

# A Nude Horse Is A Rude Horse: The Society for Indecency to Naked Animals

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**Abstract:** In 1959, Alan Abel began sending out a series of press releases to American media outlets credited to a new organization, The Society for Indecency to Naked Animals. Using the language of conservative moralists opposed to the changes in postwar society, he argued that ‘naked’ animals were scandalous and needed to be clothed. Pets, farm animals, and wildlife were all included, as the organization hued to slogans like ‘a nude horse is a rude horse’ and ‘decency today means morality tomorrow’. Abel employed comedian Buck Henry to play the organization’s president, G. Clifford Prout, who gave interviews and speeches covered widely by the mainstream press. Over the next four years, Prout and the group were featured on every major American newscast. The hoax was exposed in late 1962 after he gave an interview to Walter Cronkite. The following year, *Time* magazine officially debunked the existence of the group. It was an elaborate hoax, but it was also a satire, using animals to critique moralists attempting to ban books and music for indecency. In so doing, the group also unintentionally laid bare American contradictory thinking about animals, as clothing nonhuman animals and worrying about their ‘indecency’ assumed that they had some level of agency. The United States, for example, had always classified the killing of those wearing clothes as murder. Thus it was that while the satire of The Society for Indecency to Naked Animals was directed toward human moralists, the content of its crusade focused exclusively on nonhumans, raising clear questions about their role in human society.

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To hear Alan Abel tell it, the hoax began on a dusty Texas highway. He and other motorists were forced to stop for a herd of cattle crossing the road. Two, however, lagged behind the others, and began having sex, keeping the cars stopped and the drivers wholly uncomfortable. They averted their eyes, or laughed, as Abel paid more attention to their reactions than to the cows. He was intrigued that the human moralism ingrained in the minds of the drivers would translate into the sight of perfectly normal bovine activities. 'It projected such a tangle of conflicts between our society's principles and its actions,' he remembered. He 'began to think of a satirical story line, poking fun at people's foibles and fears, with a basic premise that would involve the civilizing of animals' (Abel 1-2). He began to write an outline for a story there in the car before the cows allowed the drivers to continue, and when he arrived at his hotel room, he typed out a final draft, titled 'The Society for Indecency to Naked Animals (SINA)'.<sup>1</sup>

Written as a news report, the story described G. Clifford Prout, Jr., leader of the organization. 'It is Mr. Prout's belief that all domestic animals should wear clothing for the sake of decency,' the story explained. 'He points out that we human beings, who are biologically animals, share our food, our love, and our homes with our pets. Then we should also share our decency with them.' Abel claimed that Prout's organization had a \$400,000 bequest left by his father. 'When children are denied the healthy habit of dressing their pets, they rebel against their parents, school, and community, in that order,' said Prout. 'The sooner we clothe these naked animals the better our chances are that we'll bring up young people to be decent citizens.' The organization claimed more than 25,000 members, 'who have taken the pledge to clothe all animals, including those of their neighbors and any strays prowling backyards.' SINA adherents carried animal clothing with them at all times in case of emergencies. All potential members had to take an emotional stability test prior to induction, so as to 'weed out the crackpots, thrill seekers, and other undesirables who would attempt to infiltrate SINA, possibly undermining the cause' (Abel 3-4). The group had a women's auxiliary, a marching song, and a pledge that closed with its motto:

I pledge allegiance to SINA  
And all the scruples for which it stands.  
A universal family of man and beast,  
Decently clothed and morally armed.

I promise to cover all our pets  
Including those of my neighbors.  
So that nobody ever forgets,  
Decency Today Means Morality Tomorrow. (Abel 5-6)

That original story would morph in 1959 into a fake organization that expanded the hoax into the real world, using the language of conservative moralists opposed to the changes in postwar society to argue that ‘naked’ animals were scandalous and needed to be clothed. Pets, farm animals, and wildlife were all included,<sup>2</sup> as the organization hued to slogans like ‘a nude horse is a rude horse’ and ‘decency today means morality tomorrow’. Abel employed comedian Buck Henry to play Prout, who gave interviews and speeches covered widely by the mainstream press.<sup>3</sup> Over the next four years, Prout and the group were featured on every major American newscast. The hoax was finally exposed in late 1962 after an extended story on the CBS Evening News with Walter Cronkite sparked deeper journalistic investigations. The following year, *Time* magazine officially debunked the existence of the group. It was an elaborate hoax, but it was also a satire, using animals to critique moralists attempting to ban books and music for indecency. In so doing, the group also unintentionally laid bare American contradictory thinking about animals, as clothing nonhuman animals and worrying about their ‘indecency’ assumed that they had some level of agency. The United States, for example, had always classified the killing of those wearing clothes as murder. Thus, it was that while the Society for Indecency to Naked

Animals was directed toward human moralists, the content of its crusade focused exclusively on nonhumans, raising clear questions about their role in human society.

Hoaxes are contrived fictions played as facts for a variety of potential reasons, and though many such reasons stem from a desire to expose social or political hypocrisies, they differ from acts of direct propaganda in that, in the words of Ian Reilly, ‘hoaxing assumes a more playful, guileful, and trickster sensibility’ (143). But hoaxing is an effort at ‘revealing’ as well as ‘fooling,’ explains Lynda Walsh (167). It creates ‘new medial challenges or epistemological insecurities’ (Busse and Hubler 12) to demonstrate holes in social thinking, and relies on journalism and its claims of legitimacy and objectivity to carry that epistemological baggage (Castagnaro). ‘Media spoofs are entertaining’, argues Moira Marsh, ‘but they also uncover the constructed nature of news as factual discourse’ (444).

