

exhibition guide

WE ARE ANIMALS



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INTRODUCTION

To humans, animals can either be foe or family, food or cattle, god or symbol, exotic mystery or popular entertainment. We love them, we use them, and we talk about them. We produce animals for consumption, and we exterminate them when they become a threat to public health. We bring mice into our homes as pets, we use them for drug trials in laboratories, and we poison them to keep them out of our kitchen cabinets.

The wolf's comeback to the Netherlands has put our paradoxical relationship with wild nature completely on edge. The wolf is not the least bit concerned with our rules and will not be locked in.

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It is oblivious to any boundaries between habitats: it simply claims the space. Conversely, this is exactly what human beings are also doing to the habitats of so many animals. As most of us have moved to the city, we have become largely disconnected from nature. We are yearning for nature – i.e. the habitat of the animals – while at the same time doing anything but take care of it in the right way.

We sometimes seem to forget that we are no more or less than a 'species' ourselves, surrounded by a multitude of others. Of course there are differences between human beings and animals, but we do share a lot of our DNA with them. Animals are also able to learn, communicate and even influence their environments.

We Are Animals explores how humans and animals have become part of each other's habitats, and how we behave in each other's company. It is an artistic journey of discovery into how people can love animals while simultaneously make them the subject of – and subject them to – our wishes and technologies. It reveals how we ascribe human characteristics to them, and how we both want to protect and manipulate them.

Each from a unique perspective, the works of over thirty contemporary artists in this exhibition shed light on our relationships with the many species we share this planet with. From consumer patterns and storytelling to our perspective on, and control of nature. Although humans are hardly ever featured in the works, We Are Animals allows us to see.

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theme 1

ADORABLE ANIMALS

Martin Eder, Catastrophe, 2018

Private Collection, photo: Uwe Walter, c/o Pictoright Amsterdam 2021

Isn't it cute! Large eyes, fluffy fur and walking clumsily on oversized legs. Some animals seduce us with their babyish looks, social behaviour or penetrating gaze. We love to surround ourselves with cuddly and adorable creatures. Colourful cuddly toys are smiling at us from toy shop shelves, and many of us consider our pets to be our favourite family members.

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In our consumer and entertainment culture, cute animals can also be found just about everywhere. There is a wide variety of viral animal videos: kittens doing daredevil stunts, endearing puppies in the snow, and parrots squawking quick-witted remarks. These videos are irresistibly attractive to us and can even be comforting in these difficult times.

We are charmed and seduced by cuteness. The degree to which the animals are able to generate empathy determines how we categorise them, whether we allow them to enter our living environment, and how far we are willing to go to turn them into our ideal image when breeding them. Some animals appear to be so vulnerable and helpless that we feel a need to nurture and protect them. But are they really so weak and feeble? Do they even need us at all – or is it the other way around?

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theme 2
WILD ANIMALS

Mark Dion, Mobile Wilderness Unit – Wolf, 2006

Courtesy Georg Kargl Fine Arts. Photo: David Stjernholm

Lions, tigers, elephants, hippopotamuses, snakes... some animals make us shudder because of their intimidating appearance or reputation. We are fascinated by the wolf, a species that over the past years has been busy reclaiming its position in our society, and refuses to be controlled. It confronts us with the wilderness that us humans have become more and more estranged of.

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Many people dream of authentic encounters with animals in their natural habitats. It is an impossible dream as humans always bring along their civilization and culture: two aspects completely at odds with wild animals and unspoilt nature. We want to manipulate and regulate the wilderness, thereby turning the idea of a pure and spontaneous connection between us and other animals into a utopian fantasy that is just as difficult to realize in the wild as it is in zoos.

This is why zoos are such controversial places. We visit them for a fun day out, and to encounter the animals that, in our eyes, are either funny, beautiful, ugly, dangerous or cute. But the only reason we are able to encounter them at all is because they are in captivity. At the same time, zoos are also places where large-scale scientific research into animal species is carried out with the aim of protecting them. For some species, captivity has even become their only option for survival.

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theme 3

HUMAN ANIMALS

Various works of Paola Pivi, 2008. Photo: Marco De Swart

Animals are everywhere – also in our stories. In fairy tales, myths and fables. In religious scriptures. In animated cartoons and comic strips. In these stories we often endow them with human traits and the ability to speak – also known as anthropomorphism. A sly fox, a wise owl, a proud lion: we turn animals into metaphors for power, wisdom, sexuality, death, beauty, and vulnerability.

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We allow animals to play an important part in our search for a better understanding of our own lives. We use them to hold up a mirror to ourselves, or to critically address certain subjects. In these stories animals act as humans, with similar physical, psychological, social, and moral traits and values.

Artists also use animals in their work to create stories about human behaviour. Visual stories that explore the symbolism in human nature, and our cohabitation with other species. The way in which the animals are presented in these works is actually more revealing about us than about them.

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COLOP HON

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The exhibition is realised in collaboration with
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