

# Unscoping Animals

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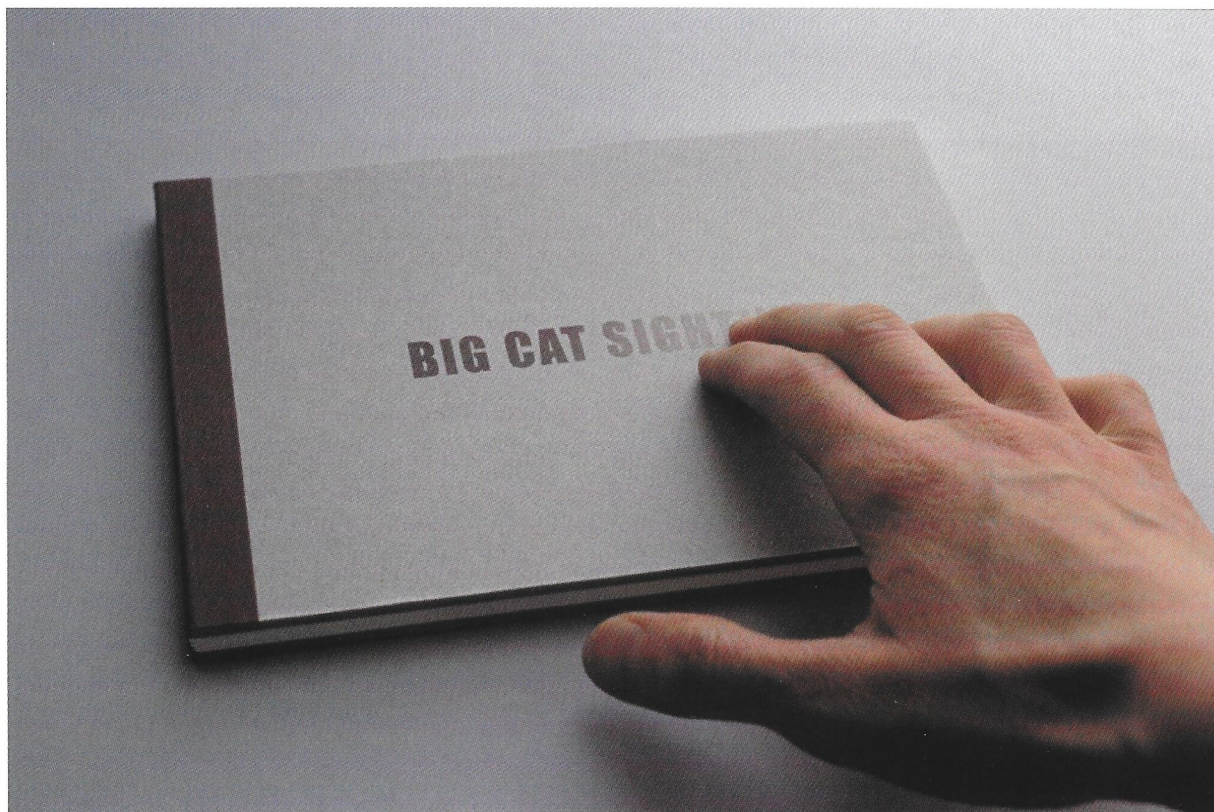
*Habitualization devours works, clothes, furniture, one's wife and the fear of war. "If the whole complex lives of many people go on unconsciously, then such lives are as if they had never been." And art exists that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists to make one feel things, to make the stone stony.*

Viktor Shklovsky<sup>1</sup>

The urban mode of living is shot right through the European countryside like the darker threads in a tweed blanket. Electrical and digital networks, fibre-optic connections, motor highways and global flight paths now traverse the rural, linking urbanist to urban destination and back again in a way quite unconsidered even only 50 years ago. Mobile signal black spots, slow broadband, single track roads and longer delivery times characterise not any rural intransigence or resistance, but only the countryside's remaining tractability for urban networks. The social space of rurality in Europe is now a product of gigacapital invested in bio-tech and agri-businesses or the commuter dormitories of a local European demographic in which the human population has increased almost threefold in just a century, all set in the context of world population growth by sevenfold over the same period.<sup>2</sup> If the "social" is to include the other animals sharing or exploiting that same space, then for many of those animals the stretching acres of

annually fertilised soils and sprayed crops of arable farmland now determine vast wastelands for those animals to cross in search of new food sources, partners or area for landgrab.

