

Sometimes I Think I Was a Parrot, but Then I Realized I Am  
Only a Fish: On “Animal Art” and Its Contemporary Condition  
Lisa Moravec

When I learned that I was going to give a lecture as part of the festival, my initial idea was not to theorize the historical material of this pioneering exhibition project on animals but instead to bring my interpretation of it to life. I first had in mind to imitate different parrot voices, singing a selection of the forty-seven animal categories that are alphabetically listed in the exhibition catalog *Animal Art*. Some of the animal names would have been:

APE  
ANT  
BEE  
FISH  
CHICKEN  
DOG  
MOUSE  
DOVE  
PARROT  
SHEEP  
PIG  
and GOAT

But that was not all I had in mind. I also wanted to invite you to take a swim with me in the river Mur.

Now, I have in a way rehearsed the script of the first part of my initial performance provocation, but not the second one. In fact, it would be problematic for me to realize it as the quality of the Mur’s water has been categorized as “not excellent”—which means that it is not of drinking water quality. As some of you know, in the 1980s the river was indeed one of the most polluted in Europe because factories and canals disposed their sewage in it. So, who knows what would happen to us if we were to swim, like fish, in this water today?

So, here I stand now in an auditorium to tell you more about “Animal Art.”

My talk is connected to my completed doctoral work, which I am currently revising for a book publication. In my thesis, I have theorized and historicized a selection of artistic performances with real, embodied, and filmically projected animals through a combined historical materialist and posthumanist framework. To investigate artistic modes of critique, I have focused on performance works by renowned and underresearched American, European, and British artists since the 1960s in regard to what I conceptualized as “societal dressage,” forming social, cultural, and economic life, and “bodily (human and animal) animality.”

### *Animal Art*

Artist Richard Kriesche coined the term “animal art” for the eponymous pioneering exhibition project of steirischer herbst '87 under artistic director Peter Vujica. Kriesche conceptualized and organized (note that I do not use the word “curated” as it was not commonly used in the 1980s) *Animal Art*: it comprised a large group exhibition, bringing together recent live performances and visual art objects, a foundational catalog amassing more than eighty artworks, and a symposium. The show was concerned with “live matter,” with its subtitle defining *Animal Art* as “a conveyer and medium of art.” It conceived of art as being made by artists who are aware of the role “the animal, the beastly, the organic, the living” plays in the “survival in our society.” Kriesche defined the relation between the notion of art and animals by stressing that artists (consciously or unconsciously) “resort to media with which they move into extra human communication, [and] simultaneously transgress[ing] the restrictions imposed by society on the arts.”<sup>1</sup>

The multifaceted artistic approaches to animals accumulated at steirischer herbst '87 represented avant-gardist body politics. The festival edition focused on the living and broke away from normative concepts of art and the art object. Real animals were either included to perform particular tasks in live performances, or they were figuratively represented through images or in the form of objects (taxidermy). Some of the exhibited works foregrounded political awareness of day-to-day politics or drew attention to structurally installed biopolitics and economic issues deciding over the life and death of animals, while others critiqued the societal role of the human subject in the culture industry.

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Kriesche, preface to *Animal Art*, ed. Richard Kriesche, exh. cat., steirischer herbst '87, Graz.



Figure 1: Richard Kriesche, ed., *Animal Art*, exhibition catalog, steirischer herbst '87, cover

In a critical review of *Animal Art* for Deutschlandfunk, Klaus Colberg points out how “multifaceted but thematically quite undisciplined” the event was and sarcastically notes that the term “Animal Art” could easily be added to the list of recent art tendencies since the 1960s such as Pop, Op, Poor, Ear, Conceptual and Land Art.<sup>2</sup> Although *Animal Art* was, to my knowledge, the first large international exhibition survey of late 20th-century art devoted to real animals, bringing the work of artists engaging with the animal question together, I do not focus on whether Animal Art, written with two capital As, represents the international neo-avant-garde of the late 1980s. Instead, I consider it crucial to recall Harriet Ritvo’s seminal paper “On the Animal Turn” (2007). Ritvo notes that although animals have been omnipresent in culture and agriculture, in literature, and in scientific studies dating back to Aristotle, they have remained “marginal in most disciplines,” which is productive for scholars and society at large because focusing on animals allows, she suggests, “challeng[ing] settled assumptions and relationships.”<sup>3</sup> Taking this into account, my text examines why animals have increasingly gained currency in the art world since the late 1980s.

