



**SLIPPERY SIGNIFIERS IN GAYLE WEITZ'S  
FOXY, CHICKENHEARTED, AND HAREBRAINED HUMANIMALS**

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WITH CONTRIBUTIONS BY GAYLE M. WEITZ

Gayle Marie Weitz is an artist and educator whose large scale, fantastic creatures, which she calls “humanimals” engage the child-me, and take me to a place of charm and peace where animals can speak English, play games, and share their wisdom. This is a place of dreams where nobody hurts, hunts, hungers, or yells except in joy. This is a place of simplicity and acceptance surrounded by wonder. These humanimals accept my child-self just as I accept them unconditionally.

The grownup me steeped in visual culture critique and feminist theory has a little more trouble. I can't escape the baggage that has been acquired over years of living within the multiple discourses of identity and I suspect that there is more to these animals than meets my child-self's naïve longing for peace, playmates, and security.

In *Humanimals*, the series of 12 adult-size carved, painted, and collaged cabinet-sculptures, Weitz invites us to question not only the humanimals' identities, but our own. (See Figure 1.) What are the typical stereotypes we bring to the interaction with others? Are we what we wear? Are we what we do? Are we our gender, race, class, ethnic background? And what self-knowledge do we bring to our encounters with others?

She explains:

Anthropomorphizing is attributing human characteristics to non-human beings or things. Animals are often depicted as creatures with human abilities, such as Mickey Mouse, Bugs Bunny, and Winnie the Pooh. Most cultures possess a long-standing story-telling tradition with anthropomorphized animals as characters that represent common types of human behavior; for example, boars often symbolize courage, birds illustrate prophetic knowledge, and fish are frequently associated with intellect. Often these fables are used to draw moral conclusions, as in Aesop's “The Boy Who Cried Wolf.” Do animals really share human characteristics? Do humans really share animal characteristics? How do these similarities and differences affect how humans view/treat other animals? (G. M. Weitz, artist statement, September 2010)



functional sculptural cabinets by gayle marie weitz

HUMANIMALS

Figure 1. Gayle M. Weitz's *Humanimals* exhibition announcement photo of 12 humanimals

Weitz also invites us to consider food production for human consumption as we consider how we understand these *Humananimals*. She writes, “The inside of each piece is information and images explaining how we (humans) actually treat that animal in the idiom (such as vivisection, pork, and beef factory farming)” (G. M. Weitz, artist statement, September 2010).

An egalitarian society will never come about while sections of it are oppressed, whether on the basis of their sex/gender, race, ability, sexual orientation – or species. (Fox, p. 1, no date)

The very first question Amelia Jones asks in the prologue to her book, *Seeing Differently* (2012, xvii) is: “How is identity visible?” In this book, Jones troubles the tendency to rely on binaries to place identity—is Jones rich or poor? White or black? Fat or thin? Etc. These dichotomies, she argues are immediate unmediated easy responses reflecting social stereotypes, and we are cautioned to question the simple answers as they are always layered with multiple other designators.

At first glance, it's easy to gender the *Humananimals*. Foxy is the girliest, with breasts and short turquoise polka dot dress/jumper, yellow snakeskin shoes, animal-skin hat and gloves, and stylish scarf. Her lips are bright red and held tightly together. She stands with erect posture, hands on hips, her tail wagging; and she looks straight ahead into the distance. She seems to be on high alert and in spite of the clothing and red lips, she does not seem nearly as inviting as her name would indicate. On closer look (see Figures 2 to 5), her allure is a threat to her life.