At the Western end of the Eurasian landmass, all field margins (our hedges, walls and fences, our planted trees and the tended riverbanks that pen in our farmed livestock) have, since the Neolithic, also provided the low-level infrastructure for the otherwise invisible olfactory or navigational networks that stake out the resources and food patrol routes of undomesticated animals. As field boundaries have been removed to facilitate recent mechanisation and greater food yields for humans, so the topology, nodes and geometries of invisible animal territories have grown more isolated, transformed into odd-shaped pockets, enclaves and archipelagos. Most animals in rurality thus live and travel conditioned by our own alternative modern, an anthropocene



existence directed along or framed by liminal lines we have set for centuries. In their local journeys, these animals thus perform each day a form of giant and invisible drawing of their own corralled liberty that we may only guess at.

To re-imagine wild animals, livestock, and companion animals for this new rurality (as opposed to any urbanism) now, one may need to remember, think of and configure animality as *a priori* to humanity, to understand cities and rural settlements as our own animal homes; to appreciate seas, skies, rivers, fields, forests, deserts, mountains, bedrock and soil as our own animal resources, with our technology as our own animal adaptation. On these terms, the human animal is as wild as any other and both sets may thus meet each other on the common lands of the ideal. In any such posthuman utopian venture, a different sort of art practice may now prove useful for new readings, interpretations and imaginings of the

rural real. That is, art practices which deploy no romanticised rural landscape, no instrumentalised nature reserve, nor the totalised micro- and macroscopic lens regimes of current wildlife photography and videography, but centre instead on what may be observed unscaled by an unenhanced eye or on visualisation and not on what is made from visual observation at all. In making readings of such art, we may come to acknowledge how few animals of much visibility except ourselves there are in a world that humans have now helped shape over millennia, how distant and unconfiding those few other animals often are, as well as what little we notice of them and the reasons why.

Popular television culture is packed with animal subjects in what are called wildlife documentaries, yet which are all carefully scoped for human fictions with telephoto or macroscopic lens in the same repetitive tropes: animal action

(overleaf left) Fig. 2: Snæbjörnsdóttir/Wilson, Research image from: *(a)fly* (2006) Reykjavik, Iceland

(overleaf right) Fig. 3: Snæbjörnsdóttir/Wilson, Documentary image from the installation: *nanoq: flat out and bluesome* (2004) Spike Island, Bristol 257











shots, animal romantic comedies, animal hospital dramas, animal penetration scenes and of course animal snuff movies: the animal metaphor permits a broadcasting of documentary film we would often find ethically transgressive, were it of our own kind. Knowledge of animality is gained vicariously and virtually in this way, enabled by the camera only. This scoping of other animals for mass visual consumption has been in place since the roll-out of television. The recent *Making Nature* exhibition at the Wellcome Collection in London showed Heinz Sielmann's innovative 1954 film *Woodpeckers* of a bird feeding its chicks, filmed from a camera in the back of the nesting hole. In terms of popularity, this was the first really successful invasion of animal privacy by camera. Its TV ratings were at the time second only to the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II. Curiously, the broadcaster James Fisher described this film at the time as an "escape to reality," presumably the viewer's entertaining escape from daily chores into another hitherto secret reality.<sup>3</sup> Sixty years on from *Woodpeckers*, scoping animals in this way is now an escape from reality; nature documentaries provide merely an opportunity to switch channels. The quotidian familiarity of scoped images has virtually erased any shared animality. We have watched moving images of other animals via camera point-of-view conventions which have been used over a century everywhere for human-only narratives. The lens regimes we are accustomed to are now so mediated as to be problematic for art about animals and so the imagery of wildlife observation may now turn from and force ignorance of the rural real.

