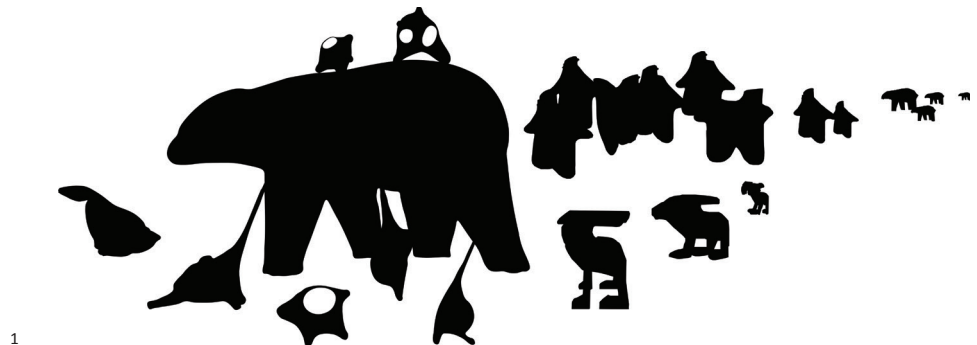


Please Don't Feed the Animals!

In recent years there has been a contemporary trend towards the prolific production of architectural objects, which, in their cuteness, furriness, colorfulness, and sometimes grotesqueness and viciousness, are here referred to as “animals.”¹

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It comes as no surprise, that in an age where Internet traffic is dominated by videos of kittens and porn, that architecture feels compelled to question its capacity to attract and entertain. Rather than merely operating as a backdrop for selfies on Facebook and Instagram, how might architecture be redefined as the subject (or object) of affection? Meaning, by being more cute, like a kitten, or more grotesque, like porn, can architecture better communicate with and engage new audiences?

Animals are taking over the contemporary architecture scene: from Greg Lynn’s recycled toy furniture (2009) and fountains (2010) to D.O.T.S.’ menagerie of *Massimals* (2010–2012); from LADG’s plaster and latex formed *New Balloon Animals* (2012) and *48 Characters* (2013) to Bittertang’s plush toy inspired *Pig Pile* (2010) and *Testacio* (2011); from First Office’s animal print *Zoopol* (2012) to Angie Co’s quixotic *Rabbit And* (2013) and *Critters* (2015). And, let us not forget about the recent *Possible Mediums* touring exhibition, in which many of the aforementioned participated, and where animals—or their figurative likeness and metaphorical references (note: Ellie Abrons’ *Peep Peep* and Bittertang’s *Pet Sounds*)—clearly outnumbered both people and buildings.

You name it, animals are everywhere (fig. 1)! So what’s the craze all about, and what’s at stake for architecture?

Figure 1: Whitney Moon, *Animals*, 2015.



2

For those generations raised on the likes of Sesame Street, the Muppets, Alf, Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, Pound Puppies, My Little Pony, Care Bears and gummy bears, it should come as no surprise that its architecture is striving to similarly assert itself as either cute, silly, odd, or sweet. Instead of thinking of this architectural animal-mania as the “elephant” in the room—that is, the trend that is evidently pervasive but nobody is actually talking about—how might animals be performing critically and constructively to further the project of contemporary architecture? Is this an operative project, aimed to revolutionize the architectural object, or is it a fetishization of the non-building? Are these animals operating as decoys, simulating the real as a means to subvert natural systems of order and classification? Or, have we already given the animals too much attention?

