Mark B. Feldman

Where the Wild Things Aren't: Animals in New York City

On top of the cantilevered entrance to Marcel Breuer's Whitney Museum of American Art, an elegant modernist box, rests an unruly eagle's nest (Fig. 1). Made of interlocking sticks and approximately six feet in diameter, this biological artifact contrasts dramatically with the urbane form of the building it sits on. Outside the Whitney and inside in the sculpture garden there is more evidence of animal activity that might seem out of place in this vast city, often assumed to be a place where "the natural [has] ceased to exist" (Koolhaas 10). A flying squirrel nesting box surveys Madison Avenue, while in the courtyard a lattice of gourd-shaped purple martin nesting structures rises out of a stark reflecting pool, in a setting where we would expect a Calder sculpture (Fig. 2).

Are these dwellings a sign that New York City might be partly reclaimed by animals, not in an end-of-the-urban scenario, as detailed in Alan Weisman's *The World Without Us* (2006), but through a more benign mutualism, a sharing of space (Fig. 3)?[1] For a few months at least, the answer to this question was yes. The animal homes described above were part of Fritz Haeg's *Animal Estates 1.0* project for the Whitney Biennial (on view from March to June of 2008 and extended through the middle of August), a series of model or prototype dwellings for animals that have historically resided in Manhattan. Part site-specific sculpture, part environmental education, and part habitat restoration *Animal Estates* aims to "provide a provocative 21st century model for the human-animal relationship that is more intimate, visible and thoughtful" (Haeg). Haeg's project is ongoing, involving not only multiple cities (including San Francisco and Utrecht) but also many associated activities: animal-inspired music and movement, tours of the animal estates, and lectures on urban ecology. *Animal Estates* shares the contrarian and whimsical utopianism of Haeg's earlier, but ongoing body of work: *Edible Estates*. For these projects, Haeg reclaimed the sterile anti-environmental space of the suburban front lawn, replacing grass with high-density, multi-species edible landscapes. While *Edible Estates* pushes us to think about the place of nature and agriculture in the suburbs, *Animal Estates* prompts us to consider where animals belong in the contemporary metropolis.

Haeg's work can help us reconsider not only where we find animals in vast cities, but also how urban space might be shared

more fully and what some of the effects of this sharing might be, not just in terms of ecology but also on attitudes and values. Although it is important to welcome actual animals back into the metropolis, it is equally important that we make space for certain sorts of representations of animals. My primary goal is not to describe or advocate the ways in which we might literally re-wild New York City, repopulating it with animals, although the return of hawks and coyotes, seals and owls strikes me as hopeful and important. Rather, I am concerned with how both real and represented animals can change public discourse about nature and nonhuman life in the metropolis. While it is possible to dismiss actions that merely acknowledge animals figuratively as ecologically beside the point, these sorts of interventions are valuable in their ability to change public sentiment. In other words, representations of animals can have very real effects. It is also difficult to neatly separate real animals from their representations. For example, a zoo animal is both real and representational. While I will argue that Haeg's work can help us rethink the place of animals in the contemporary metropolis, I also have a healthy skepticism about his project and I certainly don't think that by itself it will usher in an equitable animal-human metropolis. But environmentalism must coordinate the real and the representational so that natural and discursive ecologies work together to establish a balance between human and nonhuman life.

Welcoming animals into the metropolis can be an important step in changing attitudes towards nature. Seeing animals as belonging in New York City helps us imagine new urban forms that can move beyond what is widely acknowledged as an inaccurate separation of country and city. Just as idealizing the country as a pastoral site obscures labor and naturalizes its work, conceptualizing the city as a place where nature has been wholly exiled has a self-fulfilling logic. If we imagine the city as anti-natural, as wholly a product of human artifice, then we are let off the hook: we don't need to even consider nonhuman life in our calculations and plans. Jennifer Price argues that, in fact, cities are where nature writers and nature stories are most urgently needed. In "13 Ways of Seeing Nature in L.A." she writes, "What we need…is a foundational literature that imagines nature not as the opposite of the city but as the basic stuff of modern everyday life." This essay intends to contribute to that foundational literature by changing how we define animals in urban contexts; changing where we position animals in cities; and speculating on what the increased visibility and viability of animals in the metropolis might do.

Figure 1. Fritz Haeg, "Animal Estate 1.1: Bald Eagle," 2008.
Commissioned by the Whitney Museum of American Art for the 2008 Whitney Biennial Exhibition. Photograph by Fritz Haeg.

