

Press release

October 15th
November 12th, 2022

Opening
Saturday, October 15th
from 11am to 8pm

How to Murder Your Pet Steve Gianakos

Portrait of The Artist as a Cockroach

Among the earliest epitaphs carved into the gravestones in France's oldest pet cemetery, in Asnières in the Paris suburbs, we can find inscriptions that repeat well-known declarations such as: "The more I learn about people, the more I love my dog," or "Disappointed by the world, never by my dog." Darwin believed that the intense love humans feel for their pets was reciprocal, imagining that monkeys smile at us because they are happy; unfortunately, today's research shows that this superficial smile simply testifies to the individual's submission to a creature better placed in the pecking order.

For Saint Thomas Aquinas, Locke, Kant and Schopenhauer, there is a general link between cruelty to animals and violent acts committed against humans; moreover, recent sociological studies indicate that the majority of serial killers as well as simple murderers, "learned their trade" by killing or torturing animals when they were young. For Sigmund Freud, the motive for this is sexual, so it's hardly surprising that Steve Gianakos was attracted by the subject. In his *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1905), Freud postulates that the urge to commit acts of cruelty and the sexual urge are linked in early childhood by anastomosis, an interconnection that is biological. This association of sexuality and cruelty—exercised from an early age and against animals of all shapes and sizes—is quickly curbed and ideally even controlled by the emergence of feelings of pity; the ability to empathize with the pain felt by others, including animals, which inhibits the universal desire to dominate and that appears relatively late in a child's development.

Artistically, empathy takes on an unconventional form in Gianakos' work. In a now legendary interview with Susan Morgan in 1979, published in the second issue of the magazine *Real Life*¹, whose cover featured a drawing from the *How to Murder Your Pet* series, the artist states: "My work is not nearly as offensive as the people who look at it. Just walking the streets, you see things which are much more disgusting than anything I could ever conceive of doing—people vomiting all over the place. I try to sweeten things up, I don't try to vulgarize them. I try to take things I know exist and make them prettier, rather than trying to make pretty things more ugly. When you talk about rich ladies fucking their dogs, that's an example of something it would be impossible to vulgarize because it's already too vulgar. So, the only way to prettify it is to make a nice picture of a rich lady fucking her dog. At least that would appeal to some people."

The sight of suffering does one good, the infliction of suffering does one more good.
Friedrich Nietzsche,
The Genealogy of Morals, 1887

Animals don't know they are going to die. That's why they continue to frolic around when they have a temperature of 38.6 °C.
Pierre Desproges, *Chronicles of Ordinary Hatred*, 1987

Produced in 1978, the 24 drawings that make up the series *How to Murder Your Pet* are perfect examples of Gianakos' art. Firstly, as we have already seen, the subject matter is deeply linked to the primal emergence of sexuality. Secondly, the serial treatment of the subject is typical of his working practice. As he explains to Susan Morgan: "Obviously the best way to murder something is to tie a rock around its neck and throw it off a bridge, but since I'm so arty and these are all very visual, I make my idea a pretty picture." In this series, Gianakos does not depict dead domestic animals, but rather ways of killing them, a variety of forms of torture that are all variations on the childish cruelty described by Freud. While some of them have obvious sexual connotations (the goat, stuck in a doorway with a sweeping-brush in its rectum, which at the time outraged a

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number of commentators), others depict the brutal—and certainly painful—encounter between an orifice and a foreign body: the guide dog with a walking stick protruding from its eye socket, the bowling ball forcing open the hippo's mouth, the cow sucking on the exhaust pipe of a beetle (the car), the leg of a modernist chair being force-fed to a duck... There's also symmetry in the corkscrew tail of a pig penetrating an electrical wall socket, leading to its electrocution.

Following a logic as unyielding as the rigor of his drawing—mechanical, objective, impersonal lines that maintain the same width along the entire length of the stroke—the abuses that the artist comes up with are not simply a product of his fertile imagination but more one of a Magritte-like dialectic. One might wonder whether certain animals are simply victims of their accoutrements (the seeing-eye dog and his owner's cane, the circus monkey and his tricycle, another dog hanged with its own leash...), while others seem to suffer due to their particular morphologies (the pink flamingo getting its feet caught in a toaster...). Gianakos favours hyperbole to make the spectator die of laughter (which is hyperbole in itself): the hamster, although used to spinning endlessly on its wheel, can't stand the speed of a record player; the rabbit in its desire to look like a cuddly toy perishes under the needle of a sewing machine; the pony dies buried in a sand-box; the snake, perhaps in order to slither better, is flattened by an overheated iron; a turtle, although amphibious, drowns at the bottom of a cocktail glass, trapped under a straw...

While some situations may seem like a nod towards the history of art (the wheels of the monkey's tricycle on the steps of a staircase it has come down a little too quickly, make one think of Duchamp), others emphasize the metonymic link between the pet and its corresponding environment, instilling the idea that a pet is an object like any other: the deer's tongue hangs like a towel over the side of the Turkish steam bath, the pig's snout looks like a female plug-socket, the skunk's spikey claws resemble the ends of the on/off cords of the reading lamp...

Although, as with his drawings, Gianakos can be counted on to never entirely reveal himself, or at the very least to sell his thoughts dearly, in this interview that took place during the precise period when he was doing these drawings, he let slip a profound doubt as to his position as an artist (going so far as to announce that he intended to put a stop to his artistic career and embrace that of an actor, or at least of an extra, in California), which he then resolved with a temporal pirouette: "The best artists are always dead artists, because you don't remember anyone who isn't good and dead. Some of the living ones are good, but I like girls better."

The pet is me, Steve Gianakos might also have claimed, following on from Flaubert, and having included in his series of drawings animals that are not usually domesticated such as skunks, deer and elephants: "Obviously," he declared to Susan Morgan, "any animal can be a pet, depending on where you're living." Any animal? That would also include artists then? As an epigraph to her famous article *How to Murder an Avant-garde*², which appeared in *Artforum* in 1965, Barbara Rose uses an extract from John Sloan's classic textbook, *The Gist of Art* (1939), in which artists are also described as pets, but of a quite particular kind: "Artists in a frontier society like ours, are like cockroaches in kitchens—not wanted, not encouraged, but nevertheless they remain."

Stéphane Corréard

1. *Real Life Magazine*, N°2, October 1979, New York.

2. "How to Murder an Avant-garde," *Artforum*, vol. 4, n°3, November 1965.

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Stéphane Corréard has been a specialist in contemporary art, and in particular the French art scene, for thirty years. He has been an art critic, curator, gallery owner, contemporary art expert, journalist and collector. As a curator, he directed the Salon de Montrouge from 2009 to 2015, and is regularly invited to curate exhibitions in institutions (Palais de Tokyo, Villa Arson,...) and galleries (Christian Berst, Gabrielle Maubrie, Kréo, Loevenbruck, Christophe Gaillard). He contributes to the radio programme La Dispute on France Culture.