

MIRRORS OF ABSURDITY: THE POSITIVE UNCONSCIOUS OF  
KNOWLEDGE

By

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A PERFORMANCE IN LIEU OF THESIS PRESENTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL  
OF THE UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT  
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF  
MASTER OF FINE ARTS

UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA

2005

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by

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank the members of my supervisory committee, Barbara Jo Revelle, Sergio Vega and Desiree Navab for their invaluable instruction and feedback; thanks to Alexander Alberro for his ongoing guidance and support; to Scott Hazard, Mariola Alvarez and Taylor Shields for their help in putting this exhibition together; and special thanks go to Nikki Schiwal and Danielle Mericle for their lasting friendship and inspiration.

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Summary of Performance Option in Lieu of Thesis  
Presented to the Graduate School of the University of Florida  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the  
Degree of Master of Fine Arts

MIRRORS OF ABSURDITY:  
THE POSITIVE UNCONSCIOUS OF KNOWLEDGE

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May 2005

Chair: Barbara Jo Revelle  
Major Department: Art and Art History

This work consists of two parts. The first part is a collection of photographs, drawings and text installed in the display case in the hallway of the Fine Arts C building. The second part is a video projection inside the Focus Gallery. The video runs on a twenty-minute loop and consists of four basic chapters. The subject matter of the images in both the display case and the video projection is animals. I shot many of the photographs, but many others have been culled and collected from other sources, such as the internet and books. Similarly, I wrote some of the text pieces, but others were taken from news stories and works of fiction. Much of my interest in this project is in exploring the notion of the subjective as an effective research strategy. I have arranged the images in the case according to a loose, personal taxonomy that

uses an obsessive curiosity about certain details of certain images to generate a fluid series of nodes or groupings. I am playing off of the institutional authority of the display case in the museum or university, but replacing that authority with my own obsessive and subjective approach. The video basically picks up where the display case leaves off. It begins with the same sort of loose taxonomy of images, in a slideshow format, but gradually evolves into a more focused, close gaze, embodied by slow motion video of lions at the zoo. I am using the image of the lion and, more specifically, lions' paws, to explore the potential of this sort of close, obsessive gaze. In the end, the video loops back around to the broad taxonomy, thus illustrating a constant shifting between these two seemingly disparate modes of looking and of acquiring information. One of the slow motion shots of the lion is an intense close-up of the lion's gaze back into the camera, which directly references the mirroring aspect of the project that is suggested by the title. In this shot and others, I am trying to point to the function that animals serve as distorted mirrors, or foils, for our own identity as human beings.

This work consists of two parts. The first part is a collection of photographs, drawings and text installed in the display case in the hallway of the Fine Arts C building, entitled *Animal Life*. The second part is a video projection inside the Focus Gallery, entitled *My Paw-Paw Tree*. The video runs on a twenty-minute loop and consists of four basic chapters. The subject matter of the images in both the display case and the video projection is animals. I shot many of the photographs, but many others have been culled and collected from other sources, such as the internet and books. Similarly, I wrote some of the text pieces, but others were taken from news stories and works of fiction.



Figure 1

Much of my interest in this project is in exploring the notion of the subjective as an effective research strategy. I have arranged the images in the case according to a loose, personal taxonomy that uses an obsessive curiosity about certain details of certain images to generate a fluid series of nodes or groupings. I am playing off of the institutional authority of the display case in the museum or university, but replacing that authority with my own obsessive and

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It makes sense to me, finally, why I am attracted to the subject matter of animals. Animals sit on a very weird divide, a boundary line between what we name life, and thus possessing a perspective worth considering, and not-life, which is not subject to the same considerations. It is a bizarre line and all animals sit on one side or another. Dogs and cats, for instance, are generally treated like humans, albeit inferior humans; while it is perfectly acceptable to treat cows and pigs as commodities to be systematically slaughtered for food.

My attraction to the zoo as a particular site of this conflict is due, I believe, to the complex intersection between these two worlds that we find there. On one hand, contemporary zoos embrace a mission of preservation and kindness to animals; on the other hand, zoos are sites of displacement, captivity and superficial entertainment. Although I've always disliked zoos somewhat, as many people do, I am not particularly interested in launching a scathing indictment of the whole institution. They have evolved, and they do, in some cases, serve a real function in the preservation of species. Most zoos nowadays

make at least the pretense of considering the comfort and happiness of the animals themselves.

