

# ECO NOIR

A COMPANION FOR PRECARIOUS TIMES



JACK FABER & ANNA SHRAER editors



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This book is dedicated to James, Monina and Mia Faber,  
our closest friends and dearest companions.





JACK FABER & ANNA SHRAER

## Eco Noir – An Introduction

The images of the Australian bush engulfed by firestorms, never before documented in human history, hit us like a crashing wave. All the wild mass of this thing called nature coming straight at us – devastatingly merciless and beyond breathtaking. That physical embodiment of the untamed, roaring down to crush all illusions of control and imagined mastery over the elements.

Watching these towering fires and thick smoke covering half the continent, followed by destructive thunderstorms, was like watching the planes hit the twin towers in slow motion at the turn of the century. Almost two decades apart, the same particular sense of sheer dread and astonishment grabs us when confronted by such spectacles of horror,<sup>1</sup> faced with the eerie consequences of humanity's follies. It seems they come back with vengeance to show

1 Baudrillard, *The spirit of terrorism and other essays*.

us how far things actually have gotten. While understanding permeates us slowly, the velocity of nature's reaction is accelerating – soon to surpass our grasp.

The idea for this book was ignited in the wake of such catastrophic eventualities and conceived to serve as a reaction to the current climate emergency. It is a collective attempt to examine interactions with other species and our shared environment through political and personal views.

The cultural concept of Noir originated in the aftermath of the unprecedented destruction, brought by the fascist regimes of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This ashen and burnt ground has proven fertile for the original, disillusioned view Noir conveys on the violence humanity brought upon itself, resulting in colossal collateral damage. Noir, as an almost feral – and completely fresh literary and cinematic approach<sup>2</sup> – suggested a realistic yet highly stylized reflection upon the inherent abuse of power, and the fatal consequences of its shadowy allure. This abuse of power – embedded in all social hierarchies, whether fascist, communist or capitalist – was criticized by the new narratives, inventive storytelling and audio-visual forms. Noir refused diverting its (and our) gaze from the darkness of the corruptive qualities hidden in the center of our dominant ideologies.<sup>3</sup> It kept a sharp eye to the places where our socially deflected dreams are shaped as individual nocturnal visions – nightmares in disguise. As humanity was raising from the catastrophes of the last century – the great epistemological rupture of the Second World War and the Holocaust – Noir brought an

2 Noir is often considered as a film genre, although it is actually a wide cultural movement encompassing literature, art and many cinematic categories. See: Shrader, 'notes on film noir' in *Film Comment*. 8-13.

3 Ibid.

endangered existence's perspective of life on earth as an enduring struggle. This gritty struggle, conducted by women and men caught in moral ambiguity, lead for the most part to violent collisions, leaving havoc in their path.

In a sense it seems we are still walking (and rather hastily) this same path paved by the legacy of totalitarian regimes, manifested in the all-encompassing corporate logic and its dominant short-term profit ideology. Between the constant distractions propagated by the ethically dubious algorithm-based Attention Economy, the exponentially growing fears festered by the Security Economy and the current coronavirus crisis, we are very much at a loss. While the demands for emergency measures needed to decelerate the climate crisis are being ignored by almost all governments and corporates, as well as by most of humanity,<sup>4</sup> it is evident we lost our grip on the state of the ecosystem. Instead we have been expanding our role in the accelerated destruction.

The same questionable tools of the Attention Economy, that aim to distract us from the literally burning facts, are used in seemingly democratic processes.<sup>5</sup> They solidify the influential positions of those who are indifferent to the notion that their actions (or perhaps even worse – inaction) are burning our collective lungs. From the Amazon to Australia, through the American West Coast and the Arctic Circle, their spur seems to be dividends promised by the highly damaging logging, fossil fuels and animal agriculture industries.<sup>6</sup> In Australia alone, the bushfire season of 2019-20 took the

4 Casper, "Climate Justice: Holding Governments and Business Accountable for the Climate Crisis."

5 Bueno, *The attention economy: Labour, time and power in cognitive capitalism*.

6 Escobar, "Deforestation in the Brazilian Amazon is still rising sharply." And: Taylor, and Watts, "Revealed: the 20 firms behind a third of all carbon emissions." And: Tullo et al. "Environmental impact of livestock farming and

lives of over a billion wild animals, bringing many to the verge of extinction.<sup>7</sup> It is clearer than ever that our ancient relationship with nature has been broken, and as John Berger suggested, the actual presence of animals – which used to be at the center of our existence – is now marginalized, replaced and reduced to a spectacle.<sup>8</sup> The responsible parties for these broken ties resonate the same irresponsible bureaucratic approach and corporate logic, that have been proven extremely harmful to all life on earth. We are indeed living now an Eco Noir existence.

In light of the current situation and the threshold of climate catastrophe we're hovering over, we wish to raise anew awareness and empathy towards our environment. Bringing our focal point to the importance of nature and our co-inhabitants, we call for attention to the connections between climate crimes and the corporate activities which are deeply embedded in our personal lives. Therefore, the aim of this work is to encourage positive cultural actions for the betterment of our lives with all other species and the fragile and unique environments we share.

*My conviction is that environmentally engaged art bears the potential to both rethink politics and politicize art's relation to ecology, and its thoughtful consideration proves nature's inextricable binds to economics, technology, culture, and law at every turn.*<sup>9</sup>

Precision Livestock Farming as a mitigation strategy.”

7 Filkov et al. “Impact of Australia’s catastrophic 2019/20 bushfire season on communities and environment. Retrospective analysis and current trends.”

8 Berger, *Why Look at Animals?*.

9 Demos, *Decolonizing nature: Contemporary art and the politics of ecology*. 8.

Following this notion by T.J. Demos, we find that nowadays all cultural agents play a crucial role in the fight for climate justice, from both sides of the trenches. The difference between accelerating crisis and actively striving for species survival is often a question of awareness. Awareness to our conditioned conduct, single serving ethics and language we tend to use and toss with little thought. Especially in these days of growing social polarity, catalyzed by the spreading pandemic and fatal climatic changes.<sup>10</sup>

### TERRITORIES OF TERMINOLOGY

Ecocide is the official term coined to denounce the environmental destruction the American use of Agent Orange brought to Vietnam’s ecosystem, as part of its covert chemical warfare.<sup>11</sup> It echoes the genocides committed throughout history – now encompassing the entirety of the world ecology. Despite the fact the concept of Ecocide has been around since the 1970s, it is still foreign sounding to most of the population of our damaged planet. Dissimilarly, it creates a paralyzing effect among those familiar with its impending threat.

To bridge this binary gap, countering both the general apathy and corruptive short-term profit ideology, we recognize a dire need for quite a different attitude and the appropriate emancipatory terminology to reflect it. In this call for active participation we position the linguistic scope of the term Eco Noir as an approach for a deeper, emotional understanding of interspecies relations – framed in the context of climate crisis and its economic and cultural accelerators.

10 Miles-Novelo and Anderson. “Climate change and psychology: Effects of rapid global warming on violence and aggression.”

11 Zierler, *The invention of ecocide: Agent Orange, Vietnam, and the scientists who changed the way we think about the environment*. 1-33.



By avoiding the hope-devouring tone and the deterministic view that Ecocide points to, Eco Noir suggests the capacity to transgress the conservative cultural logic of late capitalism and subvert the submissiveness to its devastating economic powers<sup>12</sup> – enclosed in one's perception.

In the core of this book stands the urge to explore these positively disruptive strategies through a collective space that conjoins texts, visual artworks and their reader. A triangulation that each of its parts merges with the others while autonomously affecting them to form an experience of reciprocal dependence – inspired by the mutuality of human-nature-animal relationship. Hence, all the works are contextualised and their significance is amplified through this kinship, as the connections between them highlight the interspecies relations they address. The new alliances and commonalities emerging from these encounters invite constructive, unexpected discourse and contemplation. Fusing culture critique with animal studies, philosophy, art, cinema and media studies, the book opens a possibility for the reader to journey through a diverse constellation of textual visions and captivating imagery.

The works in this book, therefore, offer a wide range of perspectives on interspecies relations. They propose kinship and empathy as answers for the influence of environmental misdeeds – whether overwhelming or almost mundane. From Yvette Vatt's sharp observations and singular solution to the double standard of 'invasive' species, to Naomi Roelf's investigation of how cinema foresaw the ways animals re-appropriated public spaces during the pandemic

12 Transgression as a means of tackling the cultural logic of late capitalism is a central idea in Fredric Jameson's book *Postmodernism, or, the cultural logic of late capitalism*.

lockdown. Amir Vudka looks further into futuristic territories to offer insight on the vast investments of the military-industrial-entertainment complex in popular culture commodities, in the shape of anti-insect propaganda campaigns. Ido Hartogsohn takes us on an inspiring epistemological journey via the possibilities granted by psychoactive plants, giving the reader a unique view on interspecies relations through the works of pioneer scholars. Nir Nadler's exploration of the use (and abuse) of animals in contemporary artworks, correlates to key aspects in history, language and modern philosophy through his personal work with animals as part of the artist-duo Hertog Nadler. Guy Königstein, on the other hand, revisits his childhood experiences growing up on a farm next to the Syrian border, exposing the sometimes-dissonant approach towards animals, and his adult reflections upon it. Daniel Peltz poetically ponders on the prospects of finding refuge for modern-day elephants emancipated from the logging industry, while Mika Elo reflects upon the relations between scientific conventions of animal testing and artistic research. Annette Arlander, respectively, writes a letter to a pine tree which is part of her artistic research, giving the reader a close look to the distinctive relationship fostered between them. Mohamad Sleiman Labat and Pekka Niskanen research within the remarkable Sahrawi people their difficult and forced transition from being a nomadic desert community – between whom and nature was no buffer – to a life in which maintaining a link to nature is a daily struggle. Through analysis of cinematic representations Siiri Siltala studies the connection between man and nature by looking at their manifestation on various islands of isolation. Kalle Hamm presents a personal reflection on the contrasts and correspondence between the works of Pier Paolo Pasolini and Doris Lessing, integrating text and stunning visual works. Dreaming of a very different hidden haven, Marte Kiessling

guides us through imaginary lands and lost continents, investigating humanity's captivation with the possibility of such fantastic realities. Lastly, Lea Kantonen revises her encounter with artists from another culture through an unexpected approach – inviting the reader to see the world with the “eyes” of a very specific mango.

#### BRUSHING AGAINST THE FUR

The work on this book has been accompanied by the coronavirus pandemic outbreak, and continuous news of its fatal impact on human life, economy, as well as the biosphere, kept flooding us. Alongside surprisingly reassuring, however temporary, reports on decreased pollution and wild animals returning to the territories they were expelled from by man<sup>13</sup> – we also witnessed dreadful consequences. Of course, the subject matter of the connection between the coronavirus crisis and the biosphere deserves a whole bookshelf of its own, but still some of the accounts were hard to bear and impossible not to mention. From German zoos issuing kill lists of animals to be fed to other animals in the premises – stating this as one of the needed measures they will resort to for cutting costs<sup>14</sup> – to numerous bat colonies being brutally eradicated in China after they were blamed for igniting this crisis.<sup>15</sup> And most recently, Denmark's declaration to exterminate its entire 17 million mink population due to a fear of a coronavirus mutation. Although the threat of the mass mink culling<sup>16</sup> was dropped for now by the country holding

- 13 Rousseau and Deschacht. “Public Awareness of Nature and the Environment During the COVID-19 crisis.”
- 14 Schuetze. “Zoo may feed animals to animals as funds dry up in pandemic.”
- 15 Dalton. “Coronavirus: exterminating bats blamed for spreading COVID-19 would increase risk of further diseases, warn experts.”
- 16 Culling is defined by Oxford as the “reduction of wild animal population by selective slaughter.”

the questionable title of world's greatest mink fur exporter;<sup>17</sup> and the German zoos didn't feed monkeys to the polar bears – we ask how come we view such solutions as feasible. It seems that the immediate reaction to a problem most probably caused by the consumption of the highly endangered pangolin<sup>18</sup> is resorting to the mass annihilation of other animals in order to protect the human overpopulation. Our own species is so invested in surplus killing of other species (as well as humans, perceived as ‘others’) as history keeps reminding us, it became almost an instinctive solution.

Walter Benjamin's key concept, “To Brush History Against the Grain”<sup>19</sup> was originally translated to Hebrew, and how we first came to know this phrase, as “to brush history against the direction of the fur”. This resonates the animalistic nature of our use of language in attempts of understanding the world. It is a demanding task, requiring checking and rechecking our motives and interests – creatively and productively – while making sure we're not standing still in the heart of a vast blind spot, which was home to diverse life forms. Whether this brushing of history against the grain is something sustainable, while we're on the fast lane for a planetary burnout, is part of what we aim to discover. *Eco Noir*, with the correlating international group exhibition *Cooking for the Apocalypse*,<sup>20</sup> expand this idea while functioning as spaces dedicated to experimenting, through different means, with the ideas and theories presented in

- 17 Kevany, Sophie. “Denmark drops plans for mass mink cull after Covid mutation fears.”
- 18 Wong et al. “Evidence of recombination in coronaviruses implicating pangolin origins of nCoV-2019.”
- 19 Benjamin, Walter. “On the concept of history.”: 389.
- 20 *Cooking for the Apocalypse*, November-December 2020, Exhibition Laboratory, Helsinki.

the ongoing *Autonomous Animals* artistic research.<sup>21</sup> This research and its practice-led approach play a significant political part in the struggle against hierarchies and entrenched power positions, which the arts and their engulfing cultural industries rely heavily upon. It seems only appropriate to re-appropriate these positions as the issue of equality, in its broader, interspecies sense, stands at the core of this project. Hopefully, it will enable us to shed new light on our intricate relations with nature and other species, while suggesting positive critique on complex cultural systems.

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21 *Autonomous Animals* is a multidisciplinary research by Jack Faber (editor), from which stem this publication and the affiliated exhibition *Cooking for the Apocalypse*, among others.

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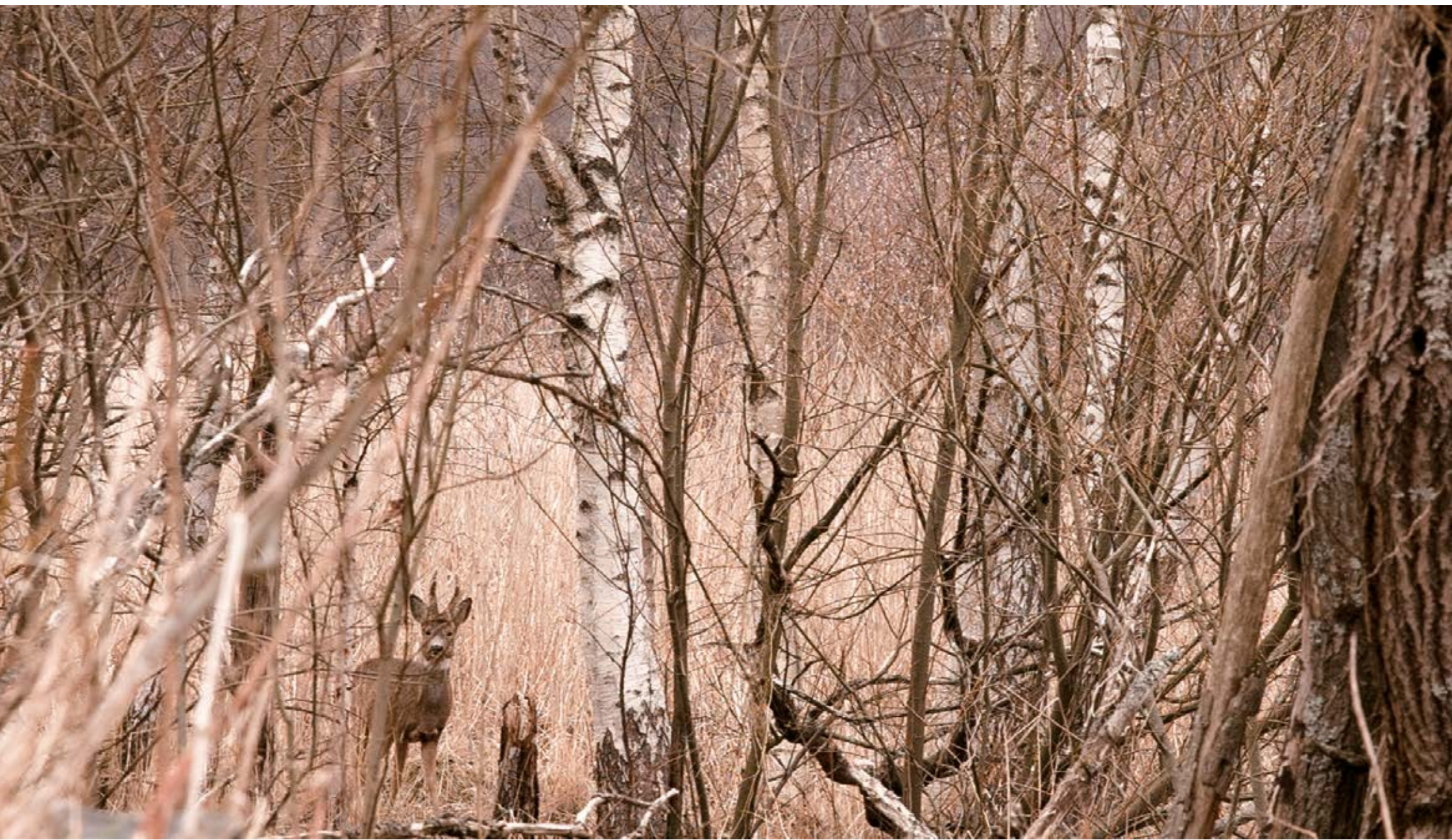
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Following pages:

Ewa Górzna & Katarzyna Miron, *From A Distance, 2020*, Still image from HD Video









YVETTE WATT

## **Eating the Problem**

### **Biodiversity, “invasive” species, and the luck of the draw**

Humans are very good at putting things into categories. I would go so far as to suggest that it is something of an obsession of ours. Arguably we do this to try and make sense of the world, but we also use it as a controlling measure—making sense of the world and trying to control it seem to be intrinsically linked for us. Just one of the ways we categorise animals (and plants, but I want to concentrate on animals in this essay) is as “native” or “invasive” (or “feral”, or “pests”, or “vermin”). But how do we define these terms? I haven’t been able to find agreed upon definitions of terms such as “native” and “invasive”, even when considering them only as they are applied in my home country of Australia.

Kookaburras, an iconic Australian bird, are an interesting case in point. Until the arrival of Europeans in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, kookaburras were only found on the eastern mainland of Australia, but were introduced by European colonisers (or, more pertinently,

invaders) to the states of Tasmania and Western Australia in the late 19<sup>th</sup> / early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. This is something I suspect that many people are unaware of, including a lot of Tasmanians and Western Australians. While indisputably a native Australian bird, do kookaburras count as “native” to Western Australia and Tasmania? Not if you go by one Australian definition, which is that non-native species are those introduced by humans after European settlement in 1788.<sup>1</sup> Or does that definition only count for species that have come from outside Australia? Even if you stick with the “1788+species from outside Australia” definition, there is some evidence that cats arrived well before 1788 with Dutch shipwrecks or Indonesian trepangers<sup>2</sup> in the 17<sup>th</sup> century in the north-west of Australia,<sup>3</sup> and so according to that definition, cats may be native to Australia.

Dingoes are a particularly interesting example when it comes to defining what, or who, counts as native<sup>4</sup> (not to mention trying to define what a dingo is).<sup>5</sup> Dingoes are believed to have arrived in Australia around 4000 years ago with Asian mariners, and they are commonly blamed for the extinction of the thylacine or Tasmanian Tiger on mainland Australia. The dingo is certainly deemed to belong in Australia by indigenous Australians. However

1 See for e.g. New South Wales Department of Primary Industries, “Non-native animals” and Caulfield, *Animals in Australia*, 293.

2 Trepangers traveled from what was then Sulawesi to Arnhem Land in the far north west of Australia to harvest sea cucumbers, known in Indonesian as *trepang*.

3 See for e.g. Koch, Algar, Searle, et al. “A voyage to Terra Australis” and Franklin, *Animal Nation*, 23.

4 Carthey and Banks, “When Does an Alien Become a Native Species?”

5 See Probyn-Rapsey “Eating Dingoes”, and “Dingoes and dog-whistling” for an extensive discussion of the complexities of defining what a dingo is, and how this relates more broadly to issues of race and culture.

their uncertain status as wild or domesticated,<sup>6</sup> their propensity for killing sheep, and the fact that they may choose to crossbreed with other dogs has resulted in their persecution as an unwanted pest, with the Western Australian State Government, for example, declaring that dingoes are not native.<sup>7</sup>

Ultimately, when it comes to other animals, we humans give ourselves a decidedly anthropocentric license to determine who does and doesn’t belong, and the consequences can be fatal for anyone that is seen to transgress whatever category or place we have decided that they belong in. For the most part the post-colonial introduction of species to Australia has been intentional and so, for a while at least, these animals were deemed to belong. A good number of such species are still seen to have a place, and these are generally the ones we like to eat. In a colonised country such as Australia, cows, sheep, pigs, chickens, and even trout, remain welcome. These animals avoid being labeled as invasive because we (mostly) have them under our control, and we benefit from their presence for food and financial reasons. However, once we feel like we have lost control of a species, fear, frustration, and guilt tend to result. For those animals who are labelled invasive, it is all too common for us to demonize them, giving us justification for treating them in ways that would otherwise be deemed unconscionable. We kill them in huge numbers in whatever way we see fit, which often results in protracted and painful deaths. In addition, successful newcomers often exist in such large numbers that we rarely manage to kill them all, such that the killing just goes on and on in regular cycles, resulting in untold suffering. And so, we might start to feel guilty at wastefulness of all these animals we kill, leading some to the conclusion

6 Ballard and Wilson, “The Australian dingo: untamed or feral?”

7 Bamford, “Dingoes to remain classified as non-native wild dogs.”



that we should, for example, eat them. Eating these animals, some might rationalize, gives them “value”, as all too often animals are only worth whatever value we humans ascribe to them.

The idea that eating invasive species is a good idea was behind an invitation I received in April 2017, to contribute a short essay to a book titled *Eat the Problem*<sup>8</sup> to be published by MONA, the privately run Museum of Old and New Art, in Hobart, Tasmania. The brainchild of Kirsha Kachele and her husband David Walsh, the wealthy owners of MONA, *Eat the Problem* was proposed as primarily a book of recipes, with the email invitation that I received stating: “The problem, here, is invasive species. And our solution, as you may well have guessed, is to eat them.”

There is no doubt in my mind that the short text I was asked to contribute was expected to provide a counterpoint to the book’s premise. My invitation was received at the very time I was engaged in a robust, and at times public,<sup>9</sup> debate with Walsh about animal rights and veganism following his decision to program 150.Action by Austrian artist Hermann Nitsch,<sup>10</sup> into 2017 Dark MOFO winter festival. The event, described in the festival program as “A bloody, sacrificial ritual”,<sup>11</sup> required the slaughter of a bull and caused a furore, with local activists, included me, campaigning hard to have the event cancelled. However, despite complying with all editorial requests, when *Eat the Problem* was finally published 2 years later,

8 MONA, “*Eat the Problem* book.”

9 I was named (and shamed) in David Walsh’s blog as well as corresponding privately via email over several months. There is a whole other essay I could write about this matter!

10 Nitsch’s “actions”, which he has been undertaking since the 1960s, involve the dismembering and tearing apart of animal bodies, copious amounts of animal blood, with participants, who may be naked, rolling around in and stomping on the animals’ entrails.

11 Dark MOFO “2017 program: 150.Action.”

to my surprise and dismay, my text was not included—all that was included was a recipe I offered as an afterthought, for (eggless) meringues made with human blood.

In some ways this essay is an expanded version of that which was intended for *Eat the Problem*. My concern, as I outlined in the brief 500 words I was ultimately allocated, was that the project was fundamentally flawed, as it was based on humans assuaging their guilt while simultaneously avoiding the real problem; that the single biggest contributor to species loss is habitat destruction, and the greatest reason for habitat destruction is animal agriculture.<sup>12</sup> The impact of animal agriculture goes beyond land clearing; animal agriculture is one of the biggest contributors to the greenhouse gases that are resulting in the devastating climate change that is driving more species to extinction. So, as my unpublished text pointed out, we are in fact already eating the problem, and in doing so, we are also contributing to the problem. However, as noted earlier, while the animals we farm are also introduced, we don’t consider them “invasive” because we have them under our control.

*Eat the Problem* is essentially based on an anthropocentric sense of self-importance that puts humans at the top of the food chain and so we consider it our right to eat animals, even though most of us have no need to, regardless of the effect this has on the animals, the environment in general, or our health. This self-imposed position of dominance means that humans also consider it their right to control the ecosystem so that it conforms to what they

12 See Morrel, “Meat-eaters may speed worldwide species extinction” and United Nations, “Nature’s Dangerous Decline ‘Unprecedented’.” I do note that the *Eat the Problem* website states “The ultimate invader is, of course, the human, and it is our taste for boring / cruel / unhealthy things like cows that is causing the most damage of all.” See <https://mona.net.au/museum/kirsha-s-portal/eat-the-problem#eat-the-problem>

think it should be like, and thus do whatever they think necessary to achieve this. But the “do whatever it takes” attitude to invasive species is being challenged, with the Compassionate Conservation movement a growing force. The University of Technology Sydney, for example, has a Centre for Compassionate Conservation, and to quote the website “With the guiding principles of first, do no harm, individuals matter, inclusivity, and peaceful coexistence, compassionate conservation is forging a new path to enable positive human-wildlife interactions.”<sup>13</sup> [original emphasis]. I think that Kirsha Kachele, David Walsh, and the contributors to the *Eat the Problem* book are genuinely driven by environmental concerns, but are locked into an old anthropocentric model that refuses the individuality of the unwanted aliens, and in doing so extends little or no compassion toward them. We worry about losing species, but if you are a wallaby, do you worry about whether it’s a thylacine or a dingo or a wild dog (or a human) that is taking you down? The irony of all this is that the really successful introduced species (the ones not under our control that is), especially those that have been around for a while, are so well established that they often become intertwined with natives. In Australia, rabbits, for example, are a favoured prey of native raptors, and black-headed python numbers have increased since the introduction of the cane toad,<sup>14</sup> which is otherwise seen to have been one of the more disastrous post-colonial errors of judgement, having been introduced in 1935 to control the cane beetle in sugar cane farms. The cane toads failed miserably at doing the job they were imported to do, while negatively impacting

13 University of Technology Sydney, “Centre for Compassionate Conservation.”

14 This is thought to be due to the goannas, that usually eat the python eggs, preying on cane toads and being poisoned in the process, this reducing the goanna numbers. See <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-03-04/native-animals-recovering-after-cane-toad-havoc/8317384>

on native species either by eating them, or by killing them when the unwary natives tried to eat the toxic toads.

I am undeniably annoyed that I was not advised that my text for *Eat the Problem* would not be included, as if I had been informed I would likely have chosen not to be a contributor at all. But my concerns about this book, and the bigger project, go beyond a personal frustration, and are based on the use of the creative arts to engage usefully with social and environmental issues. At the time I received the invitation, I assumed that the book’s premise was more a tongue-in-cheek provocation than a serious proposition, and I felt that there was value in contributing a counterpoint. However, given the decision to exclude my brief text, and the organisation of follow up events, including a series of dinners where the bodies and other products derived from those species designated as “invasive” were served, I wonder if in fact Kachele and Walsh intended their “solution” to be taken more seriously than I had initially thought. It is hard to be sure, as there is an undertone of wry provocation that runs through *Brand MONA*, and a determination to be perceived as “edgy”, evident in this quote from the *Eat the Problem* webpage:

*Option A is to rub [humans] out (and cook us with plantain leaves under hot stones). But if we’re not game for that the least we can do is alter our eating habits, and in doing so change an ecological nightmare into something totally delish. And morally superior. Also, it means Kirsha can wear fur without feeling guilty (made from nutria, which was where this whole thing started: Kirsha’s encounter with the invasive nutria of Louisiana). The fur is the main thing. Plus morals etc.*<sup>15</sup>

15 MONA, “Eat the Problem project.”

This quote is indicative of the disrespect shown to the animals who are the focus of the project's premise and whose individuality and sentience is subsumed by being damned with the label of "invasive". These animals are reduced to being the subjects of a very expensive joke. Herein lies another concern of mine about the Eat the Problem project; the matter of privilege that comes of wealth and social status, and its connection to environmental destruction. The project tackles the issue of invasive species by the production of a cookbook and a series of dinners, all of which are priced such that they are only available to those with significant financial resources. This is perhaps another reason my text didn't make the cut, as it contained a cheeky title and provocation to the wealthy Walsh and Kachele, that, as meat eating is aligned with wealth and status, if we are to "eat the problem", maybe we should "eat the rich"?

I'm not suggesting that we should be careless about introducing other species, or that invasive species have not had deleterious effects. But what we face is a truly wicked problem, and if any kind of eating might help this problem, it would be to not eat animals at all. This would not only help slow climate change, it would open up large amounts of agricultural land for return to native vegetation. This seems to be the least risky approach.

