

(ENG)

# OSCAR HOLLOWAY *OTHERLY SEERS*

## SOLO EXHIBITION

05.10.21-16.01.22

1731-35

Johann Jakob Scheuchzer publishes *Physica Sacra*, a four-volume anthology on art, science and spirituality that takes the Old Testament as a reference point to describe the natural world. *Physica Sacra* was considered by Scheuchzer's contemporaries as a work of natural theology: in it the author links scientific phenomena to biblical verses through seven hundred and sixty-two engravings by Johann Melchior Füssli and Johann Daniel Preissler. The scenes, which testify to Scheuchzer's interest in botany, biology, the occult, astrology and the weather, are densely ornamented and framed by a series of graphic elements that represent his subjects of study and observation: minerals, larvae, fungi, fossils, all sorts of flora and fauna, and fantastical and telluric elements such as depictions of death and the formation of the stars, hypothetical plans of Noah's ark and the dreams of a gestating bat.

1749-1804

The forty-four volumes of *Histoire Naturelle* are gradually published over fifty-five years under the supervision of Georges-Louis Leclerc, Comte de Buffon, and after his death by Bernard Germain de Lacépède. Contemporaneous with Diderot's *Encyclopédie* and enjoying a similar

popularity, *Histoire Naturelle* is the great referent of modern natural science. Throughout Jacques de Sève's illustrations in the twelve tomes dedicated to quadrupeds, one element is a constant: a plinth that supports and exhibits the creature to be described and analysed. On the plinth that currently bears the monument to Buffon in la Grande Galerie de l'Évolution in Paris, the following inscription can be read: *Majestati Naturæ par ingenium*.

1872

Charles Darwin's *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* is published. In the style of a Victorian family album, the book brings together photographs, illustrations and engravings of the Darwin family's pets, drawn by the zoological illustrator T.W. Wood, as well as works by the artists Briton Rivière, Joseph Wolf and A.D. May. People whose facial expressions convey distress, joy or madness give way to pets in postures that are interpreted by human eyes as manifestations of appreciation, fidelity or rejection. Critics and intellectuals close to Darwin were surprised that the book does not include a study of *deceit* and its expression, both in animals and humans.

1934

Jakob von Uexküll publishes *Streifzüge durch die Umwelten von Tieren und Menschen*, a disquisition on the limitations of human perception in comparison with the wide range of possible sensory experiences found in the natural world. Lavishly illustrated by Georg Kriszat, the book presents diagrams and 'sensorial translations' of different cognitive experiences of the environment, from that of the flea to that of the domestic dog. The cover of the second edition of the book (Rowohlt, 1956) shows a moth, a fly, and a raven (minor creatures in the human imaginary), each surrounded by a circle, illustrating Uexküll's theory, according to which the perceptual environments of each being operates as a kind of 'soap bubble' that can be related, or not, with those of other individuals, depending on the cognitive configurations of each species. This interest in showcasing the study of the multiplicity of intersubjective experiences of the sensory world triggers an intellectual passion for seeing things through the eyes of unlikely creatures, and calls into question the priority of human experience.



*Otherly Seers* is an exhibition that displays several avenues of research focused on the structures of the knowledge and representation of vision, emotions and perceptual otherness in non-human animals.

Based on illustrations found in *Physica Sacra*, *Histoire Naturelle*, *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* and *Streifzüge durch die Umwelten von Tieren und Menschen*, and using hyperbole, play, repetition and absurdity, the exhibition fantasises about how the constrictions and limits of human perception lead to speculation and fabulation.