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<sup>2</sup> Klaus Colberg, “Steirischer Herbst: Animal Art,” Deutschlandfunk, 1987, folder I.142, steirischer herbst archive, Graz. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.

<sup>3</sup> Harriet Ritvo, “On the Animal Turn,” *Daedalus* 36, no. 4 (2007): 118–22, here 122.

The pixelated cover of the exhibition catalog (see fig. 1) and the festival poster for *Animal Art*, both designed by Kriesche, as well as a small selection of works in the exhibition explicitly address the increasing intersection of physical (embodied) and digital (visually represented) forms of living and working. In the 1980s, society experienced a shift toward infrastructural digitization in the organization of everyday life, communication, and aesthetic experience due to the mass production and consumption of home computers. Looking at the cover of *Animal Art* today, three different artistic responses to technological progress become visible: one represents the trend to rather uncritically appropriate technological means of production; another focuses on bodily animality instead of on technological means; and the third applies technology as a tool to critique societal forms of working and living.

If *Animal Art* conceived of animals as “live matter” and “a conveyer and medium of art,” then a critical investigation of animals in art prompts us to question the relationship between image-based forms of representation and the politics implied in body-based performances. In other words, revisiting *Animal Art* in the early 21st century offers both an art- and performance-historical anchor to analyze how (human and animal) animality, which allegorically stands in for “the living,” has culturally operated as a form of body politics in the second half of the 20th century.

To get a clearer idea of what kinds of political attitudes and ways of thinking with and through animals were gathered in the exhibition *Animal Art*, and how this connects to the program of the avant-garde festival *steirischer herbst*, I will proceed in two parts. First, I introduce the exhibition and then I move on to more theoretical questions about the relation between the pioneering *Animal Art* exhibit and the historical narrative of *steirischer herbst*.

### The Origin of *Animal Art*

The idea for the exhibition *Animal Art* was born out of an interference caused by real animals at an event of *steirischer herbst* '85.<sup>4</sup> The festival had commissioned the opera *The Holy Grail of Jazz and Joy* by Georg Gruntz to be performed at the Lurgrotte in Semriach close to Graz (see fig. 2).<sup>5</sup> During the rehearsals leading up to the performance, animal rights activists expressed anger about the art event disturbing the habitat of the bats in the grotto. Their complaints grew to such an extent

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<sup>4</sup> Richard Kriesche, email to author, October 8, 2022.

<sup>5</sup> *The Holy Grail of Jazz and Joy* by George Gruntz was commissioned by *steirischer herbst* '85. With Bobby McFerrin, Sheila Jordan, and Karlheinz Miklin, it had a star cast. The premiere was planned for October 28, 1985, an additional performance for October 29.



Figure 2: Georg Gruntz, *The Holy Grail of Jazz and Joy* (1985), scenic jazz oratorio, Lurgrotte, Semriach, steirischer herbst '85, photo: steirischer herbst archive / Philipp

that the two scheduled live performances were canceled and only a recording of the opera was shown on the national broadcaster ORF.

The artistic director of steirischer herbst, Peter Vujica, a dog owner himself, took these protests seriously and came up with the idea to make this public interference the subject matter of an upcoming festival edition. In 1986, he commissioned the Austrian artist Richard Kriesche, an animal art expert, to conceptualize and organize an art exhibition focused on animals. That same year, Kriesche's own artistic work with animals became well known through his thirty-second TV commercial *Faktisch Richard* for Humanic, broadcast for six months in 1986. It showed him standing in St. Mark's Square in Venice as a sculpture-like living thing, dressed in a suit onto which grains of corn were glued and pecked by pigeons (see fig. 3). The idea for this performance emerged from an earlier one from 1972. While studying at the Slade School of Fine Art, University College London, with Stuart Brisley, a participant in steirischer herbst '75 and '16, Kriesche showed a similar act at Trafalgar Square.

