

Mona Chalabi (b. London, 1987; lives and works in London and New York) has published work in *The New Yorker*, *The New York Times*, *The New York Review of Books*, *New York Magazine*, *The Guardian*, and many more. She has written for radio and TV including NPR, Gimlet, Netflix, BBC, and National Geographic. As an illustrator Mona's work has been commended by the Royal Statistical Society and has been exhibited at several galleries including the Tate, The Design Museum, and the Brooklyn Museum. As a producer and presenter she is one half of the team that created the Emmy-nominated video series *Vagina Dispatches*. Before she became a journalist, Mona worked with large data sets in jobs at the Bank of England, Transparency International, and the International Organization for Migration. She studied International Relations in Paris and studied Arabic in Jordan.

The exhibition is generously supported by the Whitaker Foundation, and Nancy and Kenneth Kranzberg.

WHITAKER FOUNDATION

Mona Chalabi: Squeeze is organized for the Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis by Misa Jeffereis, Associate Curator.

Related Programs

Artist Talk: Mona Chalabi
Wednesday, November 16, 6:00 pm

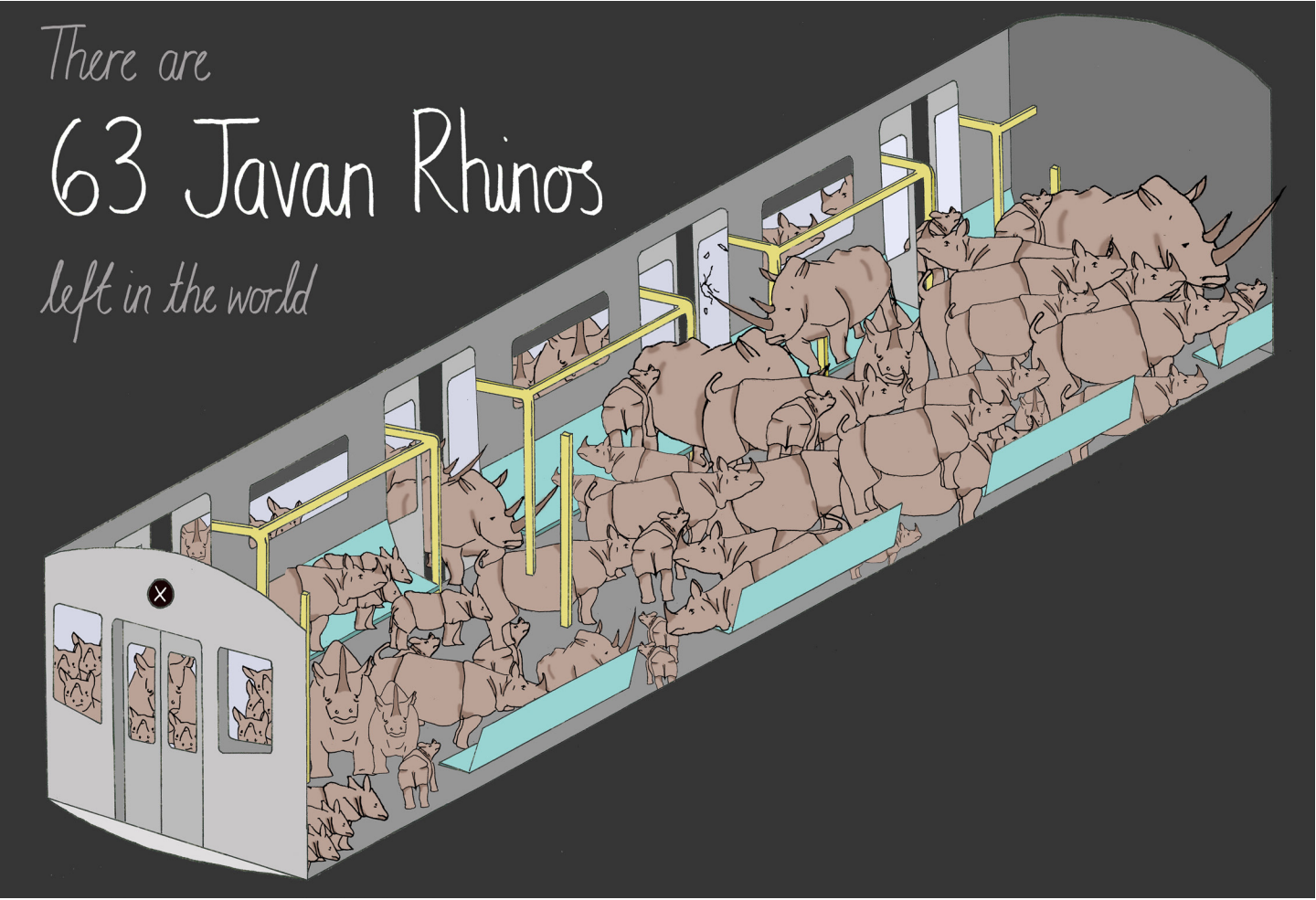
Gallery Guide
Contemporary Art
Museum St. Louis

September 9, 2022–
February 12, 2023



Mona Chalabi

Squeeze



Mona Chalabi, *Endangered Species On A Train*, 2018. Source: IUCN Red List, 2018. Courtesy the artist.