Media hoaxes have existed for centuries. ‘There are’, explains Gerald Haigh, ‘hundreds of years of monsters, tarot cards, clairvoyants, missing ships, lost continents, talking dogs, vibrating forked sticks and knocking tables to prove it’ (Haigh 59). Mikhail Bakhtin has argued that it was the ridicule of the powerful at carnivals and other gatherings that helped erode the feudal system. Satire created ‘a continual shifting from top to bottom, from front to rear, of numerous parodies and travesties, humiliations, profanations, comic crownings and uncrownings’ (84). Kembrew McLeod has traced the American origins of such uncrownings to the work of Benjamin Franklin, who used newspaper media and his *Poor Richard’s Almanack* to create hoaxes aimed at both political and personal targets (1-3; see also Gorbach 239-240).<sup>4</sup>

But the 1960s provided a new relevancy for them, made possible by the ubiquity of television and an emerging generation who had never known life without it (Deseriis 94). Actors like Abel were, in the explanation of Umberto Eco, ‘communication guerrillas’ who were able to manipulate their familiarity with the varied media of media for ‘the constant correction of perspectives, the checking of codes, the ever-renewed interpretation of mass messages’ (Eco 143).<sup>5</sup> Marco Deseriis notes that a variety of media platforms continued to cover Abel even after his hoaxes were exposed. ‘Far from being embarrassed for their own lack of judgment, TV producers understood that Abel’s personas worked, and as such deserved airtime regardless of—

or perhaps precisely because of – their fictional character’ (Deseriis 95-96). In an increasingly competitive media environment, journalists often select stories based on interest rather than relevance, making it easier for satirists and hoaxers to use that competition against them. The hoaxes continue to resonate in American minds because journalistic embarrassment often manifests as subtle or nonexistent retractions, only giving credence to the underlying epistemological principle of the hoax itself (Deseriis 97).<sup>6</sup>

Such efforts are framed by Marilyn DeLaure and Moritz Fink as ‘culture jamming’ (6), by Naomi Klein as ‘semiotic Robin Hoodism’ (280). The efforts of Abel and others like him ‘appropriated, reworked, and disseminated cultural symbols in order to contest meanings and challenge dominant forms of power’ (DeLaure and Fink 6). Or, as reduced by Abel, ‘I like to give people a kick in the intellect’ (*Nelson Mail* 26). Jeanne Abel, Alan’s wife, who was a co-conspirator in the effort to clothe animals, explained, ‘With SINA, it was a comment on censorship. The purpose of satire is to get people to look at something again with a little more thoughtfulness’ (McLeod 237).

A contemporary exemplar of such culture jamming is the Yes Men, a group of hoaxers whose interest in generating ‘a little more thoughtfulness’ has manifested itself in a decided environmental direction in the twenty-first century. Unlike Abel, the group has not directly engaged animals in its efforts, but by forging statements from Shell Oil, the Minister of Environment and Climate Change, and others, it has sought to push environmental change that would ultimately benefit nonhuman animals through public hoaxing (Reilly). The group’s goal ‘is to draw scrutiny to the system. The end goal, however, is not to prove the nihilist’s version of Baudrillard’s theories, to demonstrate that no one is believable or that nothing is more or less true than anything else; rather, it is to encourage evaluation’ (Day 173).

As Moira Marsh has explained, ‘all joke performance has a social base,’ but ‘when the nature of communication is uncertain, it is the context – the relationship – that decides the meaning’ (223). Such uses of humor were as powerful a weapon in the 1960s as they have been for groups like the Yes Men in the twenty-first century. And unlike the Yes Men, animals were marshalled in service to those earlier critiques. On August 23, 1968, for example, Abbie

Hoffman's Youth International Party, the Yippies, announced at Chicago's Civic Center Plaza that they were running a 145-pound black-and-white pig named 'Pigasus' as a candidate for president at the 1968 Democratic National Convention (Mizelle 127; Kusch 60; '7 Yippies' 6). Abe Peck, Yippie editor of the Chicago underground magazine *The Seed*, promised reporters prior to the convention that Pigasus would be the group's candidate. 'After we nominate him we will roast him and eat him,' he said. 'For years the Democrats have been nominating a pig and then letting the pig devour them. We plan to reverse the process' (Lucas 64). Another Yippie leader announced that the group had telegraphed Lyndon Johnson requesting Secret Service protection for Pigasus. While five of the human Yippies were taken to jail, the pig was captured by police and taken to the Chicago Humane Society (Kusch 60).<sup>7</sup>

The efforts fall under the umbrella of what Erving Goffman describes as 'corrective hoaxing,' public humorous displays 'with the object of making a moral point' (90-91). That moral point, however, can reach beyond its intended target. Marsh explains that 'practical jokes teach lessons to a variety of audiences, but the joke targets are only one such audience' (60). The rights of animals were not on the agenda of either the Yippies or Alan Abel, but the repeated use of animals in such corrective efforts makes a necessity of reading hoaxes in light of the unintended targets of such consistent uses.<sup>8</sup>

A decade prior to the Yippies' stunt, Abel's original attempt at an animal hoax was rejected by a variety of magazines, so the thrust of the con would have to wait until April 1959, when he wrote to Dave Garroway, host of NBC's *Today* show, claiming to be Prout, describing his organization, and making himself available for an interview. To his surprise, *Today* responded. The con was on (Abel 17-20).

The literature that Abel sent to *Today* in preparation for Prout's appearance claimed 'that the members of SINA shall devote their time and energy to clothe all naked animals that appear in public' in order to 'protect our children from the sight of naked horses, cows, dogs, and cats'. Abel claimed to be the group's vice president; he recruited comedian Buck Henry to play Prout. 'There are naked animals everywhere!' Henry, cum Prout, announced on *Today*'s May 27 episode.

