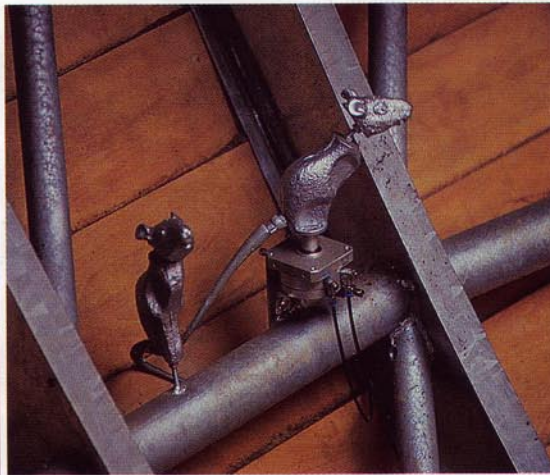


MICE AND MAN

THE ART OF CARSTEN HÖLLER AND ROSEMARIE TROCKEL

This page and
opposite page:
Carsten Höller and
Rosemarie Trockel,
*Augapfel: Ein
Haus für Tauben,
Menschen und
Ratten (Modell
im Maßstab 1:1)*,
(*Eyeball: A house
for pigeons,
people and rats
[1:1 model]*),
1996/2000.
Installation views,
EXPO 2000
Hannover. Photo:
Roman Mensing.



The creatures outside looked from pig to man, and from man to pig, and from pig to man again; but already it was impossible to say which was which.

—George Orwell, *Animal Farm*

High hedges surround the building, hiding it from view like a public toilet that the denizens of this little German city, Kassel, aren't particularly proud of. From the outside it's not very hospitable, its strangely minimal architecture making it look like a bunker. The door is ajar, as if to facilitate quick access when the need is pressing. But once you enter the building, an altogether unexpected atmosphere prevails. You have entered a place of calm reflection, meditation, even wonder. Groups of people, young and old, sit and lie on gray carpets arranged on a concrete incline. Everybody is looking in the same direction, as if silently scrutinizing a large painting in a museum. But what these people are marveling at is alive: a group of pink pigs with big black spots. Carsten Höller and Rosemarie Trockel's *Ein Haus für Schweine und Menschen* (A house for pigs and people), presented in 1997 at Documenta X, was a pigpen complete with a sow feeding her enormous litter. The pig family, relaxing behind a large sheet of glass, was sometimes so still that it didn't seem quite real. At times you had the feeling you were looking at a large photograph. Then, suddenly, one of the piglets would start moving, and the fiction of a still life disintegrated.

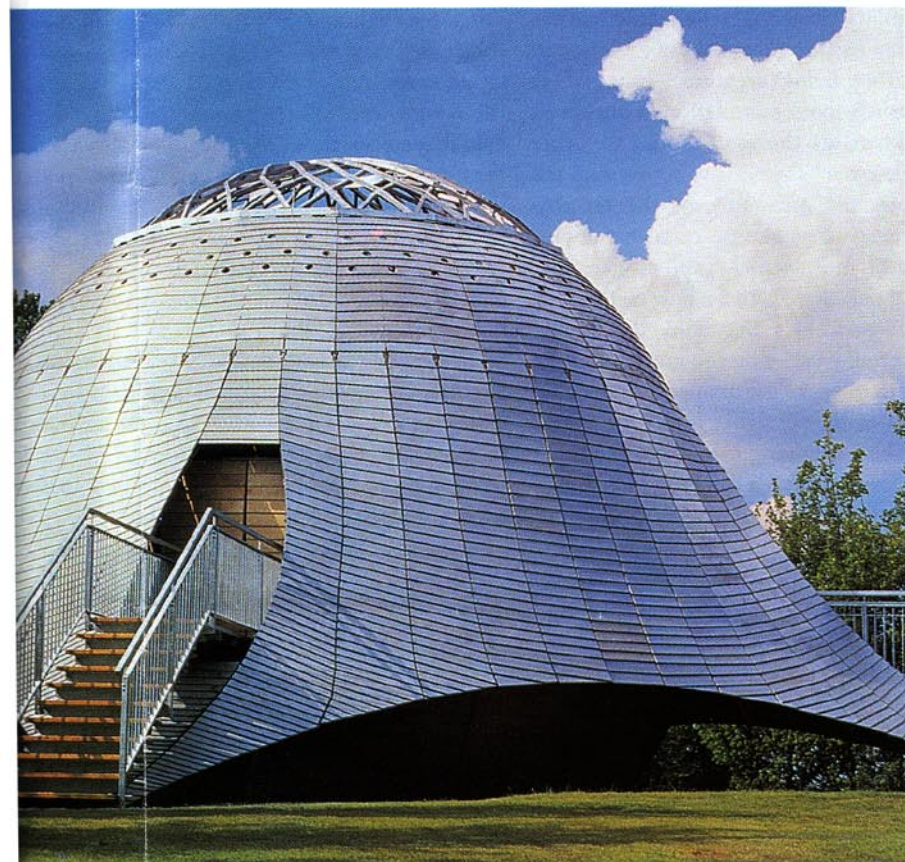
What is an animal? In a series of collaborations that began in 1996, Höller and Trockel have staged encounters between man and beast that make this question pressing. And in a second step that seems to follow on the heels of the first, one is led to

