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## When Art Abuses Animals

**Vancouver humane organizations confront art gallery over an exhibit's use of live animals**

If a caller told you that a new local art exhibit featured dozens of cats and dogs trapped together with no food, water, or places to retreat, you would scramble out the door to help those animals. But what if the exhibit contained lizards, tarantulas, and insects? Would your response be the same?

It was for staff at the Vancouver Humane Society and the British Columbia SPCA, after they learned that live scorpions, snakes, crickets, and other creatures would be displayed in Chinese artist Huang Yong Ping's "Theatre of the World" exhibit at the Vancouver Art Gallery.

In this excerpted interview, the Vancouver Humane Society's project and communications director, Peter Fricker, talks with freelancer Julie Miller Dowling about the exhibit, its unfortunate conflict between artistic expression and humane treatment of animals, and its subsequent closure.

### **AS: How did you find out about the exhibit?**

Peter Fricker: It came to our attention the first week of April. We had a complaint [from an art history student] about an exhibit that was about to start at the Vancouver Art Gallery. The description was that a number of different species were to be confined to a small space. So we contacted the gallery, and they basically confirmed it.

### **What were your principle objections?**

We were objecting in two ways. One was about the conditions and appropriateness of the exhibit as a way to accommodate animals and the specific effect on the animals. But our second objection was on principle, one we hold across the board: We are against the display of ex-

otic animals for entertainment or artistic purposes. It is not morally right to exploit animals in this way; to use [this] as art is just wrong. We made this clear—that no matter what the art gallery did to improve specific conditions for the animals, we would have objected to it on principle in any case.

### **Can you describe the display?**

Basically it consisted of a long table, about five by eight feet, and over it was a kind of dome made of mesh material, resembling a tortoise shell. Under this dome were a variety of animals, including toads, snakes, lizards, scorpions, tarantulas, and insects. Extended over this was a large spotlight lamp that was totally inappropriate for reptiles. Although the gallery said it had consulted with a herpetologist, the display was certainly not designed even with the

minimum standards you'd see in a zoo. The SPCA engaged a veterinarian to examine the condition of the animals and produce a report. The report found problems with the animals' conditions, lack of water, heat problems from the lamp, improper lighting, lack of hiding places for retreat, stress caused by proximity of species, and potential for conflict and aggression.

### **Why were animals being used in the exhibit?**

In previous reviews and promotional material, it was clear that it was meant to be a metaphor for human conflict. We interpreted that animals were being thrown together to let people observe conflict and aggression: "Let's see what happens. Will they get along? Will they conflict? How will they conflict?" That is the artistic intention. And in our view, whatever the artistic merit might be, it was completely inappropriate and meaningless compared to the importance of ensuring animals were treated humanely. In our view they clearly weren't, and that was the same view confirmed by the SPCA and the veterinarian.

### **Did your organization and the BC SPCA make recommendations to the gallery?**

Yes. The SPCA, based on the veterinarian's report, made specific recommendations. The lighting was changed, more materials were put in to provide hiding spaces for the animals to retreat, and more water was provided. The SPCA demanded removal of scorpions and tarantulas, I think because of the potential for conflict. At that point the art gallery, I believe on the instruction of the artist himself, refused to make further changes and follow those recommendations because they said they felt it would compromise the integrity of the artwork. They decided instead to remove all animals. Whether [the reasons they gave] were true or whether they caved because of mounting pressure, we don't know.

### **What was the artist's response to the closure?**

Judging from the statements he issued, when the decision was made to remove

the animals, he was not very happy. He basically accused those who were against it of not understanding the concept he was trying to get across. He thought we did not understand the importance of the art. Some people just valued artistic expression so highly, considered it almost sacred, that they would not listen to opposition.



### **How did the public respond?**

Our supporters were pretty well unanimously in favor of our position. There was a split among the public. We had about 15 total e-mails, and 10 of those were in favor of our position and five were negative. The SPCA also received quite a bit of feedback, including some quite nasty e-mails. These were from people who felt that the animal rights people were censoring art, and that there was nothing more important than artistic freedom of expression. We acknowledged that two very important values had clashed: the freedom of artistic expression and humane treatment of animals. And in our view the humane treatment of animals was going to trump artistic expression every time.

Part of the problem was that people just read the headlines or first paragraph and got an inaccurate idea of the argument. For example, a lot of the headlines described it as a bug exhibit or insect exhibit. One e-mail said, "Look, I spray bugs at home. What's the big deal here?" But it wasn't just insects; it was a number of different animal species.

### **But had it just been insects, your response wouldn't have been any different?**

We would have definitely objected. One of the ways I explained it to one journal-

ist is that people may not value the life of a fly very much, but if you came upon your child pulling wings off the fly, most would find that extremely disturbing. Why is that? Perhaps it isn't because we value the life of the fly much but because we have a responsibility—and it's an important human value—to treat animals and all life humanely. Even for people who wouldn't value the life of the insects, surely it is still inappropriate to put them in a position where conflict between them is being used as entertainment or as art.

One of the other things we pointed out was that some people who didn't have a problem with this would have certainly objected if it had been kittens, puppies, or birds. Our position was that there is no difference in principle. People generally have more affinity for kittens, birds, and dogs than they do for reptiles and insects. But we explained to people that just because people find puppies and kittens cute, we can't base our decisions on what is humane and what is not humane on the level of cuteness. We must use other criteria.

### **Was there a lot of media coverage?**

The coverage of this story was worldwide. This story appeared in the media as far away as Taiwan, France, South Africa—even the *New York Times* did an item on it. It strikes a chord, gets people interested, and creates a lot of controversy because of the philosophical questions of what is art, of which value is more important.

Although we think important principles and issues were at stake here, we found it frustrating that some of the other issues we're dealing with—for example, the battery cage issue, [where] there are 26 million battery cage hens in Canada suffering immeasurably—are difficult to get into the media and into the public understanding. I'm not downplaying the importance of the animals who were involved in this exhibit, but we wish we could get that kind of attention to some of the other issues we're working on. **AS**

*Julie Miller Dowling is a freelance writer living in the San Francisco Bay area.*