



Joan Fontcuberta and Pere Formiguera, *Solenoglypha Polipodida*

## Best of the bestiaries

Plus 30 reasons why the List goes like "Clockwork!"

by David Bonetti

"Specious Origins," by Joan Fontcuberta and Pere Formiguera, and "Clockwork!" At the List Visual Arts Center, MIT, through February 12.

Imagine this: You're looking at a photograph of a sheeplike beast with two bodies sharing one head. You're told it's found in the Spanish Pyrenees. You read a text that says, "*Hermafrotaurus Autositarius*'s pseudo-false hermaphroditism results in complete monogamy, and sexual relations with itself are quite frequent. . . . One of these parts is female and particularly sensitive to gastronomic and emotional stimuli (love for its offspring). The other part is male and very sensitive to sexual stimuli (the female part is constantly in heat) and to somnolence (the male part is almost always asleep, unlike the female part, which suffers from total insomnia). Both parts completely share the five senses. Mating is achieved by means of a vigorous leap and a fierce butt of the hips that permits penetration. The only cry the creature has been heard to make comes from the female part and is meant to wake the males for the purpose of coitus. It is a

lyzes its enemy. . . ."

What we have here is not the natural madness of God's creation but the witty and subversive creation of Joan Fontcuberta and Pere Formiguera. Gathered together under the name "Fauna," some dozen such imaginary creatures, at the same time bizarre and strangely familiar, are on view at MIT's List Visual Arts Center. In the literary tradition of Jorge Luis Borges and Italo Calvino, Fontcuberta and Formiguera have produced a fiction, a sly parody of the scientific method, and have presented it in visual form. Their antecedents in art are far flung across history: Arcimboldo's portrait heads made from composites of fruits, vegetables, or (most disgustingly) fish; the surrealism of Dalí, Magritte, and Meret Oppenheim — the Swiss woman who made the tea cup lined with fur.

They have created a fictional naturalist, Dr. Peter Ameisenhaufen (both Ameisenhaufen and Formiguera mean "ant hill," in German and Catalan, respectively), whose life and career is as weird as the creatures he discovered on every continent and in every climate until his death, suspected to be suicide, in 1955, in Scotland. Ameisenhaufen's journals, along with family photographs, are displayed in vitrines, and along the walls are hung the documentation he gathered in the field and in the laboratory of his marvelous discoveries. Each creature is documented in the doctor's splattered and illegible field notes handwritten in the original German, along with an English translation, maps of its terrain, and photographs of it in its natural habitat and in captivity.

In addition to *Hermafrotaurus Autositarius* and *Solenoglypha Polipodida*, my two favorites, there are creatures such as *Myodorifera Colubercauda*, a gopher with ducklike webbed feet and a tail that looks remarkably like a snake's (a stuffed example of which is included in a vitrine); *Cercopithecus Icarocaryu*, a winged monkey with a shelled horn growing out

of its head; and *Alopex Stultus*, an armor-headed fox that mimics — usually ineffectively — a shrub for self-defense. In a vitrine — and not to be missed — is a single photograph of two Kenyan "Aerophants" — winged elephants taking off into flight, which Dr. Ameisenhaufen himself regretfully had to label apocryphal.

"Specious Origins" (the pun is on Darwin), the exhibition of Fontcuberta and Formiguera's work, also includes "Herbarium," a similar photographic account of fictive plant species. Both shows raise questions about the scientific method that systematizes and codifies phenomena. If such fraudulent creatures can be ac-

commodated to existing structures, you might wonder conversely what real experiences and phenomena go unrecognized because they defy categorization. This delightful display is a natural for the List Visual Arts Center, which serves the scientific-technological world of MIT as it provides the Boston/Cambridge arts community with important exhibitions of contemporary art. ("Fauna" premiered in the US at the Museum of Modern Art.)

## Art

murmurous sound, a kind of sudden and repeated 'Psssst-key!'"

Or imagine this: a snake with six pairs of chicken-like feet found in the deciduous forests of the Tamil Nadu state of southern India. "Extremely aggressive and venomous, *Solenoglypha Polipodida* hunts for food and also for the pleasure of killing. It is quite rapid and moves forward in a curious and very rapid run, thanks to the strong musculature of its 12 paws and the supplementary impulse which it obtains by undulating all of its body in a strange aerial reptation. When facing its prey it becomes completely immobile and emits a very sharp whistle which para-