inquire, And what precisely are we who ask this question? Höller and Trockel have realized ten projects together, the final one being their contribution to EXPO 2000 Hannover, *Augapfel: Ein Haus für Tauben, Menschen und Ratten* (Eyeball: A house for pigeons, people and rats), 1996/2000. Hens, pigs, mosquitoes, bees, silverfish, rats, and pigeons have all appeared in this series of works, which Höller referred to in a recent lecture as "monuments of incomprehensibility." Both artists have produced works with zoological ingredients before (Höller is also a devoted ornithologist), but never has the hermeneutic problem been so evident as in this series of collaborations. "If a lion could talk, we could not understand him," Wittgenstein wrote in the *Philosophical Investigations*, and Höller and Trockel appear to agree: We're surrounded by animals, some of them we know well, some we even love, but they remain strangers to us. They're inscrutable.

As an introduction to the book *A House for Pigs and People* (2000), Höller and Trockel pose a long series of questions—moral, epistemological, and political—concerning the relation between humans and animals: "Do races living on a vegetarian diet behave differently than meat-eaters when it comes to territorial expansion? Is there a link between Hitler's vegetarian eating habits and what he did? Why is it that worldwide many more men kill than women? How would it be if we ourselves had to kill the animals we eat and could no longer delegate the unpleasant side of it? How would it be, as proposed by Porphyrius, to eat but only without killing and thus to live on fruit and withered cabbage leaves?"

The Documenta piece, perhaps the best-known work in the artists' collaborative series, emphasized the importance of the eye. Because of the glass, all the other senses are bracketed. The pigs cannot be touched, smelled, or heard. They're reduced to visual phenomena. As it turns out, the glass separating the humans from the pigs was transparent only from one side: Seen from the pigs' perspective, the glass was a mirror. The humans who, after visiting the house, wanted to get a pig's-eye view of the setup—that is, watch the humans watching—soon realized that the people weren't visible to the swine: The family of pigs was free to walk in and out of the house, which opened onto a muddy outdoor area, and one could thus get a glimpse of the pigs from around back if one walked around the hedges, but the human audience on the ramp would always remain out of view, behind the mirror.

There is something about a pane of glass that fictionalizes whatever is on the other side. Thus the pigpen became a kind of theater with animals onstage. One could even take the glass for a large screen; this cinematic quality was emphasized in



a smaller version of the piece presented as part of the 1999 show "Maisons/Häuser" at ARC Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, where the artists displayed the whole series of animal projects, some in the form of models. The miniature version of the Documenta work was titled *Ein Haus für Schweine und Kinder* (A house for pigs and children), a replica so small that only little kids could enter. For an adult to find out what was going on in the house, he or she would have to ask the children, who would report that they'd seen a film

HÖLLER AND TROCKEL'S HOUSES DON'T ACTIVELY RENEGOTIATE THE TRADITIONAL NOTION OF HUMANISM. BUT THEIR UNTIRING EXPOSURE OF THE VERY LINE OF DEMARCATION BETWEEN MAN AND OTHER SPECIES FORCES THE VIEWER TO ASK THE SAME QUESTIONS OVER AND OVER: WHAT IS AN ANIMAL? WHAT IS MAN?

