Between 1997 and 2002 Frank Noelker traveled throughout America and to Europe to photograph animals in zoos. The resulting fifty portraits show the disparity between a living subject and the strict confines of an artificially constructed environment.

In Erie, a gorilla stands on a large branch that juts up against a massive tree trunk; through a window we see trees and hills. The animal’s stance is aloof: he is not looking at the photographer. He appears to be aware of his captivity and role as object on display. His refusal to engage, or perform for this portrait is countered by the fact that he cannot escape the lens of the camera. As early as 1908 Alexander Sokolowsky wrote about captured apes “total lack of engagement with their surroundings … one notices immediately that the animals cannot get over the loss of their freedom … I could even observe how, in order not to be seen, they tried to keep the eyes of the viewer away by covering their own eyes with their hands” (Rothfels 2002: 1).

There is no place for an animal to hide when placed in an enclosure whose only purpose is to exhibit the object within. The branches and tree trunk are manufactured, but this environment is less stark than the one in Toledo where the gorilla sits on an artificial rock formation against a white wall. The stage set includes ropes that hang from the wall, the gorilla looks straight at the camera; there are no companions in sight (we know that gorillas live in groups), and no escape. In Erie, the animal refused to look back, in Toledo, the gorilla returns the gaze of the camera but without the ability to engage. There is no curiosity, humour, play, or hope. It simply looks out, used by now, one assumes, at being the focus of the look of the other. In his well known essay “Why Look At Animals?” John Berger writes:

The public purpose of zoos is to offer visitors the opportunity of looking at animals. Yet nowhere in a zoo can a stranger encounter the look of an animal ... They have been
immunised to encounter, because nothing can any more occupy a *central* place in their attention (Berger 1977, 1998: 161).

He also notes that no natural action or reaction is possible for an animal isolated from its environment because there is nothing to act upon (Berger 1977: 160). There can be no reciprocity between a caged being with no recourse, and one who is at liberty. A 1998 study reveals that the average viewing time at the polar bear exhibit is between 52 and 93 seconds. Naturalism, realism, exhibit size, and animal activity will increase viewing time (naturalism will get an extra 9.84 seconds, and exhibit size as much as 45 seconds) (Johnston 1998: 325ff). An animal that spends all day on display will figure out that a couple of minutes of attention is all that it merits. Noelker’s lone gorilla in Toledo simply sits and watches the crowd go by in a moment of excruciating resignation.

Noelker’s third photograph of a gorilla shows his subject sitting in a large rock enclosure, less obviously a cage than the previous two, with a background of hills and sky that could be a panorama. His look is simultaneously resistant and challenging. Randy Malamud equates Roel Rudinow’s ‘voyeuristic project’ with zoo spectatorship: “The voyeur seeks a spectacle, the revelation of the object of his interest, that something or someone should be open to his inspection and contemplation; but no reciprocal revelation or openness is conceded” (Malamud 1998: 250). In a zoo there is no reciprocity but also, no escape from visual inspection. By positioning himself centrally in his exhibit and returning the gaze of the camera, the silverback makes us uncomfortably aware of our complicity in this invasive and aggressive act of looking.

Noelker here demonstrates that even an animal in an environment that simulates nature well, is caught in a stranglehold. The gorilla is there for our viewing pleasure, but that pleasure is impossible to achieve. Film and television have heightened human expectations of what they
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might experience at the zoo with ‘real’ animals. Through extensive editing, nature shows only present the dramatic highlights of animal life rather than their routine behaviours (Kiley-Worthington 1990: 130). Rothfels reminds us that, conditioned by media representations, the viewer expects the animal to be always ‘full on’ and is disappointed when no action is performed at the zoo. The large enclosures, and more recently developed immersive exhibits, like the Congo Gorilla Forest at the Bronx Zoo, pack animals into an enclosure (so that viewers are guaranteed to see something), fill the space with ambient sound, and create a complete environment that mimics television, not nature (Rothfels 2002: 201f).

Noelker’s Hippopotamus in D.C. is coming out of a heavily barred black cage and descending tiny steps in order to drink water from the pool which takes up the central space. The painted mural anthropomorphizes the animal by suggesting it prefers an indoor palace to the outdoors. Enclosing animals within exotic architectural structures dates back to the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. The Berlin zoo erected an antelope mosque, a pachyderm Indian temple, and an Egyptian ostrich temple (Strehlow: 1996: 66f). The perversity of this kind of architecture operates on two levels: the first simply disregards the needs of animals, the second displays a blatant colonial disrespect for other cultures. Amongst the mosques and temples Christian church structures are conspicuously absent, although European animals too were on display.

Carl Hagenbeck’s Tierpark, established in 1900 revolutionized animal displays, but his innovations (moated enclosures and panoramas) did not necessarily improve living conditions for animals. The primary objective was always to offer the human visitor the best vantage and most interesting environment.

