

TELEGRAPH

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WHAT
ALBERTO VID
DOING IN THE ZO
BY BYRON ROGE



ZOOLOGY

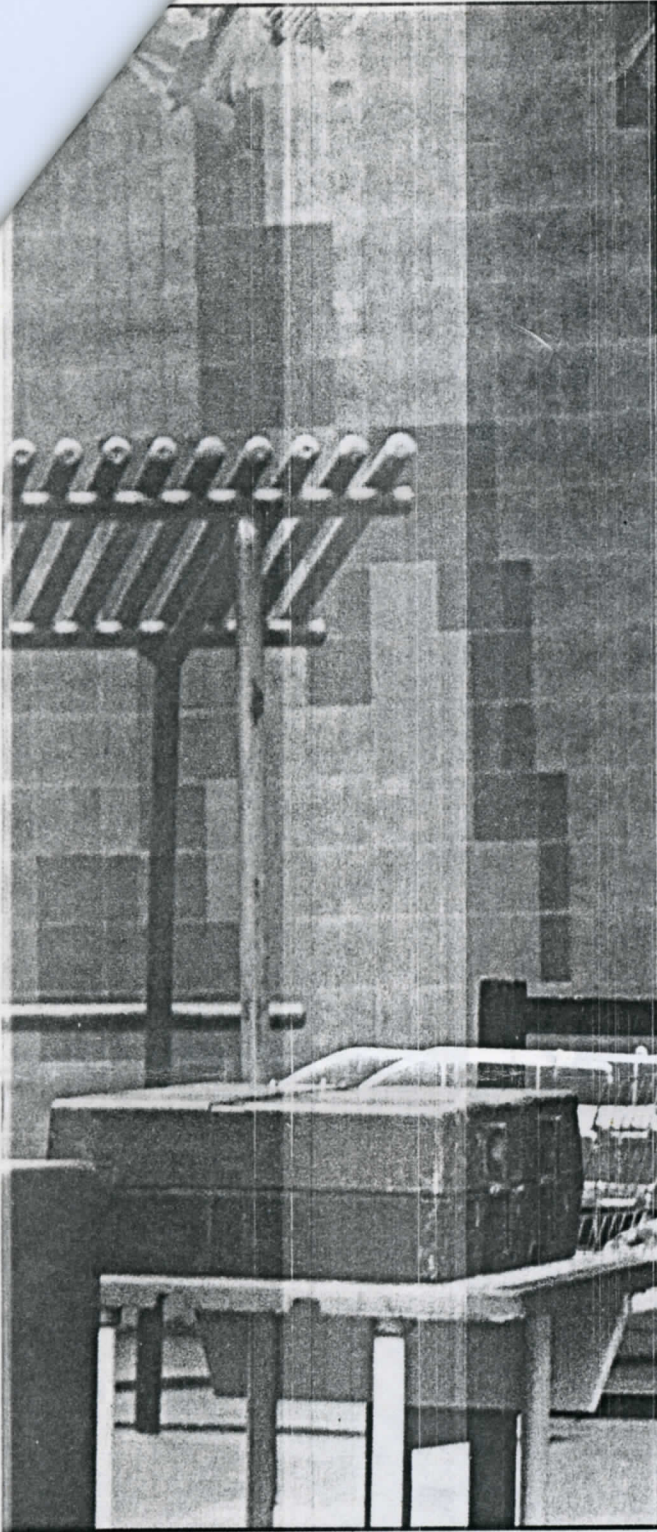
THAT ANIMAL CALLED MAN

Going to London Zoo will be an even greater education than usual later this month when a prime example of Urban Man goes on display. He will eat, shave, work and watch television – and be stared at by thousands of paying customers who spend their lives doing precisely the same. Byron Rogers reports on a zany idea

Mr Alberto Vidal was the lion. But the lion had a gland too long and social entered his soul; neighbors in London, when they are at the *table d'hôte*, are a nuisance. Feller moves road... next thing you are calling on you. talking stared stonily into space

"The motive of my call to London", declared the Spaniard, "was to visit an exhibit is to take place house-hunting, in the Zoo

In Berne, in Switzerland had put him in the bear-pit they had put him in with tortoises. They had been useful and very slow; not like at all. In Barcelona he



Photographs by Brian Moody



Man the worker on display at Barcelona Zoo (above left); Man the keep-fit fan (top) and Man the social animal making contact with fellow *homo sapiens* (above). Feeding time for Alberto Vidal (left)

the monkeys, but a stream, which the monkeys could not jump, had separated them. Good fences make good neighbours. The monkeys, said Mr Vidal, would have played with his typewriter and his television set, and he might have been tempted to play with their palm trees, which could have alarmed them.