The real price of fur must be measured in deaths—not dollars. To make one fur coat you must kill at least fifty-five wild mink, thirty-five ranched mink, forty sables, eleven lynx, eighteen red foxes, eleven silver foxes, one hundred chinchillas, thirty rex rabbits, nine beavers, thirty muskrats, fifteen bobcats, twenty-five skunks, fourteen otters, one hundred twenty-five ermines, thirty possums, one hundred squirrels, or twenty-seven raccoons. (*In Defense of Animals*, 2012, para. 1)



Figure 2. *Humanimal # 1 – Foxy* (open)



Figure 3. *Humanimal # 1 – Foxy* (detail)



Figure 4. *Humanimal # 1 – Foxy* (addresses fur). Carved, painted, and collaged wood. Approximately 65x18x10 inches. 1992-2008



Figure 5. *Humanimal # 1 – Foxy* (back)

*Chickenhearted*, with his huge decorated brown cowboy boots is clearly male. (See Figure 6.) Sporting blue jeans, yellow and white checked short, bola tie, and especially the holster and two guns, with the golden star of authority (sheriff?) on his stripped vest indicate that he is in charge. However his cowboy hat is not as big as what I would expect on a “real” lawman, and his erect posture and neat clothing contradict his hands in the act of drawing his guns. Perhaps this *Humananimal* is a chicken as his name indicates. And, as a chicken, he has been exposed to routine cruelty in the chicken industry, and finds that he is unable to enforce protection from torture for his species because of the human profiteers.



Figure 6. *Chickenhearted* with artist (addresses poultry, eggs, and down) Carved, painted, and collaged wood. Approximately 74x24x11 inches. (1992-2009)

Doctor *Harebrained* is a male rabbit. While it may be the nature of the sculpture series that all the *Humananimals* are tall, erect, and upright, Harebrained seems especially stiff. His glasses, pocket protector, and white medical jacket visually scream intelligence, and nerd. His yellow and blue shirt, matching blue polka dot tie, neat slacks, and sensible shoes connote reliability, stability, and authority. But he is a rabbit. Is he a gynecologist since rabbits are quite familiar with reproduction. Or a scientist calling our attention to vivisection, the invasive cutting technique used on live animals to test cosmetics and other products to see if the products are good for humans. It can be painful, abusive, and be the cause of torture-like death.<sup>1</sup>



Figure 8. *Harebrained* (detail)



Figure 7. *Harebrained* (addresses vivisection) Carved, painted, and collaged wood Approximately 68x28x12 inches. (1992-2009)

1. For further information about vivisection and alternatives to vivisection see Animal Rights Concerns (2009) at <http://www.animalsuffering.com/resources/facts/vivisection.php>.

Harebrained, and the others, seem more human than animal because they wear clothes, stand erect, and sport the signifiers of their professional, personal lives, and personalities. Weitz invites us to question what it means to be human and what it means to be animal. Genetic research bringing the chicken, hare, fox, sheep, and other animals into more intimate connection with the human animal is on the horizon, if not already here.

What makes each of us, as individuals, human to one another, or, more generally, what makes an individual creature human? We have not often had to ask the question because of the species line based on reproductive capacity and incapacity, although “degrees of humanness” were explored in the various eugenic programs of the last century. Now the biotechnological possibility of fusing human and other forms of life is presenting the question in a new and serious way. If the traditional biological means of defining species are no longer reliable, what other criteria might determine what is “human” and what is “nonhuman”? (Vining, 2008, p. 50)

The desire, effort, and spending of money to combine human and animal are pushed partly by pure curiosity, or by competitiveness among people who find themselves equipped to do it. Partly it is transgressive, and some involved have said as much. And partly it is driven by the hope of medicine that can reduce human suffering and vanquish human disease. It has come up of course against opposition to any human cloning and any experimentation on human creatures that cannot give consent, including the human in the womb. There are other grounds for opposing it too—among them, where cloning is involved, the difficulties in obtaining a supply of human eggs. (Vining, 2008, p. 51)

Genetic science might shine brilliantly with possible cures to serious diseases and reduce human suffering by creating real human-animals, and my child-self might delight in adventures with them, but it's not easy for my adult female self to imagine use of my eggs or those of my daugh-

ters for this purpose.

Animals continue to be considered and consumed as food by the majority of both women and men although there are multiple arguments for revising our diets to eliminate animals and their byproducts without harm to humans and with great benefits to the exploited and abused animals trapped in the food industry (Harper, 2010). All animals suffer under systems of factory farming and but the females experience the most severe abuses:

Battery hens are imprisoned in tiny cages with several other hens. Their beaks are cut off with a hot wire guillotine, an extremely painful process and many have great difficulty eating properly for the rest of their short lives. They are forced to lay egg after egg and after a year, their bodies ‘spent’, they are dragged from the cages, stuffed into crates, trucked to the abattoir and shackled upside down on a conveyor belt to await slaughter. Many suffer multiple fractures during this process.