Fables such as the one of the chicken that confused its own shadow, the one of the jackdaw that sympathised with a pair of swimming trunks caught in a cat's jaw, the one of the hunters carrying swimsuits they had shot down, the one of the fly unable to recognise the artist Jannis Kounellis, the one of the eye of a squid seen by itself during its own dissection, the one of Darwin's pets showing due attachment to their master and the one of the frames and plinths devoid of both figure

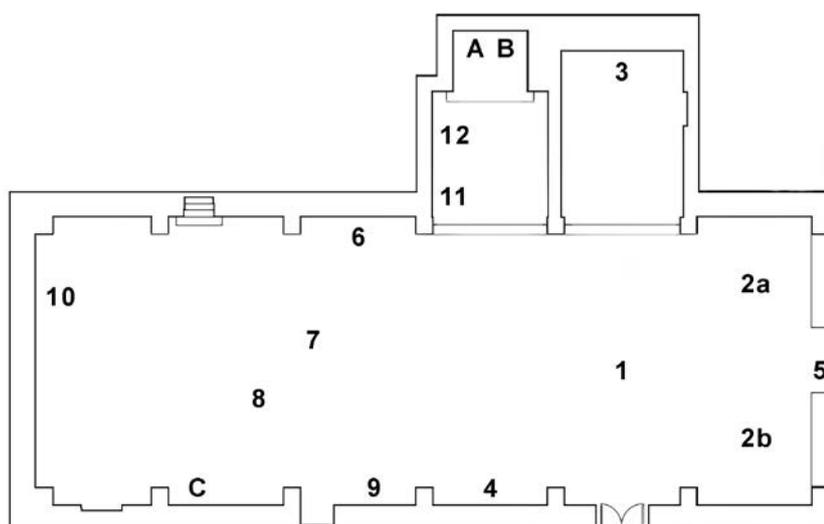
and landscape overlap with the illustrations with which Scheuchzer, Buffon, Darwin and Uexküll offer visions through other eyes.

All are allegories that distort the experience of seeing, perceiving and understanding things as they are supposedly seen by non-human beings. Tales that glorify the doubt and confusion generated by claiming to take a different perspective while retaining the way we have learned to look at things. Scenes that – despite meaning to celebrate the picaresque aspect and imagination involved in relinquishing our place and getting to know better the beings that surround us – are intended to preserve an uncertain, mysterious and unexplorable meaning.

*Incomplete beings, we are "Procrustean" in that, although we take in only tiny parts of an immensity whose totality we cannot possibly perceive, we nevertheless cannot help but fill in the blanks, constructing a whole we then take to be real. This premature completeness allows organisms to be fooled by signs, the parts and sensations they take for wholes. Uexküll shows us the sea urchin extending its spines to the stimulus of passing ship and cloud, which the sea creature misinterprets as a potentially deadly predator fish. He intuits the plight of the fly, its vision unable to resolve the strangling strands of the spider's web, or the jackdaw fooled by a cat carrying a rag.*

Dorion Sagan

Introduction to *A Foray into the Worlds of Animals and Humans* by Jakob von Uexküll translated by Joseph D. O'Neil – University of Minnesota Press, 2010



- 1 *The Master*
- 2a *Funktionskreis*
- 2b *First dichotomy*
- 3 *Der magische Schatten*
- 4 *für die Fliege / von Mollusken gesehen*
- 5 *Flagge für die Dohlen*
- 6 *Dohle und Heuhüpfer*
- 7 *Physica Sacra*
- 8 *Histoire Naturelle*
- 9 *Jäger auf dem Heimweg (1)*
- 10 *Jäger auf dem Heimweg (2)*
- 11 *El perro que llora*
- 12 *Puss on Pentecost*

A Scan and enlargement of the book cover of *Editionen (1964-1975)*, by Marcel Broodthaers (Munich: Galerie Heiner Friedrich, 1978)

B Joan Brossa, *Poema visual per al Bulevard Rosa* (1982) Poem folded in four parts. 63.5 x 43.5 cm. Screen print on Super Alfa Guarro paper. Private Collection

C Four copies of *Streifzüge durch die Umwelten von Tieren und Menschen – Bedeutungslehre* by Jakob von Uexküll and Georg Kriszat (Rowohlt, 1956)