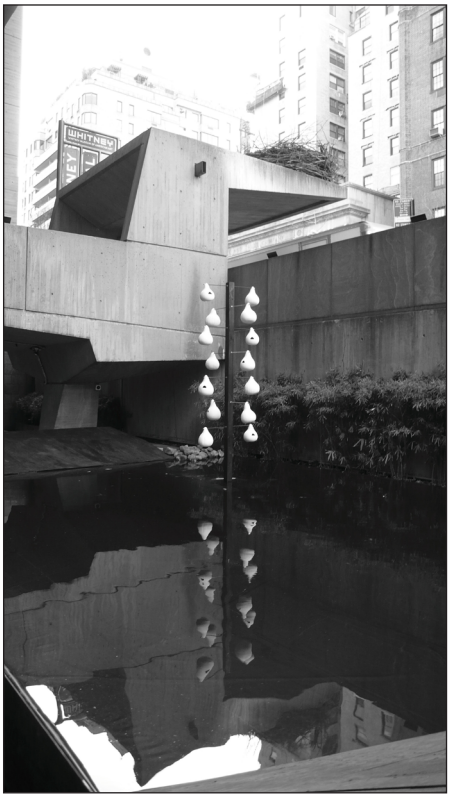

Figure 2. Fritz Haeg, "Animal Estate 1.4: Purple Martin," 2008.
Commissioned by the Whitney Museum of American Art for the 2008 Whitney Biennial Exhibition. Photograph by Fritz Haeg.

Figure 3. "Visual Timeline Slideshow: New York Without Us."
Images by Kenn Brown. From Alan Weisman, "The World Without Us"
(http://www.worldwithoutus.com/multimedia.html). Accessed 23 June 2009.

Figure 4. Pale Male and Lola. Photograph by Zerena.
http://www.flickr.com/photos/zerena/2171138. Accessed 23 June 2009.

Pets and Pests, Inclusions and Exclusions

Haeg's written statements offer a useful starting point for defining animals and their place in urban centers. He suggests that animals in contemporary western cities exist as either pets or pests.[2] As pets, animals are welcomed as quasi-family members (Shell), valued as vectors of conspicuous consumption (Veblen), and shaped, often violently, by human desires (Tuan). As pests, animals are seen as obstacles to our civilization and way of life. For instance, rats (Burt) and cockroaches (Copeland) are unsanitary impediments to economic modernity and to a comfortable urban existence. Animals outside of cities are, of course, often resources, on factory farms and in laboratories.

What strikes me about these two quite different human-constructed forms of animal life in the contemporary metropolis—pets and pests—is their essentially similar posture towards difference. Pets have been molded to conform to human expectations of animality (don't bite; go to the bathroom here). Our attitude towards pests is similarly intolerant of difference. We want to get rid of them because they are in some way inimical to our mode of life. I am not suggesting that we share our urban spaces more equitably with all pest species: cockroaches, for example, are certainly a public health hazard. But imagining animals in cities as only pests or pets is severely limiting for both animals and humans. For animals the ultimatum is to fit yourself comfortably into human domestic life or be exterminated. For humans the pet/pest dichotomy is limiting because it does not permit life to exist in the metropolis in non-human forms, thus curtailing our imaginations and experiences. A range of contemporary writers have, in different ways, argued that nature and animal life are psychically beneficial and essential to human well-being (Louv, Wilson). Haeg notes that even in our imaginations and psychic lives, animals tend to inspire the "opposite feelings of fear or friendship" (Haeg). These emotions map quite neatly onto the categories of pest (fear) and pet (friendship). Haeg implies that both of these emotional responses are mistaken and are ways of failing to take animals seriously, as animals possess "a profound intelligence that we do not understand" (Haeg).

In "The Trouble With Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature," William Cronon argues that the modern, western idea of wilderness is dangerous insofar as it locates nature away from human activities and lives, in pristine untouched areas. The fiction of untouched wilderness lets us ignore the nature that is closer to home, in empty lots and urban parks, rivers and bays. Wilderness and nature should be reimagined as an otherness that exists just about everywhere, even and indeed especially in vast cities. Cronon

urges, "We need to honor the Other within and the Other next door as much as we do the exotic Other that lives far away—a lesson that applies as much to people as it does to (other) natural things" (89). If we apply Cronon's reasoning to the urban, it seems to suggest that nature and animals are forms of otherness that exist "next door" and that this otherness ought to be honored. The value of animals and more broadly of nature seems to be that they are not us. Scholars of animal studies frequently note how animals, despite some similarities to humans, are resolutely different. For instance, Erica Fudge opens *Animal* as follows: "Animals present a challenge to humans. They are both similar to and different from us. That is, they are like us…but they are simultaneously completely lost to us" (7). It's invaluable to be reminded that our ends and aspirations, our habits and habitats are not the only ones on the block. Haeg comments that animals experienced as part of everyday life can provide "a daily reminder of our place in the world and the other creatures that we share it with."