Before bringing this essay to a conclusion, I want to return to the matter of categorising animals. Why do we feel it is so important to divide fauna into native and invasive in the first place, and having done so, why do we feel the need to get rid of the invaders? I think it comes down to issues we have with guilt, purity and control. We feel bad that we introduced new animals, and we feel bad about the impact they may have had on the environment and pre-existing species. We also have an unhealthy obsession with purity. We like to imagine a return to a pre-colonial utopian world that is not polluted by

impure aliens, even if the invaders have effectively become a part of the ecosystem. We do all we can to try and control the ecosystem so that it looks like we think it should look like, based on some unstable utopian concept. We even try and control animals' choice of mate—we despise the hybrids that come of the interbreeding of natives and newcomers (dingoes should NOT get the hots for Labradors. Pacific black ducks should STOP getting it on with European mallards). We long for the purity of the old world before we messed it up. We believe it is our job to bring things back under control. We want, dare I say, to make things great again, and in doing so, rather than solving the problem, we often just make a bigger mess.

The messiness surrounding human categorizing of animals was behind an exhibition I took part in in 2014 titled Beautiful Vermin. For this exhibition I designed a set of playing cards made up of images of animals, fish, birds and insects which have at some time been declared pests or vermin in Australia. Titled Luck of the Draw, the set of cards also included locations, modes of transport, and methods by which animals are caught/killed. Humans were the "wild cards" or jokers, who could be given various roles such as scientist, hunter, politician or fisherman. While I provided the cards, I did not supply any rules – it was up to the players to devise the rules, just as we humans do when it comes to our decisions on which animals are vermin, and which are not. A couple of years ago I had the opportunity to sit down with a diverse group of artists and experienced playing with the cards with them. It was a wonderful thing to be able to witness the conversations and engagement with the issues prompted by the cards. A great deal of attention was paid by the players to the complexities of the issues around devising the rules to play by, and how this affected the way that the animals were categorised.

Ultimately in our attempts to make things great again we play a dangerous and often nationalistic game. There are many examples of our strategies to fix the problem of invasive species backfiring, just as we made mistakes in deciding which animals should be introduced in the first place. It's a game in which we deal the hands, we give ourselves license to change the rules at any time, and if you're a nonhuman animal, whether you win or lose is very much the luck of the draw. If there is one good thing to come of the frustrations I feel about my involvement with the Eat the Problem project, it is that I feel motivated to revisit the set of cards with a view to making them available as affordable, printed sets, that act as a counter to the polemics of Eat the Problem. Who knows, maybe I can even convince MONA to sell them in the museum shop.

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Following pages:

Pavel Wolberg, *Abkhazia horse*, 2015, C-print, 90x80 cm







NAOMI ROELF

## Recovering Territories

Every era in history has at least one set of narratives and visual aesthetics that are associated with it. It is quite astounding how rapidly both develop during a state of emergency, as though fueled by the same sense of urgency in which task forces and crisis regulations are installed. In that respect, the Coronavirus pandemic is no exception. By the very nature of lockdown policies that were administered internationally, many of the initial images that swiftly became commonplace, were produced indoors. The global curfew was perpetuated most prominently through haphazard shots of people in private spaces and informal attire, captured mostly by nonprofessional cameras. The aesthetic counterpoint of this confined sense of space, surfaced in public and social media through imagery of the great outdoors. Though empty at times, often it was occupied by wildlife. Quaint images circulated in the media of wild boar, flamingos, wolves, crocodiles and mountain goats roaming

Tchelet Pearl Weissbaum, *Silent Gallop*, 2018,  
Still from site specific installation



the streets, seals sunbathing on asphalt, and monkeys swimming in the pool. In some cases the hordes that filled the empty streets were animals seeking alternatives, after their main supplier of food – tourists – disappeared. Even then the captions remained lighthearted, marveling the curiosity and even beauty of the occasion. The unusually free movement of undomesticated animals was perceived as one positive outcome of the unsettling events that brought the world's human population to a sudden halt. Wildlife was perceived as a delegate of nature, repossessing the land, casting an implicit doubt on humanity's rightful claim to Earth.

"Fake news" in the form of unauthentic photos and videos also made its rounds. Old stock of wildlife stepping into human territory, at times startling unsuspecting witnesses, reappeared in social media. Commercial photography was also repurposed. In one case an advertisement from 2016, in which a lion roams the streets of Johannesburg, reappeared with captions, claiming that hundreds of tigers and lions were released in Russia to enforce the lockdown. If anything, these images are a reminder that the concept of animals wandering into human territory are not a novelty and has long served as the silver lining in our imagination of global catastrophe.

In apocalyptic narratives animals sometime embody the imminent disaster, as is the case in Hitchcock's *The Birds* (1963). They are also envisioned as the successors of the human race, which will master both knowledge and power after human demise, as in Schaffner's 1968 *Planet of the Apes* and its sequels.<sup>1</sup> But the calm imagery of wildlife moving in on human grounds, is more reflective of the transitory nature of prospect destruction that lurks in human

1 *Planet of the Apes* has had four cycles of sequels so far: cinema releases in the early 1970s, TV films in the 1980s, a remake in 2001 and another batch of cinema releases in the last decade.

fantasy. It allows the present to interact with the past and fills the scene of devastation with life.

Since ancient times, untamed animals featured in apocalyptic tales.<sup>2</sup> At the same time exotic animals were regularly collected for menageries and parades.<sup>3</sup> In both practices wildlife symbolized power and mastery. From a historical perspective, the domestication of fauna and flora constituted the true expression of human aptitude and dominance.<sup>4</sup> However, in the civilization's mind, farm life seemed too mild to express potency. The subjugation of wild beasts thus became the ultimate symbol of accomplishment and victory. Along with their educational value, zoos have always served as an indication of wealth.<sup>5</sup> By the same token animals that wander out of the zoo came to personify the disintegration of power.<sup>6</sup> In *And The*

- 2 Researchers trace the apocalyptic tradition and its integration of animals back to Judeo-Christian writings. David Bryan provides a detailed discussion of the various animals in the apocalyptic bible scripture, within the historical context (Bryan, 1995), while Francis Klingender surveys a wide range of imagery from the Christian world in the following decades. (Klingender, 1971)
- 3 R. J. Hoage, Anne Roskell and Jane Mansour trace the menageries and parades to both Western and Eastern cultures in the ancient world. (Hoage, Roskell & Mansour, 1996, pp. 8-18)
- 4 See the analyses of the implication of domestication in Zeder, 2015, pp. 3191-3198, and Boivina et al, 2016 pp. 6388-6396.
- 5 See Thomas Veltre's discussion of the cultural utility of menageries. (Veltre, 1996, pp. 19-29)
- 6 During WWII rumors spread that the animals had escaped from the zoos in Hamburg and Berlin (Itoh, 2010, pp. 131, 135) In fact, the prospect of zoo animals breaking loose led to extensive euthanizations of zoo animals in Asia and Europe. In the USA this policy was also adopted as the appropriate reaction to air raids. (Ibid, pp. 37-160) Beyond the unjustifiable perception of zoo animals as a threat, they have proven to be the most vulnerable among the victims of war and crisis. Zoo animals in Paris famously "wandered" into restaurant menus during the Prussian siege in 1870. Among others, restaurants served elephant broth, kangaroo stew and terrine of antelope (Ewbank, 2017). Mayumi



*Ship Sails On* (1983), Fellini reflects the end of an era at the threshold of World War I. An extravagant funeral unfolds in a succession of opera performances on a cruise ship sailing the Mediterranean. The first indication of a loss of control is a stench that spreads from the ship's hold. It emanates from an unwashed rhinoceros that has been neglected by the crew. The animal is one of many emblems of opulence. Cramped into the bottom of a ship, it signifies excess as well as absurdity. After the ship finally sinks, the film ends with the Rhino and the film's narrator drifting on a boat in the open sea. They are the last ludicrous remnants of a world that falls apart. Andej Kurkow's novel from 1996, *Death and the Penguin* follows the daily routine the protagonist shares with Misha, a king penguin. Misha was adopted from Kiev's zoo, which had given away its animals to save them from starvation. As the plot progresses the narrative retunes repeatedly to the penguin, capturing its habits, movements, gestures and the occasional facial expressions, which are deemed peculiar because they take place in a domestic and urban environment, in the company of humans. His "unnatural" existence is clearly a remnant, a reminder of the Soviet Union's collapse, which left him stranded in an environment that is not his own.

More often, however, wildlife does not merely enter the human environment, but overtakes it entirely. Most documentaries from the vicinity of Chernobyl are captivated by this re-inhabiting process.<sup>7</sup> The animal's course of life, sheltering, nesting, hunting,

Itoh also provides a number of cases in modern times, in which animals are hit hard by crisis, mostly at the hand of human pillagers. (Itoh, 2010, pp. 1-5) In the most recent report, Venezuela's zoo animals fell prey to its starving population. (Gutiérrez Torres, 2018)

<sup>7</sup> Among the documentaries made about the fauna in the aftermath of the Chernobyl disaster are Hayden's *Chernobyl reclaimed: An Animal Takeover*

hibernating, are all made fascinating because they take place in what was once a school, a factory or a home. They not only repurpose the environment, but leave their mark, change, and ultimately destroy it. Two television documentaries took a step further, and simulated the disappearance of the entire human race. Both National Geographic's *Aftermath: Population Zero* (2008), and the History Channel's series *Life After People* (2009-2011) follow an imaginary timeline starting with the disappearance of humans, recording the various stages of destruction, change, and ultimate revival. While *Aftermath: Population Zero* remains consistently within its fictitious scenario, *Life After People* repeatedly breaks the "fourth wall", integrating expert interviews and footage of past events. Otherwise they tell a similar tale, detailing the corrosion, decay and destruction of a manmade world, as it is taken over by nature. Various stages of the process are captured through animals that move in a world bereaved of man. First, the survival and demise of human bound animals – pets as well as pests – is depicted, as conditions change, and captive animals who broke free venture into new territory. Then, the repopulation of the urban environment by wildlife is portrayed, repurposing constructions designed to cater to human needs. Next, the change in wildlife population is reflected, and while a few species diminish numerically, most are said to benefit from the absence of humans. The screen is filled with flocks of animals in the water, air and land that thrive in the imaginary new conditions. Finally, the film and the series end with the wild descendants of domestic animals, readjusted in an environment that cleansed itself of the pollution created by man. The harmonious images of wildlife free of human interference is

(2007), Feichtenberger's *Radioactive Wolves: Chernobyl's Nuclear Wilderness*, the eighth chapter about forests in Netflix's *Our Planet* (2019).

complimented by the conclusion both the film and the series draw: earth had existed before us, and will continue to thrive without us; earth can undo all the damage mankind had caused, if only the latter disappears.<sup>8</sup>

While the two documentaries advance towards their closing words gradually, developing a scenery that appears increasingly harmonious as it is overtaken by nature, Emmerich's 2004 science fiction disaster film, *The Day After Tomorrow* reaches it suddenly and almost unexpectedly. The film follows its protagonists' struggle with climate shift, when a sudden ice age spreads across the northern hemisphere. The film focuses on death, suffering and victorious survival in inhuman conditions. It ends on a space station hovering in space, where two astronauts take a look at the newly formed ice cap. "I have never seen the air so clear!" declares one, adding a positive twist on the global catastrophe that claimed many lives in the course of the film. Because the film focuses on human suffering, it is no surprise that its representation of tamed animals gone wild is ominous and menacing. Wolves, that inexplicitly disappear from the zoo as conditions worsen, resurface in the urban environment after it freezes over. They are inexplicitly strong and malicious, hunting humans who venture outdoors in search of food. They resemble demons that descend upon humanity in God's wrath.

The sinister portrayal of animals stepping into human territory may well be associated with the climatic sin.<sup>9</sup> When the source of the conflict is among humans themselves, animals become a visual and audible source of comfort. In Lawrence's 2007, *I Am Legend*<sup>10</sup>

8 This optimism towards earth's ability to rejuvenate is not universally accepted. The United Nations, for instance, warns against irreversible damage. (UN, 2019)

9 Lydia Barnett reviews the theological tradition in the discourse about climate change. (Barnett, 2015, pp. 217-237).

10 *I am Legend* is the third film adaptation of the 1954 novel by the same name. It

a manmade virus wiped out most of the world population and rendered the majority of survivors into violent nocturnal mutants. Neville, a scientist who is immune to the virus, becomes the last healthy survivor in New York. He fends for himself against the mutants, who lurk in the dark and take over the disintegrating city by night. The threat they pose is made tangible even before they appear. As the sun sets, Neville becomes visibly tense and seals his home. The sounds heard at night are intimidating, indicating the viciousness of the human beasts. The wildlife that wanders the streets of New York during the day, on the other hand, attract nothing but the viewer's fascination and attraction. New York is covered with vegetation and its air is filled with the sounds typical of the savannah. The camera follows hordes of animals that roam the landscape. The harmonious sounds are designed to counter the urban soundscape, which is generally associated with the city, as well as the mutant nocturnal sound that the film puts forth. Wildlife roaming the streets is the link that connects Neville and his semi-human antagonists. They compete over livestock as a source of food and Neville's hunting escapade leads to direct confrontation. But beyond that, the presence of wildlife functions as a smooth buffer between Neville and his mutant brethren, offering an environment that is free both of civilization and extreme threat.<sup>11</sup>

pays cinematic tribute to both its predecessors. Ragona's *The Last Man on Earth* (1964), and Sagal's *The Omega Man* (1971). In the original novel and *The Last Man on Earth* the mutants are vampires, and in *The Omega Man* they have vampire and zombie like traits. *I am Legend's* novelty is not only in its integration of the natural world, as it takes over the urban environment, but also in the animalistic character of its antagonists.

11 The film also reflects upon the domestication of animals. It expands greatly upon the relationship that the protagonist of the novel has with a dog. The emotional dependency Neville expresses for his canine companion, and the humanization of their relationship corresponds with the animalistic nature of

In Gilliam's *12 Monkeys* (1995) the world is also devastated by a manmade virus epidemic. What little was left of the world's population moved underground. The protagonist, James, is sent to scout the deserted streets of Philadelphia, which is inhabited by wildlife, including several predators that visibly frighten him. As James is sent back in time, he gets to walk in Philadelphia before the massive infection and devastation. The film juxtaposes the past and the present through James' consciousness, as he eerily recognizes the urban environment he steps into. The film moves back and forth between the "present" in which space is occupied by humans, and the "future" in which it is in disarray and inhabited by animals.<sup>12</sup> In this context the visible creatures are coupled with an invisible form of life – the virus that had brought on the change. This is made stronger by the fact that the prime suspects in setting the virus loose is an activist group called The Army of the Twelve Monkeys, which protests the cruel treatment of animals by humans. *12 Monkeys* ends in a fatalistic manner. The protagonist dies at the airport during the attempt to stop the man who releases the disease. He dies in a scene that he envisions all through the film. It remains unclear if the scientists from the "future" really do intend to stop the spread of the epidemic. Nevertheless, before this happens, both The Army of the Twelve Monkeys and the animals they wish to protect are exonerated. On the way to the airport James and his "present" love, Kathryn, discover that the actions of The Army of the Twelve Monkeys are less sinister than they suspected. Overnight the group had locked a prominent scientist in the zoo and released all its animals. As the latter were released into

his mutant human enemies, and the presence of wildlife in the deserted city.

12 The film, which is partly based on Marker's 1962 short film *La Jetée* revolves around the elusive relations between the past, the present and the future.

urban space, they blocked traffic everywhere. With relief, amusement and fascination, the couple watch Giraffes running across the bridge and flamingos flocking over a skyscraper. The camera continues to follow the various animals as they run across the streets of Philadelphia. “I think it’s going to be alright!” exclaims Kathryn, as they cast an infatuated gaze at the living wonders of nature that walk the earth.

Twenty-five years after the release of *12 Monkeys*, we humans have done the same. Confined to our homes, we cast an infatuated gaze at footage of wildlife roaming our empty streets. The beauty and perceived freedom of these wildlife scenes assured us that there was a positive aspect to our restriction, that nature is ready and willing to take our place, and that in fact it is going to be alright after all.

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## Filmography

*12 Monkeys* (Terry Gilliam, 1995, USA)

*Aftermath: Population Zero* (2008, USA, CA)

*And the Ship Sails On [E la nave va]* (Federico Fellini, 1983, IT, FR)

*The Birds* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1963, USA)

*Chernobyl reclaimed: An Animal Takeover* (Peter Hayden, 2007, DE, NL)

*The Day After Tomorrow* (Roland Emmerich, 2004, USA)

*I am Legend* (Francis Lawrence, 2007, USA)

*La Jetée* (Chris Marker, 1962, FR)

*The Last Man on Earth* (Ubaldo Ragona, 1964, IT, USA)

*Life After People* (2009-2011, USA)

*The Omega Man* (Boris Sagal, 1971, USA)

*Our Planet – Forests* (Jeff Wilson, 2019, USA)

*Planet of the Apes* (Franklin J. Schaffner, 1968, USA)

*Radioactive Wolves: Chernobyl's Nuclear Wilderness* (Klaus Feichtenberger, 2011, USA, AT, DE, UK)

Following pages:

Pavel Wolberg, Gaza border 2006, C-print, 47x31 cm

Tufah [second Intifada] 2002, C-print, 47x31 cm

West Bank 2004, C-print, 68x45 cm





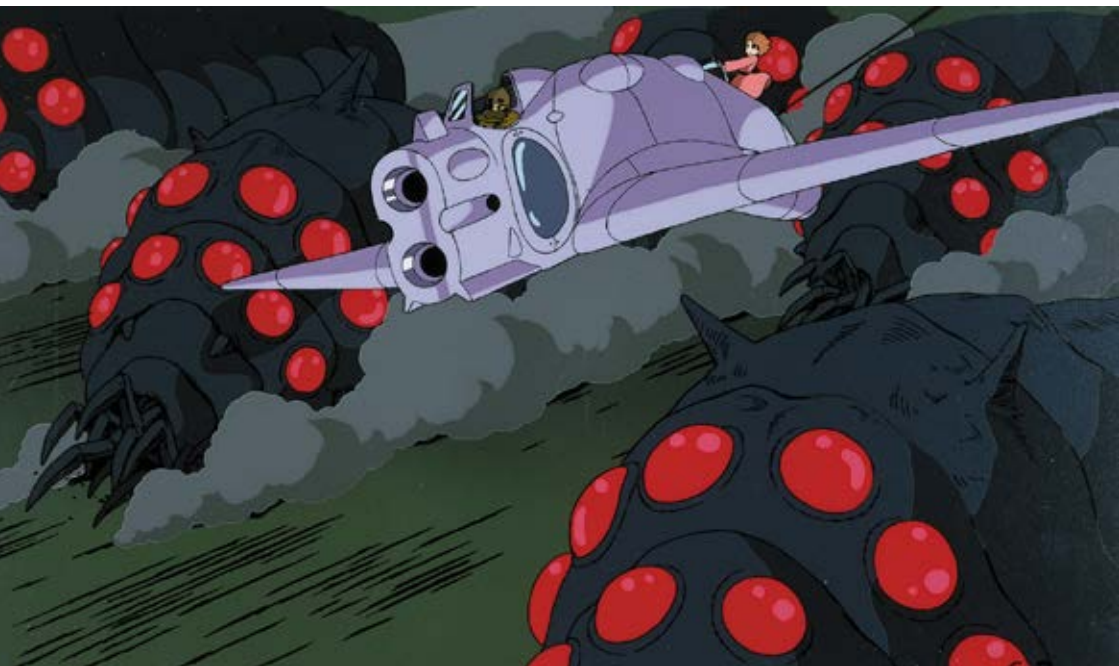












Still from 'Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind' (1984),  
Image credits: Studio Ghibli & Cinema Mondo

AMIR VUDKA

## Bug Wars

### Military-Cinematic Campaigns Against Space Insects

Aliens in sci-fi movies often represent an enemy, appearing as repulsive and malicious creatures that seek nothing but the destruction and/or the enslavement of humanity. *Independence Day*, *The Predator* and *Aliens* are just a few of Hollywood's sci-fi blockbusters that represented the alien as the face of vile otherness, and by that, harness identification with the American military as representing humanity, now in a battle of survival against 'them', the external threat from outer space. After all, it was the American President (and former Hollywood actor) Ronald Reagan, who in a speech at the United Nations contemplated that 'Perhaps we need some outside, universal threat to make us recognize this common bond. I occasionally think how quickly our differences worldwide would vanish if we were facing an alien threat from outside this world'.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Address to the 42d Session of the United Nations General Assembly in New York, New York. September 21, 1987.

To intensify the sense of sheer otherness, many alien species in sci-fi cinema appear in the semblance of bugs. Insects, writes Rosi Braidotti, are a radical form of otherness,

*They have become the sign of a widespread repertoire of angst-ridden fears and deep anxiety as phobic objects. Creepy mutant; vermin emerging from the sewerage; resilient survivors; tentacular left-overs from a previous evolutionary era; signs of the wrath of God as the Biblical locusts.*<sup>2</sup>

Bugs are perfect candidates to represent a threat that would be effective on a deep psychological, if not existential and biological, level. The feeling of repulsion when confronting insects seems to be universal and wired into our collective psyche. As entomologist Jeffrey Lockwood claims in his book, *The Infested Mind*,

*Our emotional response to insects on our bodies and in our homes is not merely a modern, socially constructed phenomenon. Rather, it is a vital part of being human. Our perception of insects is deeply rooted in our species' evolutionary past.*<sup>3</sup>

Insects have probably gained the worst reputation in the animal kingdom. These are creatures that cannot be domesticated, are too different to be easily turned to anthropomorphized figures,<sup>4</sup> and are rarely exploited for food or other human consumption. Insects

2 Braidotti, 'Are bugs to nature as chips to culture,' 158.

3 Lockwood, *The Infested Mind*, xxi.

4 Apart from animation films such as *A Bug's Life* (1998), *Antz* (1998), and *Bee Movie* (2007).

are already, in their strange ways, aliens on earth. As the Belgian poet-playwright Maurice Maeterlinck expressed it:

*The insect brings with him something that does not seem to belong to the customs, the morale, the psychology of our globe. One would say that it comes from another planet, more monstrous, more dynamic, more insensate, more atrocious, more infernal than ours.*<sup>5</sup>

There are countless alien invasion movies. This paper is restricted to examine film representations of aliens that are specifically insect or bug-like entities. Three types of such representations will be considered. First, the Hollywood, anti-alien, pro-war, or propaganda film. Such movies (*Independence Day* is a prime example) represent the military-industrial perspective that aims at the justification of war, the glorification of the military and its technologies, and valorization of the soldier's sacrifices – all pivoted around and set against a fundamentally dehumanized enemy. Second, the ironic, self-reflective and subversive *Starship Troopers* movies will be discussed to uncover the undelaying assumptions of the anti-bug, pro-war film and its tactics. These films suggest that the opposition between man and bugs hides a subtler analogy between the military organization and insect societies. More in the critical film section, the film *Ender's Game* shows how dehumanization increasingly becomes a matter of technological perception. Lastly, the paper examines sci-fi movies that instead of advocating conflicts, open the possibility of becoming-insect (*District 9*), and calling to 'make kin' with bugs (*Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind*).

Accordingly, the paper takes three theoretical avenues. First, the American military's involvement in Hollywood's contemporary

5 Cited in Shaviro, 'Two Lessons from Burroughs,' 47.

sci-fi/war film productions will be examined. Alien bugs in this context serve to dehumanize the enemy as absolute otherness, and thus establish an image of American troops as the ultimate good guys. Second, Julia Kristeva's concept of abject, and its implications in the horror film genre according to Barbara Creed, will be utilized to discuss the more internal facets of the alien-insect threat and its psychological and political implications. Military-cinematic campaigns against imaginary space insects can inform attitudes towards real political minorities, whether foreigners, refugees, or women. From this perspective, the militarized Hollywood blockbuster functions as a martial ritual of purging the abject to secure the integrity of the national body and its borders from that which does not 'respect borders, positions, rules', that which 'disturbs identity, system, order'.<sup>6</sup> This militarized cinematic practice of purification is an endless task that intertwines with perpetual American wars. Third, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's concept of 'becoming-animal' and Donna Haraway's notion of 'making kin' will be offered as alternative approaches. Making kin with bugs, or even becoming-insect, are ways of 'staying with the trouble' (as Haraway puts it) in these precarious times.

#### MILITARY PROPAGANDA AGAINST SPACE INSECTS

In his famous 1961 presidential parting speech, Eisenhower warned against the dangers of the Military-Industrial Complex. By today we are facing what Aaron Tucker calls the 'military-industrial-media-entertainment network' which includes not only the army and its industries, but also all forms of military entertainment: video games, TV and movies, which are now part of an ideological state apparatus that informs culture on a massive scale. It is a global production and

6 Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 4.

reproduction of war, with the war film – which lies 'at the junction of two multibillion-dollar industrial complexes' (the military and the film industry) – serving as a key influencer in shaping the attitudes towards war.<sup>7</sup> According to Paul Virilio, cinema had an affinity with the modern war machine from the get-go. The medium itself has been shaped by war, just as war was transformed by the technologies of film. From the synchronized camera/machine-guns on the biplanes of WWI to the laser satellites of Star Wars, the technologies of cinema and warfare have developed a fatal interdependence. Therefore, beyond the question of how war is represented in movies, we have to look at how film is used as a technology of warfare and how war itself has transformed into a cinematic battle, 'a war of pictures and sounds [that] is replacing the war of objects'.<sup>8</sup>

The long-standing involvement of the American DoD (Department of Defense) and Pentagon in Hollywood film production is well documented.<sup>9</sup> Yet, since the end of the nineties, and increasingly more after the attack on New York's twin towers on the 11<sup>th</sup> of September 2001, the American military is invested in types of genres that are no longer conventional war films. For example, in the last two decades the Pentagon has assisted in some capacity to the productions of *Day After Tomorrow* (2004), *War of the Worlds* (2005), *I Am Legend* (2007), *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (2008), the *Transformers* films (2007, 2009, 2011), the *Iron Man* films (2008, 2010, 2013), *Man of Steel* (2013), *World Invasion: Battle Los Angeles* (2011), *Battleship* (2012) and more.<sup>10</sup> Arguing that the pro-war film is not what it used to be, Tanine Allison writes that 'the science-fiction

7 Tucker, *Virtual Weaponry*, 15.

8 Virilio, *War and Cinema*, 4.

9 Garofo 2016; Allison 2016; Tucker 2017; Löffmann 2013.

10 Allison, 'How to Recognize a War Movie'.



genre has replaced the war/combat genre as the prime narrative vehicle for the military to sell itself and its technology to America's youth'.<sup>11</sup> Such films would not be commonly associated with the military, but with entertainment (for kids), yet the best propaganda, as Goebbels once stated, 'works so-to-speak invisibly [...] without the public having any knowledge that it is at the initiative of the propaganda [ministry]'.<sup>12</sup>

Like Vietnam, the 'war on terror' became largely unpopular, and posed a problem for pro-war film productions: how to market an undesirable product? Sci-fi and superhero films are able to sustain a righteous image of the military by projecting its conflicts elsewhere. Instead of fighting asymmetrical wars against the poor peoples of Asian or Middle-Eastern countries to gain control over their natural resources and maintain the geopolitical superiority of the American Empire, in these films the American army is engaged in wars against technologically superior adversaries that came from outer space to threaten the entire human race. Since WWII movies, the opposition between 'us' and 'them' never seemed so clear.

To a concerned child who is watching aliens destroy the world, parents would probably say 'it's just a movie'. But military-Hollywood co-productions undermine the presumed distinction between film and reality. The USA military provides Hollywood productions assistance in the form of genuine and functional weapons and vehicles, actual military locations, and active-duty personnel for use as extras or advisors. Besides the glorification of the military and its weapons, a major aim of this large-scale investment is to entice fresh recruits. The contemporary sci-fi blockbuster, Allison suggests, should be examined as a military recruitment vehicle:

11 Ibid., 259.

12 Tegel, *Jew Süß*, 182.

*Although the military liaisons in Hollywood rarely publicly admit the benefits they receive from enforcing their views in popular cinema, they receive undeniable advantages in terms of public support; this becomes directly measurable in terms of government funding for various military branches, as well as boosted recruitment numbers. Although recruitment figures are difficult to determine, and hard to pin to any one cause, in Philip Strub's words, 'it's widely assumed that [collaborating with Hollywood] does contribute' to successful increases in recruitment across the services.*<sup>13</sup>

Films such as *Top Gun* (1986) led to a marked upsurge in recruitment figures for the Navy and Air Force,<sup>14</sup> and in effect also contributed to the unavoidable casualties of the next war. Linking movie spectatorship to participation in real wars, Michael Herr wrote: 'I keep thinking of all the kids who get wiped out by seventeen years of war movies before coming to Vietnam to get wiped out for good'.<sup>15</sup> Watching a film, in this sense, can really kill you (and others). Today, it is not WWII movies, or any other conventional war film, but flicks like *Transformers* that prep youth to serve as cannon fodder for future wars.

