

//THE PRESENCE OF ANIMALS IN CONTEMPORARY ART
AS A SIGN OF CULTURAL CHANGE//

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ABSTRACT: The confrontation and interaction with non human alterity has shaped our way of thinking, our aesthetics and technologies, as well as our language which is full of metaphors and expressions based on zoological instances. The opposition of culture and nature - deeply rooted in anthropocentric and humanistic visions of the world - doesn't seem to make much sense any longer. The broad proliferation of theriomorphism in art, but also in many other manifestations of contemporary culture, could be the signal of an existential void that affects the urbanized and globalized western society. Analyzing the animal presence in contemporary art could be useful to understand how both the post-humanistic and non-anthropocentrism thoughts are growing and changing our look on the world.

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1. Introduction: nature and culture, the end of a conflict?

An important step to a major awareness of the complexity of the cultural interactions between humans and animals is to recognize that hybridisation of humans and animals has occurred in the field of cultural evolution even more than in the field of biotechnologies and genetic engineering. As Roberto Marchesini points out in his recent studies, the confrontation and interaction with non human alterity have shaped our way of thinking, our aesthetics and our technologies, as well as our language, which is full of metaphors and expressions based on zoological issues. While art history reports a number of animal-inspired forms and topics, contemporary artists are increasingly focused on the very mechanisms of interaction between the human and animal sphere. Recent art research ends up questioning the boundaries between nature and culture: assuming human culture as an open system that has borrowed so much from the non human alterity and from what we are used to call "nature", the opposition of culture and nature - deeply rooted in anthropocentric and humanistic visions of the world - doesn't seem to make much sense any longer.

2. Why trying to systematize theriomorphism in contemporary art?

Considering the proliferation of theriomorphism in art, but also in many other manifestations of contemporary culture, is difficult and perhaps even senseless to propose a complete analysis of the animal presence in contemporary art. In her very interesting study of 2003, Karin Andersen proposed a sort of "guide" to observe theriomorphism in culture, instead of a systematic survey which would be appeared not very helpful to understand the cultural relationship between human-beings and animals (hereafter read nonhuman animal). According to the method and Andersen thought, I am going to try to trace a short essay focused on some key points characterizing the presence of theriomorphic in the contemporary art.

I will try to argue to what extent the presence of animals has come in the current art scene: in fact, in each exhibition context, in any form, media or language, the animal is the real and unacknowledged "star" of the contemporary art system. In analogy with what Silvana Annicchiarico said about art-design, it could be argued that this persistent presence is a part of a necessary remedy for a palpable absence:

What is behind this fatal attraction? What makes so many designers turn to animal forms for inspiration and so many consumers recognise themselves in objects designed in this way? It is my hypothesis that design objects shaped like animals or with animal names express, on a symbolic level, a sign of extinction. They make something that has been expelled, something that is missing, feel as though it is present; and they help, in some way, to make its absence more bearable (Annicchiarico, 2007: 14).

The constant animal representation in arts could be the signal of an existential void that affects the urbanized and globalized western society. This thesis agrees with what Bernard Fibicher claims about the meaning of animal presence in visual art through different historical periods: such presence would be proportional to our need of

animal contacts, whereas it would be inversely proportional to our real closeness to the natural realm³. In the last twenty years we can notice a common trend to explore organic forms or to detect the mutation of the current concept of both the human and the animal nature⁴.

Actually, in the modern society a split between human and other animals happened. In rural society of mid twentieth century the animal shared its own existence with farm families. With the progressive urbanization the animal was gradually removed from city life. With the advent of intensive-farms, and with their development far from our eyes, the tendency to humanize pets started growing within the urban society. However, we must not forget that theriomorphism in art is not exclusively caused by historical and contingent facts; as the above-mentioned Karin Andersen's study well illustrates, there are deep implications related to the myth and to human origin and existence on earth itself. Anyway, an existential separation occurred and it was, in some cases, recorded by many western artists who, since the forties more or less, explored the ontological animal sphere as well as, in parallel, new technologies. Such double way of reference (animal and technology) in post second world war avant-gardes indicates the human need for a dialogue with the alterity, which implicitly means the beginning of an acceptance's path of a non self-sufficiency human condition. This point is partially in conflict with the humanistic tradition and it coincides with what Roberto Marchesini defined in several occasions "the decline of anthropocentrism"⁵ which characterizes our post-humanistic era.