They are on the streets and sidewalks – a public disgrace to our children – and along the highways, causing accidents as motorists take their eyes off the road to watch nude cows and bulls. And these animals are not grazing – they are hanging their heads in shame! So don't let your moral standards go lower and lower due to naked animals.

While there was laughter among many of the crew, Garroway and his cohorts, particularly Barbara Walters, seemed convinced of Prout's authenticity (Abel 23-25; Henry).

Both the original literature and Prout's monologue emphasized children as those most demonstrably affected by naked animals, mimicking the moralist notion that obscene material would harm America's youth.<sup>9</sup> And obscenity was on people's minds in 1959. The sex research of Alfred Kinsey had scandalized many in the years leading up to SINA's creation and that of Masters and Johnson would scandalize them in the years following its dissolution (Drucker; Maier; Robinson). As Henry appeared on the *Today* show as Prout, Timothy Leary began his position in Harvard's psychology department (Minutaglio and Davis) and Grove Press published the first American edition of D.H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, sparking successful censorship litigation that would lead the company, in 1961 as the SINA hoax was still ongoing, to publish another banned book, Henry Miller's *Tropic of Cancer* (Glass). The birth control pill had been approved by the FDA to regulate menstruation in 1957 and would be approved as a contraceptive in 1960 (Asbell; May). They were advances that, taken in total, caused national public hand-wringing about the state of the country's morals, leading many to worry about an American descent into profligacy that would surely incur a similar wrath to that befalling Sodom and Gomorrah.

But there was also inherent in Prout's claims the assumption that animals themselves had taken on human constructions of decency, seeing themselves as morally compromised because of their lack of clothing. They were 'hanging their heads in shame'. There is in the historiography of animal domestication a substantive debate about the push and pull factors that generated domestic animal companions for humans, but there is consensus that the human-animal bond has had a positive symbiotic role for the adaptation of both humans and various species of domesticated nonhumans (Shipman; Young; Zeuner; Mason; Palmer). And if they

were able to adapt to specific feeding times and human patterns of behaviour, went the SINA conceit, then surely they were adopting our moral sense, as well. Though Prout's harangue strained credulity, its play upon common assumptions about morality and the development of animal-human relationships gave it, for some, an air of authenticity. Letters poured into the address of SINA's supposed national office asking for more information.

Others, however, were incredulous. 'You certainly couldn't expect the farmer or the rancher or even the housewife to "change the diapers" of hundreds of heads of cattle or even one lively dog or cat,' wrote one angry correspondent. Or what about 'the dog who wishes to roll in a puddle to cool off'. Another claimed 'that there is absolutely no feeling of embarrassment in the minds of the unclothed animals you may care to interview on the subject. In fact, their comments on your ideas might shatter your morale badly'. Or, 'with all our pets clothed, what will we think when we see squirrels and other wild animals unclothed?' And 'what happens to dogs and telephone poles?' (Abel 26-31).

Such arguments came accompanied with epithets and vitriol, but the claims in between them were telling. The correspondents acknowledged logistical problems with clothing animals, but also the artificial difference imposed by human standards of decency on one class of animals while ignoring the others. There was in the protests a tacit acknowledgement of the social construction of decency, of the greater universality of those without the physical trappings of such constructions. In describing the possibility of interviewing animals about their thoughts on the subject, correspondents gave an assumed agency to animals, gave them a potential human voice even as they interpreted their standards as fundamentally unhuman. It was a demonstration of the contradictory thinking about animals that dominated human thought. Animals were of us and beyond us. They were to live among us but kept at arm's length. To be loved and to be eaten. The SINA hoax was never intended to draw out such contradictions; the drawing was inevitable when they dominated the human relationship with animals.

The consistency of those contradictions ensured that the hoax would continue. The massive amount of correspondence related to the organization led Abel to draw up a constitution and by-laws document, along with a fictional will for Prout's father that

demonstrated his similarly fictional \$400,000 bequest to the organization. SINA wanted ‘all good people to clothe their animals with proper covering so that vital areas will not be observed by the human naked eye’, the document claimed (Abel 58-59). There was in the desire a nod to both bestiality and speciesism. Bestiality has existed in all human societies from at least 40,000 BCE (Rosenberger). While it has not always been condemned, it certainly grew to be so in the modern American context (Miletski). Less than a generation prior to the SINA hoax, Alfred Kinsey claimed that one in thirteen men had some kind of sexual contact with a nonhuman animal. It was the kind of scandalous conclusion that lingered in American minds and added further credence to the organization’s claims about the potential for sexual promiscuity in the display of animals without clothes.

The species supremacy assumption came from the human judgement of animals by what was ‘proper’ to the ‘human naked eye’. While the ‘naked’ eye was a tongue-in-cheek reference to the general hypocrisy of public moralism, the statement’s broader effect was a demonstration that human standards of decency were the only standards that mattered. It was a colonial statement, an imposition of the will of the powerful on those less powerful. SINA was engaged in missionary work, an inherently colonial endeavor, with the added caveat that the human victims of the missionary project were encouraged to make a mission field of a third group, nonhuman animals. This tripartite colonialism was historically part of all animal movements. Henry Bergh founded the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals in 1866, for example, and the group developed through the Gilded Age as the United States began its own colonial project in Samoa, Hawai’i, and the Caribbean. As the country imposed its will overseas, the ASPCA imposed its will at home. Bergh used his connections to get the association an official legislative charter in the state of New York and a new anticruelty statute that classified and scheduled for prosecution cruelty to any nonhuman animal and gave the new group the ability to enforce it. Other states soon followed with similar measures (Beers; Freeberg). Within that context, SINA was ‘open to all people without regard to their wealth, religion, or political affiliation’, with ‘people’ as a stand-in for the human mission field that would be responsible for closing the tripartite loop by clothing animals (Abel 61). It was phrasing that made the satire

effective because it aligned neatly with American colonial assumptions and the trajectory of traditional animal welfare arguments.