A good war requires an evil enemy, and the more this enemy is different from 'us', the better. Aliens represent the ultimate otherness – not just another nation, a different race or a rival ideology, but something which is not even human. Aliens, Georg Löfflmann asserts, are a perfect template for any enemy of the United States:

13 Allison, 'How to Recognize a War Movie,' 256.

14 Löfflmann, 'Hollywood, the Pentagon, and the cinematic production of national security,' 284.

15 Cited in Monnet, 'Is There Such a Thing as an Antiwar Film?' 410.

*Just like Nazis, Soviet Communists, or Jihadists (see Kagan 2012), the Alien invader simply represents an enemy of freedom that America has to defeat in a basic struggle of good versus evil, confirming the essential role of the United States as the ‘world’s preeminent power’ (Joint Chiefs of Staff 2011).<sup>16</sup>*

All sorts of alien threats appear in contemporary military-Hollywood co-productions, but aliens that take the form of bugs seem to be best suited for propaganda purposes. According to insect expert Jeffrey Lockwood, the overwhelming majority of insects are harmless or beneficial.<sup>17</sup> However, the very common entomophobia (fear of insects) and katsaridaphobia (fear of cockroaches) oftentimes ‘drive us to “protect” ourselves from innocuous species by poisoning our homes, polluting the environment, and throwing out perfectly good food’.<sup>18</sup>

As imaginary invaders and polluters, bugs and vermin are habitually used as metaphors that accentuate the threatening otherness of the enemy. During the cold war and the ‘red scare’ that took hold of the United States, the communists were imagined as insects.<sup>19</sup> Since 9/11 we regularly encounter descriptions of terrorist ‘nests’; and threats are often made about refugees that ‘swarm’ across the borders. As Lauren Wilcox explicates,

*The figuration of the ‘swarm’ has also been applied to refugee and migrant populations, most famously by former UK Prime Minister David Cameron (see BBC News, 2015); rhetorically figured as swarms, refugees*

16 Löffmann, ‘Hollywood, the Pentagon, and the cinematic production of national security,’ 286.

17 Lockwood, *The Infested Mind*, p. 15.

18 Ibid., 16.

19 Parikka, *Insect Media*, xxxv.

*threaten to overwhelm like a plague of locusts. Even without using the specific language of the swarm, refugees have been depicted as reproducing uncontrollably and, in turn, threatening to overwhelm, disturb order and defy boundaries. This is a common figuration of the masses, multitudes, rioters, etc., which falls back onto the monstrous as threatening other.<sup>20</sup>*

Representing alien invaders as bugs is a logical step for Hollywood’s sci-fi military propaganda films, as insects are already imagined as a foreign life form, what philosopher and cultural critic Steven Shaviro describes as ‘an alien presence that we can neither assimilate nor expel’,<sup>21</sup> and therefore – something we can always fight against.

One of the most defining films of the alien invasion (sub)genre, and the ultimate propaganda against bugs from space, is the movie *Independence Day*. When it came out in 1996 it became an instant blockbuster that shaped many films made from the same mold. The film’s plot is quite simple: one day, out of the blue, a nefarious, technologically advanced alien species known as the harvesters attacks earth. After the aliens destroy most major cities around the globe on an apocalyptic scale, the surviving humans fight back. Three main figures are leading the war: the American president (Bill Pullman), who is also a fighter pilot that joins the final battle; a Jewish scientist (Jeff Goldblum) who invents a computer virus that penetrates the alien ships’ defenses; and a black American pilot (Will Smith) who pilots an alien spaceship to deliver the virus into their mothership. After the virus is inserted, the alien ships lose their defenses, allowing fighter pilots around the world to attack

20 Wilcox, ‘Drones, Swarms, and Becoming-insect,’ 35.

21 Shaviro, ‘Two Lessons from Burroughs,’ 47.

and destroy them. The aliens are finally crushed, and the humans gain the final victory (at least until the 2016 sequel).

Unmistakably a pro-war, full-fledged propaganda film, *Independence Day* celebrates the American military, its technology, and the sacrifice of its soldiers. Similar to WWII films, an undisputed evil, here represented by the invading aliens, provided the ultimate justification for war. The film nearly anticipated the 9/11 attack on New York and the ensuing discourse about terrorism as a non-individuated, insect-like enemy formation.<sup>22</sup> In one particularly ominous scene, a colossal alien spaceship (fore)shadows the twin towers, and later attacks other prominent skyscrapers in New York, causing damage and havoc in the streets below, resonant of 9/11 images later seen on live television across the world.<sup>23</sup> It is no wonder, then, that 9/11 was narrativized as an alien invasion film. As Löffmann suggests,

*The Alien invasion theme reproduces a basic Manichean narrative of American innocence the Pentagon can support. Just as 9/11 was constructed as an attack out of the blue by 'evil-doers' and 'enemies of freedom' (see Croft 2006), the Alien invasion on screen comes over America as swift, sudden assault, taking an unprepared nation by surprise. There is no backstory leading up to the events, no 'blowback' of previous American covert or military actions (see Johnson 2000), and no insight into the rationale for invasion.*<sup>24</sup>

22 Wilcox, 'Drones, Swarms, and Becoming-insect,' 35.

23 Adam Curtis's *Hypernormalisation* (2016) shows a montage of monumental American buildings exploding and collapsing, taken from Hollywood blockbusters produced before 9/11. It opens with the destruction of the White House in *Independence Day*.

24 Löffmann, 'Hollywood, the Pentagon, and the cinematic production of national security,' 286.

*Independence Day* can be seen as a script modeled after Reagan's UN speech.<sup>25</sup> In fact, the motivational speech made by Bill Pullman as the American president right before the final battle echoes that of Reagan's: 'Mankind, that word should have new meaning for all of us today. We can't be consumed by our petty differences anymore. We will be united in our common interests'. Just as Reagan mused, the extraterrestrial threat unites all terrestrial nations to fight against a common enemy. But to achieve this global unity, the aliens had to represent a hazardous and ultimate otherness, such that will over-code all differences between humans and leave only one distinction – between humans on the one hand and aliens on the other.

The harvester aliens are single-minded bug-like species that aim at the total extermination of humanity. The president, who had a brief psychic connection with one of the aliens, saw a glimpse of their true nature: 'I saw its thoughts. I saw what they're planning to do. They're like locusts. They're moving from planet to planet... their whole civilization. After they've consumed every natural resource, they move on... and we're next'. Within their tentacular bio suits, the harvesters are revealed to be quite small creatures with disproportionately large heads and eyes, similar to the common depiction of alien 'grays'. Yet, they resemble insects in their locust-like plaguing of other planets and civilizations, their swarm, collective intelligence; and their queens, that rule their hives like ant colonies.

The harvesters do not attempt any communication whatsoever, and when the military attempts to communicate with them, they respond with immediate fire. When the spaceships appear, the few naïve people that gather for welcoming parties on the rooftops of New York's skyscrapers become the first human victims. In the only

25 See footnote 1.

scene that shows communication between the species, the president asks an alien captive if peace can be made. 'What is it that you want us to do?', enquires the president. 'Die', the alien replies.

The harvesters' threat unites all nations of earth. But in fact, this vision of globalization is American through and through. It is the United States of America that leads the nations in this war, and it is the USA that unmistakably represents humanity and the world. Therefore, the world's Independence Day (from the alien occupation) occurs on the 4<sup>th</sup> of July, the American Independence Day. As the president's speech continues:

*We're fighting for our right to live, to exist, and should we win today, the 4<sup>th</sup> of July will no longer be known as an American President holiday but as the day when the world declared in one voice, we will not go quietly into the night. We will not vanish without a fight. We're going to live on. We're going to survive. Today we celebrate our Independence Day!*

The conflation of the world with the United States of America exposes the colonial roots of an Empire that sees itself as the standard model for the universal.<sup>26</sup> It is, therefore, not surprising to find that characters' roles in the film are based on race (and gender) stereotypes. While the 'leader of the free world' is a white man (fittingly called President Whitmore), brainpower is represented by a Jewish man, and muscle power is represented by a black man (while all women are restricted to supporting roles). Considering this stereotypical typecast, it is no wonder that the alien other is represented

26 Interestingly, in the sequel from 2016, there is a strong presence of Chinese characters that signal a shift of power, yet the American president is still the head of the world council.

with a touch of orientalism. In an encounter of the third kind,<sup>27</sup> after Will Smith's character welcomes the alien with a punch (uttering 'that's what I call a close encounter'),<sup>28</sup> he refers to the alien's 'dreadlocks'.<sup>29</sup> While humanity is represented by Americans (led by a white man), the threatening other is marked by a Caribbean/Jamaican 'black hairdo', as the encounter takes place, not accidentally, in a desert. As Wilcox comments, it is 'No wonder that "alien" societies are often represented in insect form, as are racialized populations conceived of as outside of the order of the "human" and perceived as threatening the dominant racial order'.<sup>30</sup>

However, notwithstanding the movie's (quite literal) black and white approach, certain gray areas appear at the margins, clearly visible despite the film's central message. While the harvesters represent the ultimate enemy of US (both us, humans and the USA), the film also bears some points of analogy between the rivals. The asymmetrical warfare that the harvesters conduct against technologically inferior opponents, and their pattern of consuming all natural resources before moving on to the next planet, cannot but remind of the current shape of global capitalism and the ceaseless American wars for oil and other natural resources. Furthermore, a bug-like, single-minded antagonistic approach is a staple of the military's worldview, which here is projected onto the aliens.

27 In his 1972 book *The UFO Experience: A Scientific Inquiry In Ufology*, dr. J. Allen Hynek, astronomer and scientific advisor to UFO studies undertaken by the U.S. Air Force, defined a scale of UFO close encounters. In encounters of the third kind, an animated entity is present. Hynek's scale was referenced in Spielberg's 1977 film, *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*.

28 In anticipation of this moment, Smith expresses his eagerness to 'beat E.T.'s ass'. A couple of not so subtle allusions, in which the film opposes Spielberg's peaceful approach to the phenomena.

29 The alien creature in *Predator* has similar style 'dreadlocks'.

30 Wilcox, 'Drones, Swarms, and Becoming-insect,' 29.

According to Wilcox, the threat of terrorism 'is figured as the threat of the multitude, of the swarm, of the concerted action of that which does not necessarily have a single head. [...] The threat of terrorism is often represented as boundless and formless'.<sup>31</sup> Such are the harvesters, that attack out-of-the-blue, maneuvering as an overwhelming swarm rather than an organized army. Yet it is interesting to consider how the harvesters are defeated, with what could be described as equally terroristic tactics. The technological inferior American military is using the aliens' own spaceship to infiltrate the mothership and infect their system with a computer virus.<sup>32</sup> Just a few years later, Al-Qaida terrorists will infiltrate the U.S. and mount American planes to crash against the most momentous American symbols of power.

#### THE ONLY GOOD BUG IS A DEAD BUG

Directed by Paul Verhoeven based on a book by Robert Heinlein (1959), the 1997 movie *Starship Troopers* bred three sequels that could be taglined as the sci-fi war films that the Nazi's never made. Depicting a 'total war' of humans against alien space bugs called the Arachnids, the films take *Independence Day* to the next level – seemingly embracing Third Reich discourse and aesthetics, with allusions to *Triumph of the Will* (1935), served as an American teen drama television series from the nineties. The human's global federation is portrayed as a fascist utopia in which only members of the military are counted as citizens with full rights (to vote or procreate). This is a society based on war, which in the words of Brian

31 Ibid., 34.

32 Anticipating the use of nonlinear swarm tactics by the Israeli and American militaries. For more, see: Eyal Weizman, *The Least of All Possible Evils: Humanitarian Violence from Arendt to Gaza* (2011).

E. Crim is 'attractive, efficient, hyper-militaristic, and rife with Nazi signs and signifiers. [...] The Federation is a world government mobilized for racial war, driven by a quest for *Lebensraum*, and ultimately invested in genocide'.<sup>33</sup>

Verhoeven's film was bound to be misunderstood by the critics. *Sight and Sound* reviewed it under the headline 'Starship Stormtroopers'.<sup>34</sup> Richard Schickel saw it as 'a happy fascist world' and Mike Clark was struck by the 'army of sweet-tempered, fresh-faced fascists'. The mix of exterminationist rhetoric, Nazi paraphernalia, and American kitsch prompted another reviewer to describe the movie's style as 'California chic with clean, gleaming futuristic fascism'.<sup>35</sup>

The film's irony was lost on many viewers who were repelled by its blunt Nazi allusions, yet for Verhoeven, it was a critique on the American war industry and the integral part popular media takes in the military machine. 'I gave the audience enough clues to watch out!', he said in an interview. 'Since many shots were taken directly from Leni Riefenstahl, people automatically thought that I'm promoting this kind of approach, but I was actually criticizing it'.<sup>36</sup> *Starship Troopers* takes similar sci-fi/war movies to the extreme limit of their logic, to expose the military propaganda which propels such entertainment products. Humanity's enemies are therefore straightforwardly giant bugs (from a desert planet), while the

33 Crim, 'The Intergalactic Final Solution,' 105.

34 Ibid., 109.

35 Ibid., 114.

36 Utin and Vudka, 'There will always be war: a conversation with Paul Verhoeven,' 30.

Following pages:

Still from 'Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind' (1984),

Image credits: Studio Ghibli & Cinema Mondo





global federation is represented by Aryan looking American teens.<sup>37</sup> Confronted by a dehumanized threat, that here takes the literal form of a bug, viewers are pushed to identify with fascism and root for the extermination of the enemy. As Verhoeven said, 'I tried to seduce the audience to join in [the Troopers] society, but then ask, "What are you really joining up for?"'<sup>38</sup>

*Starship Troopers* exposes Hollywood films against aliens (in general, and alien-bugs in particular) as tools of army recruitment. Intentionally marketable, 'poppy' remediations of TV commercials occasionally break the plot to solicit young blood to enlist for service. The first movie ends with such an advertisement and the second installment (*Hero of the Federation*, 2004) starts with it, to make clear that this kind of films primarily function as military commercials. Here again, we witness the valor of self-sacrifice seen in movies like *Independence Day*, in which American heroes are more than willing to die for the cause. Yet this martyrdom is caricatured with such commercials that show a soldier with a prosthetic arm calling to 'hurry up, bud, we need fresh meat for the grinder!'. Not coincidentally, many actors from *Beverly Hills 90210* and *Melrose Place* were cast in the films, including Neal Patrick Harris, known for his role as Doogie Howser, here playing a high ranked officer in SS uniform. In *Starship Troopers 3: Marauder* (2008), the conjoint plane of pop media, militarism, sex, kitsch and death is pushed to the extreme with the 'Sky Marshal' (Stephen Hogan) functioning both as a supreme military commander and a pop icon with the hit song 'Good Day to Die'. The movie pertinently ends with a

romantic kiss on the backdrop of an atomic explosion that signals the genocide of the alien-bugs.

Lockwood reflected on how 'often our righteous revulsion is conceptualized and expressed in terms of insects. [...] As sources of contamination they are suitable targets for extermination, in the same sense that flies must be eliminated from a child's nursery'.<sup>39</sup> *Starship Troopers* removes any metaphorical deliberations to show how easy killing is made when the other is literally a bug. There's no empathy towards bugs and no moral considerations. For the Federation's soldiers, 'the only good bug is a dead bug!'. In a speech by the Sky Marshal in the first movie, he states: 'We are a generation commanded by fate to defend humankind! We must meet the threat with our valor, our blood, with our very lives, to ensure that human civilization, not insect, dominates the galaxy now and always.' One only has to replace 'insects' with 'Jews' and the text would perfectly fit many Hitlerian speeches from the 1940s. However, the bugs in *Starship Troopers* not only stand for the repulsive other that has to be exterminated, but are also the mirror image of the Federation itself.

Unlike bugs, humans tend to regard themselves as individuals. Bugs such as ants have no such conception. These are creatures that exist as a collective rather than individual entities. Each ant is part of a larger assemblage, whether a hive or a colony, that operates as a single whole. For Heinlein, bugs served as a metaphor for communists and their 'insect-like' discipline and dedication to the collective.<sup>40</sup> But fascism also shares something of the bug's mentality. In one scene from the first movie, while students dissect Arachnids in a biology class, their teacher praises the bugs: 'We

37 Although the protagonists are from Argentina, they are unmistakably American jocks and chicks.

38 Crim, 'The Intergalactic Final Solution,' 115.

39 Lockwood, *The Infested Mind*, 76.

40 Crim, 'The Intergalactic Final Solution,' 110.

humans like to think we are Nature's finest achievement. I'm afraid it isn't true. [The Arachnid] reproduces in vast numbers, has no ego, doesn't know about death, and so is the perfect selfless member of society.' *Starship Troopers* demonstrates the analogy with rows upon rows of anonymous Federation soldiers that fill the screen and attack in swarms, much like their enemy, with equal aggression and disregard for the life of the individual ('I'm doing my part!' screams a self-sacrificing soldier before jumping to his death). Both species spread their dominion in space, invading and colonizing other planets in endless expansionist wars. But if the alien-bugs are actually a reflection of the military, who is really the enemy?

#### CLOSE ENCOUNTERS OF THE ABJECT KIND

Although arriving from outer space, the threat posed by the alien bugs is not entirely external. It is also somewhat internal, or more precisely, it is located in a liminal position where the differentiation between inner and outer collapses. The alien bugs represent a threat of the abject kind.

Julia Kristeva defined the abject as that which threatens the borders of the self, the boundaries which separate the inside of the body from the outside, separating me from the other. The abject is associated with bodily wastes and the corpse as objects that are in a superposition, both in and out, me and other, life and death. The abject exists in-between and cannot be positioned on fixed grounds, and therefore it can be seen as a threat by cultural and societal norms, which are habitually busy expelling it, whether it is feces that are quickly flushed away, or the corpse that, at the end of the eighteenth century, was banished to the cemetery heterotopia at the outskirts of the city.<sup>41</sup>

41 Foucault, 'Different Spaces'.

In her groundbreaking work, Barbara Creed analyzed the role of the abject in horror and sci-fi films, most notably in the original *Alien* trilogy (1979, 1986, 1992). Creed argues that the insect-like aliens in these films represent monstrous feminine bodies that pose a threat to the masculine order. Although the abject does not belong to man or woman per se, Kristeva positioned women as the cultural bearers of the abject. In Freudian terms, the female genitals pose a potential threat of castration. If the phallus marks clear borders, the role of the monster in horror films is to cross or threaten to cross the border. Wilcox argues that the horror of insects,

*And relatedly of the swarm, is also of female reproduction outside of patriarchal control: that fathers are 'inessential' (Haraway, 1991, p. 151). In particular, the praying mantis is associated with femininity, female sexuality and the fantasy of the vagina dentate: a femme fatale writ small (Grosz, 1995).<sup>42</sup>*

In the *Alien* films, the alien hives are ruled by queen mothers. Mother figures in horror films often represent the abject, as the mother is an other that was once me (in symbiosis with me) and keeps reminding me of the potential to mislay the borders that separate my self from the other. The horror film, Creed writes, 'attempts to separate out the symbolic order from all that threatens its stability, particularly the mother and all that her universe signifies'.<sup>43</sup> The insect paradigm, Braidotti adds, is 'a model for polymorphous anti-phallic sexuality'.<sup>44</sup> *Starship Troopers 3* was most graphic in the

42 Wilcox, 'Drones, Swarms, and Becoming-insect,' 29. It is also worth mentioning that the Praying Mantis female is much larger than the male, and tends to decapitate him at the climax of mating.

43 Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine*, 14.

44 Braidotti, 'Are bugs to nature as chips to culture,' 159.

depiction of the 'brain-bug' as a mother figure with a devouring vagina-shaped mouth with teeth, a quite literal vagina dentata. The war against space insects, in this sense, is both political and psychological, or a psychologically driven politics. It is a patriarchal attempt to cast away the amorphous 'feminine' that threatens the phallic integrity of the borders of the self, imagined as national (or any other collective imaginary) borders.

The abject is associated with filth, contamination, infestation, and pollution. Insects disgust and evoke fear in humans 'through their capacity to invade, evade, reproduce, harm, disturb, and defy us - qualities that are evoked through even fleeting encounters with creatures such as cockroaches and termites inside our homes.'<sup>45</sup> In Nazi ideology, Jews were seen as such vermin that pollutes the 'Vaterland' from within. The infamous Nazi propaganda film *The Eternal Jew* (1940) made the comparison explicit, describing Jews as 'a plague that threatens the health of the Aryan people'. In one particular scene, the image of a Jewish family gathered at a table is juxtaposed with an image of a wall teemed with cockroaches, suggesting that just like these insects, Jews are infesting the Aryan homeland with filth and disease. In the Third Reich, bugs and vermin provided the ultimate metaphorical justification for the extermination of the enemy.

People react to bugs with visceral disgust not just because of their utter difference, but also because they are perceived as violating their boundaries. Insects are natural transgressors that invade our homes, and potentially, our bodies. Clinical psychologist Susan Miller argued that the greater the potential for something to enter us, the greater the disgust:

<sup>45</sup> Lockwood, *The Infested Mind*, 15.

*Small, primitive life-forms close at hand are especially likely to disgust us. I believe this is because they seem too likely to enter us or at least to latch on. [...] they seem hungry for an affiliation with something more substantial. If they are structurally designed to cling or ooze, the problem worsens.*<sup>46</sup>

Lockwood adds that 'our essential "self" is compromised when our biological or psychic skin is breached.'<sup>47</sup> When insects invade, the borders between inner and outer, me and other, are jeopardized, evoking a feeling of disgust. When immigrants that cross the border are seen as swarming, they represent a threat of the abject kind.

According to Creed, the horror film attempts to bring about a confrontation with the abject 'in order finally to eject the abject and redraw the boundaries between the human and non-human'.<sup>48</sup> Abjection is ambiguous: it both repels and attracts. Horror and sci-fi films are rituals that let us get near the abject and take pleasure in confronting our boundaries, but then expel it to regain the integrity of our borders. In *Independence Day*, the heroes had first to be absorbed into the alien mothership, before the monstrous alien, 'feminine' bug threat could be eventually expelled.

A most interesting case of a close encounter of the abject kind is presented in Neill Blomkamp's *District 9* (2009). It begins like many other alien invasion films, with a gigantic alien spaceship that suddenly appears over Johannesburg, but in this case, instead of attacking, the aliens seem to be stranded, just hovering motionless above.

<sup>46</sup> Cited in *Ibid.*, 63.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.

<sup>48</sup> Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine*, 14.



When the humans finally dare to go into the spaceship, they discover that the cockroach-like occupants are malnourished, unhealthy, and aimless. Like human refugees, they are put in a large camp. The temporary holding zone is soon fenced and militarized, and quickly becomes a slum. District 9 looks like many other similar locations. In the context of South Africa, it represents the apartheid regime,<sup>49</sup> but with its separation wall, weaponized surveillance systems, and the awfully crowded living conditions, it could also be Gaza. After twenty years, the alien population reaches 1.8 million. Sentiments against the 'prunes', as they are derogatorily called, are growing. Everywhere sings of 'no entrance for prunes' are seen, evoking images of the segregation of Afro-Americans in the USA, or the racial laws against Jews in Nazi Germany. The pressure is rising to get the 'prunes' out. As a local resident explains, this is a level of otherness that just cannot be tolerated, 'if they would be from another country we might understand, but they are not even from this planet'.

The MNU multinational conglomerate is hired for a project of mass eviction, relocating the aliens out of the city to a remote concentration camp. The UN-like white vehicles and neo-liberal jargon are just a façade for the true nature of this corporation, which has a major branch of weapons manufacturing, and therefore a special interest in alien technology and weaponry. Military-industrial interest groups that among other schemes, sponsor sci-fi war movies against alien bugs, are not depicted here as heroes. The almost erotic pleasure in gazing at high-tech weapons and their destructive

49 *District 9* relates to Cape Town's infamous District 6. During the 1970s, the apartheid regime forcibly 'relocated' over 60,000 inhabitants of that district.

spectacle seen in films such as *Independence Day*, is replaced with a critique on the greed and cruelty of an industry that profits from destruction and death.

Enter the main character, Wikus Van De Merwe (Sharlto Copley), a seemingly gray, all too-normal clerk in the office of MNU Alien Affairs. Wikus is appointed to lead the relocation project, a civilian in charge of a military procedure. At first, Wikus seems gentler than the soldiers, but he is increasingly revealed as a polite autocrat that finds joy in burning a hatchery filled with alien eggs ('they pop like popcorn', he glees to the camera). In search of alien weapons, Wikus stumbles upon a strange canister which he accidentally triggers to splash some green fluid onto his face. From here on a process of metamorphoses begins, in which Wikus gradually mutates into an alien bug.

Wikus' hand is the first organ to turn 'prune'. Since the alien super-weapons are biologically linked to their DNA and cannot be operated by humans, he now holds the key for activating weapons worth billions, and the MNU multinational takes immediate action. Wikus is kidnaped and taken to the cellar levels of the organization's research center, which he didn't know existed before. To his horror, he sees aliens that are viciously dissected and used in cruel experiments; then Wikus himself is taken for experimentation, and he learns on his own flesh how a 'prune' is treated. Wikus is forced to fire the alien weapons, initially at objects, but then at living aliens. In agony and despair, Wikus seems human for the first time, but ironically, it is in the midst of becoming a bug. Pleased with the trials, the corporation decides to extract his biomaterials, but Wikus manages to escape and finds refuge in District 9, where he befriends an alien father and son. Looking at Wikus' hand, the kid gestures to the similarity they now share, but Wikus reacts



with anger. 'Fuck off, I'm not the same', he utters, but the close up on his face reveals that a disturbing realization is brewing within.

Like Gregor Samsa, that other clerk who became a bug in Kafka's *Metamorphosis*, Wikus is socially marginalized. Pushed away by his wife and colleagues, he is humiliated, tortured, hated, and mocked. But while Gregor successfully re-oedipalized himself (and died), Wikus went too far to turn back. In their book about Kafka, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari discuss becoming-insect as a 'line of flight' from the inhumanness of 'diabolical powers' such as the MNU multinational. To become a beetle 'rather than lowering one's head and remaining a bureaucrat, inspector, judge, or judged.'<sup>50</sup> Wikus eventually raises his prune head, embracing Shaviro's proposal to 'cultivate your inner housefly or cockroach, instead of your inner child.'<sup>51</sup> Yet this sort of becoming, as Deleuze and Guattari cautioned, comes with 'a rupture with the central institutions that have established themselves or seek to become established.'<sup>52</sup> After raiding the building of his former employers with his alien friends, Wikus is declared a terrorist.

In a twist of perfect poetic justice, Wikus turned from the one who was in charge of expelling the prunes, to become a rejected prune himself. The division between himself and the other, human and non-human, collapsed, and with it, his ideological affiliation changed direction as well, towards what another human-bug in Cronenberg's *The Fly* (1986) called 'insect politics'. The alien-bugs are no longer just the external other from outer-space, but for Wikus, as his skin peels and the 'prune' appears beneath, it is otherness waiting to emerge from inside out.

50 Deleuze and Guattari, Kafka, 12.

51 Shaviro, 'Two Lessons from Burroughs', 53.

52 Deleuze and Guattari, *Thousand Plateaus*, 272.

## THE BUG WAR DID NOT TAKE PLACE

The dehumanization of the enemy no longer has to rely on metaphorical means (by way of calling foreigners 'aliens' or comparing minorities to bugs), but now can be carried directly by technological implements that shape perception itself.

Based on Orson Scott Card's novel from 1985, the underrated movie *Ender's Game* (2013) depicts a total war against giant alien space-ants. Taking its cue from *Starship Troopers*, here as well, the humans form a fascist society, with propaganda posters at every corner and TV ads that are constantly beating the drums of war. This militarized society has an absolute commitment to the annihilation of the enemy. Since contemporary warfare is increasingly played out on screens and electronic devices, this future war is conducted by kid soldiers that are training with video games. Ender (Asa Butterfield) is one of these young soldiers, a highly motivated and gifted prodigy that is eager to climb the military ladder. He is taken under the custody of an older commander (Harrison Ford), which believes him to be the one who will achieve final victory over the space bugs in a war that will end all wars.

Ender excels in his training, consisting mainly of battle simulations in which squadrons of drone pilots are fighting swarms of space-ants, until eventually he is made a commander. The final test before Ender can meet the real enemy is the ultimate battle simulation, staged around the enemy's home planet. Ender's mission is to direct droves of drones to protect the prime asset – a megacannon worth 70 billion dollars of pure destruction. The day of the final test arrives, but Ender has strange insect dreams, and he feels uncertain of himself. In order to win, one needs to know the enemy, but Ender knows nothing about the space-ants except what he was taught. Who is really the enemy under the ideological veil presented to him?

The day of the final simulation has arrived. The human space-ships approach the aliens' home planet and release swarms of drones, which are met by swarms of ants.<sup>53</sup> Manipulating virtual reality in his exceptional way, Ender manages to pierce through the clouds of alien-bugs, sacrificing numerous men of his own army to pave way for the cannon that blasts the whole planet, killing the entire alien species in a matter of seconds. 'Game over', Ender declares victorious, but the high command remains suspiciously silent, as the images of the dead planet, burned to ashes, keep coming in. Ender realizes that he was deceived. The simulation was in fact reality and he had committed an atrocity. Facing this, he bursts in tears. 'It was them or us, there's no other way', his commander tells him, but Ender refuses to accept it, declaring, 'I will bear the shame of this genocide forever'.