Among the latest and most prominent aesthetic results of this attitude there's a particular match of technological and animal art practices in the broad experimental field of *art biotech*. About this last issue too, it would be wrong to think in terms of self-reference; in fact, the several emanations of the current art biotech root in the 60s and 70s art practices: land art, process art and generative art (Hauser, 2007. Mulatero, 2007).

When we address all these themes by an anthropological approach, without abdicating to a historical consideration of the artistic developments, we can point out

³ "La représentation animale fonctionne à travers les âges et les civilisations comme un révélateur de nos états d'âme, de nos désirs, de nos inquiétudes, de notre imagination, de nos besoins (naturels ou maladifs) de contact avec l'animal ou de distanciation d'avec lui. Nous parlons en effet de nous-mêmes quand nous parlons d'animaux, nous les montrons à travers nos yeux quand nous les représentons" (Fibicher, 2008: 8).

⁴ Exhibitions such as *Bêtes et Hommes* (Grand Halle de la Villette, Paris 2007 – 2008) have already addressed the theme of the animal in a horizontal way: between art, design, animated films, reports, etc. Other interesting examples, beyond those above mentioned, are: *Animal Art* (Graz, 1988); *L'Art Biotech* (Nantes 2003); *Chassez le Naturel* (Liège, 2004); *Hybrid. Living in Paradox* (Lienz 2005); *Becoming Animal* (North Adams 2005 – 2006). Lately, two interesting meetings have addressed the subject: "Human-Animal", 20th/21st Century French and Francophone Studies International Colloquium (San Francisco, March 30 - April 2, 2011) and "Cas d'espèce. De la figure animale dans les pratiques contemporaines" Doctoral Seminars (Paris, 2011-2012). At the Department of Philosophy, University of Genoa, in 2008 with the PhD candidates Sara Tongiani and Paolo Vignola I organized a national conference titled "L'animale tra filosofia, arte e scienza", which involved, among others, Roberto Marchesini, Domenico Quaranta and Paolo Aldo Rossi.

⁵ Marchesini expressed that concept in the conference of May, 23, 2009 in Milan (Palazzo Isimbardi) "The sunset of anthropocentrism: acknowledging the role of nonhuman". In the large production of Roberto Marchesini see in particular *Il Tramonto dell'Uomo. La prospettiva post-umanista*, Bari 2009.

some relevant mutations in the relationship between human and animal within both artworks and life.

Actually, the animal represents our ancestral partner in the challenges and redefinition of choices imposed by the field of nature. Today - while the green economy represents one of the leading sector and, inversely, ecologically sustainable balance has exceeded its crisis point - considering the latest ways of theriomorphic manifestation in art may be useful to understand how our idea of nature has changed and what is our need to restore a brotherhood pact with it.

3. Breaking boundaries: animal and culture in the contemporary age

The nineteenth century is ambiguous for human sciences. Charles Darwin lays the scientific basis of the biological link between human beings and other animals but, in the same time, animals are increasingly seen as the dark mirror of human passions. This assumption leads, in some cases, to steady the humanistic paradigm that wants the human condition stretched between the beast and the angel. From Giovanni Battista Della Porta's physiognomy studies (second half of the 1500s) to those by Wells and Le Brun in the nineteenth-century, the human vices and virtues are attributed to the animals too through an analogical deduction. At the end of the nineteenth century - while physiognomy is used by Charles Darwin to explain the complex sensitive personality of animals⁶ and, on the other hand, the same physiognomy is distorted by Cesare Lombroso in order to certify racial discriminations – some artists approach animals with a special respect: symptom of the impending crisis of positivism that spread all over Europe.

