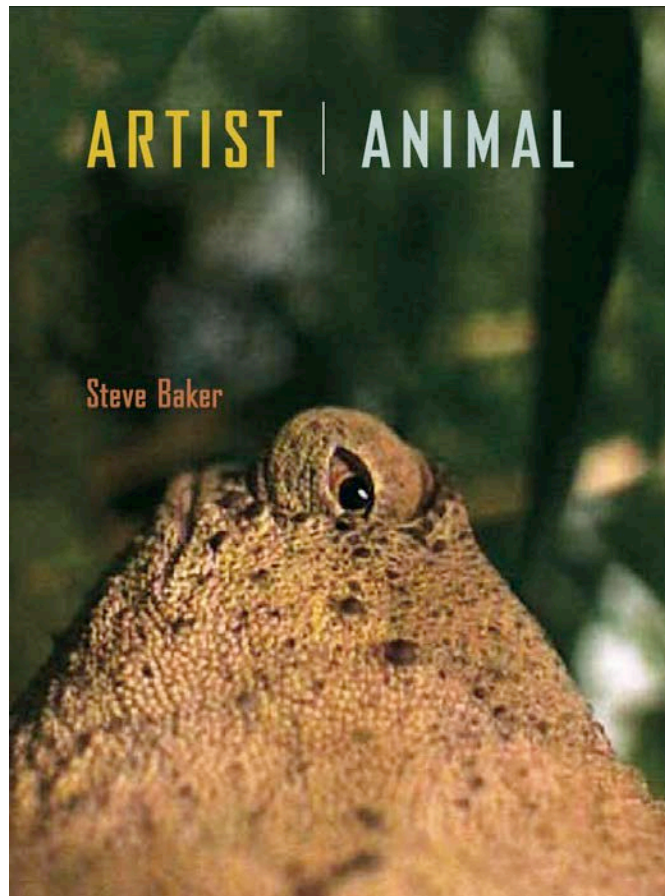


-----ANTENNAE BOOK REVIEW-----

Artist | Animal
Steve Baker

Review by Mysoon Rizk



The cover of Steve Baker's *Artist | Animal* features a purposefully oblique detail of a chameleon. Appropriated from a video still, from artist Catherine Chalmers' *Safari* (2007), it captures a chameleon in a studio-contrived tropical jungle. In advance of the book cover's ninety-degree rotation, this reptile was ambling in "landscape" format, leftward and away from a lipstick-sized camera eye. Now, in "portrait" mode, an otherwise prominent snout having disappeared from view, the averted

"face" proves evocative. In interview, Chalmers asserts that "reptiles see the camera eye, or at least [my chameleon] does, as the eye of a predator. He's very uncomfortable having the camera look at him" (Lovece 2012). Moving independently of each other, "turreted" eyes provide the exotic animal with 360-degree vision, allowing the chameleon a sidelong glance taken to extremes, while simulating mesmerizing eye contact with readers. That such a visual exchange remains utterly fictive underscores the chasms between human interpretation and the lives of most animals. Upended for Baker's cover, the resulting chameleon sitter's "expression" turns blank, inscrutable, alert, yet wary -- perhaps setting the proper tone for this ambitious book.

Whether or not artists "can be trusted with animals," despite indication by previous reviewers, has limited bearing on Baker's preoccupations, not only with "flawed and tentative" examples of animal bodies in art but also, borrowing Donna Haraway's language, "the mode of attention with which contemporary artists engage" these bodies (230). *Artist / Animal* formulates key linkages to posthumanist theory and animal studies, while settling into the complexities and ambiguities of contemporary art practice, simultaneously providing such activities, often derided, with critical defenses. The book offers lucid documentation and instructive discussion of numerous sometimes inspirational works: in addition to Chalmers, including such figures as Mircea Cantor, Mary Britton Clouse, Sue Coe, Robert Filby, Britta Jaschinski, Eduardo Kac, Lucy Kimbell, Olly and Suzi, Angela Singer, Snaebjörnsdóttir/Wilson, David Wood, Catherine Bell, and Kim Jones. Those familiar with Baker's prior projects, publications, exhibition, symposia, and conference participation, often as keynote speaker, will rightly anticipate continued focus on the subject of humans "killing animals" (Animal Studies Group). His third, perhaps bravest, book, should not be opened lightly, especially by anyone inclined to mistrust contemporary artists. Almost immediately, the book confronts two artistic projects enacting violent

