

Edith Jeřábková: Animal News

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Curatorial statement for the exhibition Escaped,
Found a Hideout, Still on the Run (Animal News)

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PLATO Ostrava

Let yourself be guided through the exhibition by animal avatars – a fox, a raven, a pigeon, an owl, a hare, a deer and a bee*

The animal news reporting turns the gallery into a newsroom. The building that once served as the city's slaughterhouse now provides a venue for expanding our interspecies imagination and disrupting the boundary between us and more-than-human animals. It also brings the picture of urban fellow citizenship, which is more interconnected than one might realise from information servers, news media and various statistics.

In the exhibition, artists and other residents ask urban animals, especially those from Ostrava and the surrounding area, about their lives in our families, communities and various kinds of neighbourhoods. They even ask those fleeing from us, escaping our traps and hiding in the cracks of walls, industrial structures and remnants of nature. Let us hear and create stories of domesticated, feral and wild animals, and let us find a safer and more equal place for them to live. The stories can be shared and exhibited by anyone who is involved in changing the view of our animal coexistence with their stories. The newsroom code of ethics is set against exploitation, manipulation and utilization of all animal species and individualities.

The exhibition features reports from the field provided by witnesses, researchers, hidden and exposed observers, coverage from a wild pasture, a farm, a pond, from the life of pigeons and cats in the city, from lynx and wolf patrols, from a laboratory, from excluded localities, from homeless people and

animals, and from the canaries' cage in a coal mine, among others. It doesn't present reports of a single kind, deliberately choosing different languages and forms, based on different types of experience and relationship with animals. The individual reports and investigations intersect to present a plastic and ambiguous picture of the animal actors and actresses. It focuses on those that had an opportunity to encounter each other in both public and hidden places in the city of Ostrava, on animals in between, trapped, at large and on the run. It publicizes their stories and interactions, as well as their being (in)voluntarily trapped within urban structures.

The exhibition space is transformed into an interspecies landscape inhabited in various ways. The alternation of light, darkness and gloom in the different parts of the exhibition welcomes inhabitants with different light preferences. The installation is not stable; it is changing over the course of the exhibition; it gets filled, emptied and rearranged. Routes change, specific spaces are lit, traces appear and disappear depending on who wants to be seen, when and by whom. Art is displayed, sometimes an exhibition room needs to be vacated for an interspecies hostel, which in turn is replaced by a workshop for making insulated kennels for stray animals. The installation is active in stimulating the senses, engaging the sense of smell or touch and other sensory receptors the existence of which has often been unknown to us.

The exhibition *Escaped, Found a Hideout, Still on the Run* reflects the steadily increasing presence of more-than-human animals in the city. Humans have built cities to live as far away from the wild as possible, to break out of it and feel safe. The cities, however, provide favourable living conditions for many other species and organisms. Moreover, humans have disturbed the ecosystems of grasslands and forests to such an extent that urban parks or brownfields are often more hospitable to wildlife than that what we call nature. Now, people in turn are interested in how they can coexist with more-than-human animals in cities and how to weave natural ecosystems into arid cities, how to avoid dividing up places for individual species and segregating them into isolated reserves. On the other hand, the approaching of some species is not perceived as positive by many people, as for example the return of large carnivores or the presence of animals labelled by humans as pests and parasites. The division between the natural and artificial worlds is currently undergoing severe upheaval, with perhaps the most significant impact on this polarity being caused by the so-called chimeras – animals developed in laboratories. The city is the place of their creation.

Which animals are doomed to being invisible or overlooked? Are they happy with this situation or would they welcome some attention? Who's asking them whether their current living space is big enough? Why don't animal employees have time off, and why is their work and home address usually the same? Does anyone care about the comfort of exotic animals travelling to destinations they didn't choose? Why can't a dog choose its master, and must it have one at all? When will the animal be liberated from the neutral gender? What do animals dream of when they are given space and time to rest? How can animal resistance be supported? And why should animals trust us at all?

