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**The Dialectics of Containment: How Photographic Representations of Non-Human Animals Transform the Everyday.**

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**Publication date:**

2016

**Document version:**

Peer reviewed version

**Link:**

[Link to publication in PEARL](#)

**Citation for published version (APA):**

Baker, C. (2016). *The Dialectics of Containment: How Photographic Representations of Non-Human Animals Transform the Everyday.*

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# The Dialectics of Containment: How Photographic Representations of Non-Human Animals Transform the Everyday

[Title Slide 1]

**Dr Carole Baker**

[Slide 2]

The photographic work I discuss, still in progress, is the result of a NiMac/Plymouth University Residence begun in November 2015. This paper reproduces the form of the photographic work it responds to, a work currently still in progress, by setting a diverse selection of visual and textual representations in dialectical opposition as a means of challenging ways of thinking and social practices. [Slide 3] The polyvocality of this approach allows disparate perspectives to exist simultaneously, opening an imaginative space in which notions of power and coercion, identity and representation can emerge and be subject to scrutiny. This approach will lead, I propose, to possible re-evaluations of our understanding of, and hence relationships with, non-human animals.

[Slide 4]

The work could be seen as a ‘Critical Realist’<sup>1</sup> method of committed investigative practice, involving rigorous research, in that it seeks to uncover and understand a pre-existing social reality. It is a response to the dog control scheme currently operating in Cyprus; introduced in 1971 “*within the context of an all-inclusive anti-echinococcosis campaign*”.

*At the time, it was estimated that there were more than 100,000 dogs in the island, almost all of which were strays...The destruction of stray dogs [was] accomplished by using guns that fire a syringe containing a euthanizing drug.*<sup>2</sup>

[Slide 5] The 1970s Scheme resulted in the extermination of nearly 86,000 stray dogs, mass spaying of females and compulsory registration, leaving an estimated 16,810 dogs on the island. Today, local authorities are obliged to keep strays in approved pounds for 15 days after which, if the owner is not found or they are not re-homed, they are euthanized. It is estimated<sup>3</sup> that around 20,000 dogs are killed by euthanasia each year, and that the annual number of abandoned dogs and puppies is 170,000. In response, a number of sanctuaries have been established around the island run mainly by volunteers who re-home to other European countries. The situation is currently at breaking point as the rescues struggle to cope with the ever increasing numbers.

[Slide 6]

**Sun 8 Nov, 2015 Nicosia:** I am gradually recovering this morning from the onslaught on the senses that was the Unified Pound; the heat, glare, nauseous smells, irritating flies and intermittent bursts of barking, howling and whining were at times overwhelming. [Slide 7] The Pound itself lies amid flat, empty fields of arid sand-coloured earth, bordered by distant mountains; an oasis-like compound with high fences and barbed wire. [Slide 8] I tour the

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<sup>1</sup> Baetens and Van Gelder interrogate Sekula’s notion of Critical Realism

<sup>2</sup> 1983 paper by Kyriacos Polydorou, the Director of Veterinary Services, Ministry of Agriculture and Natural Resources, Nicosia, Cyprus

<sup>3</sup> Cyprus Voice for Animals

enclosure, entering the cages; mobbed by puppies, shunned by a tiny aging female pinscher with teats elongated from her numerous litters, followed and gazed at and scratched and vied for by hordes of anxious, excited, restless, desperate creatures.

[Slide 9]

The tide, it seems, has turned for non-human animals, at least in the higher registers of thinking. According to Kari Weill speciesism has entered the academy. Existing categories rooted in the traditions of Western philosophy no longer provide useful or coherent bases for understanding our place in a world amidst rapid social, political, economic and environmental change. Weill identifies these developments as, [Slide 10]

“The ethical turn... a concern with and for alterity, especially insofar as alterity brings us to the limits of our own self-certainty and certainty about the world.”<sup>4</sup>

Daston and Mitman suggest that a liberation occurs with a change in perspective; thinking *as* an animal rather than *of* animals,

“Thinking with animals can take the form of an intense yearning to transcend the confines of self and species, to understand from the inside or even to become an animal.”<sup>5</sup>

[Slide 11]

The photographic method I employ, which might also be called ‘socially engaged practice’, lies between art and documentary, employing diverse mediums which dialectically traverse the territory, uncovering synergies, contradictions, paradoxes, perspectives in the social fabric. Photography, in its mimetic relationship to reality, is suited to this form of social critique; although not realistic in itself, it “arises from reality”<sup>6</sup>, and invites reflection on the nature of reality. [Slide 12] Photographs considered as visual comments, inscriptions and traces of the reality surrounding us generate questions and force revelation, transforming the everyday. “...activist photography begins when a photographer thinks beyond the photograph...”<sup>7</sup> The photograph itself cannot tell us the history of dog control in Cyprus, nor of its socio-political imperatives, but it can point to its consequences.