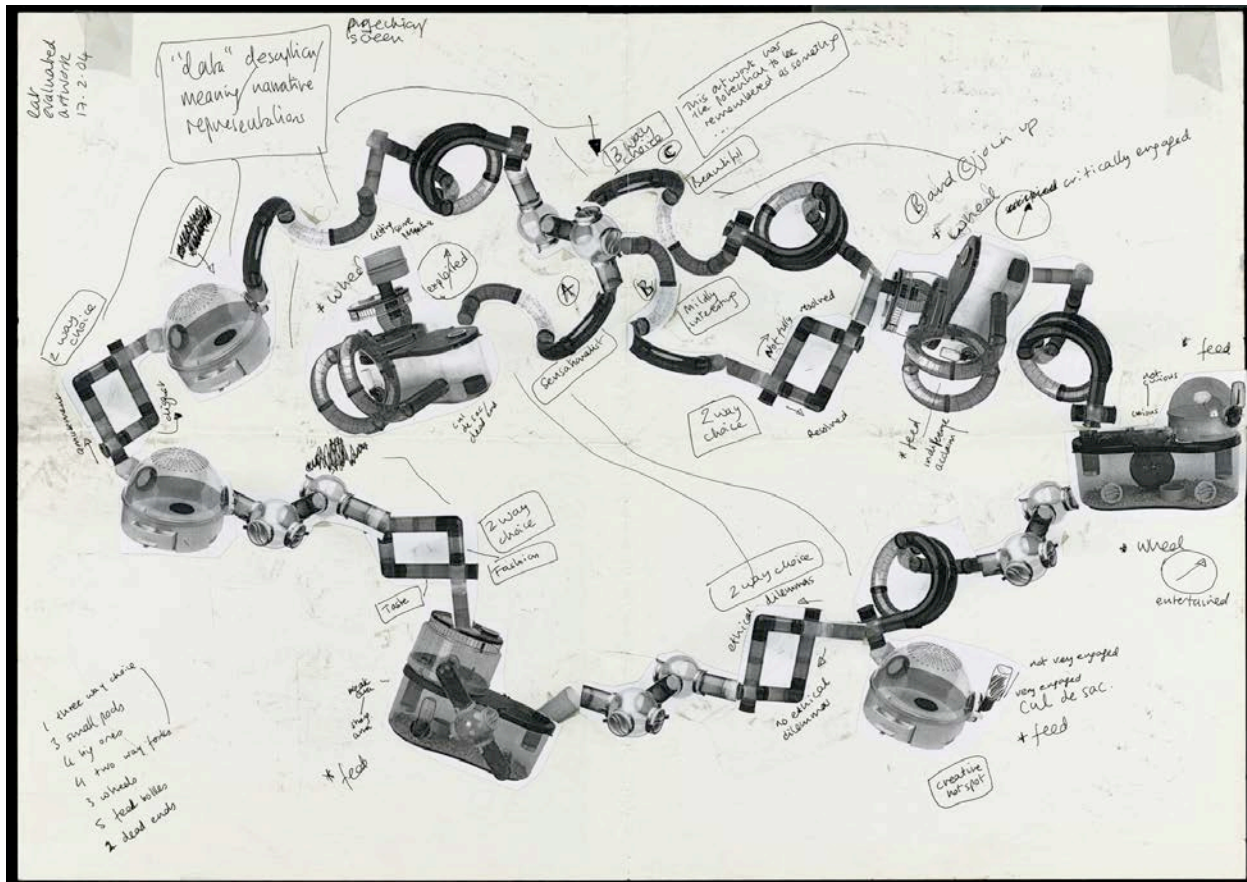


Catherine Bell

Felt is the Past tens of Feel, performance still, photograph by Christian Capurro, courtesy of the artist and Sutton Gallery Melbourne, 2006 © Bell

animal deaths. The first occurred in Los Angeles, California, in 1976, shortly after and in response to the Vietnam War, when an artist set three caged rats on fire in front of an audience, who did nothing to stop it. The artist was subsequently convicted of animal cruelty and subjected to penalties. The second went on view in Kolding, Denmark, in 2000, when a visitor elected to pulverize two of ten goldfish, part of a ten-Moulinex blender installation. In the latter case, after broad public protest, the gallery suspended the electric supply. Baker nevertheless refutes proscriptive attitudes, particularly by scholars declining to examine the objects they criticize. Baker remains no less dedicated than fellow animal studies advocates, to greatly reducing, or even eliminating, the continued exploitation and consumption of animals globally.