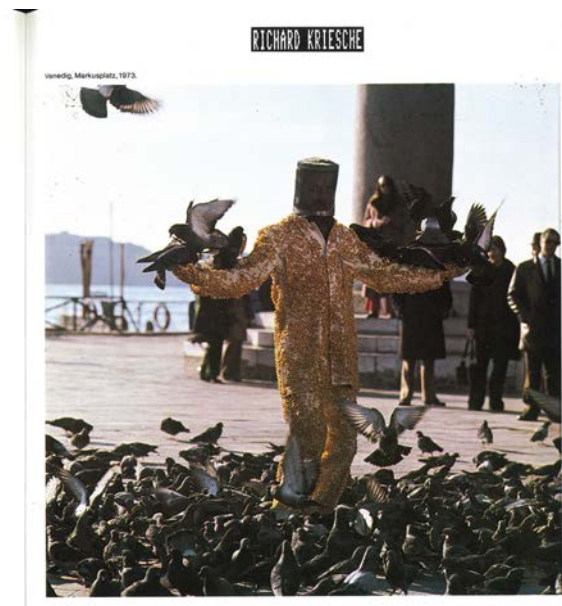


Figure 3: *Animal Art*, exhibition catalog, Richard Kriesche, *Faktisch Richard* (1973–75/1986)

More than a year before *Animal Art* took place, Kriesche contacted artists all over the world, asking if they would be interested in participating in an exhibition focused on the animal. His project comprised not only the art show at the early 18th-century building Palais Attems, but was also accompanied by an extensive research catalog for whose documentary and editorial part Werner Fenz was responsible. In the end, Kriesche was able to organize, with the help of Charlotte Sucher, the exhibition of works by about forty international and national artists made with real animals in different media such as performance, music, objects, film, and photography.

### The Live Performances

The focus on animals at the festival had an alienating effect on the bourgeois understanding of art in the 1980s. The performances of *Animal Art* were particularly critical of societal norms, which their provocative aesthetics reflected on. The Danish Fluxus composer Henning Christiansen presented forty-five minutes of his *Symphony Natura*, op. 170, sequences recorded in Rome's zoo in 1985 together with sounds of goats and chickens (see fig. 4). The British artist Mark Thompson presented honeybees that escaped their hive and flew through the city of Graz. Stiletto exhibited a TV filled with fly larvae. The American artist Joey Skaggs showed his *Fish Condominiums*, fish in an aquarium looking like a human living room. The German artist Marianne Greve staged a music sextet conducted by fifteen brine shrimps. Peter Gerwin Hoffmann exhibited microbes in glass. Denis



Figure 4: Henning Christiansen and Ernst Ludwig Kretzer, *Symphony Natura* (1985/87), composition for chickens, sheep, and goats, at Animal Art, Palais Attems, steirischer herbst '87, photo: Angelika Gradwohl, © Bildrecht, Vienna 2021

Masi showed taxidermy animals as part of an installation that played the sound of pained animals. And German artist Werner Klotz brought together seven escargots from Graz and seven from Berlin for a seven-day symposium critiquing the French food industry, which first breeds and then boils these animals to remove the slime from their bodies.

### The Symposium *Animal Art*

While the exhibition created a live experience of animals in art, the three-day symposium *Animal Art* at Palais Attems was devoted to revisit concepts and discuss social uses of animals: art theorist Peter Gorsen gave the talk “Animal Metaphor in Contemporary Art: The Passé and the Modern,” Georg Jappe spoke about artistic positions “From Coyotes to Muckworms,” art critic Jasia Reichardt reflected on the question if animals are intelligent, and art historian Werner Fenz questioned “how authentic is art reality?” Other invited speakers discussed animals in regard to further societal issues. Biochemist Franz M. Wuketits talked about “animals as being created by nature and civilization,” Hubert Kröger spoke on “Possibilities and Limits of Gene Technology,” and immunologist Matthias Wabl’s talk focused on “designer genes.”