Paul Virilio's seminal book *War and Cinema* explicated the historical ties of the war machine to the ocular machine. The use of vision machines on the battlefield had progressively become as prevalent as the use of weapons. From the gun cameras mounted on WWI airplanes to reconnaissance aircraft and remote seeing satellites, the eye's function increasingly converged with the function of the weapon. With video-guided smart bombs and killer drones, vision itself is weaponized. As W. J. Perry (former US Under-Secretary of Defense) said, 'once you can see the target, you can expect to destroy it'.<sup>54</sup>

If a camera on a plane turns the surface of the battlefield into film, the digital manipulation of the image renders the battle virtual.

53 According to Wilcox, 'In laboratories and bases, the US, UK and other militaries are developing what the US military has called "SWARM capability", or "Smart Warfighting Array of Reconfigurable Modules"'. Wilcox, 'Drones, Swarms, and Becoming-insect,' 32.

54 Cited in Virilio, *The Vision Machine*, 69.

*Ender's Game* shows the next stage of 'cinematic' warfare, which is the total virtualization of war. Although much of the technology seen in the film is futuristic, already now, military drone operators conduct war on viewing screens, while being physically remote from the action. Old wars were fought across distances, and opponents had to be in close contact. However, in the advance from swords to guns, to artillery, and to long-range missiles and 'Predator' drones,<sup>55</sup> distance is shattered, and the target can be immediately annihilated from afar. New 'tele-wars' are fought across (instant) time, but the opponents are far apart.

Even soldiers that are engaged in the battlefield itself often rely on vision machines that distance them from the gruesome carnage of war. Whether these are AR (augmented reality) technologies used by fighter pilots (with helmets that show spatial orientation data, weapons targeting, etc.) or TAR (tactical augmented reality) used by ground troops (providing sensor imagery with integrated mapping, navigation, and 3D surface models), these soldiers experience what Virilio called 'stereo-vision', a doubling of the visual field that consists of reality superimposed by AR. As war games for kids become more and more realistic, real war for adults looks more and more like a video game.<sup>56</sup>

55 'Predator' drones are the first mass used killer drones, originally deployed by the American military since the Afghanistan invasion in 2001 and later appearing in various conflict areas around the world (Iraq, Somalia, Yemen, etc.). These drones are operated mostly from U.S. Air Force bases in Nevada, tens of thousands of kilometers from the actual killing sites. They have gained commercial success that led to the development and deployment of more advance models (such as the 'Reaper' and 'Avenger').

56 In his *Serious Games III: Immersion* video installation (2009), Harun Farocki explored the connection between virtual reality and the military – how the fictional scenarios of computer games are used both in the training of U.S. troops prior to their deployment in combat zones, and in psychological care for troops suffering from PTSD and other battlefield trauma upon their return.

The increased use of AR and VR in warfare shifts the ontological status of war. First, some technologies allowed to see better what was already there, but perhaps hidden to the plain eye. Reconnaissance imagery from above reveals hidden enemy assets, and it became increasingly more important with the use of heavy artillery in WWI and the consequential explosions that obscured the visual field on ground level. Night vision allows to see threats that were previously hidden in the dark. But then, with computation technologies, what is 'seen' is no longer necessarily part of the physical vision field, but an extra dimension of data that is superimposed upon it. At the final stage of this progression, simulated military campaigns precede the real war.

According to Aaron Tucker, by the first Gulf War, the American war machine was already firmly based in the principles of virtual war 'that pushed both the fighting and the depictions of "real-life" war into the realm of unreal model and constantly mediated simulation.'<sup>57</sup> The logic behind virtual wars is to have a war without actually having to fight. Like Cola Zero, it is promoted as a sort of 'diet war'. It is a shift towards what the military had successfully marketed to mainstream media as a 'clean war', aimed at 'ensuring victory without bloodshed, at least of reducing the symbolic/media impact of the blood.'<sup>58</sup>

The French philosopher Jean Baudrillard therefore declared that 'the Gulf War did not take place'. According to Baudrillard, the Gulf War was a simulacrum: hyperreal television scenario, an event that had no reference to the real. The Gulf War saw the birth

See: <https://www.harunfarocki.de/installations/2000s/2009/serious-games-iii-immersion.html>

<sup>57</sup> Tucker, *Virtual Weaponry*, 12.

<sup>58</sup> Virilio, cited in Ibid.

of a new kind of military apparatus that incorporated the power to direct the production and distribution of images, in order to both conduct and repel the war,<sup>59</sup> and to control the picture that was seen back home.<sup>60</sup>

The Gulf War was not the first televised war. Already in the 1960s, images from the Vietnam war were broadcasted to American households. But in Vietnam, the real war preceded the image, and therefore the image was horrific, resulting in a public outcry against the war. During the Gulf War, however, the image did not derive from the battlefield itself but from vision machines which mainly showed abstract targets getting hit from afar. This was the 'reality' of war both for the folks back home and the soldiers on the battlefield. The war indeed seemed clean, or as Baudrillard claimed, pushing the logic to its end, there was no war at all.

In contemporary wars, Baudrillard argued, 'the victory of the model is more important than victory on the ground.'<sup>61</sup> Therefore, while the Americans lost the Vietnam war on the ground, they still won 'in the electronic mental space. And if the one side won an ideological and political victory, the other made *Apocalypse Now* and that has gone right around the world.'<sup>62</sup> Baudrillard did not deny the many casualties of the Gulf War. His idea was that war changed its primary locus from the real physical space to the virtual, but as *The Matrix* trilogy (1999, 2003) shows, whatever happens to bodies in the virtual, has consequences in the real.

<sup>59</sup> Films like *Three Kings* (1999) and *Jarhead* (2005) highlighted the American troops' lack of physical engagement with the Iraqis.

<sup>60</sup> *Wag the Dog* (1997) exposed how contemporary wars are staged for TV, and that reality actually follows suit.

<sup>61</sup> Baudrillard, *The Gulf War did not take place*, 55.

<sup>62</sup> Baudrillard, *America*, 48.

In *Ender's Game*, a whole civilization is annihilated, yet the war did not take place. It was supposedly just a simulation which preceded the real, but in fact, as Ender learns, the virtual had merged with the real to become a hyperreal where the distinction between reality and imaginary is rendered meaningless. In a state of affairs where there's no difference between simulations that approximate real battles and the battle itself, committing war crimes becomes much easier. If previously the enemy was dehumanized by metaphorical and ideological means (here literally appearing as bugs), at this new stage of warfare we observe the annihilation of the enemy as ontological or embodied reality. Like Ender and the other soldier kids, for military drone operators, the enemy is just a blip on the screen. The first casualty of war is no longer merely truth, but the principle of reality itself.

Yet, Ender's story did not end with his war crime. Stricken with grief and remorse, Ender is looking for a way to make amends for his terrible deeds. A surviving alien queen that already made contact with Ender through his dreams, guides him to her whereabouts so he can take the remaining alien eggs, bring them to a safe refuge and ensure the survival of the alien species. Such a telepathic connection between humans and alien bugs is also seen in the *Independence Day* and *Starship Troopers* films, but here without the negative effects. Beyond the 'us or them' opposition posed by the military's worldview, the film traces a universal plane of awareness which allows interspecies communication on a deeper subconscious level. Ender finally learns to know his enemy, but as he now realizes,

*In the moment when I truly understand my enemy, understand him well enough to defeat him, then in that very moment I also love him. I think*

*it's impossible to really understand somebody, what they want, what they believe, and not love them the way they love themselves.*

#### MAKING BUGS KIN

A similar message is carried by Hayao Miyazaki's anime film *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* (1984). Although not dealing with aliens, the film is still relevant here for its depiction of human war against giant insects, trilobite-like creatures that are called Ohmu. While not extraterrestrial, the mysterious, magical, awe-inspiring and dangerous Ohmus could be considered ultra-terrestrials. This final example offers an alternative to the antagonistic, anthropocentric approach found in so many filmic accounts of encounters with aliens, insects, and alien-bugs.

The film starts after human wars already led to an apocalypse that devastated humanity and created a vast toxic forest teeming with mutant insects; but a thousand years later, the surviving humanity still battles amongst itself and destroys nature even more. Nausicaä's Kingdom of the Valley of the Wind is peaceful and uses green technologies, but the neighboring Tolmekia, an industrial-military state, has imperial aspirations. The Tolmekians try to unite all kingdoms under their rule in a war against a common enemy: the toxic forest and its harboring insects. Using a giant warrior - a titanic humanoid bioweapon, they burn the forest and enrage the Ohmus that attack the humans in droves, threatening with another apocalypse.

Nausicaä has a different approach. She is the only one who dares to venture into the toxic forest and explore its plants and insects.

Following pages:

Still from 'Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind' (1984),

Image credits: Studio Ghibli & Cinema Mondo





She is not afraid of the giant bugs, and does not think in oppositions that set the human as the privileged species. She marvels the Ohmu, she's emphatic to them, and she knows how to communicate with them and calm them down. She makes others, human and non-human creatures, her kin. She understands that the forest's poisonousness is the result of man's toxicity, that the plants absorb the poison of the world, allowing humans to live, and that further exploitation and abuse of nature will enrage it even more. In the words of Donna J. Haraway, *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* is

*A fable of great danger and great companionship. Unlike conventional heroes, Nausicaä accompanied by animals, is a girl child and healer, whose courage matures in thick connection with many others and many kinds of others. Nausicaä cannot act alone, and also her personal response-ability and actions have great consequences for herself and for myriad human and nonhuman beings. Nausicaä's connections and corridors are practical and material, as well as fabulous and enspirited in bumptious animist fashion. Hers are the arts of living on a damaged planet.*<sup>63</sup>

At the film's finale, Nausicaa sacrifices herself to save a baby Ohmu, thereby calming the rage of the larger Ohmus, saving humanity and stopping (at least temporarily) the destruction of nature. Making kin, as Donna Haraway acknowledges, is 'perhaps the hardest and most urgent' task.<sup>64</sup> It requires a paradigm shift from anthropocentric individualism and human exceptionalism to an understanding of ourselves, like any other creature, as 'assemblages of organic species and of abiotic actors'.<sup>65</sup> It is not just to embrace

diverse human people, but an embrace of the multispecies that we already all are: 'to make "kin" mean something other/more than entities tied by ancestry or genealogy. [...] Kin-making is making persons, not necessarily as individuals or as humans'.<sup>66</sup>

Military-cinematic campaigns against space insects might form our attitude towards foreigners, refugees, or women. They might entice us to join a war against a dehumanized enemy. The alien-bug can serve as metaphor for the excommunicated other, but it can also point towards the decentering of anthropocentrism and the opening of new alliances. Make bug kin, not wars.

63 Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 152.

64 Haraway, 'Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Chthulucene,' 161.

65 Ibid., 159.

66 Ibid., 161.

**Media objects:**

*Alien* (Ridley Scott, 1979, USA)

*Aliens* (James Cameron, 1986, USA)

*Alien 3* (David Fincher, 1992, USA)

*Antz* (Eric Darnell, Tim Johnson, 1998, USA)

*Apocalypse Now* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1979, USA)

*Battleship* (Peter Berg, 2012, USA)

*Bee Movie* (Simon J. Smith, Steve Hickner, 2007, USA)

*Beverly Hills 90210* (TV series, 1990-2000, USA)

*A Bug's Life* (John Lasseter, Andrew Stanton, 1998, USA)

*Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (Steven Spielberg, 1977, USA)

*Day After Tomorrow* (Roland Emmerich, 2004, USA)

*The Day the Earth Stood Still* (Scott Derrickson, 2008, USA)

*District 9* (Neill Blomkamp, 2009, South Africa, USA, New Zealand, Canada)

*Doogie Howser, M.D.* (TV series, 1989-1993, USA)

*Ender's Game* (Gavin Hood, 2013, USA)

*The Eternal Jew* [*Der ewige Jude*] (Fritz Hippler, 1940, Germany)

*E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial* (Steven Spielberg, 1982, USA)

*The Fly* (David Cronenberg, 1986, USA, UK, Canada)

*Hypernormalisation* (Adam Curtis, 2016, UK)

*I Am Legend* (Francis Lawrence, 2007, USA)

*Independence Day* (Roland Emmerich, 1996, USA)

*Independence Day: Resurgence* (Roland Emmerich, 2016, USA)

*Iron Man* (Jon Favreau, 2008, USA)

*Iron Man 2* (Jon Favreau, 2010, USA)

*Iron Man 3* (Shane Black, 2013, USA)

*Jarhead* (Sam Mendes, 2005, USA)

*Man of Steel* (Zack Snyder, 2013, USA)

*The Matrix* (Lana and Lilly Wachowski, 1999, USA)

*The Matrix Reloaded* (Lana and Lilly Wachowski, 2003, USA)

*The Matrix Revolutions* (Lana and Lilly Wachowski, 2003, USA)

*Melrose Place* (TV series, 1992-1999, USA)

*Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* [*Kaze no Tani no Naushika*] (Hayao Miyazaki, 1984, Japan)

*The Predator* (John McTiernan, 1987, USA)

*Serious Games III: Immersion* (Harun Farocki, 2009, Germany)

*Starship Troopers* (Paul Verhoeven, 1997, USA)

*Starship Troopers 2: Hero of the Federation* (Phil Tippett, 2004, USA)

*Starship Troopers 3: Marauder* (Edward Neumeier, 2008, USA)

*Three Kings* (David O. Russell, 1999, USA)

*Top Gun* (Tony Scott, 1986, USA)

*Transformers* (Michael Bay, 2007, USA)

*Transformers: Revenge of the Fallen* (Michael Bay, 2009, USA)

*Transformers: Dark of the Moon* (Michael Bay, 2011, USA)

*Triumph of the Will* [*Triumph des Willens*] (Leni Riefenstahl, 1935, Germany)

*Wag the Dog* (Barry Levinson, 1997, USA)

*World Invasion: Battle Los Angeles* (Jonathan Liebesman, 2011, USA)

*War of the Worlds* (Steven Spielberg, 2005, USA)

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Following pages:

Hanna Mattes, L.A.U.F.O., 2013, C-print, paint on negative, 24x30 cm (left)

Mirror Mountain, 2013, C-print, negative collage, 24x30 cm (right)

Bambi, 2008, Digital C-print, 24x30 cm

Ubehebe Crater #4, 2016, C-print, 160x200 cm













Alexander Semenov, Sea butterfly 10, 2018, C-print, 90x90 cm

IDO HARTOGSOHN

## **Plant Allies: Agents and Ambassadors**

The concept of interspecies relations can be considered integral to both the traditional and modern cultures employing mind-altering plants. Encounters between humans and entities residing within psychoactive plants have long been understood to reflect a type of interspecies communication considered beneficial for both humans and plants. A prominent example can be found in the cosmology of Amazonian shamanism, which habitually refers to entities and spirits residing within such plants. By ingesting these plants, one is able to convene with these entities and learn from them. This, in turn, lays the ground for a unique type of ethic – that of preparing for the encounter and showing one's respect to these plant entities by following a diet. Shamanic practitioners habitually prepare themselves for such encounters by following a diet which includes “not only food restrictions but also sexual abstinence, social isola-

tion, and dwelling by oneself in the monte.”<sup>1</sup> Adhering to a diet is considered essential to establishing a bond of intimacy and trust with plant entities, who are habitually conceived as *muy celosa*, very jealous.<sup>2</sup> By observing a diet, one is able to turn themselves into a worthy receptacle able to receive the spirit in the medicine.<sup>3</sup>

Another complementary concept that regards relationships with plant entities is the idea of plant teachers. Resonating indigenous notions, Castaneda suggests that each plant possesses its own manner of consciousness, and that when it is ritually consumed, the plant consciousness enters the person consuming it, where it might engage in dialogue with the person.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, current entheogenic culture is replete with references to plant teachers such as “grandmother ayahuasca” and “grandfather peyote.” These mythic beings are understood as ancient, even transtemporal entities able to relate invaluable information to the individual and their culture. Challenging Western forms of rationality, consumers of hallucinogens thus commonly speak of their experience with these agents as communications with immemorial alien spirits or forms of intelligence inhabiting the bodies of earthly plants and fungi.<sup>5</sup>

Brazilian and Mesoamerican hallucinogenic religions also commonly describe momentous encounters with plant entities. One

1 Stephan V. Beyer, *Singing to the Plants: A Guide to Mestizo Shamanism in the Upper Amazon*, Reprint edition (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2010), 56.

2 Shamanic worldviews often regard ally plants as exhibiting possessive behavior, like a spouse, and demanding fidelity and exclusivity in their relationships with practitioners.

3 Beyer, *Singing to the Plants*, 56–60.

4 Carlos Castaneda, *The Teachings of Don Juan: A Yaqui Way of Knowledge* (Univ of California Press, 1998).

5 Rachel Harris, *Listening to Ayahuasca: New Hope for Depression, Addiction, PTSD, and Anxiety* (New World Library, 2017).

such notable example is found in the story of Mestre Irineu, founder of the Brazilian Santo Daime ayahuasca religion. Irineu was moved to start a new spiritual tradition by his encounters with the *Rainha da Floresta*, the queen of the forest, who appeared before him during his ayahuasca inspired visions.<sup>6</sup> Interestingly current literature on ayahuasca culture relays countless similar tales by modern travelers who tell of vivid experiences of communications with spirit others leading them to insights and intense inner transformations.<sup>7</sup>

#### ALIEN ENCOUNTERS IN MODERN PSYCHEDELIC CULTURE

Crossing the boundaries between ancient traditions and plants and the modern culture of psychedelia, encounters with plants and molecules tend to assume new features and forms. Freed from the prescribed constraints of the diet, and from the conceptual context of shamanism, 20<sup>th</sup> century Western psychonauts<sup>8</sup> set about to produce new maps and mythologies of interspecies communications on psychedelics, ones that were often more reminiscent of sci-fi mythologies than indigenous jungle lore.

One striking example can be found in the story of American physician, psychoanalyst, neuroscientist and psychonaut John C. Lilly. In the early 1960s, Lilly was enlisted by NASA to investigate the possibility of interspecies communications with dolphins in order to prepare humans for possible encounters with intelligent alien species in outer space. Frustrated by the difficulties of establishing connections with the intelligent marine mammals, Lilly began deploying

6 Paulo Moreira and Edward MacRae, *Eu Venho de Longe: Mestre Irineu e Seus Companheiros* (SciELO-EDUFBA, 2011).

7 Harris, *Listening to Ayahuasca*.

8 The term psychonaut – sailor of the mind – was coined by German author Ernst Jünger in 1970 to refer to individuals who regularly explore altered states of consciousness.

LSD in his sessions with the dolphins: first on himself, then also on the dolphins, which immediately became more talkative. Human-Dolphin communications were reportedly enhanced during these human-dolphin LSD sessions, and Lilly even performed successful LSD therapy on one dolphin and cured her of a post-trauma condition that made her terrified of humans.<sup>9</sup> Though questionable in today's clinical and ethical standards, his experiments contributed significantly to the field of human-dolphin communication.

Lilly's life and work with psychedelics were suffused with stories of interspecies encounters. In the 1970s, the daring psychonaut, also known for inventing the isolation tank and ingesting gargantuan doses of psychedelics while inside it, became convinced that he had been contacted by an extraterrestrial organization known as ECCO (Earth Coincidence Control Office), a benevolent, omniscient group that handles all earthly matters. ECCO was just the lowest of an elaborated hierarchy of such extraterrestrial entities, but Lilly habitually used psychedelics to contact the organization and even established protocols for those interested in coming into contact with them, with or without the assistance of psychoactive agents.<sup>10</sup>

- 9 John C. Lilly, "Dolphin-Human Relation and LSD 25," in *The Use of LSD in Psychotherapy and Alcoholism*, ed. Harold A. Abramson (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1967), 47–52.
- 10 John Cunningham Lilly and Antonietta Lilly, *The Dyadic Cyclone: The Autobiography of a Couple* (Simon & Schuster, 1976).



Probably the most prominent psychedelic icon to write about the subject of psychedelically induced encounters with alien entities is American ethnobotanist, psychonaut and author Terence McKenna. McKenna often argued that the most extraordinary fact about DMT (N,N-Dimethyltryptamine, a psychedelic compound occurring naturally in many plants including *Mimosa tenuiflora*, *Diplopterys cabrerana*, and *Psychotria viridis*, as well as in the human brain and body) experiences are the fantastic encounters with alien entities.<sup>11</sup> McKenna's recurring descriptions of these mischievous alien beings, which he poetically dubbed *self-transforming machine elves*, became an integral part of 20<sup>th</sup> century psychedelic lore. Starkly bizarre and amusing, these machine elves divulged a freakish, outlandish universe, which was, McKenna argued, universally accessible to all those willing to ingest DMT.

McKenna described these alien entities as "sort of like jewelled basketballs all dribbling their way toward me. And if they'd had faces, they would have been grinning, but they didn't have faces. And they assured me that they loved me and they told me not to be amazed; not to give way to astonishment."<sup>12</sup> Rather than extending their hand in a gesture of peace, or offering some sort of deep sermon, the hyperdimensional elves McKenna described were regularly busy cheerfully performing mysterious activities. What they were busy doing, according to McKenna, was "making objects come into existence by singing them into existence. Objects which looked like Fabergé eggs from Mars morphing themselves with Mandaean

11 Terence McKenna, *The Archaic Revival: Speculations on Psychedelic Mushrooms, the Amazon, Virtual Reality, UFOs, Evolution, Shamanism, the Rebirth of the Goddess, and the End of History*, 1st ed. (San Francisco, CA: HarperCollins, 1992).

12 Terence McKenna, *Alien Dreamtime*, 1993, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_86NhPx0hZQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_86NhPx0hZQ) Transcript available at: [https://erowid.org/culture/characters/mckenna\\_terence/mckenna\\_terence\\_alien\\_dreamtime.shtml](https://erowid.org/culture/characters/mckenna_terence/mckenna_terence_alien_dreamtime.shtml).

alphabetical structures. They looked like the concrecence of linguistic intentionality put through a kind of hyper-dimensional transform into three-dimensional space."<sup>13</sup>

McKenna's descriptions of his encounters with these self-transforming machine elves have him playing the role of the fortunate spectator, astonishingly allowed to behold the strange machinations of a strange alien culture yet doing his best not to freak out and keep his wits, paying close attention to a scene as fantastic and weird as possibly imaginable:

*I realized when I looked at them that if I could bring just one of these little trinkets back, nothing would ever be quite the same again. And I wondered, Where Am I? And What Is Going On? It occurred to me that these must be holographic viral projections from an autonomous continuum that was somehow intersecting my own, and then I thought a more elegant explanation would be to take it at face value and realize that I had broken into an ecology of souls. And that, somehow, I was getting a peek over the other side. Somehow, I was finding out that thing that you cheerfully assume you can't find out. But it felt like I was finding out. And it felt... and then I can't remember what it felt like because the little self-transforming tykes interrupted me and said, 'Don't think about it. Don't think about who we are... Think about doing what we're doing. Do it! Do it! DO IT NOW!!!'*<sup>14</sup>

Reading McKenna's wild and lavish descriptions of otherworldly encounters with self-transforming machine elves, it is hard to decipher just what exactly these elves were up to, and why they were divulging themselves to this befuddled human observer. Nevertheless,

13 Ibid.

14 Ibid.



full comprehension was not the point anyhow. For McKenna, the most extraordinary thing about DMT experiences was that by having them one could universally access strange worlds and their denizens. “If I’m not completely mad,” he argued “then it’s big news. Straight people—skeptical people—if given DMT will be conveyed to what is essentially the hall of the Mountain King with gnome revelry in progress. We’re not prepared for this. We expect everything to fall into the rational maps that science has given us, and science doesn’t describe a hyperdimensional universe teeming with alien intelligences that can be contacted within a moment if you have recourse to a certain chemical compound.”<sup>15</sup>

Over the years, McKenna’s descriptions of his adventures in hyperdimensional space became the basis for endless discussions and debates about the existence and meaning of DMT entities. Contrary to McKenna’s suggestions, not every person who ingests DMT universally ends up capering around hyperdimensional amusement parks teeming with alien beings. Nevertheless, McKenna is no outlier. Encounters with plant intelligences, alien civilizations and radical others are a recurring motif in the history of psychedelics. When professor of psychiatry Rick Strassman organized a pioneering study of DMT experiences in the early 1990s, Strassman and his collaborators were confronted with a deluge of participant reports detailing extraordinary encounters with alien beings.<sup>16</sup> A 1997 paper on communications with discarnate entities induced by DMT includes vivid descriptions not unlike those described

15 McKenna, *The Archaic Revival*, 16.

16 Rick Strassman, *DMT: The Spirit Molecule: A Doctor’s Revolutionary Research into the Biology of Near-Death and Mystical Experiences*, 3rd Printing (Rochester, Vermont: Park Street Press, 2001).

by McKenna, of dancing multidimensional elves and thousands of entities performing mysteriously inscrutable activities.<sup>17</sup>

A final and intriguing example of psychedelically inspired interspecies relations can be found in Diane Slattery’s *Xenolinguistics: Psychedelics, Language and the Evolution of Consciousness*. Published in 2015, the book recounts Slattery’s 12-year exploration of an alien symbolic language system titled *Glide*, to which she gained access through psychedelically inspired altered states of consciousness (the term xenolinguistics refers to the study of such alien languages). Slattery’s original encounter with the *Glide* language occurred in 1998, while she was writing a novel. During a process of self-inquiry regarding an aspect of the novel’s plot she found herself ‘downloading’ a visual language composed of 27 glyphs, which were really just one glyph dynamically morphing and transforming itself into all other glyphs. Amazed at this discovery, Slattery soon learned to use the *Glide* language as a tool for the navigation of visionary landscapes and the rewriting of the psyche. Among other things, she developed a computer software titled *LiveGlide*, which she used to write three-dimensional notes during her psychedelic communication sessions, often producing video records of her conversations with the alien other. Slattery’s *Xenolinguistics* thus reads like an extended contemplation on the possibility of psychedelically assisted interspecies communications and the transformative potential of alien inspired linguistic revelations.<sup>18</sup>

17 Peter Meyer, “Apparent Communication with Discarnate Entities Induced by Dimethyltryptamine (DMT),” *Psychedelics*, 1994, 161–203.

18 Diana Slattery, *Xenolinguistics: Psychedelics, Language, and the Evolution of Consciousness* (Evolver Editions, 2015).

# ON THE MEANING OF PSYCHEDELIC INTERSPECIES COMMUNICATIONS

Reading these varied, intriguing, and often fantastic tales of interspecies communications facilitated through the consumption of psychedelic plants, fungi and compounds, several questions appear which demand an answer. Most notably, one might wonder, what is the meaning of such psychedelically mediated encounters? Are they even a valid form of communication or just a form of pathological delusion? Do such encounters carry real worth, or are they mere esoteric curiosities? More broadly still, how are we to make sense of them?

The first question to answer regarding such experiences, it seems, pertains to their validity. Do these experiences of encounter represent something real or are these just pharmacologically induced forms of hallucination? Here we land on one of the key points of contention between rationalistic, often disapproving, views of the altered states of consciousness and those that are open to the validity and merit of such modes of experience. Anthropologists have long pointed to the contrast between traditional societies willingness to embrace and appreciate the contents of altered states of consciousness as significant and potentially illuminating, and Western society's tendency to marginalize and pathologize such states.<sup>19</sup> Thus, traditional approaches to altered states demonstrate a plurality often missing from modern day approaches.

19 Anthony FC Wallace, "Cultural Determinants of Response to Hallucinatory Experience," *A.M.A. Archives of General Psychiatry* 1, no. 1 (July 1, 1959): 58–69.



An interesting distinction that proves useful in this case was made by Laughlin et al. who contrast what they term monophasic and multiphasic societies. Monophasic societies, prevalent in Western culture, acknowledge and legitimize only one state of consciousness, universally considered as normal and desired. Multiphasic societies, by contrast, embrace the plurality of human experiences and mindstates, each presenting us with different types of validity and utility.<sup>20</sup>

Concepts of multiphasic plurality also resonate concepts of multiple intelligences advanced by psychologist Howard Gardner and multistate theory advanced by educational psychologist Thomas B. Roberts.<sup>21</sup> Gardner challenges common and limited definitions of intelligence by speaking of multiple types of intelligence that define the spectrum of human abilities, including, among others, verbal, mathematical, musical, visual, and interpersonal forms of intelligence. Roberts speaks of a *Singlestate Fallacy*, the mistaken belief that only one state of consciousness is valid and superior to others. Instead, he argues, different states of consciousness are apposite and useful in different circumstances. Each of these states offers a different viewpoint, and synergizing together, these diverse states lead to a broader, more useful, more holistic perspective on reality.