This menagerie of animals also transcends the cute and familiar, offering to architecture new modes of engaging processes of fabrication, representation, and meaning, where the digital is no longer considered novel. In 2012, William O’Brien Jr. explored precisely this concept, albeit with “totems” rather than animals. His exhibition at the Zoellner Arts Center—*Totems: Silhouettes & Iconographic Pluralism*—was comprised of a collection of digitally modeled and fabricated totems. He writes,

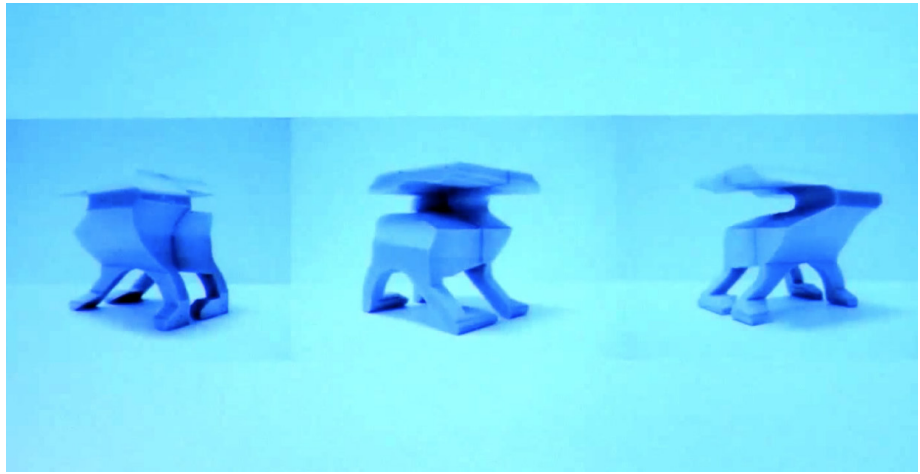
Projects can now be described in pairs of terms that until recently might have read as contradictory, as implausibly aligned with two oppositional groups: parametric and primitive, systemic and idiosyncratic, differentiated-repetitive and graphic, malleable and thick, rule-based and authored... As architectural motivations for the post-digital generation, these couplings are not only plausible, but thrilling.²

Hence, as the newness of digital tools and processes wanes, a return to primitive modes of crafting and representing architectural intent implies not a rejection of technology, but rather a deliberate questioning of its possibilities and limitations.

Crafted in a manner that Alexander D’Hooghe describes as “deliberately crude assemblages of sensuous forms shamelessly cut up to destroy any notion that they would aspire to the organic,” O’Brien’s totems index not only the technics of modeling and milling geometric forms, but also infer the semantic potential of iconography.³ Whereas D’Hooghe refers to O’Brien’s totems in terms of geometric abstraction—“their primitive, anthropomorphic quality; abstract enough to be non-explicit and appealing to the mind; but consciously artificial and un-reconciled enough to be critical”—what might a direct reference to animals offer to contemporary architecture?⁴

Let’s begin with Jason Scroggin and Akari Takebayashi (D.O.T.S.) and their *Massimals* (fig. 2). Fabricated in the same manner as architectural massing models, each bear-like figure is a mono-material construction (e.g. colored foam, chipboard and cardboard). Executed at a

Figure 2: D.O.T.S. (Jason Scroggin and Akari Takebayashi), *Massimals*, 2010. Photo by GLINTstudios.



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variety of scales (S to XL), *Massimals* employ different techniques (e.g. tessellation, contour and pixilation) to approximate volume without detail. According to their creators, “Though abstracted by the techniques of fabrication, each object’s recognizable affinity towards the shape of polar bear and its arrangement in the narrative of a traveling herd or a petting zoo brought curiosity and playful interaction from the viewers.”⁵ One variation on the series, constructed out of 20,000 zip ties (*Zip Tie Massimal*, 2011), allows people to interact with its responsive skin, whereas a larger, colorful egg-crate version (*Rainbow Massimal*, 2012) explores spatial flows, patterns, and human occupation. Most recently, a new series at the University of Kentucky (*Massimals Legion*, 2015) explored animal abstraction through the incremental distortion of six bears. Through familiarity—that is, a likeness to animals—these suggestive forms are deliberately deployed to elicit human engagement.⁶

Clearly, these animals are striving to be more than simply cuddly cartoonitectures. In fact, they are deliberately weird—although, perhaps not weird enough. According to Filip Tejchman, “‘Weird’ is good because it’s discursive, not exclusive. No one process, image, culture or idea can produce the ‘weird.’ What’s ‘weird’ is different everyday but there is always something ‘weird.’”⁷ In other words, by embracing “weird,” architecture can continually reinvent itself. What animals offer then, is the opportunity to transcend the purely technical or semantic properties of architectural objecthood. Tejchman adds, “‘Weird’ is not radical, or vice-versa. Instead, the ‘weird’ is the non-ambiguous but necessarily translated—the specific but multi-coded.”⁸ By introducing weirdness, animals can subvert or twist the familiar to perform as proto-architectures.