Mona Chalabi is a data journalist, researcher, illustrator, and writer whose work is informed by statistics gathered on politics, human rights, demographics, Covid-19 infections, climate change, and many other topics. Her colorful and often humorous illustrations distill disturbing statistics to make tangible the material impacts of seemingly nebulous forces such as globalization and capitalism.

In *Squeeze*, Mona* illustrates the harsh results of loss of habitat, poaching, and global warming on endangered species. Spanning the entirety of CAM's Project Wall, Mona's large vinyl print visualizes data



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Museum St. Louis**
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Audio Tour
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from the International Union for Conservation of Nature’s (IUCN) Red List—a database that tracks the global extinction risk status of animal, fungus, and plant species. The species depicted, such as Amur leopards and Javan rhinos, are so close to extinction that every remaining member can fit on a New York subway car (if they squeeze). The work uses the scale of a subway car as a relatable point of reference to contextualize this data. Mona’s thoughtful approach to interpreting large, reliable data sets lays bare our role within the multi-layered and intertwined systems that govern our lives.

By using hard data as the foundation of her art, Mona reconstitutes information that is often dehumanized, transforming numbers, charts, and statistics into accessible visual narratives. Her end goal is to create not just a shareable image, but rather a resource that viewers can use to understand the larger picture. As she puts it, “My job is to be a translator. There are so many important datasets being published by academics, government bodies, and nonprofits that can feel hard to find or hard to understand. I want to get those numbers and make them accessible, comprehensible (ideally even fun!).”

Mona’s process for creating these visual representations first involves choosing data that focuses on pertinent world issues, such as climate change or gun violence. She then zeroes in on a part of the data that might be confusing and begins asking journalistic questions, such as who is affected, how the data has changed over time, and how it varies by location. She draws her visualizations then digitally sizes them to-scale, ensuring that they are as precise

Fully stretch out your arm. When you are about six feet *away from someone, their face fits into your hand roughly like this: **



Mona Chalabi, *Distancing*, 2020. Courtesy the artist.



Mona Chalabi, *100 New Yorkers*, 2020. Courtesy the artist.

as any computer-generated graphic while preserving some of the imperfections that come with hand-drawn images.

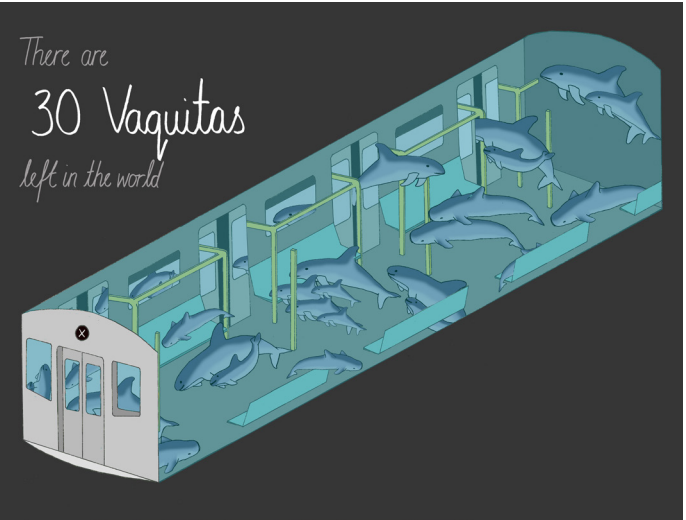
These illustrations inject humanity into numbers, connecting the reality of the subject matter with the visualization itself. For example, in a drawing published in *The Guardian*, Mona condenses data from the New York City Department of Health to depict the most popular dog names in New York. The work extracts information from this large database, comically using dog tails in a bar graph to organize the data. In *Distancing* (2020), an illustration made for Instagram where she has over 400,000 followers, Mona illustrates the Center for Disease Control’s (CDC) precaution of standing six feet apart to reduce the person-to-person spread of Covid-19. She wanted to create an “informative but not scary” way to communicate critical public health information, whether a reader measures distance in feet or meters. Her visualizations are practical, and, at times, playful, harnessing the accessibility of social media to encourage viewers to see how the data relates to them personally.

Mona uses data to both tell visual stories and to reveal difficult truths. Her project *100 New Yorkers* (2020)

visualizes what New York City’s population would look like if it were distilled from its ungraspable millions to a more relatable 100 individuals. Using census data, Mona created 100 characters that, as accurately as possible, represent the racial, economic, and social realities of the city’s population. Mona frames these characters through various statistical lenses in order to demonstrate, for example, the correlations between poverty and exposure to Covid-19. The work relays a multitude of nonfiction narratives, drawing out personal stories and illustrating that behind abstract statistics—on concepts such as health, education, wealth, and the environment—are real people.

