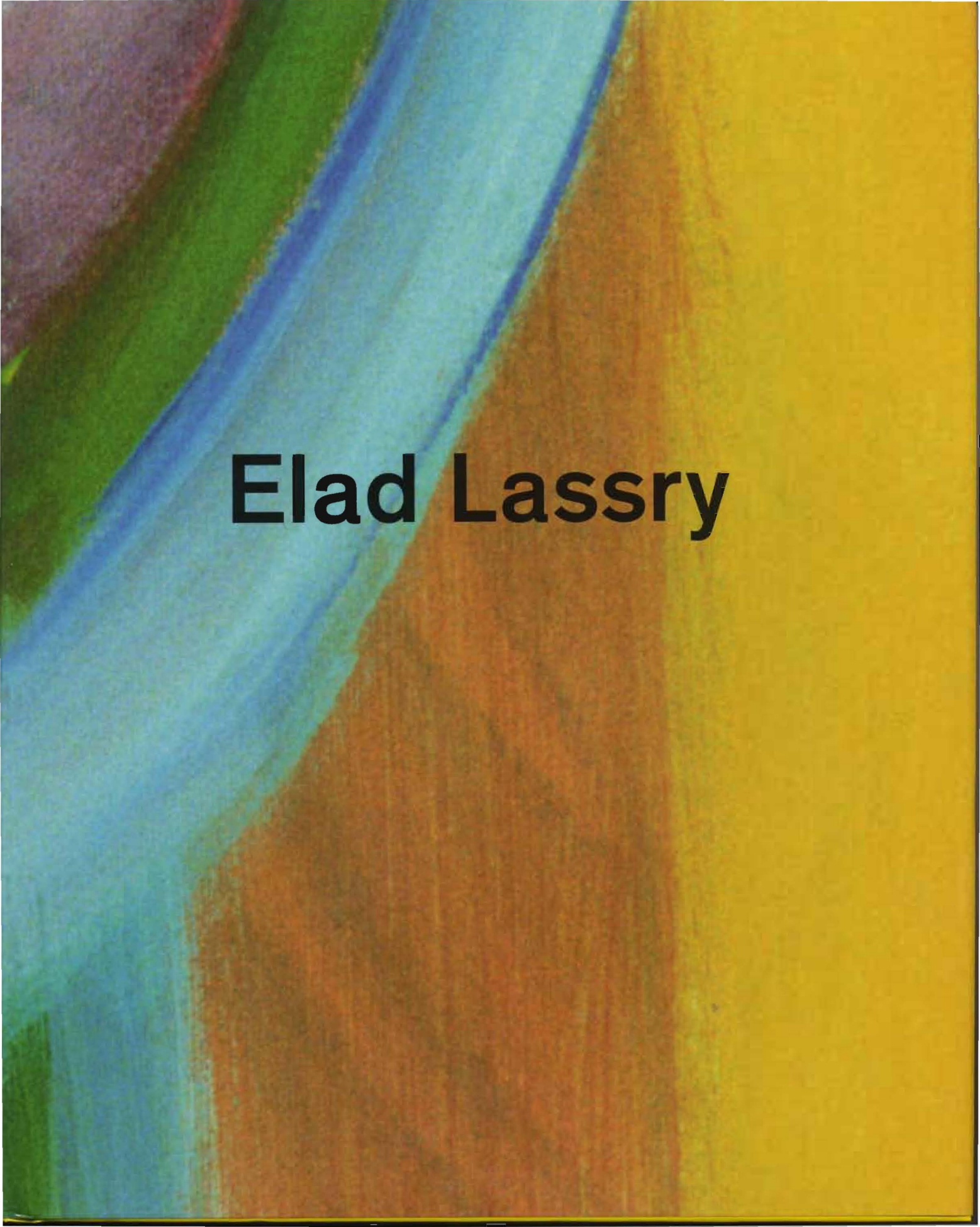
Elad Lassry

Bettina Funcke

So While in One Sense She Shares a Space with the Animal, in Another She Doesn't

"The animals have secrets, which, unlike the secrets of caves, mountains, and seas, are specifically addressed to man and his loneliness as a species [...] All the secrets are about the animal as an intercession between man and his origin."

—John Berger[1]

"My work is an investigation of both the impossibilities and possibilities that surround pictures."

