H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Pep Subirós, ed.. *Jane Alexander: Surveys (from the Cape of Good Hope).* Long Island City: Museum for African Art, 2011. Illustrations. 192 pp. $45.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-945802-57-0.

Reviewed by Pamela Allara

Published on H-AfrArts (August, 2011)

Commissioned by Jean M. Borgatti (Clark Univeristy)

Jane Alexander's sculptures, installations, and photomontages are at once unforgettable and elusive, remaining in the mind while their meanings hover beyond reach. One of the most prominent of South African artists, Alexander is known primarily for *The Butcher Boys* (1985-86, South African National Gallery): life-sized, cast "humanimals" whose nonchalant bestiality visualized the "state of the Union" under the decade's State of Emergency. Over the past twenty-five years, her installations have become increasingly elaborate, but in their very theatricality they retain an intimacy that renders viewers participants in a drama without a script. For the most part, her figures continue to be hybrids of humans and (African) mammals or birds, whose discomforting presence is increased over time as one encounters new works that include sculptures from previous installations. These repetitions demonstrate the fallibility of memory as well as the fluidity of interpretation: are these the same figures I have seen before? Do they mean the same thing now? Apart from the refusal of stable meanings over time, these cast, clothed sculptures disturb because they are in effect clones: the unique, seemingly sterile hybrids have somehow self-replicated. Yet, when installed together, the hybrid-clones rarely cohere into a community, but instead remain isolated in their individual spaces, incapable of relating to each other. They are/are not "our" society, wherever and whenever that society may be located. In any event, the social groupings appear to be dysfunctional, without direction other than perhaps maintaining a capacity for potential violence.

Work this ambitious and complex is normally accompanied by weighty critical texts. In Alexander's case, however, the literature is less extensive than one might anticipate. Since 1995, only three monographic exhibition catalogues have been published: Ivor Powell's *Sculpture and Photomontage: Jane Alexander. The Angel and the Catastrophe* (1995); *Jane Alexander: For the Daimler-Chrysler Award for South African Sculpture* (2002); and Pep Subiros's J*ane Alexander: On Being Human* (2009). They are not easily available. From my own experience, the literature on this

artist is as elusive as the works themselves. For this reason I am grateful that New York's Museum for African Art has commissioned this catalogue, and that Subirós, who knows Alexander's work well, has edited it. With new essays by Subirós, Kobena Mercer, Lize can Robbroeck, Simon Njami, and Ashraf Jamal, as well as not one but two statements by the taciturn artist herself, this catalogue will be the standard text on Alexander's work for some time to come. Perhaps anticipating its importance, Subirós also included excerpts from previously published key essays by Sander Gilman, John Peffer, Okwui Enwezor, Julie McGee, and Powell. Informative in themselves, the excerpts also motivate the reader to return to the original sources and/or other writings by these authors. Finally, the extensive and beautiful illustrations of eleven sculptures and installations from 1998 to 2010, as well as an equally exhaustive selection of her photomontages, make the catalogue an invaluable reference, as so few of the artist's works are in public collections.

However, it is both frustrating if strangely appropriate that the traveling exhibition (2011-13) that this important catalogue accompanies is difficult to track. It opened in March of this year at La Centrale Electrique (European Center for Contemporary Art) in Brussels, where it will close at the end of August. Its next venue will be a year from now at the Contemporary Arts Museum in Houston; at some point during its run, it will also be shown at the Savannah College of Arts and Design and the Museum for African Art. At present there is no South African venue. Of the eleven installations illustrated in the catalogue, four have been selected for the exhibition: ***Bom Boys*** (1998); ***African Adventure*** (1999-2002); ***Security*** (2006-09); and the deeply creepy phalanx of males/wild dogs: ***Infantry*** (2008-10). The configuration of the exhibition will vary depending on the venue; Alexander and Subirós will travel to each to collaborate with the institution's curators on the installations. Perhaps the uncertainty of the scheduling reflects these uncertain times, but fortunately, the catalogue's essays will provide extensive food for thought until such time as the full exhibition schedule is determined.

In their varied critical approaches, the essays acknowledge that there is no single methodology or theoretical framework that encompasses the complexities of Alexander's oeuvre. Nonetheless, all of the writers address the twinned theme of "becoming animal/becoming human." By way of offering an introduction to the range of the writings, as well as the consensus about the major theme that threads its way through Alexander's installations, I will briefly comment on several of the essays.

