



Joan Fontcuberta and Pere Formiguera,
Cercopithecus Icarocornu from the
 "Fauna" series, 1985-88,
 gelatin-silver print, 17½ x 15".

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JOAN FONTCUBERTA and PERE FORMIGUERA

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"On August 7, 1955, Professor Peter Ameisenhaufen drove alone to the north of Scotland. Three days later his car was found on the coast, near a cliff. His body was never found...." Thus, in mysterious fashion, ended the career of an obscure German zoologist who had spent his life discovering and classifying hitherto unknown species of world fauna. Did he commit suicide, or was he killed by one of the creatures he conjured into human consciousness? In any case, his disappearance is not without trace; what remains is the "Fauna" series: fragments of his archives of personal memorabilia, and of scientific data—taxonomic and behavioral notes, photographs, audiotapes, maps charting species distribution.

Professor Ameisenhaufen (it translates as "anthill"), his life and work, is the fiction of two Catalanian artists, Joan Fontcuberta and Pere Formiguera. "Fauna" is organized like a natural-history-museum display, complete with a videotape of a TV news presentation on "*L'Affaire Ameisenhaufen*" (to the accompaniment of the soundtrack from Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo*) describing the discovery of the professor's archive and a popularized life history including interviews with surviving relatives. Fragments of the professor's life—diaries, childhood photographs, and letters—are shown in a museum display case. The presentation reduces the man to a public spectacle by the same investigative operation that he performed on his own objects of study. The latter represent a humorous assortment of class hybrids—mammal-reptile,

tortoise-bird, fish-mammal, and so on—which nevertheless, like sci-fi monsters, tell us that nature far outstrips man's capacity to imagine bizarre life-forms. They function delightfully as satires of human typologies: for instance, *Hermaphrotaurus autositarius* is an androgynous, carnivorous bovine, eight-legged, double-bodied, and single-headed, whose male part continually sleeps unless the insomniac female part wakes it to mate. Through photographs, made more convincing by their "aged" quality, we spy these imaginary creatures going about their activities in their natural habitats, or under observation in the laboratory. The single "real" specimen in the installation, a stuffed *Myodorifera colubacauda* (sighted in South Dakota), illustrates the seamless taxidermy with which the artists have constructed their fauna. *Myodorifera* looks suspiciously like a gopher with the head end of a garter snake for a tail and who knows whose webbed feet. The stuffed animal demonstrates how the fate of a caught specimen is always death—either under the zoologist's scalpel or through poor survival in captivity.

The droll humor of "Fauna" is a pleasure, not only because humor is generally lacking in art, but because it has the capacity to carry a plurality of meanings. The installation questions the validity of scientific objectivity and the documentary status of its evidence, which supports the concept of natural history; it asks, What is natural in Western culture's writing of the histories of others? The Western world's obsessive accumulation of so-called objective scientific data, its anthropocentric (per)version of the natural world, has the effect of distancing us from nature: the more we scrutinize it as something other than ourselves, the more we fictionalize it. If there was once a time when naturalists like the fictional