

IKON

Ikon Gallery
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0121 248 0708 / ikon-gallery.org
free entry / donations welcome
Registered charity no. 528892

James T. Hong *Animal*

3 December 2021 – 13 February 2022



James T. Hong, *De Anima* (2021). Video still, courtesy the artist.

Ikon presents the first solo exhibition in Europe by Taiwanese-American artist and filmmaker James T. Hong (3 December 2021 – 13 February 2022).

Hong (b. 1970) has been making provocative films for over twenty years. Focusing on ideas of morality, his work prompts viewers to question their own biases through confronting and often humorous philosophical narratives. For Ikon's exhibition he shows two films, made 10 years apart, each with animals as protagonists. Seamlessly interwoven, humans and animals in the artist's work are one and the same: adaptable species that are equally capable of good and evil acts in given circumstances.

Hong's work *The Duck of Nature/The Duck of God* (2010) is presented as a large-scale projection and was originally made as an educational video commissioned by the Dutch government for children from migrant communities. The five-minute video

imagines the 17th-century philosopher Baruch Spinoza as a mechanical duck who is snubbed by other birds on the canals of Amsterdam. The scenario reflects the experience of Spinoza himself, 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 futile attempts to merge with different flocks. At the heart of this light-hearted work is the question of authenticity – whether a robot qualifies as a 'real' duck – and the discrimination faced by migrant and so-called 'minority' populations within mainstream society (an experience Hong identifies with as a first-generation East Asian growing up in the United States).

To access Hong's second film, visitors to the gallery must move through a set of transparent PVC curtains which recall the plastic barriers used in hospitals and abattoirs to prevent contamination. *De Anima* (2021) is a two-channel video installation adapted by Hong for Ikon. Filmed in Taiwan, the first channel presents three points of view: the artist's, that of the "enemy" virus (Covid-19), and a dog's. The voice of the narrator from the 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. The second channel, shot in India at the historical location where the Buddha gained enlightenment, reinterprets the first channel and represents the artist's quest for insight during the pandemic. In both elements, animals provide this perspective with witty observations on human behaviour.

*Who are these people? They smell old and weak.
I like walkies with less people around. No scooters, nice.
These people walking, where are they going?
I don't trust these people.*

The two video channels of *De Anima* embody "two sides of the same coin", sharing the same soundtrack yet offering viewers different viewpoints. Hong's voice and electronic score amplify the work's ominous narrative. *De Anima* is a development of Hong's video submission to *CC:World*, an online project organised by Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin, to explore the "racism, social and economic injustices" that the spread of the pandemic made apparent.

Both of Hong's films exemplify his 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 moves away from the western idea of the human soul as the ultimate arbiter of moral judgment and towards nature as a source of ethics. The title of *De Anima* references the Latin for 'soul'. Whilst Hong's Buddhist beliefs maintain that neither humans nor animals have individual eternal souls, animals are also seen as sentient beings, capable of reaching

enlightenment. In many of his works, animals feature in cutaways (shots that lead in or out of a film's main narrative), acting as allegories for human emotions.

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, Ikon Curator

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.

A trailer for *Animal*, made by James T. Hong is available here:

<https://www.youtube.com/user/IkonGallery>

Visiting Ikon: Entry is free. To book a ticket or for more information on current opening times and visiting guidelines please visit ikon-gallery.org

For more information, high-res images and to request interviews please contact Rebecca Small or Muskeen Liddar on 0121 248 0708 or email r.small@ikon-gallery.org or m.liddar@ikon-gallery.org

Social Media - Instagram, Twitter and Facebook: @ikongallery #IkonGallery

Links: ikon-gallery.org

Note to Editors:

1. Biography: Taiwanese-American filmmaker and artist James T. Hong (b. 1970) creates thought-provoking works that prompt conversation on controversial socio-political and historical issues. His films have premiered at international film festivals, including San Francisco International Film Festival (2007), IDFA (International Documentary Festival Amsterdam) (2012), Berlin International Film Festival (Berlinale), and Busan International Film Festival (2019), where he won the prize for Best Documentary (Mecenat Award) for *Opening Closing Forgetting* (2018), a film which follows Chinese survivors of Japanese biological warfare. He has screened films, and presented multimedia installations and performances in biennales and museums around the world, including Haus der Kulturen der Welt (HKW) (2013), Mediacity Seoul Biennial (2014), Kiev Biennial (2016), Para Site, Hong Kong (2015) and Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York (2017) and Institute of Contemporary Arts Singapore (2018). He has participated in several editions of the Taipei Biennale, most recently *You and I*

Don't Live on the Same Planet (2020), curated by Bruno Latour and Martin Guinard. Hong also occasionally collaborates with the mysterious electronic band Taibach, whose latest EP was nominated by *The Wire* as one of its top albums of February 2021. Referencing the Slovenian proto-industrial group Laibach, their sound is influenced by classic industrial bands, early 90s techno and "the possibility of ideological resistance through tactical sign play and subversive affirmation". Hong's work is represented by Empty Gallery, Hong Kong. He lives in Taipei.

2. Please note all dates are subject to change, in particular as a result of Government announcements relating to the Covid-19 pandemic.
3. Ikon is an internationally acclaimed contemporary art venue situated in central Birmingham. Established in 1964 by a group of artists, Ikon is an educational charity and works to encourage public engagement with contemporary art through exhibiting new work in a context of debate and participation. The gallery programme features artists from around the world and a variety of media is represented, including sound, film, mixed media, photography, painting, sculpture and installation. Ikon's off-site programme develops dynamic relationships between art, artists and audiences outside the gallery. Projects vary enormously in scale, duration and location, challenging expectations of where art can be seen and by whom. Education is at the heart of Ikon's activities, stimulating public interest in and understanding of contemporary visual art. Through a variety of talks, tours, workshops and seminars, Ikon's Learning Team aims to build dynamic relationships with audiences, enabling visitors to engage with, discuss and reflect on contemporary art. ikon-gallery.org
1. Ikon Gallery is supported using public funding from Arts Council England and Birmingham City Council.
2. Arts Council England is the national development body for arts and culture across England, working to enrich people's lives. ACE support a range of activities across the arts, museums and libraries – from theatre to visual art, reading to dance, music to literature, and crafts to collections. Great art and culture inspires us, brings us together and teaches us about ourselves and the world around us. In short, it makes life better. Between 2018 and 2022, ACE will invest £1.45 billion of public money from government and an estimated £860 million from the National Lottery to help create these experiences for as many people as possible across the country. artscouncil.org.uk