

Projects 12 : Joan Fontcuberta, Pere Formiguera : The Museum of Modern Art, New York, June 18-August 9, 1988

Author

Fontcuberta, Joan, 1955-

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1988

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The Museum of Modern Art

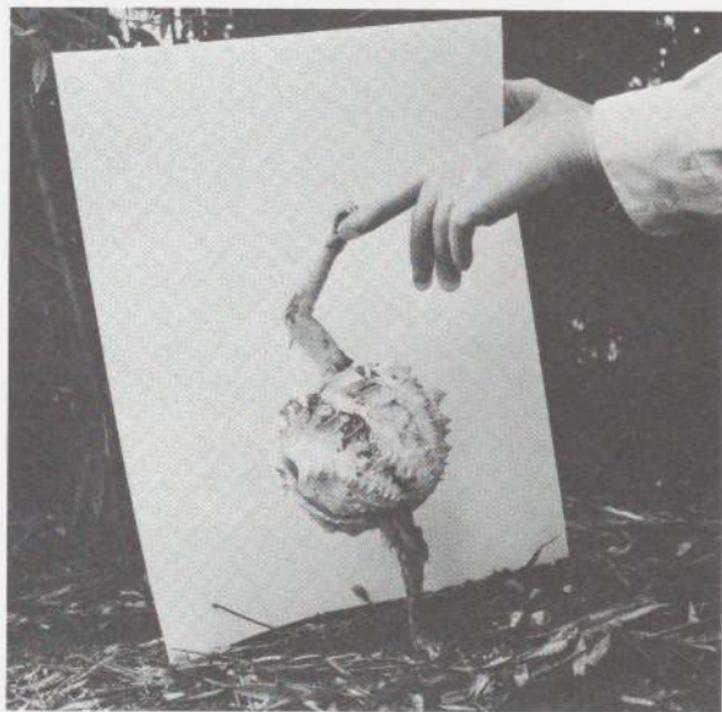
Exhibition URL

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The Museum of Modern Art
New York
June 18–August 9, 1988

projects: joan fontcuberta
pere formiguera



Micostrum Vulgaris. Not frightened by the presence of humans, a *Micostrum* plays with the Doctor's hand

projects

Designed to present recent work by contemporary artists, the new **projects** series has been based on the Museum's original **projects** exhibitions, which were held from 1971 to 1982. The artists presented are chosen by the members of all the Museum's curatorial departments in a process involving an active dialogue and close critical scrutiny of new developments in the visual arts.

This exhibition is supported by a generous grant from the Institute of North American Studies, Barcelona.

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Alopex Stultus



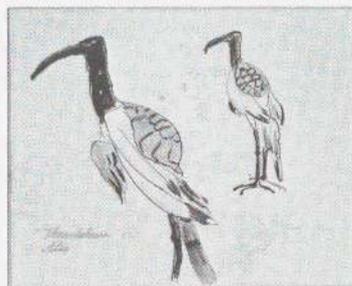
Alopex Stultus, camouflage position

**peter ameisenhaufen:
a life in research**

Peter Ameisenhaufen was born in Munich on May 5, 1895, as the first child of the explorer, big-game hunter, and safari guide Wilhelm Ameisenhaufen (b. 1860 in Dortmund, d. 1914 in Dar es Salaam) and his wife Julia (b. 1873 in Dublin, d. 1895 in Munich)....

Peter and his sister spent a happy childhood...in the care of their aunt.... When he was ten years old, he traveled to his father in Africa for the first time.

The African fauna clearly aroused a great wonderment in the young boy. Upon his return...he dragged everything into the house—dogs, cats, fish, birds, and other animals—his sister related to us.... When Aunt Maria asked him if he had liked the ani-



Threschelonia Atis

mals, ...he replied succinctly: "Yes, from the outside and from the inside."...

At the age of eighteen Peter moved to Munich, where he began his brilliant university career.... Professor Klaus Fischer, a colleague of Ameisenhaufen, gives us in his memoirs...an eloquent account of these early years: "Peter Ameisenhaufen was the youngest assistant professor at the university. He gave lectures on zoology and scientific ethics. Despite his age, he had acquired an astonishing amount of knowledge.... I deeply regretted his dismissal."...

