

An Artist for Animals in Peril



An Artist for Animals in Peril: a conversation with Bill Burns

by Renay Egami

How to Help Animals Escape from Natural History
(black bear version)
Colour Photo, 140 x 165 cm, 1995



A children's choir whose repertoire consists of the sounds of dogs, boats and airplanes, Italian mineral water for the Masked Puddle Frog, and a prosthetics program for animals with missing body parts: these are some of the ways in which artist Bill Burns considers the tensions between nature and culture. For the past twenty years, Burns has produced conceptually and socially engaged work that reminds us of what's at stake both globally and closer to home.

Now based in Toronto, Burns was born in Regina, Saskatchewan and received his Master's Degree in Fine Arts from Goldsmiths' College at the University of London. Within the expanded field of art, design, and critical writing, Burns' work has been widely exhibited and published nationally and internationally. His artists' editions are included in numerous collections, including the Tate Britain and the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Recent projects include a solo exhibition, *The Flora and Fauna Information Service* at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London (2008) and a group show, *Safe: Design Takes on Risk*, at the Museum of Modern Art in New York (2006). Burns has taught at the Emily Carr University of Art and Design in Vancouver and is Visiting Artist at Krabbesholm Højskole of Art, Architecture and Design in Skive, Denmark. He spoke to me from his Jorge Pardo-designed cottage overlooking a fjord in northern Denmark.

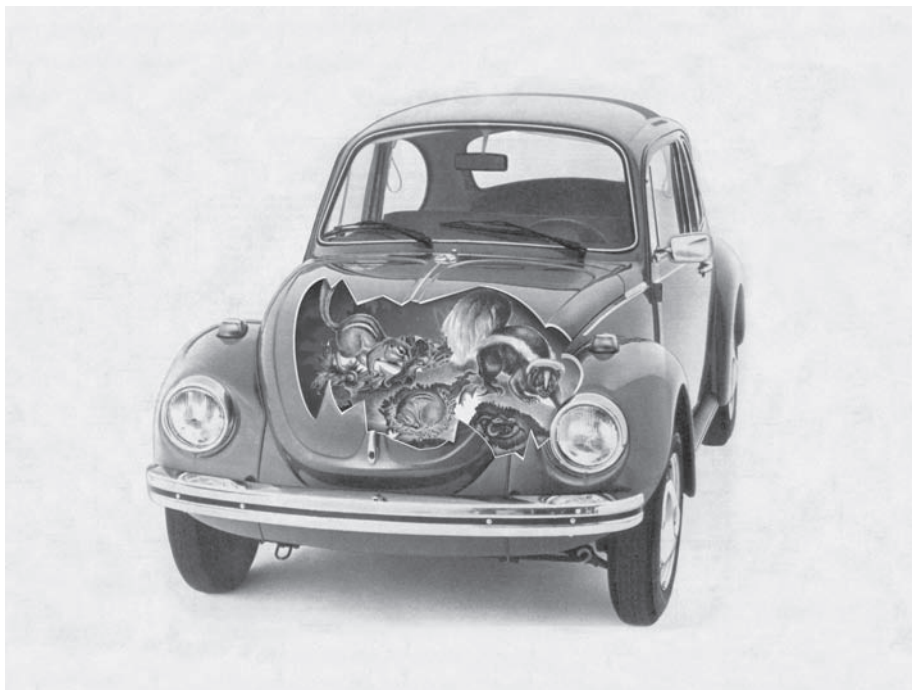
renay egami

Your multi-disciplinary art practice has been devoted to representations of and engagement with the natural world, and more specifically, about the safety of animals in peril. Could you begin by giving some background to your research in this area?