For instance, Angie Co describes her *Critters* as “quixotic animal[s]. Or a series of animals that transform as they turn (fig. 3).”⁹ Consisting of animal profiles cut out of foam, from various angles Co’s objects evade recognition. Calling attention to their both/and status, Co adds that in these objects, “Sometimes legible graphic animals appear—rabbit, and elephant, and bird, and squirrel.” Yet, despite their animal-like qualities, she explains that they only look like animals in plan and elevation. Hence, their facility to oscillate between the familiar, without actually physically settling into a known shape or form, allows Co’s creatures to possess “animalness, without being any specific animal, but being believable animals.”¹⁰ As both objects in transition, and aggregated as totems, Co exploits their potential to be recognizably figural.

Not unlike a totem, the animal operates as a signifier of cultural meaning and associations. In contemporary architectural production, animal-ness allows designers to experiment with new modes of abstraction and weirdness. By being akin to something recognizable, the animal imbues architecture with a technical and semantic plasticity that allows novelty to re-enter the discipline. Here, architecture is rendered not only as the real, but likewise the

Figure 3: Angie Co, *Rabbit And*, 2013.

fictive. In addition, the capacity for an animal to multiply, and its tendency towards a collective (e.g. hive, brood, colony, flock, herd, band, etc.), suggests a redefinition of the architectural object as both autonomous and contingent.

Working with latex balloons and plaster (*48 Characters*, 2013), Andrew Holder and Claus Benjamin Freyinger (LADG) render weirdness through “plump and fleshy sculptural objects” (fig. 4).¹¹ Asserting animal-ness through shape and behavior (i.e. fat piglet-like forms appear to be suckling from the teats of a sow), LADG’s series challenges the role of the architectural object by asserting “a problem of material and form.”¹² As they explain, “What formal analysis struggles to rationalize, the languages of character and posture easily accommodate: the piglets nestle and suckle; the sow sprawls; obese bodies squeeze and abut one another.”¹³ Subverting the conventional subject-object relationship, the situations staged in *48 Characters* introduce what Joseph Altshuler refers to as an “emphatically nonanthropocentric conception of architectural character.”¹⁴ Altshuler adds that this work “negate[s] a conventional human subject,” in turn offering “possibilities for architecture that are not based on geometry but on relationships such as repulsion and attraction.”¹⁵ This collection of impeccably crafted hand-cast objects also calls into question the status (i.e. novelty) of digital tools and processes in the production of contemporary architecture.

Although they also work with pigs (*Pig Pile*, 2010), Antonio Torres and Michael Loverich (Bittertang) posit a less-familiar exploration of animal-ness with projects like *Testacio* (2011). A collection of two-headed hollowed-out plastic (and sometimes furry) forms that are both bird- and bear-like, *Testacio* is not only weird, but also challenges the architectural object by existing only through digital renderings. By constructing a fictional narrative, Bittertang casts these characters as residing somewhere between animal and human. They write,

Dizzy, drunk and blind, like hungry heavy headed birds that await their mother to return... Their bodies look flush and healthy but to the touch they reveal a thick skin around a hollow core. They seem to be toddlers dressed in one-piece padded foot pajamas... They appear to be in a constant state of hunger and boredom.¹⁶

Whereas LADG leaves it up to the viewer to devise a narrative around its fat and fleshy objects, Bittertang creates its objects primarily through narrative. Although the fleshiness and furriness of *Testacio* is implied only through digital means, their objecthood is clearly informed by plastic dolls and plush toys, further abstracting them from the literalness of animal.