The SINA by-laws also aligned tangentially with animal welfare history in different ways. ‘Very large animals, such as those found in a zoo, circus, or wild animal show’, the document stated, ‘shall not be the concern of SINA; however, the organizations and promoters behind such barbarian and public displays of indecency shall earn the full wrath of SINA; likewise with the perpetrators of dog, cat, and monkey shows’ (Abel 59-60). Zoos, circuses, and wild animal shows had long been a target of animal groups as prisons for the nonhumans in their charge. Abel mimicked that language, but found the barbarism of the endeavours not in the actual bondage of animals, but instead in their nudity while in bondage. It was familiar argumentation with a different trajectory, only adding a pseudo-legitimacy to SINA’s claims. Similarly, the exemption of ‘very large animals’ served pragmatically to head-off claims of hypocrisy or infeasibility. The group, for example, would also ‘not be concerned over any reptiles and other animals that swim or fly for their chief means of survival. Certain amphibious animals shall be examined by a duly appointed SINA officer and his findings reported to the SINA Executive Board for classification and type of clothing recommended’ (Abel 60). The statement was funny. It was intended to be. But its alignment with American historical argumentative strains kept the country believing in its legitimacy.

In September 1961, SINA sent a faux newsletter to news outlets and collegiate newspapers across the country, encouraging members to contact representatives in congress, encouraging them to pursue federal laws requiring the clothing of animals. ‘It is not enough for individual states to pass these laws because it will become complicated and difficult to interpret when cases of interstate travel arise.’ The newsletter also explained that the group’s National Headquarters in New York was usually closed because ‘everyone is out in the field clothing animals’ (Abel 64). Abel had rented a closet in a Madison Avenue building and placed a SINA sign on the door, the ruse serving as the organization’s physical address. No one was there because it was a closet, but also because the hoax was managed by very few people. Along with several tangential co-conspirators, Abel and his wife Jeanne authored the hoax, Henry played Prout publicly, and George Wayne provided SINA’s artwork (Abel 55-57). That the group

could continue to fool the populace was a testament to its underlying claims about popular belief in the claims of media expertise and the consistency of its arguments with historical thinking about nonhuman animals.

In December 1961, the Abels went west to southern California, giving radio interviews about SINA along the way. Upon arrival, Alan Abel made a variety of television appearances as vice president of SINA, explaining and defending the organization on several programs, among them the *Paul Coates Show* (Abel 82-84). Coates was also a columnist for the *Los Angeles Times* and his profile only raised SINA's profile in the city. Among the issues engaged in that space was the most obvious tell of the Society for Indecency to Naked Animals: that its name seemed to imply that it was actually in favour of some kind of indecency. 'It should have been the Society Against Indecency to Naked Animals, of course', Prout later explained, 'but unfortunately my father was a little – well, not quite of sound mind when he drew up the will, and he used the wrong preposition' ('Bum Steer' 82).

After their brief time in Los Angeles, the Abels moved to San Francisco, where the television and radio appearances continued. The attention got the group noticed by the *San Francisco Chronicle*. Reporter George Draper interviewed Abel and Prout, even taking them to the city's zoo for an animal clothing effort to prove their claims. The two stumbled through attempts to clothe a variety of the zoo's residents that was just successful enough to be convincing. Then there was a grueling interview and a final hurdle at a belly-dancing club to test the pair's morality claims. Finally, there was a meeting at the *Chronicle* offices with a team of journalists. Again, Abel and Prout proved convincing (Abel 90-105; Madison 65-66). Thus, it was that on Monday, August 13, 1962, the *San Francisco Chronicle* published a week-long in-depth report on SINA and its exploits.

'EXCLUSIVE', a headline above the *Chronicle*'s masthead read, "'War" Against Naked Animals'. Just below the masthead in similar type, the paper announced 'Two Russians in Orbit' (Draper, 'Crusade Against Naked Animals' 1). The paper told the fictional story of G. Clifford Prout as fact, rehearsing his paeans to 'decency' and describing SINA's various animal-clothing efforts. It described the clothing patterns, the organization's song and motto, its outreach efforts

to encourage awareness. ‘Animals are born with an innate sense of modesty’, Prout told his interviewer. ‘Have you ever considered that grazing animals with lowered heads may not be grazing at all? Did it ever occur to you that many of them are merely looking away, lowering their eyes, so they won’t have to gaze at the “vital areas” of their “grazing” comrades?’ (Draper, ‘Crusade’ 16). Animals were the foils for the satire, as usual. But at one point in the *Chronicle*’s story, Prout described himself as ‘a left winger in the humane movement’, presumably signaling his interest in animal issues. It was a break from his usual banter, which emphasized naked animals as a corrupting influence on humans and never gave much consideration to animal welfare as a freestanding entity, but it was a comment left un-elaborated and unexplained (Draper, ‘Crusade’ 1).

