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Animal Influence I

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PEOPLE RESPOND TO IMAGES THAT PROVIDE HOPE

Sam Easterson has been making videos for over 15 years. Included among the museums that have exhibited his work are the Whitney Museum of American Art, "Whitney Biennial Exhibition" (New York); the Walker Art Center (Minneapolis); the New Museum (New York); and the International Center of Photography (New York). Easterson's work has also been presented on the Sundance Channel, Animal Planet, The Discovery Channel and on the Late Show with David Letterman. Here he is interviewed by fellow artist Julie Andrejev.

Text by Sam Easterson

Julie Andrejev: For Interactive Futures 2011: Animal Influence you exhibited your series of works called "Den Cams" and "Nest Cams," which were a compilation of videos you recorded of animals in their private spaces. The viewpoint of these videos offers a unique look at animal space; where they sleep, rest, hide, raise their young, and eat. What were some of your findings about the way animals live in their homes? How did the animals interact with the camera?

Sam Easterson: Although I own the copyright to all work that I exhibit in galleries, the work that I show is sometimes shot by others. A number of years ago, I realized that the animal-borne imaging and wildlife surveillance work that I was doing was not unique. I saw evidence that numerous individuals and organizations around the globe were also engaging in this type of work. Rather than just shoot my own footage, I thought it was important to begin to track and collect others' footage as well. In any event, in the "Den Cams" and "Nest Cams" videos to which you are referring, some of the clips were shot by me, others were not. I just wanted to clarify that.

As for "findings," I don't seek to collect scientific data. I'm not really looking for quantitative

information. That is not why I make videos. I believe my job is to help people empathize with animals (and plants) by giving them an intimate view of their lives. I have found that "dwelling cams" are an effective tool to help me to do this (much like the animal-borne imaging work that I used to do). Obviously, you can often get a better idea of who a person is after you visit their house. For me, the same thing is true of non-human animals.

When I peek inside their dwellings, I am looking for idiosyncrasies, as well as unusual interactions. I should note, I'm not looking for things that make them more human. In fact, just the opposite. I'm looking for things that make me feel like I'm one of them. Sometimes I feel like they are trying to tap into me as well – through the camera. It's true, sometimes the animals directly interact with the cameras. Sometimes they sniff the camera or lick it. Most often they gaze straight into the lens. The moment that happens, it's usually over. The video has peaked. I just wonder sometimes if they can also see their reflections in the camera lens.

Andrejev: In some of your first works using small cameras to record animals, you used a method that employed a camera mounted to the animal that would record video as the animal interacted



Sam Easterson

Nest Cam series © Sam Easterson

with the natural environment. How did you become interested in this approach to video making and what did you learn about animals as subjects using this method?

Easterson: For as long as I can remember, I have been interested in stepping outside myself, to see from another perspective. When micro video camera technology started becoming affordable, I began trying to use it as a tool to empathize with animals and plants. It just made sense to me to attach micro video cameras to animals. However, it doesn't make as much sense to me anymore. I think there are other (better) ways to work to achieve that empathy.

However, when I was doing animal-borne imaging work, I felt there was often a meaningful transference that took place. If done properly, animal borne imaging systems can efficiently translate gaits, sounds and environments into compelling pixels. Pixel for pixel, I have never come across such efficient footage as a videographer. A short ABIS clip can pack an amazing punch. The key is to not mess with it (in post). I find that does a disservice to the animal.

I think that is what I learned most from my ABIS work. If you let them, animals have secrets to

tell. You can't pretend like you can tell their story better than they can, through editing or narrating. In my current work, I just continue to try and give them a platform to reveal their secrets.

Andreyev: In your animal cam work, you are documenting the everyday activities of animals in their habitat. Does the animal activity you've recorded in this way challenge the preconceptions that humans have about certain animal's behavior?

