

Our Concrete Jungle: Neil Goldberg's "One Version of Events"

BY NOELLE BODICK | MAY 04, 2015



Maybe you've seen the signs around the city: "Eat like an idealist," "Grow up strong and harmless," "Values matter." The messages are not promoting some presumptuous food co-op or grassroots animal liberation movement. No, they're plugs for the huge, for-profit corporation Whole Foods Market, Inc. The ads' creators have obviously learned the

lesson enunciated by the title character of Adelle Waldman's novel "The Love Affairs of Nathaniel P": "All they have to do is put some picture of an earnest lesbian couple on a cereal box, and we just assume it comes from some free-love worker's paradise."

Like Waldman, through her protagonist, the artist Neil Goldberg skewers the self-righteous eating habits of New York's privileged class in his small, humorous show "One Version of Events," at Participant Inc. (through May 24), on the city's Lower East Side. Together, the drawings, photographs, and videos displayed suggest that "conscientious"

consumerism — including the purchase of artisanal almond butter and organic kale muffins — merely disguises our true, exploitative relationship to the natural world.

The tone is never scolding. Goldberg is the Montaigne of contemporary artists — unpretentious and generous in his evaluation of the human animal. In his show at the Museum of the City of New York in 2012, he documented instantly relatable New York rituals, from commuters' gazing disconsolately after a just-missed train, to midtown workers' surveying an inscrutable self-service salad bar, to East Village shop owners' hoisting their metal security gates in the morning.

The first part of the Participant show evinces a similar anthropological bent. The artist trains his gaze — rather voyeuristically — on gay couples exiting a New York Whole Foods store, each man clutching full brown-paper bags or shouldering eco-friendly reusable ones. These visual records do not so much point accusingly at the self-satisfied shoppers as hilariously send up the liberal idealist delusion that by paying higher prices for certified-organic food, our hands are wiped clean, even if we are actually benefiting the investors of an anti-union company. Hey, when Whole Foods says that “values matter,” it didn't specify whether these were ethical or pecuniary.

In the show's next part, animals strike back at the human world. Drawn in graphite, a pride of lions feasts on a woman, vultures tear open the bellies of a couple, and a leopard, lips drawn in a prodigious snarl, wraps its teeth around the neck of a girl. It's perhaps eyebrow raising to learn that the title of the series is “Wild Animals Eat My Family and Me.”

The hunt continues in the projection “One Version of Events No. 3.” The video begins with a cheetah, ears back, pouncing on a wildebeest, dragging down its hindquarters, and a bird of prey descending on its victim. But gradually the savannah dissolves into a planetary and then galactic background, while the animals become abstracted white outlines. Nearby, another video shows bubble sphere graphics, each hosting a scene of slaughter: a lion finishing off a graceful antelope, another big cat snapping the neck of a baby elephant. Here Goldberg transforms the wild world into, essentially, a glorified Apple computer screensaver, circa 2000.

The artist implicates himself as well as the consumerist society in this defanged and declawed nature. In the video “Reverse Commute,” he crawls backward on all fours from the East Broadway F station to an apartment, while in “Shit Hunt,” he solicits dog owners to collect their animals' bagged feces, freshly scooped up from the city's sidewalk.

Behold how fierce and savage our concrete jungle is.



Neil Goldberg's 'One Version of Events' Makes Animals of Us All

By Jessica Dawson

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There's a reason they call it the urban jungle. Count on artist Neil Goldberg to remind us.

In a wide-ranging show at Participant Inc., Goldberg pings between the veldt and the Whole Foods, recalling our animal nature even while pointing out our housecat reality. The 51-year-old New York-based artist is a sharp observer, and the often hilarious proceedings chronicled in "One Version of Events," his exhibition of recent video, photographs, and drawings, will taste particularly fresh to those starved from too many art-about-art-about-art-theory shows. Goldberg documents humanity's quirks, wishes, and darker desires — beginning with his own.

A suite of nine drawings, "Wild Animals Eat My Family and Me," is exactly that. We see vultures munching on Goldberg's mom, a cheetah jawing his nephew's jugular, and a wolf making a TV dinner of the artist. Because Goldberg renders the beasts as unhurried and the victims as resigned (or is it simply deceased?), these pictures have a deadpan humor that comes off as more of a Freudian solution to domestic discontent than a horror show. (Who among us hasn't imagined evisceration as a solid resolution to a laundry argument?) The drawings' soft contours and small scale add a dulcet intimacy, imbuing the proceedings with a tinge of eroticism.

From here we set out for precincts both animal and human, and their juxtaposition hints at some of the absurdity behind modern-day lives. Five looping videos of animals on the hunt — among them, a cheetah chasing an antelope and a hawk swiping a rabbit — become progressively more abstract (they end up as simple outlines of predator and prey) as they conjure the thrills, at once gustatory and sexual, of the hunt. Across the room, a wall of 45 inkjet prints of photographs of gay couples exiting Whole Foods, shopping bags in hand, suggests how far from those origins we've come.