ENDNOTES

1. For the purposes of this paper, I am calling attention to only those objects created by architects that evoke some degree of semblance to animals, be it through form, profile, character, or behavior.
2. William O'Brien Jr., "Afterword" in *TOTEMS: Silhouettes & Iconographic Pluralism* (Brooklyn: ETC Press, 2012) 45.
3. D'Hooghe also refers to O'Brien's totems in terms of "their primitive, anthropomorphic quality; abstract enough to be non-explicit and appealing to the mind; but consciously artificial and un-reconciled enough to be critical." Alexander D'Hooghe, "Maturing Form—Complex but not Regressive," in William O'Brien Jr., *TOTEMS: Silhouettes & Iconographic Pluralism* (Brooklyn: ETC Press, 2012) 5.
4. D'Hooghe, *TOTEMS: Silhouettes & Iconographic Pluralism*, 5.
5. Akari Takebayashi & Jason Scroggin, *Massimals: Interactive Assembly Models*, OPEN CITIES: The New Post-Industrial World Order, Research and Design Projects, Special Merit and Award Winners, Association of Collegiate Schools of Architecture (ACSA), <http://www.acsa-arch.org/programs-events/conferences/international-conference/2014-international-conference/research-design-projects> (accessed October 27, 2015).
6. As Scroggin and Takebayashi explain, "The suggestive forms and their specific arrangement imply docile behavior similar to animals in a petting zoo augmenting the way visitors approach and engage built form." D.O.T.S., *Massimals* (2010), <http://dots-ky.com/gallery.php?directory=Projects/massimals&id=work> (accessed October 27, 2015).
7. "'Weird' is good because it's discursive, not exclusive. No one process, image, culture or idea can produce the 'weird.' What's 'weird' is different everyday but there is always something 'weird.' Post-critical practice is interested in re-organizing architectural and cultural vernaculars, multiplying difference and differentiation without relying on a historical discourse based in other-ing the author to achieve a critical distance." Filip Tejchman, "Weird is Good" in MOS Architects, *Element House*, (Englewood, CO: Museum of Outdoor Arts, 2010) 7.
8. Filip Tejchman, "Weird is Good" in MOS Architects, *Element House* (Englewood, CO: Museum of Outdoor Arts, 2010) 16.
9. Angie Co, "Rabbit and Pantheon," lecture delivered at Syracuse University School of Architecture, September 10, 2013, YouTube video, 1:00:07, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VxNK-P0r0zE> (accessed October 25, 2015).
10. Co, "Rabbit and Pantheon," <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VxNK-P0r0zE> (accessed October 25, 2015).

Figure 4: LADG (Claus Benjamin Freyinger and Andrew Holder), *48 Characters*, 2013.