Once a year in London, the members of the Society of Wildlife Artists have an exhibition on the Mall at the Mall Galleries, a hundred metres or so from the Institute of Contemporary Arts. The art on show is largely painting, print or drawing, although there is always some sculpture on display, too. The wildlife subject of much of the art shown at the Mall Galleries' exhibition is necessarily worked from observation of film stills, photography or taxidermy, if only because wildlife models do not stay motionless for the artist to draw from life for very long. The Society's wildlife art tends to relate other animals to the human experience in a framework of tropes previously

reserved in European art history since the Early Modern for our own kind only: seated portraits, group ensembles, *mises-en-scene*, events in landscape, now cast in the rural vernacular of the present. All is presented as if the artist were close up to the animals out in the open, yet this is in fact the telescoped experience of birdwatchers, walkers, naturalists, anglers or hunters at their leisure. This is the stuff of a regular anthropomorphism at work in art since Landseer, wishfully understanding other animals in the displaced context of the way we see our families, our colleagues, our guests, and our crowds.

The wildlife art on show at the Mall Galleries may happily and without intended offence be described as a subset of the popular genre of tourism art to which the artist and art academic James Elkins has assigned his own favourite subset (marine painting).<sup>4</sup> By tourism art Elkins means the local art shown at and bought in large quantity from galleries in tourist destinations, seaside locations or indeed the Mall itself as it stretches between Trafalgar Square and Buckingham Palace. Similar paintings appear there year after year, their subject and approach changing little; in this case, encounters with nature in a countryside portrayed as wild as it can be in Britain today. As Elkins points out, art like this is private at heart, "fundamentally predicated on an unwillingness to look beyond the nearest available models."<sup>5</sup> Elkins goes on with regret (he wishes for an alternative) to state that in any art discourse we appear to have open to us only two forms of judgment on such art: "forgiving" (unacademic) or "demanding" (critical in an art academic way) with no stable middle ground between those two positions.

Some other artists and I choose to make the demanding judgment here, as we make a difficult attempt on representing the real in this respect. Our motive I can illustrate only by anecdote. This summer I had an instructive experience that I imagine, despite its increasing infrequency, many Society of Wildlife Artists' members will also have had at least once in their lives. If I shut my eyes I can remember it vividly right now. I had very suddenly encountered a wild animal right up close without any barrier between us both. I recall the instant

of shock I felt, the unpredictability, the split-second feeling of danger that then just as quickly vanished. That was a “wild” response. Both animals (a badger and I) made fleeting use of the emotional processors in our brains’ limbic systems to the very same end: fight or flight. We clocked each other, froze momentarily and the hairs on the back of my neck went up, before we both moved. That wild response put me on the same level with the other animal in the same space in a shared and unmediated animality. It is that shared animality that I seek, politically, in order to re-imagine the rural. I argue that it is only in the opposite of observation – in visualisation – that we may now re-imagine animality or the wild, to put the rural back in rurality, to make the stone stony in that defamiliarising way of Russian Formalism. Visualisation starts with the invisible, the implied, the off-stage or unidentifiable, even with the very summoning of a memory with one’s eyes shut.

This suggestion draws very much on the 40-year-old ethic and aesthetic of Martha Rosler’s series of photograph/text pairings *The Bowery in two inadequate descriptive systems* (1974-75), in which the artist focuses on the context for an absence.<sup>6</sup> The texts are simply typewritten words associated with intoxication. In common with many others, I always imagine Rosler’s photographs in this series as spaces where the homeless had slept or were going to sleep, although this is not made clear, which I understand precisely as the inadequacy of both of her descriptive systems. In this work Rosler made a conceptually innovative use of paradox in the artist’s “field,” in which a negative – the understood visual absence of a human subject from a text/image pairing – might then collectively imply those subjects’ social presence in (and as) the New York neighbourhood itself (the Bowery). Artists are very familiar with the effective use of negatives; we use negative space all the time to frame and highlight subject in the field. Rosler’s conceptual flip goes a step further to actually circumvent a photographer’s dilemma: how not to demean a disadvantaged subject by invasion of privacy or personal gain from display or publication. Rosler’s work asks both herself as artist and the viewer to visualise and so imagine and thus consider a subject, compensating for any inadequacy in the descriptive systems of photograph and text.

Negatives work for art in other ways, too. At the symposium, *The Animal Gaze* in 2008, Matthew Poole set out his framework for a (still unpublished) paper on ethics, art and animals, by opening with a long string of philosophical positions to which he was opposed.<sup>7</sup> He was anti-idealist, anti-romantic, anti-formalist, anti-humanist, anti-Plato, anti-liberal, anti-conservative: against so many things that one began to wonder if the ever-diminishing space left would be enough to give a paper from. At the time and afterwards, I heard people in the audience quietly scoffing at this contrarian position of multiple negatives. Not just for its meaning, but also, of course, from a common prejudice relating to curators and the language of art criticism.