(which, in this version, was indeed the case). A film about pigs.

"The brutality of a society, whose dominant trait can be clearly described as maximization of economic profit, is reflected in the fate of those without rights and of animals," Höller and Trockel contend. So is this a political work about injustice and oppression, even an allegory of class struggle? When Kafka's "A Report to an Academy," the story about an ape that is transformed into a human being, was to be published in Martin Buber's journal *Der Jude* in 1917, Buber wanted to call it a parable, but Kafka preferred the more neutral description "animal story." Most readers, perhaps swayed by the site of publication, take the story to be about the plight of the assimilated Jew. But for Kafka it was clearly important to keep the possibilities of interpretation open. Similarly, the questions asked by Höller and Trockel in relation to their house for pigs and humans don't confine the work to one specific reading but instead open up labyrinths of associations. In a recent essay about these animal projects, French critic Nicolas Bourriaud observes that they are not only about our relation to

other living creatures, but just as much about our relation to ourselves. There are things in us that are other than us: "To come to terms with the pig, the mosquito, or the rat also means to make peace with the pig-gish, mosquito-like, and rat-like parts of ourselves, with a whole community of processes that inhabit and determine us." The encounter with the otherness of the animal thus reminds us of the foreigner inside ourselves. The "becoming animal" in the short stories of Kafka has been interpreted by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari

as a liberatory strategy, a radical way out of the oedipal structure of European bourgeois subjectivity. Asked about such fantastic transformations, Höller remarks, "Nevertheless, also after reading Kafka, I am no further along in knowing how to view the animal. Or how it might be to be an animal."

Höller and Trockel's first collaborative animal project was *Mückenbus* (Mosquito bus), 1996, in which humans were to encounter mosquitoes inside a Volkswagen van to test whether sheer willpower alone could influence the insects' tendency to

bite. Why is it that some people get bitten a lot, while others are completely spared? Does it have anything to do with the mind-set of the person in question? In the end, because of the risk of disease spreading from one visitor to the other, the project had to remain largely hypothetical. When the bus was finally exhibited, no mosquitoes could be seen, heard, or otherwise perceived (for the simple reason that there weren't any). But in later projects, the visual qualities have been much more emphatic, as in *A House for Pigs and People*, where the pigs and piglets appeared as part of some hyperreal *tableau vivant*. Actually, the whole setup could be seen as a piece of optical machinery emphasizing the eye of the spectator and the completely objectified animals that are not even allowed the opportunity to meet the gaze of the observer. *Addina*, 1997, a closely related work that was originally presented in Palermo and takes its name from the Sicilian word for chicken, reversed the visual arrangement: Here it was the animal who played the role of spectator. Behind the polyester walls of a huge egg-shaped room, real eggs were being produced by forty-eight hens that could climb ramps up to a narrow wooden platform; from there, they were afforded a vantage on the oval room through egg-shaped windows that acted as mirrors when seen from the other side. This privileged perspective offered a view of the human visitors eating their eggs. The humans, on the other hand, saw nothing of the hens, hidden as they were behind the two-way mirror. Instead, other senses were activated: The visitors could hardly avoid the sound and odor of the chickens behind the walls.

In his 1997 catalogue essay "A House Divided," Richard Shusterman gives a political interpretation of Höller and Trockel's Documenta work: "There are also many human pigs in our social world: races and ethnicities that fail to gain our recognition because they are seen through the one-way glass of socio-cultural privilege. Very often such despised ethnicities are



denigrated as swine, though Hegel, in denying the African's humanity, compared him not to a pig but a dog." All of this is no doubt true, but there are also millions of real pigs that live short and miserable lives in industrial confinement only to be sent to the slaughterhouse and made into cheap meals for the masses. One needn't see the work as an allegory to see its political dimension. "Can domesticated animals protest against us in any other way than by diseases (swine fever, mad-cow disease, cardiac infarct)?" inquire the artists. These days, when militant vegans in Europe burn down burger joints and sausage factories, when apocalyptic minds declare that mad-cow disease is divine revenge, and less dogmatic souls like myself actively avoid certain meats, Höller and Trockel's houses for humans and animals

