

## Joan Fontcuberta, *Sciences-Friction*

Musée de l'Hôtel-Dieu, Mantes-la-Jolie, France,  
April-September 2005

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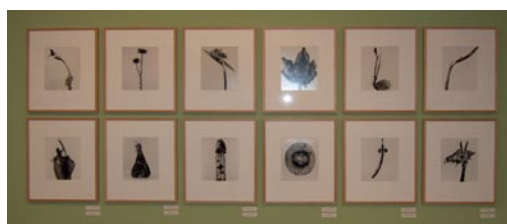
Joan Fontcuberta's conceptual work is, above all, an analysis of the transmission of knowledge. From botanical science, zoology and astronomy to history of art, geography and religion, his desire is declared: to denounce all organised and institutionalised knowledge. It's a question of appropriating and deconstructing the language of these disciplines and their ability to manipulate via a simulacra approach.



Installation view: *Fauna*

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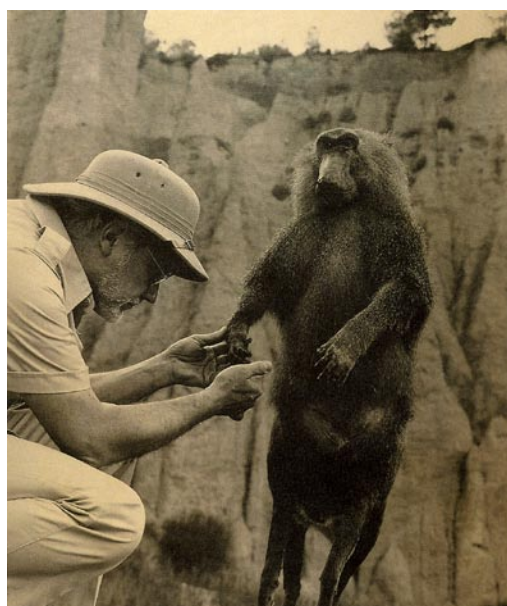
Amongst the five series shown are:  
*Herbarium* (1982-1984), an ironic allusion to one of the most legendary photographers of the 30s, Karl Blossfeldt who photographed real plants as if they were architectural elements. Here, Fontcuberta inverts the process and shoots 'pseudo-plants', small ephemeral constructions made of industrial waste, bits of plastic, the ends of dried plants, etc. *Herbarium* presents these as real plants. New and strange things are created in a workshop and the spectator's trusting gaze makes them real.



Installation view: *Herbarium* (detail)

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*Fauna* (1985-1989), created by Joan Fontcuberta and Pere Formiguera, mixes photographs, texts, maps, plans, displays and other video projections narrating with emphatic detail the history of incredible zoological discoveries made at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century by Professor Ameisenhausen. The photographs taken by his assistant (slightly yellowing to seem more convincing) are accompanied by technical files, with the



*Centaurus*, from the series *Fauna* (detail)

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professors annotations showing the context of the photographed species, giving the identity of the contacts who had helped the professor make his discoveries, the types, sub-types, class, morphology, conduct and numbering of the animals, all listed in the archives. All of this is introduced by a text recounting the career of the professor, of undeniable literary quality and perfectly convincing, only a few sprinkled details hint at the subterfuge.

By linking and presenting documentary and fictional information, the work *Karelia: Miracles And Co.* (2001-2002) is presented like a pseudo photo-essay: in a monastery located somewhere between Finland and Russia, Karelia – a small community of spurious monks – offers miracle courses to show how to perform amazing supernatural acts to naive visitors from around the world. After infiltrating himself amongst the pupils, a reporter documents the practices of this esoteric monastic community so as to unmask the deception. This exhibit is shown as a catalogue of miracles that the monastery intends to teach.

Fontcuberta's work intends 'to be an *antidote*' to any type of beatific credulity, against any subordination to a dogmatic approach to knowledge. This project thus offers a strict concordance between the very substance of the work and the Hôtel-Dieu Museum's vocation: 'to bring attention to what lies underneath or beyond forms', polishing the visitor's view and creating critical stimuli in a connection with what is displayed to them. Furthermore, it's relevant for an artist of such vast and insatiable curiosity to be presented in a Museum which affirms its multidisciplinary identity and envisages different approaches as part of its programme: ethnographic, archaeological, (the museum houses a collection of mediaeval sculptures) and contemporary.

Finally, from the layout point of view, the museum is particularly apt for Joan Fontcuberta's work which often takes the form of pseudo scientific, zoological and botanical exhibits allowing for a scenography that recalls the great naves of natural history museums.



Installation view (detail)



Le Miracle du Trekking aquatique, 2002



View of the Musée de L'Hôtel-Dieu, Mantes-la-Jolie, France

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