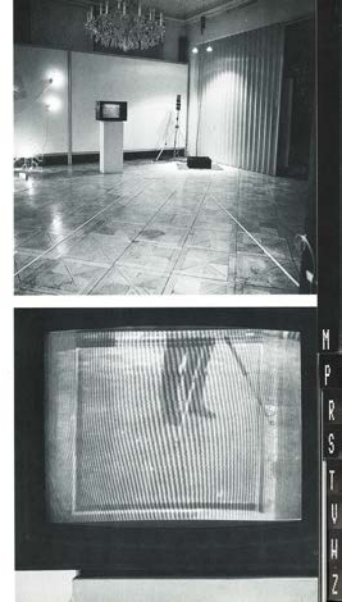


Figure Figure 5: *Animal Art*, exhibition catalog, top: Peter Weibel, *Videomaus* (1982), bottom: Peter Weibel, *TV-Aquarium* (1972)

### Artistic Approaches to Animality

Alongside the symposium and the performances and visual art, the catalog assembled about eighty-five artworks focused on animals and included statements from all featured artists. The publication was an anthology in itself as it brought together many more artists than the forty who were eventually exhibited. *Animal Art*, the book, was split into three parts: the first grouped the works according to animal taxonomy; the second was organized along artist names; and the last included the texts presented at the symposium. *Animal Art*, as the catalog's structure demonstrates, took the animal body as its only common ground and worked through species categorization and artistic individualization.

It is important to note that most of the exhibited works, both in the exhibition and in the catalog, were made in the 1970s, not in the 1980s, and that the work of Joseph Beuys, of course, also had to be included through the documentation of his performance *How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare* and his coyote performance *I Like America and America Likes Me* in New York. Among the artists included in the catalog were, to only name a few more: Helen Chadwick, Carolee Schneemann, Marina Abramović and Ulay, Jannis Kounellis, Christina Kubisch, Hans Haacke, Nam June Paik, and the Austrian artists Ingeborg Strobl, Otto Muehl, Arnulf Rainer, Peter Weibel (see figs. 5–7), Hermann Nitsch, and VALIE EXPORT.





Figure 6: *Animal Art*, exhibition catalog, Otto Muehl, *Lamb* (1970)

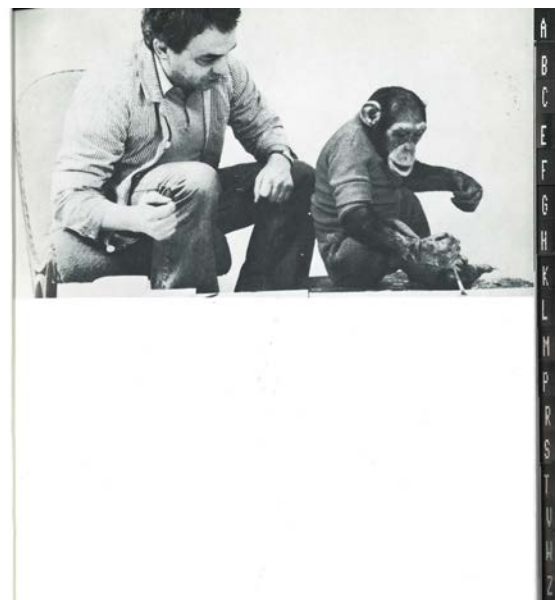


Figure 7: *Animal Art*, exhibition catalog, Arnulf Rainer painting with a chimpanzee (1979)

In the archive of steirischer herbst, I also discovered letters between steirischer herbst and artists living outside Central Europe which did not result in exhibits. For example, London-based Rasheed Araeen suggested in a letter to Kriesche to show either *I Love It, It Loves I* (1978–83), *Look Mamma... Macho* (1983–86), or *Golden Bird* (1986). The Japanese performer Kuniko Kisanuki offered to present her dance series *Tefu Tefu*, and fellow Japanese artist Goji Hamada also expressed interest in a collaboration. It seems logical that these artists did not come to Graz in the end

due to the geographical distance and material costs required. Their absence reduced *Animal Art* to a largely North American and Western European project.

### The Austrian Neo-Avant-Garde

For postwar Austrian art, which was continuously supported and developed by steirischer herbst, the catalog highlights that some of the most renowned artists (Arnulf Rainer, VALIE EXPORT, Peter Weibel, Ingeborg Strobl, Otto Muehl, and Hermann Nitsch) were primarily concerned with staging the bodily animality of humans and animals to make sense of “life,” or put differently, of reality in defense of artistic autonomy.

