

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

Animals have never been camera shy – almost since the introduction of the medium in 1839, they have appeared in photographs. While early photographs typically depicted animals that were tame, captive, or dead, modern and contemporary artists have delved into the interdependent relationship between human and non-human.

Drawn entirely from the J. Paul Getty Museum's photographs collection, *In Focus: Animalia*, on view May 26-October 18, 2015 at the Getty Center, illustrates some of the complex relationships between people and animals. From an intimate studio portrait with dog and owner to the calculated cruelty of inbreeding practices, these photographs offer nuanced views of the animal kingdom.

"It is easy to understand why artists choose animals for their subject matter – their lives are profoundly intertwined with our own, often eliciting powerful emotions," says Timothy Potts, Director of the J. Paul Getty Museum. "Whether seen as beloved pets, kept in zoos, or threatened by human activity, animals continue to fascinate and act as catalysts for artistic creativity. This exhibition highlights the many different ways in which animals as subject matter have served as an endearing theme for photographers throughout history right up to the present day."

Photographs of pets, working animals, taxidermied game,

and exotic beasts in newly opened zoos circulated widely during the second half of the 19th century. Early daguerreotypes required a subject to remain still for several minutes to ensure that the image would not blur, so photographing moving animals posed a problem. In *Study of a White Foal* (about 1845) the Swiss nobleman and amateur daguerreotypist Jean-Gabriel Eynard (1775-1863), focused the lens of his camera on a foal at rest, a moment when its movements were limited, in order to make a successful picture.

By the early 1850s, most major cities in Europe and America could boast studios specializing in daguerreotype photography. Customers sat for portraits in order to preserve their own images, and also commissioned photographs of their family members and loved ones, including pets. In *Dog Sitting on a Table* (about 1854; artist unknown) an eager dog is photographed sitting on a tasseled pedestal. The slight blurring of the head, indicating movement during exposure, betrays the barely contained energy of this otherwise well-trained animal.

The mid-19th century saw increasing demand for stereoscopic photographs – two nearly identical prints made with a double lens camera that created a three-dimensional image when viewed in a stereoscope viewer. Frank Haes (British, 1832-1916) made a reputation for himself by photographing animals at the London Zoo, much to the delight of those fascinated by hippos,



Eadweard Muybridge
 "The Horse in Motion", photograph, plate 626, 1978, from *Animal Locomotion*

lions, zebras, and other exotic beasts. Eadweard J. Muybridge's (American, born England, 1830-1904) pioneering work in motion studies are best remembered for his depictions of animals. Devising a system for successively tripping the shutters of up to 24 cameras, Muybridge created the illusion of movement in a galloping horse.

Artists have also relied on animals to convey symbolism and to represent fantastical worlds. A photograph by Alfred Stieglitz (American, 1864-1946) of a harnessed and castrated horse serves as a critical metaphor for American identity in the early 1920s, which Stieglitz viewed as materialist and culturally bankrupt. An elaborately staged photograph by Sandy Skoglund (American, born 1946) presents a dreamlike atmosphere filled with handmade, larger-than-life sculptures of goldfish that create a scene at once playful and disturbing. Recently-acquired works by Daniel Naudé (South African, born 1984) depict portraits of wild dogs the photographer found on the arid plains of South Africa. Made from a low vantage

point, individual dogs are cast against broad views of the landscape, and the photographs harken back to the equestrian portrait tradition popular during the 17th century. Taryn Simon's photograph of a caged white tiger (American, born 1975) demonstrates the often times debilitating results of the inbreeding practices utilized to obtain highly desired traits such as a white coat. This work illuminates the mistakes and failures of human intervention into a territory governed by natural selection.

In Focus: Animalia was on view between May 26 and October 18, 2015, at the J. Paul Getty Museum, Getty Center. The exhibition was accompanied by the publication of *Animals in Photographs* (Getty Publications) by Arpad Kovacs who is interviewed for *Antennae* by Matthew Brower, Director of the Museum Studies Program in the Faculty of Information at the University of Toronto and author of *Developing Animals: Wildlife and Early American Photography* (2010).

Matthew Brower: The exhibition title, *In Focus: Animalia*, and the catalogue title, *animals in photographs*, are both fairly neutral and descriptive: Do you see the exhibition as a neutral cataloguing of the animals as they appear in photographs or do you see it as bringing to bear a critique of human-animal relations?

Arpad Kovacs: The titles for both the exhibition and catalogue are intentionally neutral and descriptive because neither is an attempt to create a systematic or definitive cataloguing of animals or human-animal relations. Instead, these parallel projects are a means of teasing out under-explored histories from the Museum's large and idiosyncratic collection. The Department of Photographs at the Getty Museum, along with the collection, was started in 1984 and while it is rather comprehensive, the primary strengths are prints from first one-hundred years of the medium's history.