bill burns

When I was studying in London in the late eighties, I got homesick. I'd been in London for several years and had not been to the countryside, and I went with my friends to the Virginia Water near Windsor Castle. It's a man-made lake that was built by the Royals in the 1700s. I had heard that it was designed by Capability Brown, the great 18th century landscape architect. As it turned out it wasn't, but it had many of his licks. In any case, I got about half way around the lake and I fainted. The air, the trees, the forest were too good for me. I couldn't take it. It was about that time I started making work that reminded me of home. I made a series of crude paper models and pictures using the canoe paddle as a motif. I made a model of a forest that was defoliated save for a stand of trees in the middle and a stadium in the shape of a canoe paddle. My thinking, at the time, was influenced by political theorists such as Thomas Hobbes who observed that rights akin to property grew out of the care and nurturing of land and animals. Anyhow, I was thinking a lot about property relations, surplus value, and reading about the Enclosures. All this got me thinking about the wilds of Canada. I wasn't really that familiar with the forest but I had done some hiking, enough to have seen some totally destroyed and defoliated landscape in BC. And then I would hear deliberate distortions and mistruths from government and industry about this clear breach of stewardship that Hobbes had proposed as civil life. Then I watched the slow-motion collapse of the fishery in Newfoundland. It seemed to me that all you really needed to do was read the papers to figure out that an extermination was on the way. So, then I was back in Canada, and I started to integrate this stewardship, the needs of animals, into my work.

I got about half way around the lake and I fainted. The air, the trees, the forest were too good for me.



How to Help Animals Escape from Degraded Habitats

Above **Volkswagen with Rodents**

Below **Drill with Rats**

Iris print, 135 x 155 cm, 1995



re I first came across your work *How to Help Animals Escape from Degraded Habitats in Concrete Jungle: A Pop Media Investigation of Death and Survival in Urban Ecosystems* published by Juno Books in the mid 90's. Having associations with RE/Search Publications, which grew out of punk rock culture, this book continues the tradition of featuring subversive ideas and fringe/outsider culture-making.

bb Yes, I have had several crossovers into biker-type tattoo magazines and music outsider stuff. I am attracted to storytelling and personalities, and I think these kinds of magazines are attracted to the narrative qualities of my work. *How to Help Animals Escape from Degraded Habitats*

is a series of large black and white prints. They were made back in the early days of PhotoShop. The process was arduous by today's standards. The pictures show how to move animals in domestic appliances, electric tools, cameras and the like so as to avoid the watchful eye of border guards or custodial care authorities. They also account for the animal's morphology. For

penguins are transferred in refrigerators, frogs in Super 8 cameras, and rats in electric drill casings..

instance, penguins are transferred in refrigerators, frogs in Super 8 cameras, and rats in electric drill casings. These pictures exist as large vegetable-dye prints, as well as in the form of a guide book that explains everything you need to know to perform successful animal transfers and midnight endowments to zoos, deer parks, aquariums, and insectariums.

re You are the founder and director of *Safety Gear for Small Animals* (SGSA). Is it a company or a museum? Would you describe this dynamic collection of work?



Proving Machine

45 x 32 x 30 cm

2008

with **Flotation Device**

12 x 10 x 2.5 cm

2005

re SGSA is made up of a number of divisions, of which the travelling collection is one branch. What are some of the others?

bb SGSA also includes a modest publishing house where we have published a number of books and pamphlets. SGSA also has our research lab, which is really a mobile unit that includes a portable hard drive and me.

re What about *Bird Radio*?

bb *Bird Radio* is not part of SGSA, but it certainly has affinities. It is a bird surrogate program. I developed it for the garden at the KW Institute for Contemporary Art in Berlin a couple years ago. The system includes a set of calls



Safety Gear for Small Animals
Respirator
10 x 11 x 6 cm
1994/1999



Safety Gear for Small Animals
Safety Vest
8.5 x 7.5 x .25 cm
1994/2005

that hang chandelier-style alongside a radio transmission unit. It's very hodge-podge. Visitors are invited to play the rudimentary musical instruments or bird calls; the sounds are narrowcast on an FM radio frequency. People can tune in from home or the car as they drive by. It now includes a lounge as well, called the Eames Chair Lounge, consisting of five different Eames chairs, but that's for another interview.