Regarding Ameisenhaufen's dismissal from his university position, ...there still exists the letter sent by Dr. Walter Frank, the chancellor at that time.... [It] includes the following passage: "We deeply regret that a scientist of your stature could commit the error of following a false path that is of little scientific value."...

Greatly bored by the conservatism of science in Germany and by the political developments of the time, Ameisenhaufen emigrated to the United States in 1933, one year after his dismissal. He was accompanied by his laboratory assistant, Hans von Kubert....

In 1932 an important person entered the professor's life: Helen X., a young woman from Scotland....

From this period comes the greater part of the preserved documents, notes from the laboratory, personal keepsakes, letters, and seven chronologically unconnected volumes of the painstakingly kept journals....

Between 1933 and 1950 Peter Ameisenhaufen experienced his most intensely creative period.

During this time he classified virtually every known species. He traveled in almost every country on earth, carried on an extensive correspondence, and, when not traveling, worked in the laboratory.... In early 1950 he was diagnosed as having leukemia.... He decided, as a result, to leave the United States and to go to live with Helen in the vicinity of Glasgow, where he spent the last five years of his life....



Threschelonia Atis

On August 7, 1955, Professor Peter Ameisenhaufen drove alone to the north of Scotland. Three days later his car was found on the coast, near a cliff. His body was never found....

Helen died in an automobile accident three years later. Her little house...was sealed by her family. Through a whim of fate, it has been opened to us.

Excerpted from *Dr. Ameisenhaufen's Fauna*, researched by Joan Fontcuberta and Pere Formiguera. Gottingen: European Photography, 1988, pp. 6–11.

**fauna:
joan fontcuberta
pere formiguera**

Fauna, 1985–88, is the work of two

Catalan artists, Joan Fontcuberta and Pere Formiguera, who claim to have discovered the archive of a brilliant, if obscure, German zoologist, Dr. Peter Ameisenhaufen. The artists combine photographs (made by Fontcuberta), audio-tapes, pseudoscientific descriptive notecards written in German (by Formiguera), maps, drawings, and specimens to fabricate an imaginary taxonomy. Creatures such as *Alopex Stultus*, which has the unique ability to camouflage itself as a shrub, and *Micostrium Vulgaris*, characterized as "a gregarious animal [with] a tremendous capacity for mimicry in semiaquatic environments," are among the extraordinary hybrid species that comprise this catalog.

The photographs locate these chimeric phenomena in their "natural" habitats, engaged in primal matters of survival. Together with the supporting documentary "evidence," the artists construct a convincing evocation of actual field research and its display in the natural history museum. In building an extended narrative, Fontcuberta and Formiguera not only call into question the authority of photography as a documentary medium, but also challenge the assumed objectivity of scientific methodology and institutional display. Many contemporary artists have addressed these and other issues of authenticity by appropriating images or manufacturing studio set-ups and elaborate fictions. Fontcuberta is concerned with the way in which data assumes meaning through its presentation, while Formiguera is interested in how the fantastic is codified by science, contending that what nature creates is more capricious than anything man can conjure.

Through folklore, literature, and the visual arts, mankind has found the means to account for the otherwise inexplicable in nature. Among the sources for their work, Fontcuberta and Formiguera cite illustrations in medieval bestiaries. These liturgical catalogs meticulously describe mutant creatures, both real and imaginary, that are endowed with human attributes. Also cited are Mary Shelley's gothic horror novel *Frankenstein* (1818) and science fiction such as H. G. Wells's *The Island of Doctor Moreau* (1896)—two allegories in which the scientists are ultimately destroyed by the anthropomorphic monsters they have created. Finally, because of its traditional association with Spanish art, Surrealism must be mentioned as a source. The Surrealists explored the unconscious—the "monsters" of the psyche—within the constraints of a representational system. Their combinations of contradictory elements stretch the limits of our conception of reality, as do the fantastical creatures in *Fauna*.