Subirós' introductory essay, "In Africa and Beyond: Reflections on Jane Alexander's Mutant Universe," summarizes the fascination of South Africa for the Western visitor: "I don't know of any other societal compound ... where both the immense possibilities for a fulfilling life and the overwhelming problems of our contemporary world are so closely juxtaposed and radically counterposed" (p. 14). Subirós argues that the vast inequalities that have continued after the end of apartheid are due to the global reach of neoliberalism, and that Alexander's work thus relates at once to the South African context and to vast inequities worldwide. Her work is broadly political, but nevertheless, as Subirós convincingly argues, it is nonjudgmental. Instead of a call to action (as in resistance art from the 1980s), the work presents a "collection of farsighted interrogations and pertinent, even if often enigmatic, references concerning themes, issues, and stories that have the potential to elicit a reflection and reconsideration by viewers of their perception of reality as well as of their own stances in life" (p. 22). Stated more bluntly, Alexander does not provide answers but the settings in which viewers can examine their own values and beliefs. From this perspective, Alexander may be considered a humanist.

Mercer's "Postcolonial Grotesque: Jane Alexander's Poetic Monsters" complicates this view without necessarily contradicting it. He argues that the hybrid creatures in her installations provide a "poetics of interspecies combination" evoking in the viewer the mixed emotions of fear and compassion (p. 28). The concept that encompasses this challenge to our "common notions of the human," he argues, is the grotesque, which in his view connects disparate worlds (p. 29). Citing both historical sources (Giambattista Vico and John Ruskin), as well as contemporary curators (Nato Thompson's ***Becoming Animal*** exhibit at Mass MoCA in 2005), Mercer argues that "these poetic monsters eat away at the rigid polarity of 'self' and 'other' in colonial discourse," leading to a post-human "ethics of difference" (p. 32).

Art historian Peffer has made a similar argument in ***Third Text*** (2003) and ***Art and the End of Apartheid*** (2009), although not directly in the excerpt from the chapter included in this catalogue: "Becoming Animal: The Tortured Body during Apartheid." In the larger chapter, Peffer argues that during the violent decades of the 1970s and 1980s, "artists posed trenchant questions about the relation of corporeal experience to ideas about animality, community and the sacred."[1] Discussing the work of Sydney Kumalo, Dumile Feni, and Ezrom Legae, Peffer places their "humanimal" images in the contexts of rising black consciousness and South African animist traditions. Paraphrasing Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's "becoming-animal," he writes that "becomings-animal are hybrids and are thus sterile. They must begin again at every iteration, and they proliferate through contagion (as do violence and revolution)."[2] The benefit of this reading is that it places the genesis of Alexander's "humanimals" in the artistic context of the 1980s. In addition to the trailblazing work of these black artists, the chapter also discusses the work of Paul Stopforth, Alexander's teacher, whose life-sized, hooded plaster figures of tortured detainees are the precedent for her subsequent works, although he does not receive mention in the current catalogue. And Peffer concludes, "Getting in touch with animality may be a key to a fuller sort of humanness, if indeed a posthumanism."[3]

The reason for my detour from an excerpted essay to the chapter in Peffer's book from which it was taken is that it seems to me that Peffer provides the more pertinent context for the discussion of the theme of "becoming animal" than Mercer, as well as a less generalized definition of the post-human. Subirós's introduction takes the opposite position, however, arguing that "if one searches for a lineage in her work, one will find it--as Kobena Mercer and Simon Njami remind us in their essays, or as Okui Enwezor and Ivor Powell have pointed out elsewhere--in artists such as Hieronymous Bosch and Goya rather than in the modern or contemporary art scene.... At most, one may venture that her initial production is partly close ... to the work of certain South African artists active since the 1960s, such as Dumile Feni or Ezrom Legae" (p. 21; and here, his footnote cites Peffer). Subirós has thoroughly covered his bases, and for every counterargument one may raise, there is a response to be found somewhere among these essays! Moreover, the catalogue is scrupulous in its citations. Still, because the subject of the "humanimal" can be found in the work of a number of important contemporary South African artists, such as Diane Victor or Nandipha Mntambo, for example, and is of course central to African masquerade traditions, the art historian in me wanted a broader investigation of the theme of animality, not just in theory, but in South African visual arts.

Admittedly, a dispute over Alexander's artistic influences and sources may appear to be a minor and somewhat irrelevant art historical squabble. However, as McGee argues in the excerpt from her essay, "Canons Apart and Apartheid Canons" (2007), "It is time to write over, under, and through the operative [Western] canon ... and infuse the discourse with other knowledge and al-

ternative languages [in order to reshape] the terrain of South African art and its history" (p. 174). Despite this anthology's fresh and challenging readings of Alexander's work, the South African visual arts context, and the opportunities that context could have provided for reshaping South African art history, are of lesser concern. For example, Alexander pays meticulous attention to how her "dolls" are clothed, and these "costumes" speak about South African cultural history in a manner that demands a close reading. Powell's essay, "Inside and Outside of History," did inform me that the sculpture *Harbinger*, who first appears in boots, but otherwise naked in 2004, wears a prison uniform and shackles from Pollsmoor prison in the sculpture *Verity, Faith and Justice* (Singapore City Hall, 2006). In his essay on Alexander in *Art South Africa: The Future Present* (1996) (not excerpted in this catalogue), Jamal elucidates the houseboy outfit worn by the hooded figure in the sculpture *Integration Programme: Man with Poweralls* by quoting a 1911 newspaper article stating that natives should never be permitted to wear European clothing lest it give them an inflated sense of importance. So, scattered bits of information do exist, just not in an extended analysis. To my knowledge, no essay in the current literature examines in detail the red rubber work gloves, machetes, and sickles that have carpeted her installations since 2004. The sheer volume of these items, which number in the many thousands, would seem to require attention. Surely an essay on the iconology of Alexander's clothing and implements would have been warranted in this anthology, but perhaps the exhibition will stimulate such research.