But now, for two days, on July 20 and 21 – his neighbours still unchosen at the time of writing – he is to be one of the exhibits in the Royal Zoological Gardens in London. It

will be Mr Vidal's tenth zoo. But the wonderful thing about Regent's Park is that his materialisation there as part of the London International Festival of Theatre will mean that life has caught up with art.

For 60 years ago David Garnett wrote a short story about such an event, *A Man in the Zoo*. He was careful to add a preface to it: "...the Royal Zoological Society has always been the object of my respect and admiration, and in this story, neither explicitly nor implicitly, is anything intended that could be regarded as derogatory to the Society in any sense".

The story concerned one Cromartie ("This specimen, born in Scotland") who wrote to the Society pointing out its one omission, which



Mr Alberto Vidal was interested in the lion. But the lion had been in England too long and social unease had entered his soul; neighbours in north London, when they are not part of the *table d'hôte*, are potentially a nuisance. Feller moves in down the road...next thing you know he's calling on you. .talking. The lion stared stonily into space.

"The motive of my coming here, to London", declared Mr Vidal, a Spaniard, "was to visit where the exhibit is to take place". He was house-hunting, in the Zoo.

In Berne, in Switzerland, they had put him in the bear-pit. In Miami they had put him in with the giant tortoises. They had been very peaceful and very slow; not like the bears at all. In Barcelona he was in with



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seemed to him extraordinary, "To leave out man from a collection of the earth's fauna is to play *Hamlet* without the Prince of Denmark" He went on to outline the educational advantages of such an exhibit, and the result was that in the story Mr Cromartie, with chairs and book-cases, appeared in the cage next to the orangutan ("Visitors are requested not to irritate the Man by personal remarks").

In Garnett's story there was a row among Society members at the prospect of including Man; in life there has been none. "No controversy at all", said Jonathan Griffin, present Commercial Manager of the London Zoo. "When someone approaches the Society with a proposition we consider it".

We were in the Zoo offices, in a large equivalent of a Victorian drawing-room, all polished wood and windows which seemed not to have been opened in living memory. On the walls were portraits of former exhibits, and of the great and good who had administered them; yet you half expected to see the latter leap out at the prospect of Mr Vidal amongst the former.

"We don't see this as a replica of an animal in captivity", said Mr Griffin firmly. "That has already been tried - in Hamburg at the turn of the century, when a family of pygmies went on show"

There had been dangers then, too, it seems, especially when the pygmies went on strike. But if they were to go down that route, said Mr Griffin, then the Zoo would insist on exhibiting both sexes, in keeping with its policy of normal breeding groups (distantly you had the impression that your leg was being pulled). But this was different. Putting Mr Vidal on show could be misconstrued, but the Zoo regarded it as an artistic performance.

Mr Vidal was talking about misconceptions: "When I was in Barcelona Zoo my mother, she came and she waved to me. She is saying to people, 'Is my son'. I did not ignore her. I recognise her, but only as human being. I smile vaguely.

"Is like this with families. But when an actor is playing Shakespeare 'Hey, Tony' The actor, he cannot wave"

It began two years ago, at a theatre festival in Spain. Alberto Vidal, now 38, a producer of experimental theatre and a mime artist ("Everything in Alberto Vidal's face is urged to paroxysms of expression", Jacques Lecoq, the doyen of mime, once wrote), was invited by the Sitges Festival Committee to take part.

"But I say to them, 'Look, I am in a lake of creativity. I no longer wish to interpret life. I wish to do more, I wish to show life itself' What he



Alberto Vidal, happy in a zoo habitat

had in mind was a 24-hour non-stop performance starring himself. No script ("It is important there is no script. I refuse speaking. If I speak then soon I shall be obliged to argue with people"); no story; just 24 hours of "Urban Man", a lost, lonely figure out of touch with everything except his calculator, his video and his toothbrush, shuffling between desk and bathroom.

At first he wanted to stage it in the city itself, taking coffee in its restaurants, mooning about in its offices. Only the people following him would know what he was doing. But there were too many drawbacks - "some would be following me about, but the others, they would think I was just a politician"

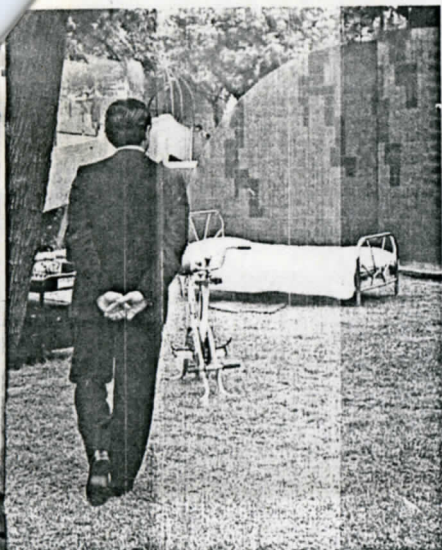
Then he thought of staging it in an abandoned hotel. But in the end it was decided that the performance should be in the main square, in a roped-off set which included office, living-room and bathroom ("and a little house for needs. Would not be good taste otherwise").