—Elad Lassry[2]

We only began to separate animals from our intimate domestic lives about 150 years ago. For millennia animals had been in our midst for economic or productive use, and as spiritual messengers and oracles. One of the first pictures in human history depicts an animal, and it is likely that animal blood was among the first paints with which pictures were made. But once animals had largely lost the traditional domestic functions of use and food, the question could arise: why do we *look* at animals?

We are not linked to animals through the possession of a shared language, at least not a symbolic or spoken one; instead we move into what John Berger called "unspeaking companionship,"[3] a primarily visual or physical exchange: eyes, lips, the entire body, a response expressed through sound, scent, or touch, with which animals seem to convey emotion and expression. We look at these creatures in order to consider the mysteries of our connection with and difference from them, to meditate on their symbolic connection to our life as expressed in fables, allegories, images. How are we like them? Can they tell us something we don't have access to otherwise? What might be the advantage to lacking a common language, what might it be like without language?

In his work the artist Elad Lassry often focuses on animals: cats, wolves, zebras, flamingos, or skunks. They are taken from their natural environment and imbued with artificial stillness, posed in a controlled studio setting, frozen like inanimate objects in arrangements with props and backdrops, all photographed at a similarly close range, often with striking monochrome backdrops. The animals are handled and portrayed similarly to Lassry's smiling, motionless young women and men; they also resemble the objects in his still lifes. The rather small sizes of the framed photographic pieces—mostly around 36 × 28 cm—together with a viewer's sense that connection or collaboration lies at the core of the image, suggests an intimate, often inscrutable encounter: between subject and photographer but also between viewer and picture. Lassry's insistent negation—his preference for a limited vocabulary, and his aversion to large-scale, loud, digital imagery—could be seen as a response to a time in which images are as unstable as they are ubiquitous. The carefully considered relationship of the frames' colors to the pictures gives the artworks the solid feel of objects rather than the transparency desired by large, face-mounted images. They are picture-objects, reminiscent of jewelry boxes or small vitrines, or perhaps of Joseph Cornell's boxes or Allan McCollum's collections of objects.

But beyond these physical aspects lies the quietness of Lassry's work, its restraint and self-imposed limitation. Robert Bresson noted, "Be sure of having used to the full all that is communicated by immobility and silence,"[4] and the quotation speaks to Lassry's stillness, sensuality, and restrained vocabulary. Despite their fervent colors, his works are quiet, with a sense of pause. Time barely passes. I am put in mind of Jack Goldstein's films, which share certain aspects: protagonists staged in composed and theatrical isolation, bright monochromatic backdrops that flatten the image, a formal and repetitive character, an avoidance of clear narrative in favor of open-ended situations. Both Goldstein and Lassry emerge during moments of highly theoretical discussion around the status of pictures but, while reflecting these discussions, both artists have produced imagery that is decidedly accessible: stylized,

humorous, mesmerizing. And both artists have worked with animals, and images of animals.

Burmese Mother, Kittens (2008) depicts a mother cat with soft, beach-blond fur nursing her nougat-brown litter, and is mounted within a similarly nougat-brown wooden frame. The intimate scene hovers on a white picture plane lit so as to remove all shadow and thus any sense of space or gravity. This commercial-studio-style lighting is one of the tools Lassry uses to produce his peculiarly flat imagery, but not the only one. The black-and-white photograph *Untitled (Herend)* (2009) depicts two collectible porcelain figurines—a doe and its fawn—reclining on velvet fabric. The animals have been covered with hand-painted black-and-white graphic patterns, an Op art effect in which the viewer is lost before even fully deciphering the scene. The deer seem to float on the fabric, indistinguishable from one another, merging into one emblem of closeness and protection. The artist has called his work an ongoing image-based investigation into questions regarding culture and ideas, and here showing also means concealing, representing means manipulating.

Lassry also works with the flatness of re-photography, searching image archives, bookstores, and libraries for pictures that might become the starting point for a collage (or a picture to simply inspire an image-idea, a restaging). The images he uses, often portraits from the 1960s or 1970s, are overprinted or overlaid with colored strips or foil to highlight or obscure the people they depict, and, in the following example, the collage is itself then set in a scene just like any of his other subjects: in *Laminated Structure (For Her and Him)* (2008), a close-cropped film still of an elated Goldie Hawn with a dog, their blond heads framed by a car window, adorns the upper third of a collage that Lassry has placed before a cream-colored backdrop. Hawn is thrilled, glancing over to share this moment with the dog who, alas, is busy with the sensation of the wind in its fur.