The exhibition featured 36 photographs, including several cased objects and prints tipped into albums. With approximately 80 plates, the catalog allowed more opportunities to highlight works that are often overlooked, including works made in the last fifty years and recent additions to the collection. I see these two projects as a way to explore the medium's diverse history through a subject that fascinated many photographers but has received relatively little attention from scholars.

M.B.: How long did it take to put this exhibition together? Was it difficult to get approval from the museum or did they recognize the importance of the topic early on?

A.K.: The exhibition was organized in about two years, which is approximately the amount of time it takes for most collection-based exhibitions to come together. I had been thinking about a project that examined photographs of animals in the collection for much longer, and working within the confines of the Museum's collection helped to shape the final project. The Museum administration was very supportive of the exhibition from early stages in the planning process. As curators at the Museum, we are encouraged to study and find new ways of understanding and presenting works in the collection.

M.B.: How difficult was it to settle on the final 35 images for

the exhibition?

A.K.: Settling on the final selection of photographs for the exhibition was an especially challenging task. The Department of Photographs' collection contains over 100,000 prints and cased objects, with pockets of material that, at the time of the project's start, had yet to be catalogued. I spent several months making an initial selection of photographs that contained representations of animals, along with a selection of prints that included some sort of a representation of an animal. The second edit focused on the condition of each object, as we would not show or reproduce prints that have major condition issues, like discoloration and fading, or tears. I wanted to ensure that the final selection contained a representation of the various periods in the medium's history and also a visual variety that made for an engaging viewing experience.

M.B.: Which images almost made it into the show?

A.K.: There were a number of photographs that I had hoped to include but was unable to do so because of space restrictions. For example, we have several incredibly compelling photographs by the South African photographer Pieter Hugo of men from Nigeria posing with animals they use to earn a living by performing for crowds. We also have a number of nineteenth-century albums in the collection that contain photographs by both known and unknown makers, of various hunting expeditions and staged scenes with animals that were popular during the second-half of the nineteenth-century.

M.B.: The show is drawn exclusively from the Getty's collections and shows off the incredible range its holdings. Are their photographs or photographers that you wanted to include but which weren't available? How did these absences affect the exhibition?

A.K.: The Getty Museum's collection of photographs contains a broad overview of the medium's history, with certain photographers, and periods, represented in greater depth than others. For example, we have excellent examples of prints by Eadweard Muybridge and his early motion experiments, however, we do not have any



Pieter Hugo

Mallam Galadima Ahmadu with Jamis, Nigeria Chromogenic print, Negative 2005; print 2010, 2010.25.1

Examples by his counterparts working in Europe like Étienne-Jules Marey and Ottomar Anschütz, working in Paris and Berlin respectively. Additionally, the legacy of a publication like *National Geographic Magazine*, which has played a significant role in introducing and publicizing of wildlife conservation efforts to the general public, is not represented in the collection.

These are only two examples, among many,

that became apparent as I worked on this project. In order to present a more nuanced view of this subject, it would be ideal to fill these gaps in the collection. Since the exhibition was rather modest in size, I don't think the absence of these two examples had a negative effect on the outcome. Becoming aware of these absences have helped me to realize some of the broader issues that need to be explored with a more ambitious project.



Alfred Stieglitz
Spiritual America, Gelatin silver print, Negative 1923, print 1920s-30s, 93.XM.25.12



Unknown
Portrait of a Girl with her Deer, Daguerreotype, About 1854, 84.XT.172.5

M.B.: Did your understanding of the relations between animals and photography shift as you developed the project?

A.K.: As with any project that evolves over several months, and even years, you find yourself arriving at realizations that in hindsight seemed incredibly obvious. While the exhibition and accompanying publication are not exhaustive surveys of the topic, the project did help me to develop a greater appreciation for the role of chance in photographing live animal. In looking at photographs that span the history of the medium it was interesting to see photographers learning to embrace, and later to exploit, the potential for successes in accidents. Photographs of

animals were highly staged affairs for a long time, but with advancements in technology near the end of the nineteenth century, a sense of spontaneity slowly crept into many pictures, especially those created by amateurs.

Perhaps the most valuable realization occurred in surveying the landscape of scholarship on this topic. The catalogue is aimed at a general reader, but while conducting research I noticed a lot of gaps in the resources readily available. This was at once frustrating and also exciting, especially since the field is rich with potential for future research.

M.B.: Which of the photographs affected you the most?



Adolphe Brown
[Still Life with Game], Carbon print, 1865, 84.XP.458.31

A.K.: Taryn Simon's photograph of an inbred white tiger, from her series *An American Index of the Hidden and Unfamiliar*, is a deeply sad picture. Both for what it shows, a malformed creature in a cage standing on a concrete platform, and what the viewer learns about selective breeding practices after reading the accompanying text panel the artist provides.

The photograph in the show that I think is perhaps the most significant, at least in the context of the narrative that I have tried to create, is Alfred Stieglitz's print from 1923 entitled *Spiritual America*. This photograph of a harnessed and castrated horse was intended to serve as a metaphor for American identity, which the photographer viewed as materialist and culturally bankrupt. The horse, a traditional symbol of power and speed, is fragmented in this depiction and reduced to a slick display of geometry. The symbolism in this tightly cropped, and highly controlled, picture signals an important shift in American modernism; it's a photograph that makes me pause every time I see it.