I also have personal experience with animals that makes this subject matter particularly compelling to me. I grew up in a vegetarian household with dozens of pets, most of which were an overpopulation of rabbits that lived in the backyard. In the process of caring for and observing the evolution of this population of rabbits, I have seen firsthand the effects of humans' ideas about animals and how nature should proceed. I discovered during my childhood that there is no easy and clear ethical line when it comes to how we should deal with and relate to animals. Since then, I have realized that the murky, frustrating vagueness of these sort of ethical questions aren't limited to our relationships to animals but can be found in any relationship—to each other, to the environment, to other cultures, etc.

When I was around 12 or 13 years old, I had an argument with my father that would deeply affect my thinking and formulation of a worldview at the time. My father, whom I respected and still respect greatly as a rational thinker, was really trying to put forth an argument for the elimination of the coyote as a species. Though my family engaged in many absurd discussions while I was growing up, this one had a particular impact on me.

The specific impact of this argument was related to my father's deep conviction about the scientific grounding for such a moral argument. It was also related to the somehow airtight rhetorical structure he had put together, which I found, oddly, difficult to refute. His argument was that since coyotes kill other

animals (in particular, the rabbits in our backyard), they are thus morally bereft, and deserve to die. He believed that this was the only way to solve the problem of innocent rabbits dying. For years since then, I have spent a lot of time wondering about the nature of science, of fact, argument, rhetoric, and truth. How was my father, a rational man, able to seriously put forth and, at least partially successfully, uphold what is, to me, an absurd argument?

There was another key moment in my intellectual development that complicated my view of science. In my undergraduate studies, I was required to take a geology class. My professor was an older woman with a sonorous voice, and at one point during her lecture, after my mind had drifted a little bit and then come back to pay attention to her words, it suddenly became so clear to me that she was just another storyteller. It isn't that there wasn't objective, empirical truth to the scientific knowledge she was presenting to the class, but for the first time I noticed the creative aspect of her performance. In that moment I saw an obvious continuum that existed between my geology professor and someone like Aesop, both telling stories designed to instruct and entertain.

These experiences and others have led me to seriously question my own assumptions about the nature of scientific research and knowledge. In my readings and studies since then, I have been exposed to thinkers who successfully complicate many of the truths we, as a society, cling to so faithfully.

I am interested, for example, in the idea of new research strategies. Currently, in contemporary anthropology, there is a raging argument between those who call for the incorporation of the subjectivity of the anthropologist into

the research that is being collected and those who believe in the more detached, documentary style of observing and researching. I am very drawn to the newer mode. Ruth Behar's *The Vulnerable Observer* was a particularly succinct and effective laying out of this position. As she says, "... I found myself resisting the 'I' of the ethnographer as a privileged eye, a voyeuristic eye, an all-powerful eye. ... I distrusted my own authority. I saw it as being constantly in question, constantly on the point of breaking down."<sup>1</sup> *The Vulnerable Observer* is a collection of essays that use Behar's personal stories as a starting point to talk about broader anthropological issues such as ritual, diaspora and death. Implied in this strategy is a lack of predetermined knowledge about what lays at the other end of the research process. Many projects, across disciplines, set out to prove a certain theory or argue a particular point, but this process is more fluid and unpredictable. As Behar states at the end of her introduction to *The Vulnerable Observer*, "If you don't mind going places without a map, follow me."

This approach of using the subjective as a starting point can be found in other writings and disciplines, such as Roland Barthes and W.G. Sebald. In Barthes' *The Third Meaning* essay, he suggests using film stills as a way to generate and interrogative reading of the film. His strategy is to isolate a visual detail of the still that cannot be attached to any meaning inherent in the film itself: a signifier without a signified. For instance, in a still from an Eisenstein film, he finds himself uncontrollably fascinated by the thick quality of one of the character's makeup. Since this specific, odd quality can't be attached to any

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<sup>1</sup> Ruth Behar, *The Vulnerable Observer: Anthropology That Breaks Your Heart* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1996) p21.