For example, VALIE EXPORT was included through a photo of the performance *Restringierter Code*, presented at the Lenbachhaus in Munich in 1979, which featured real dogs and little children (see fig. 8). In her accompanying statement in the dog section of the catalog, the artist notes that she understands the body as a means of expression, to which she refers as a “restricted code,” pointing out that “the difference between animal behavior and human behavior, between animal body expression and human body expression, is therefore an ideological axiom of social control.”<sup>6</sup>

The work of Ingeborg Strobel, who was part of the goat section, is similarly concerned with critiquing forms of societal control and normative practices applying to humans and their animals. She notes in two statements accompanying her two photographs, one showing lambs at a Spanish cattle market and the other a goat, that her work “illustrates the message: the animal as food” and draws attention to “dressage and manipulation” in regard to the performance life of Austrian Lipizzans of the Viennese Spanish Riding School, which she considers “a complete work of art.” For her, Austria’s popular imperialist cultural heritage represents, on the one hand, that “art is life and so is life with an animal,” and, on the other, she “believe[s] that using living animals can never be the base for that great imaginative creation called ART.”<sup>7</sup>

Strobel’s statement highlights the opposing views on the use of real animals in artworks to reflect on what I call “societal dressage,” the effects social, cultural, and economic life has on bodily (human and animal) animality: one objects to using

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<sup>6</sup> VALIE EXPORT, in *Animal Art*, ed. Kriesche (see note 1).

<sup>7</sup> Ingeborg Strobel, in *Animal Art*, ed. Kriesche (see note 1).





Figure 10: *Animal Art*, exhibition catalog, Ingeborg Strobl, *Sheep*

reflect upon bodily animality and flesh out the tensions that exist between bodily animality and societal dressage. In this sense, Richard Kriesche's pioneering exhibition project as a whole operated as a form of artistic critique of the infrastructures of political, economic, and cultural life.

### Animal Rights Activism in the Arts

Playing with the artificial line drawn between art, life, and work, the use of live animals at *steirischer herbst '87* aroused real political concerns. During preparations, Peter Vujica wanted to stage a real bull fight with six young animals, which traditionally ends with the animals being killed either in front of the audience or afterward behind the scenes. He had the idea of importing them and the whole ritual from Madrid. The costs for this were about one to two million schillings (ca. 65,000–130,000 euros). The money was, however, saved, as the festival's president, Kurt Jungwirth, wrote to Vujica that animal cruelty was to be prohibited.<sup>8</sup> The ethical standard of *steirischer herbst* also caused Hermann Nitsch's *85. Aktion* to use an already slaughtered cow instead of killing one onstage in his dramatic *Gesamtkunstwerk* (see fig. 11).

The less aesthetic but radically political work by Denis Masi from the late 1970s addressed the morals implied in the use of animals in *Palais Attems*. His taxidermy

<sup>8</sup> Kurt Jungwirth to Peter Vujica, November 7, 1986, *steirischer herbst* archive, Graz.



Figure 11: Hermann Nitsch, *Brudermord. 85. Aktion* (1987), Kasematten am Schloßberg, steirischer herbst '87, photo: Angelika Gradwohl, © Hermann Nitsch / Bildrecht, Vienna 2021

art displays, such as *Barrier*, *Search*, and *Hidden Sign*, presented stuffed laboratory rats, monkeys, and a parrot, functioning as a site for political discussions of animal testing. In the archive of steirischer herbst, I found a folder of propagandist magazines and leaflets from environmental and animal rights activist groups, such as Greenpeace, accompanying the documentation of the correspondence with the festival. The inclusion of Masi's works foregrounds that *Animal Art's* cultural interference into the operations of the art world indeed reflected the concerns of animal rights activists raised during steirischer herbst '85.