Tight cages went out of fashion with Hagenbeck, yet these 19th century displays continue
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to exist. Noelker’s bear in Paris lives in a small concrete rectangle without shade. The pit is open on all four sides, and visitors can lean down along two of the walls. Yet perhaps this exhibit is more honest than the newer designs: As Mullan and Marvin point out, even the best replicas and designs are stage sets and not functioning ecosystems (Mullan and Marvin 1987: 78). In 1999 the Bronx Zoo built the Congo Gorilla Forest, a six and a half acre rain forest that contains four hundred animals representing some fifty different species. The exhibit is closely connected to conservation. However convincing these exhibits might be, Rothfels nonetheless suggests that “deeply wooded “forests” and “jungles” simply replace the ornate buildings of the nineteenth century;” that immersive zoo environments are “designed to mask the fundamentally and overwhelmingly human nature of the place” (Rothfels 2002: 7).

In his series Noelker includes two giraffes: the first is housed in a faux indoor “world,” complete with skylights, a cement floor covered in sand, and an awkwardly painted panorama landscape interrupted by wall joists. The giraffe appears strikingly out of place. What Noelker shows is the discrepancy between real and imagined: the animal is real, alive, and living, but is treated like a museum display. Malamud writes:

‘But what if Jacob never gets to Africa to see a real giraffe?’ my mother asks ... Even if my son did go to the zoo, he would still not see what I consider to be a real giraffe, but rather a cultural stylization, simplification, distillation, of a giraffe; a sample of giraffe; a (situated) representation of a giraffe (Malamud 1998: 28f).

If an encounter with an animal is not possible in a zoo, what is its purpose? In D.C. the giraffe is inside a small painted room embedded in a cultural construct that Malamud refers to as representing mute nature. Hagenbeck’s real revolution, Rothfels writes, was not the elimination of caged enclosures but rather the narratives of freedom and happiness that he developed
In 2002 Douglas Gordon had a young Indian elephant, Minnie, and her trainer, brought from Connecticut into the Gagosian Gallery in New York City’s Chelsea district where she performed a series of tricks. The resulting installation, *Play Dead, Real Time*, consists of two projections and a small television monitor. The size suggests that we are seeing the elephant in real scale and, as the title suggests, in real time. But the work is heavily edited, and the image closely cropped. We rarely see the whole animal, the camera focuses on performing parts: the legs as she walks or backs up, the legs and trunk as she stands still, and the eye, which is always the first image shown on the monitor. The screens regularly fade out, although not necessarily between loops. We see an empty screen, and then a swaying trunk followed by large feet. We see her pacing, rotating, walking into and out of the view of the camera. We are struck by the slow and laborious task of following instructions: walk around, stand, hold still. Playing dead requires Minnie to lie down, stretch out and remain perfectly still. In order to get up she needs to initiate a rocking motion. Begging requires her to come up halfway, bottom legs outstretched, front legs reaching forward. Then more hauling until she comes up and is back on all fours standing. The only time that we see the entire animal on the screen is when she is lying prone on the gallery floor.

As we watch we come to know the ‘tricks’ and get a sense of the details of the animal’s tough and wrinkly skin, the bottoms of its calloused feet, the embedded eye, but do not get a sense of the whole animal. When she is playing dead we see her, when she has to get up we feel her effort, but throughout she remains focused, deadpan, detached. We are not given context: we have no sound or smell. The polished concrete gallery floor is barely even smudged, so that while the scale of the projection emphasizes her size and impressive physicality, she nonetheless...
becomes disembodied.

The editing carefully omits everything but the elephant’s movement through the space. We know a trainer must be crucial to Minnie’s willingness to perform, but no indication of their presence is given. After a while we realize that though the ‘trick’ is the same, the take is not: Minnie is performing an endless cycle of repeated spectacle. Executing a task perfectly does not mean, for Minnie, that she can move on, but that she merely has to do it again. By completely decontextualizing her, Gordon highlights the pointlessness of her actions.

In her 1990 study of British circuses, Marthe Kiley-Worthington concluded that many animals in circuses were better off than those in zoos. They had close relationships to their trainers, all of them had names and knew them, they were only infrequently treated with drugs, and were generally retired rather than slaughtered. (Kiley-Worthington 1990: 53ff). Further, that training creates positive emotional relationships between species and fosters thinking. (Kiley-Worthington 1990: 146ff).

Vicki Hearne states that “The great trainers of every kind of animal, from parakeet to dog to elephant, have said for millennia now that you cannot get an animal to heed you unless you heed the animal; obedience is a symmetrical relation.” (Hearne 1994: 185).

Minnie’s actions suggest that she is willing to heed. Stripped of all context, however, repeating meaningless tricks in a converted warehouse in New York city, makes the elephant’s responses appear unfathomable. Like Noelker, Gordon takes away the spectacle surrounding the object and leaves the subject bereft.

An orca whale, like an elephant, is a very large animal, it lives in water, and is known for its ferociousness. In front of thousands daily, The Shamu Show, Susan Davies writes, claims to demonstrate inter-species cooperation: an example of mutual and voluntary ‘learning from one
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another’ (Davis 1997: 230ff). Sea World exceeds the zoo because here there is definitely something to see.

Hearne tells us that animals motivated by food are not at liberty, and the capacity for work free from constraint can be weak, or sometimes absent, in many wild animals (Hearne 1995: 29f). Orca whales are wild animals, and the orca whales at Sea World are definitely motivated by food. The duration of their performance is always short, and the Shamu we see is actually several whales that each comes onto the stage in rapid succession.

