

“These animals that slide beneath the skin of men”

(about a work by Pilar Albarracín)

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As you enter the first gallery of the exhibition *Fabulations*, which the Centre d'art le LAIT (Laboratoire Artistique International du Tarn) is devoting to recent works by Pilar Albarracín, the viewer, who I imagine will be as surprised as I was, discovers, in the semi-darkness, an installation featuring a donkey sitting upright in the centre, enthroned on the top of a vaguely pyramid-shaped pile of several thousand books. If, at first sight, the presence of the donkey doesn't seem to be in keeping with the purpose of a venue devoted to the exhibition of contemporary works, this is because, in this case, it is a “real” donkey, or, to be more precise, a stuffed donkey, given shape and then presented in such a way that it offers itself *physically* to our gaze, holding a book with a red cover between its front legs. Moreover, this particular book seems to hold its attention. However, no matter how disconcerting this may initially seem, the work leads us to consider three key questions. The first one is more general and concerns *animal physicality* in recent art. Following on from this, the second question is about contemporary artists resorting to taxidermy and its objects. Finally, the third question touches on the complex symbolic values of *asininity*<sup>1</sup> in the western tradition, in both the history of art and ideas.

For some 50 years, the inclusion of animal species in all kinds of productions has echoed the omnipresence of the object in the Duchampian, surrealist, Dada and Fluxus traditions, originating from a shared desire to redefine the specific links connecting art and life. With the unusual exception of a construction by Joan Miró, entitled *Objet* [Object], which dates from 1936 and features a stuffed parrot attached to a perch at the top, it is Robert Rauschenberg's *Combines*, created between 1955 and 1959, which pioneered the recurrent use of stuffed specimens, such as the pheasant in *Satellite*, the cockerel in *Odalisk*, the white-headed eagle in *Canyon* and the famous angora goat in *Monogram*, with a heavy tyre around its middle. Created between 1966 and 1967, Daniel Spoerri's *Objets de magie à la noix* [Shoddy magic objects] introduced material

components taken from imputrescible animal remains, in the form of skulls, horns and other osseous elements from bovine skeletons. Spoerri's subsequent works feature a dog, the head of a sea-lion, the remains of a cat that has literally been dried out, and stuffed rodents and birds, which were acquired as he came across them or from a specialised dealer.<sup>2</sup> In 1967, Jannis Kounellis also put a live parrot on a perch embedded into a small rectangular enamelled steel plate: a device that gives the bird an effective presence that can, nevertheless, "form an image".<sup>3</sup> However, the introduction of animal physicality into recent art cannot be achieved without it being charged with a strong iconicity, blurring the established boundaries of usage between the things of the world and their representation, or, to put it in semiotic terms, between indexical and iconic signs. Between 1971 and 1972, Annette Messager dressed dozens of stuffed sparrows in items of clothing and placed them inside display cases. Entitled *Les Pensionnaires* [The Boarders], these unsettling creations represent the true metamorphosis of real remains into objects of representation which, at the same time, become humanised. A number of contemporary creations attest to similar transformations, taking on the form of an animal's body to differing degrees. To name just one example, *The Delirium of Alfred Russel Wallace* (1994), by the American artist Mark Dion, literally gives a stuffed fox the power of speech. Decked out in spectacles, the creature reclines in a hammock suspended over a miscellaneous assortment of objects that evoke a makeshift camp. The pathetic-looking animal plays the role of the explorer and British naturalist, loosely portrayed in a mock-up of a jungle, while suffering from an acute attack of malaria. Drawing on other frames of reference, Pilar Albarracín's reading donkey nevertheless reveals the same anthropomorphic "treatment" of the animal. Bearing in mind that such a transformation is presented as reversible, it would be equally apt to recognise the animalisation of a human situation, about which the least one can say is that it is alien to what constitutes the living reality of this member of the horse family. The Spanish artist's humanised donkey appears to have been *infiltrated* by the image, by the world of images, a world that it contaminates in turn, according to a mimicry with a double meaning. No longer just about iconic representations, but about symbolic constructions, this process clearly reminds us of the characteristic device of the fable, in which the animal reduced to an archetype doesn't so much borrow its traits from the fauna of distant lands than from a cultural history charged with uses, duties, instructions and other rules of conduct. In the fabliaux of the Middle Ages, in La Fontaine's and Florian's fables, a world of ancient wisdom inherited from the books of fables from

Asia and Europe (those of Aesop, Phaedrus and many others) is perpetuated and renewed; a world in which animals speak, think and act like men so that they can recognise themselves in the oblique mirror that hairy, woolly, feathered animals proffer to them in turn. We'll return to this later.

