

Exhibition Guide

James T. Hong
Animal

3 December 2021 — 13 February 2022
First Floor Galleries

Taiwanese-American artist and filmmaker James T. Hong (b. 1970) has been making provocative films for more than twenty years. Focusing on ideas of morality, his work prompts viewers to question their own biases through confrontational narratives. Darkly humorous, his films draw on the aesthetics of political cinema, combining documentary footage with compelling voiceovers. Many of his films explore our search for meaning in a “post-truth” world, where information is often accepted based on emotions and beliefs rather than facts.

Animal is James T. Hong’s first solo exhibition in Europe. It presents two works – made 10 years apart – which feature animals as protagonists. In the films, humans and animals are one and the same: adaptable species that are equally capable of good and evil acts.



IKON

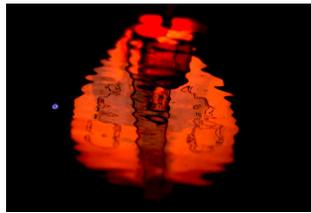
Please note *De Anima* (2021) by James T. Hong contains strong language.

First Floor

Exit



2. *De Anima* (2021)



2. *De Anima* (2021)



1. *The Duck of Nature/
The Duck of God* (2010)

Entrance



1. *The Duck of Nature/The Duck of God* (2010)
Single-channel video, sound. 4:09 minutes
Courtesy the artist and Empty Gallery, Hong Kong

Entering the gallery, viewers see a large-scale projection of ***The Duck of Nature/The Duck of God* (2010)**. Hong was commissioned by the Dutch government to make this educational video for children from migrant communities. The video imagines the 17th-century philosopher Baruch Spinoza as a mechanical duck (“Beneductus de Spinoza”) who is snubbed by other birds on the canals of Amsterdam:

*I have many enemies and very few friends. I am looking for my friends.
Who will listen to me? Who will listen to me?
If only the others would listen to me.
Whatever is, is in God. Whatever is, is in Nature. I will prove it.
No one will listen to me. Listen to me.
There is no free will. There is no design.
Listen to me.*

The scenario reflects the experience of Spinoza, who was excommunicated by the Jewish community for his humanist beliefs. The film’s rousing score, an excerpt from Tchaikovsky’s *Waltz of the Flowers* (1892), lends pathos and absurdity to the motorised bird’s attempts to join with different flocks. Central to this light-hearted work is the question of authenticity – whether a robot qualifies as a ‘real’ duck – and the discrimination faced by migrant populations within mainstream society (an experience Hong identifies with as a first-generation East Asian growing up in the United States).

The Duck of Nature/The Duck of God was originally made as a preview for a feature film. Never finished, its script includes the characters “Cootfried” – an incarnation of German mathematician, scientist and philosopher Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646 – 1716) – and “geometric objects”. Their dialogue expands on Spinoza’s ideas of substance (something that needs nothing else in order to exist) and God (as equivalent to nature).



2. *De Anima* (2021)
Two-channel video installation, sound.
Each channel 20 minutes
Courtesy the artist and Empty Gallery, Hong Kong

***De Anima* (2021)** is a video installation made by Hong for the architecture of Ikon’s first floor galleries. To access the work, viewers move through a set of **transparent PVC curtains** that recall the plastic barriers used in hospitals and abattoirs to prevent contamination. The installation comprises two video channels, each projected on either side of a block. The films embody “two sides of the same coin”, sharing the same soundtrack yet offering different viewpoints.

The soundtrack begins with Hong saying that it has been “20 years since [he] changed the prescription on his glasses”. The statement – highlighted in blurred scenes – underlines the skepticism that informs his filmmaking philosophy and practice. For Hong, skepticism has a connection with stoicism, a philosophy that supports living in accordance with the rules of nature and accepting our inability to control them. His voiceovers and electronic score amplify the work’s ominous narrative.



Shot in Taiwan, the **first film** presents three points of view: the artist’s, that of the “enemy” virus (Covid-19), and a dog’s. An American anti-Japanese propaganda film *My Japan* (1945) provides the voice of the virus, echoing the anti-Chinese sentiment that surfaced at the beginning of the C-19 pandemic. This relates to Hong’s interest in ‘biomorality’, a system of ethics inspired by Aristotle’s *History of Animals*, which is shaped by organic processes and the interrelationship between humans and animals. In ***De Anima***, immorality is as easily detectable as a bad smell; a form of biological essentialism that looks to nature and microbiology as sources of ethics.

I have caused suffering.

I have probably caused more suffering to the people I love most than to my enemies.

Our thoughts give off smells.

*Some ideas obviously stink. Do we live in a world of s**t?*

For the pessimist, it is a world of excrement. For the optimist it is a world of extra-mints.

*I’m prepared to eat this minty s**t.*

I’ll answer my own question. Ideas can make us sick.



The **second film** depicts the Mahabodhi Temple in India. The location marks the site of the Bodhi Tree under which the Buddha is believed to have attained enlightenment.

This film reinterprets film reinterprets what we have seen in the first, representing the artist’s quest for insight during the pandemic. Footage shot with a heat detector camera shows the bodies of pilgrims as pools of red and orange, which merge with surrounding matter. Stray dogs – seemingly unaware of the temple’s spiritual significance – roam amongst people in prayer.

Hong’s Buddhist beliefs maintain that neither humans nor animals have individual eternal souls (the title ‘anima’ is Latin for ‘soul’). ***De Anima*** questions the western idea of the human soul as the centre of moral judgment. It also sees animals as sentient beings, capable of reaching enlightenment. Their witty observations of human behaviour (conveyed through voiceovers from the dog) question the superiority of human beings over animal species. Anthropomorphised by Hong’s narration, animals also act as allegories for human emotions.

Viewers can watch **De Anima** from **two sets of seating**. Their tiered shape mirrors the steps and bell curve (a graph of normal distribution with a rounded peak that tapers at each end) seen in the work. The plastic surface of the seating for the first channel reflects the urban infrastructure of Taipei. The fabric seating for the second channel resembles the patterned prayer cushions used by pilgrims at Mahabodhi Temple.

James T. Hong is one of Taiwan's most distinctive filmmakers. Often addressing taboo subjects, his smart scripts and immersive visuals invite much-needed reflection about the state of human ethics in today's society. This exhibition gives Birmingham and UK audiences the chance to discover his unique voice and vision through two key works, selected from more than 20 years' oeuvre.

Melanie Pocock, Curator, Ikon.

The exhibition is accompanied by a programme of public events and a digital publication, including an essay by Melanie Pocock, Ikon Curator and excerpts of other films by James T. Hong.

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Free entry, donations welcome

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