inhabit a house where other creatures were living on the same terms. It's always an issue of a power structure already visible in the architecture and of who is the subject watching and who the object. In *Eyeball: A House for Pigeons, People and Rats*, the optical associations are stressed even more. In fact, everything takes place in a giant eye. Built on a hill in the EXPO park in Hannover, this pavilion takes the shape of an eyeball, the iris and pupil directed skyward. One sees the strange-looking building from far away. A wooden canopy covers a circular steel sphere ten meters in diameter, producing the visual effect of a utopian architectural construction reminiscent of Buckminster Fuller's geodesic dome or Galeron's Globe Céleste built for the Universal Exposition in Paris a century ago.

HÖLLER AND TROCKEL'S EYEBALL, THEIR FINAL COLLABORATIVE WORK ADDRESSING OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH THE ANIMAL KINGDOM, SUMS UP THE DOMINANT THEMES OF THE PREVIOUS PROJECTS, RADICALIZING THE ROLE OF THE HUMAN GAZE, TRANSFORMING IT INTO AN ORGANIZING PRINCIPLE THAT ALSO MANIFESTS ITSELF ARCHITECTURALLY.

cannot be seen merely as amusing visual arrangements of various zoological specimens or as works about the incomprehensibility of animal behavior and nothing else. They're also about power. Indeed, the philosophical underpinnings of humanism itself seem to be at stake. Do we humans need constantly to reassure ourselves of our supremacy over other species through the exclusion of that which is not us but looks, smells, and acts a bit like us—i.e., the animal?

In an interview conducted in 1989 by Jean-Luc Nancy for *Confrontations* ("Eating Well"), a speculative and outspoken Jacques Derrida delineated a theory of the Western subject as an essentially meat-eating creature. Western humanity has defined itself through a violent exclusion, and incorporation, of the animal: "The subject does not want just to master and possess nature actively. In our cultures, he accepts sacrifice and eats flesh." The subject of power is essentially male and carnivorous, says Derrida, and he inquires, "I would ask you: In our countries, who would stand any chance of becoming a *chef d'Etat* (a head of State) . . . by publicly, and therefore exemplarily, declaring him- or herself to be a vegetarian? The *chef* must be an eater of flesh."

Höller and Trockel's houses for animals and humans do not try to blur the border between man and other species, nor do they actively renegotiate the traditional notion of humanism. But their untiring exposure of the very line of demarcation forces the viewer to ask the same questions over and over: What is an animal? What is Man? These works never suppose that humans could

The artists' original plan was to keep living animals in the gigantic eye. The iris was supposed to open at certain hours, letting the pigeons fly out at the top. What the artists ended up presenting in Hannover was a mechanical model, albeit an impressive one. Visitors could enter the construction from four directions on ramps. Inside the sphere, a never-ending automatic ballet was performed by metal rats and pigeons, pneumatically controlled. The viewers, standing on a circular balcony inside the eye, could see rats shooting out of tubes at the bottom of the construction. The birds in the upper regions of the sphere would suddenly start to move. Some would even flutter their wings and "fly."

Höller and Trockel's *Eyeball*, their final collaborative work addressing our relationship with the animal kingdom, sums up the dominant themes of the previous projects, radicalizing the role of the human gaze, transforming it into an organizing principle that also manifests itself architecturally. This pavilion is not a construction about the power of the eye, like the panopticon. This pavilion is an eye. But since the pupil is turned toward the sky, there are things going on inside that remain unseen. Here it's no longer a question of such delicious creatures as hens and pigs that, according to Derrida's model, have to be incorporated for humanity to define itself as other than animal. In this work, rather, it's a question of animals normally considered unworthy of our attention, let alone respect. Dirty and despicable animals. Vermin. Rats and pigeons. But, in an uncanny way, they have entered a space that is interiority itself. They've made themselves at home in a home that I thought was only mine. *Unheimlich*. □

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