The following day, Tuesday, the paper again put SINA above the masthead, with another front-page exposé to accompany it. In the second installment, Prout emphasized San Francisco as a ‘moral disaster area’, playing on the city’s libertine reputation. ‘There is an incredible amount of laissez faire in terms of tolerance of naked animals in San Francisco’, he told reporters. ‘This adds up to blatant immorality’ (Draper, ‘Blame the Beasts’ 1). By Wednesday SINA had been replaced above the masthead by the Russian cosmonauts returning home, but the group still retained its place on the *Chronicle*’s front page, a third installment describing Prout’s effort to clothe animals at the city’s Fleishhacker Zoo (Draper, ‘Naked Animals’ 1, 12). The next day, Thursday August 16, the group was again on the front page, Prout explaining in a final installment that ‘we’re in the middle of an animal population explosion this minute’, prompted by the libidinousness of animals created by their perpetual nudity. He argued that clothing animals ‘would be much more humane than the present techniques for promoting animal birth control’, referring to the spaying and neutering of household pets (Draper, “‘Solution” on Naked Animals’ 1, 12).

On Friday, the series over, the paper featured fourteen letters to the editor indignant over the group and the *Chronicle*’s placement of it (*San Francisco Chronicle* 22). Still, that exposure led to the organization’s most successful publicity coup, an August 21 exposé on the *CBS Evening News* with Walter Cronkite.<sup>10</sup> When asked by a CBS reporter about what kind of garments he proposed for animals, Henry, as Prout, said that SINA wanted ‘simple, decent, and comfortable

clothing'. He argued that a program to clothe naked animals would 'solve a labor problem', as the manpower required to manufacture animal clothing and to apply it would provide jobs to many in need of work. 'I think it will do a great deal to help the country's economy', he said. Prout wanted federal legislation 'that would make bringing a naked animal in public a crime'. He didn't speculate on potential penalties, leaving it up to the legislators themselves to decide the issue. He closed by singing the official SINA Marching Song (see below). After the report, Cronkite provided an incredulous punctuation to close the show: 'Now I've seen everything' (CBS).<sup>11</sup>

It was more publicity than SINA had ever received, and it led to more scrutiny. Later that month, *Look* magazine's *Insider's Newsletter* exposed Prout as being played by Buck Henry and the group as a fraud, but it did not have the coverage of the *Chronicle* or Cronkite. And so the television interviews and press reports continued. A documentary on the group appeared in West Germany (Abel 126).<sup>12</sup> The *National Enquirer* devoted coverage to the organization, Buck Henry, as Prout, rehearsing SINA's talking points and describing its mission. 'There's a definite correlation between this animal nakedness and the city's [San Francisco's] high rates of alcoholism and suicide', he told the tabloid in a full-page report that further fuelled national interest (Henry 2). The publicity also generated a different kind of scrutiny, as the IRS launched a lengthy investigation of the group, attempting to collect taxes on SINA's supposed \$400,000 bequest (Abel 85, 88-89, 212, 219-220; Randall 143).<sup>13</sup>

In November, Abel gave a speech on SINA at the University of California, Berkeley. He claimed that Prout's grandfather, Otis Prout fought in the Civil War, 'both against the North and the South. He wore blue trousers and a gray jacket'. He 'slapped General Grant in the face for drinking during the Battle of Gettysburg'. He 'delayed Pickett's Charge at Cemetery Ridge for two full hours trying to get the officers to put clothes on their horses'. Prout's father spent a decade trying to communicate with animals in various languages. He spoke 'at least twelve languages, including some strange Grecian modal dialect that's not spoken by anyone'. Abel showed his audience charts claiming to show an increase in automobile accidents where naked

animals were on the side of the highway. ‘A fellow will drive along the road, see a naked cow or horse, and he’ll run into a tree. We’re all basically Peeping Toms of a sort. Don’t deny it’ (Abel 130-135).

The talk was absurd comedy, but the power of the publicity that preceded it carried its own weight, and many in the audience believed it, whether incredulous or supportive. Abel attempted to bolster his credentials by quoting Joyce Brothers on the increasing anthropomorphism directed toward people’s pets. ‘We want them to like what we like, go where we go, and if possible eat what we eat, and even wear what we wear’ (Abel 133). Brothers’s statement was in no way an endorsement of anthropomorphism in human-animal relations, much less an endorsement of SINA, but it did have the benefit of being true. The tendency of humans to anthropomorphize has been a constant of social formation since the birth of storytelling. It was enhanced further with the birth of film and television, allowing animals on camera and in cartoons to speak with human voices, further exacerbating the trend of assuming human characteristics in pets and other animals (the literature is vast, but for an example see Datson and Mitman).

The American anthropomorphic bent toward pets only gave SINA more quasi-credibility, and the following year, Abel used an edited version of the Berkeley speech for an album, *Inside SINA*, released by ABC-Paramount (Abel, 1966: 150-152; SINA, *Inside SINA: The Society*). Building on the theme of anthropomorphism, the record’s jacket featured an introduction by Prout. ‘Most animals behave better when they are permitted to share our social habits. Ask any SINA member. Strangely enough, people let animals share their food, homes and automobiles; then they turn them loose to romp and play in the nude!’ (SINA, *Inside SINA: The Society*). The group also produced one issue of an organizational magazine, also called *Inside SINA*, scheduled for publication in March 1963.

Meanwhile, Abel continued his television promotions. He appeared with Dick Gregory and Sonny Liston on the *Irv Kupcinet Show* in Chicago and on the nationally syndicated *Mike Douglas Show* in Cleveland with Gypsy Rose Lee and Jayne Mansfield. His back-and-forth with the celebrity panelists and his feigned outrage and their opposition to SINA and its mission only

enhanced the group's media profile (Abel 148-149, 154-156). And it's legitimacy. Abel even had to return a \$40,000 donation sent to the organization by an ardent believer (McLeod 234).