The jury awarded him the Festival prize for the best work of theatre ("For contribution and research into new modes of communication and research". Mr Vidal trotted out the sentence, which, if nothing else, should include him among the cloudy trophies in Peter Simple's column).

The zoos came later, and by accident. Finding suitable locations was always his great difficulty, and in Barcelona the Zoo was simply the best place. But zoos, he found, added a Darwinian dimension: Urban Man staring at urban men.

Gub Neal, a director of the London International Festival of Theatre, who invited him to London, talked about the performance. "It is very subtle, and hard to explain. He just goes about his day, but at the same time is very aware of his audience. There is this interaction between him and them. The effect of watching and being watched gives it a mystery and an enigma.

"Sinister? Oh no, there's nothing



made as congenial as possible for Man

sinister at all. It can be very funny. You are looking at a mirror image”.

So a neat small man in a dark suit shaves and eats and types. There are three meals, the last of them a high tea, for zoos close. No alcohol (“for then it would be me getting drunk, and not Urban Man”). The eating is carefully choreographed (“for anything I do wrong would be seized on”); he takes care of rhythm and gesture, making sure he does not play it for laughs.

You must by now be getting an idea of the hideous concentration which is required. Urban Man has to be self-contained... Vidal has to walk a tight-rope between being aware of his audience and being alone. “Inevitably I respond to being on display. I run, or I type very fast, just as man would”.

He will approach his audience and shake hands. If they try to speak he hands them a business card. He does not change clothes in front of them (“that would be exhibitionism”), preferring to retire to the little house when the striped pyjamas give way to the suit. He also retires there when he feels unwell or the strain gets to him (“maybe five per cent. of the time”). He does not cook. “That would be open to misconception. Urban Man would be a camper, which he is not; or a tramp, which he is not”.

Mr Vidal enquired about the English weather. If it rains he has an umbrella and plastic sheeting for his electrical goods. This is brought by the two assistants, who also bring the food.

In the two years he has stuck to the same furniture, though the potential for advertising is obvious (it was not lost on the quick men of Madison Avenue who buzzed round him in Miami that he had tripled the zoo’s attendance over the previous year for his weekend appearance, prompting the zoo’s director to say that his \$10,000 for the 72 hours was “a modest fee”). The neat furniture is, in fact, Italian (“though no publicity”: Mr Vidal does not advertise

and there is a radio, a record-player and a television set.

“This began as 24 hours in a daily life, but it has developed. I watch animals to see how they use space when they are watched, and I approach people like an animal, staring the way an animal stares, not looking at anyone in particular”. His eyes are set in an expression which is distant but intrigued; the men from the stars might look at us like that some day.

“Then people smile, and sometimes they laugh. I do not laugh. In America I hear a child ask its mother, ‘Why do you stay so calm, looking at this man? He does just what Daddy does in the house, and always you scream at Daddy’.

“The children stay the longest. Sometimes they stay for hours. I think they understand that this is not entertainment. The worst thing for me is when people think I’m playing a parody. You understand, I am not making a parody of Man. I wish to show my respect. But I also wish to leave an ambiguity for the people to interpret”.

Yet he is enough of an old trouper to love the final loudspeaker announcement (“Ladies and gentlemen, the exhibition is now closing, but it will be open again tomorrow”). He loves it not because one performance is over, but because it announces another. The night was an interval, he said, the only difference being that it was eight hours long.

He does not sleep on set (“that would be too bizarre”). It was, he said, an exercise in concentration. He finds winding down hard; for half an hour he stays where he is after each performance, not talking.

He rifled through a great sheaf of photographs. In them he was shown gloomily reading a newspaper. He smiled absently at a globe; or, in the Berne bear pit, did his man-from-the-stars look at the photographing public. The backgrounds were always full of people, peering over each other’s shoulders to see a neat figure doing exactly what each of them did every day.

Before London there was Brussels and Barcelona (“the monkeys again”), and Geneva. This winter he will be running a workshop on dance in New York. But next year he has been invited to tour North America and Japan as Urban Man. He does not see himself being an exhibit for the rest of his life. “But I go on as long as it is a creative process”.

In Garnett’s story the Zoo released Cromartie from his contract only when he announced his engagement and his future wife threatened to move into the cage. Mr Vidal is not married, and has no plans to appear with Urban Woman.

He walked past the tigers and a pair of yellow eyes followed him. ①