

CALGARY: City of Animals

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her dark materials

yvonne mullock's
dark horse at stride gallery

jim ellis

university of calgary



Yvonne Mullock's *Dark Horse* ran from June 3 to July 15 at Calgary's Stride Gallery, overlapping the dates of the 2016 Calgary Stampede. The installation consisted of three principal parts: a set of paired, framed monoprints of the top and bottom of a flattened cowboy hat; the press constructed to make these prints, which uses the weight of a horse to crush the hat; and a video that documents the production of the artworks. The press (fabricated by Ann Thrale) resembles the sort of treadmill formerly used in farms that were powered by horses or large dogs; in its dimensions, it is about the size of the animal chutes used at the Stampede. It has an inclined platform that is attached to pulleys, and gates at both the back and the front. Attached to the front gate is a trough that holds hay. The video (shot by Noel Bégin, and approximately sixteen minutes long) takes us through the production of two sets of prints. Although ostensibly it works to document the process-as-performance, it is itself shot and edited in a highly artful way that directs the viewer's attention to all of the various animate and inanimate elements of the art-making assemblage.

In the video, the action takes place in a riding stable. In the middle of the corral are a couple of tables with hats, ink, and paper, while nearby sits the printing press, with ropes extending from it to weights. A figure in a white apron (Mullock) enters, walks to the table, opens a can of ink and spreads it on some paper with a palette knife. She then rollers and sponges the ink onto a hat, and puts the hat between two sheets of paper that have been sprayed with water. The paper and hat are carefully placed in the press.



A horse (Shere Kaan) is led by a handler (Karly Mortimer) up to the press; it steps onto the platform and begins to eat the hay. The platform lowers, and the hat is flattened. When the hay has been eaten, the front gate is opened and the horse steps gingerly out. The print is removed and displayed to the horse, who in the first iteration has no reaction. The process is repeated. On a second viewing, the horse appears to nuzzle the print, and the printmaker looks delighted. Otherwise, there is little emotion to be seen in the video.

There is an obvious comedy to this process and to this machine, which is not unlike the elaborate contraptions made by Wile E. Coyote to capture (or obliterate) the ever-elusive roadrunner. In those cartoons, the coyote was, like the stetson hats here, frequently flattened into an imprint. He became a representation of the violence that he tried to visit on the roadrunner but which is instead returned to his own body: the flattened coyote as the sign of an ironic poetic justice. Here, we might be tempted to see the press as the horse's symbolic revenge on the cowboy, on behalf of all the horses who were pressed into the service of the Stampede, and in compensation for whatever suffering they endured. As Susan Nance shows in her essay in this collection, Stampede horses were made to serve as signs of something other than themselves. In Mullock's work the crushed stetson, a key symbol of the cowboy and the west, could be read as the sign of the horse's revenge.



When we watch the video, however, it is difficult to see any spirit of revenge at work, because the horse appears neither to understand nor to care about the art being produced. This is reminiscent of one of the crucial elements of the Wile E. Coyote dramas: their asymmetry. The coyote was recognizably human, with a human name and human emotions. He was obsessed with the roadrunner, with a desire that went far beyond the need for nourishment. The roadrunner, on the other hand, was largely without emotion. He occasionally displayed what could be labelled an animal curiosity, and at times, he showed what seemed like a fleeting amusement at the futility of the coyote's obsessions and the inevitability of his failure. But his joy largely stemmed from his own animal motion, and he never entered into the human realm the way the coyote did, with Wile E.'s elaborately drawn plans and his frequent orders to the Acme Corporation. Crucially, the roadrunner did not have a name, which placed him beyond the borders of the human. He was unlike almost every other animal in the cartoon universe in retaining his alterity. This made him a frustrating presence, putting us to some degree in the same camp as the anthropomorphized coyote: we could only ever guess what might be going on in his head.

In writing about art that addresses animal rights and animal welfare, or what is often called the "question of the animal," the theorist of post-humanism Cary Wolfe (2010) urges us to think about the formal strategies of the art, rather than just the content. He looks at Sue Coe's drawings of the faces of animals in slaughterhouses, and how these



representations work to generate empathy. But he argues that their effectivity to some degree hinges on the way the animal faces in her art evoke a human face, with a human-like consciousness and human-like suffering implied. This is similar to certain arguments for animal rights or the ethical standing of animals: that animals are like us, and therefore our concept of rights should be expanded to include them in our circle. The limitation of this way of thinking is precisely the problem of limits: How far can we or do we extend our compassion or our fellow-feeling? Does it go further than those beings we can readily anthropomorphize? More fundamentally, it leaves the human in the centre, as the measure of everything. It does not challenge us to rethink what it means to be human, and in particular, how the human has been defined in relation to the animal, but rather extends to non-human animals key aspects of humanity. In the process, it could be argued, it fails to recognize or respect the animalness or the alterity of the animal. Put another way: the effectivity of this kind of art is the extent to which it can remake the animal in human terms.