In March 1963, the SINA profile would grow even larger with a picket at the White House ('Pickets Ask First Lady' 8). A SINA press release claimed that 'this demonstration would serve a twofold purpose: 1. Adherence to the President's physical fitness program. 2. A plea for Federal legislation outlawing nude animals'. The group claimed that a small group of 'key SINA leaders' would march on Washington 'as an advance scouting party to establish a command post and a general picketing area at the White House', then the crowd of adherents would grow in groups of fifty for a twenty-four-hour period (Abel 162-165). The only picketers to actually arrive were Alan and Jeanne Abel and coconspirator Bill Moran, but the small group drew the crowds and the press for which they were hoping. Abel's sign gave everyone an idea of the purpose of the march:

MR. PRESIDENT:

The indecency of naked animals  
 can be corrected through new  
 Federal laws and SINA, the Society  
 for Indecency to Naked Animals.  
 (We are now over 50,000 strong)

So too did the literature passed out by all three. There was support, incredulity, and laughter from onlookers and question after question from the press. A light rain gave the marchers a reasonable excuse as to why the large crowd never materialized (Abel 168-170; 'White House Urged' 32).

That didn't stop press queries as to why G. Clifford Prout had not arrived. Or as to what the group hoped to achieve with the protest. Alan Abel did the talking, while Jeanne and Bill Moran paced with their signs. Referring to the first lady and daughter, Jeanne's sign read:

'Mrs. Kennedy: won't you please clothe Caroline's horse?' (Abel 170-178; 'Dress Horse' 1).

Interviewed by Robert Goralsky for NBC News, Abel sang the SINA Marching Song,

'Wings of Decency':

High on the wings of SINA  
We fight for the future now.  
Let's clothe every pet and animal,  
Whether dog, cat, horse, or cow.

G. Clifford Prout, our President,  
He works for you and me.  
So clothe all your pets and join the march  
For worldwide decency.

S.I.N.A. that's our call  
All for one and one for all,  
Hoist our flag for all to see  
Waving for morality.

Onward we stride together,  
Stronger in every way.  
All mankind and his animal friends,  
For SINA...S...I...N...A! (Abel 179-180)

Reporters from all of the country's major newspapers, as well as NBC and ABC, covered the event, but the publicity soon turned, as more outlets began to realize that Prout was being played by Henry (Dixon A15; Abel 181-185). Later in March, a *Newsweek* magazine report covering the Washington protest exposed Henry as being the brains and voice behind Prout.

After reaching him for comment, however, Henry was unbowed. He admitted that he was Prout, but claimed to be investigating naked animals in Hollywood. ‘He plans to “look into” the Lassie problem, and to find out why Pluto is bare when Mickey Mouse is clothed’, *Newsweek* reported (‘Hart Schaffner & Barks’ 36). ‘The least we can do’, he told the magazine, ‘is use camera shots which aren’t revealing’. Days later, *Time* magazine followed its counterpart and called the SINA effort a hoax. ‘G. Clifford Prout Sr. not only did not die in St. Louis; he did not ever live there, or anywhere. As for Junior, he turned out to be a successful writer for the Garry Moore Show.’ The organization’s album was ‘very funny’, and whatever money it raised would ‘at least give SINA the last, best laugh’ (‘Bum Steer’ 83).<sup>14</sup>

Still, many news outlets continued to believe, presenting a variety of stories indignantly reporting on the Washington protest and the aims of the organization in general (Abel 197-201). The public responded with another mass of letters and telephone calls denouncing or supporting SINA’s aims (Foer 20-21). The group’s magazine appeared soon after. ‘There are naked animals everywhere!’ wrote Prout in an opening letter to readers. ‘They are on the streets and sidewalks – a public disgrace to our children – and along the highways, causing accidents as motorists take their eyes off the road to watch nude cows and bulls.’ It was a nod to the genesis of Abel’s original idea for the satirical organization. The magazine featured reprints of newspaper headlines reporting on the group, pictures of clothed animals, diagrams of clothing, and even the sheet music for ‘Wings of Decency’. There were faux charts documenting SINA’s popularity, reports from chapters around the country, and other stories of member encounters with the moral turpitude of naked animals. The magazine’s lone edition essentially collected all of the stunts the group had created and organized them in the style of popular periodicals (*SINA: Official Organ*). It was funny and decidedly not obscene.

The post office, however, decided to confiscate the copies as questionable content. The *Tropic of Cancer* case was still in the courts, and would remain there for another decade. *Roth v. United States*, decided in 1957, had ruled obscenity to be material whose ‘dominant theme taken as a whole appeals to the prurient interest’ of the ‘average person, applying contemporary community standards’ (*Roth*). *Memoirs v. Massachusetts*, decided in 1966, would clarify *Roth* by arguing that an obscenity charge could be mitigated by demonstrating redeeming social value

(*Memoirs*). In between the two Supreme Court decisions, it was clear that *Inside SINA* met no definition of obscenity, and yet the post office chose to stop its distribution. To solve the problem, Abel decided to picket New York's main post office at Twenty-Third Street and Eighth Avenue.

The activism was now about the First Amendment, using *SINA* as leverage. But animals still played a role. One protester had her two dogs with her, clothed of course, and someone responded by calling the ASPCA. Two men arrived demanding to see her dog licenses. They 'instructed her to water the dogs every half hour, rest them occasionally, and not do anything that might be considered cruel', before watching and waiting at their car (Abel 216). A similar incident occurred during *SINA*'s White House protest. A reporter asked Abel, 'Are you connected with this anti-vivisection league?' He told the reporter no. 'We do not involve ourselves with politics' (Abel 173-174). Despite the organization's national profile and controversy, they were two of the only times when actual animal issues invaded *SINA*'s conceit. And they were significant. Clothing animals, particularly while walking them in circles on a hot day, could easily be considered cruelty. Vivisection was a real, substantive issue killing thousands of animals every month. And yet for all of the emphasis on animals presented by *SINA* over the preceding four years, actual animal issues were rarely introduced into the facade, even by those incredulous about their organization. There were some claims of cruelty by counter-protesters, arguing that clothing would inconvenience animals in various ways, but organizations like ASPCA and the American Anti-Vivisection Society never engaged with the elaborate showmanship of *SINA*, despite the fact that it put animals into the public discourse in a new way. Abel's claim not to 'involve ourselves in politics' belittled the efforts of actual animal welfare activists. Taken together, the two brief intersections between them and *SINA* demonstrated that the latter simply used animals as a cudgel for decency claims, played of course for satire, rather than concerning itself with animals themselves.