In past works that took New Yorkers as subjects, Goldberg shot and tightly edited footage of cubicle drones circling the salad bar or straphangers emerging from the subway, lending a heroic cast to the minor anxieties of urban living. At Participant he is

both observer and prankster, setting up strangers in a charade that reveals much about our economies of value. The gem of a two-and-a-half-minute video *Shit Hunt* is a string of vignettes in which the artist approaches dog owners as they bag Fido's feces and offers five bucks for the turds. We see the range of reactions, from bewilderment to scorn: One woman can barely be pried from her cellphone and seems pleased to get the shit off her hands. Some take Goldberg's money, others refuse it. Some won't hand over the poop. Meanwhile, the dogs sniff the artist's pant leg. The intervention is as hilarious as it is instructive: Goldberg creates an economy out of a set of circumstances, an economy that changes the value of excrement. All the while, the canines (remember they descend from wolves?) look on.

Goldberg has borrowed his show's title from Polish Nobel laureate Wislawa Szymborska's elegant poem about disembodied beings contemplating the possibility of living. But "One Version of Events" also sounds like the language of a police blotter. With the crimes in Goldberg's show ranging from wished-for murder to waste trafficking, it's high time we all got locked up. We're animals.



One Version of Events: Neil Goldberg at Participant, Inc.

May 10, 2015

by Joseph Keckler



One Version of Events No. 5 (Spheres), 2015, HD video, duration variable. All images © Neil Goldberg

Over the course of roughly 20 years Neil Goldberg has created a poetic body of work that is unified more by ideas than a singular visual style. His ongoing interest in moments of vulnerability has motivated him to create surreptitious photographic portraits of **individuals who just missed the train and to film shoppers circling a salad bar** as they decide what to eat. Goldberg also draws on material from his own life, often to powerful and haunting effect. For instance, after his father died, Goldberg cast his father's hearing aid in gold and filled his Toyota with autumn leaves that appear to pour out from every door.

In his new solo exhibition, *One Version of Events*, on view at **Participant Inc.** (253 E. Houston in Manhattan) through May 24th, Goldberg focuses loosely on eating and being eaten, this time including more visible brutality than one generally encounters at the salad bar. In one series of drawings he envisions various wild animals devouring him and his loved ones. And in the central video installation, *One Version of Events No. 5 (Spheres)*, he depicts countless portraits of predator and prey, caught in the moment that one has locked its jaws around the other's neck. The pairs of animals drift gently through a quiet black void, contained within austere bubbles. These images begin to feel at once sorrowful, tender, and even humdrum. In another video installation from the same series, Goldberg features a wolf in pursuit of an elk. But the two animals gradually become more abstract, transforming into simple forms outlined in white. And by the time the inevitable capture occurs, they read simply as amoeba-like blobs merging, or two mapped regions with undulating borders, a pair shifting territories that join.

For a piece very different in tone, though no more appetizing, the video *Shit Hunt* finds Goldberg himself as a pursuer of another sort; the artist hustles down the streets of New York, on the lookout for dogs who have just defecated so that he can ask their owners if he can buy the droppings for \$5. According to Goldberg, many New Yorkers declined his handsome offer and even those who agreed to it tended to pause for a moment to stare bemusedly at the money in their hand, apparently wondering how to feel about the exchange that had just taken place. He made a policy of replying, "I'd rather not say" whenever someone asked what he intended to do with the poop.

I recently visited Goldberg in his Lower East Side studio, where we spoke about his work.

VICE: You've dealt with eating before in your work.

Neil Goldberg: Yes, in *Salad Bar*. I just find that moment so tender, on one hand. I love watching people giving their order to a waiter or waitress. Maybe that will be the next project. There's something kind of open and needy and touching and vulnerable on their faces.

On everyone's face? Aren't there some demanding customers out there?

I guess I'm thinking of the people I choose to eat with! I'm sure some people are like *Why isn't the food I have yet to order already here?*

But this show deals with animals eating each other. What brought you to focus on this exchange, and on these moments of going in for the kill?

I think the fundamental structure of life, as pertains to our need to eat, has always been horrifying and borderline unbelievable to me. I always say: imagine if there were a Hollywood science fiction pitch meeting. The screenwriter says to the producer *OK, there's this planet and on this planet there are creatures that chase each other. Every now and again one creature catches another, tears its body apart, and puts that body inside its own.* Can't you just imagine the producer saying *OK, but can't you bring it down a little bit?* The fact that life involves, inevitability, one organism overriding another's will to live—and that being built into the structure of life—has always felt incredibly powerful to me.

In the videos and images from your show, it seems that the categories of predator and prey dissolve in a way.