One might, of course, wish to dismiss the phenomenon of psychedelically induced interspecies encounters as a kind of magico-spiritual hogwash, a deluded idea born out of self-indulgent involvement with pernicious chemical agents. Yet, such a reductive

20 Charles D. Laughlin Jr, John McManus, and Eugene G. d'Aquili, *Brain, Symbol & Experience: Toward a Neuropsychology of Human Consciousness*. (Columbia University Press, 1992).

21 Howard Gardner, *Multiple Intelligences*, vol. 5 (Minnesota Center for Arts Education, 1992); Thomas B. Roberts and James Fadiman, *Mindapps: Multistate Theory and Tools for Mind Design* (Park Street Press, 2019).

perspective would miss the surprising epistemological and philosophical possibilities which such encounters confer. As countless psychedelic voyagers over the years have insisted, insights and epiphanies arrived at during a psychedelic experience can prove incredibly useful even after the effect of the drug has waned.

Putting the question of the ontological validity of such entities aside, if one chooses to view the question of interspecies relations through the prism of multiphasic encounters, one can conceptualize such altered states encounters with alien others as interspecies encounters with the self. It was, after all, McKenna, who, following C.G. Jung, conceptualized the encounter with the alien other as an encounter with the deepest recesses of the self.<sup>22</sup> Indeed, according to McKenna, anticipated encounters with alien life are less likely to occur in outer space, where international institutions are attempting in vain to chase the aliens. Rather, they are already occurring regularly in psychonautic inner space voyages.

Even if one does not accept the ontological validity of entities encountered in inner space, one need not believe in these alien entities to see the value of encounters with occluded, alien possibilities of the self. Slattery characterizes the types of messages received through these sorts of interspecies communications as “a scathing critique of life on planet earth at the time of the writing and an evolutionary imperative.”<sup>23</sup> Indeed, the common and recurring themes that bind together many such plant and molecule induced communications regard the danger to ecological systems on planet earth, the possibility of alternative forms of mutual existence and the need

22 McKenna, *The Archaic Revival*, 58–69, 75; C. G. Jung, *Flying Saucers : A Modern Myth of Things Seen in the Skies*, trans. R. F. C. Hull (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979).

23 Slattery, *Xenolinguistics*, 25.

for personal and collective transformation. In fact, the messages received in altered states communications are often more rational and saner than the proclamations of many political and business leaders who seem to believe that the planet's ecosystem can be exploited indefinitely and without paying a price.

Going back to Slattery and her concept of psychedelically revealed xenolinguistics, one could connect her ideas with the ideas of Benjamin Lee Whorf and Edward Sapir, otherwise known as the progenitors of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, which argues that the structure of a language determines its speakers modes of cognition. The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis argues that since language is the foundation of thinking, languages with different traits allow different kinds of thinking and different kinds of thoughts.<sup>24</sup>

It is in this way that the question of psychedelically induced interspecies communications leads us directly to the question of cognitive liberty. Psychedelic activists have long pointed to the war on drugs and the draconian punishments on using mind-altering substances as a violation of cognitive liberty – the liberty to mental self-determination, to choosing one's preferred state of mind without outer interference. The attempts to prohibit certain states of minds by prohibiting the use of certain plants and compounds are also attempts to prohibit certain types of language structures and thus certain modes of thought enabled by these languages.

If psychedelic plants represent alien possibilities and mind-civilizations that the war on drugs rejects and seeks to destroy, then those psychonautic voyagers taking the trip to the other side in order to encounter these alien worlds are like peace dialogue activists

24 Paul Kay and Willett Kempton, "What Is the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis?," *American Anthropologist* 86, no. 1 (1984): 65–79, <https://doi.org/10.1525/aa.1984.86.1.02a00050>.

willing to assume the label of criminals in order to break the barricades and visit those other worlds condemned by the state. In a monophasic world fanatically and destructively following a dangerously limited conception of reality all the way to the destruction of the planet, human values and all else – these psychonautic ambassadors convening clandestine rendezvous with "enemy" agents are like diplomats whose role it is to bring back knowledge across the iron curtain of consciousness and establish surreptitious routes of interspecies communications of existential import.

\* This paper is dedicated to the memory of Abie Nathan (1927–2008), an Israeli pilot, peace activist and humanitarian activist who challenged Israeli and Arab politics by performing historical flights that violated political borders, and leading multiple initiatives to promote peace and conciliation between Israel and the Arab states.

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Alexander Semenov, Sea butterfly 3, 2015, C-print, 90x90 cm

Following pages:

Hertog Nadler, Harvest, 2013, Production still from HD experimental film Harvest











NIR NADLER

## Natural Acts

### On ethics and aesthetics of interspecies relations

“The Animal”, cries the French philosopher Jacques Derrida, “What a word!”

*In this word lies the origin of logocentric humanism. Animal is a word that men have given themselves the right to give. At the same time reserving for humans the right to the word, the name, the verb, the attribute, to a language of words, in short to the very thing that the others in question would be deprived of, those that are corralled within the grand territory of the beasts: the Animal.<sup>1</sup>*

Is it possible to look at nature without imposing social or political meanings on it? And can the ethical and political coincide when integrating animals in artwork? These key questions occupy

critics, animal rights activists and artists, such as my partner Chaja Hertog and me. In this essay I hope to shed light on the topic and share some of my own work experience, thoughts and doubts concerning the relations between ethics and aesthetics in the context of working with nonhumans in art projects.

Throughout history man has sought to define and control nature in order to justify his own existence. We (agri)cultured the land and domesticated wild animals to become our beasts of burden,<sup>2</sup> guards, pets and food source. We harvest animals' meat in mass quantities—an endeavor that heavily damages the very environment we live in. What often serves as an emotional alibi for these indifferent undertakings, is the stories we tend to tell ourselves, and our children. Stories that are anchored in the idea of a separation between 'us' the civilized humans, and 'it' the wild nature with its entire animal kingdom.

Our dialectic interspecies relationship with animals knows several schools of thought with dissimilar outlooks; philosophical, scientific and spiritual. René Descartes, the father of modern philosophy, described animals in the 17<sup>th</sup> century as 'beast machines'. By stating, "I think therefore I am"<sup>3</sup> he argued that other living being don't feel pain and that feelings are attributes reserved to humans.<sup>4</sup> Descartes' philosophical doctrine, the 'natural automata',<sup>5</sup> implies a

2 A draught animal, such as a donkey, mule, llama, camel, horse or ox, which is employed to transport heavy loads or perform other heavy work (such as pulling a plow) for the benefit of humans.

3 Descartes, "I think, therefore I am." *The philosophical works of Descartes* 1.

4 Cottingham, "A Brute to the Brutes?": Descartes' Treatment of Animals." 551-559.

5 Descartes' perception of animals as automata or soulless beings confirmed the biblical dualistic division between humans, made in God's image, and other living beings implicit in the injunction to "...have dominion over the fish of the sea, and the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth" (Genesis 1:28).

fundamental difference between animals and humans and assumes that animals are machines who have no soul or mind. According to Darwinism, the biological theory developed by the English naturalist Charles Darwin and others; all organisms develop through natural selection. Thus, opposed to Descartes who distinguished between human and nonhuman beings Darwin claimed that there was no separation between humans and nonhumans but a gradual interspecies evolution. Zen Buddhist ethics, on the other hand, relies on the premise that animals and humans share the same essential nature.<sup>6</sup> It is believed that neither class nor ethical rules separate us, humans, from nature, thus we should avoid causing suffering or death to any other living being.

In the following pages I will address the most essential issues and manifestations of interspecies relations through these three schools of thought—detachment, hierarchy and harmony. This paper is an exploration of how they are reflected in various artworks relevant to my artistic practice.

#### NATURE IS A LANGUAGE, CAN'T YOU READ IT?

While strolling with Mika, my six-year-old daughter, through the Amsterdam zoo she surprised me by stating that she hates wolves. When being asked for the reason why; she determinedly answered, "Well, wolves are dangerous and inheritably mean". I listened quietly and shortly after responded that this assumption is, in my opinion, incorrect. Mika looked at me perplexed, as if I just told her the world was flat, and demanded an explanation. I lingered on it for a few minutes and then I elaborated that a wolf would not harm any other living being unless it's either hungry or scared. Unlike people, who can sometimes do horrific things to animals and to each

6 Cozort, and Shields, eds., *The Oxford handbook of Buddhist ethics*.



other, wolves only attack for survival reasons such as hunger or to protect themselves and their cubs. As a matter of fact, I continued, the wolf's 'cruelty' is nothing more than an allegory for the viciousness of mankind.

Remarkably, animals play an important role in the world of children, their imagination and subconscious. According to various researches most of children's dreams revolve around animals, and as we grow older, they gradually 'disappear' to make way for fully human protagonists. Adults dream of animals mostly when they play a significant role in their waking lives as pets or farm animals.<sup>7</sup>

As children we are primarily exposed to wildlife in folk stories and fables. Walking, talking animals populate children's books and TV shows; animal characters decorate clothes and lunchboxes, and stuffed animals are tucked into bed at night. In the stories we tell our kids, animals for the most part, are fully humanized; they go to school, drive cars, and go on with the same daily routine as we, humans, do. Anthropomorphism<sup>8</sup> has made a long way; from the wolf dressed in grandma's clothes in *Little Red Riding Hood*, the White Rabbit clad as a British gentleman in Louis Carole's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* to more contemporary looking Walt Disney's *Mickey Mouse* and Robert Crumb's *Fritz the Cat*. Ascribing human characteristics and features to nonhuman beings or things,

- 7 Researchers argue that animals appear more often in kids' dreams than in adults' as it's a pattern that reflects life at that age. See: Barrett, *The committee of sleep: Dreams and creative problem-solving*; Bulkeley et al., "Earliest remembered dreams." 205.
- 8 Anthropomorphism is the late mid 20<sup>th</sup> century flowering of the extreme Cartesian view of animals as automata, beings that respond in a prescribed way to pre-determined incentives. See: Moore; *Ecology and literature: Ecocentric personification from antiquity to the twenty-first century*.

is proven to be an effective method to submerge children in the story and educate them with life lessons about the 'real world'.<sup>9</sup>

As much as anthropomorphized animals govern children's books, in adult literature they hardly play any prominent roles.<sup>10</sup> Could that consequently be one of the reasons they play a lesser role in our daily lives and (sub)consciousness?

Yet, in a way, animals are around us (or at least their images) on a daily basis in our natural habitat—they are embedded into our immediate surroundings in the form of consumer logos and corporate or political identities. Our human perceptions of animal characteristics are used to full advantage to give us an idea about a product or a company. Depending on the type of animal chosen, a brand is strong, luxurious, caring, mysterious and countless other traits. Car companies, for example, frequently use animals such as horses and fast cats, indicating speed; a company logo depicting an elephant indicates something sacred or 'larger than life'. The association between certain animal species and different kinds of products or corporations is a crucial element in the relationship between memory and identity. Some of the best logos not only stick in your head because they are iconic, they tap onto an emotional connotation; perhaps childhood memories or affection to a particular children's book character.<sup>11</sup>

- 9 Dunn, "Talking animals: A literature review of anthropomorphism in children's books."
- 10 One remarkable exception in adult literature, which makes similar use of anthropomorphisms as children's books often do, is George Orwell's *Animal Farm* (1945). Orwell's allegorical novella stages animals as humans in order to comment on totalitarian regimes and enforced social hierarchical systems, which exist also in liberal societies that (allegedly) believe in equality.
- 11 Lloyd and Woodside, "Animals, archetypes, and advertising (A3): The theory and the practice of customer brand symbolism." 5-25.

In fables, children's books and advertisements we often depict animals as humans. At the same time we tend to animalize humans in metaphorical idioms such as "eat like a pig", "die like a dog", "fuck like bunnies" and "led like sheep to the slaughter".<sup>12</sup> Recently it was common to address refugees as 'swarms' coming from the Middle East and Africa, they were reported to be treated 'like animals' when approaching Europe's national borders. Supposedly, such animalized idioms are mostly intended to diminish but they serve not only as an insult to humans, but to nonhumans as well, as it places them into stereotypical categories and advocates a narrow-minded subject-object perspective.

Could it be possible that in this linguistic definition lays the friction of our interspecies as well as our inter-human relationships. Perhaps when we stop treating animals 'like animals' and instead accept them for what they really are, then we can begin treating humans like humans, regardless of their ethnicity, skin color, gender and/or socio-economic status.

#### BIRD'S EYE VIEW

The anthropomorphic approach, which attributes human traits to nonhuman entities, has a flip side of the coin—attributing animal traits to humans—and by doing so, dehumanizing them.

"I am not an animal! I am a human being!" shouts out a severely deformed man when surrounded by a curious crowd in a public toilet in late 19<sup>th</sup> century London. This heartbreaking moment in David Lynch's *The Elephant Man* (1980), which portrays the life of

12 The phrase "like a sheep being led to the slaughter" is originated in the Old Testament (Isaiah 53:7). Years later that same phrase has been meta-articulated by Jacques Derrida, amongst other authors; comparing modern farming practices to the WWII genocide. See: Weil, "Killing them softly: Animal death, linguistic disability, and the struggle for ethics." 87-96.

Joseph Merrick, insinuates the subject-object correlation Descartes' philosophy introduced.

One of the earliest-known zoos in the Western Hemisphere, that of Montezuma in Mexico, consisted not only of a vast collection of animals, but also humans such as albinos and hunchbacks. In the 17<sup>th</sup> century colonial exhibits became popular in the western world with showcases that not only included artifacts but actual people. Human zoos, also known as ethnological expositions, were initially designed to accentuate cultural differences between Western and other civilizations. These shows could be found, amongst others, in progressive cities such as Paris, Hamburg, Barcelona, London, Milan, and New York.<sup>13</sup> Set up in mock "ethnic villages", indigenous men, women and children were brought overseas from all parts of the colonized world<sup>14</sup> to perform their "primitive" culture for the gratification of eager masses that most likely got a sense of racial superiority.<sup>15</sup> Even into the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the practice of human zoos endured and in 1958, for instance, the Brussels World's Fair featured a Congolese Village.<sup>16</sup>

In 1871, Charles Darwin wrote, "[There] is no fundamental difference between man and the higher mammals in their mental faculties [...]. The difference in mind between man and the higher animals,

13 Abbattista, Iannuzzi, "World Expositions as Time Machines: Two Views of the Visual Construction of Time between Anthropology and Futurama".13 (3).

14 In his 1908 autobiography, Carl Hagenbeck, a human rarities agent, bragged that during a ten-year period, he alone brought more than 900 indigenous people to the U.S. and Europe for exhibition, in which some were detained amongst the great apes. See also: Rothfels, "Savages and beasts: The birth of the modern zoo".

15 Lewis et al., *Understanding humans: Introduction to physical anthropology and archaeology*.

16 Boffey, "Belgium comes to terms with 'human zoos' of its colonial past".

great as it is, certainly is one of degree and not of kind”.<sup>17</sup> In her book *Animals in Translation* (2005) Temple Grandin outlines the similarities between people with autism, such as herself, and other sentient beings. Grandin’s theory is that the brain function of a person with autism falls “between human and animal”.<sup>18</sup>

A great deal of Grandin’s autism is sensitivity to details, which enabled her to notice animals’ traumas caused by humans and the farming industry.<sup>19</sup> She goes on to explain that all animals are more intelligent and more sensitive than humans assume them to be. In his book *Are We Smart Enough to Know How Smart Animals Are?* (2016) primatologist Frans de Waal pursues a similar line of thought, showing that there is no clear behavioral division between ourselves and other animals. Language, self-recognition, tool making, empathy, co-operative behavior, mental time-travel, culture and many other traits and abilities have turned out not to be exclusively human, as De Waal explains with his empathetic approach to animals.<sup>20</sup> This is hardly surprising, given that we evolved from an ape ancestor not so long ago. Thus, we share behavior with our relatives, just as we share anatomy.<sup>21</sup>

17 Penn et al. “Darwin’s mistake: Explaining the discontinuity between human and nonhuman minds.” 134 & 152.

18 Grandin and Johnson, *Animals in translation: Using the mysteries of autism to decode animal behavior*. 20.

19 Farmelo, Graham, “Was Dr Dolittle autistic?”

20 De Waal, *Are we smart enough to know how smart animals are?*.

21 Cobb, “Are We Smart Enough to Know How Smart Animals Are? by Frans de Waal – Review.”



WHO'S AFRAID OF THE BIG BAD WOLF?<sup>22</sup>

In his graphic novel, *Maus* (1997),<sup>23</sup> Art Spiegelman portrays his father's experiences in Auschwitz death camp during the Holocaust. The novel depicts Jews as mice,<sup>24</sup> Germans as cats, and Poles as pigs. By using anthropomorphic motifs of children's books, *Maus* raises awareness to the horrific history, as well as to his dad's personal survival story.<sup>25</sup> In Nazi Germany, prior to the outbreak of WWII, signs on entrances to cafés, restaurants and other shops read 'No Entrance to Dogs & Jews'.

By dehumanizing the Jewish population, turning them to 'animals', the Germans could emotionally detach themselves from the inhuman acts that were later committed. The anti-Semitic discrimination was later validated and rationalized by the Nuremberg Laws and during the Holocaust;<sup>26</sup> as a result the Jewish population was swiftly 'relegated' from dogs to pests. In the apocalyptic Nazi vision, they were represented as parasitic organisms such as leeches, lice,

22 Title of a popular song featuring in the Disney cartoon *Three Little Pigs* (1933). In her book *Adolf Hitler: a Psychological Interpretation of his Views on Architecture, Art, and Music* (1990) Sherree Owens Zalampas writes that early in his political career, Hitler enjoyed being called The Wolfsschanze, (Wolf's Lair) by his associates and had the habit of whistling the familiar Disney tune "Who's Afraid of the Big Bad Wolf?"

23 Spiegelman, *The Complete Maus*.

24 According to Spiegelman what inspired him to draw Jews as mice was the German "documentary", *The Eternal Jew* (1940), which portrayed Jews in a ghetto swarming like rats in a sewer with a title card stating the "vermin of mankind." Remarkably Zyklon B, the gas used as the killing agent in Auschwitz and elsewhere, was a pesticide manufactured to kill vermin (such fleas or roaches). See: Art Spiegelman in conversation with Hillary Chute.]

25 This landmark project led literary critics and International audiences toward seeing comics as a serious art form. See also: Chute, "Comics as literature? Reading graphic narrative." 452-465.

26 Heideman, "Legalizing hate: The significance of the Nuremberg Laws and the post-war Nuremberg trials." 5.

bacteria, or vectors of contagion.<sup>27</sup> In that light the mass exterminations of the Jews of Europe; Hitler's Final Solution, was presented as a sanitization to a global epidemic.<sup>28</sup>

The flexibility of the term 'animal' was always loaded with emotive connotations and representations. Throughout Hitler's regime the definition of the word 'animal' remained ambiguous for binary purposes; when referring to the Jewish population, it was degrading and associated with overwhelming plagues. whilst when referring to the German folk the concept of human-animal was associated with a natural predator; an imperial eagle or a wild wolf that is committed to the pack and its virile bloodline; on the one hand a degradation of one human species and on the other a declaration of evolutionary achievement and inborn superiority of another.<sup>29</sup>

Despite the Nazis' inhumane cruelty towards certain ethnic groups, Adolf Hitler and his top officials rejected anthropocentric reasons for their actions<sup>30</sup> and even went as far as to pass several progressive laws for protecting them. Under the Animal Protection Act<sup>31</sup> it was forbidden to mistreat animals in any way. The law also provided protection to animals in circuses and zoos, and people who neglected their pets could be arrested and fined.<sup>32</sup>

27 Smith, *Less than human: Why we demean, enslave, and exterminate others*.

28 Browning, *The origins of the final solution*..

29 Fisk, "When Words Take Lives: The Role of Language in the Dehumanization and Devastation of Jews in the Holocaust."

30 Anthropocentrism, also known as homocentrism or human supremacism, is the grounding for some naturalistic concepts that claims of a systematic bias in traditional Western attitudes to the non-humans. See: Norton. *Environmental ethics and weak anthropocentrism*. 131-148.

31 German: Tierschutz im Nationalsozialismus Deutschland. Till this day Germany's animal protection regulations are based on the laws introduced by the Nazis.

32 Arluke and Sax, "Understanding Nazi animal protection and the Holocaust." 6-31.

How do you reconcile love for animals and racial fanaticism? Animal protection measures may have been a legal veil to blur moral distinctions between animals and people, and by doing so justified the prosecution of Jews and other ‘undesirable species’, who were considered a threat to the Aryan purity.<sup>33</sup> When the Nazis described Jews as ‘Untermenschen’ (meaning, sub-humans) they didn’t mean it metaphorically, but literally. The arbitrariness and contradictions of the Nazi regime regarding animals and humans, animal protection next to ethnic cleansing, indicates that the Nazis were not necessarily the inhumane monsters as history books describe them but merely ordinary human beings living by diverged morals and ethics dictated by society.<sup>34</sup>

In 1994 an estimated 800,000 Rwandan Tutsis and moderate Hutus were murdered in the course of 100 days. In the years preceding the 1994 genocide, Tutsis in Rwanda were often called by the slang epithet ‘Inyenzi’ (meaning, cockroaches). The animalized slang was not only the word on the streets but actually utilized by organs of state and mass media, which consistently conveyed the Kafkaesque message that part of the population were actually ‘cockroaches’, and by doing so they laid both the foundation as well as the justification of the Rwanda genocide.<sup>35</sup>

#### CONTEMPORARY NATURAL AUTOMATA

In the late sixties Jannis Kounellis, a key figure associated with Arte Povera,<sup>36</sup> brought a dozen horses into the gallery L’Attico in

33 Figueira, *Aryans, Jews, Brahmins: theorizing authority through myths of identity*.

34 Mann, Michael, “The dark side of democracy: Explaining ethnic cleansing.”

35 Ter Haar, “Rats, cockroaches and people like us: views of humanity and human right.”

36 Arte povera (Italian: poor art) was a radical Italian art movement from the late 1960s to 1970s whose artists explored a range of unconventional processes and

Rome. By being fixed to the wall, eating hay indifferently, the exhibits in *Untitled (Cavalli)* (1969) became an extension of the gallery’s architecture. Recalling the Dada movement, such artistic intervention can be seen as homage to Marcel Duchamp’s concept of the readymade.<sup>37</sup> The crucial difference, however, is that Kounellis’ readymade sculpture consisted of live animals and not a mass-produced object like a urinal carrying the artist’s signature.<sup>38</sup> Despite the fact the horses were taken care of just as in any other stable, when *Untitled (Cavalli)* was restaged in New York in 2015, it stirred a much-heated debate than it did in 1969 regarding animal cruelty and triggered countless protests around the venue.

Is it ethics or just aesthetics? This fundamental question comes to mind regarding artworks in which animals literally sacrificed their lives so that the maker would gain fame and fortune. *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living* (1991) is one of Damien Hirst’s most celebrated sculptures; it consists of a tiger shark preserved in formaldehyde solution in a vitrine. The shark, a near-threatened species, was caught off Hervey Bay in Queensland, Australia, by a fisherman who was commissioned to do so, because Hirst wanted something “big enough to eat you”.<sup>39</sup> With this sculpture Hirst reflects on subjects of life and death, and addresses the tragic fate of all human attempts to preserve life. Through the nineties Hirst carried on making his controversial ‘pickled animals’ series, which raised ethical questions regarding

non-traditional ‘everyday’ materials. See: Poli, *Minimalismo, arte povera, arte concettuale*.

37 The term readymade describes artwork made from manufactured objects. It was first used by French artist Marcel Duchamp in 1913 and applied since then more to works by other artists made in this fashion.

38 *Fountain* (1917) is a readymade sculpture by Marcel Duchamp.

39 Barber, “Bleeding art.”



treatment of animals within the art market, but at the same time earned him a place of honor in the pantheon of most influential, and richest, artist alive today. This friction between form and content is perhaps what makes him such a significant player in the history of modern art; he is presented to us as the ‘bad boy’, the anarchist that ‘swims against the current’, but in fact his enterprise is capitalist by nature.<sup>40</sup>

In Douglas Gordons’ video installation *Play Dead; Real Time (this way, that way, the other way)* (2003) a four-year-old Indian elephant called Minnie was brought to the highly regarded Gagosian Gallery in New York from the Connecticut Circus. While shooting the video in the gallery, a professional film crew recorded her carrying out a series of tricks such as ‘play dead’, ‘stand still’, ‘walk around’, ‘back up’, ‘get up’ and ‘beg’. The work documents Minnie as well as the conditions of her captivity, which force her to perform anthropomorphized actions unrelated to elephant behavior in the wild. Like many of Gordon’s protagonists, the elephant is subjected to greater forces, beyond its control. The artist has remarked that the work lies somewhere between “a nature film and a medical documentary”, which allowed him to “get close enough or under the skin of the elephant [...] to see] a sense or sensibility that doesn’t actually physically exist”.<sup>41</sup>

When I experienced Gordon’s video installation ‘Play Dead’ for the first time I thought it was absolutely brilliant. Today, however, I see it differently. The affiliation with the entertainment industry makes the work inherently problematic, considering the aggressive training the endangered animal had to undergo to ‘learn’ these circus tricks. Additionally, the fact that the elephant was brought into one of the most commercial galleries in the world to pose on

40 Enhuber, “How is Damien Hirst a cultural entrepreneur?,” 3-20.

41 Gordon, “Douglas Gordon on Working with Elephants.”

command—for the sake of an artwork—is disturbing as it reinforces the exploitive correlation to the art market.

Another kind of art that examines the bizarre relationship between mankind and its fellow creatures is of artist-prankster Maurizio Cattelan, whose controversial work often employs (black) humor and the grotesque. Drawing inspiration from children’s books and pop culture, Cattelan’s satirical installations often consist of taxidermied animals tangled in absurdist narratives, such as *Bidibidobidiboo* (1996),<sup>42</sup> which portrays a crime scene wherein a squirrel is slouching over a kitchen table after committing suicide, with a gun laying on the floor.<sup>43</sup> He later made a whole sculpture series of taxidermied horses that included a hanged one in *The Ballad of Trotsky* (1996), a dead one in *Untitled (Inri)* (2009), and multiple headless ones in *Untitled, Kaputt* (2013). Other animals that guest starred in his surreal world included stuffed domestic dogs, a donkey carrying a TV-set, an ostrich burying its head in the gallery floor (denoting a familiar anthropomorphic idiom), a gang of 2000 pigeons overseeing the central pavilion (Palazzo delle Esposizioni) at the Venice Biennale in 2011, and an elephant (in a room) that happens to be dressed in a white Ku Klux Klan cape. Cattelan is often described as a Shakespearian fool, expressing universal truths about themes such as power, death and authority through what appears to be jokes or stunts. Despite the evident political connotations of his work he refuses to take a stance and claims to be an idiot who doesn’t know what his work means.

42 Maurizio Cattelan’s work title is directly derived from the novelty song “Bibbidi-Bobbidi-Boo”, which was written in 1948 by Al Hoffman, Mack David, and Jerry Livingston, and featured in the 1950 film *Cinderella* (also known as “The Magic Song”).

43 Cattelan and Portinari, “Bidibidobidiboo: details of deception and interruptions in Maurizio Cattelan’s inventions.”



Personally, I find that exploitive artistic practices such as Damien Hirst's pickled animals or Cattelan's cartoonesque interventions tap the box of human superiority Descartes philosophized back in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. But on a different, yet similar, note; it is impossible for me to discuss artistic taxidermy without mentioning its strong correlation with photography. Both practices freeze objects/subjects in time and by doing so 'mummify' them. In that respect, I find that the work of Hiroshi Sugimoto is worth mentioning, specifically his Dioramas series that began in 1974 and spans over four-decades. As a visitor to the American Museum of Natural History in New York, I myself admired the stuffed wildlife in the dioramas. Staged before a craftily painted backdrop, they looked impressive but at the same time seemed completely fake. Yet, when these dioramas are captured through Sugimoto's architectural lens, as I later saw in large black and white prints at the Neue National Galerie in Berlin, these mummified animals come to life. They appeared as if photographed on location, in the wild, and not in front of a two-dimensional representation of it.

#### THEY LIVE<sup>44</sup>

In recent decades the practice of incorporating living animals in artworks became increasingly common. Echoing Darwinist ide-

- 44 The title refers to John Carpenter's film *They Live* (1988), a Sci-Fi thriller about greed and propaganda. Based on Ray Nelson's short story *Eight O'clock in the Morning* (1963) The plot revolves around a wanderer who discovers a pair of sunglasses, capable of depicting the world the way it truly is. Through these spectacles he perceives capitalist consumers as aliens while mass media, adverts and billboards deliver blunt subliminal messages such as "OBEY," "MARRY AND REPRODUCE," and "NO INDEPENDENT THOUGHT."

as, this particular practice by some artists is aimed to juxtapose between nature and culture, and enhance a sense of displacement when inserting wildlife into domestic/public spaces.