Catherine Evans, Assistant Curator
Department of Photography



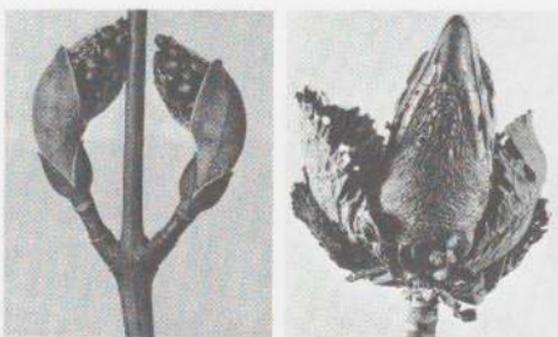
Solenoglypha Polipodida

biography: joan fontcuberta

Born Barcelona, Spain,
February 24, 1955

Resides in Barcelona

Before his collaboration with Formiguera on *Fauna*, Fontcuberta completed a series of photographs titled *Herbarium*. The pictures are plant studies, whose straight, analytical style mimics Karl Blossfeldt's botanical catalog *Urformen der Kunst*, published in 1928. However, Fontcuberta's subjects are constructed entirely from found organic and inorganic materials. Photographed in the flat, objective, stripped-down manner of Blossfeldt, Fontcuberta endorses the notion that documentary photography does not necessarily yield the truth about its subject, but is simply another style of photography.



Above left: Karl Blossfeldt. *Acer Rufinerve*. Photo-gravure, from *Urformen der Kunst*. Berlin: E. Wasmuth, 1928

Above right: Joan Fontcuberta. *Lavandula Angustifolia*. 1984. Gelatin-silver print. 10⁹/₁₆ x 8¹/₂ (26.8 x 21.5 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Robert and Joyce Menschel Fund

education

University of Barcelona, Masters Degree
in Communications, 1978

selected individual exhibitions

1988

Zabriskie Gallery, New York
Städtische Galerie, Filderhalle, Stuttgart

1987

Centro de Arte, Palacio Almudi,
Murcia, Spain
Galeria Roma e Pavia, Porto, Portugal

1986

Zabriskie Gallery, New York
Hadler/Rodriguez Gallery, Houston
Presentation House Gallery, Vancouver
Museo de Bellas Artes, Bilbao
Museo de Arte y Historia,
Durango, Spain

selected group exhibitions

1988

Center for Creative Photography, Tucson
The Photographer's Gallery, London*
Galerie Jutta Rössner, Stuttgart*

1987

Museum Folkwang, Essen*
Galerie Zabriskie, Paris*
Museu de História Natural,
Coimbra, Portugal*

1986

Galerie Maeght, Barcelona

selected bibliography

Dr. Ameisenhaufen's Fauna (with Pere Formiguera). Göttingen: European Photography, 1988

Ciencia y Ficción. Murcia, Spain: Palacio Almudi, 1987

Joan Fontcuberta. Toulouse: Galerie Municipale du Chateau d'Eau, 1984

Joan Fontcuberta: Fotografies. Barcelona: Caixa de Barcelona, 1984

Joan Fontcuberta: Animal trouvé. Bilbao: Caja de Ahorros Vizcaina, 1985

Fotographias: Joan Fontcuberta. Zaragoza, Spain: Editions Alabern, 1976

Herbarium. Göttingen: European Photography, 1985

Idas and Chaos: Trends in Spanish Photography 1920–45. Madrid/New York: Ministerio de Cultura/International Center of Photography, 1986

biography: pere formiguera

Born Barcelona, Spain,
May 5, 1952

Resides in Sant Cugat, near Barcelona

education

University of Barcelona, M.F.A., 1977

individual exhibition

1988

Galeria Visor, Valencia

selected group exhibitions

1988

The Photographer's Gallery, London*
Galerie Jutta Rössner, Stuttgart*

1988

Marcuse Pfeifer Gallery, New York
Museum Folkwang, Essen*
Galerie Zabriskie, Paris*
Museu de História Natural,
Coimbra, Portugal*

1986

Galerie Maeght, Barcelona
Perspektief Gallery, Rotterdam

1985

Museo Español de Arte Contemporáneo

1981

The Photographic Gallery, Cardiff, Wales

selected bibliography

Dr. Ameisenhaufen's Fauna (with Joan Fontcuberta). Göttingen: European Photography, 1988

Contemporary Catalan Art 1970–85. Barcelona: Xarxa Cultural, 1985

Pere Formiguera Sequences 1976. Zaragoza, Spain: Editions Alabern, 1976

Herbarium (introduction by Pere Formiguera, photographs by Joan Fontcuberta). Barcelona: Cromoarte, 1985

*An exhibition of *Fauna*.