Bird Radio and Eames Lounge
Installation view
electronics, bird calls, and furniture

re How does SGSA function within the natural history museum frame, using similar conventions of display and authoritative didactics? Is this a critique of the institution?

bb I find the early conventions of natural history museums both comforting and conducive to learning. I think new museums with enormous push buttons that provide sound and light shows are ridiculous and I think most children agree. So it is probably more of an homage, but I do provide some didactic licks regarding class, place, and human-centredness.

re The exhibition *Becoming Animal: Contemporary Art in the Animal Kingdom* at the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art (2006) explores the awareness of the diminishing space between human and animal existence. I am thinking about your exhibition and catalogue *Everything I Could Buy on eBay about Malaria and Mosquitoes*, as well as *Bird Radio*. Do you have any thoughts about the shrinkage of the gap between human and animal life?

the gap between the wild and us certainly is smaller

bb Yes, I really think “shrinkage” is a good way to put it. Cougars in Yosemite are fitted with soporific injection collars that are triggered from satellites when they stray. Penguins in the Antarctic are bar-coded for easy identification. Elephants in Kruger are implanted with soccer-ball-sized birth-control pills. Animal husbandry is an expanding field, and the gap between the wilds and us certainly is smaller. It may be a stretch but there seems to be a corollary. Our desire to go to the backcountry seems to be expanding, hence another diminishment of the gap. I suspect sales at Mountain Equipment Co-op would bear this out.

re SGSA has travelled and been exhibited widely. It was included in the group show called *Safe: Design Takes on Risk* at the Museum of Modern Art in NYC (2006), which presented several prototypes and products designed in response to danger and risk. You have been very successful in making crossovers between a critical practice in art and in design. Is this hybrid practice a fertile ground for future projects?

bb I have recently been asked to join a working group of designers, engineers, and biologists in Australia. They want to consider producing some protective devices for animals in the forests of Australia. This is in the post-Great Forest Fire era. It has been a kind of interruption for me, since the most optimistic reading I’ve given my safety gear has been as agitprop. By this I’m referring to agitation and propaganda as an open-ended and socially-engaged method. More Brechtian than communistic. So this has led to some soul-searching and some serious thoughts that have more

to do with real results and real animal health and safety issues. It's really not a reading I would have expected. I do admire designers and architects in this respect: they often think they can change the world. As an artist, I rarely think that way.



The Moose and the Curator

Watercolour, 22 x 31 cm

2008

re “Can art save the planet?” Responses in various art journals have been mixed. Do you feel that artists can effect change?

bb I don't think artists are different from other citizens in this respect. We can make small changes, and I think we can keep an eye on democratic practice, global economics, ecology, equity, and the like. It's our job, but it's also the job of all citizens. I'm not that keen on the rarified artist citizen.

re During the past few years there has been a flood of art exhibitions addressing the diverse ways in which artists are

engaging with ecological concerns, from sustainable strategies in art and design to high profile Arctic expeditions, such as Cape Farewell, where artists and scientists research and produce work in response to climate change. How important is it to work with and between other disciplines to sound the alarm?

I think environmental issues really are resource issues and resource issues are really social justice issues.

bb Yes, there are fancy expeditions and fancy biennial exhibitions. I'm reminded of Sheriff Bell's words from *No Country for Old Men*: "We're being bought with our own money." I reckon he's got a point. I think environmental issues really are resource issues and resource issues are really social justice issues. People foul their nests. They cut all their trees; they wreck rivers and wells; they ruin land; they run out of food and water. These are historical facts. One great empire after another has destroyed itself. But as Ronald Wright has so eloquently suggested, the Sumerian, Roman and Mayan empires were relatively small parts of the world. The dilemma we now face is that the entire planet is under the unified regime of industrial capitalism, and it has an extremely ravenous appetite. I've worked with several scientists and I've enjoyed their minds and processes. I really don't know how important these collaborations between artists and scientists are, but I do think we must pursue them, perhaps as citizens more than as artists. I'll have to report after I get back from Australia.

re The Krabbesholm Højskole of Art, Architecture and Design in Skive, Denmark is a design-focused institution. What projects are you working on with your students, and do these projects have any relationship to your own art?

bb There is an old tradition of art and design in Denmark. With the advent of parliamentary democracy, the state established a network of schools to educate people in art and philosophy so that they would become better citizens. I'm working with students on some prototypes, and we're doing a lot of talking. Mostly we are working with the notion of captivity. I'm not sure where it's going, but the students are very keen.

re Please describe your long-term affiliation with Art Metropole in Toronto.