If we apply Cronon's call to value otherness to animals within the contemporary metropolis, then we must certainly stop categorizing them only as pets or pests. The pets/pests dichotomy is a form of categorical or taxonomic exclusion; animals within the city also face numerous forms of geographical exclusion. Scholars have traced how live animal markets and slaughterhouses were zoned out of cities in the nineteenth century (Philo) and how urbanization is usually understood to depend on the conquest, exploitation, and exclusion of nature and animals (Wolch 119). In "Zoöpolis," Jennifer Wolch calls for a new form of urbanism that recognizes both our kinship with and our difference from animals (122). She urges that we "renaturalize cities and invite the animals back in, and in the process re-enchant the city" (124). She calls this new sort of city a zoöpolis. While Wolch gestures toward some practical dimensions of a zoöpolis, including less use of toxic substances, more wildlife-friendly landscaping, and habitat corridors, her essay is most promising in its theoretical proclamations. This is not a detraction, because it is very difficult to imagine what a more animal-friendly, animal-inclusive city would look like. Indeed, a fully-functioning, vibrant zoöpolis will emerge only as a product of a variety of actions and changes. Although changes in laws and policies will be necessary, equally important will be changes in attitudes and values caused by cultural interventions and representational practices. There are, of course, limits to how fully modern cities can welcome animals; Wolch notes that while cities are misunderstood as "ecological sacrifice zones," they are "ecological disturbance regimes" (130). Despite this, there is a great deal more that can and should be done

to make cities greener, more biodiverse, and more effective shapers of responsible environmental attitudes.

Eagle's Landing: Subdivisions, Modernist Accessories, and Social Sculpture

There may seem to be a too easy quality to the rapprochement that Haeg envisions between city and animal. At first blush, his purple martin homes look like bird houses that would be for sale in Design Within Reach: stylish organic modern accessories. Yet not all of Haeg's prototype animal dwellings are quite so good looking and even those that are exist as more than just aesthetic objects. *Animal Estates* has been extended in a number of ways that make it more akin to what Joseph Beuys termed "social sculpture" or what Nicolas Bourriaud has called "relational aesthetics." Beuys took an increasingly expansive view of art, seeing it as participatory and interdisciplinary, as something anyone can create. One of Beuys' more renowned social sculptures was *7000 Oaks* (started in 1982) for which 7,000 oak trees were planted. The meaning of this work of art changed over time and the work relied on the social labor of many individuals who planted and tended the trees. Similarly, Bourriaud defines relational art as "a set of artistic practices which take as their theoretical and practical point of departure the whole of human relations and their social context, rather than an independent and private space" (113). As for Beuys, the viewers or audience are essential to quite literally making the work. Haeg's work fits into these expanded and extended definitions of art. His projects tend to rely on non-traditional art spaces (front lawns, remnants of urban natural space), to emphasize process, and to involve a large cast of characters.

Haeg's process is highly collaborative. The *Animal Estates* are planned with the input of ecologists, artists, and other local informants. In addition to the prototype model homes, the *Animal Estates* project has included dance performances that interpret and respond to animal movement; animal themed music for children; and talks by environmental educators, scientists, and artists. Haeg writes, "Animal Lessons will be a parallel series of educational programming by Sundown Schoolhouse offering animal related classes, workshops and seminars. This may include anything from animal movement workshops with choreographers and dancers to informative seminars by local zoologists, ethologists, and animal specialists." For me it's these messy and sometimes quite goofy aspects of his projects, such as an opossum dance, that are most intriguing. They are what give the project its genuine life and dynamism, ensuring that it is not merely a set of beautiful objects cordoned off from everyday life in a

gallery or museum. Their status as relational art or social sculpture also links them to ecology through a shared concern with process and interconnections. What I find so compelling is that Haeg's projects enlist a relatively broad public in the process of rethinking the place of animals in contemporary cities.

