

Seeing, Collecting and Reconstructing: The Gorilla Kingdom

I work at the Natural History Museum, where I pass by Guy the gorilla—taxidermied, frozen mid-stare—every single day. Guy was once the star of the London Zoo. His popularity after the Second World War was so immense that it inspired the creation of Gorilla Kingdom, built to keep the excitement of Londoners alive. That daily walk past his glass case became the seed of this project, and I couldn't help but wonder: if you're here, Guy... who's in Gorilla Kingdom now?

In *The Gleaners and I*, Agnès Varda investigates the act of gleaning—people who pick up what others throw away—through her own process of filming, collecting, and joining in. She travels across France, rural and urban, meeting farmers, artists, and scavengers who find value in leftovers. Each conversation she gathers becomes part of a quiet protest against the excesses of modern life—a reminder that even what's discarded holds meaning. Varda's central theme of finding worth in what society overlooks resonated deeply with my own investigation of the zoo—a place where value, spectacle, and neglect coexist.

Over the past three weeks, I've met almost as many "gleaners" as Varda did: visitors, keepers, and even ticket staff at the zoo. My project takes the audience through these encounters—mixed with historical research tracing how the zoo evolved from a colonial spectacle to a modern site of leisure. Like Varda, I collected scraps: overheard conversations ("Is Juno after Jupiter? Juno? Do-you-know?"), snippets of sound, fragments of twisted wires forming a cage. I printed, layered, and wove (both traditional and my own method) them into one tangled visual narrative, exploring the paradox of captivity built for human enjoyment. I couldn't "interview" the gorillas—language barrier—but their silence, their pacing, and the occasional eye contact said more than enough about isolation and power.

Still, my daily encounters with Guy at the museum didn't help. I went into the zoo full of judgment, already convinced I knew what I'd find. My early observations were just that — confirmations of my own opinions disguised as research.

Then came Georges Perec. In *The Street* from *Species of Spaces and Other Places* (1974), Perec tells us to record everything: the time, the weather, what passes by, what's boring, what's invisible. To look "slowly, almost stupidly." So, I tried. I looked, then watched, then observed, then—eventually—closed my eyes to listen. What began as chaos of soft, messy impressions slowly hardened into something more concrete. Colours, rhythms, and textures started to make sense, forming a new way of understanding Gorilla Kingdom—not from what I thought I knew, but from what I actually experienced.

Perec's simple way of finding became the foundation for everything I made: from a 3D model that twists sound and sight into space, to a woven "cage" built from overheard dialogue. Somewhere between Varda's potato fields and Perec's street corners, I found my own zoo—messy, layered, and unexpectedly alive.

Guy is gone, but Kaburi, Effie, Mjukuu, Gernot, and their young remain. The enclosure grows fuller, but the loneliness endures.

Citation:

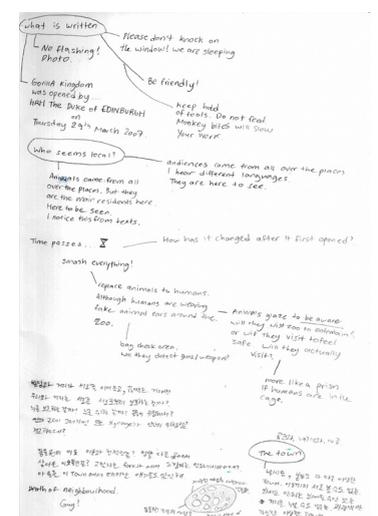
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(*The Gleaners and I*, 2000)



(London Zoo ZSL, 2025)



(My Investigation notes, 2025)