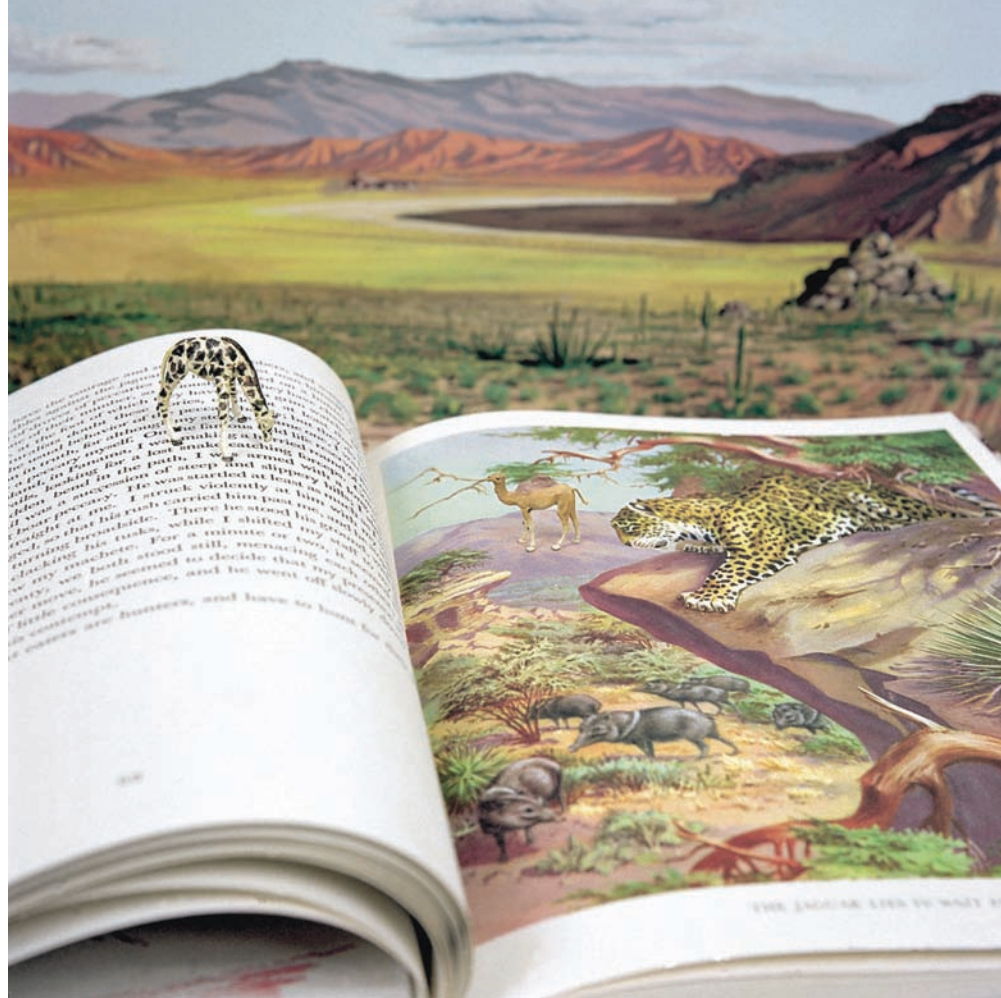
bb I first came to Art Metropole in the early 1980s to sell my wares. It was a great help and support to me. Now I'm a board member. We sell works by hundreds of Canadian and international artists and at fairs in Basel, Miami, and New York. We also manage an archive, publish multiples and book projects, and, perhaps most importantly, we provide access to an international network of like-minded artists.

re You have published several books and instruction guides that are central to your sculptures and installations. What about the role books play in some of your photographic works with the animal miniatures?