11. Joseph Altshuler, "Animate Architecture: Twelve Reasons to Get in Character" in *Log 33*, Winter 2015 (New York: Anyone Corporation) 128.
12. LADG, 48 Characters, <http://www.theladg.com/48-Characters> (accessed October 27, 2015).
13. LADG, <http://www.theladg.com/48-Characters> (accessed October 27, 2015).
14. Altshuler, "Animate Architecture: Twelve Reasons to Get in Character," 128.
15. Altshuler, 128.
16. Bittertang, Testacio, <http://www.bittertang.com/testacio/index.htm> (accessed October 25, 2015).
17. "To reproduce nature's form is neither possible nor interesting. Humans express their delight in nature by creating quasi-natures—aesthetic perversions of natural phenomena. The greatest achievement in the production of quasi natures is the animal print. The animal print is the aestheticized figure/ground of an animal that can be applied to anything." First Office (in collaboration with Tijana Vujosevic and John May), Zoopol, <http://www.firstoff.net/projects/zoopol/> (accessed October 25, 2015).
18. "Living in a Zoopol, citizens develop intimate relationships with an animal through a modern version of a totem. The abstraction of nature returns as urban form. This relationship between the subject and city is a relationship of waste. But isn't architecture everything that isn't necessary?" First Office (in collaboration with Tijana Vujosevic and John May), Zoopol, <http://www.firstoff.net/projects/zoopol/> (accessed October 25, 2015).
19. "'Zoopol, a monument to the animal kingdom.' (Project 1, 2012)," First Office (in collaboration with Tijana Vujosevic and John May), Zoopol, <http://www.firstoff.net/projects/zoopol/> (accessed October 25, 2015).
20. "Call it what you want: translation, chunking, piecing together, superimposition, hybridization, pastiche, collage, remixing, riffing, etc., this project was developed in two ways. Firstly, we used every skill set introduced into the course as a tool set to complete the third and final project. Secondly, we translated precedent projects from the previous five years that dealt precisely with the concept of architecture operating formally and compositionally 'in-between objects and fields.'" Kyle Miller, Objectified Fields, <http://cloudzwatching.tumblr.com/post/82915651421/objectified-fields> (accessed October 25, 2015).
21. In December 1954, Philip Johnson gave an informal talk to architecture students at Harvard entitled "The Seven Crutches of Modern Architecture." The lecture was subsequently published in *Perspecta*. In the essay, Johnson identifies "The Seven Crutches of Modern Architecture" as: 1) History; 2) Pretty Drawing; 3) Utility, or Usefulness; 4) Comfort; 5) Cheapness; 6) Serving the Client; and 7) Structure. Philip Johnson, "The Seven Crutches of Modern Architecture" in *Perspecta*, Vol. 3 (MIT Press, 1955) 40-45.

Whereas D.O.T.S. and Co literally deploy the animal as a means to explore issues of fabrication and representation, and LADG and Bittertang engage the formal and narrative characteristics of animal-ness, Andrew Atwood and Anna Neimark (First Office) explore animal-ness through pattern, rather than form. With *Zoopool* (2012), they utilize animal print as a strategy to develop what they call "quasi-natures—aesthetic perversions of natural phenomena."¹⁷ By "Living in a Zoopol," they claim, "citizens develop intimate relationships with an animal through a modern version of a totem."¹⁸ Here, nature is abstracted through a graphic reference to animal-ness (i.e. leopard, zebra, and giraffe) to generate "urban form." First Office embraces graphic abstraction as an attempt to distance us from the literalness of animal, and to reassert the architectural object as building(s). Although architecture is more overtly addressed through a direct translation to the built environment, their definition of *Zoopool* as "a monument to the animal kingdom" ought to raise some eyebrows.¹⁹

What all of these animal architectures call into question is something Kyle Miller identifies as "the concept of architecture operating formally and compositionally 'in-between objects and fields.'"²⁰ In their plurality, animals start to suggest a capacity to negotiate between autonomy and contingency: D.O.T.S. constructs animals out of a variety of materials and processes to engage user-interaction; Angie Co challenges the legibility of the animal as it oscillates between one identifiable (yet quickly shifting) profile into another; LADG samples familiar animal characteristics and performative tendencies, yet negates exactitude; Bittertang more overtly exploits the seeming-to-be animal as a means to invent new species; and First Office generates urban form from animal print.

Rather than proto-architectures that look like buildings, this menagerie of animals demonstrates a range of qualities that the contemporary architectural object can perform: it can make visible the materials and methods of fabrication, challenge modes of orthographic representation, subvert subject-object relationships, and construct itself through narrative. Despite seeming autonomous, these animals have everything to do with architecture. They exploit objecthood to communicate disciplinary concerns and possibilities. By engaging new and expanded audiences through their propensity to attract, animals reveal the polyvalent qualities of objects. Simultaneously exhibiting oppositional characteristics—the cute and grotesque, the natural and the artificial, the high- and low- tech—it could be said that architectural animals illustrate the generative potential of performing weirdness.

Despite their allure and ability to captivate audiences, could it be said that animals have become, in the words of Philip Johnson, a "crutch" for contemporary architecture?²¹ Meaning, have we become too comfortable (and even reliant) on their presence to validate the production of objects, rather than buildings, as architecture? Or, are these animals more operative—decoys of sorts—masquerading as something 'other' to distract us from architecture all together?