Easterson: I think one of the things I have tried to do in my work is demonstrate that all animals are worth watching. Sharks, snakes, bears, alligators, etc. often dominate broadcast and cable TV. Over the years, I have become thoroughly convinced that more common animals can be just as interesting to watch. I have worked with moles, snails, armadillos, pigs, opossums, etc. I like to try to go out of my way to make them the subject of thought.

I should mention, though, that I have sometimes worked with "primetime animals." I feel like a lot of these types of animals are demonized in the mainstream media. For example, according to the International Shark Attack file, there were 12 fatal shark attacks worldwide in 2011. However,



Sam Easterson

Nest Cam series © Sam Easterson

some experts estimate that humans kill 100 million sharks per year. It absolutely blows my mind that fatal shark attacks get such intense media attention. Whatever the case, whenever I work with a primetime animal, I try to portray them in another light.

I can provide a quick illustration - when I was in my twenties, I flew to the Okefenokee, rented a canoe and paddled out into the swamp to observe American alligators. After canoeing about a mile into a small waterway, I was surrounded by alligators. They had no interest in me though. They were mostly idle. The majority of them just sat on the banks of the waterway. The ones that were in the water just sort of floated there. When I later ended up making an American alligator video using animal-borne imaging technology, the alligator mostly stayed still on the shore of the swamp, or in the water. It was a boring video but I thought it was beautiful. More importantly, it was like how I had remembered them on my canoe trip.

Andreyev: You've recorded sounds, sights and viewpoints that offer a kind of intimate relationship with the animal, or at least with the animal's actions and physical nature. Could you please describe

some of these intimate moments and what were the ones that were the most surprising for you?

Easterson: Without hesitation, I can say that some of the most intimate moments I have seen come about when one animal comes across another animal (especially if they are the same species). I have seen cows run to each other in the pasture, wolves lick each other's faces under a tree in the forest, and pigs touch their snouts together when wallowing in the mud. These sort of interactions always pierce my soul.

I was probably most surprised, though, by an intimate interaction that I observed using a Black Phoebe nest-cam. Two adult Black Phoebes were tending to their nestlings. One Black Phoebe then left the nest and returned with a European Honey Bee in his/her beak. S/he then passed the bee to the other adult Black Phoebe who proceeded to gingerly push it down one of the nestlings' throats. The care with which this bee was handled and transferred from bird to bird was truly remarkable. It would have been impossible to see this without the nest cam.

Andreyev: You've exhibited your work in prominent art galleries and museums such as the



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Den Cam series © Sam Easterson

Whitney Museum of American Art (New York); the Walker Art Center (Minneapolis); the New Museum (New York); and the International Center of Photography (New York). In addition, you've made videos for science venues such as the Exploratorium, the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles and the National Museum of New Zealand, and for television on Animal Planet. Did the aesthetic or content concerns for these venues differ from those for the art venues?

Easterson: I often find that the aesthetic and content concerns are somewhat similar between venues. I have always tried to focus my energies on the content, and worry about the venue and/or delivery method later. I think this approach is the best way to ensure compelling footage. This approach also frees the footage to roam the cultural landscape. If there is an agenda, I believe it will show. As a result, I try and collect footage for the joy of collecting videos, and learning about nature.

If anything, I think I sometimes need to show a wider range of behaviors in the final footage that I exhibit at non-art venues. That range of behaviors is often tied to larger curatorial/exhibit directives.

Andreyev: Your project "Museum of Animal Perspectives (M.A.P.)" collects and displays remotely sensed wildlife imagery. You have plans to open a permanent home for M.A.P. in St. Paul, MN, in 2013. What is the history of M.A.P. and how do you see it contributing to the growing discourse on animal consciousness?

Easterson: The M.A.P. started out as an online project in 2009. After working as a video producer on a large-scale global biodiversity project, I began to realize that a lot of the most compelling wildlife imagery (particularly remotely sensed wildlife imagery) is not being generated by professional photographers and videographers. Instead, it is being generated by amateur naturalists.

