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Review: *We Animals* (2013)

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We Animals is the first book by animal rights advocate and photojournalist Jo-Anne McArthur. This 200+ page hardcover collection presents a hundred of McArthur's photographs shot between 2003 and 2013 for her ongoing project of the same name. The images depict animals in the human environment and are accompanied by McArthur's narrative. The book is organized into six segments. In the introduction, McArthur establishes the tone of the book and sets out her aim: "to break down the mental and physical barriers we've built that allow us to treat our fellow creatures as objects and not as sentient beings."¹ She writes about her early interest in both photography and animals, and how her critical take on humans' use of animals emerged, which eventually led her to develop the *We Animals* project, named to affirm the commonality between humans and other animals. In the next three sections, McArthur examines

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humans' treatment of animals in entertainment and fashion, food production, and research. The penultimate section brings attention to the work of animal advocates and sanctuaries, while the last offers a collection of excerpts from journals McArthur kept while in the field. Ever the activist, McArthur also includes a list of resources at the end.

In *We Animals*, McArthur uses her narrative (which is both descriptive and analytic) to teach. Her text is free of judgment and misplaced emotion, and leaves the reader open to the behavioral endpoint she hopes they will one day reach. Facts are presented in a way that compels the audience to read between the lines to glean the significance of the situation and to establish their own meaning. McArthur, for example, details her experience at an alligator farm by noting that the tour guide “showed the children newborn alligators in small plastic bins—before everyone went to the gift shop, where they could buy anything from a ‘genuine alligator head’ for \$19.99 to a gator cookbook.”² Though subtle, the implications are there. Her narrative gives new depth, substance, and context to the images, including what lies outside their frame. McArthur tells the reader, for instance, that as she photographed a bald eagle at a Canadian zoo, visitors did not so much as glance up at the bird “to appreciate that he was there” but instead walked by in search of more exotic animals. She also animates scenes with details of smells and sounds and other striking elements lost in a solely visual presentation and in this way works—as Rowe (2012) stresses one must—to restore the “tangible animal, the literal killing, and all the repugnant stuff.”³

While McArthur's narrative is cleverly nuanced, her imagery is appropriately harsh at times. She makes no attempt to shield the unpleasant from view, but rather is strategic in how she frames it. She encourages individuals to spend time with grizzly scenes by ensuring they contain “beauty and humanity” and in so doing aims to draw readers in, rather than turn them away. Jenni (2005) credits visual presentations for helping move viewers beyond a mere “pale” understanding, by enlivening their beliefs and allowing the situation to register more fully in a way that the harmed individual is no longer merely a stick figure in their mind.⁴ This, Jenni believes, helps block “avenues of escape” that may otherwise be used to avoid an emotionally powerful awareness. McArthur's images strive for this, while also being a form of art, and art has the potential to engage where other methods may fall short.

While McArthur does not miss the opportunity to expose readers to the unpleasant—thought to be one of the most fruitful elements in animal rights imagery⁵—she also makes efforts

to go beyond. Baker (2001) maintains that it is not merely distressing representations of animals that can foster change,⁶ and McArthur comes through on this front by introducing readers to rescued animals who serve as a critical frame for what their species is capable of in a different context.

McArthur's narrative also exposes humans' dangerous anthropocentrism by outlining how we make animals ours, distort their life's purpose, and then—paradoxically—sideline their experiences. The result is that animals are at once everywhere, yet nowhere. A fitting example is McArthur's photograph of a bullfight in Spain. The image centers on two spectators in the crowd holding a fan and a cigar, which is juxtaposed against a slain bull in a blurry background. As McArthur explains,

Each man, woman and child seemed present not merely to witness a fight, but to be part of a masquerade, where it's more important to be seen by and with friends than focus on what's taking place at the heart of the spectacle. In this three-act opera of death, the humans once again take centre-stage, as the animal, even though in the middle of the arena, is out of focus, an afterthought.⁷

The photographs in the book, along with those coming from McArthur's wider collection, are among the most significant images in the animal rights movement. In contrast to a great deal of the movement's imagery, McArthur's contributions are shot using sophisticated equipment and are taken close to the animal and from their vantage point, making the scenes more intimate. Such techniques, McArthur explains, help to “draw the viewer in and let her linger on what she sees, to feel disturbed or intrigued in a way that would compel her gaze ultimately to turn inward, where questions and changes begin.”⁸ McArthur uses her photographs to offer an authentic depiction of each situation and in openly documenting them herself, she also adds credibility in a way that anonymous undercover investigators regrettably cannot.