With hindsight, Poole’s prologue was very useful as a tactical focus and filter for precision in what he had to say. Art practices may also use such tactics to define themselves and their systems. I have come to understand that I, too, used a similar filter of negatives to curate the large show which accompanied that symposium *The Animal Gaze* back in 2008.<sup>8</sup> I had set out a curatorial brief as follows: no animals as decoration; no animals as status symbols; no animals as vehicles for ancient mythology or totemic ritual; no animals as objects of affective or pathetic fallacy; no studio portraits of animals; no wildlife studies of animals; no anthropomorphs; no animal/human hybrids; no ironies around stuffed animal toys. In a question to me following a talk at The Showroom in London for Olga Koroleva’s event “The Political Animal,” the artist and art historian Steve Baker described these accurately as prohibitions.<sup>9</sup> I must have looked at the work of coming up to 400 artists for *The Animal Gaze* exhibition. I showed 44. Using this filter of prohibitions, a levitical code for art and animals, it was a matter of nine refusals for every inclusion. That is the brutality of the selection process for exhibition and is how discrimination (previously the stuff of connoisseurship) works in art. Selection for exhibition is always a minor denial of or even censorship of image. What I was trying to do was see what I was left with, a remainder which I was sure would have some teeth to critique the conventional ways in which animals had been represented before and at the time.







To represent the animal is, however, not necessarily to visualise animality. Visualisation is a specific process for which artists and designers are trained and their skills here are often called on visually to communicate complex ideas quickly to audiences. Robert Kosara has usefully laid out three simple rules for visualisation:

A visualization is based on data - transforms from the invisible to the visible.

A visualisation has to produce an image.

The result must be readable and recognisable.<sup>10</sup>

Kosara goes on to qualify his rules by making a special exception for art – that “artistic visualisation is to communicate a concern, rather than to show data. The data is used as the basis, the raw material.” The three rules are not the loose or baggy definitions artists might prefer in art, but they are useful in their literal mid-century modern Chicago School of Criticism way. The three reductive rules are simple handles, which may give pointers in how to visualise the animal for the new rural. Kosara’s best point lies in the invisibility of the data, which he states that visualisation will transform into image. Raw data in art lies in context for and research into the art project. An exemplary visualising of animality in this respect is the artist collaboration Snæbjörnsdóttir/Wilson’s *nanoq: flat out and bluesome* (2001-6) (Fig. 3), whose basis depends on a database the artists compiled of all the taxidermic polar bears in the UK, curated into an exhibited collection of documentary photographs and an installation of some of the taxidermy itself.<sup>11</sup>

For visualisation, raw data itself is too amorphous and reductive for perception as meaningful. No drawing from observation at the zoo here. No *plein air* painting in the deer park. No photographing animals in a studio or in the wild, either. Animality is not at hand, staged or unstaged, for its visualisation. Nor can animality be virtually rendered at hand by the visual regimes of the telephoto lens or the microscope. For the artist, then, visualising the animal may be to produce an image or a model from memory or from

imagination only. Visualising animality using a photograph or video may come about in post-production or via images in which the animal is either not present or unidentifiable as animal. There is an element of Dürer’s rhinoceros at work here: the animal never seen, but faithfully rendered for authority or patron as a drawing meme, copied from artist to artist.

Contemporary conditions favour visualising the animal via absence or the unidentifiable, because seeing other animals is becoming harder to achieve. Visually, the settlements where the human animal now lives are almost devoid of the presence of other animals compared with even only a century ago, certainly in terms of a reducing diversity. There are tens of billions of individual animals currently alive for short periods only among the 30 or so species farmed for human consumption. However, since the industrial revolution and the explosion of the human population from a world population of 1 billion to its over 7 billion today, all these short-lived agents have come increasingly to live and dwell outside our larger settlements in private, gated, liminal communities only, accessible mainly by the small minority of humans who live and work there, too – largely invisible to the rest of us.