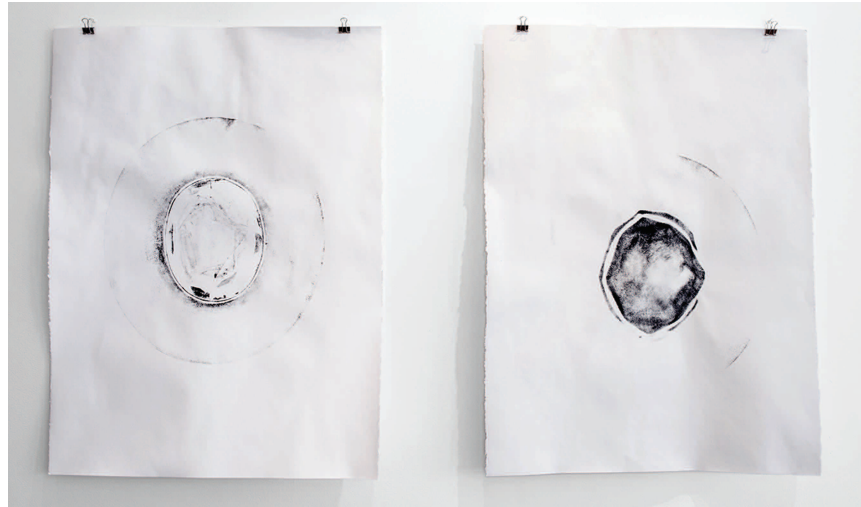
Rather than generating sympathy through the representation of rodeo horses or other animals, Mullock's work pushes us to attend to the processes that make art. Rather than picturing animals, she has in a series of works involved animals in the production of images or objects or performances. In *Dog Pick-Up Sticks*, for example, a performance made with Ann Thrale, dogs play a game with huge pick-up sticks made from poles. There is an aleatory element of this work that is different from the print-making process:



pp 104-109 photos by Noel Bégin

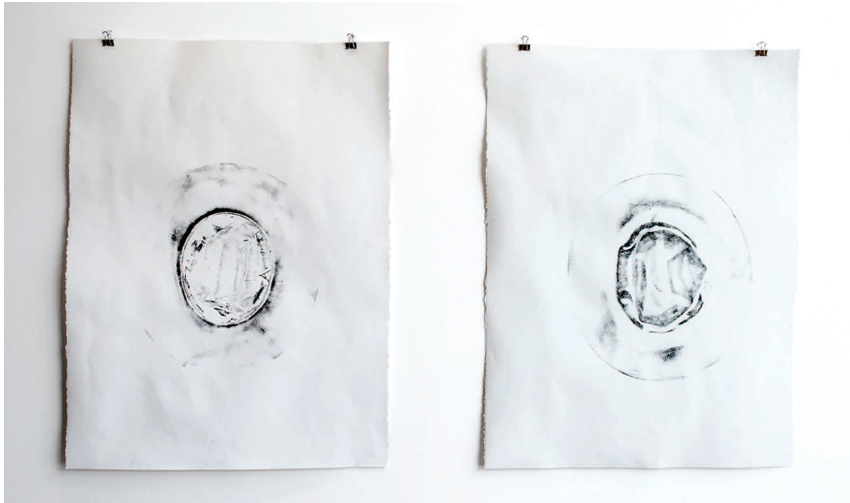
the final work is unpredictable, as it is produced by chance. This work prompts us to question in what sense or to what extent the animals are participating in the act of creation, as animals. What does it mean to think of an animal as an artist, or a co-creator of art? The most naïve formulation of this would be to claim that the paint marks made by animals on canvas or paper are art, and that the animal is an artist, which remakes the animal in human terms. By contrast, this video suggests that art is fairly meaningless to a horse. But is it possible to see the horse in *Dark Matter* as a co-creator, without overwriting its animal nature?

The video offers us few different approaches to this question. Two immediate things to note are that there are no credits, and there is no language anywhere in the video. Language has long been used as one of the key dividing lines between the human and the non-human, and so the lack of language arguably enacts a kind of levelling between the various beings in the video. The lack of credits takes this further, and highlights one of the central issues explored in the work: Who and what should be credited with the creation of this work of art? Who or what makes any work of art possible? In expanding our sense of co-creators, we might think beyond the inclusion of the trio of animate beings at the centre of the work—the artist, the horse, and its handler—and also consider the inanimate objects that together make the assemblage that produces the print: surely the hay that lures the horse to the press is a crucial part of the process, as are the prominently displayed weights that allow the press's motion, as is of course the press itself.



Attention to the conjunction of beings and objects that produces the work takes us past the human/animal divide, to consider the more fundamental division between animate and inanimate. Here we enter the realm of what Jane Bennett calls the universe of “vibrant matter.” In her materialist view of the universe, Bennett goes back to the classical philosopher Lucretius, who argued that everything in existence is made of the same atoms, and the most fundamental creative power in the universe is the ability of these atoms to swerve and collide, creating new forms. Matter, in this view, is not inert. While not ascribing intention or volition to matter and material things, Bennett urges us to think of objects as “actants,” as agents that help to make things happen. We need to be attentive, she argues, to “the agentic contributions of nonhuman forces” (Bennett 2010, xvi) that form part of the assemblages of beings and objects that come together to cause events or produce effects. As with Animal Studies, this attention to the web of connections between human, animal, and material actants has an ethical dimension: it insists that we are all part of the same material web, created out of the same atoms, and thus we have an ethical duty to consider the non-human and even the inanimate when thinking about the implications of our actions in the world.