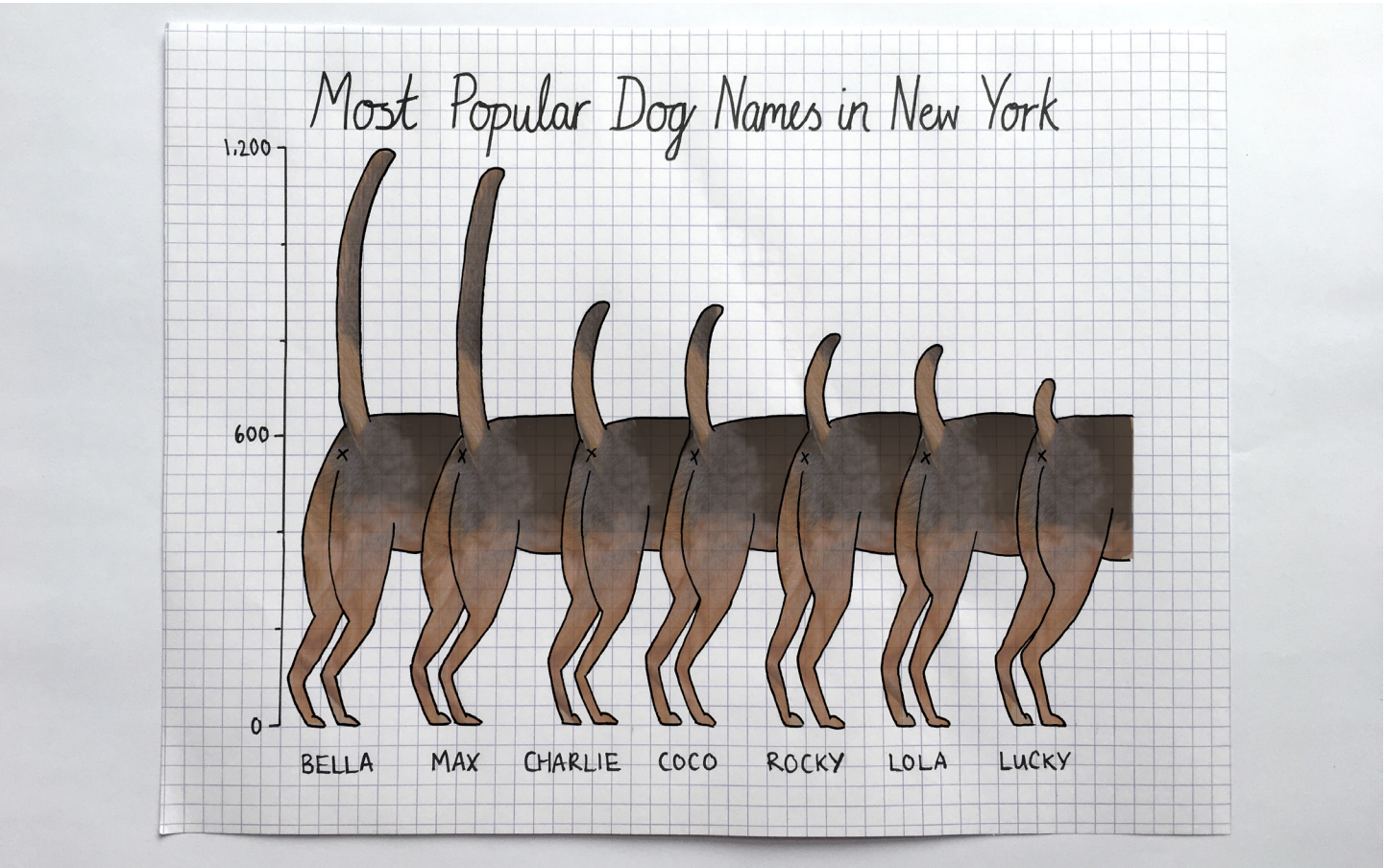
In keeping with her data-informed creative practice, *Squeeze* breaks down the wall between statistical information, art, and illustration, encouraging viewers to leave with a deeper understanding of the global impact of daily lifestyle decisions.

- Javan Rhino: 63 as of 2020
- Erythrina Schliebenii: 10-49 as of 2011
- Amur Leopard: 310 as of 2021
- Vaquita: 10 as of 2022
- Guam Kingfisher: 145 as of 2020
- Hieracium Kneissaeum: 200-250 as of 2020



Mona Chalabi, *Endangered Species On A Train*, 2018. Source: IUCN Red List, 2018. Courtesy the artist.

*As part of her dedication to the accessibility of her work, Mona is referred to by her first name to facilitate a conversation between the artist and the viewer.



Mona Chalabi, *Most Popular Dog Names in New York*, 2018. Courtesy the artist.