Invisibility is one of Kosara’s conditions for visualisation. Yvette Watt’s images in her 2013 *Animal Factories* art project about Australian factory farms (Fig. 5) pass all three rules for a successful visualising of the animal. The data for the animal lies only in the art project’s title and in the photographer’s proximity to the factory farm estate, in the documenting of a project to get as close as legally possible to owned animals that the artist and the public are not allowed to see. Some animals permitted to range free are certainly visible here, but the others locked in the building remain invisible.<sup>12</sup> The image’s context within the described project renders the hidden animals’ presence readable and recognisable beneath the grey sky of the agri-landscape.

Mishka Henner’s 2012-13 series *Feedlots* (assemblies of seamed satellite images of Texas cattle farms) works similarly (Fig. 4).<sup>13</sup> At first glance, the compositions invite a reading as modernist abstract prints, but the artist soon shifts the

Fig. 4: Mishka Henner, *Coronado Feeders, Dalhart, Texas* (2012-13)





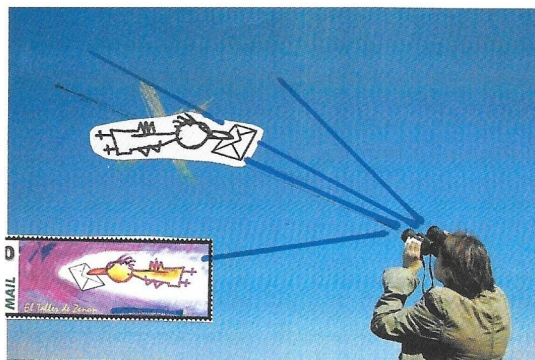
viewer to the raw data via the series' title. The cattle are unidentifiable as such, invisible at first except as meaningless dots, yet the context then renders those animals and their condition in an easily readable and recognisable way. The gaping red or green blobs in the images are slurry lagoons in algal bloom. On the ground one cannot get near farms like this, because farm security will stop visitors ahead of any approach. One can, however, smell these farms for miles around.

Andrea Roe's artist book *Big Cat Sighting* (2002) is printed with heat sensitive ink which causes the cover text to disappear when handled (Fig. 1).<sup>14</sup> Inside, curated with the deliberate banality of Martin Parr's collection of boring postcards, are eight images of locations in Aberdeenshire where big cats have reportedly been seen, but are not on view. In Snæbjörnsdóttir/Wilson's *(a)fly* (2006) (Fig. 2), different issues around shared animality (the violence of human hunting of other animals; the distribution of companion animals in a human settlement; a companion animal's dwelling-place in a human home) are yoked in photographs via the random data produced by a shotgun blast on district maps of Reykjavik and its relation to the distribution of pet-owner's houses in that city.<sup>15</sup>

*Falco subbuteo subbuteo* (*The Hobby*) is an artist project I have developed for almost 10 years now (Fig. 6). The work is a collection of completed forms, provisionally framed in the manner of a popular British tabloid newspaper "Spot the Ball" competition for football supporters, but in which visitors and viewers are invited to make any sort of mark on an image where they think a bird might be.<sup>16</sup> The collection features thousands of participatory visualisations. There are no prizes on offer and no animals were ever visible in the making of the work.

If making artworks for the current rural real might mean never working from the visible animal, then I shall in conclusion briefly lay out some other useful negative conditions, too. One might never work from visual documents of live animals, because that is just a compromised visibility, making use of animals documented at and in another time or exploiting the work of others who saw the animal when we did not. The condition would be: no painting from, drawing from or modelling from photographs of animals. For a visualising of the animal to be readable and recognisable in a useful way, artists may also have to be responsible regarding the invisible animal, too, just as artists should take responsibility when visualising the vulnerable such as children, the very old, the homeless or the sick (so taking us back to Martha Rosler's *The Bowery in two inadequate descriptive systems*). For animals, we may have to discard any visual trope by which we visualise humans, or all artists will ever do is cast the other animal in conventionally human terms only and so never in terms of any shared animality. Portraiture with its conventional monumentality and faciality is not a particularly useful form for visualisation of animality: in the visualised portrait of an animal most of us will always read human context, because so few of us are ethologists. Conventional taxidermy visualises nothing, but asks us instead to consider plastic forms that appear in their proximity to confide in us the predators: nothing could be more visually unhelpful for other animals. Instead, to imagine animals in the rural real, artists might well depict animal absences only, free of any lens regime that takes humans into places we would never see animals otherwise. This would accurately represent our political relations to other animals in the rural real: the poverty and apathy of most of our current representations; the rarely bridged distance between us and almost all other animals and the extensive reduction in diversity among other animals in our era.