#### Artistic Interferences in the Festival's Program

The opening day of steirischer herbst '87 turned the issue of exploiting animals for food or science on its head by transforming its brutal seriousness into a comedy show. Animals, not humans, were invite to attend with their owners and eat from a rich buffet catered toward dogs, cats, birds, hamsters, and other animals (see figs. 12 and 13). In a brief report, *The Guardian* expressed disappointment that, in the end, only sixteen animals took advantage of the offerings.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>9</sup> David Lewis, "Musical Tadpoles Star in Art Show," *The Guardian*, October 19, 1987, folder I.142, steirischer herbst archive, Graz.



Figure 12: steirischer herbst '87 opening event, Elisabethstraße, photo: Angelika Gradwohl

The most popular spectacle at the opening was the performance Homing Pigeons by American artist Paul Kos at Galerie Hanns Christian Hoschek. Kurt Jungwirth introduced it with the words “No more birds of war, only peace doves.” In contrast to the majority of works that foregrounded ethical issues underpinning the political, economic, or cultural use of animals, Kos’s performance was a bold response to the Cold War. Parallel to the festival beginning in September 1987, the negotiations between the two superpowers intensified. In January, Radio Moscow transmitted Ronald Reagan’s speech for Radio America also to the Soviet people. In March, Willy Brandt stepped down as chairman of the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD). In June, Margaret Thatcher was elected prime minister for a third time, and Reagan traveled to West Berlin, urging Mikhail Gorbachev to tear down the wall, organize the Olympic Games in both parts of Berlin as a symbolic act for the unification, and reduce nuclear weapons. Kos’s performance referred to the failed attempt to melt the cruise missiles withdrawn from Europe by both the Western and the Eastern Bloc into bells. Inside the gallery, he set loose a large flock of pigeons (see fig. 14), and later large bells appeared in Graz.

Another part of steirischer herbst '87 was the photography exhibition *Österreichische Fotografen fotografieren österreichische Tiere* (Austrian Photographers



Figure 13: steirischer herbst '87 opening event, Galerie Hanns Christian Hoschek, photo: Angelika Gradwohl

Shoot Austrian Animals).<sup>10</sup> Organized by Otto Breicha at Kulturhaus Graz, it reflected upon what it means to be an Austrian artist by displaying Austrian animals. The photographs showed either domesticated and propertyed animals such as pets as well as livestock in their habitats or next to their owners.



Figure 14: Paul Kos, *Homing Pigeons* (1987), performance, Galerie Hanns Christian Hoschek, steirischer herbst '87, photo: Angelika Gradwohl

#### steirischer herbst and the Media

The Austrian press responded to the 20th edition of steirischer herbst as it used to. It provocatively questioned the relationship between the avant-garde art festival and its audience. Who this audience was, of course, not said, and no note was made of the tax payers. The *Salzburger Volkszeitung* published the article “Publikums- oder Kunst-Krise,” printing statements by the festival’s artistic director already at the end of August. Vujica stressed that contemporary art in general “cites and reproduces,” and that steirischer herbst needed a new audience rather than the audience a “new herbst.”<sup>11</sup> The Carinthian and East Tyrolian *Volkszeitung* reprinted these statements, but also included Vujica saying that art had become tamer and friendlier and was not teeming with newness.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Otto Breicha, ed., *Österreichische Fotografen fotografieren österreichische Tiere*, exh. cat. Kulturhaus, Graz (1987). The exhibition was organized by the culture department of the City of Graz within steirischer herbst '87.

<sup>11</sup> “Publikums- oder Kunst-krise,” *Salzburger Nachrichten*, August 27, 1987, folder I.142, steirischer herbst archive, Graz.

<sup>12</sup> “Brauchen neues Publikum,” *Volkszeitung*, August 28, 1987, folder I.142, steirischer herbst archive, Graz.



The press's reproduction of the festival's self-critique has since 1967 spun a narrative that feeds on the idea of the avant-garde arousing public outrage.<sup>13</sup> Art becomes provocative when it does not look like art, and when it appears in public when it is least expected. The expectation of art appearing as "art" in formal terms turns into a problem for politically engaged aesthetic practices.

