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The pet in contemporary art

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Elmarie Pretorius: The Pet in Contemporary Art

Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to investigate the figure of the pet in contemporary art. I will argue that the pet offers rich potential for creative exploration that challenges the conventional binaries of self/other, human/animal, and tame/wild in a way that tries to speak of a different subjectivity.

I take as a starting point that the pet is seen as not *other* enough and this explains its relative absence in contemporary visual art practice and discourse. Currently there is a lot of interest in the animal within this field, but the animal is usually cast as *wild* or *untamed* – all too often functioning as a signifier of difference from the human (through this difference, of course, we define what is human). For all that the pet is an animal it does not serve as a signifier in the same way. It straddles binaries/boundaries of human/animal and even self/other in a manner that is often interpreted as 'uncomfortable'. I will argue that the widespread prejudice against pets is based on a very deep seated and problematic formulation of the *wild*, and if the binary opposition of the wild and the domestic is discarded (as the binary opposition of the human and the animal was/is) the pet is more than equal to the same theoretical, and consequently practical, burden as the wild animal. With special attention to the concept of becoming-animal, outlined by Deleuze and Guattari, I look at the artists Jo Ractliffe, Carolee Schneemann, and William Wegman whose pets play a pivotal role in the production of their artworks, and in some cases, the trajectory of their careers. I contend that within this cross-species relationship/experience/void/communication (or any other description one might hazard to apply) something happens, an event, something meaningful, worth consideration. The very nature of a cross-species phenomenological, libidinal relating is, for me, laden with creative possibility. I argue that the pet has the potential to open up a creative space within which important and topical issues, anxieties and subject fractures can be visually manifested.