Another persuasive, skeptical retort to Haeg's eagle nest atop the entrance to the Whitney Museum and his other *Animal Estates* is that these are bad faith efforts or superficial nods towards the animal kingdom. In this vein, a blog post responding to a Portland, Oregon, version of *Animal Estates* wonders: "when commissioned for a museum, as in the case of the New York Estates, Haeg's work raises the question of intention. Building habitats in a museum courtyard won't likely attract regionally-extinct species. Falcons may adapt to skyscraper aeries and honeybees may nest atop apartments, but does a bobcat have a chance in Manhattan? When presented in this setting, does his piece merely become a symbolic gesture akin to naming the streets in a development after the former flora and fauna? It is a thought-provoking exercise, but a hard one to enact as practice" (Leonard).

So is Fritz Haeg's project fundamentally different from naming a subdivision Pheasant Run or Eagle's Landing after the fauna displaced by it? This is a thorny question. Subdivisions conjure a more natural state through a name, but while the bobcat admittedly probably won't return to New York City anytime soon, most of the other estates need not go unoccupied. The other New York City estates might house beaver, bat, bee, duck, eagle, opossum, owl, purple martin, salamander, squirrel, and turtle, all within city limits.

Even if Haeg's projects don't actually enable many animals to return to New York City, they have the potential to be highly visible and to do important work reintroducing animals to the urban imaginary in at least two distinct ways. First, Haeg's *Animal Estates* could help New Yorkers realize the rich fauna that already exists under our very noses. Even marginal spaces—empty lots, building ledges, rooftops, a single street tree—can and do house animal life. In this sense Haeg's installations alert us to what is already there. This could result in a change in attitude such that animals would figure more explicitly in our urban planning and our everyday lives. Second, Haeg's *Animal Estates* can be understood not as simply acknowledging what is already present, but as marking what has been lost. In this sense, they teach us about New York City's environmental history, reminding us of what was once there. The Mannahatta Project, led by Eric Sanderson, is similar in this respect. This ambitious experiment in ecology, urban history, and

Figure 5. Fritz Haeg, "Animal Estate 1.4: Purple Martin."
Commissioned by the Whitney Museum of American Art for the 2008 Whitney Biennial Exhibition. Installed at Swindler Cove Park, 2009. Photograph by Jason Smith, New York Restoration Project.

visualization helps us imagine New York City circa 1609. For The Mannahatta Project and *Animal Estates* part of the point would seem to be to hold the deep past and the present in our minds at the same time. The Mannahatta Project will gain public visibility through a recent book, an exhibit at the Museum of the City of New York, a temporary beaver dam sculpture in Washington Square Park, illustrative posters on bus shelters, walking tours, and sidewalk markings indicating the former paths of streams. Remembering the past might inspire more modest ecological restoration projects, aimed not at undoing the city, but at striking a different sort of balance between human and nonhuman life. For example, the New York Audubon Society sponsors a grassland restoration project at Floyd Bennett Field in Brooklyn, begun in 1985. There have also been efforts to reintroduce reptile species in Gateway National Recreation Area in Brooklyn and Queens (Mittelbach 83) and to restore alewives to the Bronx River, to mention just a few projects. Ecological restoration in large cities can create a sense of temporal as well as biological otherness: not only can cities support animals, they can also support what would seem to be spaces or biological communities that belong to an earlier time.

The Public Life of Animal Dwellings

While it may seem that we can dismiss Haeg's eagle's nest as a sculptural fantasy, just a few blocks away a more unruly, massive red-tailed hawk nest has graced 927 Fifth Avenue for a number of years (Fig. 4). In terms of conservation biology, Pale Male and Lola, these two celebrity hawks, are insignificant; red-tailed hawks are common and one more breeding pair matters most to the people who might see them. These hawks are worth more because they can be seen by so many people. Nature writer Robert Pyle uses the term "extinction of experience" to describe how "the loss of neighborhood species endangers our experience of nature. If a species becomes extinct within our radius of reach…it might as well be gone altogether" (261). Certainly our inner cities are areas where the experience of nature and nonhuman life is jeopardized. The media spectacle of Pale Male and Lola was not the extinction of experience but the extension of experience. That two such beautiful and graceful predators could live and breed on Fifth Avenue seems miraculous. Given that the majority of people in the US—and the world—now live in urban areas, cities are absolutely crucial in shaping attitudes towards nature and non-human life. A highly visible hawk nest or even an empty animal home insinuates nonhuman life into our imaginations and our everyday lives.