This might seem like a large weight to put on a video of a horse crushing a hat, a video whose overall affect is best characterized as droll. This droll affect is in fact crucial in orienting us toward the performance: it encourages a distanced, bemused perspective on all of the actors and actants. Part of the drollness is created by the sound, which is



pp 110-111 photos by Nicole Kelly Westman

a crucial element in the video's attention to the work of representation and, in particular, the representation of matter and material relations. The video has something of the mood of a Buster Keaton silent comedy, with a musicality to the sound track created by rhythmic motion that underscores the video's essentially comic nature. We hear the quick back-and-forth rhythm of the roller on the sticky inked paper; the repeated daubing of a sponge on the hat; the quick sharp sprays of water on the paper. In the absence of any spoken language in the film, these sounds take on a greater prominence than they normally would. With the exception of the horse snorting at the end of the film, virtually all of the sounds are produced by one object coming into contact with another.

One object encountering the border of another creates a sound. Sound presses on our eardrums. We receive an impression. This process is analogous to the mechanical process of creating the print. In the video, we hear the sounds of paper moving on paper, of hoof on wood, of paper pulled across a gritty surface, of hay being stuffed into a wooden trough. We hear the banging when the platform is lowered, and the squeak when it lifts. The dominance of non-linguistic sounds draws attention to the objectness of the entire assemblage; each actant plays its role, with the sound making us aware of how and when each actant encounters another. No one actant makes a sound that is qualitatively different from any other: there is no hierarchy of linguistic and non-linguistic sounds. Rather, these are the sounds the assemblage of actants makes when it produces art.

The horse is an important part of the assemblage that creates the work, but crucially, the horse does not leave its mark on the resulting prints. The print does not record the intention or the emotion of the horse; it is the product of the complex functioning of a series of objects coming into contact with each other: horse on platform; platform on paper; paper on hat; hat on paper. While it provides the force that crushes the hat, the horse's relation to the print is highly mediated. Its trajectory is different from that of the artist: it is led to the platform, and it is rewarded with hay. It knows nothing of the of the hat beneath the platform. The horse retains its horseness; while it might be a co-creator, it is in the more limited (but important) sense of being an actant in an assemblage.

But if the horse's status as co-creator is thus limited, so is that of the human artist. (In an interview with *Canadian Art*, Mullock says that she is simply acting as a printmaker's assistant in the video, with the horse as the printmaker [Sandals 2016].) As with the horse, her relation to the artwork is mediated. Although she determines the conditions of production, and sets the process in motion, she does not completely determine the outcome. Nor does the resulting print bear any discernible trace of her involvement: the print records the coming together of an inked hat and paper placed under considerable force. The distanced, droll tone of the video is again important here: the largely affectless artist appears more as a technician than a creative, directing force; she appears to be simply performing her preordained functions, like every other part of the assemblage. This is similar to the role played by the artist in those performance pieces like *Dog Pick-Up Sticks*, or the *Beaver Ready Mades*, where Mullock cast in bronze sticks chewed by beavers. The work thus draws attention to the human exceptionalism at work in our notion of art, without making the specious claim that animals can be artists.

To claim that an animal can be an artist can be seen as a form of symbolic violence, making the horse into something that it is not, and thus failing to acknowledge and respect its alterity. In *Dark Matter*, the horse is left to be an animal, while nonetheless participating in the production of meaning. While the entire work makes a comment on the spectacle of violent force that is a crucial element of the entertainment of Stampede, the work itself is paradoxically very gentle. The horse's movements are calm and slow, the handler is bemused, and the artist is mostly clinical in her movements. Although the print is the result of the destruction of the hat through the application of a powerful force, the resulting image is not one that suggests violence; as the essay that accompanied the exhibition noted, the imprints of the pressed hats have a feminine form. The crushing of the hat is an act of symbolic violence that offers a comment on the way that horses have been used for entertainment and work. But crucially, it does this without

once again overwriting the horse's horseness by placing it into a different yet equally alienating symbolic position, either positive (artist) or negative (suffering, human-like victim). The video's attention to the various actants that make up the art-making assemblage relieves the horse of the burden of intentionality. The crushing of the hat is not the horse's victory over the cowboy, a symbolic gesture that would be hollow compensation for the way horses have suffered for human entertainment (while providing yet more entertainment). But the horse doesn't care about the hat, or the symbolism it provides. It is not interested in revenge. The horse is a part of the assemblage which makes visible a critique, but this is not the horse's critique. The horse remains a horse, and the absence of any payback does not relieve the human observer of any complicity in our culture's treatment of animals.

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