meaning, indexical or symbolic, in the film, Barthes attaches to it what he calls “the third meaning.”<sup>2</sup> Even though there are very specific rules and strategies that Barthes outlays for identifying and utilizing the third, also referred to as obtuse, meaning, in my opinion, it depends highly on the subjectivity of the viewer. After reading his descriptions of certain obtuse meanings he has identified, I can understand why he would have picked those details, but I also think I would have chosen different details. I am excited by the possibility of developing a system of research and interrogation that incorporates such subjectivity. In developing *My Paw-Paw Tree*, the video piece for this exhibition, I used a method that touched on similar aspects of fascination, obsession and curiosity. While not following the exact method that Barthes outlines in this essay, I still tried to experiment with the possibilities he was presenting. In my work with the subject matter of animals over the past year and a half, I have noticed a peculiar fascination on my part with the image of the lion. I decided to descend from the broad taxonomy to the focus on the lion, and see where that led the piece. I specifically focused on what, to me, is the most fetishized part of the lion: the paws. Lions’ paws are enormous, blunt and dangerous. They are adorable and frightening. I wasn’t interested in the overtly symbolic nature of the lions’ paws, but tried to get a look at the more detached significance of their image, tried to get at some unnamable quality about them. I found the excessively close and slowed down footage of lions’ paws to be somehow both satisfying and unsatisfying, which I believe reflects the difficulty of getting at this

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<sup>2</sup> Roland Barthes, *Image-Music-Text* (New York, NY: Hill and Wang, 1977) p53.

kind of obtuse meaning. It was satisfying in the sense that the viewer gets an uninterrupted look at the paws, but unsatisfying in the lack of overt and easily comprehensible meaning that is immediately apparent in the imagery. It is this line of discomfort and fascination that I hope this portion of the video demonstrates.

W.G. Sebald is another writer who uses subjectivity to get at grander research projects. In particular, in his novel *The Rings of Saturn* he uses a loose, autobiographical approach to talk about the detritus of history in rural England. Bookstores often don't know whether to place *The Rings of Saturn* in the fiction or nonfiction section. The story revolves around a walking tour of England that a character named W.G. Sebald is taking, which Sebald the author did actually take. He describes his encounters with the sad, decaying remains of 19<sup>th</sup> century industry, and uses certain details of his encounters as springboards to talk about grand historical narratives that interweave with each other in different ways. By utilizing such an approach, Sebald is able to make connections and tell stories that a traditional approach to history could never make, and also to relate the historical content to the present day in surprising and unpredictable ways.

As Sebald stated in a 2001 interview,

...I never liked doing things systematically. Not even my Ph.D. research was done systematically. It was done in a random, haphazard fashion. The more I got on, the more I felt that, really, one can find something only in that way—in the same way in which, say, a dog runs through a field. If you look at a dog following the advice of his nose, he traverses a patch of land in a completely unplottable manner. And he invariably finds what he's looking for. I think that, as I've always had dogs, I've learned from

them how to do this. So you then have a small amount of material and you accumulate things, and it grows, and one thing takes you to another, and you make something out of these haphazardly assembled materials. And, as they have been assembled in this random fashion, you have to strain your imagination in order to create a connection between the two things. If you look for things that are like the things that you have looked for before, then, obviously, they'll connect up. But they'll only connect up in an obvious sort of way, which actually isn't, in terms of writing something new, very productive. You have to take the heterogeneous materials in order to get your mind to something that it hasn't done before. That's how I thought about it. Then, of course, curiosity gets the better of you.<sup>3</sup>

In the spirit of these thinkers, I have tried to use my own subjectivity as an initial springboard to look at the way humans relate to nature and, specifically, to the animal world. Specifically, I used my own attraction to certain details of the images in the display case to generate the entire structure of *Animal Life*. For instance, I began the whole arrangement with the image of Churchill's lion from the Lightner Museum in St. Augustine. I found myself fascinated by that fixed, wide open jaw,



Figure 2



Figure 3

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<sup>3</sup> [http://www.newyorker.com/online/content/?010903on\\_onlineonly01](http://www.newyorker.com/online/content/?010903on_onlineonly01)

and sorted around through my images until I came across the image of the deep sea fish head with the rows of sharp teeth, being held in a lab by a researcher, presumably. From that image, I picked up on the uncomfortable closeness of the soft flesh of the researcher's hands and the blue steely sharp teeth of the fish. The notion of holding and presenting came to the foreground; from there, I was led to the image of my roommate, Kathy Huala, holding a monkey, and so on. Different details would lead to different pathways, and sometimes come back again to meet in the middle. I found that the images naturally gathered in certain clusters of relationships, which helped guide where I placed the text pieces.