In John Berger's opinion (1980) the zoo emergence, within the bourgeois western society of the second half of the 1800s, marks the beginning of the ontological separation between human beings and other animals. From that moment, the daily relationship with animals will have changed by several filters for the gazes: photography and cinema, zoo, circus and entertainment are different techniques for keeping the distance between animal and human life.

In this framework, while in lots of artwork the animal is used allegorically, as a human projection (see for example the series *Los Caprichos* by Francisco Goya or, much later, Félicien Rops' *Pornocrates*), in artistic expressions between naturalism and symbolism, a substantial sense of human-animal shared destiny emerges. For example, the second version of *Ave Maria a trsbordo*, painted by Giovanni Segantini in 1886 and now hosted at the St. Gallen Otto Fischbacher Foundation, shows a family on a boat in prayer together with the sheep. The picture is highly symbolic: the human family (father, mother and child) and the group of sheep are all enclosed in the ideal home-border represented by the round brackets that encircle the small boat. The precarious journey across the water indicates the precarious journey of life, against which human as the animal opposes the strength of the group and the refuge of the nest⁷. Even in realist

⁶ In 1872 Darwin published *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals*.

⁷ The reflection of light on water makes the image hieratic: all the energies are focused on the moment of silence combining human and animal in a whole. This aesthetic attitude reminds, in some ways, to the

painting we can see the result of the feeling of affinity with the animal partner. In naturalistic views by Giovanni Fattori, the man at work – farmer – is described at the same linguistic and semantic level as the oxen. The ox is man's daily partner: an animal with which human being shares his hard work condition. Between the end of the 1800s and the begin of the 1900s Fattori, Guglielmo Micheli, Franz Elmiger and many other painters focused their attention on the oxen.

Still in the early decades of the twentieth century the situation is extremely interesting. Italian futurism conceives the overcoming of human being by the contribution of science and technology but it addresses many theoretical references to the semantic animal sphere. The animal presence in futurist art and theory is still pervaded by symbolist spirit (as in the first manifesto by Filippo Tommaso Marinetti in 1909) or by technicality instances of Cartesian memory, especially since the 1915 *Manifesto della ricostruzione futurista dell'universo* (the Manifesto of Futurist Universe Reconstruction by Giacomo Balla e Fortunato Depero). This mechanic interpretation of animal body – that leads in some cases to an abstract and symbolic representation - is prominent in all the futurist art: from sculpture to painting, from ceramic to poetry. Although the myth of the machine is ruling in futurism, animals keep an exceptional role in the iconography of both the first as the second futurism; this attention is reflected in three kinds of representation: 1) dynamism (e.g. the horses of Boccioni, the little dog of Balla, the hare in the Ligurian ceramic and glass art), 2) plasticity (e.g. the horse-tamer sculpted by Mino Rosso, the bulldog or the rooster in ceramics of Munari, the elk painted by Depero) and 3) symbolism (e.g. birds, flyer horses and sea snakes by Giovanni Acquaviva⁸).

On the other side of avant-garde, animal appears in a subtle linguistic and conceptual triangulation between Picasso's painting and Rilke's poetry. It is known that Rilke, for his Fifth Duino Elegy, was inspired by the Picasso's series of acrobats. In that elegy, the closed and circular universe in which the acrobats constantly fall, could be compared to the animal fate: to the poet's eyes, the acrobat is destined to a cyclical existence without consciousness for life and future. In the circus, this tragic and enviable fate is shared by humans and beats, as can be noticed in the 1905 Picasso's painting *Family of acrobats with monkey*. Once again, the animal shares its life with human family but in this case, the animal partnership is challenged by Picasso not only through a formal way, rather by an essential philosophy of the ontological. In this circumstance, the animal, like acrobat, hasn't a clear subjectivity, it is just a puppet: a machine governed by other forces.