That's a good way to put it. There's a moment of disinterest in the eyes of predators. A kind of blasé attitude at a certain point. And it feels like there's almost a type of relenting or resignation on the face of the prey, though I realize I'm projecting.

I was the kid who was depressed for a month when I saw *Old Yeller* and Old Yeller gets shot. So this is partly a way for me to deal with this intrinsic horror. I was talking to this astrophysicist, Michelle Thaller, and I asked her about eating. She said, "we're all atoms." And she didn't put it this way, but the gist was that eating is a technicality—in that the fundamental building blocks never change. Atoms don't change. So this fluidity between predator and prey is meant to get at the idea of this constant exchange of our composition.

Why did you choose to put these images inside of bubbles? Inside of these glass-like spheres?

It was mostly an intuitive decision—I know that word 'intuitive' is suspect. But I think I was trying to vignette these couples. Much of the show is about relationships and couples, in a weird way. It was a way to frame these pairs and I wanted to suggest the cosmically infinite. There's something about the way that moment speaks to something about the structure of the universe, of our known world. Another thing this astronomer talked about was the way galaxies and universes will consume each other.

This footage of chases was taken from what, documentaries?

Yeah, all from the Internet. There's something about the low-res quality of the images that feels like it supports what I'm trying to communicate about these dissolving bodies.

Well, it echoes the idea of going to an atomic level. The pixels are these little units that make up an image.

Yes! I love that.

And had you done stuff with animals before?

My first video project was called *She's a Talker*. It was 90 gay men, from all 5 boroughs, combing their cats and saying, "she's a talker."

Many artists work from the personal, but the choice not to erase an autobiographical origin in one's work feels particular to me. Can you talk about this choice to include the element of the personal in much of your work?

As much as I don't connect to the term conceptual, there's not really a novelistic impulse in my work. My work is rooted in experience. I'm not interested in creating *fiction*. That's not because I disparage it as a form. It's just not the way my mind works. So I use the literal as a conduit to something that is maybe less specific. My students are often saying, "Memoir is too personal. People won't be able to relate to it." But I actually think the more personal it is, the *more* people will relate to it. So the reason I don't obscure the autobiographical nature of the work is because I think it paradoxically allows for a richer identification.

Despite a common assumption that anything directly relating to personal experience is somehow limited and narcissistic.

Yes, or sentimental. I feel like I'm doing my Wallenda tightrope walk over a chasm of sentimentality. It's also harder to disown work that is unambiguously rooted in the personal.

In a sense you're not putting yourself in the position of "the creator" when working with autobiography. You're partly like a character. Less reliable.

Right. You're implicated.

Let's talk about *Wild Animals Eat My Family and Me*.

So elusively titled, isn't it?

It's a series of graphite drawings. I notice that the infant (who is strangled by a snake) is the only one who appears to be conscious, and in a state of anguish.

Remember the magazine *Highlights For Children*? They have it at pediatrician's offices. You might be too young.

No I do remember seeing it at the doctor's.

OK, so they would always have a wildlife illustration and there was often something borderline sinister about it. And I have a distinct memory of there being an image on the cover of a piglet being squeezed to death by a python, which couldn't have been there. That's over the line! So I created that *Highlight* cover as part of the show, and that's also what the image of the baby is based on.

Do these graphite drawings belong to, subvert, or invoke a specific tradition?

I'm getting a lot of "I didn't know you drew!" I didn't draw them. They were a collaboration with Kerry Thompson, who is very interested in the tradition of wildlife illustration. We spent a lot of time reworking them. I wanted to invoke Audubon. And I was thinking *what if humans were demoted in the food chain?*

People might think they are a bit Goya-like.

I'm getting Goya a lot. But I didn't want the impact of it to be about disembowelment.

To depict disembowelment in Goya's time and ours may be quite different.

That's a good point. When you and I could right now get a really explicitly detailed, high-definition video of someone getting their head slowly cut off, it probably does mean something different.

How does identifying these figures, who are about to be ravaged, as members of your family change the way we look at the images?

That they are members of my family is essential to my own experience of the pieces. So much of wanting to make these pieces was wanting to see what that felt like to see them. What would it mean for other people? Well, you want there to be stakes in your work. I think if we're talking about the availability of images of incredible horror-- we don't feel a type of empathy or compassion or identification...

Unless it's personal?

Yes. So I wanted that experience. And with these images I really wanted to have the opportunity to be a spectator to my own work, in a sense.

By having someone else execute the drawings?

Yes, with me kind of choreographing it.

A removed involvement.

Yes. Almost like being at a restaurant and ordering something to eat.

On May 10th at 7pm Goldberg will present an evening of storytelling related to the exhibition at Participant Inc.

Joseph Keckler is an interdisciplinary artist, writer, and operatic bass-baritone whom the Village Voice named "Best Downtown Performance Artist" in 2013. Follow him on Twitter.