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Our Concrete Jungle: Neil Goldberg's "One Version of Events"

BY NOELLE BODICK | MAY 04, 2015



Neil Goldberg's "One Version of Events No. 5 (Spheres)," 2015.
(Participant Inc)

Maybe you've seen the signs around the city: "Eat like an idealist," "Grow up strong and harmless," "Values matter." The messages are not promoting some presumptuous food co-op or grassroots animal liberation movement. No, they're plugs for the huge, for-profit corporation Whole Foods Market, Inc. The ads' creators have obviously learned the lesson enunciated by the title character of Adelle Waldman's novel "The Love Affairs of Nathaniel P": "All they have to do is put some picture of an earnest lesbian couple on a cereal box, and we just assume it comes from some free-love worker's paradise."

Like Waldman, through her protagonist, the artist Neil Goldberg skewers the self-righteous eating habits of New York's privileged class in his small, humorous show "[One Version of Events](#)," at [Participant Inc.](#) (through May 24), on the city's Lower East Side. Together, the drawings, photographs, and videos displayed suggest that "conscientious" consumerism — including the purchase of artisanal almond butter and organic kale muffins — merely disguises our true, exploitative relationship to the natural world.

The tone is never scolding. Goldberg is the Montaigne of contemporary artists —unpretentious and generous in his evaluation of the human animal. In his show at the Museum of the City of New York in 2012, he documented instantly relatable New York rituals, from commuters' gazing disconsolately after a just-missed train, to midtown workers' surveying an inscrutable self-service salad bar, to East Village shop owners' hoisting their metal security gates in the morning.

The first part of the Participant show evinces a similar anthropological bent. The artist trains his gaze — rather voyeuristically — on gay couples exiting a New York Whole Foods store, each man clutching full brown-paper bags or shouldering eco-friendly reusable ones. These visual records do not so much point accusingly at the self-satisfied shoppers as hilariously send up the liberal idealist delusion that by paying higher prices for certified-organic food, our hands are wiped clean, even if we are actually benefiting the investors of an anti-union company. Hey, when Whole Foods says that "values matter," it didn't specify whether these were ethical or pecuniary.

In the show's next part, animals strike back at the human world. Drawn in graphite, a pride of lions feasts on a woman, vultures tear open the bellies of a couple, and a leopard, lips drawn in a prodigious snarl, wraps its teeth around the neck of a girl. It's perhaps eyebrow raising to learn that the title of the series is "Wild Animals Eat My Family and Me."

The hunt continues in the projection "One Version of Events No. 3." The video begins with a cheetah, ears back, pouncing on a wildebeest, dragging down its hindquarters, and a bird of prey descending on its victim. But gradually the savannah dissolves into a planetary and then galactic background, while the animals become abstracted white outlines. Nearby, another video shows bubble sphere graphics, each hosting a scene of slaughter: a lion finishing off a graceful antelope, another big cat snapping the neck of a baby elephant. Here Goldberg transforms the wild world into, essentially, a glorified Apple computer screensaver, circa 2000.

The artist implicates himself as well as the consumerist society in this defanged and declawed nature. In the video "Reverse Commute," he crawls backward on all fours from the East Broadway F station to an apartment, while in "Shit Hunt," he solicits dog owners to collect their animals' bagged feces, freshly scooped up from the city's sidewalk.

Behold how fierce and savage our concrete jungle is.