
REVIEW

Review of *Making Nature: How We See Animals*

Making Nature: How We See Animals, Exhibition at *The Wellcome Collection*, 1st December 2016–21st May 2017

Elizabeth Farebrother

The intensifying effect of climate change on our global environment has implications for humans and animals alike. *Making Nature* emphasises the symbiosis that has existed between humans and animals for thousands of years. Four separate rooms: 'Ordering', 'Displaying', 'Observing' and 'Making' combine to explore how human decision-making influences our classification of animals and our attitudes towards them. Themes of behaviour, communication, display and modification are effectively integrated with taxonomic literature, artistic representation and scientific debates to demonstrate changing human-animal relationships.

Keywords: Nature; Animals; Science; Human-Animal Relationships; Review; Museum Collections; Zooarchaeology

Introduction

Against the backdrop of changing environments and new steps in human-animal interaction, *Making Nature* explores and challenges narratives surrounding the way in which humans choose to view, categorise, and manipulate animals. Lines between 'wild' and 'domestic' are blurred throughout, using creatively-curated objects to divide themes by room (**Figure 1**). *Ordering*, *Displaying*, *Observing* and *Making* represent four visual and ideological challenges to the audience's perception of humans, animals and their interaction. Whilst mostly applicable to the modern world, the exhibition occasionally digresses to explore human-animal relationships in the recent past.

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Ordering

Ordering explores taxonomic classification and acts as an introduction to the core themes of *Making Nature*: classification and perception. A range of resources including books, posters, art and film are presented to show how humans have chosen to order and classify animal worlds for several thousand years. Allora and Cazedilla's (2014) film installation '*The Great Silence*' is a powerful opening to the exhibition (**Figure 2**). Exploring recent developments from the Arecibo Observatory in Puerto Rico and its local endangered parrots, it is a moving narrative which juxtaposes the wealth of information that is yet to be discovered about the animal world alongside new efforts in space exploration. It also leaves the audience to critically analyse the relationship between humans, animals and exploratory science.



Figure 1: Budgie specimens illustrating colour variations: Budgie specimens illustrating colour variations © Trustees of the Natural History Museum.



Figure 2: Allora & Calzadilla, *The Great Silence*, 2014, © the artists, courtesy Lisson Gallery: Allora & Calzadilla, *The Great Silence*, 2014, © the artists, courtesy Lisson Gallery.

The work of Carl Linnaeus takes pride of place in *Ordering*, and the exhibition effectively explores how he derived his taxonomic classifications presented in his influential work *Systema naturae* (1735), and how others have since chosen to classify the animal world. A minor criticism of *Ordering* would be that humans have been categorising animals long before Ancient Greek philosophers began to order them into textual resources. Particularly complementary worldviews may have been found in discussions of animal domestication, the emergence of secondary products, animal deities and decisions to consume and avoid particular animal resources (e.g. Sherratt 1981, 1983; Clutton-Brock 1994; Manning and Serpell, 1994; Politis and Saunders, 2002; Marciniak, 2011; Russell, 2012; Poole, 2013).

Throughout *Making Nature*, examples of taxidermy are creatively placed to illustrate changes in the relationship between humans and animals. In *Ordering*, Waterton's imaginary taxidermy of saki monkeys evokes ideas of the Enlightenment-era 'Cabinet of Curiosities'. It highlights how humans have modified animals for display, conveniently setting the scene for the central theme of the second room.

Displaying

This room considers how curation decisions have profound influence on audience perceptions of certain species as a result of their display. The increasingly urbanised nature of human experience has led to further separation between human and animal worlds. Whilst some animals have responded to increasing urbanisation by adapting to new ecological niches, or by being kept as pets, *Displaying*, and the following area *Observing* draw upon themes of human perception, and emphasise that this is not universal. Perception of nature is key to how authors, media and museums express animals. *Displaying* presents an excellent retrospective of a variety of objects, designed to deliberately show the contrast in human attitudes towards animals.

Making Nature also reflects the wide-ranging interests of Henry Wellcome

(1853–1936) himself (see Larson 2006). *Displaying* integrates science, art and display and reflects upon these themes particularly effectively. The integration of science and art is not a particularly new phenomenon, as echoed by the illustrations of children's author and Wellcome's contemporary Beatrix Potter (1866–1943) which are displayed upon the wall. Potter's own illustrations of British animals were particularly influenced by her visits to the Natural History Museum in London and – like Peter Rabbit in his blue jacket and shoes – her children's books often anthropomorphosised animals to allow young readers to better identify with her work (e.g. Potter 1902, 1905, 1908, 1913). Drawing upon animal stereotypes in folklore was as important to her writing as scientific accuracy. The sketches from her studies exaggerate human qualities in animal specimens, and are displayed next to plans and sketches of the Natural History Museum during its inception. This curatorial decision evokes continuity of the theme of *Displaying* in itself.

Displaying chooses to use examples of anthropomorphosised animals such as Potter's illustrations throughout, but in a style which one has come to anticipate from exhibitions at the Wellcome Collection, *Making Nature* shies away from examples one might expect. This area of the exhibition uses 19th Century taxidermy to highlight how display affects interpretation of a scene. An 1876 diorama of foxes in their natural habitat by Peter Spicer (1839–1935) is placed immediately adjacent to a Taxidermy Diorama of Squirrels Playing Cards by Walter Potter (1835–1918). The stark contrast between animals in their natural habitat, and clothed animals positioned in a house conducting typically human activities. This emphasises the choice to exaggerate how specific characteristics and behaviours affect our perception of the natural world.