**How to Help Animals
Escape from Natural History**
(white bear version)
Colour Photo, 150 x 150 cm
2001

**How to Help Animals
Escape from Natural History**
(giraffe version)
Colour Photo, 150 x 150 cm
1996



bb The first book I used scale models in was called *Analgesia*, published in 1993 by Editions Rochefort in Montreal. The photographs in the book were made from models I had made a few years earlier. The story is about Pill Mine and Painkiller Factory, where life is rather fine. A jaunty voice tells the reader how “we have put the ‘e’ back into pharm-e-cology.” The story developed out of the photographs of the scale models of Pill Mine, Painkiller Factory, and the Monument to Analgesia. I enjoy working this way, and there has been a considerable amount of to-and-fro between the photographs and the story writing. This is also true of my book *How to Help Animals Escape from Degraded Habitats* (Optica, Montreal:1996) and my trading card series *How to Help Animals Escape from Natural History* (Dunlop Art Gallery, Regina: 1995).

re Other sites of production include telephone systems, such as your recent solo exhibition *The Flora and Fauna Information Service 0.800.0Fauna0Flora* at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London and your project from the late 90’s *1-800-ECOSFEAR* at Art Resources Transfer in New York.

bb I've operated two interactive toll-free telephone services. Both of them resembled "choose your own adventure" stories with multiple narrative streams, and at the end, things to buy. I liked the possibility of an expanded audience. The New York project was toll-free throughout the US and Canada, and the London project was toll-free throughout the UK. It was a way to move beyond the usual in-house audience. In London, there was a poster campaign and considerable promotion, and there were several thousand calls. I think for me the most attractive thing about a telephone service is its storytelling potential. It's actually quite a literary form. You can buy the guidebook to the Institute of Contemporary Arts project at Art Metropole.

re I have attended a few of your public lectures, once at the Banff Centre and then at UBC Okanagan when you came as part of our Visiting Artists Program. Your lectures are highly enjoyable and stimulating, in part due to their suspension between fact and fiction. Are these performances?

bb Most of my public readings are about my relationship as an artist to other arts professionals and institutions. They are usually stories of missed opportunities, failed relationships, and global travel. They are all true stories. I think they might seem like performances because artists are not supposed to talk about this stuff or at least they do so at their peril. But they are the type of experiences a lot of artists have. Low pay, big museums, fancy dining in exotic places, curators who sleep with your girlfriend, girlfriends who sleep with your curator, career advancement through backcountry hiking, retrieving stock from bankrupt galleries, and so on.

re Considering that you are dealing with some serious environmental issues, do you deploy humour in your work as a strategy to soften the blow, as a way of easing your viewers in?

bb My mom used to say to me: you're half Irish, half French, and half Indian. I never questioned the math. I think that storytelling runs deep in Canada. I like John Ralston Saul's notion that Canada is a Métis Nation—I think it explains a lot about our traditions, our way of talking, and our humour. I guess I would say this is the way I've learned to express myself. I guess I should also say it is a strategy, insofar as I'm a highfalutin conceptual artist. I would like to say, though, that I do care very much about animals, and this is not just a biological concern. For me it's really a cultural and intellectual concern. Imagine our stories, our books, our movies and pictures occupied only by dogs, cats, pigeons, coyotes, and Atlantic salmon.

re Speaking of dogs, could you describe the new body of work you are currently developing, *Dogs and Boats and Airplanes*?

bb *Dogs and Boats and Airplanes* is a series of photographs, a book in the form of a photo-roman, and a 100-voice children's choir whose entire repertoire is the sound of dogs and boats and airplanes. My interest in the blend of these three subjects is, on the one hand, an absurdity; on the other hand, they are ciphers of modernism: pedigree, global capital, movement, and travel. As someone operating within the international art market, these elements are familiar to me.



