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Uncertainty in the City

Snæbjörnsdóttir/Wilson

In January of 2007, as a consequence of an earlier urban-animal project having come to their attention, we were commissioned by the Storey Gallery, Lancaster, UK, to research and make a proposal for a major new project.¹

Uncertainty in the City is an artists' project that begins with an examination of those animals that reside or nudge at the borders of our homes—those about whose presence we are ambivalent and over whose comings and goings we have a limited degree of control.

In our research we explore questions such as: What is a pest? What is the relationship between fear or discomfort in this context and “a lack of control?” What are the inconsistencies in our responses to “nature” in our locality and the reasons behind such contradictions?

And what is it about ourselves that is or begins to be revealed by the encroachment of outsiders in our midst? A few suggestions in answer to this have become evident from our research.

Fear of a disregard of individual territory
Fear of a disregard of manners and protocols
Fear of an implicit erosion of boundaries
Fear of disruption of our own patterns of behavior
Fear of those setting up residence, without our permission
Fear of aural disturbance
Fear of damage to property
The anxiety regarding pets and children
The anxiety regarding the possible spread of disease
And concerns regarding possible other, associated pest infestations

Our initial research was completed in the autumn of 2007.

Phase 2 research is ongoing.

Our work in Lancaster stemmed from our awareness of the wide range of responses to “wildlife” as it is encountered within urban environments by city dwellers. Long ago, settlements and therefore latterly cities were predicated on the concept of *refuge* and a physical division of culture and nature. Clearly such division has proved increasingly porous as more and more animals and birds consider concentrations of human population an attraction rather than a deterrent because of the opportunities such culture provides in terms of habitat and feeding. For some, the presence of these creatures—pigeons, starlings, rats, mice, foxes and all manner of insects is a threat of some kind, a kind of *leakage* and therefore a representation of the fragility of our insulation from the “wild,” the unpredictability and chaos of nature. For others, the enfolding of human and animal habitats is a source of pleasure and fascination. For many others again, there may be little conscious awareness until their personal boundaries are impinged upon.

Our plan in Lancaster in the early stages was to work with a number of local individuals and associations, in order to identify key spaces of encounter and issues specific to human environments in and around town. In order to have some insight into specific perceptions and limits of tolerance and “animal infringement,” we were keen to establish a working relationship

with those undertaking pest control in and around the city. The Pest Control Office, operating within the Environmental Health Department for Lancaster City Council, has been generous in their assistance during the research stages of the project.

As artists, we should say a little about how we undertake this kind of work—how research-based art practice functions for us in the generation of ideas and artwork. We first began working in this way during an Arts Council International Fellowship Residency in Melbourne, Australia, in 2002. During our two-month stay, we ended up interviewing a number of people whose lives were embroiled or had become bound up with the history, myth and current perspectives on the *Tasmanian Tiger*. By interviewing a number of people, each of whom had a different stake in this supposedly-extinct creature we were able to generate a picture of the animal without invoking its physical representation—that is, we focused not on the animal, extinct or otherwise, but instead on its significance to a human community, itself shaped by the absent animal's continued resonance.

In the Lancaster project we acquainted ourselves with a number of instances of animal/human encounters, and by so doing, we've been building a picture of local human behavior towards animals and the environment—of tolerance and intolerance, of fear and loathing, affection, conflict, pathos, admiration...we are thus being made aware of correspondences between our attitudes towards animals, and to society's attitudes (more generally and revealingly) to *the other*, including types of human communities both remote and closer to home.

What is conspicuously at play here is a continual conflict over territory. During our research we've observed ambivalence and contradictory vested interests in relation to a wide range of creatures. Most significant to us is this mixture of responses, the paradoxical nature of human attitudes towards agents of "the wild," and the implicit cohesion-in-tension of the human/nature paradigm.

So we wonder if the paradoxical intertwining of detached fascination on the one hand and neurotic repugnance on the other is the inescapable architecture of an irreconcilable tension? And in the final analysis, might this irreconcilability hinge on our own ambivalence to the animal in *us*?

In Lancaster, we are conscious that instead of working from within the home as we did in *(a)fly* and foregrounding a controlled and desired symbiosis, the space of encounter here is a marginal one, a liminal area that is host to encroachments each way and exemplified in areas of overlap. 2 If the urban garden is the area where such contention might be experienced, we felt we'd do well to focus here...the garden, especially one that is used regularly as a kind of extension to the house, can be regarded as the epidermis—our way of sensing, touching and experiencing an environment of which some elements are controllable whilst others are clearly not.

We may mow the lawn and weed the borders but things beyond our control continually arrive and depart, through hedges and fences, across and below the surface of the soil and grass and by air, inhabit or visit the trees and flowers. Some will be welcome, some not and some will be a source of vexation and perplexity. In an unthinking way, what perplexes or bothers us, we'd all too often just as soon be without. For this reason, we thought—who better to call on than the Pest Control Department?