In May 1974 German conceptual artist Joseph Beuys flew to New York and was directly taken by an ambulance to a sealed room in the René Block Gallery where he shared the space with a wild coyote for eight hours over three days. Beuys believed that “everyone is an artist”<sup>45</sup> with the agency to transform the world around them. His coyote performance was an example of what he called ‘social sculptures’; actions intended to change society for the better.<sup>46</sup> While the work’s patriotic title *I Like America and America Likes Me* refers to the US as a “melting pot” where everyone can co-exist, Beuys ironically related to America as he saw in the seventies—a divided nation whose white population oppressed indigenous, immigrant, and minority populations. Despite the coyote being represented as an aggressive predator by European settlers and their descendants, who sought to eliminate it, for Beuys it was America’s spirit animal and by sharing space with it, he attempted to connect with what it represents.<sup>47</sup> Thereby, establishing a national dialogue between the diverse cultures inhabiting it.

In Doug Aitkens’ multi-channel video installation *Migration (empire)* (2008) Indigenous North American migratory animals were inserted into roadside motel rooms across the industrial

45 Beuys’s famous phrase, “Everyone is an artist”, is borrowed from Novalis, a poet, author, mystic, and philosopher of Early German Romanticism. See: Michely and Mesch, *Joseph Beuys: the reader*.

46 Beuys. *What is art?: Conversation with Joseph Beuys*.

47 The coyote is a prominent animal in the Native American culture; often it represents the figure of the trickster or an artist of a sort. See: Bright, *A coyote reader*.

landscapes of the United States. Removed from their natural habitats but drawing on their natural instincts, these wild animals interact with the room’s furniture and utilities. One of the vignettes entails a horse watching a herd of wild horses on TV as they gallop freely through a landscape. Other scenes include a beaver indulging himself in a bathtub, an owl hypnotized by a rain of feathers coming out of a pillow, and a buffalo that completely trashes the motel room. Despite the absence of humans in the rooms, their presence is implied through the scenography; Televisions, coffee machines, refrigerators, lamps and an alarm clock are all turned on. Similarly to Beuys’ performance with the wild coyote, Aitkens’ work explores the complex relationship between America’s wilderness and its extensive man-made environment; the displacement of wildlife within urban interiors serves, in my opinion, as an allegory to the lost freedom of a bygone era and ambivalence to their approaching extinction. As much as I can relate to the message Aitkens wishes to convey in his video vignettes, I do wonder about the conditions that made them possible. Is it really the ideological and critical artwork it appears to be or is it once again an embodiment of human’s detachment from ‘other’ animals, reminiscent of Descartes’ philosophical argument?

Other influential artists working today undertake methods of provocation, which question their position between Descartes and Darwinist perspectives. In Marco Evaristti’s installation *Helena & El Pescador* (2000) ten goldfish were swimming in circles, each within the constraint of a blender. Visitors were given a choice of either killing the exhibits in a click of a button or sparing their lives. Evidently, by placing the goldfish in a blender, Evaristti refers to the contemporary food industry and emphasizes a sense of responsibility we (should) have as a society and as consumers. This, in turn,

led museum director Peter Meyers to be charged with animal cruelty (but found not guilty).<sup>48</sup>

The 2018 controversy revolving around the exhibition *Art and China after 1989: Theater of the World*, led to protest from animal rights activists worldwide. The show at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York marked the rise of newly powerful China to the world stage and presented works by 71 key artists and groups active across China and around the world. People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) President Ingrid Newkirk stated, “People who find entertainment in watching animals try to fight each other are sick individuals whose twisted whims the Guggenheim should refuse to cater to.”<sup>49</sup>

Consequently, several works were removed from the show including Huang Yong Ping’s *Theater of the World* (1993), an enclosure in which live insects, amphibians, and reptiles fight and eat each other; a video documentation of Peng Yu and Sun Yuan’s performance *Dogs That Cannot Touch Each Other* (2003) that displays restrained mastiffs walking toward each other on treadmills, and Xu Bing’s *A Case Study of Transference* (1994), which features a boar and a sow stamped with the artist’s trademark fake Chinese characters, mixed with Roman letters, in the act of mating. World-famous artist Ai Weiwei, who served as an advisor for the show and curated its film component, defended the show by stating, “When an art institution cannot exercise its right for freedom of speech, that is tragic for a modern society [...] Pressuring museums to pull down artwork shows a narrow understanding about not only animal rights

48 Boogaerdt, “‘Helena’ by Marco Evaristti.”

49 Telonis, “Protest of Controversial Art in New York City Museums in 2017-2018: Reactions, Responses, and Legal/Ethical Obligations of Museums in the Age of #MeToo, #BlackLivesMatter, and Activism on the Internet.”

but also human rights.”<sup>50</sup> Sometimes art doesn’t necessarily reside in the object, but in the conversation around it. While such works are arguably ethically irresponsible and even exploitive, they do uncover what the public perceives as ethical and unethical—thereby provide an opening to a discussion on interspecies relationship.

Another issue altogether is highlighted through Tania Bruguera’s participatory performance *Tatlin’s Whisper #5* (2008).<sup>51</sup> Staged at the Tate Modern in London, two policemen mounted on horseback regulate the movement of museum visitors through the Tribune Hall. The performers, who were in fact members of the Metropolitan Police, practiced crowd control techniques. The visitors were herded in various directions and formations through the space, as the mounted police officers either surrounded or divided them into smaller groups. By infiltrating the museum with the presence of authorities, Bruguera deprives the audience of their ‘safe zone’. Unknowing whether they are witnessing an actual police regulation or participating in an artwork they become both the subject and object of the performance.

#### A DOG’S LIFE

The cast of *Going to the Dogs* (1986),<sup>52</sup> a four-act theater play by Dutch artist and TV persona Wim T. Schippers, features six German shepherds in a domestic living room scenography. Following

50 Pogrebin and Sopan, “Guggenheim Museum Is Criticized for Pulling Animal Artworks.”

51 *Tatlin’s Whisper #5* (2008) is the fifth segment of a performance series that aims to activate viewers’ participation by decontextualizing dynamics of power, Tate Modern, London.

52 An idiom describing a sense of disgrace and a verge of social deterioration. See: Gehweiler, “Going to the Dogs? A Contrastive Analysis of S. th. is Going to the Dogs and jmd./etw. geht vor die Hunde.”

its premiere at the notable Stadsschouwburg in Amsterdam, which was completely sold out, the play drew national attention and provoked much controversy.<sup>53</sup> Meanwhile, in the Dutch parliament, questions were raised regarding whether such an absurdist play is eligible for government subsidies. A lasting effect of the performance has been the inclusion of a painted portrait of the leading performer, the female German shepherd Ilja van Vinkeloord (1981–1996) in the Stadsschouwburg's hall of fame as part of the significant actors in Dutch theatre; hence acknowledging the nonhuman performer as equal to humans.

Under similar circumstances as Wim T. Schippers, the artist Guillermo Vargas Jiménez (aka Habacuc) portrayed 'man's best friend' in an unconventional light and received immense backlash. At the center of Vargas' exhibition at the Códice Gallery in Managua, Nicaragua, stood a stray dog tied by a short leash to the wall, without food or water. Various images of the exhibit *Exposición N° 1* (2007) circulated the web and triggered an outrage. The allegations that the dog had starved to death spread internationally, followed by a petition that received over four million signatures.<sup>54</sup> Vargas has not only endorsed the petition and even signed it himself, he claimed that the work was intended to draw attention to the unfortunate lives of animals and comment on the amount of dogs that starve to death in the streets of his hometown San José, without human intervention to save them.

Several years later a similar work of his titled *Axioma* (2013), was exhibited in a gallery in Heredia, Costa Rica. Especially for this show Vargas began a blog documenting the starvation of an

53 Schippers, "Show Went To the Dogs (Literally, One Might Say)."

54 Couzens, "Outrage at 'starvation' of a stray dog for art."

emaciated dog (named Axioma) until the end of the Costa Rican elections in February 2014. The photos aimed to demonstrate the passing of time through the dog's condition as a metaphor that mirrors the state of the nation. As a result of a global online controversy the blog was taken down and the Costa Rican National Animal Health Service investigated the case, finding the dog in good health. Vargas later clarified he had found a street dog in poor condition and documented its recovery. The photos of the dog's rehabilitation were, in fact, posted over time in reverse order.<sup>55</sup> By doing so Vargas exposed the social mechanism of disinformation and the tendency to express opinions online regardless of the truth.

Pierre Huyghe is arguably one of the leading contemporary artists that incorporate animals and other living organisms in their oeuvre. A frequent collaborator of his is an albino Podenco hound with a striking pink foreleg that answers to the (anthropomorphized) name 'Human'. Like Vargas's dog 'Axioma', 'Human' is presented as a living artwork and makes guest appearances in video works or on sites where Huyghe's work is exhibited. The only difference between these dogs, however, is that 'Human' is not tied by a leash to the gallery walls but wanders freely between them, accompanied by an animal handler who oversees her safety and needs. At the LACMA (Los Angeles County Museum of Art) 'Human' had been examined by animal welfare organizations, obtained a permit as a 'performer' for her inclusion in the exhibition, and even got her own web page. Nevertheless, it is not so much empathy for animals that Huyghe seeks to engage in his work, but rather an

55 Montero, "Habacuc: obra pretendía mostrar rescate de perra en orden invertido."

Following pages:

Hertog Nadler, *The Four Riders* 2010, Production still from 4-channel HD video installation





uncanny sense of wonder by nature and the indifference it has regarding man's desires. *A Journey that Wasn't* (2008), for example, is an elaborate reenactment of an expedition to an unknown island in the Antarctic Circle. The reenactment is staged with a music concert and light show in the middle of New York's Central Park, where the main protagonists are a species virtually unknown to science: the albino penguins.<sup>56</sup> The sculpture *Untilled* (2011-2012) is a statue of a reclining female nude with an actual beehive mounted on her head, while In *Zoodram 5* (2011) a hermit crab, living in an aquarium, is confined in a replica bust of Constantin Brancusi's *Sleeping Muse* (1910). His eerie video *Untitled (Human Mask)* (2014) stars a monkey-waitress, wearing a wig and a traditional Japanese mask, wandering aimlessly in an abandoned restaurant in a post-apocalyptic setting in Japan.<sup>57</sup> The waitress occasionally rests by a window and touches her smooth human white mask in a disturbingly sensual way. The video was inspired by the 2011 man-made disaster triggered by a natural one, in the Fukushima nuclear plant reactor.

Animals displayed in the context of the arts introduce an authentic aspect within an artificial context; they disrupt the expectation of a controlled agency by their spontaneity<sup>58</sup> and their "resistance to being represented".<sup>59</sup> They are indifferent to what the camera,

56 The Aptenodytes albus are a fictional penguin species described by explorer William Dyer; a character created by science fiction author H. P. Lovecraft. They are six-feet-tall, the tallest and heaviest of all living penguin species. In that light, the 'discovered penguin' could have been with animatronics. See: Lovecraft, *At the Mountains of Madness: The Definitive Edition*.

57 Higgle, "Take One: Human Mask."

58 Manuel, "Theatre Without Actors: Rehearsing New Modes of co-Presence."

59 Georgelou & Janša, "Janez Janša's Camillo 4". 83-89.

the audience or art critics may think of them and their mannerism, or shall I say animalism.<sup>60</sup>

Personally, what I find inspirational in Huyghe's work is that the animals take on human features or cultural references but at the same time remain 'themselves'—they are not performing but appear to be going about their everyday activities. The artist constructs a framework and the way in which the nonhuman animal inhabits it becomes the artwork. Despite the fact that amongst the three schools of thought Huyghe's work fits best to Zen Buddhism, I do wonder whether his endeavor of incorporating live organisms in his artwork is indeed as harmonious as it presented to be. As much as I find Huyghe's interdisciplinary sculptures intelligent and multi layered, they also seem to discourse with the old tradition of imperial zoos and curiosity exhibitions that set nonhumans under human gaze. This is, in my opinion, the paradox of Huyghe's practice—he devises an artificial scenario to explore 'the real' but simultaneously assumes superiority of man over nature by wisely blurring boundaries of animal ethics to satisfy human whims.

## DOUBLE TROUBLE

Since 2006 I have operated as part of the artist-duo Hertog Nadler, together with my life partner Chaja Hertog. In our work we continuously engage with relations between the natural and the artificial; between politics and poetics. In each new project we first set out to create a 'universe' with an inner logic before intervening in it. Our goal is to make each work in a way that it is capable of reflecting onto multiple topics simultaneously, so that the viewers

60 Animalism is a philosophical and ethical stance that emphasizes the value of all sentient beings. See: Blatti and Snowden, eds., *Animalism: New essays on persons, animals, and identity*.

do not only 'get the message' but also reflect on their own life experiences and fill in their own meanings. In each new process we look for the balance between being in control and totally letting go; in the same way as nature maintains a close connection between order and chaos. On the one hand we highly value craftsmanship and strive for accuracy, and on the other hand embrace having a factor of uncertainty—as though things can dissolve or fall apart somewhere along the way.

Our video *Harvest* (2013) opens with a wide shot of an orderly olive grove in a Mediterranean landscape. The serene scenery is suddenly interrupted when one tree, among a thousand others, starts shaking its branches. This lone action provokes a chain reaction amongst neighboring trees. As this movement spreads on to other orchards, a riot police squad rallies through the landscape seeking to suppress the rebellion. Our departure point for this project was the ancient olive harvest methods in which aggression and cultivation come together (i.e. beating the trees with sticks); this ambiguous duality between what seems harmful to the observer but in fact beneficial to the trees inspired us greatly. We invited choreographer Aitana Cordero to collaborate on this project because we both consider dance as a consequence of committed actions, rather than an accumulation of steps and formations. The choreographic goal in this process was initially to find the relations between the different bodies; the olive trees and the anti-riot police officers. Our intention, in terms of choreography, was to carefully study and explore the possibilities of movements that lie within the olive harvest, alongside with riot police formations in urban environments and crowd psychology. Throughout the process we continually considered how do the trees 'fight back', express their resistance, and how does the fragility of the police officers manifest itself.

Filming outdoors, in Andalusia, Spain, had been a challenge due to natural restrictions of daylight and weather conditions, but having nature as our theatrical podium has a magical quality simply because it is unpredictable and has a will of its own. Furthermore, during the production of the film and later during exhibitions and screenings we found ourselves in conflict with some of the spectators who had trouble with the idea of hitting harmless olive trees for no apparent reason (which was the whole idea in the first place). While some of the spectators took offense by the images of beaten trees, the farmers had no issues with our undertaking on their orchards. "These trees have been here for hundreds of years", they claimed—thus in the course of time our endeavors, which may seem aggressive, have no actual consequences for the trees. It is as harmful as bees penetrating flowers to collect nectar (and spreading pollen along the way).

Fundamentally, I see parallel relations between colonialism—man's desire to dominate other cultures, and agriculture—man's desire to cultivate nature. In that respect, 'Harvest' has a double meaning or reading. On the one hand it deals with the impossibility of taming the wild and addresses mankind's relationship with nature. At the same time, it serves as a social metaphor on the absurdity of enforced ideologies and power structures between authorities and civilians. Other interpretations are welcome.

Flora and fauna are the main (f)actors in earlier works such as in the immersive video installation *The Four Riders* (2010), which juxtaposes the tamed and restrained with the wild and grotesque. Initially inspired by Albrecht Dürer's woodcut *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* (1498)<sup>61</sup> the work deconstructs horse anatomy into

61 Dürer's woodcut referred to the figures in Christian faith, appearing in the New

massive landscapes of moving flesh and shiny hooves. Four large panels, hanging in mid-air; on each a horse's body is projected. A white horse with fringes on his legs, long hair that waves beautifully with every step; a black eventing horse with slender legs, which makes you wonder how it can even carry its body weight; a grey Arabian horse, slender and slightly smaller than the rest; and a brown draft horse, a stocky Belgian one, with short, broad and strong legs. The video is filmed close to the skin so that you can see all their folds contracting, muscles trembling, veins swelling, pointy ears twirling and noses nostril breath impatiently. Everything indicates that the horses can jump forward at any moment.<sup>62</sup> A soundscape of dark ambient noise and stamping hooves increase the anticipation. The four separated panels are edited in such a way that the horses seem to move almost synchronously. That slow, almost mechanical swinging of those chests, left right left right. Slowly the tempo increases and the tension builds up, you almost expect them to burst out in a gallop and storm forward out of the screens and straight towards the audience. A bolero for four horses, larger than life size, restlessly drifting and grinding and walking and trotting, endlessly.

Another significant inspiration source for this work was early studies of animal anatomy in motion, and the horse in particular. In June of 1878 by the racing tracks on the Palo Alto Stock Farm the innovative photographer Eadweard Muybridge and his companion, the industrialist and politician Leland Stanford, carried

Testament's final book, Revelation, an apocalypse written by John of Patmos, as well as in the Old Testament's prophetic Book of Zechariah, and in the Book of Ezekiel, where they are named as punishments from God. The Christian apocalyptic vision is that the Four Horsemen are to set a divine end time upon the world as omens of the Last Judgment. See: Cunningham and Grell, *The four horsemen of the Apocalypse: Religion, war, famine and death in reformation Europe*.

62 Spaink, "De vier ruiters."

out a public experiment that would settle the theory about equestrian gait, and prove once and for all whether the horse's limbs are completely aloft when galloping. Across the track they mounted a white backdrop with a dozen cameras lined up. The cameras were connected to 12 wires in an electrical circuit, tripping the shutter of the attached camera when a horse with a two-wheeled cart raced down the track. It was the first time in documented history that a horse was captured in motion, and the first time that the human eye could pick out the position of its legs at such speeds. Some claim that this is also the day motion pictures were introduced into the world.<sup>63</sup> Muybridge's dialectic correlation between art and science undoubtedly influenced our method and process when working on *The Four Riders*. In early stages of the work we extensively consulted with scientists and researchers from the Utrecht University who have at their veterinarian clinic a treadmill designed for medical use. Eventually we filmed at 'Centre Européen du Cheval de Mont-le-Soie' in Belgium and at 'Tierklinik Hochmoor' in Germany. Both locations had a special orthopedic conveyor belt designed for horses and other large animals. The cooperation with doctors and assistants at 'Centre Européen du Cheval de Mont-le-Soie' was valuable due to their personal interest and constructive input to the project. We filmed in a circular space surrounded with cameras that are capable of capturing every single movement on the conveyor belt from 360 degrees simultaneously.<sup>64</sup> This method provides them

63 Clegg, *The Man Who Stopped Time: The Illuminating Story of Eadweard Muybridge" Pioneer Photographer, Father of the Motion Picture, Murderer*.

64 Such innovative technique was first introduced in the sci-fi blockbuster *Matrix* (1999).

Following pages:

Hertog Nadler, *The Four Riders*, 2010, Production still from 4-channel HD video installation





with insight on the animal's medical condition and traces where it may feel pain or inconvenience. The reason the doctors were fascinated by our project was because it offered a new perspective on the horse's anatomy they hadn't explored before: frontal, beneath its hooves, and in slow motion.

If *Harvest* portrays olive trees as rioting civilians, then *The Four Riders* portrays horses as mechanical organisms (it is not called 'horsepower' for no reason). Similarly to *Harvest*, we received some criticism from animal rights activists who expressed their concern for the horses' well-being, who were forced to perform for the sake of an artwork. It is true that the film was shot without the performers' consent, but what is in fact the moral difference between filming a horse running on a treadmill for an art project and horse-back-riding? And what about horses performing tricks under the circus tent, competing at the Olympics or the racing tracks? In essence, all activities are imposing an action the animal did not approve of. So, what is the link between nature and culture, when is it ethical and when is it just aesthetic to incorporate animals in artwork? These questions occupied us during the process of earlier works and accompany us in the development of our future project—this time with camels.

### COLLISIONS

In 2018 we were invited to participate in the 6<sup>th</sup> Çanakkale biennial in Turkey and conduct a field research for a new work. During our stay we drove through countless landscapes around Çanakkale, the location of ancient Troy. We visited all the archeological sites and studied ancient Troy's history and mythology. While touring various villages in the outskirts of the Marmara region we stumbled upon the local tradition of camel wrestling. Originated among ancient Turkic tribes over 2,400 years ago, Deve Güreşi as it is locally called,

is a sport in which two male Tülü camels<sup>65</sup> contest in response to a female camel in heat. The camels fight one another by using their necks as leverage, forcing their opponent to fall. A camel is declared the winner when his competitor falls to the ground or flees the scene.

Together with the curators, Seyhan Boztepe & deniz erbas, and with the assistance of craftsmen of Mahal Art center in Çanakkale we plan to construct various scale models of cityscapes, which will be tailor-made to fit onto camels' backs like body extensions. In a two-channel video we will follow two camels' processions marching towards each other through different landscapes. The miniature cities they carry on their backs will be filmed from various up-close perspectives; using drones and custom-made camera-rigs mounted onto the models. The two processions will eventually come together at the point the camels engage in battle, causing the cityscapes to gradually erode leaving dusty ruins on the camels' backs. We envision the city-models to be made from ceramics, a material that is part of the local economy and can collapse beautifully. We visualize these models to be constructed in generic, universal forms, to prevent them from being affiliated with the victory or defeat of any particular civilization. The city ruins that survived the collisions are intended to be displayed in a separate room to the video installation as archeological relics.

Normally, I share my thoughts and aspirations only after a work is completed and not during the process of its formation. In this particular case, however, I make an exception because I still didn't fully resolve the ethical matters in the context of this work. Therefore, I

65 A Tülü Camel is a breed of camel that results from mating a male Bactrian camel with a female Dromedary. The resulting camel is larger than either a Bactrian or a Dromedary, and has traditionally been used as a draft animal. Tülü Camels have a single large hump instead of two or one smaller ones.

think it may serve as a study case that can potentially recapitulate some of the notions I addressed so far. *Collisions* (working title) is a commentary on the absurdity of war. It deals with the destructive nature of mankind and explores the relations between 'man-made' and 'sculpted by nature'. Through combining these two related components, materialized in video and sculpture, the principle of 'creation through destruction' is explored. With this project our main objective is to contemplate on some of the most fundamental aspects of human nature; namely violence, destruction, patriarchy and cruelty. At the same time, we hope to emphasize a sense of wonder by nature—accept it as it is and highlight the dread hidden underneath its facade of beauty.

The truth of the matter is that we do not know what is best for nonhuman animals, but I think that at least we can recognize our abusive actions towards them. By acknowledging our misconduct towards nonhuman animals, we can begin to change our behavior and interaction with them.<sup>66</sup> When it comes to including living (or dead) creatures in artworks, I principally consider a difference between wildlife and domestic species. In the case of wildlife, I think the artistic intervention should be reduced to the minimum, thus interference with their natural course of life should be prevented as much as possible. In other words, the artwork and the artist should avoid causing any anxiety or affecting their natural conduct. Working with domestic animals, on the other hand, is slightly different in my opinion. This distinction has largely to do with the fact that throughout history domestic animals have evolved alongside humans; they have become accustomed and familiar with our world, to the extent that it constitutes part of who they are. Having said that, I do not mean to endorse nor justify mankind's venture of taming the wild. I do,



Hertog Nadler, *Collisions* 2021, Still image from simulation for 4K video installation

66 Weil, *Thinking animals: Why animal studies now?*. 16-17.

however, acknowledge its existence. Throughout thousands of years, camels played an important role in the Turkish rural lives. During the ottoman era camel caravans crossed the landscapes, transporting jewels, food supplies, spices and woven finery. Apart from carriage the Turks used camels for transportation, warfare and sport. According to archaeological evidence, camel wrestling has at least 4,000 years of history in Turkey.<sup>67</sup> As much as camel wrestling may sound cruel and to some extent anachronistic, it is important to bear in mind that camels wrestle in the wild.<sup>68</sup> Thus, these traits occurred ages before nomads placed them in the framework of a competitive folk sport. Nowadays, camel wrestling venues are still real folk festivals that take place only during mating seasons, they do not involve cheating, match fixing or gambling.

There are two fundamental questions that initially occupy me when considering incorporating animals in the context of an art production. Firstly, I ask myself what is the genuine purpose of the work? Secondly, and equality important, how do I prevent any suffering, be it physical or psychological, in my undertaking? As a maker it is essential to clarify for myself the key motivations before making a work. It is only when I am convinced that my intention derives from an honest and poetic place that I would carry on with the plan with full conviction. And on the contrary, when I feel that my motivations are driven from greed, ego, profit or personal gain, then better to let it go because most likely nothing good will ever come out of it. In regards to that, before starting production of our upcoming project in Turkey we plan to further investigate the subject matter of camel wrestling and make sure that in the course of our artistic endeavor no suffering, physical injury or

67 Yilmaz and Ertugrul, "Camel wrestling culture in Turkey."

68 Trefler, "Fodor's Turkey". 242.

mental distress is caused to the camels. In case we realize otherwise, we'll undoubtedly seek alternative ways to get the visual result we strive for, without harming them (such as Computer-Generated Images or filming the collapsing cityscapes with hyper close ups without harming the camels).

#### ANTHROPOMORPHIZE THIS

As stated in the beginning, interspecies relations are largely divided to three schools of thought. The philosophical attitude relies heavily on Descartes's anthropocentric views of animals as automata and humankind as the center of existence. The scientific doctrine is predominantly based on the Darwinian evolution theories, which claim that mankind had evolved and transcended from animals—hence, our superiority. And the spiritual approach, that originates in ancient religions like Hinduism and philosophies such as Buddhism, which thrive on the conviction that we are part of nature and that all living beings should be treated equally. But perhaps (an)other approach is viable; one that could allow to rethink our relationship with nature and as a result would gain us a better understanding of our own human nature (and nurture).

*According to the natural sciences, man is included in nature.*

*And if man is included in nature, all his actions are included, too.*

*Ant colonies, foxholes, lion dens, turtle shells. Like wheat silos, like workmen's dormitories*

*Everything is natural; nothing but rules and material, process and product.*

-Meir Ariel<sup>69</sup>

69 Meir Ariel (1942-1999) was an Israeli singer-songwriter. He was known as a "man of words" for his poetic use of the Hebrew language. The cited text is my own

The way nonhumans are represented in artwork not only tells us about our own nature, it reveals our evolutionary (hi)story and in some cases validates our hierarchical position in 'the food chain'. Scientific developments enable us a much better understanding of animal minds and possibly other organisms. At the same time technological advancements push us closer to intelligent machines. Algorithms learn to read our mind, and soon will be able to anticipate a thought before it had even occurred.<sup>70</sup> Does this begin to sound like an Orwellian prophecy or more like the Cartesian theory attached to the 'other' (nonhuman) beings? Either way, I believe that these developments pose the fundamental question—Are we entitled to presume our superiority in relation to other species?

Cave paintings, gladiator shows, horse racing, trophy hunting, big-game fishing, cockfights, dog grooming, fur wearing, meat eating, cat-videos, equestrian displays, circus, safari, rodeo, bullfighting, zoophilia, animal sacrifice, scientific experimentation, species preservation, taxidermy and (post)modern art.

Where do we draw the line between ethics and aesthetics? When is art considered poetic, and when is it considered an immoral, inhumane provocation? The truth of the matter is that I don't have all the answers. Despite researching and writing this essay I still feel that there is so much to learn, and as a working artist I still find myself in a dilemma when it comes to working with sentient beings in the context of an artwork. If this essay is successful, it will hopefully assist in navigating through several chapters of the public discussion on interspecies relations in contemporary arts.

translation to an excerpt from Ariel's song "What's New in Science" (Hebrew: מה חדש במדע).

70 Carr, "Is Google making us stupid?"

We live in a critical point in which, I believe, art should address mankind's relations to animals and the environment appreciably more. What I personally think is required at this point is making a shift from a 'humanist' anthropocentric perspective, to one that is inclusive of all species. We may strive to detach ourselves from 'the others' but 'they live' in our (selfish) genes;<sup>71</sup> there is no need to 'go back to nature' because it already resides in us, there is no escape.

No creature, human or nonhuman, was mistreated or killed for the purpose of making this essay

71 *The Selfish Gene* (1976) is a book on evolution by biologist Richard Dawkins, in which he builds upon the principal theory of George C. Williams's *Adaptation and Natural Selection*.

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GUY KÖNIGSTEIN

## My Family and Other Animals

*I first borrowed Gerald Durrell's book title when I was twelve. For a school assignment dedicated to the study and documentation of one's ancestry, I decided to add a photographic chapter about our animals under this name. When re-reading Durrell's amusing piece while writing this essay, I was often thrown back nostalgically to my childhood. Durrell's lengthy descriptions of human characters by means of comparison to animal or plant features, as well as his later dedication to wildlife preservation and education, make it feel even more appropriate to borrow this title a second time.*

In a coffin-like shoebox lay the hen. The funeral procession consisted of us six young siblings, walking slowly towards the open field on the other side of the road. We took it pretty seriously, possibly enjoying the small drama of digging and then filling the hole with dirt.

Guy Königstein, Deer dance – my brother and I at play, 1988,  
From family album

I vaguely remember the silent expectation that one of us would say something to conclude the ritual. I guess we opted for this special treatment, as this – nameless – hen was the last in its generation. Its fellows, who used to walk freely in our garden and sleep high in the trees, were deprived of their lives one after the other by a neighbour's dog (and, I believe, were dumped to the rubbish container with no formal farewell).