Falco subbuteo subbuteo (The Hobby)

Name \_\_\_\_\_  
Address \_\_\_\_\_



Miguel Jimenez  
El Taller de Zambón  
C/ Santa María de Guis 1 - 4º D  
28-0209 Sevilla España

PLEASE SEND INFORMATION/DOCUMENTATION, THANKS, GREETINGS



Falco subbuteo subbuteo (The Hobby)

Name STEFANO COZZI  
Address SE13DS LONDON



Falco subbuteo subbuteo (The Hobby)

Name James Armstrong  
Address NCAD Dublin



Falco subbuteo subbuteo (The Hobby)

Name Martin Pover  
Address Flat 1 14 YONGE PARK  
LONDON  
N4 3NT



Falco subbuteo subbuteo (The Hobby)

Name Grace Edith Radford  
Address 103 Chandos Road  
London, E15 1TU



Falco subbuteo subbuteo (The Hobby)

Name L  
Address \_\_\_\_\_

## Endnotes

- 1 Viktor Shklovsky, "Art as Technique," 1917
- 2 United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, *World Population Prospects: The 2017 Revision, Volume I*, Comprehensive Tables (ST/ESA/SER.A/399)
- 3 Heinz Sielmann, *My Year with the Woodpeckers*, (trans. James Fisher), (London: Barrie & Rockliff, 1961): Introduction
- 4 James Elkins, "Two modes of judgment: forgiving and demanding (The case of marine painting)." *Journal of Visual Art Practice*, 3, no. 1 (January 2004): 37-46
- 5 Ibid., p.42
- 6 Martha Rosler, *The Bowerly in two inadequate descriptive systems, 1974-75, forty-five gelatin silver prints of text and image mounted on twenty-four backing boards*, dimensions variable, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Purchase, with funds from John L. Steffens, <http://collection.whitney.org/object/8304>
- 7 Matthew Poole, "Conditions of Solidarity and Justice – Does the conceiving of ethics separate humans from other animals?" Unpublished manuscript, last modified 20<sup>th</sup> November 2008, Microsoft Word file
- 8 Rosemarie McGoldrick, "The Animal Gaze" symposium and exhibition at London Metropolitan University, 20<sup>th</sup>-21<sup>th</sup> November 2008, <http://www.animalgaze.org/Archive.html>
- 9 Olga Koroleva, *The Political Animal*, [Accessed 26<sup>th</sup> November 2017] <https://www.theshowroom.org/events/the-political-animal>
- 10 Robert Kosara, "Visualization Criticism – The Missing Link Between Information Visualization and Art," *Proceedings of the 11<sup>th</sup> International Conference on Information Visualisation (IV) 2007*: 631–636
- 11 Snæbjörnsdóttir/Wilson, *nanoq: flatout and bluesome* (2001-6) archive in editions of 5, 600 x 610 mm and size 1100 x 1200 mm. [Accessed 26<sup>th</sup> November 2017], <http://snaebjornsdottirwilson.com>
- 12 Yvette Watt, *Animal Factories*, 2013, 12 digital prints mounted on aluminium composite sheet, dimensions variable, owned by artist
- 13 Mishka Henner, *Feedlots*, 2012-13, archival pigment prints. [Accessed 26<sup>th</sup> November 2017], <http://mishkahenner.com>
- 14 Andrea Roe, *Big Cat Sighting*, 2002, artist book, in edition of 40. [Accessed 26<sup>th</sup> November 2017], <http://www.andrea-roe.com>
- 15 Snæbjörnsdóttir/Wilson, *(a)fly*, 2006, [Accessed 26<sup>th</sup> November, 2017], <http://snaebjornsdottirwilson.com>
- 16 Rosemarie McGoldrick, *Falco subbuteo subbuteo (The Hobby)*, 2008-2017, installation of 2,000+ completed forms beneath a giclée print mounted on Di-bond aluminium composite sheet, 210 x 120 cm, owned by artist.