The Second World War seems to break up any doubts about the need to rethink the human role within the complexity of a collapsed reality, and the animal is ready to help intellectuals and artists. After the global conflict the animal role in the art reflection

coeval Giovanni Pascoli's poetics. The decadent Italian poet finds in the observation of animal society a way to access the poetic moods. In such a symbolist poetic scenario, some animal behaviours take the value of signal for anxiety of human soul. Birds, in particular - but also the famous horse that witnessed the murder of the Pascoli's father (*La cavallina storna*) - allow the poet to get other states of knowledge about the world, life and death.

⁸ See the recently discovered works and documents about second futurism in Liguria (Lecci, Sborgi, 2009).

still seems to be an anthropological projection but a new gaze on the alterity is insinuating: using violent animal iconography, the artist removes the human figure to communicate an idea in another way almost inexpressible. Several exponents of European sculpture of the fifties conceive theriomorphic hybrid figures, winged creatures, flayed animals on a corroded material: German Richier (*Le griffu*, 1952), Lynn Chadwick (*Winged Figure*, 1955), Elisabeth Frink (*Winged Figure*, 1959), César (*Scorpion*, 1955) and so on. In Italy examples include the precocious Angelo Camillo Maino with *Simango* (an hybrid man-monkey figure of 1942), Aligi Sassu with *Figura urlante* (Screaming Figure, 1959) and Agenore Fabbri. In Fabbri's ceramic sculptures, animals remind to the nuclear disasters image. The works *Rissa tra uomo e cane* (Fight between Man and Dog, 1951), *Cane della guerra* (War's Dog, 1952), *Cane atomizzato* (Atomized Dog, 1957) and *Gatto bruciato* (Burning Cat, 1953), as well as the iron serie of *Atomized Insects*, embody an alterity that does not belong to the beast, but to the human being, who has become alien to himself.

It is the "last cry" of expressionism and informal art: in the sixties and seventies the animal involvement in contemporary art changes if compared to the past. The new theriomorphic view corresponds to a new bioethics sensibility: in 1971 Van R. Potter creates the term "bioethics" and eight years later Hans Jonas edits his *The Principle of Responsibility*. Even new environmental attitudes, typical in practices as Land Art, highlight the relativity of a self-referential anthropocentrism and the emergence of a heterospecific consciousness.

4. Four variations to the understanding of the animal role in contemporary art

At this transition period, around the sixties, some guidelines foreshadowing the current animal artistic interaction are clear: 1) multimedia animal portrait 2) animal simulacrum 3) ritual use of dead animal 4) presence of living animals in the artwork.

From the nineties, all above is supplemented by the wide range of theriomorphic hybridization, that we'll see.

In the first case, I consider all that representations focused exclusively on the animal identity, body or eyes, beyond the metaphoric representation; e.g. portraits elevating animal to the status of icona, questioning it as a thinking creature: *Cow Wallpaper* by Andy Warhol (1966) or the video by Georges Rey *La vache qui rumine* (1970). Today, a lots of artists face, in different way, animal eyes, physiognomy, body and identity: Oleg Kulik, James Mollison, Robert Devriendt, Quentin Garel, etc.

The second case includes sculptures that use animal body (in taxidermy or in syntetic media) as both simulacrum and element of a metaphorical narrative. In the past we could find, for example, *Monogram* (1955-59) by Robert Rauschenberg, in which a stuffed goat interacts in terms of contamination with painting, sculpture and urban objects. Today, the use of animal simulacrum is very frequent; just consider Maurizio Cattelan, Robert Gligorov, Paul McCarthy, David Altmejd, Erick Swenson, Gloria Friedman, Wim Delvoye, Tessa Farmer, just to name a few.

In the third case, I think to all that practices and expressions in which the dead animal plays the role of offering: a sacrifice capable to purify human being through the

artist-shaman mediation. Consider the examples of Hermann Nitsch and the Wiener Aktionismus' *Orgien und Mytherien Theater* (since the early sixties), or the partnership between Joseph Beuys and the hare in the famous performance *How to explain Picture to a Dead Hare* at the Schmela Gallery of Düsseldorf in 1965, or the 1972 Ana Mendita's action *Death of a chicken*. Today, the dead animal is one of the mainstream media for works that reflect on the sacredness and cyclical nature of life, as well as the violence of death: Damien Hirst, Sarah Lucas, Guillermo Habacuc Vargas, Eric Poitevin.