[Slide 13]

“The emergence of the prison” writes Foucault “marks the institutionalization of the power [and the will] to punish...”<sup>8</sup> “The body, according to this penalty is caught up in a system of constraints and privations, obligations and prohibitions.... Punishment has become an economy of suspended rights.”<sup>9</sup> Is it legitimate to incarcerate and end the life of creatures irrespective of crime?

[Slide 14]

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<sup>4</sup> Weill, K *Thinking Animals: Why Animal Studies Now*, 2012, p15

<sup>5</sup> Daston & Mitman *Thinking with Animals: New Perspectives on Anthropomorphism*, 2005, p230

<sup>6</sup> WJT Mitchell

<sup>7</sup> Bogre M *Photography and Activism*

<sup>8</sup> Foucault *Discipline and Punish* p130

<sup>9</sup> Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* p11

Postcolonialism and Feminism have familiarised us with the notions of difference and Otherness, challenging and destabilising the centrality of the white, Western, bourgeois male subject and exploring the construction and adoption of alternative subjectivities. How is the other known? Is knowledge of the other a form of colonization, domination, violence? [Slide 15] Edward Said writes of a type of knowledge<sup>10</sup> that rises “above immediacy, beyond self, into the foreign and distant. The object of such knowledge is inherently vulnerable to scrutiny... To have such knowledge of such a thing is to dominate it, to have authority over it. And authority here means for “us” to deny autonomy to “it”...since we know it and it exists, in a sense, as we know it.”<sup>11</sup> [Slide 16]

Are we incapable of seeing the other except through the lens of anthropomorphism? The pet, according to Berger from his Marxist perspective,<sup>12</sup> is a reduced animal; merely a reflection of its owner. [Slide 17] “From Rousseau through Nietzsche to Deleuze and Guattari, we find similar condemnation of the domestic pet as a deanimalized creature that has been stripped of its original virile wildness and tamed into a “feminine” and inauthentic servitude.”

Seeing requires a framework of knowledge or knowledges; to allow an understanding of what is seen. What is it that humans think they are looking at when they see a nonhuman animal? [Slide 18] Berger describes the look between human and animal as an “abyss of non-comprehension” resulting from the lack of a common language. The animal’s silence, he writes, “guarantees its distance, its distinctness, its exclusion, from and of man.”<sup>13</sup> [Slide 19]

Kari Weill offers a response,

To be dumb... is not to be lacking in language, but to have an alternate means of apprehending the other and the world.”<sup>14</sup>

“...all living beings live in relatively unique perceptual worlds...”<sup>15</sup> Humans and dogs are “animals of unequal lexicons and unequal capacities for scent, touch and hearing – but each of whom must be acknowledged as “having a world” and having something to say.”

[Slide 20]

McFarland and Hediger suggest that animals [such as dogs] that conform to the behavioural standards of the group are moral beings, who behave ethically, citing play behaviours as one way in which animals display a sense of justice and fairness.

[Slide 21]

The senses of vision and touch in Western culture appear to be at opposite ends of sensory experience; vision is culturally ascribed as cerebral, male and

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<sup>10</sup> Used by Balfour to justify the British occupation of Egypt

<sup>11</sup> Said, E *Orientalism* p32

<sup>12</sup> Berger, J ‘Why Look at Animals’

<sup>13</sup> Berger, J ‘Why Look at Animals’ p6

<sup>14</sup> Weill, K *Thinking Animals: Why Animal Studies Now*, 2012 p87

<sup>15</sup> McFarland and Hediger p23

distant, while touch is bodily, female and proximate<sup>16</sup>. [Slide 22] Unlike vision, touch is not valued epistemologically. "Information gathered through touch and more proximal senses is thought to provide only subjective feeling and cannot be grounds for knowledge."<sup>17</sup>

[Slide 23]

Critical Realist practice seeks to uncover truth. Truth is always contingent and partial, but through dialogue and collaboration and the generating of intellectual, affective and sensual responses, complex realities can be explored. Like Susan Meiselas I attempt to "create images and a sequence that's sustaining and engaging, but asks people to wait, to not think they know, but to be suspended and uncertain along with those pictured whose lives are unpredictable and unravelling."<sup>18</sup>

[Slide 24]

It is believed that dogs were domesticated more than 15,000 years ago. Scientists in Lyon (Morgane Oliver) have recently discovered that, beyond the range of shapes and sizes, domesticated dogs substantially differ from wolves in their DNA, including an ability to digest a wider range of foods, including starch. This bio-cultural co-evolution of dog genes and human culture developed around 6,000 years ago, coinciding with the spread of human farming.

