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***The Ghosts  
in Our Machine***

Liz Marshall examines  
our uneasy relationship  
with animals



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COURTESY: GAT MEDIA

## Liz Marshall's *The Ghosts in Our Machine*

"I knew I needed to find a way to attract people to the subject, not repel them," says director Liz Marshall. The challenge before Marshall, however, was a difficult one, as the subject she is referring to is animal rights. Thought of as grim and gory, the issue is far from sexy, and embroiled with ethical questions over definitions of sentience. It's not surprising, then, even with a background in human rights and environmental activism, that Marshall says this topic "has got to be the most polarizing issue" she's encountered. Which is why with *The Ghosts in Our Machine* she focused on creating what she calls the "ebb and flow of bearing witness," and—most importantly—community building.

Though Marshall admits she's drawn "to issues that are harrowing or unjust"—her previous documentary, *Water on the Table* (2010), addressed water as a human right—her work eschews an exposé or "misery-porn" style. Instead, she chooses to focus on what she calls "the resilience of the human spirit." Or, here, the animal spirit. Following photojournalist Jo-Anne McArthur as she crosses the globe documenting the atrocities in fur farms, factory farming and pharmaceutical laboratories, Marshall's film draws attention to the forgotten beings: animals who are neither pets nor wildlife.

Instead of bombarding the audience with images of animal abuse, Marshall structures the film around McArthur's journey, which adds a human centre and allows for necessary moments of reprieve from the

horror. For instance, McArthur speaks openly about her PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder), which she counters by visiting an animal sanctuary. In these moments Marshall seeks to reveal "the beauty and the hope and the change" in a topic that is not often thought of in these terms. As such, Marshall hopes viewers will "walk away in a reflective state of mind, as opposed to arriving at a conclusion immediately."

For as much as Marshall's focus is on creating an experience rather than having the audience merely watch, what happens when they leave the theatre is equally important to her. "You can't make the film and walk away," says Marshall, who finds the power of documentary lies in the ability to "tap into and build your own community that grows over time." Marshall has thus teamed up with Michael Simons and Paul Shoebridge, who together form the digital creative team The Goggles, to create a multiplatform and cross-media project, which will be released alongside *The Ghosts in Our Machine*. Allowing viewers to go deeper into the film, the web components create an interactive experience. (Marshall points to being able to access McArthur's photo journal, which is shown in the film, as an example).

Given this, Marshall sees *The Ghosts in Our Machine* as an "unfolding journey" whose aims and issues don't end at the credits. In this way, she's taking on the issue of "armchair activism"—the feeling of having done something merely by watching a film—head on. Marshall is not only addressing how to turn an audience into a community, but is also actively doing it.

— KIVA REARDON



## Bearing Witness

Documentary photographer Jo-Anne McArthur's unflinching gaze records man-made animal atrocities in Liz Marshall's *The Ghosts in Our Machine* (see page 42).