Figure 4

I started approaching this work from two somewhat discrete directions over the past couple of years. About a year and a half ago I started using text and personal narrative as a sort of generative process for making work. I would write, allow the writing to expand and range from the original starting point, and then make photographs. Sometimes the photographs came first, sometimes the writing. The photographs weren't illustrations of the text, but were related to

similar issues. As the work evolved, it began to focus more on issues of natural history and our relationship to nature and the environment. As a sort of logical extension of this subject matter, I began to be attracted to displays of all sorts, but especially museum displays.

Soon after this, I went back to experimenting with video stills. It was also around this time that I started going to zoos to get footage. Going to zoos was a slight departure from the earlier subject matter, but seemed continuous, since zoos both entertain through displays and construct ideas of nature. I shot both 35mm still film and video at the zoos, but it was the video stills that seemed more appropriate to the subject matter. I tried different ways of laying out the stills on the wall, even trying a complex, crossword puzzle type approach, with varying degrees of success. With the crossword puzzle setup, I was trying to point to specific intersections between different images and how these interactions could produce various meanings, depending on how and where they were placed in the overall arrangement.

*Animal Life*, the display case portion of the exhibition, is a sort of blending of these two modes of working. I found the series of video stills to be more useful as sorts of pathways to get from one idea or node of images to another, rather than presented as ends in themselves. Similarly, the text elements function much better as simply one more element in a complex arrangement. To broaden the textual perspective beyond my own first person narratives, I included both factual news elements and selections from works of fiction that related to the subject matter.



Figure 5

I am interested in the possible evocations of literary structures that the arrangement in the display case could spark, along with the more obvious implications of institutional displays. I have tried to situate my work in a liminal, boundary zone between media, disciplines and areas of study, because it is there that I believe productive and unexpected discoveries can occur.

The video was originally conceived as a sort of alternative to presenting the images I had as photographs on the wall. I was interested in the potential for producing meaning through the sequencing of images, as well as in the new possibilities presented by the audio element. As the video has developed, I have begun to recognize the continued presence of the odd relationship between still and moving image. By including extremely slowed down video (which, at 29 frames per second, produces a sort of pulse similar to the pulse of the still images) alongside paced and sequenced stills, I have tried to complicate this relationship. In this case, it is the moving image that opens up more potential for an obsessive gaze than the still image; and it is the still images that generate pacing and movement. Conceptually, while the still images help narrow the

subject matter down, it is the moving image that evokes, for me, issues of obsession and fetishism as a research strategy. The moving image allows for a closer gaze than the still provides for. I believe there is further potential for this work to push the idea of cinephilia and the sort of interrogation that Barthes talks about in “The Third Meaning” essay.

I feel that *Mirrors of Absurdity*, as a whole, foregrounds collecting over making pictures. The images included in this exhibition range from my own snapshots, to drawings and photographs scanned from books, to images found on the internet. My authorial role is less that of the photographer capturing and composing with her camera than that of an obsessive collector pursuing images of a type, from any source. An artist who clearly outlined this sort of role was Marcel Broodthaers. Broodthaers, with his background in poetry and literature, was not so interested in composing a formally cohesive image of any sort; rather, his artistic practice pointed to other aspects of the overall artistic process, such as acquisition and display. His *Museum of the Eagle* is an important precedent, and opened up the door for further investigation of these issues.

Another artist who works with issues of natural history is Mark Dion. Dion explores adopting the role of the naturalist (rather than the collector), and with popular notions of ecology. His tactics are primarily sculptural, while the basic grounding for my work is photography.

I have always been interested in the potential of the film or video still as a photographic image in its own right. The work that I did before coming to graduate school was comprised entirely of video stills arranged in books and in

lines. I believe that there are possibilities for building meaning based on isolating certain key moments from video footage that would be impossible to find in an image composed with a still camera. Barthes' "Third Meaning" essay seemed to tap into this possibility in the relationship between diachronic and synchronic. In both the video and the installation in the display case, I have tried to explore this potential for directed meaning; a meaning that spreads vertically as well as horizontally. The slideshow and its sequencing of still images was the original



Figure 6

inspiration for *My Paw-Paw Tree*; by adding extremely slowed down segments of actual video, I hope to complicate this relationship between the still and the moving image even further. The parts of the video that are built out of still images move more fluidly and "cinematically" than the slow motion footage. By slowing down and focusing to the point of abstraction, the video questions our formal expectations, while also conjuring issues of obsession and fetishism as a research strategy. This relates conceptually to the idea of the subjectivity of the researcher as a starting point for any project or body of research. The use of the

loop in the video further references this difficult relationship between the subjectivity of the author and the goal of describing an objective reality; it literally embodies the push and pull between these apparently diverging intentions.

