Our Animals and Other Family

An exhibition inspired by John Berger asks us to reconsider human-animal relations.

By Max L. Feldman • January 29, 2026

ART & ARCHITECTURE

> *To make covenants with brute beasts is impossible; because not understanding our speech, they understand not, nor accept of any translation of right; nor can translate any right to another: and without mutual acceptation, there is no covenant.*
> —Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (1651)

> *When I grow up, I'm going to Bovine University!*
> —Ralph Wiggum, *The Simpsons* (1995)

CATS ARE A DOWNWARDLY mobile species. The decline has been gradual, but they sure are resentful. In the misty days of the pharaohs, they were sun goddess Bastet's slit-pupiled eyes on the ground, glaring at mere mortals in loincloths toiling on the floodplains. These days, they're reduced to gulping down gooey chunks of animal matter, yowling doom into the night in protest. Things are a little different in Athens, Greece, where you can glimpse something of their former glory: swarms of lean, velvet lovelies prance balletic over the polished paving slabs, swooning into sun-traps; quizzical sphinxes perch on moped seats, unmoved by their drivers' pleas to Poseidon for safe passage; after a languid lunch, they slouch up to the Acropolis for some tragic theater. Andrew Lloyd Webber, as the young say, *could never*.

Cats don't appear much in *Why Look at Animals? A Case for the Rights of Non-Human Lives*, showing at the National Museum of Contemporary Art Athens (ΕΜΣΤ) through April 15. The exhibition's focus is broader, though our relationship to pets, precisely because we view them as part of our families, as more human than "brute beasts," offers a useful vantage point. Inspired by John Berger's eponymous 1977 essay, which provides the ethical and political frame, the show aims to renew the dignity of animals as a subject in art, and from there ask larger questions. Why look at animals? Because, Berger writes, "man becomes aware of himself by returning the look." A truly human life not only respects its origins in nature but also makes sense of itself in relation to an other:

something like us yet irreducibly unlike us, an independent source of value outside ourselves.

Berger's text makes no promises about practical outcomes, however. It's neither an anatomy lesson for budding vets and artists nor a vegetarian manifesto. While he makes abstention from meat ethically attractive, Berger isn't doctrinaire. He asks instead how human development is shaped by our ideas about animals. In late industrial societies, meaningful interaction with animals has largely disappeared, and this alienation reflects humanity's alienation from itself. Berger doesn't systematize the point, but his argument has two sides: an explanation of how we arrived here and an ethical claim about what it means.

The historical argument traces human-animal interactions across successive worldviews. For some Indigenous peoples—Berger mentions the Nuer people of South Sudan and Native Hawaiians—animals were friends if not family. In ancient Greek mythology, animals offer exemplars of virtue, making it possible to explain human action. The mechanistic worldview since René Descartes, however, sharply separates mind from body. Bodies, existing in space and time, are governed by physical and mechanical laws and can be understood scientifically; mind is philosophy's domain. Deemed mind- and soulless, animals are reduced to automata whose behavior can be calculated and predicted, allowing industrial societies to use them as machines. Or, in a consumer society, through toys, zoos, and Disney films, "nature" survives mostly as fantasy, a sanitized realm we've created for ourselves where images of cute or zany animal antics replace reality. We sometimes see animals' bodies and hear their noises, but their smells, bodily functions, births, and deaths are removed from us. Most people no longer know what animals are really like.

The ethical point follows directly. Our concepts of "animal" and "human" have changed, and so has our understanding of how they're related. What we believe about ourselves as humans today is thus bound up with what we think an animal is and how *we* value them. The fact that we consider it rational to *separate* their lives from ours—and their gaze from our gaze—says more about our conceptual habits than about animals themselves.

Cats offer a useful register for thinking about this. We've interfered with feline evolution to remake them in our own image. They've become extensions of ourselves, cared for on our terms: fed, petted, endlessly photographed. Four of the 10 sculptures on display by animalier Euripides Vavouris, produced between 1938 and 1944, show felines in their full noble indolence. Vavouris's now-unfashionable technical mastery leads to a compromise: his cats are neither sentimental portraits nor entirely free from idealization. By contrast,

How to guarantee conditions of contemplation of the older feline population (2006) by Kostis Velonis imagines something animals might actually use, a modest case of humans thinking about animal needs independently of themselves. It is a wooden sculpture designed to provide refuge for cats once they've become old, arthritic, less social media ready than those prowling the elegant streets of Koukaki behind the museum.