The fourth case is closely related to the previous, in fact the use of living animals is often connected to ritual works but also to the metaphoric representation. In some cases the living animal action determines the course of the artwork to an equal or exceed order than those of the artist. A group of worms moving on Gina Pane's face during the performance *Death Control* (1974); in the same year, Joseph Beuys realizes *I like America and America likes Me* at the René Block Gallery of New York: the performance involves a coyote which spends five days in the gallery with Beuys. Moreover, a practice which will be very successful since the nineties, but already happening several years before, is the exposure, otherwise the interaction, with living animal within and outside the gallery. For example in 1969 Jannis Kounellis presents twelve living horses at the gallery L'Attico, in Rome. Among the artists who today are investigating the energy, the languages or the symbolic power of living animal are Paola Pivi, Xu Bing, Wim Delvoye, Mircea Cantor, Petrit Halilaj, Anri Sala, Natalie Jeremijenko and many others. Compared to the historical cases, the current trend is more oriented towards the research of a dialogic and a linguistic relationship with the animals, and inter-species or ethically correct boundaries are often challenged.

Of course, such classification is relatively useful, insofar as it simplifies this report and allows us to trace the historical precedents of many current artistic expressions. Indeed, although the just mentioned activities of the sixties and the seventies include the seed of the future theriomorphic commingling, since the nineties the animal presence in art scene has got peculiar characteristics that require specific analysis case by case on the concepts, languages and aesthetic principles used.

The art of the last twenty years, in which the hybrid has had a dominant role, has been influenced by and is still influencing the cultural change noticed at various levels of the natural and humanistic sciences. While still in the eighties it comes to "ethical anthropocentrism", in nineties the epistemological anthropocentrism is questioned: the human parameters are not the only measure of the world, every living being is an intelligent center that relates itself to the reality in a different way.

5. The several faces of hybrid

The animal raises questions that human being is not use to understand: in the animal eyes, in the animal skin, with the animal partnership, man can acquire answers to the adaptive needs. The progressive consciousness of being a hybrid ecosystem, hosting bacteria and genes common to different animal species, has made human being more inclined to reconsider the other animal realities.

For these reasons, today, theriomorphic hybridization is the distinctive element of the animal presence in the art but also in many areas of creative, ecological and bio-medical research.

One of the most interesting aspects in the recent developments of the aesthetic of the animal hybridization, is wearing the animal skin to take on its ontological perspective. By assuming the animal appearance - through a mask, a suit, some implants or tattoos - the artist applies a behaviour typical to shamanic rituals but with different intentions. In artworks like the video *The Point of Least Resistance* or *The Right Way*, Fischli and Weiss bring a rat and a bear (masked artists) as protagonists of the narrative development of the film sequences. The two animals implement processes of knowledge of the contemporary world, seeking absolute references in the variability of fields such as art, friendship, crime, money, etc.

In his 2008 performance, Mark Wallinger spends seven night dressed as a bear in the Neue National Galerie of Berlin. Every night, people walking can see the “bored bear” inside the lightened Museum. The artist claims the gaze of human on animals and, in the same time, the way people enjoy art-exhibitions.

In 1997 Oleg Kulik, inspired by the above mentioned Beuys' action, proposes the performance *I bite America and America bites Me*, spending two weeks as a caged dog and living like it. We can find number of examples: consider Robert Gligorov (*Self Portrait Chicken Skin*), Tom Leppard and many others. These trends are also common to literature and theatre, just think to Aleksey Meshkov's novel *Iodok the Dog* or to the dramatic trilogy by the Italian company Teatro Valdoca *Paesaggio con fratello rotto* (Landscape with Broken Brother) in which actors disguised as animals speak to the Mother and the Butcher.