Tsovel (2005) has critiqued animal rights imagery for bypassing the “animal biography” in favor of a focus on problems at the industry level. Tsovel believes the former is “by far more empathy-stimulating than are attempts to represent a mass event or an entire site of misfortune.”⁹ McArthur avoids the pitfall of an exclusive abstraction to the billions by relating stories of specific animals and her experiences with them, while still conveying the enormous scale of animal use and how we are conditioned to view animals *en mass*. In so doing, she draws out singular personalities and plights, though importantly she does so without anthropomorphizing—

indeed she does not have to. Even in photos crowded with animals, McArthur manages to capture individuality. This is illustrated in a photograph of a group of sheep walking up a gangplank to be trucked to slaughter. As most look ahead to their fate, McArthur centers her lens on one sheep who has his or her head turned to the side as if in reflection. This technique of focusing on distinct individuals serves as a compelling way to introduce newcomers to the world of animal exploitation. For instance, the reader learns of the life of female pigs used for breeding through the story of one such pig in a gestation crate whose eyes followed McArthur as she documented the conditions in the facility — one whom McArthur tells us she regrets having to leave and who has remained in her memory ever since.

A major contribution of *We Animals* is its underscoring of the range of ways humans harm animals. Readers are told of the sensory assaults, from men yelling, animals screaming, and metal rattling, to smells so piercing they linger on McArthur's camera for weeks. They also learn how animals are separated from their family (including mothers from their offspring), and kept in conditions that bring about boredom, frustration, stress, and cannibalism. McArthur relates how solitary animals are made to be communal, while social individuals are isolated, much like Kiska, an orca who lives alone in a tank at Marineland unfittingly called "Friendship Cove." McArthur points to the presence of fear, and also how animals are dominated, crowded, confined, and suffer indignities including sexual interference. She explains that they have their lifespan truncated, their hierarchies disrupted, their bodies manipulated, and their lives entirely predetermined. She also points out how the impoverishment becomes all the more sinister through the removal of nature, recalling animals farmed for their fur who can see and smell the forest, dolphins who perform in sight of the ocean, and slaughter-bound pigs who are kept just out of reach from the beautiful blue sky, "the cruelest sky."

McArthur also of course depicts pain and suffering, including the inconceivable, but in many cases with a new approach. Take for example her recounting of how laying hens caged on wire attempt in vain to provide respite for their feet, "standing first on one leg, curling their toes and feet; then they lower that foot onto the wire and do the same with the other leg."¹⁰ Even scenes of unsanitary conditions—mite infested hens or rabbits dripping with excrement from those in the cages above—are made palpable. McArthur does the same for dietary deprivation: from recounting the banality of unvaried diets, to how malnourishment, dehydration, and starvation are commonplace. She also shows that it is typical for the living to share space with

the dead, and indeed that the living are effectively treated as dead. The reader also learns of the lasting trauma experienced by those who find themselves on the other side, as exemplified by Ron—a chimpanzee and former research subject who appears on the book's front cover and is the focus of both its opening dedication and its final passage.

Not only does *We Animals* convey the variety of assaults inflicted on animals, it leaves the reader with no escape from the realization that this befalls every corner of the globe, and in similar ways. McArthur captures scene after scene from Antarctica, Australia, Cameroon, Canada, the Cayman Islands, Cuba, France, Kenya, Laos, Poland, Spain, Sweden, Tanzania, Thailand, Uganda, the UK, the US, and Vietnam. She is also holistic in her approach, covering an assortment of industries and practices from agricultural fairs, aquariums, bear bile farming, breeding farms, bullfights, circuses, and fox hunts, to fur farms, greyhound racing, poaching, reptile parks, research facilities, rodeos, zoos, and animal agriculture in its various manifestations. McArthur even manages to capture the tiniest of subjects, beginning the book with a beetle at an insectarium who lives alone and “spends much of his time circling his tank, feeling his way along the walls, looking for a way out.”¹¹ There are few, if any, resources that cover this variation and omnipresence of animal use, let alone so powerfully, beautifully, accessibly, and ultimately, one assumes, so convincingly.