Another quibble: in her detailed description of Alexander's *African Adventure* (1999-2002) in her "Canons" essay, McGee invented the now indispensable term "humanimal," for which I wish she could have been more consistently credited. However, lest I descend further into nitpicking, I must concede that one of the real pleasures of this catalogue is moving back and forth among the various essays to see the varieties of ways in which the works are interpreted, and to mentally add one's own opinions into the mix. The essays are in dialogue with one another, and the reader is by implication invited into the conversation.

This catalogue represents the fourth collaboration between Alexander and Subirós. In 2007, he commissioned *Security with Traffic (influx control)* for the exhibition The South African Mirror: Apartheid at the Centre de Cultura Contemporània de Barcelona, and in 2009, he brought the installation On Being Human to the Galilee Chapel in Durham Cathedral in the United Kingdom. The ongoing collaboration was initiated when Alexander was included in Subirós's exhibition, Africas: The Artist and the City in Barcelona in 2001. As she writes: "I had already embarked on the tableau *African Adventure*, but it was at this exhibition (albeit in Spain) that I was exposed to a range of new perspectives on and different impressions of the African continent and art produced there" (p. 72). As a result of her broadened perspective, she turned to new themes, such as migration and surveillance, so that in her view, *African Adventure* as a project also includes more recent temporary installations such as *Security* (2006-09), as well as the photographic essay *Survey: Cape of Good Hope* (2005-09).

Because the latter is the title of the catalogue, a word should be said about this suite of fifty-four black-and-white photomontages, which is reproduced in full. Whether images of the Western Cape landscape or of urban Cape Town, the photographs/photomontages have a sort of pregnant emptiness that charges them with what Jamal terms in his essay an "allegorical force" (p. 167). According to Alexander's pithy statement, "They make reference to the land as a resource and repository of the invisible residue of human presence, habitation, intervention and conflict, migrations and social manipulation" (p. 63). For me the drama of the series derives from the fact that on occasion the seemingly banal images that may in-

clude a recognizable human or animal suddenly will contain one of her "humanimals," who are as "real" as the houses, fences, or, for that matter, Table Mountain. No longer confined to specific institutional installations, the clones now wander through the South African landscape that presumably created them, at once "ghosts" of the past or "harbingers" of the future. We do not, like a child, provide metaphorical life to these dolls; rather, they have a life of their own. As W. J. T. Mitchell has written, "It is now possible to make an imitation of a life form that is itself alive.... That is what cloning epitomizes as a cultural icon.... The questions that need to be asked of images in our time, and especially during the epoch of the war on terror and the clone wars, are not just what they mean.... We must also ask how they live and move, how they evolve and mutate ... [and animate] the structures of feeling that characterize our age."[4]

I have gone rather far from my task of reviewing the authors' essays in this substantial catalogue, and my excuse is that Alexander's work is so viscerally arresting that it is difficult to avoid voicing one's own responses. But these digressions also stem from the very provocative arguments in the essays themselves, each of which is worth thinking about and mentally sparring with. Yet, given the challenges her art presents, it seems only appropriate to let Alexander have the last word on her work. In "Notes on African Adventures and Other Details," she writes: "The experience and structure of apartheid as a social system was a significant source in my early work and a foundation for research for my later production in which I reference a broader view of discrimination, colonialism, displacement, security, etc., and the concomitant and pervasive conditions and relations of social control and political power.... All my figures, male/female, hybrid or doll-specific, are intended to act, with a degree of realism, representation, and invention, as an imaginative distillation and interpretation of research, observation, experience, and hearsay regarding aspects of social systems that impact the control and regulation of groups and individuals, of human and nonhuman animals" (p. 71). This is a hugely ambitious agenda, but one that the artist, whether herself human, "humanimal," or post-human, has indisputably achieved. The essays and reproductions in this catalogue constitute a fitting tribute to that achievement.

Notes

[1]. John Peffer, *Art and the End of Apartheid* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 41.

[2]. Ibid., 59.

[3]. Ibid., 71.

[4]. W. J. T. Mitchell, *Cloning Terror: The War of Images, 9/11 to the Present* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), xix.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at https://networks.h-net.org/h-afrarts

Citation: Pamela Allara. Review of Subirós, Pep, ed. *Jane Alexander: Surveys (from the Cape of Good Hope).* H-AfrArts, H-Net Reviews. August, 2011.

URL: https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=33689