At an iconographic level the animal hybridization results in different ways: referring to genetic manipulation, myth, fantastic poiesis and linguistic experimentation. A case such as the theriomorphic creatures in Matthew Barney *Cremaster 4* (1994) could clearly be related to all these areas. In recent developments of sculpture the attention to interspecific animal hybridization is frequent: the plastic art, in fact, provides to artist the possibility to experiment real appearance of animal bodies in all its organic and biological complexity. See for example the works of Thomas Grünfeld, David Altmejd, Julia Schrader, Juul Kraijer, Monyka Gricko, Charles Avery, Patricia Piccinini, Jane Alexander, etc.

Moving on a two-dimension and virtual media subject, we can notice that in several of Daniel Lee's works the genetic and biological promiscuity is evident in the changing form of human and non-human animal. Whereas, recently, Karin Andersen's painting, video and digital photographs the gap between reality (and thus the real possibility for biotechnological intervention) and imagination is reinforced in the symbolic and fantastic composition of mutant creatures. However, both Lee and Andersen address to the concept of identity, which must necessarily deal with the cultural contribution of alterity⁹.

⁹ This concept is well addressed in the exhibition *Theriomorphic*, which involved Karin Andersen, Daniel Lee and Robert Gligorov (edited by Luca Panaro at Betta Frigeri Arte Contemporanea, Modena 15 May – 13 July 2010).

This is the crucial point of the current debate on identity; unlike the humanistic tradition, in the post-humanistic era identity is no longer considered as decontamination from the “Other”, but it appears as the result of issues proposed by the “Other” (genetic and physiology, philosophy and language, etc.). An interesting example of this deep interaction with animal alterity is the work of Nicolas Primat: a young artist from Toulouse disappeared in March 2009. Although he was in contact with farm animals since his childhood, after fine arts academic studies Primat worked for four years with a group of baboons reared in a laboratory of the Marseille CNR. There, he worked on the inter-species communication, interacting with monkeys during their captivity. Unlike many artists of today, Primat brought the human presence in the animal poetic context, reversing in this way the anthropocentric perspective. The artist argues that through a little changing in his behaviour, human being can cause big positive changes in the relationship with both animal and natural alterity. To explain how this change would be now necessary and useful, Nicolas Primat transfers from the scientific laboratory all his discoveries to the contemporary art scene, by producing videos, sculptures and installations.

The biotech-art paradigms are addressed from the multiple perspective of alterity and identity, science and art. In some cases animals are definitely equable partners of human being in defining the conceptual and operational criteria behind the artwork. In *Nature?* Marta de Menezes partially modifies the wings of a butterfly, intervening at the level of normal cell growth of the animal organism. Without manipulating the genetic code, the artist alters the aesthetic of the natural forms of the wings. The artist produces visual asymmetry by letting unchanged the other wing (Hauser, 2007). This project, conducted in collaboration with a laboratory at Leiden University, presents interesting similarities with what discovered and published by Cornelia Hesse-Honegger in *Heteroptera* (2002). After having portrayed insects artificially modified in 1967 for the Zurich Zoologic Institute, in 1987 Honegger conduces a survey about the effect of Chernobyl radioactive cloud on the Swedish insects. Such creatures present abnormalities in body shape and in phenotypic characters; in these cases, the visual asymmetry, very similar to that realized by Marta de Menezes, are instead caused by serious genetic mutations.

These examples demonstrate how voluntary or involuntary human acts can distort, with very different purposes, all those characters of animal mimicry that Roger Caillois, through a mythological interpretation, in 1960 identifies as the aesthetic trend common to all natural phenomena (Caillois, 2009).

For other artists such as Eduardo Kac, Piero Gilardi, Tissue Culture & Art Project (Oron Catts, Ionat Zurr & Guy Ben-Arty) and Brandon Ballengee, animals or living nature (e.g. botanic organisms) have not a role of fetish, simulacrum, metaphor or allegory.

Alba [the rabbit made fluorescent by Eduardo Kac thanks to a jellyfish gene] is simply the synecdoche of an artistic tendency which uses all the contemporary biology's fields [...] Artists [...] deliberately violate the procedures of the metaphor and representation to address the manipulation of living. Biotechnology is not just an abstract theme but a tool: green fluorescent animals, wings implanted on the backs of pigs, sculpture that are

shaped in bioreactors and under microscopes, or, better, the DNA used as an artistic medium¹⁰.