However, while the inclusion of stuffed animal species bears witness to the characteristic practices and challenges of post-modernity, their interpretation should not be restricted to this, far from it. In addition to the bestiary in fables, certain animal figures in art bring up to date the historic associations that attest to very different processes. Indeed, recent creations – particularly those by Pilar Albarracín – show retrospectively that early examples of taxidermy contain the *evolution-work* of stuffed animals. These date from the 17th century, the era when scholars and wealthy collectors would exhibit their specimens in cabinets of curiosities, which resulted in the first museums of natural history. During the second half of the 18th century, tanning and mounting techniques devised by apothecaries and anatomists were deemed to be stable and reliable enough in the long term. From the very outset, the specimens treated and preserved through taxidermy were not just objects for study, but, in structural terms, they resembled *exhibition artefacts*.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, although they weren't considered works of art in their own right for almost three centuries, they were far from being devoid of an artistic dimension, in terms of their conception and the gaze they required. Significantly, despite scientific hegemony, some artists, such as the engraver Étienne Fiquet, took part in the preparation of some specimens, on the initiative of Buffon. At the beginning of the 19th century, Hénon and Marie-Jacques-Philippe Mouton-Fontenille had no hesitation in comparing “the artist who mounts and stuffs a bird to a painter who does a portrait”.<sup>5</sup> Of course, the interest of contemporary artists in taxidermy doesn't stem from an illusionism of this kind placed at the service of scientific naturalism. They too took advantage of this very particular form of *inherent realism*, which brings with it a vast amount of historical baggage, meanings and practices. So, for instance, the “physical” introduction of animality into art underpins the deconstruction carried out in the work of some artists who, like Mark Dion, mimic the exhibition protocols that have been in place since the invention of cabinets and museums, in order to turn them on their head and bring up to date the ideological bedrock to which they implicitly conform. In the *Misfits* by the German artist Thomas Grünfeld, the hybrid animal mocks the boundaries that separate the monster from the marvel, associating the vestiges of a medieval imaginary with the world of transplants

between species and other genetic mutations. If such metamorphoses are often arresting, it is because they are underpinned by the *prodigious* effectiveness of a dead body that is able to imitate life and, at the same time, form images.

The condition of Pilar Albarracín's reading donkey is clearly (and intentionally) more ambiguous. The way it is displayed borrows freely from certain characteristic principles of "simple tableaux" and "arranged tableaux", according to the terms used by Mouton-Fontenille to describe naturalised montages, devised like *scenes*.<sup>6</sup> From the end of the 19th century to the beginning of the 20th century, these tableaux attained their ultimate form with the dioramas with which some museums sought to place the reconstructed image of the animal and its environment against a landscape background. But, while the naturalist refers to what he thinks he knows about animal life, Pilar Albarracín adheres to an often contradictory cultural backdrop where – in biblical tales, myths and fables, medieval engravings, Renaissance literature, the philosophy of Giordano Bruno, Goya's *Caprichos*, etc. – asininity and its changing values inform the cause of men. This is why the iconic and symbolic construction showing a donkey reading confers on the creature the heraldic status of a *figure*.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, this aspect is reinforced by the lighting system that lends theatricality to the anthropomorphic animal and projects its disproportionately large silhouette in the manner of a shadow play.

The superfluous stack of books the donkey is perched upon lends this intrusion a reality replete with images and knowledge, the limits of which are hard to determine.

Prematurely worn, yellowing and dog-eared, but, above all, almost forgotten, because most of them have become unreadable, they won't enjoy the same fate as the fables of Aesop and La Fontaine. They weren't published that long ago but they have already been stricken by obsolescence; the sort of topicality that once made them successful and their comparative relevance have become, definitively, a thing of the past. Now they are only of interest to flea markets or dealers who buy them by weight. After all, what would most of us do nowadays with the memoirs of some obscure minister telling us about a government during the Third Republic? What are we supposed to do with the confidences of a retired general, long ago reconverted to humanitarianism? What can we do with the commercial strategy of a "revolutionary" advertising executive, who is now forgotten? And how can we become attached to the discoveries of a front man, specialising in diets; to those of a TV presenter who has made astrology part of couple counselling? And so on and so forth... Suffice to say that this donkey, engrossed in its book, looks as if it is wasting its time. Perched on the top of a pile that gathers all

manner of half-baked knowledge, untruths and outdated information, he has unfortunately replaced the man who, in the early *Natural Histories*, fearlessly hung from the pyramid of life. So we would be wrong to abandon asininity in order to retain from Pilar Albarracín's work only a disillusioned comment about murmurings in the media.