One of the slow motion shots of the lion is an intense close-up of the lion's gaze back into the camera, which directly references the mirroring aspect of the project that is suggested by the title. In this shot and others, I am trying to point to the function that animals serve as distorted mirrors, or foils, for our own identity as human beings.



Figure 7

Inherent in any discussion of science and art is the issue of the museum. Museums of science and museums of art originated from approximately the same place: namely, the 19<sup>th</sup> century cabinet of curiosities. These were collections of various specimens and objects, usually gathered from foreign lands in the colonialist expansion of Western Europe. There was little rhyme or reason to these collections; at least, none that the modern sensibility would recognize. The same collection would include, for instance, “holy relics from a Spanish

ship...; earthen pitchers and porcelain from China; a Madonna made of feathers, a chain made of monkey teeth, stone shears, a back-scratcher, and a canoe with paddles, all from 'India'; a Javanese costume, Arabian coats; the horn and tail of a rhinoceros, the horn of a bull seal, a round horn that had grown on an Englishwoman's forehead, a unicorn's tail; the baubles and bells of Henry VIII's fool, the Turkish emperor's golden seal...."<sup>4</sup> I hope that a similar diversity of types of images is represented in both my display case arrangement and in the taxonomy chapter of the video. My impulse to collect and my method for organizing springs from the same sort of rabid, obsessive curiosity. Writers such as Stephen Greenblatt connect such feverish, open-ended collecting not just to the need to acquire and display the trophies of colonialism but also to the widespread experience of wonder that Europe was experiencing in its encounter with the New World. Thus the museum's origins incorporate both this need to control other cultures through visual displays and a genuine sense of amazement and wonder at the encounter of such difference. It is this uncomfortable position that museums of any kind continue to occupy to this day. So it is that the museum is referenced in my work on two different levels: one that hearkens back to the origins of museums and the open ended drive to accumulate; the other pointing to the problems and contradictions of the institution of the museum in its current form.

An important moment for me in my thinking about these issues was when I visited the Museum of Jurassic Technology in Los Angeles. This institution,

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<sup>4</sup> Lawrence Weschler, *Mr. Wilson's Cabinet of Wonder* (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1995) p76.

which sits behind a nondescript storefront in Culver City, is the work of one man, David Wilson. It aspires to all the authoritative pretense of any natural history museum, but the exhibits one finds in the museum strain the viewer's faith in this authority. Included among the exhibits are "the horn of Mary Davis of Saughall," a horn supposedly taken from the head of an Englishwoman in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, a bat supposedly captured in a block of lead, buckskin gloves, taxidermied quail, fruit-stone carvings, etc. The environment is darkened, hushed and mysterious, and there is not a lick of irony to be found anywhere. In his book about the museum, Lawrence Weschler goes to great lengths to ascertain the truth of this or that of the exhibits, to varying degrees of success. But the ultimate goal of the museum seems to point beyond the factual truth of the claims it makes. It is an exploration of the nature of museums and collecting in general, and it manages to simultaneously critique the authority of the museum while still reveling in the mystery and the poetry of it. In the motto of the Museum, I find echoes of Ruth Behar's "maplessness": "The learner must be led always from familiar objects toward the unfamiliar; guided along, as it were, a chain of flowers into the mysteries of life." This impulse is, again, reflected in my methodology for the arrangement of the images in the display case. I began with details of images that were almost obsessively familiar, and tried to use those details to push the viewer into more unfamiliar places, signified by the unexpected connections and juxtapositions.

It is on this uncomfortable site, this intersection between knowing and unknowing, that I place my work.

## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Robyn Mericle was born and raised in Tucson, Arizona. She received her Bachelor of Arts in Studio Art at the University of Georgia in Athens, Georgia. She focused on digital photography, collage and the use of text in her undergraduate work. After graduating from the University of Georgia, she lived for four years in Brooklyn, New York, during which time she worked at the New York Public Library and continued to write and make photographs and videos. In 2002, she came to graduate school in Electronic Intermedia at the University of Florida in Gainesville.