We Animals' uncovering of the ways that animals are purposefully kept out of view is an example of the politics of sight—a term coined by Pachirat (2011) that refers to efforts to realize social change by bringing visibility to that which is hidden.¹² The idea is that the unpalatable process of turning animals into commodities continues in part because it is largely¹³ kept out of view, and thus by providing a window into the socially invisible conditions under which animals are used, the process may be reconceptualized as ethically repugnant. Like Pachirat, McArthur acknowledges that “much of what is done to animals in our name is deliberately hidden—either physically from sight or verbally in our euphemisms.”¹⁴ In response, she uses *We Animals* to bring visibility to animal issues by encouraging her readers not only to look but to *see* and in so doing to recognize their complicity.

Yet there may be a danger in the politics of sight. As Pachirat notes, efforts to make the once invisible visible may lead to the opposite effect whereby exposure brings about an increased tolerance. Indeed, Acampora (1998) has written that zoo animals are “degraded or marginalized through the marketing of their very visibility.”¹⁵ McArthur shares a scene of a

bullfight in Spain that could serve as a case in point for how sight can be co-opted. McArthur recalls,

Wounded and weakened, the bull lay bleeding in the warm light of the late afternoon as the matador moved in for the kill. The audience around me leaned forward on the edges of their seats, cheering. The connoisseurs of the *corrida* waved their white handkerchiefs. It was a gesture that served as a petition to the matador to cut off one or both of the bull's ears—a signal that they thoroughly approved of the way he'd "fought" the animal. The matador then paraded around the arena with the bull's ears—one in each hand, his hands held high. The audience showered him with flowers. In response, he threw first one ear, and then the other, to children in the audience. The ultimate prize.¹⁶

To the extent that empathy is in danger of being diminished through sight, McArthur appears to take steps to limit this outcome. To generate moral concern, Aaltola (2014) argues that "images of nonhuman suffering need to walk hand in hand with a narrative that positions nonhuman beings as morally valuable individuals,"¹⁷ which is something that McArthur carries out in striking fashion.

The book is brought to a close with excerpts from the journals that McArthur kept while in the field. These notes give insight into the lengths she went to capture some of the scenes, including the risk both to her physical security—names, places, and other identifying information is blackened throughout—and to her emotional wellbeing. Indeed McArthur has been public about her time with post-traumatic stress disorder. Her journals also show how she works for balance by appreciating small comforts in her off-hours, whether companionship, food, or a safe place to rest. While McArthur's tone is careful earlier in the book, the snippets from her journal are less reserved, more colloquial, and even angry at times. This approach would not have worked in the body of the book, but its inclusion near the end is very smart and together both parts serve as the perfect balance of McArthur herself.

We Animals aligns with critical animal studies in a number of ways, including its focus on activism, commitment to liberation, critical perspective, and disruption of the social construction of animals. Given its holistic, novel, and educational approach to animal issues, *We Animals* has the potential to serve as an invaluable work for the animal rights movement. It not only has the capacity to instruct and invigorate existing advocates, but also—and more importantly so—to reach a wider audience in a transformative way.

Notes

- ¹ Jo-Anne McArthur. *We Animals*, p. 9.
- ² Jo-Anne McArthur. *We Animals*, p. 106.
- ³ Bradley D. Rowe. Food, habit, and the consumption of animals as educational encounter, p. 217.
- ⁴ Kathie Jenni. The Power of the Visual.
- ⁵ Steve Baker. *Picturing the Beast: Animals, Identity and Representation*.
- ⁶ Ibid.
- ⁷ Jo-Anne McArthur, *We Animals*, p. 48.
- ⁸ Ibid, p. 10.
- ⁹ Ariel Tsovel, What Can a Farm Animal Biography Accomplish? The Case of *Portrait of a Burger as a Young Calf*, p. 247.
- ¹⁰ Jo-Anne McArthur. *We Animals*, p. 119.
- ¹¹ Ibid, p. 14.
- ¹² Timothy Pachirat. *Every Twelve Seconds: Industrialized Slaughter and the Politics of Sight*.
- ¹³ As O'Sullivan explains, although animal invisibility is increasing, some animals remain more visible than others. Siobhan O'Sullivan, *Animals, Equality and Democracy*.
- ¹⁴ Jo-Anne McArthur. *We Animals*, p. 134.
- ¹⁵ Ralph R. Acampora. Extinction by Exhibition: Looking at and in the Zoo, p. 1.
- ¹⁶ Jo-Anne McArthur. *We Animals*, p. 51.
- ¹⁷ Elisa Aaltola. Animal Suffering: Representations and the Act of Looking, p. 27.

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