

Joan Fontcuberta & Pere Formiguera

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PETER DUBÉ



I know. I know. These words, or their equivalent, must count among the most frequently uttered phrases in any Western language. They recur in nearly all social contexts with the unquestionable naturalness of “hello”. They pass unexamined and seem harmless, their utterance approaching absolute discursive transparency.

Yet these innocuous words rely for any kind of meaning on a phenomenon so slippery as to be untenable—knowledge.

Paradoxically, and despite the ease with which most of us claim to know, there is an equal willingness to disdain its possibility; to claim the relativistic position in the realm of ethics, values, and human experience at large. These areas are generally acknowledged as, at the very least, ambiguous; the province of a whole range of grays. One notable exception to this embrace of contrary positions is science, which is generally, and willingly, ascribed a firmer grasp on epistemological certainty.

But there remain those who would like to question such assumptions more closely. Foucault’s elaborate archeologies with their exploration of the manner(s) in “which all knowledge could be constituted as immediate and non-problematized evidence,”¹ come to mind.

Fauna Secreta, the recent exhibition of Joan Fontcuberta and Pere Formiguera provides another, related, though different, example.

Joining a satirical narrative to the distinct formal authority of the documentary, these artists created a “forgotten” researcher named Peter Ameisenhaufen and the remains of his life’s work in the “New Zoology”. And they did so with compelling illusionistic power, though the show offered as much surprise as contemplation.

On entering the gallery space one was presented with a series of black and white photographs of “previously unknown” species. Each print was suitably yellowed and stained to reproduce both the effects of time’s passage and the neglect that one might expect in lost and recovered documents. The images were accompanied by detailed technical drawings and German-language notes outlining Ameisenhaufen’s field observations and supplying the required Latin taxonomies. In some cases, even sound documentation was provided. Moreover, in the best tradition of natural history display, a few stuffed specimens of the animals themselves held court at the top of the Redpath’s staircase.

The “late Professor’s” research unearthed—among other discoveries—baboon-headed centaurs, multi-footed snakes, a fire-breathing lizard, and winged monkeys more sinister looking than those that threatened Dorothy. In fact, an entire oneiric menagerie was falsely documented with an eye to effectively

reproducing museological convention and creating an authentic feeling in the display. The fabulous creatures, so absurd as to be monstrous, follow each other through a space deliberately arranged to appear *other-than-gallery*. Contrary to the norms of contemporary *art display*, with its insistence on reading as an active process, these exhibits asked that they be looked at and accepted. Indeed, via all the textual accompaniment, they provided references for it.

And that is precisely the point. The images want to be impossible and actual simultaneously. We know that no such animal could ever exist, and yet there they are—before our eyes, presented with the peculiar sobriety attached to the products of research.

It is this sobriety itself that animates the exhibition’s particular approach to site-specificity as well. Unlike much *in situ* contemporary work, which tends to explore either the formal qualities of a given space or its historical position—the wrapping of the Reichstag, for instance—*Fauna Secreta* is concerned with the institutional authority of the museum. Although it has been presented in more conventional venues in the past, its occupation of the Redpath pointedly foregrounded the work’s theoretical underpinnings. Though positioned largely in the vestibule of the second floor, some of the pieces were placed among the museum’s permanent collections, blending in with the artifacts and zoological remains. And, given the gravitas with which the imaginary specimens were presented, it would require careful observation to distinguish one from the other during a casual viewing, a sharp eye to separate the real “knowledge” from the less real. There is, necessarily, a tendency to accept institutional sanction as in and of itself a kind of touchstone. Having accepted their context, the works call into question not so much their own truth, but that of the other exhibits. If they are false how are we to assume the reality value of the surrounding objects? How can we know the actuality, the true function of fossilized fins or organs? What is the status, not

merely of observational “objectivity”, but of the very construction of the factual? The category of knowledge itself, in the heart of its most formidable institutions—the museum, the university—is opened up to question by Fontcuberta and Formiguera’s monsters.

Opened up, I might add, to great and immediate effect.

I recall on the evening of the opening, the first, though not the last of my visits, overhearing the conversation of two young women. One of them remarked to the other, “this isn’t real, is it...” An incomplete question hung in the momentary silence, a slight inflection carrying it upwards. I cannot, of course, know with any certainty how serious that question was, or how ironic, as she stood before the evidence of something utterly untrue.

Whatever the truth—and I use the word in full consciousness of its ambiguity—of the matter, I heard or imagined something in her voice to suggest she almost wanted to discover that these chimeras were real. The novelist Rikki Ducornet wrote in an essay on some other monstrosities: “... the Monstrous and the Marvelous are all that give both the things of the world, and our capacity to receive them, their original keenness, their primary fire.”² Perhaps there was something of that keenness in my overheard remarks. A wish for a world a little more complex, unexpected or even just plain silly.

I hope so, because that’s a wish I suspect is hard at work in *Fauna Secreta*, and one that can only possibly begin with a questioning of knowledge and a flirtation with something even more elusive—desire. ■

Joan Fontcuberta and Pere Formiguera, *Fauna Secreta*
The Redpath Museum,
Presented by Galerie Occurrence
in conjunction with Le Mais de
la Photo à Montréal

NOTES:

1. Foucault, Michel, *The Order of Things*, Vintage Books, New York, 1994, p. 345.
2. Ducornet, Rikki, “The Monstrous and the Marvelous,” in *The Monstrous and the Marvelous*, City Lights, San Francisco, 1999, p. 69.

Joan Fontcuberta &
Pere Formiguera,
Fauna Secreta, 1999.
Photo: Alain Chagnon.