What, then, is this donkey sitting there with its imposing mysterious presence, awakening in us the remnants of a belief that we haven't been able to rid ourselves of completely?<sup>8</sup> And what *altered* image of humanity is this indecidable being reading? It seems to me that Pilar Albarracín's masterful donkey speaks to us precisely about the symbolic power of the contradictory figures of asininity. Its history is rich but we cannot help but suspect it of pedantry and ignorance.

Biblical texts already bear witness to these exchanges of meaning, alternating dull-witted donkeys and patient donkeys. Although the word taken from the Latin has been used as a derogatory term for humans, the donkey of ancient times embodies toil, obedience and perseverance. But the stupidity we reward it with continues relentlessly across the centuries to turn the medieval donkey into a stubborn, lazy and lustful creature. "Fortunately this symbolism isn't always negative", Michel Pastoureau writes; "some 13th-century authors attributed a certain number of virtues to it. The donkey is humble, solemn, patient ; if its owner knows how to handle it, the donkey will prove to be hard-working, courageous and peaceful; it is an animal that is badly treated, and unjustly so, a creature that suffers, a victim and, as such, an animal with an intensely Christological dimension".<sup>9</sup> In accordance with the preceding ambiguities, in his book devoted to asininity in the thinking of Giordano Bruno, Nuccio Ordine makes a distinction between "positive donkeys" and "negative donkeys" to make up three antinomial pairs: kindly/fiendish, powerful/humble, wise/ignorant.<sup>10</sup> In his satirical pamphlet *Cabala del cavallo Pegaseo* (The Cabala of Pegasus), Bruno targets "the greatest asses of the world", who "rot in perpetual pedantry".<sup>11</sup> As we already know, the donkey reappears in ten of La Fontaine's fables, where it is generally depicted as rather dim. In the 18th century, the animal's obstinacy gave rise to the expression: "Stubborn as a donkey". The French verb *ânonner*, meaning to read out in a droning, monotonous voice, comes from the French word for little donkey, *ânon*, and has now become the prerogative of school dunces.

Pilar Albarracín's visual representations evoke some of Francisco de Goya's *Caprichos*. The Musée Goya in Castres, which is not far from Albi, has a set of these. Indeed,

among the 80 etchings that make up the *Caprichos*, the biggest subgroup is entitled *Asnerías* (a series of etchings whose main character is portrayed as an ass), in which Goya attacks the exploiters of the people (aristocrats, teachers, doctors, servile artists, political leaders, etc.), and, as a moralist, condemns their ignorance and vanity. However, unlike the Japanese artist Yasumasa Morimura – who produced a series of photographs in 2004 whose composition and iconography are directly borrowed from Goya’s engravings –, Pilar Albarracín’s installation isn’t the result of a quotational approach but of a gesture of designation that is as informative as it is allusive. This aspect also distinguishes her output from the work of the British artists Jake and Dinos Chapman who, in 2005, created a series of retouched engravings, using an edition of the *Caprichos* like a ready-made that could be “rectified”.<sup>12</sup> In this regard, we can see that some of Goya’s engravings – precisely those that portray donkeys in a sitting position, involved in all sorts of activities – borrow freely from other 15th- and 16th-century engravings, which show donkeys that have just as many human attributes. In Pilar Albarracín’s work, the body of the animal is by no means devoid of humanity, nor is it, *a fortiori*, a degenerate figure. It is no longer the image of a radical otherness or the vestige of a lost paradise. Beyond the surprise and, perhaps, the unease that the transgressive gesture can provoke by naturalising a domestic animal and making a real sculpture out of a genuine skin, the artist’s work takes us to a place where knowledge, practices, beliefs and symbols can be deployed and experienced. It is precisely this deployment which, anthropologically speaking, forms the basis of our relationship with the world, reactivating more or less distant temporalities, and summoning up beings that are surprisingly complex because they are interwoven with a palpable thickness, images and meaning. This results in a realism that cannot be categorised, which acts as if by intrusion, that we can deem to be ageless and, at the same time, resolutely contemporary; a realism whose power of conviction stems from the fictions it engenders. This inherent realism of *taxiconic* contamination is a reminder that, for us, the *anthropoi*, the detour through animality and its mirrors is one of the most highly cultured gestures we are capable of. “Every time we look closely at an animal”, Elias Canetti writes, “we have a feeling that a man is hidden inside and is making fun of us”.<sup>13</sup>