Dairy is an industry built on the control of the reproductive systems of female non-humans (surely a feminist issue given the movement's emphasis on fighting for women's rights to control their own bodies and reproductive systems). Cows are kept perpetually pregnant, so that their babies (whom they carry for nine months, much like human mothers) and their babies' milk can be stolen from them. Cows bellow with grief at the loss of their young. Female calves' horns and extra teats are cut off with no anaesthetic and in some areas the same happens to their tails. Milking machines attached to the cow's body result in painful infections of the teats such as mastitis. The cycle of forced pregnancy, birth, theft and grief continues until the cow's body can give no more and she is shipped off to be slaughtered.

Female pigs are forcibly impregnated and kept in ‘sow stalls’ – tiny spaces not big enough for them to turn around, where they often go insane with boredom as they are social creatures. They

are kept like this for life, constantly impregnated. After giving birth, they are forced to nurse their babies from the confines of gestation crates where they can barely reach them. (Fox, no date, p. 1)

On the surface, and at first glance, and on the outside, Gayle Weitz's *Humananimals* are benign invitations to play, dream, and enjoy her excellent artistic vision. A deeper look at these strange creatures, and a look inside their cabinets is a call to awareness of a type of oppression that we need to consider: "our fight for justice as women, as feminists, is inextricably linked to racism, homo/transphobia, class and speciesism as well as the devastating destruction of the planet and the damage to our health through unethical corporations' promotion of products that they deceitfully label 'food' (Fox, no date, p. 1).

We always bring our own knowledge, histories, and experiences to every encounter with others – whether human or animal—and we necessarily privilege our own unique position because we really don't have any other without pretending. Even acknowledging that the markers of identity are performative and slippery signifiers, it is easy to revert to simple dichotomies and stereotypes to understand the Other.

Animals have always been Other to humans, and Weitz makes it easy for viewers to initially misunderstand her creatures. She intentionally gives them stereotypical names. Through the visual language of dress and attitude, she adds a redundancy to the stereotypes to direct our understanding. And then she upends this understanding by inviting viewers to come closer, to open them up to see a deeper truth. Inside each stoic façade is Weitz's thorough layer of criticality, inviting our consideration of issues that exist in nightmares, and inviting us to question the nature of our relationships with our animal companions.

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**Authors' Bio**

Deborah L. Smith-Shank received a Ph.D. from Indiana University in 1992, and serves as Chair of Arts Administration, Education and Policy at The Ohio State University. She is also Emeritus Professor of Art at Northern Illinois University where she served as Head of the Art Education program. Smith-Shank has taught K-12 art, as well as undergraduate and graduate students for over 30 years. Her research is involved with artifacts of visual / material culture and social justice examined through semiotic and feminist lenses and has published over 100 journal articles, book chapters, and books. Smith-Shank currently serves as elected Vice President of the International Society for Education Through Art (<http://www.insea.org/>) and is co-editor and founder of the journal of Visual Culture & Gender, an international, freely accessed, multimedia juried journal (<http://www.emitto.net/visualculturegender>). Contact the author at [smith-shank.1@osu.edu](mailto:smith-shank.1@osu.edu)

Gayle Marie Weitz received a Ph.D. from the University of Wisconsin in 1994, and currently serves as Coordinator of Art Education at Seton Hill University in Greensburg, PA. She was also Professor of Art at Appalachian State University where she served as Founder and Director of the Community Arts School, Head of the Art Education program, and Chair of the Faculty Senate. Weitz has taught K-12 art, as well as undergraduate and graduate students for more than 30 years. Her award-winning cabinets have been shown in hundreds of museums and galleries and publications across the country. Currently she is working on two series: Clothesline, which addresses the exploitative practices of many textile industries in third world countries, and Kitsch'n Folk, which addresses major diseases associated with poor lifestyle choices. Contact her at [weitz@setonhill.edu](mailto:weitz@setonhill.edu)