As we've said, in Lancaster and Morecambe City Council, the Pest Control Department is a division of the Environmental Health Agency. When we approached them initially in August last year with these thoughts in mind, we interviewed Chief Pest Control Officer Susan Clowes, asking her a series of questions—the answers to which informed, in part, the anxieties listed above.

She also told us that: ...there is undoubtedly a dependency on institutions to deal with what in many ways is a local and domestic problem if a problem at all. Many callers are uptight about any animal presence in their homes and even in their gardens...

This Pest Control Department, at least in principle, is generally tolerant of other animal species and has stated they would never respond to suggestions to act against animals in their “natural environments.” It was the late social anthropologist Mary Douglas who famously made the observation that what any society designates as “dirt” is not fundamentally a category of material polluted by germs or microbes but is a case of “matter out of place.”

Dirt as matter out of place is an idea Douglas framed in order to explain the extraordinary range of ways in which different societies distinguish between what is ritually “pure” and what is “defiling” or polluted. Which may ultimately come down to the distinction between what is sacred and what is profane.

So pests, like dirt, are thought to be so when they are encountered “out of place”—the issue of what's in and what's out of place seems to be a matter of variable opinion, both between and within cultures. (During our research, for instance, we've learned that in Germany it is technically illegal to kill moles. It can be done legally, but a license must be applied for.)

Part of what we do and continue to do in this project is to examine the nature of representation and the pitfalls and obstacles that representation may put in the way of understanding. An increasing amount of television coverage (the educationally-entertaining variety) has in recent years been devoted to the scrutiny of human-animal margins of the type described above. A model is now established. Our TV has become a living room zoo—we're guided, by experts, from environment to environment and encouraged to gawk and wonder at the magical, the secret world of the animal that exists just outside our curtained window—literally—there on the bird bath or padding over the trampoline at night. TV demands no warm clothing and no obligation from us to stand still long enough for an animal to reveal itself.

And this is another inference we can draw; as attractive as these glimpses are, characteristically, we're happy to let the machine of the media do the work—to defer to the expert who will set up the shot, hide the camera, who will interpret, explain—give us the backstory on this highly-edited and therefore constructed, sharp-eyed moving vision of fur and nervous curiosity.

The waiting is erased. We see the money shot, not the hours of anticipation, the suspension of disbelief. Nor do we experience the real thrill of surprise at having days of fruitless persistence bear at last the tiniest but most gratifying reward. So what do we want? We are, after all, animal. Being us means, to some greater or lesser extent, being animal. Animals have proved their ingenuity and determination in finding their way into the citadel. So what do we want?

The media technology that appears to bring non-human animal “worlds” closer to ours—or to make their proximity so temptingly tangible—is the very agent that sustains their parallel remoteness from us. They are secret and we expect them to remain that way because seemingly, intuitively to us, they have no place in the world we’ve designed for ourselves. To imagine otherwise suggests a great self-deception, spectacularly unravelled when for instance our pets practice lapses of propriety—when the cat brings a rodent into the house and begins to fling it about the room. Finding body parts in the soft furnishings and wiping blood from the wallpaper is a stark reminder of why we built the walls in the first place.

Interestingly, the invasive construct we are presented with by experts and technicians, those people whose profession it is to do our looking for us, is so perfect, so intimate and complete that it bears almost no relation to our own actual experience of wild animals, a key characteristic of which there are fleeting and occasional incidences on the periphery of our vision.

So what to do with the paradox? Could it be that the issue only becomes an issue as such when we attempt to generalize, and that in fact a spectrum of all human behavior accommodates all manner of human/animal proximities and symbioses—of indifference and antagonism? What part plays empathy? What part irrational or intuitive rejection of alterity? What part pragmatic and dispassionate exploitation? How do we reconcile the components of this schema?

At the heart of all such questions is the issue of contested space. Whether by accident, by gate-crashing, by symbiosis, by tolerance, invitation or by cultivation, all species encroach or are encroached upon by others. There is nothing unique in this. What makes humans (possibly) exceptional is our obsession with analysis. In order to order and control our world we engage in the practice of definition—this in itself is a supremely graphic analogy of border control and manifests itself in ways that determine what is part of and what is apart from ourselves and our wishfully delimited lives.

One thing seems certain and that is the more we seek to insulate ourselves from what is deemed the natural environment of creatures, traditionally the more we seem to resent their scratching at our doors and their encroachment in or on our spaces. So while we can acknowledge that other cultures have a different take on cohabitation, those more like our own, obsessed with making human environments exclusively human, don’t take kindly to being reminded that it isn’t just up to us.