[Slide 25]

In opposition to the human-centredness of much previous enquiry. David Harvey argues that "the artificial break between "society" and "nature" must be eroded, rendered porous, and eventually dissolved"<sup>19</sup>, while Tim Ingold suggests that there is a need to dissolve 'the category of the social' and 'to re-embed these [human] relationships within the continuum of organic life'.<sup>20</sup>

[Slide 26]

This approach reverses centuries of distancing and differentiation, as humans separated themselves from 'animals' in a process of civilisation. Walter Benjamin in his essay *Gloves* recognises the desire of humans to deny their animality,

"In an aversion to animals the predominant feeling is fear of being recognized by them through contact. The horror that stirs deep in man [sic] is an obscure awareness that in him something lives so akin to the animal that it might be recognized. All disgust is originally disgust at touching."<sup>21</sup>

[Slide 27]

**Wed 11 Nov, 2015 Moni, Limassol:** Sandwiched between a Power Plant and a Limestone Quarry, an hour's drive along the coast road from the old town of Limassol, Sirius Dog Sanctuary is not signposted and doesn't appear on the map. [Slide 28] Walking into the centre of their colossal shed, my eyes adjust to the darkness pierced by shafts of dazzling sunlight. A deafening

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<sup>16</sup> Rodaway 1994: 122-3

<sup>17</sup> Vasseleu 1998: 12

<sup>18</sup> Bogue p55

<sup>19</sup> Harvey, D 1996: 192

<sup>20</sup> Ingold, T 1997: 249-50

<sup>21</sup> Walter Benjamin 'Gloves', in *One-Way Street and Other Writings*, 1997

cacophony of sound, of every register, erupts from the surrounding enclosures and intensifies, assaulting my ears.

[Slide 29]

Charles Darwin fostered the idea of subjectivity and even of abstract thinking in animals, envisaging a continuum between nonhuman animals and humans. He reflected that, although no animal can be regarded as self-conscious in the sense that he reflects on the nature of life and death,

But how can we feel sure that an old dog with an excellent memory and some power of imagination, as shewn by his dreams, never reflects on his past pleasures or pains in the chase? And this would be a form of self-consciousness.”<sup>22</sup>

[Slide 30]

Ultimately, the Critical Realist photographer aims to generate social change, through focussing on that which has been ignored, marginalised and dispossessed; and revealing the socio-political narratives hidden beneath the everyday veneer of civilized societies. [Slide 31] Activists seek to illuminate that invisible picture, to amplify that unheard voice, to reveal that untold story; they are “...always seeking some evidence necessary to maintain, retain, or restore liberty for someone somewhere...”<sup>23</sup> This change may be gradual, a forced reflection leading to an awakening consciousness, an expanded awareness, but ultimately, a catalyst for socially responsible action.

[Slide 32]

**Sat 21 Nov, 2015 Paphos:** Having tried, and failed, the previous afternoon to locate the entrance to Paphiakos Animal Sanctuary, I return with renewed determination and my persistence pays off. [Slide 33] The enclosures contain nothing but blue barrels for sleeping, and the dogs are anxious and fractious and readily break into barking and howling; some are bullied aggressively by others lacking any alternative stimulation. [Slide 34] The small dogs flock to the wire to lick my fingers, but soon become bored as I remain there silently and they eventually wander off to sit or lie down. Suddenly a donkey appears and the whole enclosure erupts in frantic noise and chaos.

[Slide 35]

Jacques Derrida<sup>24</sup> writes of his female cat who stares at him naked in the bathroom one morning. Derrida knows he is in the presence of someone responding, not of a machine reacting. [Slide 36] “I see it as *this* irreplaceable living being that one day enters my space, enters this place where it can encounter me, see me, see me naked.” Recent debates on agency (the capacity to effect change), once conferred only on humans, suggest that an,

“Attentiveness to agency may enable us to see beyond stereotypical representations of species on display, so that we encounter real, live

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<sup>22</sup> Charles Darwin *The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex*, 1871, Princeton University Press, 1981

<sup>23</sup> Bogre, M *Photography as Activism*

<sup>24</sup> In two essays, entitled ‘And Say the Animal Responded?’ (1997) and ‘The Animal that Therefore I Am (More to Follow)’.

whole individuals and appreciate their significant otherness without reducing them to aesthetic, consumable objects.”<sup>25</sup>

[Slide 37]

“If we accept that animals other than human beings may be conscious, intentional agents, then we have also to ascribe to them personal as well as natural powers.” writes Ingold, [Slide 38] “That is, we are forced to recognize that they embody attributes of personhood which in the West are popularly identified with the condition of ‘humanity’.”<sup>26</sup>

Word Count: 2,290

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<sup>25</sup> Whale Agency: Affordances and Acts of Resistance in Captive Environments. In S. McFarland & R. Hediger (eds) *Animals and Agency: An Interdisciplinary Exploration* (23-43). Leiden: Brill p42/3

<sup>26</sup> p9 Tim Ingold *What is an Animal?* 1994