Dogs and Boats and Airplanes

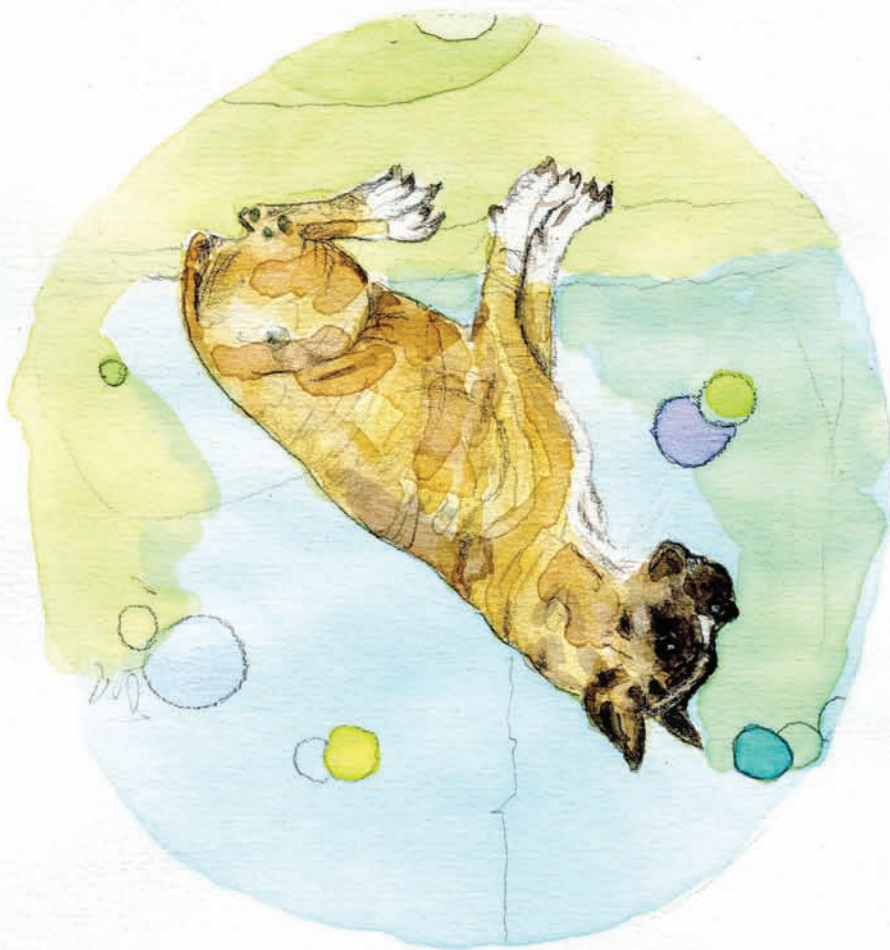
Colour Photos, 20 x 25 cm

Seoul Dogs 2002

Vancouver Boats 2006

London Airplanes 2006





INEXPLICABLY THE IMAGE OF AN UPSIDE DOWN
DOG APPEARED ON THE WALL BESIDE MY
OXYGEN TENT.

re You have described the role of dogs as one of “interlocutor or double agent.” What do you mean by this? Also, are the voices of children significant in any way?

dogs have travelled the entire planet with us; they are part worker, part merchandise, part wolf, and part friend and advisor.

bb Dogs have an amazing connection with people in our stories and our biological and geo-political history. In our origin stories, they are often the guides into or through the darkness, the forest, and the like. For instance, depending on which version you subscribe to, when Cain gets the boot from Eden, he is sent with a dog. Dogs and dogmen are associated with scary foreigners, yet at the same time they help us negotiate both nature and culture. This is one aspect of the dog’s role as interlocutor. Another can be found in our biological history. I think Donna Haraway calls this aspect “protean.” Because we have lived with dogs for millennia, we are deeply connected to them through our agriculture and husbandry, our immune system, even, I suppose, our DNA. The same goes for our cultural life both in work and in play. And double agency is part of this, too; it’s partly metaphorical, but dogs have traveled the entire planet with us; they are part worker, part merchandise, part wolf, and part friend and advisor.

The voice of children is a reiteration of the complexity of this double agency. Children, especially within modernism, are in a kind of limbo without political or economic agency. They are to be protected at all costs from the ravages of adult society, from labour, from idleness, from sex, and from video games. We advocate their innocence while we fear their drug-addled, gun-toting ways.

re Your work has also crossed over into pop culture. What is the story behind you and Homer Simpson?

bb I’ll stick to the facts. I showed my *Safety Gear for Small Animals* in New York in 1994. The show was widely reviewed, including an AP wire service story replete with pictures and notices in the *New York Times* and the *Village Voice*. In a widely admired episode a couple of years later, Homer Simpson became a conceptual artist and started making safety gear for animals. That’s all I know.

re Thank you, Bill.

Facing page: **Upside Down Dog**
Watercolour, 22 x 31 cm
2008