Translated by Mark Waudby

Notes:

1. The epithet is formed from the Latin *asinus* (ass).
2. The works referred to are: *Objet dans l'espace* [Object in Space] (1982), *Sans titre (Ethnosynchrétisme)* [Untitled (Ethnosyncretism)](undated), *Ça* [That] (1986), *Murmel-Murmel* (1988), *Sans titre (Détrompe-l'œil)* [Untitled (Détrompe-l'oeil)] (1988). Spoerri often purchased his specimens from Boubet's in Paris.
3. When commenting on Kounellis's 1969 installation at the Attico Gallery in Rome featuring 12 horses, Rudi Fuchs had no hesitation in evoking the Panathenaic friezes in the Parthenon, the bronze horses on the façade of Saint Mark's basilica and those by Géricault and Delacroix. (Rudi Fuchs, preface, in *Jannis Kounellis*, exhibition catalogue, Van Abbe Museum, Eindhoven, 1981). Spoerri and Kounellis' works were the first examples of a major phenomenon that I can only touch on here. For an in-depth analysis see, among other publications, *Dards d'art – Mouches, moustiques, modernité*, exhibition catalogue, Musée Réattu and Musée Camarguais, Arles; "L'animal vivant dans l'art contemporain", *Recherches Poïétiques*, 9, 2000; "Animalités", *Revue d'esthétique*, 40-01, 2001; *La part de l'autre*, exhibition catalogue, Carré d'art, Nîmes, 2002; "Animaux d'artistes", *Figures de l'art*, 8, Publications de l'Université de Pau, 2003/2004; *Hommeanimal – Histoires d'un face à face*, exhibition catalogue, Les Musées de la Ville de Strasbourg, 2004; *Bêtes de style – Animals with Style*, exhibition catalogue, Mudac, Lausanne, 2006; *The Idea of the Animal*, exhibition catalogue, Melbourne International Arts Festival & RMIT Gallery, 2006.
4. Taxidermy is, etymologically speaking, the shaping (*taxis*) of animals whose skin (*dérma*) we preserve. The compound word reflects quite well the double iconic/indexical condition of the object-animal perpetuating its appearance *even to itself*. In French, the term appears for the first time in the *Nouveau Dictionnaire d'histoire naturelle* (1803-1804) by Louis Dufresne, who was an assistant naturalist at the Muséum de Paris.
5. In *L'art d'empailler les oiseaux*, Yvernault and Cabin, Lyon, year X [1802], p. 192; quoted by Amandine Péquignot, in "Dans la peau d'un spécimen naturalisé – La

représentation du monde animal en taxidermie”, in *Hommeanimal – Histoires d’un face à face*, *op. cit.*, p. 158.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 158, 159.

7. The heraldic nature of the animal figure in La Fontaine’s *Fables* is discussed in Michel Pastoureau, *Les animaux célèbres*, Arléa, Paris, 2008, p. 204-211.

8. Although it has been used for scientific purposes, taxidermy cannot be totally divorced from the characteristic system of belief in the relic, which stems from the fascinating effectiveness of the object itself. Furthermore, we cannot believe that an art that is able to make dead creatures look alive can be completely “secular”. The impurity that constitutes taxidermy appears in the adjective “naturalised” which, in this case, almost has the value of an antonym.

9. *Op. cit.*, p. 169.

10. Nuccio Ordine, *Le mystère de l’âne – Essai sur Giordano Bruno* (1987, 1996), Les Belles Lettres, Paris, 2005, p. 11. My thanks to Jérôme Goude, from the Centre d’art le LAIT, who drew my attention to this work.

11. Giordano Bruno, *Œuvres complètes*, Les Belles Lettres, Paris, 1994, vol. 6, p. 34.

12. See *Goya, les Caprices & Chapman*, Morimura, Pondick, Schütte, exhibition catalogue, Palais des Beaux-Arts, Lille; Somogy éditions, Paris, 2008.

13. Elias Canetti, *Le Territoire de l’homme, réflexions 1942-1972*, Albin Michel, Paris, 1978 [1973], p. 21.