Travis Parker and Chilean Flamingo, 90028 (2008), the only diptych in Lassry's oeuvre, plays with a different sort of animal-human bond (just try to envision the day the artist spent with an animal trainer, a flamingo, and an aspiring local actor in order to get these pictures). Parker holds exactly the same posture in each picture, but while in the right-hand image he gestures at a gracefully reserved creature, an ideal of a flamingo, almost taxidermic, the left-hand picture reveals that the bird is in fact alive: here its head is lifted, its beak open in protest. Lassry tips his hand. What might all the photographs look like that were rejected in order to get The One? Or, why is this the only occasion in which he needed two pictures to make a work? He has an interest in the relationship between photography and film, in particular the fact that film is made up of individual photographic images. Has he made the shortest possible filmic impression by joining two photos to suggest motion?

In some of his portraits, Lassry uses selective double exposure to multiply the eyes alone, an effect that seems designed to simultaneously disturb and emphasize a viewer's act of looking. In *Wolf (Blue)* (2008), however, he doubles the eyes and the back legs. A black wolf is posed before a deep blue backdrop, front paws on a low pedestal. Otherwise motionless, his doubled eyes and back legs make him (or her?) into an uncanny, shape-shifting six-legged and four-eyed creature. Why, in this vocabulary of doubling, the back legs—what do they signify? Does the blue backdrop suggest twilight? And if so, why have the back paws, the tip of the tail, and small patch on the chest been painted in the same metallic blue? As usual in Lassry's work, what in some sense appears to be "a simple picture" at the same time reveals its own curious set of decisions and processes. With *Felicia* (2008), Lassry has applied the double-printing effect to an entire photograph. A conventionally pretty young woman with a slightly guarded smile, reminiscent of a high school yearbook, is set in front of a backdrop of colored dots. Through the effect, psychological and metaphorical readings arise: it is as if the photograph demonstrates that the entire identity of a woman, or of the image itself, slips in a ghostly displacement.

Lassry's effects are initially produced through studio- and darkroom techniques, and his research and artworks have a strong relationship to the photographic conventions and experiments of an earlier time. However, the scans and finishes take place in the digital format. He uses any manipulation that comes in handy and has stated before that he does not see any difference between the different strategies or formats of manipulation. From photography's beginnings, the potential for manipulation, multiplication, and mobility was inscribed in the medium, and ghost photography is an example of the use of that slippage so characteristic of its early history: while the photograph can depict the world more realistically than ever before, it is also fraught with the potential for manipulation, and thus the potential to

make visible the invisible as well as to hide that which we think we know.

Why would someone make a particular picture? Why do we make figurines of animals, and why do we then photograph them? Why do we stare at these mute objects, where is the communication, how does the shared language work? Since we do not share a language with animals, our encounters happen largely through vision, through the meeting of eyes. Eye contact marks another curious aspect of the relationship between animals and humans: full of expectation and attentiveness. In the end the gaze is based on a certain kind of indifference, one coming from the animal's existence in another place. There is no gaze especially reserved for humans; animals presumably look at us just as they would at other animals, and this is a strange equivalence. Viscerally it makes little sense to us, and leaves us suspended in self-reflection. While we may share our space with animals, they will always remain in another place altogether, one that is beyond our reach, unknown and unknowable. We can transpose the question, "Why do we look at animals?" onto Lassry's carefully controlled images, and ask: "Why do we look at pictures? " A photograph opens into a private world that may have no use for us, or may touch us deeply, mysteriously. Unknowability must be one of the main reasons for our attraction to animals, and perhaps also has something to do with our attraction to art.

1. John Berger, *Why Look at Animals* (1977), Penguin Books, London 2009.
2. Elad Lassry, "Artists Dictionary: Elad Lassry," *FlashArtonline.com*, October 2009, http://www.flashartonline.com/interno.php?pagina=artisti_det&id_art=374&det=ok&nome_artista=LASSRY-ELAD (last accessed: June 17, 2010).
3. Berger, *Why Look at Animals*.
4. Robert Bresson, *Notes on Cinematography*, Urizen Books, New York 1977, p. 11.