Davies points out that Shamu is both logo and commodity, living creature and mass media image. Not only is the image of Shamu a stand-in for all orcas, so in this sense standardized, but the supervision of animal training techniques at Sea World are centralized. (Davis 1997: 58ff). Training is based on the trust and mutual regard established over time between two individuals. Teaching a whale signals and then expecting it to respond to them regardless of where it is and who is giving the signs is to fundamentally misunderstand the idea of training.

Hearne’s caution about the absence of the capacity for liberty work in some wild animals, and Sea World’s habit of exposing whales to many trainers, might be one cause of the ‘accidents’ that occur regularly with performing orcas. Whales are unpredictable. Their natural habitat is the ocean where they travel at random across huge expanses of sea to hunt and live. Tilikum weighs 12,300 pounds, is 22 feet and 6 inches long and, at twenty-nine years old, he has lived in captivity since he was two. Tilikum currently lives at Seaworld Orlando and has killed three people. ‘Accidents’ like this occur but Sea World is quick to dismiss these as isolated and tragic incidents. Animals too can have a bad day.

Like zoos, Sea World mobilizes conservation rhetoric to pacify its audience and provide them with a viewing experience free from uneasy feelings about animal captivity and coercion.
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After Kandu died, staff veterinarian Dr. James F. McBain told the *New York Times* that the whales at Sea World do “a really important job. They’re seen by young, impressionable children and people who would otherwise have no contact with them” (*New York Times* 08/23/89). What if Jacob never gets to Africa to see a real giraffe?

The installation *Play Dead, Real Time* strips Minnie of any narrative, she is neither mythologized nor characterized; she is simply physically present, performing tricks. When the elaborate constructs of Sea World are eliminated, we are left with the real reasons for keeping wild animals: greed and selfish curiosity. Gordon’s subjects are often protagonists who cannot determine their own fate, and earlier works have examined the psychology of perverse experiments done in the interest of medical research (*10ms-1*, 1994). Gordon also produced three large-scale video pieces focused on the image of a dying fly: (*Film Noir (Fly), Fuzzy Logic*, and *B-Movie*). The medical subject, the dying insect, and the elephant are all caught in an existence not of their own making. They are forced to struggle merely to live; all are put under a microscope and scrutinized to satisfy human curiosity.

The small monitor in Gordon’s installation brings the elephant down to a familiar scale and image: we see her here as we might see any other wild animal served up to us under the guise of natural history. The dominating perspective of the camera, however, rebukes the suggestion that there is anything natural about its lens scrutinizing an animal at such close quarters. It mocks the claim that documentaries are shot in the wild without disrupting it.

We do not know the story of Minnie, whether she was rescued or captured, but we do know that she is in Connecticut, with no real option of being returned to India. What is the alternative, then, to life on a game farm or in the zoo?

Between 2002 and 2006 Frank Noelker photographed chimpanzees at the Fauna
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Foundation sanctuary in Montreal, and the Center for Great Apes in Wauchula, Florida. The resulting eighteen portraits are accompanied by text panels detailing the lives of each chimp. All have been ‘retired’ from either biomedical research, the entertainment industry, and the pet trade, and sometimes a combination of all three. Sue Ellen and her adopted chimpanzee brother Billy Jo, both born in 1968, lived out their first fifteen years in the circus, during which time both had their teeth knocked out with a crowbar. When their owner could no longer afford to keep them they were sold to LEMSIP, the Laboratory for Experimental Research and Surgery in Primates at the New York University. For the next fourteen years they endured liver biopsies, bone marrow biopsies, lymph node biopsies and were inoculated with HIV. Toddy, Roger and Toby all spent time at roadside zoos: Roger, born in a roadside zoo in 1980, was pulled from his mother as an infant and sold to a family in Connecticut. When he was three the family sold him to travelling circus trainers where he stayed until 1993 when his handler died. He was then placed into another roadside zoo, castrated, and separated from other animals. When he was rescued, the lock and door of his cage had corroded shut.

The now much maligned nineteenth century zoos lined up single species as representative of their entire animal kingdom; their counterparts in the twenty first century continue to do the same but with more sophisticated means. Animals, as Mullan and Marvin point out, need no interpretation, they do not signify and hence mean nothing beyond what they are; they require no connoisseurship, their unproblematic display needs only a simple sign that designates what they are, where they come from, and what they do (Mullan and Marvin 1987: 123ff). And even then statistics show that less than 5% of the public read signs associated with the animal (Johnston 1998: 341).

Noelker and Gordon give us familiar animals stripped of all the usual accoutrements. By
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focusing on animals who are kept captured in environments completely controlled by humans, both artists expose the animal, and human-animal as bereft. “What if Jacob never sees a real giraffe?” might be countered with ‘what if Minnie never got to see the inside of a Chelsea gallery?’ ‘What if Sue Ellen did not get to perform in a circus?’ or ‘What if that Bear in Paris never got to live in a cement enclosure with a tree fabricated to withstand its strength?’
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