A few days later we found the hen somewhere nearby in a partially decomposed state, covered with worms. Only years later will I learn that the predecessors of contemporary gravestones and memorials were heavy stone structures, constructed to protect the corpse from being dug out by scavengers. In any case, it was this lively image of moving worms devotedly devouring the dead that remained with me for a longer time. And indeed, a few months later, as my tenth birthday approached, I surprised my parents with my request for a present: a chicken house. Attempts to discourage my enthusiasm failed, I had to assume future responsibility for the chickens' welfare,<sup>1</sup> and the house was eventually built: a large wooden construction, roofed with corrugated metal sheets, fenced with mesh wire and equipped with self-filling drinker and privacy cabins<sup>2</sup> for laying and hatching eggs. Thus, I became a chicken keeper.

I might be risking an unfounded assertion here, but I would maintain that our relation to animals as children was pretty unique. Growing up in a farm, our animals needed to have a purpose: dogs for guarding, goats for milk, horses for riding,<sup>3</sup> chicken for eggs, and

1 Unlike toys and sweets or household activities and work in the farm, which we always had to share or do together, taking care of an animal was an individual task and personal responsibility.

2 These were crafted from old and empty wooden ammunition boxes, of which we had plenty and in different sizes, and which we usually used for storage or play.

3 Our mare, however, clearly disliked carrying any of us on her back, making it

since my mother disliked cats: snakes for keeping the mice away. True – aquarium-fish and cage-birds do not follow this scheme – but these were part of the household only for very short periods. If not productive (or reproductive), an animal should have at least served an educative purpose. And to this category I assign, for instance, the attempt to instil a sense of homing and the duty of message carrying into a group of white pigeons; an effort that ended in misery when the birds simply chose a different home and never returned.

While these “domestic” animals were not allowed into our house, wild animals were very welcome. For many years, next to working on the farm, my father served as a ranger in the Nature Reserves Authority.<sup>4</sup> When wounded animals were found they would first be brought to our home for immediate recovery, until the appropriate shelter or veterinary clinic was found.<sup>5</sup> The story in the family tells about a wild swamp cat peeing in my sister's bed. But I also remember the small gazelle fawn we immediately baptised as Bambi, a white stork with a red beak, a tortoise with a damaged shell, and the group of orphaned falcons, who sadly never learned how to fly.

Our farm was located in the Hula valley in northern Israel, nearby a small stream and within large fields and orchards, which bestowed on us many encounters with other wild animals in different

explicit by breaking one of my mother's ribs, and leaving a scar in the shape of her teeth on my sister's back. I still remember how tight I had to squeeze each of my muscles onto the saddle and stirrups when she tried to shove me off her back.

4 Most exciting benefit of this function was the green 4x4 ranger jeep, with which we often went on day trips in the nearby mountains, but also used for joining official research surveys; for instance, I remember us driving slowly in a late desert night, holding spotlights in search of terrestrial bustard birds, in order to count and map their local distribution.

5 Dead animals (especially rare cases of anatomy) were brought to us as well. These were usually kept in the deep freeze until being picked up by a family friend who worked as a taxidermist in the local nature museum.

shapes and sizes: frogs and fish, jackals and wild boars, lizards and bats, crickets and butterflies, local as well as migratory birds. As young kids, we would try to catch some of them – for instance by setting traps for rabbits (always in vain!) – and even ventured into domestication-experiments. In one memorable case, I found an adorable hedgehog and could not resist the urge to share this extraordinary cute finding with my classmates. I first housed it in an empty aquarium, and the next day took it with me to school in a small cardboard box. My classmates were extremely excited, and our teacher allowed it to stay, and even walk freely in the classroom while we were occupied with practicing geometry and memorising verses from the Old Testament. After a few days, to our great surprise and shock, we discovered a large tick on the hedgehog's back. We then rushed to the nearest "authority" – a teacher for nature studies – who yelled at us, saying that we cannot simply keep a wild animal in captivity, that it can bring diseases, and that we should immediately let it free outside.

One might think that with this background and experience I would become a good chicken keeper. But this was not at all the case. Surely, I was very engaged in the first weeks, always excited to find small brownish warm eggs in every other possible hideout than the designated cabins. And I was happy to observe the mechanical wonder of the self-filling drinker in action. But, the self-filling drinker did not self clean itself. Nor did the house or its tenants, and thus much more work was involved in keeping the chicken beyond their basic feeding. I developed routines, but found it hard and unrewarding to follow them, and quickly learned that the thin borderline between care and neglect can be very slippery.

Real tragedies began to occur when one of the hens persisted with her hatching and the first chicks appeared. What a lovely sight

it was, those tiny creatures! But the initial joy was soon overshadowed by their mysterious disappearing. At first I thought I miscounted, as they kept hiding under their mother and reappearing again – all looking rather similar. But when the sound of peeping silenced after a couple of days, we realised that something went wrong. The next generation received much more attention, and since we noticed that other hens behave nastily to the young ones, we fenced off a safe zone for the small family. The next morning I discovered one of the hens lying motionless on the ground, and again it seemed that some chicks were missing. The mystery was finally resolved that same night, when my brother and I went out to inquire unusual noises and hustle among the chicken. Upon entering their house – barefoot as usual – the torchlight revealed the chicks' mother lying on the ground, and next to her a large viper snake. Terrified – and having arrived too late to save the mother and kids – we ran away.

A new wire fence with a finer mesh seemed to block future venomous burglars, but the next generation did not survive as well. This time, the mother alienated herself from the chicks, and I had to separate them and act myself as their mother. What a misfortune! It was high summer, and the only cool and shaded place I could think of to house the small creatures was the vacant bomb shelter across the street. The large cement structure, covered with big basalt rocks, dated from the 70s but was still in use once or twice a year when sirens would declare expected rocket attacks from beyond the Lebanese border. In peaceful periods we would occasionally play there, but in the rest of the time it was simply abandoned. And thus, I have padded a large plastic box with straw, fetched some water and grains, and placed the new home and its residents in the somewhat dark shelter. I have no explanation to what followed, but after checking on them once or twice during the next days, I



completely forgot the poor chicks. The sight upon “rediscovery” was so startling, that I repressed the whole story and left it untouched for what seemed to be ages, until I finally managed to collect myself, admit my misdoing and clean up the space.

Next to the occasional emergency-use of the shelter, the proximity of the village to the border and the regular military operations at the front required our readiness to different scenarios. Each of these scenarios was coded by a different animal name. For instance, when the code word OWL was transmitted through the radio, we understood that a hang glider is suspected to have crossed the border and we are asked to remain inside, while LEOPARD A, B or C meant different levels of certainty regarding an infiltration by foot through the border fence. During the first Gulf War, VIPER was introduced as the televised code word for an expected missile attack from Iraq, upon which we had to enter a “sealed room” in fear of chemical warheads. In retrospect I see this choice of vocabulary as a strategy to dehumanise different “enemies,” but I believe that as a child it merely contributed to the excitement and general mystery we associated with the border and the inaccessible landscapes behind it.

But farm life has also confronted us with real animal-enemies. There were the moles that could, out of the blue, “ruin” the green lawn by spotting it with their brown earth mounds; the wild boars that broke off large tree branches in order to reach ripe figs; the armoured red scale insects that appeared on citrus leaves and fruits, inserting their mouthparts deep into the plant-tissue to suck the sap and inject in return their toxic saliva; the woodpeckers that used to puncture holes in irrigation lines in the fields; or the cranes and crows that would raid the pecan groves and steal the nuts. Fighting back required implementing different strategies.

For instance, flooding the moles’ burrows with water, erecting electric fences around the fig groves, spraying pesticides against insects,<sup>6</sup> or using sonic cannons to frighten away the birds. Another remarkable and quite dreaded creature was the wood leopard moth. Every summer we would slalom-scan the apple orchards, searching around each tree-trunk for evidence of sawdust. These infamous caterpillars enter through the thin branches, eating their way to the core of the tree, eventually causing its death. Finding sawdust was a source of pride among us children, but we were not allowed to express any joy, due to the dramatic circumstances. One of my parents will then detect the entrance of the caterpillar’s tunnel (from which it has pushed out the sawdust) and using a long metal wire with a loop at its end, begin the offensive. In a complete silence, the wire was slowly pushed up the tunnel, until a deep plop sound was heard. This was half a victory. Now the wire had to be pulled back slowly, hoping that the caterpillar is hooked to the loop, and will be pulled out as a proof of success. As a measure of precaution, in case no sound was heard, nor the caterpillar was pulled out, we would stick a small cork plug into the tunnel’s end, hoping that its poison will eliminate the villain.

Poison and other kinds of pesticides were quite often used - and misused<sup>7</sup> - on our farm. I remember vividly how we found my younger brother’s dog nearby the pesticide cabinet in the garage. And how he was shaking in my arms, as if suffering from epileptic seizures, as we ran down the street to bring him to the vet who lived a few

6 Ironically, some chemical pesticides that were used on the farm to fight red scales were called: *Tiger*, *Cobra* and *Stingray*.

7 My father’s diagnosed Parkinson’s disease is suspected to have been triggered by his early practice of spraying chemicals in the orchards without sufficient protection.

houses further. The first two injections failed to work against the poison he ate and the third one eventually put him to sleep.

Our domesticated animals were thus not real pets.<sup>8</sup> They were not allowed into the house, and only dogs were called by their names. I will speak for myself now, as I am not sure my siblings would agree on that, but something in our upbringing made an emotional attachment to animals feel “unnatural” or even “inappropriate.” Physical intimacy was pretty much out of question, and indeed till this very day I experience difficulty with accepting dog’s licking or finding cat hair on my clothes (not to mention in my bed). Having left my parents’ house and farm about twenty years ago, and living since in dense urban environments, most of the animals I encounter as an adult are friends’ pets.<sup>9</sup> Observing my friends play with them, listening to the way they talk to them, or witnessing their intimate interactions often confuses me.

Recently, a friend’s dog – which is, admittedly, the only animal that can make me forget the stains it just smeared on my jacket and animate me into play – has literally opened my eyes. Dragged into a long personal conversation with my friend one evening, my friend suddenly began to cry. His dog, who up until now was resting in one of the room’s corners, seemed not to be able to grasp this unexpected shift in mood, became himself restless and disoriented, and then: jumped on my friend’s lap and started licking away the tears from his eyes and cheeks. This reaction to my friend’s sadness

8 The Hebrew term for a pet *מחמד* can be literally translated as *precious* or *darling animal*, and the less common term *שעשועים* as *entertainment animal*. We also did not experience our animals too much as companions, as the French (and other Roman languages) *animal de compagnie* suggests.

9 Unexpected sightings of urban swans, squirrels or hares usually make me stop for a short peaceful moment of close-up marveling.

simply perplexed me. When I try to recall personal intimate experiences with animals, all I can unearth in my memory are somewhat traumatic events.

Take for instance my unfortunate infestation with scabies fifteen years ago. Seemingly from nowhere (but presumably from someone), tiny parasitic mites have secretly resided under my skin, tunnelled slowly scratch-like burrows on my intimate body parts, and caused me a disturbing itch with a daily growing intensity. Beyond the physical inconvenience and the deep shame I felt (having to warn friends and family members, whom I might unknowingly have infected myself), I think that unlike lice, which I have sadly experienced as well, the fact that those creatures dwelled in my interior made me feel as if I lost sovereignty and control over my own body.

Another much earlier event of rather unconsented intimacy possibly occurred somewhat differently from the way I picture it today. I was a young boy, and the story was told so often, that reality and fiction probably merged into some sort of a legend. In my mind I see my siblings forming a circle on the front porch, my father standing among them, and from his risen hand, stretching in the form of an upside-down U, a long black whip snake. Since each of us knew well enough the danger of a viper-sting, my father found it important that we learn to recognise this harmless specie. Suspicious, I kept distance, but my father insisted that I get closer. The moment I did step forward, the snake lifted itself - now curved in the shape of a laying S - and quickly whipped a bite directly between my eyes. Did I bleed? Was it hurtful? I cannot recall. All the story further tells is that it was the only time in the family history that my mother yelled and cursed my father in front of us kids. And I have indeed never heard her cursing even a cat. Sometimes I like playing with the idea

that the small scar I carry on my nasal bridge, or the one just a bit farther on my forehead, was caused by this harmless snake's bite. But unfortunately, I have no way to prove that true.

Likewise starred by a snake and my father – with me having this time a minor role – the following story took place a couple of years later. I believe it was one of the farm workers who initially noticed the snake in the shed next to our house. Alarmed by the possibility of it being a viper he quickly called my father. But in first look, from a distance, my father could not tell if it was a viper (which would mean it must be killed) or actually a different, coin-marked snake (which would mean it can be spared). Research suggests that coin-marked snakes have actually developed (in an evolutionary adaptation) a skin pattern similar to this of a viper, in order to frighten predators with venom they do not at all possess. A closer look can however reveal if the pattern consists of consecutive but separated coin-like dark patches, or of a long zigzag-shaped dark strip. This would help determining between the two candidates, which was exactly what my father now intended to do. Using a long wooden stick, he managed to pull the snake from his hideout, and then pressing the stick on the top of his head to prevent it from biting or crawling away. The snake was understandably nervous, and has not ceased to move for a second, the pattern of its skin continuously vibrating and remaining undecipherable. To make it stop, I was called and asked to approach the poor beast, lift the end of its tail, and stretch it so that my father could study it unhurriedly. And once again, this is where my memory ends. I do not remember the result of the investigation, nor the eventual destiny of the snake. What I do remember – and in fact very physically – is the sensation of the cold and smooth tail in my hand: twisting, curving, tightening and releasing itself around and between my fingers again and again. Desperately?

Angrily? Enthusiastically? I cannot say, but it was intimate - almost erotic - in a way that makes me shiver.

Now, it would be misleading to approach the end of this account without mentioning the animals that were brought to our house in plastic bags or on styrofoam trays, plucked, chopped, minced or otherwise prepared to be cooked and eaten. They cannot be neglected because they simply were part of our daily routine, similarly to feeding the chickens (and eating their eggs), or irrigating the trees (and eating their fruit). We liked eating meat,<sup>10</sup> and the triviality in which we did so never occurred to me as paradoxical to other relationships we had with animals. Even when once a wild boar was hunted nearby in the fields, carried to our garden and, hanging upside-down from the forklift, was stripped off from its skin in front of our eyes, such an activity did not seem to contradict the harmonious order of things. Years later I would begin reconsidering my personal attitude towards the consumption of meat and dairy products - not always with clear conclusions or operative decisions, but with certain growing awareness to its implications. I remember one puzzling moment, which made me wonder about this “negotiation” we have been practicing from a very young age. While visiting South Africa a couple of years ago, I rented a small car with a friend and drove up from Johannesburg to the famous Kruger National Park. An ordinary safari experience, as we quickly observed, meant prowling through the wide veld in jeeps and continuously scanning the landscape in search of wild animals. We were free to drive around and discover the park on our own pace,

10 As far as I know, all family members still enjoy eating meat. Nonetheless, most of us eat significantly less meat than we used to eat in our childhood, and some of us even ceased to do so for long periods of time.

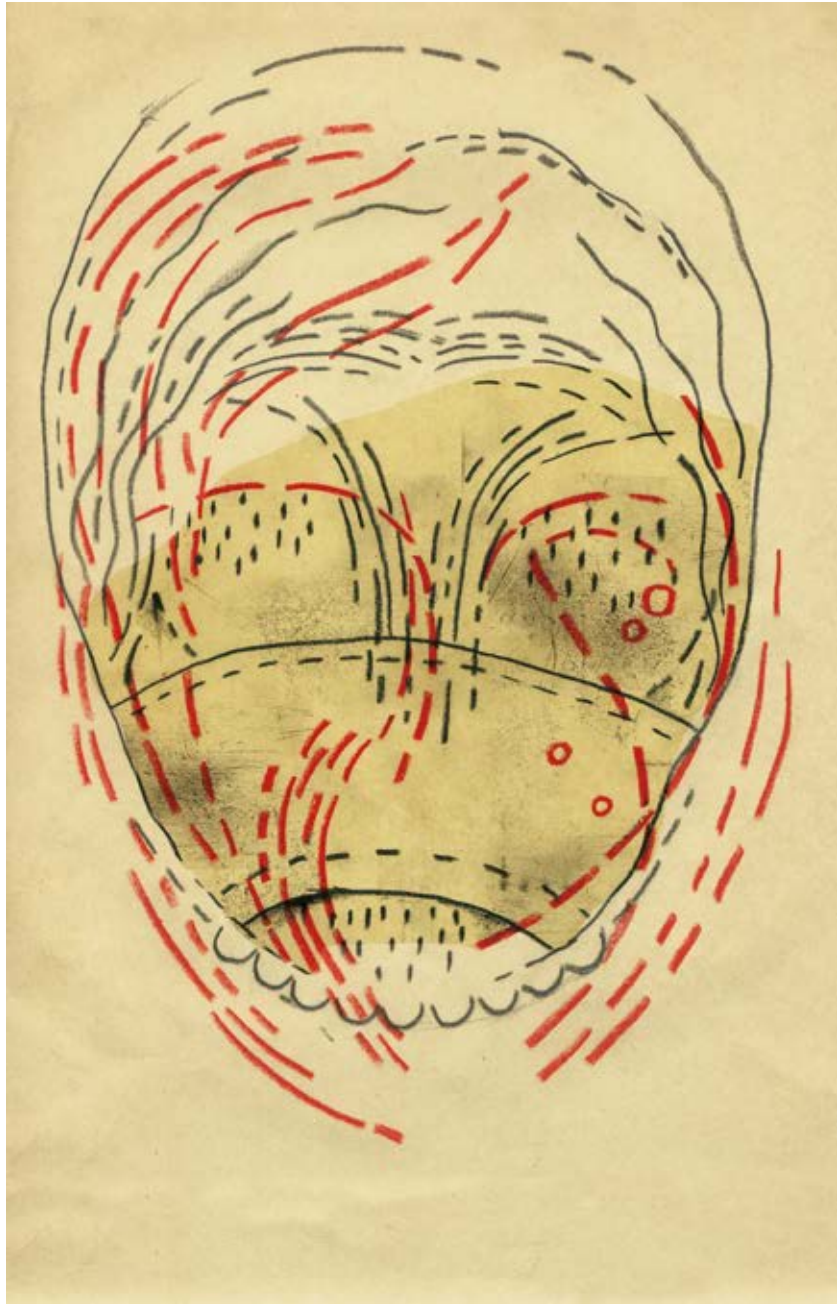
but very often encountered a gathering of parked vehicles blocking the way, long telephoto lenses popping out of their windows, all directed to one spot. As if replacing a shotgun, making the best shot with your camera seemed to be what occupied most park-visitors; an activity that requires patience and concentration, maybe even a mental submission to the environment. Immersed in this peaceful natural wonder during the day, one must however reach the safe confinement of a rest camp before dusk. The night is to be spent in air-conditioned facilities – between restaurants and souvenir shops – and in the company of other park-visitors, all equipped with malaria prophylaxis and barbecue accessories. And indeed, soon after the sun set, and while wildlife continued undisturbed outside the electric fence, smoke began to curl up from different spots in the camp, and the smell of grilled meat disseminated all around us. I was not truly surprised that the popular braai-ritual – the local form of a grill event – takes place also within this absurd setting. Yet, in these circumstances, the shift between day and night rationales felt somehow more challenging to grasp.

*Engaging in writing this essay was in itself an attempt to grasp such negotiations and mixed feelings. When invited to propose a contribution to this publication I felt that a first step towards re-thinking and re-imagining multispecies relations would require me to look back, recall and share my personal relations to, and entanglements with, animal life. And as often the case is when digging into your past, the present echoed back. My writing was accompanied by the lockdown measures as result of the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic in Europe. What presumably - though*

*not indisputably – began as a local, daily human-animal interaction in a far wet market, quickly evolved into an unprecedented global performance of living bodies, political campaigns and financial trends, that left me no other choice than submissively take part. Isolated at home, hearing of people who adopt pets to assuage loneliness, or others who take walks to nearby parks and feed ducks to escape digital alternatives for social interaction, I bring my writing to an end.*

Following pages:

Yaron Shin – a.k.a Jewboy™, Identi-Kit #1 + #2, 2020, Mixed media, 32x44 cm





DANIEL PELTZ

## Becoming Any Thing

an average Asian elephant  
in the wild  
lives to be 56-years-old

an average wild elephant  
becomes an average broken elephant  
employed in the logging industry  
lives to be 52-years-old

a soon to be unemployed elephant  
becomes an eco-honeymoon  
becomes a YouTube video  
lives to be viewed 96,632 times

an average Asian elephant  
employed in the tourist industry  
lives to be 26-years-old  
half a life lost  
in shifting labor conditions

a recording of an elephant  
struggling to overcome  
becoming touristed  
becomes a glass master for a DVD  
of a YouTube video  
of an average Asian elephant  
soon to be unemployed  
from the exhausted teak forests of Myanmar

a glass master  
too irregular to fit  
in the DVD mastering machines  
becomes a clear vinyl recording  
of the audio  
of a YouTube video  
of an eco-honeymoon  
becomes a product  
produced by an artist-guest-worker  
in the historic Reijmyre Glassworks  
in the forests of Östergötland, Sweden

an artist-guest-worker  
charged with making a product  
of and about labor  
makes a thing  
called 'Any Thing'  
that contains a clear vinyl recording  
of the audio  
of a YouTube video  
of the last labors  
of a Burmese logging elephant

an Any Thing becomes part of a display  
of artifacts from a historic ice dive excavation  
uncovering pieces from a fallen history  
of cable car carts  
that jumped their rails  
depositing the story of their labors  
in the depths of Lake Hunn

an Any Thing made to be lost  
and perhaps later found  
jumps its rails  
falling from a cable car of history  
into a lake of possible meanings

an average Asian elephant  
is found where it was lost  
under the icy depths of the Hunn  
in Östergötland, Sweden

a vinyl recording  
becomes a prehistory of  
an elephant in Rejmyre  
becomes an impetus  
to consider what is possible  
the possibility of a refuge  
in Rejmyre  
for an average Asian elephant  
recently re-employed



MIKA ELO

## Rendezvous projected

Some of them were speaking, others kept silent. This pattern seemed to repeat itself in countless variations. At times, many voices would raise their volume simultaneously until the babble would break into silence. Then the speeches would start again, one after another. Words were not discernible, but it seemed that they all used the same language. Except for those who didn't say a word. These silent ones would cringe now and then, but there was no real evidence of their linguistic involvement. They were clearly implicated in the communication, though, but more or less only as surfaces to be acted upon.

The walls of that space were covered with porcelain tiles. Reasons for this were interpreted to be either hygienic or aesthetic. Smooth and dense surfaces are easy to keep clean, and they give a polished impression in many light conditions. If dirt is matter out of place, in this kind of places all matter matters as potential dirt.

Glossy surfaces suggest that stains are either to be read or swept away, recorded or erased.

It is not sure what kind of measurements they were finally aiming at. Scales were involved, and the setting was clearly relational, but it was not possible to tell the difference between causes and effects without any further information about the nature of the constraints in the system.

It seems that they were interested in invisible forces and had therefore heavily reduced the number of possible parameters. Gravity was supposed to function as the constant in relation to which other forces would appear as measurable quantities. Stable light conditions were indispensable. It was estimated that even minor fluctuations in the light levels might disturb the measurements. Air flows had to be controlled as well, since microscopic particles could not completely be eliminated from the air. No airborne pollutants were expected to come in contact with olfactory tracts. In short, they tried to take into account everything for the sake of the event.

They were desperately looking for means to produce some sort of “immutable mobiles”<sup>1</sup>, recorded traces that could have been shown to others, in another place, in another time. Something that would not be corrupted in the process of displacement, something

1 In his article “Visualisation and Cognition: Drawing Things Together” Bruno Latour argues that when analysing the colonising and universalising effects of modern sciences it is not enough to focus either on the evolution of cognitive paradigms (for example from pre-modern to modern ones) or on the development of ever more fine-tuned techniques of inscription. One has to focus on the intertwining of cognition and visualisation facilitated by “immutable mobiles”, material-discursive framings that enable the mobilisation of cognitive patterns and their comparative visualisation, and consequently, capitalisation and mastery across different contexts. One of Latour’s examples of “immutable mobiles” is linear perspective that establishes a two-way relation between nature and fiction, between the image of reality and the reality of image. (Latour 1986).

that could convince the others, turn them into virtual witnesses. A map, a diagram, a stain in the grid.

But is it fair to describe their endeavour in these terms? From where do we look at them? What makes us think that we can identify the relevant parameters? Who are we? *Not them*, is that “us”? If they are in the image that looks back at us, aren’t we then implicated by that image, by the image we make of them? Aren’t we part of the structure of that image?<sup>2</sup>

“Artistic practices need diplomacy but cannot delegate experts”, she wrote.<sup>3</sup> “Because there is no clearly delimited set of practices or discourses to promote”, I added in a diplomatic tone. “If an expert is someone who can tell the truth of something in a context that is detached and abstracted from that particular issue, then there are no experts of artistic practice”, I continued. We noted that we share the view of art as something that destabilises the accustomed territorial framings of experience and expertise, but her subsequent comment brought me to a halt: “And from this anything can follow, except an ‘artistic’ knowledge claiming to promote its constraints and negotiate its scope and meaning for others”.<sup>4</sup>

All of a sudden, the scene was populated by a bunch of conceptual personae: the practitioner, the expert, the professional, the diplomate, the witness, and the victim.

A claim starting with “we experts...” is blind to its own precondition, namely, the assumed position of a unified “we”. An expert relies on facts given within certain conditions and focuses on the

2 In a short text entitled “Nous Autres”, Jean-Luc Nancy describes how an image, especially a mechanically recorded image, makes up an interface for identity building and forces us viewers to face the essential non-coincidence that makes us other than ourselves. (Nancy 2005, 100–107).

3 Stengers 2011, 455.

4 *ibid.*

seemingly neutral requirements implied by them. When a diplomat says “we”, she is speaking on behalf of others, structurally separated from them. Instead of requirements implied by the given conditions, her focus is on constraints.<sup>5</sup> A practitioner can say “we” only in view of a problem strong enough to nourish a situated practitioners’ culture. From practitioner’s point of view the obliging constraints emerge out of practice and constitute its specificity. But how to demonstrate and expose the relevance of the practice to others? This is an urgent question for the practitioners of research in the arts. Artist-researcher surely is an expert in her practice, but she is expected to act like a professional as well.<sup>6</sup> On who’s terms can her expertise be recognized beyond her practice?

5 In her exposition of “cosmopolitics” that builds on a speculative idea of “ecology of practices” Isabelle Stengers makes a distinction between “constraints” and “conditions”: “Unlike conditions, which are always relative to a given existent that needs to be explained, established, or legitimized, constraint provides no explanation, no foundation, no legitimacy. A constraint must be taken into account, but it does not tell us how it should be taken into account” (Stengers 2010, 43).

6 In *Catastrophic Times* Stengers expresses her grave concern at the devastating effects of the neoliberal knowledge economy. When experts turn into professionals who strive for excellence only by following the protocol, practitioners’ research culture will be destroyed: “In effect, what distinguishes practitioners from professionals is also the capacity to perceive the difference between situations and question the definition of what matters to them as a community, what causes them to gather, and to others for which their knowledge or expertise can be useful, even necessary, but will never allow them to define the ‘right manner of formulating the problem.’ Certainly, and it’s the least one can say, such a capacity hasn’t really been cultivated by scientific communities and the modes of training they developed. But with the triumph of professionals, this capacity will be eradicated. Another potential resource will have been destroyed, which matters in a crucial manner if it is a question of the gathering together of heterogeneous knowledges, requirements, and concerns around a situation that none can appropriate.” (Stengers 2015, 92–93).

Some kind of arbitration is needed. Practical expertise in the arts generates an intensive field of problems to be explored and presented. But is this generative inclination the highest goal to be set when artistic practice enters a research context? Shouldn’t the artist-researcher aim beyond testing and contesting the constraints of her artistic framework? Shouldn’t her research also involve compromises?<sup>7</sup>

Compromise is a *pharmakon*; it can have both poisonous and vitalising effects. It can function as a poison by settling the disputes and consolidating already existing standards, by leaving the future to its delegates, the professionalised experts. The vitalising effects of a compromise, in turn, come to the fore, when diplomacy sets the tone. Unlike professionalised experts who are concerned with the implications of their theories, diplomats are familiar with the weight of *mathesis singularis*.<sup>8</sup> When the negotiations are driven by diplomats instead of experts, the aim is not epistemic pacification but rather a generous exposure of the different aspects of a specific problem. Epistemic diplomacy is not about translation-betrayal

7 In Stengers’ diagnosis, various “techniques of influencing” such as psychoanalysis are, in the modern epistemic landscape, condemned to demand a status of a “modern” technique that might be unsuitable to them and that reduces them to a caricature of themselves (Stengers 2011, 357). Does this apply to “artistic research” as well?