The historical avant-garde radically challenged bourgeois ideas of art: Dada started as an anti-art movement; the futurists flaunted their pro-war and progressive stance throughout their work; the Russian Constructivists started making Productivist art as they wanted their activities to be socially useful rather than operating in the vacuum of theory and beautiful decor amid the move from Vladimir Lenin's idealist to Joseph Stalin's totalitarian Russia; and Bertolt Brecht's epic theater created a form of artistic resistance in East Germany, a political dramaturgical form. These aesthetically unusual artworks critiqued society in what were then unfamiliar ways, provoked—following Leo Steinberg's note on new artistic forms—"shock or discomfort," and bewildered its audience.<sup>14</sup>

## The Avant-Garde

The arrival of the Western (Neo-)Avant-Garde of Conceptual Art, Fluxus, and happenings in the late 1950s led the way to the increasing institutionalization of artistic works, including experience-based events, from the late 1960s to the late 20th and early 21st century.<sup>15</sup>[footnote] In the 1980s, the cultural field started to be increasingly standardized through the global rise of performing and visual arts festivals, which have become tourist events, financed by both the market and the state.<sup>16</sup> The growing number of biennials, documentas, fairs, and the expanding field of educational (artistic, critical, curatorial, and contextual studies) programs have not only created what has been dubbed contemporary art but have also brought forth the idea that something like a universalized global avant-garde exists. While Peter Bürger, in 1974, conceived of the Neo-Avant-Garde as a bourgeois "institution" that operated under different political and economic conditions, by the 2000s, the increasing entanglement of institutional financialization and artistic practice has

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<sup>13</sup> *Provokation* (2013), DVD, steirischer herbst archive, Graz.

<sup>14</sup> Leo Steinberg, *Other Criteria: Confrontations with Twentieth-Century Art* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), 5.

<sup>15</sup> On a distinction between first and second Neo-Avant-Garde from the early and late 1960s, see Hal Foster, "What's Neo about the Neo-Avant-Garde?," *October* 70 (1994): 5–32.

<sup>16</sup> On the biennial format and contemporary art, see, for example, Terry Smith, "Biennials: Four Fundamentals, Many Variations," Biennial Foundation, December 7, 2016, <https://biennialfoundation.org/2016/12/biennials-four-fundamentals-many-variations/>.

started to beg the question if a more recent avant-garde has therefore emerged as an art praxis per se, and not as previously as a form of life.<sup>17</sup>

In her investigation of the concept of the avant-garde, Keti Chukhrov notes, countering Bürger, that the projects of the avant-garde and modernist art are not entirely different.<sup>18</sup> As both come about as a form of practice by negating the cultural status quo, the Adornoian concept of negation is at play. This negation becomes visible through art's distinct aesthetic form, which already embodies, I would argue, a societal critique. The concept of the avant-garde I have tried to sketch here in a very condensed form feeds, at its core, on the desire for aesthetic autonomy: the avant-garde's embodied critique of social, cultural, and artistic norms is externalized through its cultural production, which is then, perversely, fed back into the system and sets new artistic norms and cultural standards.

### An Animal Art Avant-Garde?

To return to *Animal Art*, the initial provocation that gave birth to Kriesche's *Animal Art* was caused by animal activists protesting against the festival's site-specific mode of production. It was, of course, not the animals themselves who protested but humans advocating on their behalf. Similarly, it was the institution of steirischer herbst festival that, in 1987, put artistic work dealing with animality into its spotlight, not the artists who had been working with animals. Given the origin of *Animal Art*, it seems only natural that programmatically placing animals into the foreground caused artificial irritation: on the one hand, the pairing of animals and art alienated art from its formalist criteria, and, on the other hand, the incorporation of animals into art provided a new cultural realm where animals could be present. While the animality implicit in the exhibited works became the common ground, the formalist innovation of the works took a back seat—*Animal Art*, in turn, gained currency in the visual and performing arts.

The exhibition made animals and culture mutually alien to each other. Visual art and performances that feature or represent real animals do not mark a Hegelian “end of art,” but challenge our conceptions of what the art exhibited in cultural institutions and contexts can and cannot do. If the early 20th-century avant-garde emerged through its struggles of making sense of life and reality, the works exhibited in

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<sup>17</sup> Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Michael Shaw (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

<sup>18</sup> Keti Chukhrov, *Practicing the Good: Desire and Boredom in Soviet Socialism* (Minnesota: Minnesota University Press, 2020), 226.