The decision to use a mirrored wall along one wall of this part of the exhibition emphasises another important, yet not immediately obvious point to the audience – humans

are animals too. Upon this mirrored wall is the 'Museology' series by Richard Ross, which places animals into human worlds, surrounded by man-made resources such as bubble wrap. This further blurs the boundaries and is perhaps a commentary on the drastic effect of humans on animal habitats during the Anthropocene.

Displaying is also the first time that we see how modern technology is affecting the relationship between humans and animals, later featured in *Making*. The advent of 3D Printing has caused excitement in the world of natural history as it allows curated specimens to be replicated for study. In the case of extinct taxa, this is especially pertinent, as it allows us to create and display multiple likenesses for educational purposes, without compromising precious specimens. In this case, a Barbary Lion Skull, 3D printed for the Natural History Museum Gift shop reminds us how technology changes the discovery, recording and reproducibility of animal specimens.

Observing

The theme of perception that began in *Displaying* is immediately apparent, and emphasised by *Observing*, which focuses upon

animal confinement and how humans choose to observe animals. This room itself is wooden and crate-like. The mirror is once again used to remind us humans are animals too, but wood has created bar-like separations, also apparent throughout the room, which mostly focuses on how humans capture and control nature.

Upon entering the room, one is immediately distracted by the noise of a chuffing tiger from Warnell's (2016) 'Ming of Harlem: Twenty One Storeys in the Air' (**Figure 3**). This installation removes the animal from its natural habitat to an apartment in New York, and shows the relationship between humans and apex predators at its most extreme. Celebrity animals – arguably a continuation of exotic confinement – are also exhibited here: Jumbo the Elephant, Ivy and Brumus the Polar Bears, and a model of a Chimpanzee Tea Party remind the visitor that human interest in observing animals is not always simply scientific.

Humans have removed nature from its natural environment for thousands of years, choosing to domesticate particular taxa, introducing them to new areas outside their natural range and confine exotica for entertainment or pet-keeping purposes (e.g. Zeder *et al.* 2006; Vigne *et al.* 2009; O'Connor and Sykes, 2010). Even the



Figure 3: 'Ming of Harlem', Phillip Warnell, 2016 © the artist: Phillip Warnell, Ming of Harlem, 2016 © the artist.

Tower of London was once occupied by the Royal Menagerie, which was moved to the Zoological Gardens in Regent's Park in 1831 (O'Regan *et al.* 2006), and eventually became London Zoo – now part of the Zoological Society of London (ZSL). The history of this London centre for animal observation is showcased alongside videos of nature documentaries. Pieces contrast animals in their natural habitat against changing human approaches towards wild animal captivity. Incorporating the previous theme of display, *Observing* shows how more recent concerns of the scientific community have chosen to move from the display of animals in unnatural habitats towards recreations of natural habitats. The

ZSL 'Land of the Lions' landscape, which is based around the environment of Gir National Park (2009) is showcased between images of 1960s Zoological exhibits, – including the now-listed modernist redesign of the elephant and rhinoceros pavilion – and nature documentaries. This bold decision to curate these pieces together emphasises both the theme of the room, and creates a powerfully reflective review of transitions in animal captivity.

Making

The final room in *Making Nature* focuses upon the future of human-animal interaction. Dramatically lit, and with black walls,



Figure 4: Transgenic mosquito (*Aedes aegypti*), pinned specimen, 2009. photos by the Center for PostNatural History: Transgenic mosquito (*Aedes aegypti*), pinned specimen, 2009. photos by the Center for PostNatural History.

Making slightly distances itself from the more historical aspects of *Making Nature*. Focusing on intentional human modification of animals including domestication, selective breeding and genetic modification, this room asks where we as humans will go next in our relationship with animals.

Objects in *Making* have been collaboratively selected by the Wellcome Collection and the Center for Postnatural History, Pittsburgh (Wellcome Collection 2016). They truly challenge our current perceptions of nature, and ask how human-animal relationships will evolve. Transgenic mosquitos (**Figure 4**), silk-lactating goats known – somewhat intimidatingly – as ‘Biosteel Goats’, and rodents collected from Nagasaki show the resilience of nature, but also how we as humans are changing our natural environment in the Anthropocene. This powerfully highlights that altering our natural environment requires careful consideration.

Scientists are currently exploring new methods and debating ethics relating to the revival of previously-extinct species. Claims regarding the woolly mammoth are often referenced in such debate (Callaway, 2015; Shapiro 2015, 2016), but more recently-extinct taxa might present a more appropriate starting point. In this area of *Making Nature*, a DNA sample of a taxidermied passenger pigeon taken from museum collections is used to briefly touch upon this debate, and whether it is ethical to revive animals which have previously become extinct in an epoch defined by a rapidly-altering climate.

Conclusion

Making Nature showcases a number of relevant issues to those studying human-animal interaction in the past through innovative curatorial decisions. It effectively shows how these relationships change, and how human decision-making affects the way in which we view animals. By integrating Henry Wellcome’s varied interests and vision, *Making Nature* creates an accessible exhibition, with excellent learning materials available for school groups. A minor criticism is the lack of further discussion surrounding

the ethics of humans modifying animals as demonstrated in the final room. Humans have always manipulated nature, but exploring the ethics in further detail might also have been of interest to scientists and the public alike. Nevertheless, *Making Nature* represents a thoughtful, insightful exhibition for visiting and learning.

Making Nature runs until 21st May 2017. Admission is free to all and a large print guide can be downloaded from the website (<https://wellcomecollection.org/MakingNature>).

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Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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