In effect, the book seems to chronicle diminishing levels of tolerance for animal cruelty, in both public opinion and artistic display, as when worldwide outcries ensued against Huang Yong Ping's 2005 installation of *Theater of the World* at the Walker Art Museum. The Minneapolis, Minnesota-based organization subsequently prohibited live animals from future exhibitions. In counterpoint, Baker nevertheless defends artistic practices from such outside-imposed boundaries, as through pressure from normative conventions or application of regulatory protocols, not unlike, say, those of scientific experiments proposing the use of animal subjects. After *Rat Piece* -- the single live performance from 1976 already mentioned, by American artist and Vietnam veteran Kim Jones -- the book's most extreme inclusion may well be *Felt Is The Past Tense of Feel*, a singular video-captured staging in 2006, depending on forty freshly killed squid bodies, for a multi-media installation by Melbourne-based Australian artist Catherine Bell. Having personally come to know both artists, along with the book's author, I greatly appreciated Baker's even-handed, objective, and meticulous delineations.



Lucy Kimbell

Rat Evaluated Artwork, (detail), 2005 © Kimbell

There is no denying that both of these works responded to past and recent traumas of suffering and death by reinflicting further suffering and death. In the case of Jones, Vietnam wartime experience of horrendous rat torture during American camp infestations was ritualistically reenacted before the 1976 Los Angeles audience. It concluded in three rat executions, their burial, and criminal penalties paid by the artist, not to mention his perception of feeling ostracized by the community, compelling a permanent move to New York. In the case of Bell, in 2006, to help process her father's painful death by cancer, she staged a one-time shamanistic action of erasure/resurrection involving the corrosive ink of forty sacrificed squid. Dressed in her father's pink-felt-coated suit, and seated on stage in an empty theatre before two cameras, she sucked and spit out the ink all over herself. She then gathered, cradled, and temporarily interred the forty squid within the suit jacket, while easing backwards into the darkness of the blackened stage. Squid were then given to a birthday barbecue, while the ink-soaked jacket palpably anchored Bell's installation.

To work "in the service of art," as British artist Lucy Kimbell has phrased it, means proceeding, in Baker's words, as if "artworks are objects, material things, with their own internal necessity and integrity, their own resonances, and their own work to do" (111). As amply demonstrated by riveting and clarifying explications of their work, many artists in the book share a commitment to adopting positions of neutrality, impassiveness, equivocality, and/or non-judgment, even in the context of extreme discomfort and/or death, and even when self-inflicted and/or personally imposed on other animals. In addition to intelligent and persuasive discussion of often troubling works of art, the author intersperses seven chapters with brief and powerful philosophical reveries on the ethics and aesthetics of human-animal divides. Baker willingly ventures with artists into arenas of moral, ethical, or existential ambiguity, every candid exploration drawing upon elaborate personal interviews. While defending creativity and creative practice, even for those who manipulate animal bodies, *Artist / Animal* indicates great benefit in appreciating and deriving insights from what artists "learn from the objects and signs they produce" (Shiff 133).

References

The Animal Studies Group. *Killing Animals*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2006.

Baker, Steve. *Artist / Animal*. Posthumanities Series 25. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2013.

Lovece, Frank. "Catherine Chalmers -- Nature Photographer -- Interview by Frank Lovece." *TakeGreatPictures.com*. September 18, 2008. <<http://www.takegreatpictures.com/photo-tips/photo-tips-and-techniques/catherine-chalmers-nature-photographer-tips-for-photographing-tiny-wildlife>>. Last accessed February 22, 2014.

Shiff, Richard. "Specificity." In *Contemporary Art: 1989 to the Present*. Eds. Alexander Dumbadze and Suzanne Hudson. West Sussex, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013. 126-136.