Kathy High exposed her work *Embracing Animal* in the exhibition *Becoming Animal* (Mass MoCA 2005). This artwork underlines the relationship between the artist and three transgenic lab rats. The rats - Matilda Barbie, Tara Barbie and Star Barbie – were formerly been created with human genes in order to suffer of auto-immune disorders. Kathy High, who has got an auto-immune disease too, adopted the rats and

[...] implemented homeopathic treatments in conjunction with close observation and empathetic communication - the same treatments she chooses for herself. She charts their health, living habits, and experiences with journal entries, photographic and video documentation. High suggests in an interview with Suzanne Anker that she is not the soul author of this work/research/life, but that the rats are active participants: "We're working together" (Willet, 2005).

Use biotechnology in art stresses that human being is conscious of how he depends on the animals and *vice-versa*. In many cases, the complexity of technologies corresponds to a simple message: the human emotional needs of sharing experiences of life with animal (whatever it is) beyond the submission of it to the individual (often morbid). Sort of a confirmation of this may come from an artistic tendency opposed to the biotech-art, but complementary to it: the iconographic use of animal in terms of fantastic re-appropriation. Sandy Skoglund, Marnie Weber, Katharina Fritsch and, in Italy, Ericailcane, Gabriele Arruzzo, Oscar Colombo and Karin Andersen testify the need in different ways of re-establishing the boundaries of reality, creating a parallel scenarios based on the principles of fairy tales, fables, dreams and myths. Thus, in the human imaginary the animal may go back to be the alter ego, the prominent referent, the sacral figure able to projecting the human thoughts towards new experiences.

6. Short and temporary conclusion

I think it is clear, at this point, that there are substantial differences between artists using animals in traditional ways (lacking a gaze that be critical and aware with respect to the subject) and artists who involve the animal as an effective partner in the artworks creation. Looking to the western art of the last two centuries from a historical and cultural perspective allows us to understand that the animal presence is stronger in periods characterized by an idea of disaggregation of human identity. On the other side, we can notice that in cyclical times of rise of classical values it is harder to find an animal portrait, specific theriomorphic symbolic, allegorical presence.

In order to understand the real impact of theriomorphism on the artists thought and on the linguistic and medial construction of the artwork, it is important to complete art historiography from an anthropologic perspective. As a matter of fact, animals have been continuing to fascinate artists in the last century and still today as a sort of mirror in which man thinks to see his true self. The use of the animal skin, blood or body and

¹⁰ My English translation from the Italian version by Jens Hauser, *Gènes, genie, gènes*, in Hauser, 2007: 33-34.

also some peculiar kinds of animal portraits of course have a long tradition in artworks related to the myth and the ritual. Indeed, although some of the examples mentioned in this paper may represent exceptions, we can notice that such an anthropological perspective remains strong in western art until the nineties, when the post-human starts to change our way to interpret and interface the world. The culture of the hybrid (which can be expressed through a genetic manipulation rather than through an iconic or symbolic representation of the animal conveying a cultural hybridization) permeate nowadays many fields of popular images, applied arts as well as visual and plastic arts. In this last field, bio-technological art coexists today with a high numbers of artists who reclaim the animal as the partner of their work, of their thought, just as of their life. And this is now also evident in both the literature and the experimental theater.

Traditionally, artists have always seen forwards more than any other actor of society; thus, today we should stop to look at the presence of animals in art as a simple device to attract people's interest. Animals should be addressed from critics, curators and art historians as it has already been done for other important topics of art, for example the female, the work, the urban landscape, technologies, etc. Surely a part of critics has already done that, but a lot of work has still to be done in the academia to put that subject in the core of the humanistic debate. To do so, as well as an historical and anthropological approach we have to make a further purification of our critic perspective, giving up the anthropocentrism view in considering the animal presence in the current art. This kind of survey is necessary to understand the real new possibilities of partnership with animal alterity.

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