Perhaps the crutch that architecture in 2015 needs to address (or at least be wary about) is the rampant over-aestheticization of Postmodernism. Jimenez Lai reminds us that Venturi and Scott Brown's duck is "no precedent," but suggest its comical transformation into something other.²² This characterization of duck-ness affords the contemporary a method to engage history in both a rhetorical and generative manner, without relying on it as a crutch. Johnson's acknowledgement that "architecture is the sum of inescapable artistic decisions" only further supports the claim—applicable both then and now—that architecture is not only a technical project, but also a semantic one.²³ The act of contemporary form finding, as Lai implies, is in dialogue with both the box and the duck, but certainly not tethered to either.

Lai's *White Elephant (Privately Soft)* (2011) transcends the literal characterization of animal, and instead posits what Deleuze and Guatarri refer to as "becoming-animal."²⁴



The interchangeability of Lai's object/installation—it has eight different postures, yet no set orientation—allows us to see the potential of objects to engage participation, and to produce architectures. A reference to animal is executed here through both its title and interior patterning, but the shift is away from the figurative, and towards the generative. Challenging the ubiquity and purposelessness of the installation and pavilion, Lai's *White Elephant* is an object asserting a new set of architectural values. As he explains, "What is a building that can tumble freely without gravity or fixed orientations, hard on the outside but soft on the inside, and obstructs the continuity of interior spaces like an elephant in a room?"²⁵

This posture study for *White Elephant* performed by Lai (fig. 5), where the designer is cloaked in a cow hide, illustrates how "becoming animal" can transcend the fixed definitions of object and subject, resulting in what Deleuze and Guattari refer to as the state where "all forms come undone."²⁶ But, what are the implications for becoming-animal? Steve Baker writes, "Overall, the question is whether or not becoming-animal amounts to something that might be acted on: a practice, in other words, rather than a mere rhetoric."²⁷ How then, in the contemporary, can we move beyond "imitation, mimesis, mimicry or metaphor," and allow the animal to not only become architecture, but to reterritorialize and redefine the discipline?²⁸

Or, has it already?

22. Around 2012, Jimenez Lai produced a drawing of a duck-shaped house with a speech bubble stating, "I am no precedent." I believe this drawing is related to the *Hefner/Beuys* house, part of Lai's "Super-Furniture Series" a performance-based installation whose funding was featured on Kickstarter. More info can be found on Arch Daily, Kickstarter: Hefner/Beuys House / Jimenez Lai, <http://www.archdaily.com/224160/kickstarter-hefnerbeuys-house-jimenez-lai> (accessed October 27, 2015).
23. Philip Johnson, "The Seven Crutches of Modern Architecture" in *Perspecta*, Vol. 3 (MIT Press, 1955) #
24. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari refer to "becoming animal" in both *Kafka* and *A Thousand Plateaus*. See: Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986) Dana Polan, trans.; and Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000) Brian Massumi, trans.
25. Jimenez Lai, *White Elephant* (Privately Soft), http://bureau-spectacular.net/711_WELEPHANT.html (accessed October 25, 2015).
26. In *Kafka*, Deleuze and Guattari write, "To become animal is to participate in movement ... to cross a threshold ... to find a world of pure intensities where all forms come undone, as do all the significations, signifiers, and signifieds, to the benefit of an unformed manner." Deleuze and Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986) Dana Polan, trans., 13.
27. "What does it take to gesture toward the other-than-human, and thus to enter that privileged 'experimental' state of identity-suspension which they call becoming-animal? ... what does becoming-animal look like? Overall, the question is whether or not becoming-animal amounts to something that might be acted on: a practice, in other words, rather than a mere rhetoric." Steve Baker, "What Does Becoming-Animal Look Like?" in Nigel Rothfels, *Representing Animals* (Indiana University Press, 2002) 68.
28. Laura Cull, *Theatres of Immanence: Deleuze and the Ethics of Performance* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012) 118.

Figure 5: Jimenez Lai, posture studies for *White Elephant* (Privately Soft), 2011.