M.B.: How do you see the practice of animal photographs shifting or developing over the time period the exhibition covers?

A.K.: This is an especially difficult question to answer, as the exhibition was tasked with presenting an overview of the medium's history with only 36 photographs. Developments in animal photography are closely tied to advancements in camera and lens technologies, and the increased range of movement those improvements permitted on the part of the photographer. A daguerreotype showing a young girl standing next to a deer from the 1850s is especially interesting because the process required a great deal of stillness from the subject. While not a great deal is known about this particular daguerreotype, it is highly likely that the animal depicted was domesticated. Photographers during the nineteenth-century often looked to painting for their subject matter. The genre of "still life" was adapted by photographers like Adolphe Braun who created inventive compositions that meant to compete with small paintings of similar subjects.

The introduction of new photographic papers and developing chemistry also played significant roles, especially for art photographers at the turn of the twentieth century. Furthermore, the increasingly broad circulation of

photographs that depicted animals, primarily through journals and publications dedicated to the study of nature and wildlife, helped to cultivate diverse views of animal representations. The exhibition broadly reflected some of these developments but did not dwell on any particular shifts.

Aside from technical changes, the major shifts have historically concerned desires to capture motion, often through increasingly dynamic angles. The exhibition contained two especially wonderful examples with Albert Renger-Patzsch's *Sacred Baboon*, 1928 and Lisette Model's *Rhinoceros Resting on Its Side*, 1933-38. More recently, I think the most important developments concern individual attempts to understand and reflect an animal's own subjectivity and consciousness. While these ideas are difficult to read in a photograph, I think these concerns are bubbling to the surface in the work of photographers like Daniel Naudé.

M.B.: Do you find more continuities or discontinuities between the early images in the exhibition and the contemporary ones?

A.K.: I tried to make a selection that emphasized the wide range of approaches photographers have explored over course of the medium's history, while also presenting a variety of visually engaging pictures. Contemporary artists are certainly aware of photographers like Eadweard Muybridge and William Wegman, whose careers have arguably been defined by photographing animals. However, it was less important for this project to examine photographs that continue any specific legacy or visual approach.

The majority of pictures included in the exhibition were by photographers not necessarily known for their photographs of animals. Most have turned to animals as subjects at some point in their careers, and this is the most significant continuity that comes to the fore. There is a plethora of reasons why people photograph animals, and they tend to make their way into the oeuvre of most photographers.

M.B.: The exhibition has now been up for several months and has received a number of reviews and notices (including a recommendation as family friendly children's



Lisette Model

Rhinoceros Resting on Its Side, Gelatin silver print, 1933-38, 84.XM.153.16



Daniel Naudé
Africanis 8. Barkly East, Eastern Cape, 5 July 2008, Chromogenic print, 2008, 2014.26.3

outing); how do you characterize the response?

A.K.: The response to the exhibition has been quite positive. Whenever I walked through the gallery I was happy to see families with children visiting the show as I think it's a great way to get young kids excited about art. The exhibition at the Getty was more concerned with photographs of animals as art, rather than serving a specific pedagogical function like an exhibit at a natural history museum. I think the subjects

matter was a great point of entry for many who do not regularly visit art museums.

M.B.: Will the Getty now be focusing on animal photographs as a collecting area?

A.K.: The Getty Museum's collecting priorities are not dictated by subject matter, and photographs of animals will not become a collecting area. It is, however, an interest that

will continue to be considered as we strengthen holdings of works by specific photographers.

M.B.: Does this project mark the end of your exploration of animals and photography or are their future projects that will take aspects of the project further?

A.K.: Currently there are no other projects on the horizon that explore the relationship between animals and photography, however, it's a rich topic and will certainly yield other opportunities.

Matthew Brower is a curator and academic. He is the Director of the Museum Studies Program in the Faculty of Information at the University of Toronto. He included Max Streicher's *Dream of Guernica* in *Mediated Memory*, a Canadian Focus Exhibition for the 6th Annual Beijing International Art Biennale that he co-curated in the Fall of 2015.

Arpad Kovacs joined the Getty Museum's Department of Photographs in 2011 as an assistant curator, and was the organizer of the exhibition *In Focus: Animalia* (May 26 – October 18, 2015). He is currently working on a monographic exhibition of the work of English photographer Richard Learoyd titled *Richard Learoyd: In the Studio* that will be on view at the Getty Museum from August 30–November 27, 2016. He organized the exhibitions *In Focus: Play* (December 23, 2014 – May 10, 2015), and *Hiroshi Sugimoto: Past Tense* (February 4–June 8, 2014) among others. Arpad received his Master of Arts degree in art history from York University, and his Bachelor of Arts in the same field from Queen's University.