But we have to remember that even though we are trying to give voices to the more-than-human urban population, we are still humans and we speak our language. Let's acknowledge that this is a human perspective and that we need to train ourselves out of so many things. The displayed reports wish to serve a purpose other than fixing, naming and further utilizing. They are a way of approaching the animal world of which we are a part, of seeking the possibilities of a different and deeper connection, of learning from other animals in this world and becoming attuned to them. How to acknowledge and respect their/our needs and sensitivities. How to train and expand the imagination of what is possible within this relationship.

So, let's try to listen more carefully to what they say:

Interspecies public reporting and stories about the (self-)liberation and (self-)savaging of us animals, second-class citizens, from human jobs, colonies and prisons of various forms, are produced here in the newsroom, on the site of the former city slaughterhouse, as a rebellion against humans treating us, in the past and future, as things with no feeling or memory. Who among us can live with you, how, for how long and at what distance? Which of us animals could be employed by PLATO in its gallery, a former slaughterhouse? Animal journalism turns the gallery into a newsroom and an asylum for fellow mates on the run. Testimonies from the neighbourhood will be turned into manifestos, messages and poetry. Real stories will get wild sequels, and Octopus Press will publish the most popular ones. Come and try out new perches made by artists, nests and burrows made by us animals, boxes and nesting boxes, watch the refugees, read the letters they've left us, try to escape from a trap, practice a rescue, lick a vitamin mix, get a haircut like a pigeon, feed them in the winter months, get lost and feel hungry. Our editorial staff is open to all animals including humans, of whom an animal advocate, ecophilosopher David Abram, says: "Caught up in a mass of abstractions, our [human] attention hypnotized by a host of human-made technologies that only

reflect us back to ourselves, it is all too easy for us to forget our carnal inherence in a more-than-human matrix of sensations and sensibilities. Our bodies have formed themselves in delicate reciprocity with the manifold textures, sounds, and shapes of an animate earth — our eyes have evolved in subtle interaction with other eyes, as our ears are attuned by their very structure to the howling of wolves and the honking of geese. To shut ourselves off from these other voices, to continue by our lifestyles to condemn these other sensibilities to the oblivion of extinction, is to rob our own senses of their integrity, and to rob our minds of their coherence.”

“Two monkeys escaped from the zoo; one pulled its tranquilizer shot out.”

“Three children attacked flamingos at the zoo with sticks and stones, killing one.”

“Male zebra tried to escape from the zoo, jumped through a window and damaged the gatehouse.”

“Red Panda in Ostrava Zoo earns the name Kájínek.”

“Zoo visitor breaks flamingo’s leg.”

“The giraffe underdog died not of poisoning, but apparently of heart failure and stress.”

“Woman with cigarette in hand sneaks up to the giraffes at zoo and takes photos of herself.”

“Tiger escapes from a circus right out of a show for schoolchildren.”

“Female elephant escapes from circus and is executed in the street.”

“Bull escapes from a slaughterhouse and swims across a river; shot near the town of Hodonín.”

“Pregnant cow escapes from slaughterhouse and gives birth to a calf. Officials so moved by it that they’re fighting for change.”

“Deer sentenced to death escape from the slaughterhouse, now the police are chasing them.”

“This is what the owls in Ostrava-Dubina can do. They are the attraction of the housing estate; people can’t sleep because of them.”

“An expensive hideout. Mireček the crocodile was hiding in tyres; owner accepts the penalty.”

“Lemur that escaped from Ostrava Zoo still on the loose.”

“The hyena that escaped and lived in the Beskydy Mountains.”

“Róza the female hippopotamus, the longest-kept animal in the zoo, dies in Ostrava.”

“Lemur that escaped from Ostrava Zoo is back.”

“Escaped cow roams around Ostrava.”

“Escaped crocodile was hiding in the building’s basement. Police will

investigate the circumstances of the breeding.”

“Agama on the street in Ostrava.”

“A snake in a pharmacy, a deer in a cake shop, an escaped iguana.”

“Police stop searching for the escaped crocodile from Ostrava.”

*The animal avatars were created by artist András Cséfalvay.

**Printed material for the exhibition / graphic design:
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