In short, the M.A.P. used a series of Google maps to highlight remotely sensed wildlife imagery that was created by amateur naturalists from around the globe. I think one of the reasons it was successful was because it really provided a case for remotely sensed wildlife imagery – that it was a global phenomena. I think the project was also successful because it relied heavily on deep linking. It cut through a lot of the clutter and brought the

animals to people in a very direct manner. In addition, because the M.A.P. did not add text to any of the animal imagery, the content had no language barriers.

As the M.A.P. moves forward with plans to move offline, I actually hope that it can have an impact on a real community (not on the web). Lately, I've been far less enthralled with the internet. I feel like I need more from it spatially and socially, which it can't give me. Some of my senses are starving. I'm starting to wonder if the discourse on animal consciousness should be thought of in more spatial and sensory terms. If a meaningful discourse on animal consciousness took place locally because of the M.A.P., I would be content. I am curious how it would affect the surrounding area. But it's even more basic for me, it's not just about animal consciousness. I simply don't think there are enough magical little places anymore. Maybe the M.A.P. could be a magical little place. A place you have to see to believe. That's important to me too.

Andreyev: You've described how your animal cam videos went viral when you put them on-line. Youtube, blogs and other social media forms have contributed to information sharing in a profound way over the past 5-6 years. Since the beginning of the period when you started working with animal imagery to today have you noticed a change in public reception of artwork about animals?

Easterson: I have noticed a change. I have noticed that works which highlight an animal success story do better now than ever before. I recently posted a link on Facebook that took visitors to a camera trap image of the first confirmed wolf sighting in Western Oregon in nearly 65 years. The responses I got were overwhelming, and they came from all over the world. The image itself wasn't of particularly high quality, but people responded to the message. I have seen this over and over the last few years. People are responding to images that provide hope. They seem to trump all other images that I work to present, no matter how aesthetically compelling they may be.

Sam Easterson has been making videos for over 15 years. Included among the museums that have exhibited his work are the Whitney Museum of American Art, "Whitney Biennial Exhibition" (New York); the Walker Art Center (Minneapolis); the New Museum (New York); and the International Center of Photography (New York). Easterson's work has also been presented on the Sundance Channel, Animal Planet, the Discovery Channel and on the Late Show with David Letterman. As a video naturalist, Sam is best known for his animal borne imaging work, which he discontinued in 2007. He now captures footage by implanting cameras in natural environments. In addition to working as a video naturalist, Sam Easterson has also worked as a museum professional in the US, Canada and New Zealand. He has held staff positions at the Minneapolis Institute of Arts, the Te Papa Tongarewa National Museum of New Zealand and at the Royal Ontario Museum. Easterson currently works as a Senior Media Producer at the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles, where he is developing video content for the NHM's new Nature Lab. Easterson is a graduate of The Cooper Union for the Advancement of Science and Art in New York and also earned a Master of Science in Landscape Architecture from the University of Minnesota, Minneapolis. He has received grants from the Durfee Foundation, the Yellow Fox Foundation, the Peter S. Reed Foundation and the Creative Capital Foundation, among numerous others. In addition, Easterson is also a recipient of the prestigious Tiffany Prize.

Julie Andreyev is an artist whose recent area of practice called Animal Lover explores animal consciousness and creativity through modes of interspecies collaboration and chance, to produce interactive installation, video, social media, and performance. Her work has been shown across Canada, in the US, Europe and Japan in galleries and festivals such as The Vancouver Art Gallery, SIGGRAPH, Cultural Olympiad Vancouver 2011, Viper, CHI, Japan Media Arts Festival, Digital Art Weeks, Nuit Blanche. Andreyev's work is supported by The Canada Council for the Arts, The British Columbia Arts Council, Foreign Affairs Canada, and The Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. She is Associate Professor at Emily Carr University of Art + Design in Vancouver, and Artistic Director of Interactive Futures, www.interactivefutures.ca.