*SINA* was not Abel's only stunt to feature commentary on animals without engaging in meaning-making about them.<sup>15</sup> After magazine rejections for his original story on the society, the satirist took a job for a New York Buick dealership seeking to draw customers to the showroom. He staged an elaborate talk show in the store window, one that ran constantly,

twenty-four hours a day. The subject the participants would discuss was ‘The Role of the Dog in Society’. A group of actors worked in shifts portraying experts from around the world on the subject, all with differing views. One of the ‘experts’ claimed that ‘a dog is a four-legged animal, featherless, weighing less than twenty-five pounds, who stands on all four legs’. He was immediately challenged by another: ‘I personally know a dog that lives in San Bernardino, has feathers, and weighs 276 pounds’. A third argued that ‘a dog is nothing more than a mass of electronic particles whirling around a spine’. The absurd talk continued, but the veneer of respectability given to expert panelists drew in onlookers and drew their interest not to the comedy, but to the subject. One woman brought her dachshund for examination by the group. One of the actors pretended to hook the dog up to a machine in the room, claiming that he could communicate with the canine in German (Abel 8-10).

‘What is your name and age?’ he asked, before translating for the audience: ‘He says his name is Pierre and he is three years old by the Gregorian calendar’. Why did he have a French name? ‘He says he was born in Alsace-Lorraine’. What did he want to be when he grew up? ‘He says he would like to be a motorcycle policeman when he grows up. Why? Oh, I see. Because of his low center of gravity’. The charade lasted seventy-two hours, but even more surprising than the increasing sale of Buicks that it drew was the fact that people believed that what they were seeing was real, despite the obvious humour of the sketch. At one point, one of the panelists drew an amalgam between a giraffe and a frog, a ‘girogge,’ and claimed that it had, thousands of years ago, been the first dog on earth. And yet the simultaneous interest in and lack of popular knowledge about dogs, combined with the assumption of authority given to presumed experts, gave the charade credibility (Abel 10, 11-13).

Abel, in this instance, was playing on the human fascination with and ignorance of animals. Pets, for many, hide in plain sight. They are a source of comfort and inspiration, but one that is largely inscrutable to common pet owners, heightening both the fascination with and gullibility about their presence. No one in late-1950s New York, and no one in the twenty-first century west, has known a society without companion animals. They are a part of almost every human milestone, and yet they are relegated to a tertiary position, background players for most endeavours. They are, then, both there and not there in many human minds, making interest in

them a priori for anyone inquisitive about the human condition, but not such an interest that it would supersede speciesist claims of human dominance. In that sense, the role of pets in human minds is similar to that of aliens or ghosts, specters assumed by some to be a relatively common presence, a presence bred by assumptions of human supremacy to create an intersection of fascination and gullibility. Abel would play in the crosswalks of that intersection. He used animals as a foil to critique human foibles – in this case, the fallacy of appeal to authority, in the case of SINA, overzealous moralism – but that use of animals demonstrated their place in that interstitial space for so many human minds. Animals were both present and absent at the same time, the living embodiment of our aliens and ghosts, and thus the perfect fulcrum for human belief and projection.

In that sense, pets served as an absent referent in human minds, much as did corporate greed in the public acts of twenty-first century groups like the Yes Men. Carol Adams famously interpreted animals as the absent referent within her analysis of the sexual politics of meat. She presented the theory in the literal, physical, and metaphorical form, focusing in particular on the human use of farmed animals in food production. A cow, for example, is literally killed for that production, then physically dismembered and sold in pieces, making evidence of a former life almost impossible to see. That brutality is then marshalled as a metaphor for other dispossessed groups who are treated ‘like a piece of meat’ (Adams). Pets, in many cases, form a fourth mode of the absent referent. They are the locus of human concern, but that locus is a moving target, moving into human spaces at times of need or convenience, then pushed to the margins when other human needs supercede. Pets are absent as referents, then, not in physical or metaphorical form, but instead in a kind of metaphysical form; they are the spectres that move in and out of human concern. And because of their status as an absent referent, they are perfect canvases for satirical use.

In another effort years later, Abel launched a fake campaign against elderly bird-watchers, arguing that they were ‘interrupting the mating season of birds and being perverts and voyeurs’. It was one hoax that was never exposed, Abel explained, ‘probably because a lot of the media just thought, Oh, a group that thinks birders are a bunch of animal perverts – that makes

sense' (Foer 21). Again, a manufactured concern for animals centered on an intersection of love for animals and lust for animals, of care and perversion.

