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Artist | Animal

Steve Baker,

Minneapolis & London: Minnesota, 2013, 278 pages

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Reviewed by Vanessa Corby, York St John University

Steve Baker's *Artist | Animal* is a remarkable piece of scholarship that offers a selective examination of artists' engagements with animals since 2000. 'One major hypothesis of this book' he tells us 'is that careful attention to artists and their objects may itself suggest ways around some of the more entrenched attitudes found in discussions about art, animals, curiosity, and creativity [...].' For Baker this 'careful attention' is made manifest in questions of materiality, process, the immediacy of the experiences art has to offer and the necessary openness of our production and reception of it. As such it is greatly indebted to Baker's own return to practice over the past five years and an exemplar of how to craft the relationship between theory and practice in written form. As Baker's recollection of an earlier, less enlightened time, while working in collaboration with London-Based artist Edwina Ashton in 2005 makes clear: 'occasionally [Ashton] grew frustrated with my relentlessly ideas-oriented approach. Ideas, she suggested, could all too easily pose what she called "the wrong questions – certainly for making things."'

Artist | Animal stands shoulder to shoulder with a growing number of texts, Fisher and Fortnum (2013) immediately springs to mind, that make compelling arguments for the necessity for the kind of 'not knowing' indicative of practice-led research. This is nowhere more apparent than in Baker's discussion of *Rat Evaluated Artwork* (2005) and *One Night with Rats in the Service of Art* (2005) by Lucy Kimbell. Her humorous and absurd play on RAE/REF culture gathered rat enthusiast/owners (ratters), scientists and activists and she continually reminds readers that she didn't really know what she wanted to know or what the project's outcomes would be. As such it presents a welcome relief from the kind of earnest, meta-discursivity that too often gets in the way of engaging with actual examples of arts research. More seriously what Baker's analysis of Kimbell's work and that of others such as Mary Britton Clouse and Catherine Bell makes clear is that artists can no longer simply enlist animals as metaphors for the human condition. Instead his juxtaposition of artist | animal underscores Baker's further contribution to the understanding of the posthuman. It is the intensity and patience integral to the working processes of artists such as Olly and Suzi, painting leopard seals underwater in painfully cold and dangerous conditions in Antarctica, or Catherine Chalmers tuning into the biological rhythms of the cockroaches in the *Residents* project, staying up night after night for a month in her studio 'under their conditions,' which facilitates this contribution. For it is the investment of artists' time and attention to process that, in the lineage of Donna Haraway, marks these artworks as the index of an encounter made within a social made up of 'multiple species'. As such they are testimony to the break-down of the radical alterity of the animal in Western thought. For Baker this move is a crucial one, for it is the presupposition of distance between the human and the animal that necessitates the most salient of what are for Baker the 'wrong questions'; 'is it ethical?'

Baker argues that the need to privilege the question of ethics is indicative of an instinctual mistrust of contemporary art in general and of artists in particular; as if artists were closet 'animal abusers' passing off their 'misdeeds' under the guise of art rather than practitioners with 'integrity.' Baker tackles this question of trust head on in his Introduction by discussing two of the most notorious uses of live animals by artists in the twentieth century; Kim Jones' *Rat Piece* (1976) and Marco Evaristti's *Helena* (2000). For the sake of brevity I will outline only the first, in which Jones conducted a performance during which he poured lighter fluid on to three live, caged white male rats and set fire to them, killing them. Central to this action had been the artist's desire to communicate some

element of his experience as a soldier in Vietnam. It thus staged a re-enactment of a practice common in the barracks, which filled the gallery with smoke and the smell of charred flesh. For the artist it offered the audience a direct experience of the deathly stench inexorably linked to war and activated questions about their own culpability in the event due their failure to intervene. That such distressing content should appear so early in Baker's text and be worthy of attention, which cannot help but accord it a kind of cultural 'value,' will be enough to make some put this book down and not wish to pick it up again. Before readers run for the moral high ground I would entreat them to read on, however. As Lucy Kimbell's reflection on *One Night with Rats in the Service of Art* makes plain, we are all, or very nearly all, protected by vaccinations and drugs that have been the product of animal testing; 'My body, your bodies, are a charnelhouse; stacked in it are corpses of millions of rats and mice [...].' How many of us can really claim the moral high ground that entitles us to judge works with animals out of hand? For as Baker argues, if such works are simply condemned outright, if the motives of such artists are not trusted, then we will get nothing from them.

Like his fellow artists included in this lavishly illustrated text Baker is concerned with the decision making process that emerges through the handling of material and conceptual stuff. It is an endeavour that artists undertake in order to make some sense of the world. To put those outcomes out in the public realm realises some part of art's potential, as Baker says borrowing from Guattari, to 'rupture sense.' While this call to art's validity as an agent of social change poses more questions about the dissemination of practice than were addressed by Baker, his position is not only credible but necessary. It is the logic of the materials and form enlisted in artists' strategies that make artworks *work* and generate new sense. But as he cogently argues this logic only comes to the fore if the position of the moralist is suspended.