The Works

The works in *Uncertainty in the City* will be twofold. First, a radio station will attempt to map the spectrum of opinion and response through personal accounts, and we’ll use these as material for what we’re calling:

#1 Radio Animal – a local and on-line radio event where over a period of a day or series of days a mobile broadcast unit, modified to our specifications, will be parked visibly in the center of town and field vocal contributions from people of the city regarding their experience of wild creatures in their homes, gardens, in the parks—a mix of good and bad, of the extraordinary, of anxiety, of repugnance and delight.

When considering the possibilities in setting this up, we were drawn conceptually to an illegal or pirate approach, simply because the impertinence of its encroachment mirrors the uninvited arrival of animal itinerants. Even a modest radio intervention done on this basis might have been a coup. Questions arose regarding how this could be monitored and its effect documented. The extreme intolerance of the law regarding pirate radio stations suggests that this option would be problematic for us as citizens. Fortunately, much can be achieved by using webcasting and streaming live over the Internet.

The station will be a depository, a battery, a tool for knowledge and knowledge dissemination. It will be a propaganda tool and, simultaneously, a source of reassurance. Ultimately it sets out to be strategically pluralistic and unclassifiable in political terms—a bloodless animal revolution? Having launched *Radio Animal* in Lancaster we will take it on the road, probably to field events in the area.

#2 The Exhibition – This will comprise the final assemblage and exposition of the material accumulated in the research and the *Radio Animal* phases. An installation in spring/summer 2009 comprising audio and visual material at the (by then) newly opened Storey Gallery that will include the unit and equipment utilized in *Radio Animal* together with documentation of its operation in Lancaster and at the other venues.

Concluding Thoughts

We tend to suppress our awareness of the degree to which we share space with other creatures. If we were to make a cross-section of a house, imagine what multitudes we would find embedded in its fabric—and if we were to extend that to the garden, our sense of being outnumbered would be profound. The sense that is evident through all of this thinking corresponds with what's implicit in artist Stan Bonnar's essay "Context and Provocation."³ In this essay, which uses a conceptualization of the urban pigeon to unravel the mediating effects of language on our experience of the world, it can be construed that the contestation of urban space between the humans and other species is akin to an overlaying of interests, to us best articulated perhaps by an overlaying of maps of the same territory to denote respectively divergent land usage. The territory may comprise a "landscape" made up of earth, rocks, concrete and cement edifices (cliffs), trees (lampposts, telegraph posts and wires) and some moveable or permeable borders—gates, doors, windows, hedges, etc.—but the decisions and motivations regarding how that land and its furnishings are used are predicated on entirely different principles held or exercised respectively by "the non-human animal" and by ourselves. Significantly, also implicit in Bonnar's essay is the oneness of animal and its environment—how the two concepts are inextricably bound up in the animal's existence, survival and procreation...

Despite paradoxically and destructively having grown to imagine ourselves as being fundamentally independent of environment (intellectually, at least, un-rooted), the social-human concept of place is nevertheless of instinctive importance. The wild animal seems to oppose and impudently ignore our "defenses," regarding urban land instead as continuous space—either making use of it or passing through it.

It is probably the unresolved and complex paradox intrinsic to our intellectual and instinctive attitudes that causes so much anxiety and irrationality of response when our spatial borders are tested by whatever “invader.”

These matters are made much more complex and fascinating by the ambivalence of human response. In several cases in Lancaster, we have both witnessed and been told of cases where neighbors are in contention over the presence of specific groups of animals in their shared or adjoining gardens or house frontage. Some were pleased when bats took up residence in a roof space and others panicked. Insects in and around the garden are problematic for many whilst for one man in Lancaster, the presence of over 200 species of moths in his garden has been a source of utter fascination and provided a subject for a remarkable photographic archive. Some will feed foxes in one garden whilst the next-door neighbors will put out poison for them. Some feed the birds whilst others worry that this will attract “vermin.”

In addition to wildlife enthusiasts and special-interest groups, individual residents in the region have been key to our research. A case in point is the gentleman we interviewed on a local housing estate who feeds the pigeons on a spectacularly generous (or antisocial) level, pouring out sackfuls of mixed corn for them onto the street just *beyond* his gate at regular times, twice daily. As a consequence, his home has been a constant target of attack by his neighbors. It’s a response that may in some respects be understandable, but all the windows in his house are boarded up for the simple reason that they have repeatedly been broken. He lives in darkness but continues to champion and support a species that he considers to be both maligned and the subject of systemic abuse.

1. (a)fly – Snæbjörnsdóttir/Wilson, Reykjavík International Arts Festival 2006—see artists’ website www.snæbjörnsdóttir/wilson.com. 2. Ibid. 3. Stan Bonnar, “Context and Provocation” from *Decadent*, eds. David Harding and Pavel Büchler (Glasgow School of Art, 1997).

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