idyllic motifs, an ideal starting point for the acceptance of painterly synthesis showing the supposed disharmony that shaped the modern world. But as Marc’s oeuvre re-emerged as both pop and popular, the paintings became removed from their content as the animals were supplanted by the legend of the avant-garde, in turn leading to their shelving as the work of “dead white guys” who could offer no commentary on the contemporary obsession with identity. Thus, there is value in reinscribing historiography with the image of the real dog who inspired such paintings as Liegender Hund im Schnee (1911) (Fig. 8).

Lodged somewhere between snapshots and portraits, these images can be read as alternative family photographs. In reading them so, however, it is not only the aesthetics and codes of family photography that are called into question but also the construction of the family unit itself.
The pictures of Marc and Russi resist the potential for sentimentality, and reification, but allow for the inclusion of humans in animal groupings, and vice versa.

The relationship between photography, animal biography, and art history becomes a conceptual framework rooted in interconnectedness. Family albums in which a primary relationship between a person and an animal is shown are a catalyst to introspection and extended to broader questions, tensions, and messiness. This is a partial inquiry, an opening rather than a statement of conclusion, and a conversation that is meant to be provocative. As a counter to a linear interpretation of Marc’s life trajectory as Expressionism’s integrative personality, I offer an alternate perspective by focusing on what was obviously most important to Marc: Russi. Learning to reflect with sensitivity and hold precious what belongs to another time and place, to another life story, is a beginning in developing feelings for animals, human and non, who are alive in our own time.

Notes

[i] Elisabeth Erdmann-Macke. Erinnerung an August Macke. (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1962), 145. Elisabeth Macke, the wife of August Macke, gives this description of Russi in an account of her first meeting with her husband’s close friend, and the dog, in spring 1910.


[iii] …one that can be slightly problematically masculine, as in proclaiming Carl Andre (1935–) as the thematic descendant of the gentle Kurt Schwitters (1887-1948))!


[v] Sabrina Hughes, e-mail message to author, October 2016.

[vi]


[xiii] Sabrina Hughes, e-mail message to author, October 2016. This is not to say that issues of distribution and disbursement of the rapidly increasing number of digital and otherwise reproduced images are not a legitimate vector of research, even as concerns the very definition of photography. On this subject see the many works of Geoffrey Batchen, for example: “A shift in focus from the photograph to its dissemination would have any number of effects on how we understand the practice of photography. In the short term, it would do away with a lingering art historical bias that privileges origins and originality, innovation and invention, over ordinary and vernacular practices,” Geoffrey Batchen. “Disseminating Photography.” The Brooklyn Rail, February 2013, 42. This subject has enormous ramifications; as such, it is the realm of a particular sort of scholarship and falls outside the limited scope of my interest here.


[xix] Hal Foster. “The Return of the Real” in The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1996, 138. And further: “I also offer it in the belief that a re-evaluation of a canon is as significant as its expansion or its disruption ... On this analogy, the avant-garde is never historically ... fully significant in its initial moments. It cannot be because it is traumatic – a hole in the symbolic order of its time that is not prepared for it, that cannot receive it, at least not immediately, at least not without structural change.” Hal Foster. “Who’s Afraid of the Neo-Avant-Garde,” The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1996, 10.


[xxi] Elizabeth Edwards and Janice Hart stress the materiality of early photography but their assertions inform archival research as well: “Photographs are both images and physical objects that exist in time and space and thus in social and cultural experience,” Elizabeth Edwards and Janice Hart. Photographs Objects Histories: On the Materiality of Images. (London: Routledge, 2004), 67.

References and Related Literature


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