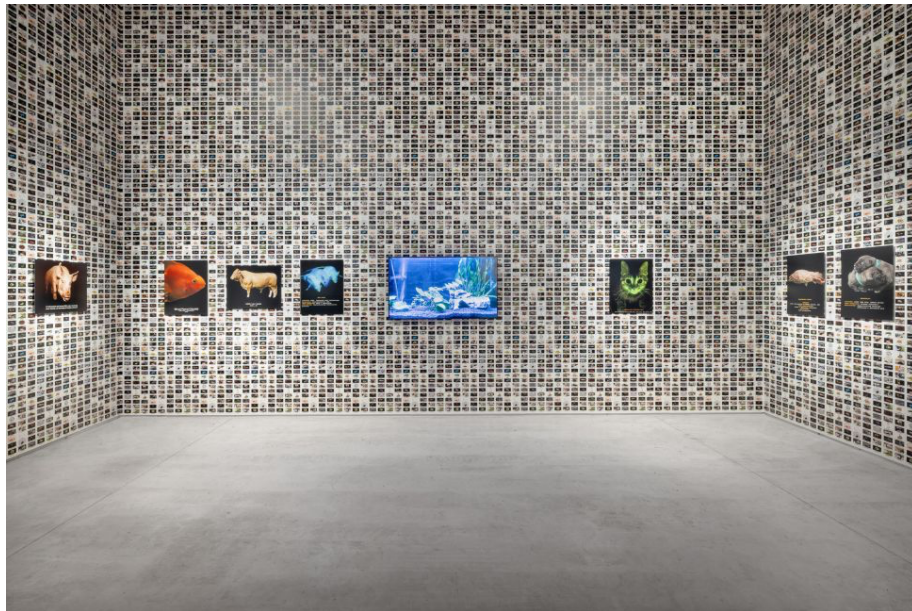


Duray, Dan, " One Fine Show: 'Why Look at Animals?' at the National Museum of Contemporary Art Athens," *Observer*, September 3, 2025

Over sixty artists from four continents offer provocative perspectives that probe how animals shape culture, memory and imagination.



Francisco and Bridget Donahue, New York. Photo: Paris Tavitian

Welcome to One Fine Show, where Observer highlights a recently opened exhibition at a museum not in New York City, a place we know and love that already receives plenty of attention.

You probably don't remember a minor interaction in *Blade Runner* (1982) when Harrison Ford admires a snake at the night market, and asks the seller if it's artificial. She responds, "You think I'd be working in a place like this if I could afford a real snake?" The film is the story of android slaves run amok, but the vogue for artificial animals is given much more attention in the book that inspired it by Philip K. Dick, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep* (1968), which opens with Ford's character getting into a fight with his wife about the need to save up for an authentic lamb.

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The farther we get from animals, the more we want them in our lives. “Why Look at Animals? A Case for the Rights of Non-Human Lives,” a new exhibition at the National Museum of Contemporary Art in Athens, seeks to examine the unique bond that exists between humans, animals and their representations. The show features over 200 works that occupy each floor of the museum, representing over 60 artists from four continents, among them Mark Dion, David Claerbout, Lynn Hershman Leeson, Emma Talbot, Rossella Biscotti and Marcus Coates.

Claerbout’s video piece is representative. *The Pure Necessity* (2016) is an hour-long version of Disney’s *The Jungle Book* (1967) that excises the narrative of the lost boy, the dancing and the animals’ anthropomorphism. It took Claerbout and his team three years to hand draw this new version, a worthy project that forces us to consider the extent to which generations of young impressions about animals have been shaped by an animation studio whose founder admired Leni Riefenstahl.

Coates is something of a mystic and has thrown himself into the project with vigor, contributing a digital text piece that examines the life of animals around Athens, a sound piece that traces the sonic connections between sounds made by diverse species, and *Extinct Animals* (2018), a sculpture series featuring plaster casts of the artist’s hands as he made shadow puppets of animals gone forever. It’s disheartening to see how many have gone in my lifetime—I like to hope I did see a Pyrenean ibex at one point. Biscotti’s contribution also abstracts a long-gone animal of consequence. *Clara* (2016) is named after a famous rhinoceros who toured Europe in the mid-eighteenth century as an oddity, brought to the Netherlands from Bengal by Douwe Jansz Mout van der Meer, a captain with the Dutch East India Company. Biscotti’s installation recreates Clara via handmade bricks and a pile of tobacco, which was said to keep her calm during her travels.

“The zoo cannot but disappoint,” wrote John Berger in the 1977 essay that gives this exhibition its title. In earlier forms of society, the animal represented not only material needs like warmth and food but also spiritual guidance: “The animal has secrets which, unlike the secrets of caves, mountains, seas, are specifically addressed to man.” Representations of animals are always fraught, as they are laden with baggage about what modernity has both given to us and taken away.

“Why Look at Animals? A Case for the Rights of Non-Human Lives” is on view at the National Museum of Contemporary Art in Athens through February 15, 2026.