*Animal Art* make visible how artists take apart perceptions of reality by reacting in an instinctive, animal-like way to their social, political, and economic environment.

After *Animal Art*, animals have remained present at steirischer herbst. For example, Willy Puchner's photographic series of longing penguins was used for the 1990 edition on nomadology, and a selection of stage performances were produced with real animals: in 2008, Michael Schweizer showed *Bleib opus #3*, dealing with the dressage of dogs; in 2012, Guillermo Gómez-Pena's arts organization *La Pocha Nostra* included a slaughter animal in their investigations of far-right politics; Ann Liv Young's contemporary approach to *Elektra* (2014) included pigs; Philippe Quesne showed *Die Nacht der Maulwürfe (Welcome to Caveland!)*, a performance that staged nonhuman figures, in 2016; and in 2021, Flo Kasearu presented *Disorder Patrol*, a performance featuring real horses, in public space.

### The Archive of steirischer herbst

My engagement with a cross-section of *Animal Art* in the analog and partly digitized archive of steirischer herbst led to two observations: One concerns the festival's public narrative. It appears that it has shifted, since the late 1960s, from an expectation of serious provocation to, more recently, a striking quality due to its comical character (such as the 2021 edition, *The Way Out*) or its historical self-reflexivity (as we can see through the large visual art exhibition at Neue Galerie Graz as part of the 2022 edition, *A War in the Distance*). The second observation is sparked by the festival's pioneering focus on animals in art in 1987, which addressed the changing perception of the physical by drawing attention to animal bodies at a time when digital communication and information technologies, notably the home computer, became popular. As *Animal Art* was an avant-garde exhibition that assembled pioneering artworks, the question how we conceive of the "living" avant-garde today is crucial. Which topics and media do current avant-gardist practices deal with? Can they be found in art institutions? Or have they created their own entrepreneurial and institutionalized strategies?

While the work of many now acclaimed Austrian and international artists developed alongside steirischer herbst festival, the forces of political economy, to be more precise, of the neoliberal state, have transformed the idea of a revolutionary or gallery-based neo-avant-garde. As John Roberts notes in his recent study on avant-gardism, "the avant-garde is the recurring name we give to the conflict between free artistic labour and capital."<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> John Roberts, *Revolutionary Time and the Avant-Garde* (London: Verso, 2015), 600.

Precisely by not being required for everyday life, but by having the financial means to support artistic and organizational labor in the cultural sphere, the state-funded arts festival *steirischer herbst* continues to be an important annual event in and outside of Austria. Its persistent realization in the form of a series of public events and exhibition formats, aligned with the programming of other cultural institutions in Graz, foregrounds that asking questions about, and collectively negotiating, the historical and contemporary relationship between politics and aesthetics—and ethics as it was the case of *Animal Art*—remains crucial. Such dialogic forms of communication allow idealized perceptions of autonomy and emancipatory politics to keep approaching each other.

It is remarkable that in 1987, Kriesche's exhibition and book project developed without recourse to discursive or curatorial trends but because of the public's response to the 1985 festival and aligned with existing artistic practices. Today's cultural production, in contrast, seems to be all too occupied with adapting to current events and fantasizing about ecological and posthumanist discourses rather than showcasing practices that embody cultural resistance. The growing subsumption of cultural and aesthetics practices into the mainstream discourse and the mainstreaming of certain artistic positions highlight that the relation between institutionally exhibited art and avant-gardist practices needs to be negotiated again and again. Their relation is as unresolvable as the link between autonomy and emancipation—they need each other to bring forth something, ideally, different. As Kurt Jungwirth noted in his introduction to *Animal Art*: “Let the new generations have a go. Let us give them an open stage. We shall know more definitely in a few years' time, whether one produces momentary shooting stars or becomes the next classic.”<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> “Twenty Times Styrian Autumn—An Anniversary?,” in *steirischer herbst '87* (Graz: steirischer herbst, 1987), 7.

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Lisa Moravec was a steirischer herbst Research Fellow in 2022 and first presented the results of her archival research in a lecture.

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