Whatever its concern for actual animals, SINA's existence had been compromised by exposure in publications like *Time* magazine, but the group would continue to garner belief in the organization and its aims for several years. The *New York Daily News* ran a piece taking SINA seriously in May 1965. Months later in September, the London *Daily Mirror* covered the work of Deborah Lewis, who was sincerely campaigning for clothing animals in England (Abel 239). Some hoaxes, it seemed, were hard to kill. In 1966, Abel published a book about his experience with SINA titled *The Great American Hoax*. Playing on the history of uncertainty associated with the group, the *Saturday Review* played its coverage of the new book as its own media hoax, claiming to refuse to believe Abel's account. 'He must be a very bitter fellow to go to such lengths to undermine the fine work of the Society by labeling it a trick,' the review argued, tongue-in-cheek. 'Trident Press doesn't enhance its reputation by being a party to such action. More power to SINA!' ('Trade Winds' 14). Thus it was that SINA remained in death what it had been in life. 'From an unpublished short story to a gag, then a 'social experiment', and, finally, a game to see how long it could last', Abel remembered, 'SINA seems to have achieved an enigmatic state of immortality' (Abel 239).<sup>16</sup>

That enigmatic state came largely from humans' enigmatic relationship with nonhuman animals, allowing them to assume, whether they approved or not, that people could take assumptions of human supremacy to new, absurd lengths. If human norms could expand society into animal habitats, could justify the institutionalized killing of billions every year for food, or place them in the hands of researchers for cruel treatment in aid of the human common good, was it really such a stretch for human social norms to impinge on the lives of animals, as well? After all, SINA never concerned itself with vivisection issues or other cases of animal cruelty because 'we do not involve ourselves with politics' (Abel 174). Or because interest in SINA, both positive and negative, was built on the same assumptions that allowed vivisection and animal cruelty. In that sense, the Society for Indecency to Naked Animals's critique of American moralism actually fit well within the scope of the country's historical concern for nonhuman animals. Or, perhaps more appropriately, its lack of concern.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> For a full biography of Abel's career as a professional satirist, hoaxer, and comedian, see Jenny Abel, *'Abel Raises Cain'*, 2004.

<sup>2</sup> Animals smaller than six inches were excluded, fitting SINA's categorization in some way within the framework of Sue Donaldson and Will Kymlicka, who proposed dividing animals into domesticated animals as citizens, scavenger animals as denizens, and wild animals as foreign nationals. Alan Abel was not in any way thinking about animal rights in his statements, but those divisions did slot nicely into the *Zoopolis* paradigm (Donaldson and Kymlicka).

<sup>3</sup> Henry discusses his participation in an interview with the Academy of Television Arts and Sciences. See Henry.

<sup>4</sup> For more on the historical and epistemological evolution of hoaxes, see Fredal; Fleming and O'Carroll.

<sup>5</sup> As William Gurstelle has explained, Abel's stunts were designed to 'expose hypocrisy and the media's willingness to air pretty much anything as long as it's salacious enough to improve ratings' (Gurstelle 136).

<sup>6</sup> Much of that resonance in the twenty-first century involves what has become known as 'fake news'. For more on the modern manifestations of such hoaxes, see Gorbach; Tandoc, Lim, and Ling.

<sup>7</sup> Eventually, the pig, along with two others seized in and around the protest area, was cared for and removed to a farm in Grayslake, forty-five miles north of the site of the convention ('Yippie Pig Retires' 3). Meanwhile, the ACLU made a film debuting in October comparing Richard Daley to Pigasus (Elmer A8).

<sup>8</sup> While the acts described in this essay are referred to as 'hoaxes', and scholars like Marsh have devoted themselves to evaluating their intricacies, she uses 'spoofs' to describe them rather than 'hoaxes' because 'the former term does not carry negative connotations of using a fabrication for

illicit gain' (136). As will be apparent in the remaining text, and though the common term 'hoax' is used throughout, Abel and his co-conspirators did not use their efforts for any kind of illicit gain.

<sup>9</sup> 'We feel that people should no more take children to a zoo than to a burlesque show', said Bruce Spencer, Abel co-conspirator and another presumed SINA vice president ('Bum Steer' 82).

<sup>10</sup> There are no references to the segment, or Cronkite's or CBS's pique after discovering that they had been had in either the papers of CBS Evening News or Walter Cronkite. See CBS Evening News Archive, 1957-1987, and Walter Cronkite Papers, 1932-2007, Dolph Briscoe Center for American History, The University of Texas at Austin.

<sup>11</sup> Archival footage of the broadcast exists, but is incomplete. The author obtained the footage from the CBS News Archives through correspondence at [footage@cbsnews.com](mailto:footage@cbsnews.com).

<sup>12</sup> Abel did not maintain a press clipping service, so the number of articles about and mentions of SINA is difficult to determine, but it was hundreds, if not thousands (Abel 127).

<sup>13</sup> The investigation was quietly dropped when the IRS discovered that they, too, had fallen victim to the hoax.

<sup>14</sup> The joke was well-taken. 'Time is taking all the fun out of life', wrote one correspondent to the magazine after its coverage. 'First you tell me that the American Communist Party is 19% FBI men. Then you announce that the second funniest organization in the US, the Society for Indecency to Naked Animals, is a hoax. Are there no serious, dedicated crackpots left?' (Holyman 6). In January 1964, Abel admitted the hoax to syndicated columnist Art Buchwald. 'You could call it a great morality play', he told Buchwald. 'I was trying to satirize our customs. People say one thing and do another. We find this in politics, business, sex, and in every part of our life' (Buchwald B1).

<sup>15</sup> It was also not his only stunt more broadly. Some of his other non-animal-related work that came in the years following the SINA hoax featured Omar's School for Beggars, which claimed to be a training center for panhandling, and an organization launched in 2000 seeking to ban breastfeeding, as 'it is an incestuous relationship between mother and baby that manifests an oral addiction leading youngsters to smoke, drink, and even becoming a homosexual'. In both instances, and in others, public outrage was fed by overzealous media coverage that only encouraged Abel's mischief-making (Gurstelle 135-136; Abel 2004).

<sup>16</sup> For a general summary of SINA's existence, one that tracks closely to Abel's own account in *The Great American Hoax*, see Rice 49-61.

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