Another measure of the success of Haeg's project is that a number of these estates have now found a permanent home and thus will remain visible. After the exhibit at the Whitney closed, several of the *Animal Estates* were moved to Swindler's Cove Park in northern Manhattan. This seems a fitting permanent home for these dwellings. Swindler's Cove Park is a project of Bette Midler's New York Restoration Project, located in a poor, largely minority neighborhood that has historically been deprived of parks and access to the waterfront. Swindler's Cove begins to correct this with green space, a schoolyard garden, and boating programs for neighborhood youth. It is, of course, impossible to know what these *Animal Estates* will do to the park's visitors (Fig. 5). I would like to think that this and the other estates that have been moved to Swindler's Cove will help people start seeing urban animals not only as pets or pests, but as genuinely other forms of life that have value and deserve space. Cities are not places that relentlessly exclude nature, but places that have their own particular disturbed and dynamic ecologies. Just as nonhuman life might have a right to urban space, city dwellers might have a right to access and experience nonhuman life. At the end of the passage quoted above, William Cronon writes that valuing otherness "applies as much to people as it does to (other) natural things" (89). We need what Wolch refers to as a "trans-species urban practice" (131). This will entail sharing urban space with animals as well as humans. Not only do we need to make room for hawks and salamanders, but we need to ensure that a city's biodiversity is not restricted to its wealthiest areas. The final home of Haeg's New York City *Animal Estates* does this in a small but important way.

Notes

1. The images on *The World Without Us* website are beguiling in their presentation of New York City as a romantic ruin: The return of nature is predicated on the disappearance of the human, and, in this particular image, the animal world is absurdly compressed, almost as if this were a natural history diorama.
2. Haeg is certainly not the first to suggest this conceptual framework for animal life. See Wolch 128.

Works Cited

Bourriaud, Nicolas. *Relational Aesthetics*. Dijon: Les Presses du réel, 2002.

Burt, Jonathan. *Rat*. London: Reaktion, 2006.

Copeland, Marion. *Cockroach*. London: Reaktion, 2003.

Cronon, William. "The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature." *Uncommon Ground: Toward Reinventing Nature*. Ed. William Cronon. New York: Norton, 1995.

Fudge, Erica. *Animal*. London: Reaktion, 2002.

Haeg, Fritz. *Animal Estates*. <http://www.fritzhaeg.com/garden/initiatives/animalestates/about.html>. Accessed 5 May 2009.

Koolhaas, Rem. *Delirious New York: A Retroactive Manifesto for Manhattan*. New ed. New York: Monacelli, 1994.

Leonard, Patrick. "Fritz Haeg's *Animal Estates*." <http://www.urbanhonking.com/pica/2008/09/fritz_haegs_animal_estates.html>. Accessed 7 May 2009.

Louv, Richard. *Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder*. New York: Algonquin, 2008.

Mittelbach, Margaret, and Michael Crewdson. *Wild New York: A Guide to the Wildlife, Wild Places, and Natural Phenomena of New York City*. New York: Crown, 1997.

Philo, Chris. "Animals, Geography, and the City: Notes on Inclusions and Exclusions." *Animal Geographies: Place, Politics, And Identity In the Nature-culture Borderlands*. Ed. Jennifer R. Wolch and Jody Emel. London: Verso, 1998.

Price, Jennifer. "Thirteen Ways of Seeing Nature in L.A." *The Believer*. April 2006. <http://www.believermag.com/issues/200604/?read=article_price>. Accessed 5 May 2009.

Pyle, Robert Michael. "The Extinction of Experience." *City Wilds: Essays and Stories About Urban Nature*. Ed. Terrell Dixon. Athens: U of Georgia P, 2002.

Sanderson, Eric. *Mannahatta: A Natural History of New York*. New York: Abrams, 2009.

Shell, Marc. "The Family Pet." *Representations* 15 (Summer 1986): 121-53.

Tuan, Yi-fu. *Dominance and Affection: The Making of Pets*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1984.

Veblen, Thorstein. *The Theory of the Leisure Class*. 1899. Amherst, NY: Prometheus, 1998.

Weisman, Alan. *The World Without Us*. New York: St. Martin's, 2007.

Wilson, Edward O. *Biophilia*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1984.

Wolch, Jennifer. "Zoöpolis." *Animal Geographies: Place, Politics, And Identity In the Nature-culture Borderlands*. Ed. Jennifer R. Wolch and Jody Emel. London: Verso, 1998.