The issue, of course, isn't just how we interact with our furry friends; it's also how we treat all beings with whom we share the world. Humans kill and eat so many animals, and before they reach our plates, we package them. Designers make processed meat look attractive, which produces a psychological disconnect: plastic wrapping, logos and typefaces, and images of glorious rolling countrysides help us repress the fact that what they contain was once alive. This reflects a deeper estrangement not only from animals but also from nature itself—an antagonism that defines us more than we care to admit, especially when confronted with industrial cruelty.

Ang Siew Ching's video *High-Rise Pigs* (2025) does this directly. Filmed in the world's largest pig farm, the 26-story Zhongxin Kaiwei Pig Building in China's Hubei Province, it shows us how pigs are turned from swine into pork. There's no need to describe what goes on in this terrible place, which processes 1.2 million pigs a year. Perhaps it has such a functional name, like the evasive word "pork" itself, to obscure the horror. Maybe the euphemism fails because it's so bland. These millions are a mere drop in the ocean of the 1.5 billion pigs slaughtered annually across the world. Pork is China's most popular animal product, demand for the meat rising with the expanding consumer base while the country's leap from agrarian to advanced consumer society marks a transformation of human-animal relations *within living memory*.

China is only one case. Roughly a quarter of the artists in the exhibition are from or based in Greece, but most of the works would be as effective elsewhere because human-animal relations are a universal question. Nobody lives *completely* apart from nature, but our relationship to it is inflected by local conditions, as animal habitats *and* human environments vary widely. *Eye Witnesses* (2006–22) by Paris Petridis, a series of 13 photographs, shows how animals are forced to adapt to a world designed by and for humans. This is especially evident with transport: a turtle crossing a busy road (without traffic, but we anticipate the danger); a forlorn donkey standing tethered on barren land, overlooking urban sprawl; sheep grazing on a traffic island in what appears to be an affluent suburb.

Experience confirms how place shapes animals' social roles everywhere. Athens has cats, London has hard-as-nails woodland critters, Vienna has sedated horses condemned to

haul guffawing tourists around the historic center, and the New York City sewers house blind albino alligators as well as rats named after saints that still celebrate traditional Latin mass and live on chili cheese fries. Yet how we live inevitably makes animals' "animalness" remote, and we mostly learn about them from screens. Even the best nature documentaries, for example, tend to emphasize technically virtuosic camera work over their own solemn conservation messaging, ensuring that animals remain objects of *our* gaze.

Animalness is nonetheless the subject of *Celebrities/Ovine Condition* (2014) by Nabil Boutros, a series of 65 photographic portraits of ewes, lambs, and rams. These images don't glorify the sitter, like the European portraiture tradition they parody, but they counter the cliché of sheep as emblems of conformity, revealing the quiet dignity of their personalities, which, like all creatures, they do have. What might at first seem frivolous (sweet at best, silly at worst) proves unexpectedly serious. Similarly, David Claerbout's *The Pure Necessity* (2016) shows animals as they are and not as they appear in our fantasies, though its premise is more problematic. Claerbout and his team have redrawn every frame of Disney's *The Jungle Book* (1967), removing the narrative and voice acting to produce a 50-minute glimpse of animals as they live in nature—eating, grooming, sleeping, playing, staring into space. The aim is to show animals as they might exist apart from human fantasy, but the work remains saturated with human intention precisely because they've been painstakingly rendered to teach us a lesson about how we look at them. The piece thus exposes the paradox at the heart of any attempt to see animals "as they really are": we can't eliminate mediation. Whether through cameras, drawings, or concepts, animals mostly appear to us in terms of our own desires and habits. In this case, what we think is natural or wild is never free from our fantasies about what "naturalness" and "wildness" *should* be like.

Over coffee, EMΣT Artistic Director Katerina Gregos said that she's been planning this exhibition for at least a decade and a half. It's taken that long for such questions to be regarded as exhibition-worthy. In the same period, faith in human rights discourse has waned: Hobbes's sovereign *absorbs* the brutality of the state of nature, keeping us in "awe," and when state power recedes, the world becomes the Zhongxin Kaiwei Pig Building, making of us mere bodies, lumps of fleshy matter that can be moved, processed, violated, experimented on, destroyed. Many have found a kind of solace in Hannah Arendt's solution—"the right to have rights"—but it only applies to humans. Hobbes said that we can't have political relationships with animals because they can't communicate with us. Berger shows the historical effects of this idea, and Gregos goes a step further: we're only going to get human rights right if we get *animal* rights right.

Featured image: Euripides Vavouris, Dog, *ca. 1950;* Little Cat, *1943;* Grumpy, *1944;* Little Dog, *ca. 1950;* The Cows, *1935;* Little Donkey, *1935;* Duckling, *1967;* Pussy Cat, *1944. Courtesy of Euripides Vavouris Estate. Photo: Paris Tavitian.*

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