8 In his famous essay on photography, *Camera Lucida*, Roland Barthes speculates about the possibility of *mathesis singularis*, a science of unique being. After confessing his desperate resistance to any reductive system and his ultimate dissatisfaction with different critical discourses he writes: “[...] So I resolved to start my inquiry with no more than a few photographs, the ones I was sure existed *for me*. Nothing to do with a corpus: only some bodies. In this (after all) conventional debate between science and subjectivity, I had arrived at this curious notion: why mightn’t there be, somehow, a new science for each object? A *mathesis singularis* (and no longer *universalis*)? So I decided to take myself as mediator for all Photography.” (Barthes 1993, 8).



with view on a solution, a realizable convergence of all possible calculations. It is about generosity, about the production of convergence as virtually effective constellation.<sup>9</sup>

Generous research allows itself to be carried further by other means than those that it itself has adopted. It allows the transposition of its research gestures into other conditions and ramifications. Generous research offers diplomatic guidelines for this transposition with gestures that tangentially indicate areas of thought foreign to the image it has made of itself. Its diplomatic compromise is a promise of connection, a cosmopolitical gesture.<sup>10</sup>

The word 'cosmopolitics' signals the path of (re)invention of politics that in many research settings requires a revaluation of means and ends. Epistemic practices need to take into account the ways in which they situate not only themselves but also others. In terms of "interspecies relations" this implies that all species involved in an experimental setting should be taken into account as experiential

9 Stengers 2011, 414.

10 The cornerstone of Stenger's cosmopolitics is the question whether and how epistemic practices can find their justification without any programmatic agenda, how they could create commensurability without reciprocal capture, how they could become 'delocalised' and thus cultivate the sense of the limitations of their own territory without becoming 'purely nomadic' (ibid., 372). "The prefix 'cosmo-' indicates the impossibility of appropriating or representing 'what is human in man' and should not be confused with what we call the universal [...] as an ingredient of the term 'cosmopolitics,' the cosmos corresponds to no condition, establishes no requirement" (ibid., 355). An "ecology of practices", which Stengers is arguing for, is not a solution but a learning process and creation of new ways of resisting a future made plausible by the power relations effective in the present (ibid., 407). "Everything we today judge to be normal, a synonym of progress, has been invented through struggle [...] But there is nothing neutral about this dynamic of invention. It defines *our* 'ecology' in a way that is political, that requires that we accept *the test that distinguishes between condition and constraint*" (ibid., 349).

participants.<sup>11</sup> Not everything is political, but, as generous research might be able to indicate, politics is everywhere, embedded not only in legal, social and economic structures, but also in epistemic and existential relations.

Some of us are talking, while others keep silent. This complicates the basis on which we can say "we". Who are we? What kind of constellations of participation animate us?<sup>12</sup> The question remains with "us".

11 Stengers' cosmopolitical proposal has multifaceted implications with regard to "interspecies relations". It calls for "a change in the nature of practices that produce 'facts' and 'proofs' whenever they are directed at beings that are not indifferent to the way they are treated" (ibid. 315). Cosmopolitics "creates the question of possible non-hierarchical modes of coexistence among the ensemble of inventions of nonequivalence" (ibid. 356). It resists the "mutilation of thought" that prevails whenever a research setting demands the researcher to "forget the difference between pouring a drop of acid on a lump of dead flesh or on a living organism" (ibid. 314–315). The cosmopolitical pathway implies that whatever is endowed with "behaviour" should be seen as capable of observing the observer and the questioner (ibid. 315).

12 Stengers' cosmopolitics involves 'reclaiming animism', that is, "recovering the capacity to honor experience, any experience we care for, as 'not ours' but rather as 'animating' us, making us witness to what is not us" (Stengers 2012, n.p.). In another vocabulary (and obliged by different philosophical constraints, as Stengers might state) we could say that insofar as existence is creation, "*our* creation" (Nancy 2000, 17), recovering the capacity to honor experience other than ours involves heightened sensitivity to being as being-with and to language as "the outside of the world in the world" (ibid. 84). Language not only exposes the world of bodies in its relationality, it also exposes the plurality of origins of sense. It involves 'translation', not in the sense of conservation of signification in the process of its displacement, but rather "'trans-lation' in the sense of a stretching or spreading out [*tension*] from one origin-of-meaning to another" (ibid., 87). "Language is the the space of its declaration" (ibid. 88). This implies that language is a radically indeterminate space, where the question of what "really" matters always keeps coming up short.

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ANNETTE ARLANDER

## Dearest Pine

Dearest Pine,<sup>1</sup>

I know I should have written to you before, but something else always seemed more urgent or important. Now, when almost a year

<sup>1</sup> This letter addressed to a pine tree is written as a voice-over text for a time-lapse video recording repeated visits to the tree, as part of an artistic research project called Performing with Plants. The project was an attempt to focus attention on plants, especially trees, respecting their special relationship to place and temporality, exploring ways of performing with them for camera in the places where they grow. (For details, see the project website <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/316550/316551>) The letter describes the process of creating a work, but it is written to be a part of an artwork, not a text about it. *Year of the Dog in Lill-Jan's Wood (Sitting in a Pine) with text* <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=652999>

Here the text is slightly revised for publication, with some sections removed and some footnotes added, such as this one.

Annette Arlander, *Year of the Dog in Lill-Jan's Wood (Sitting in a Pine)*  
2019, Still image from HD video

has passed since our time together, I just want to tell you how much I appreciate the opportunity to spend time with you, and your patience with my irregular comings and goings, my clumsiness and insensitivity at times, and my general human brutality.

We met for the first time on 15 February 2018, when I finally decided to simply begin my repeated visits to Lill-Jansskogen by creating a round, a walk with a few stops or stations, to pose for a camera on a tripod. And you were my last stop, the moment to rest and feel nurtured by your hospitality, after sitting on two spruce stumps and swinging as well as hanging from a tall pine, not far from where you live. My plan was to find a pine tree to hang and swing from,<sup>2</sup> the spruce stumps were something extra, a spontaneous reaction, a response to circumstances. I found a pine further away on a hill towards Brunnsviken, and even made a try-out image (on 4 February) together with it, but never felt comfortable with that connection, so I looked for something else. And now, in retrospect, I realize how important it was that I met you.

Well, I am an old woman, so as you might imagine, you were not the first pine tree in my life, not even the first I spent a year with. There have been others, like the lopsided pine tree growing in the southern part of Harakka Island in Helsinki that I sat in once a week for a year in 2006.<sup>3</sup> And the smaller pine tree on the shore of the same island that I was lying next to, on the rock, to perform as its shadow.<sup>4</sup> And there was also the huge grandfather pine near

my grandmother's cottage in the countryside, one I was traveling to and hanging from once a month for a year in 2007.<sup>5</sup> Not to mention my party with pines, many of them, in Nida on the Curonian Spit in September 2017.<sup>6</sup>

Now, however, when I look back at our time together, I realize that you were quite special after all. Perhaps because you are so small and skinny, despite your age, or perhaps because of your living quarters, up on the small hill right next to the running path. I could sit on your "lap", on the two slightly thicker branches that could carry my weight, very close to the ground, and still feel like I am up in the tree looking at the passers-by down below, due to the slope in front of you. In order to sit in, or on, or with you, I really had to enter your space, make my way through and amongst your branches. Sometimes I felt like I was intruding, even hurting you, other times you seemed almost welcoming. Because you were my last stop, at the end of my walk, and the only one that involved sitting *in* a tree, being embraced by you, I often felt drowsy and relaxed, although your branches were rather hard to sit on, like some skinny knees. I also wrote some notes of our meetings.

For instance, on 12 May I wrote: "The world of the spruces in the valley and the world of the pines on the hill are not that different, because they are all evergreen, although everything else around them is green now, as well. And the tiny birch growing next to the small pine, which I hardly noticed in wintertime, has grown big leaves, which hide me completely while sitting in the pine. What I

2 I edited several works of my performances with the tall pine tree, growing near the small pine that I address in this letter, such as *Swinging-Hanging in a Pine* <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=709657>

3 *Year of the Dog – Sitting in a Tree* <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=134462>

4 I was lying on the cliff next to the pine as if being its shadow. The four-channel installation is called *Shadow of a Pine*. <https://www.av-arkki.fi/works/mannyn-varjo-i-ii-iii-iv/>

5 *Year of the Dog in Kalvola – Calendar* <https://www.av-arkki.fi/works/koiran-vuosi-kalvolassa-kalenteri/>

6 I have described my attempts at performing with several pine trees in Nida in the text "Resting with Pines in Nida – attempts at performing with plants", *Performance Philosophy* vol 4 (2) 2019, pp 452-475, <https://www.performancephilosophy.org/journal/article/view/232>

thought would be an image of a pine, or an image of a human being in a pine, turned out to be an image of a pine and a birch.”

On 2 May I wrote: “This morning I followed the link in a tweet and encountered the text ‘Befriending a Tree’<sup>7</sup> that recommends the practice of befriending a tree and gives detailed advice on how to do so. I realized I am not really befriending any of my trees, two of them are actually stubs, and my way of approaching them was rather abrupt in the beginning, if not downright brutal. But that is my way with humans too, I guess. The little pine tree I am sitting in at the end of my walk is the one that I probably cause the most distress or even damage to, but I have slowly learned to balance my weight on two of its branches to cause a minimum of strain. And the tall pine tree I am swinging and hanging from, is so tall, I don’t think my weight really matters. I like to imagine that it enjoys the attention...” – I wonder why I thought only the tall pine tree would appreciate attention.

The image of the two of us, repeated for a year, between 16 February 2018 and 3 February 2019, it shows more of you compared to the image of the taller pine tree, but by no means all of you.

On 28 June I wrote: “Three visits to the spruces and the pines in a row, in a forest suffering from drought, especially up on the hill where there is very little soil on the rocks. Although plants are very clever in spreading out their root system towards water and nutrition, it can take them only so far; they cannot easily relocate. Although plants are very insistent, insects or other animals can eat most of their leaves, and they will happily grow new ones, they cannot survive prolonged drought unless accustomed to that type of

environment. The small birch growing next to the pine I am sitting in at the end of my walk is barely alive.”<sup>8</sup>

At the end of our year together, on 21 January 2019 I wrote, after moving to a new work space: “Perhaps that is why I am so attached to repetition as a method or a tool; when everything changes, it is nice to keep some things fixed, at least for a while, such as the duration of a year.”<sup>9</sup> For some reason I rarely mention you in my notes but keep describing places I visited or texts that I had read that week, and so on. Later, when looking at the video recordings of our encounters I always felt something was missing; there was no complementary image, unlike the images of the two spruce stumps that contrasted with each other or the images of hanging and swinging from the tall pine that could be compared and combined. Perhaps therefore I always returned to you, when something extra was needed, for instance for the artistic research working group. Thus, I returned to you on 4 June 2019 with a Gopro camera and explored how to record stillness with the help of movement, or movement in a manner that produced a feeling of stillness, turning my head with the camera gently from left to right and back while sitting on your

7 Chelsea Steinauer-Scudder “Befriending a Tree” in *Emergence Magazine* Issue no 1 Perspective (2018) <https://emergencemagazine.org/story/practice-befriending-tree/>

8 Another quote from the blog: “On 26 July, I wrote: ‘... at the end of my round I thought again how different my view in the tree was from that of my witness, the camera behind me. So, I made a few quick variations, from the three remaining directions, simply to explore alternatives. And they sure look different, the first one is from the path below, right in front of me, although I am hardly visible due to the vegetation. The two others are taken from the sides.’”

9 In the voice-over text the quote continues: “But on the other hand, I have really exhausted this method; since several years I have been looking for some new approach. If I cannot find a useful alternative to these rough time-lapse works, at least I should focus on shorter time periods, like a day and night. There are only a few more sessions to do this year, the year of the dog, and then I will start editing the material and thinking of some possible text or music to add to it. So, rather than planning how to produce more material, I should try to look at what could be done with the material that I already have gathered.”



lap. I also explored what an attempt at climbing higher up on your branches would look like recorded with the same device.<sup>10</sup>

And later, on 8 September 2019 I returned to you again to make a small study of light and darkness in response to a study of light and movement. At that time, I used my phone to record the view from sitting on your lap at night, at 9 pm, with the nearby street-light as the only light source. And then returned in the morning at 9 am to record the same view in day light.<sup>11</sup>

When I look at the final edited video of our meetings during the year, with short clips of me sitting among your branches recorded with a camera on a tripod, I like it more than I expected. While performing with you at the end of my round I always thought that the images would not be so interesting and that the experience was more important, like a reward to end the round with. And at some point, I thought that the tragic fate of the little birch growing next to you, which really died of the summer drought, was the only interesting thing in the rather bland images. But now, looking at the brief version of the video with some distance to our time together, I think that these sessions with you were the most successful ones, simply because I am not standing out so strongly as the main character and am often partly hidden between your branches. True, you are not fully visible in the images, but I never planned to create a real portrait of you. At least our roles are more balanced, both of us are only partly visible.

It is a pity that I cannot show you the video, the diary, that records and celebrates our year together.<sup>12</sup> Perhaps, one day, I will

10 This resulted in the split-screen video *Moving in a Pine* <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=641796>

11 The split-screen video is called *View from a Pine* <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=681580>

12 I edited two versions of the material. The version with one-minute clips of

find a small projector with a portable power source and come to you at night and project the video on your branches. Or perhaps I should attach a QR code that links to a website with the video, on you somewhere, if not for you to see, then for potentially curious passers-by, as a gesture of sharing, if nothing else. Perhaps I should bury this letter at your roots, if you would like the paper as a small treat, although it is made from the flesh of some of your relatives... Sorry for being morbid again.

Anyway, I want to tell you how grateful I am for the time we had together, the short moments of intimacy we shared, and I do hope that you did not feel too disturbed by my repeated visits. A big, big thank you for your patience and all the best for the future.

each image, made for exhibitions, called "Year of the Dog in Lill-Jan's Wood (Sitting in a Pine)" is 1 h 40 min. 10 sec. long. The brief version, with ten second clips of each image, called "Year of the Dog in Lill-Jan's Wood (Sitting in a Pine) mini" is only 16 min. 50 sec. <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=652999>



Kalle Hamm, *The Paradise Dream*, 2017, Mixed media, 60x66 cm

KALLE HAMM

## A She-Tiger in the Garden of Eden

Pier Paolo Pasolini and Doris Lessing are thinkers, who had a huge influence on me when I was an adolescent, dealing with earlier visions of what nowadays is regarded as interspecies relations. Now, decades later, I noticed that I am referring to both constantly, yet I cannot remember exactly what they say in their texts and artworks. I also realized that I am not referring to their words, but to my memories of their words – that is, what I imagine they said. Therefore, I decided to read and see all their artworks again in this so called mature age. This process took several years, and it led to the creation of a series of artworks<sup>1</sup> loosely based on re-reading and re-interpreting the oeuvres of Pasolini and Lessing.

<sup>1</sup> The artworks were exhibited in two solo exhibitions in Helsinki: *Notes on Pasolini* took place in 2015 at the Sinne Gallery, and *Letters About the City* in 2018 at the ARTag Gallery. Three of these artworks accompany this text and were selected to be part of the group exhibition *Cooking For The Apocalypse* in Exhibition Laboratory, Helsinki, 2020.

In the oeuvres of Lessing and Pasolini, the question of civilization is of great importance. Lessing touches the subject on a cosmic and spiritual level, while Pasolini on a social and individual level. Both are also concerned with the effects of technology on our local and global environment. Lessing is focused on the collapse of civilization, and Pasolini on the literal history of civilization. They yearn to return to times when human activity was in balance with nature, which is an ambiguous request, since technology is said to be both the cause and solution for climate crisis.

### TEKHNÉ

According to classic philosophers 'tekhné' is a human being's way of experiencing, understanding and knowing the world. Hence, technology as well as art stem from the ancient concept of 'tekhné', the method humans use to reveal reality through embodied praxis.<sup>2</sup> In this approach it is not to be seen in terms of facts, in the form of solid data or matter, but rather as something which comes to the world and is about to be tested, more like a skill. Both skill and art come into being as a result of the resistance/fraction which the world or others exert on us. This resistance/fraction is important, because without it we are left to the mercy of our own limited imagination.

The human mind can create an entire universe, not to mention other minor realities. They can be "right, good, convincing or the best", because of the mere fact that we, humans, created them. The problem with imagining is that we do not even notice, when our imagined realities collide with the shared world, where other people and beings exist.<sup>3</sup>

2 Adiwijaya, D. Rio. "Techne as technology and Techne as Art: Heidegger's phenomenological perspective." 13-24.

3 Varto Juha. *Isien synnit – kasvatuksen kulttuurinen ja biologinen ongelma*. 104.

Nowadays, the understanding of 'tekhné' has shifted and is mainly associated with technology as the practice of science. This interpretation does not serve all existing worlds, but only the world of humans, constructed by humans and the primary stress is on the needs of humans.<sup>4</sup>

In Pasolini's case, he sees language as a human technology that allows people to look at their own history and learn from their mistakes. Language can be instrumentalized just as science, and it will not remain intact. However, the problem of this humanistic approach is anthropocentrism, viewing Language as an entirely human construct.

Lessing on the other hand, explores interactions between different species and the universe with the help of technology. According to her, the issue of balance between humans and nature lies in cosmic vibrations, which are out of tune. Nevertheless, humans cannot control this tuning with the use of their technology. The only option is to simply wait for better times. Yet, this approach easily leads to apathy and nihilism, which increase the inherent hopelessness.

### COMPASSION

In the documentary *Appunti per un film sull'India (Notes for an Indian Film, 1968)* Pier Paolo Pasolini documents his preliminary research for a narrative film to be shot in India (a film he never made). It tells the story and hardships that Maharaja's family endures after his decision to give his body to a starving tigress and her cubs. Interestingly enough, in Pasolini's unpublished autobiographical notebooks *I Quaderni rossi*, written in 1946, he writes of how as a child he saw in an illustrated booklet a picture of a man lying under the paws of a tigress, half swallowed, like a mouse in a cat's mouth. He writes:

4 Varto, Juha. *Kauneuden taito – Estetiikkaa taidekasvattajille*. 113-115.

*[...] I began to wish I was the explorer devoured alive by the wild animal. Since then, before falling asleep, I would fantasize about being myself devoured [...] and then of course, although it was absurd, I would also devise a way to free myself and kill her [the tigress].*<sup>5</sup>

What Pasolini does not mention, is that his opening scene of the Indian film is based on the well-known Buddhist Jataka tale, which tells the life story of Bodhisattva<sup>6</sup> Prince Sattva and gives a lesson about compassion. As an erudite man, he must have known the original Jataka tale:

Bodhisattva was born into a wealthy family. When the prince grew up many looked up to him because of his wisdom. Drawn to guiding others along the path of selfless generosity, he decided being a teacher is his true calling. He left the city for the forest, where he established a sanctuary for those seeking to enter a higher life. One day, he was walking in the forest with a disciple, after weeks without rain, the trees were bare, the streambeds nearly dry and the grass was brittle. Suddenly, they heard coughing roars coming from somewhere nearby. These were the roars of a starving tigress. The teacher and the disciple came to the edge of a cliff and looking down they saw a starving tigress with two small cubs trying to nurse from her. When the tigress looked at her own cubs her eyes narrowed, in her desperation she started to view them as prey, as meat. Bodhisattva asked his disciple to run and find food for the tigress while he will stay and do all he can to stop her from eating her children. He looked at the tigress with pity, she

5 Viano, Maurizio: *A Certain Realism*. 195-196.

6 The bodhisattva (Pali: bodhisatta) is a being who aspires for Bodhi or Enlightenment. The concept of bodhisattva (meaning 'Buddha-to-be') is one of the most important concepts in Buddhism. Kariyawasam, A. G. S. *The Bodhisattva Concept*. 4.

struggled to get up, and once she succeeded Bodhisattva realized his disciple will not return in time. As he felt his mind vast, empty, Bodhisattva removed his robe and leaped from the cliff. The tigress, startled at first, gathered her remaining strength, longed forward and began to feed. When the disciple returned empty handed, realizing what happened, he threw himself to the ground in tears. The gods were stunned by what they had witnessed, they descended to earth and covered the ground with heavenly parfum. Since this day, Bodhisattva is praised for his selfless deed by humans and by gods.<sup>7</sup>

The words of the tale are not enough for Pasolini, he adds imagery to them. Storytelling as a technique is used not only to produce text, but as a holistic apparatus, which benefits personal experiences, borrows from other cultures and moves fluently between mythical and modern times. Pasolini does not cut from word to word, not from image to image, but from thought to thought, whether literal or pictorial.

### THE GOLDEN AGE

In her writing, Doris Lessing tells the story of an ancient city. The different development phases of the city are scattered in many of her books. In the novel *Martha Quest*, the young Martha Quest dreams of a white city in the mountains while walking around her family's estate:

*I looked over fields and savannahs and imagined a noble and gleaming white city on the hills. Many-fathered children were running and playing among the flowers and the terraces, able to be glimpsed through the white pillars and tall trees of this fabulous and ancient place. I pictured*

7 Martin, Rafe. *Endless Path: Awakening Within the Buddhist Imagination: Jataka Tales, Zen Practice, and Daily Life*.

*my parents outside one of the gates. They were forever excluded from the city because of their pettiness of vision and myopic understanding. They stood grieving, longing to enter, but were barred by a stern and remorseless me. Unfortunately one gets nothing, not even a dream, without paying heavily for it, and in my version of the golden age there must always be at least one person standing at the gate to exclude the unworthy.*<sup>8</sup>

Later in her adulthood, Martha has visions where humans and all animals live together in perfect harmony:

*When I moved to London, while making love I saw a vision of a man and a woman walking in a high place under a blue sky, holding children by the hand, and with them all kinds of wild animals, which were not wild at all. Then this vision appeared in my dreams: a similarly marvelous family walking with their friendly animals. The golden age.*<sup>9</sup>

The idea of the Four-Gated City was born, assuming its final form in the eponymous volume of the *Children of Violence* series. In this novel, Martha's employer, Mark Coldridge, first writes a short story and then a novel about the birth, growth and destruction of the city. A similar description of a utopian Round City can be found in Lessing's novel *Shikasta*, where she recounts how the Round City was built and what finally became of it. Other accounts of mythical cities can be found, for example, in the novel *Briefing for a Descent into Hell* and the short story *The Reason for It*.

Lessing does not regard technology as a problem. The problem is what it is used for – the ethical aspect of it. She makes a journey from socialist humanism, opposing self-reflection, to liberal

humanism, emphasizing the role of personal feelings. She stresses the notion that ideologies have become like religions and they are approached emotionally. This creates new types of competing groups whose argumentation is no longer based on facts, but rather on faith and emotions.

#### THE REALITY

Pasolini shows us a world, where innocence still exists. Lessing leaves us to the mercy of the universe. Pasolini encourages us to act, Lessing to wait patiently. Both ask us to feel something, which is a fascinating aspect of art, but what we feel lays on the way we view reality, and the way we locate ourselves within it.

Human relations to reality (and to other species sharing it) can be broad or narrow. The narrowed relations are a typical Western phenomenon, where the relations to the world are determined by a bodiless mind or spirit manifested in the ability to imagine. Through this ability, Western people choose what they want from their environment, and close away what they do not want.

Human criteria dominate the world that is created according to human principles, ideas, hopes, dreams, fictions, fantasies, political utopias and generally thoughts of how things should be. This concept has become crucial since based on the technological principle, western science, even at its best, is only hopes and idealizations of what reality really is.

8 Lessing, Doris. "Martha Quest (Children of Violence, vol. 1)."

9 Lessing, Doris. "The Four-Gated City."



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Kalle Hamm, *The Daydream City*, 2017, Mixed media, 60x66 cm



SIIRI SILTALA

# Marine Panic

## Interspecies relations on cinematic islands

The way we choose to represent the sea and its inhabitants, greatly depends on our cultural context. Using the sea as a vehicle to portray abstract fears is a tradition as old as the act of storytelling. Going back to the very beginning of western literature we find Homer's tales taking place in and around the sea in Iliad and Odyssey; the later popularized genre of robinsonades also originates in ancient times, focusing on the experiences of solo travelers, mainly castaways in sea.

Traditionally, the sea is used to say something about the things we fear but cannot quite put into words, as Stephanos Stephanides and Susan Bassnett describe through the ever-changing traditions associated with islands as milieus:

Jakob Johannsen, 5 AM on a Fishing Boat (San Agustinillo, Mexico), 2020,  
C-print, 50x75 cm

Ice Fishers at Vanhan Kaupunginlahti (Helsinki, Finland),  
2019, C-print, 40x55 cm

*The virtual spaces of islands are susceptible to translatability and articulate perspectives on the shifting relationship between self and other, center and periphery. Islands place here and elsewhere in dialogue and, in this way, serve as sites of mediation between cultures. Within a global culture marked by inequalities and differences, islands induce a contrapuntal approach for literary and cultural criticism.*<sup>1</sup>

This way of studying islands in film provides us with a different approach to works made during the later stages of capitalism. Inspired by this approach, this text analyzes three films involving islands, isolation, despair and aggression—exploring how the sea and its creatures interact with the human characters of each story, making them essential to the way these themes are portrayed.

Though themes of isolation and loneliness are ever-present, context is always relevant in setting the thematic trends, in part created by the dread arising from our economic and social conditions. In the aftermath of spring 2020 we gradually start seeing the global effects of severe isolation, but this act of limiting social interaction isn't an entirely new phenomenon. The number of Americans who say they have no one with whom to discuss important matters has more than doubled, and social connectedness has been on a sharp decline already since the early 80's.<sup>2</sup> In 2018, the European Commission published policy briefs calling loneliness "*an unequally shared burden in Europe*". Unfavorable economic circumstances and living alone were mentioned to be associated with higher rates of loneliness.<sup>3</sup>

1 Bassnett, Stephanides, "Islands, Literature and Cultural Translatability," 8.

2 McPherson et al., "Social Isolation in America: Changes in Core Discussion Networks Over Two Decades," 353-375.

3 The European Commission's science and knowledge service, "Loneliness – an unequally shared burden in Europe," 1.

When struggle and discomfort are caused by deep seated systematic structures, one major fulfilling way to access the resulting fears is through storytelling. The mismatch between one's physical experience and the reality as it's described by other sources creates collective cognitive dissonance; this phenomenon is better accessed via more implicit means. In film, certain trends can be observed surrounding concerns created by the effects of late capitalism. The way this term is contemporarily utilized, refers to a capitalist system that has lived past its golden age. The downsides of the system—like mass wealth inequality, disappearance of social safety nets and exponential growth of consumer culture—are heightened while the benefactors of the said system keep decreasing in numbers.<sup>4</sup> Societies that value spectacle over objective reality and consumption over humanity create individuals with shared anxieties.

#### ISOLATION OF A FAMILY: THE RED TURTLE

Michael Dudok de Wit's film *The Red Turtle* (2016) is an intriguing study of isolation. Within the big blue, the story unfolds without any spoken or written language. A nameless man is shipwrecked on an island from which he is determined to escape. However, every attempt to sail back to civilization is prevented by the titular red turtle, a mysterious, forceful and perhaps malignant being that forces the man back to shore. Enraged, he tries to destroy the turtle. After turning the animal on its back to dry and die, his guilt starts to manifest. The nameless Robinson Crusoe ends up relinquishing all escape attempts and stays on the island to take care of the turtle that, eventually, turns into a red-haired woman with whom he has a child.

4 Jameson, *Postmodernism, Or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, 18.

Based on the setting presented in the beginning of the film, the story seems to be a traditional robinsonade. However, as its more magical elements are slowly revealed the viewer is invited to go deeper. We know how these stories are expected to evolve: a man is stranded, creates shelter, struggles for a while but ends up surviving and maybe teaching some Christian values to a native or few. In this story, the nature ends up teaching the man a series of fundamental life lessons. The stripped-down setting shows the change we see in the man's attitude towards nature—the nature he meets in his surroundings, in his partner, in himself.

From the very start, the island of *The Red Turtle* is alive and thriving. The stranded man encounters different neighbors: bugs and crabs keep bothering him and the countless seagulls make appearances whenever the protagonist looks up in the sky, seeking in vain a moment of peace and silence. Put together with his initial lack of shelter and nourishment, these elements seem like nuisances to the man. Still, to him, they are largely insignificant as his focus is on the big mission of getting off the island as fast as he can. When nature shows itself in a more precarious light, in the shape of a giant red turtle, the man's anger grows. He is unable to notice what is in front of him before it becomes his (perceived) enemy. The turtle is big enough to get his attention, to shake his raft. Its red color is a warning sign or maybe a war cry. In the man's mind the sea and its inhabitants are meaningless until they become harmful, there is no in between, and so the turtle must take a drastic route. In breaking the man's raft the turtle shows wisdom, as it knows the man would not survive the endless blue on his humble makeshift vessel. Instead of seeing these measures as a sign to stop, ponder and look around, the man is instantly filled with the need to strike back. This need to take revenge is brought by the man's false interpretation and

therefore cannot be foreseen by the turtle, who is unable to fight back as the man discharges his rage.

After his fit, we see remorse. Guilt comes over the man as he finally pays attention to the turtle as something more than an obstacle. In his efforts to save the animal it is almost as if he realizes that its red color was not a warning, but a demand to be seen. This change in relation is so drastic that the strange animal ends up shifting in shape; becoming something the man previously felt he must escape the island to reach—a partner, in the form of a beautiful woman.

With the idealization of the frugal way of living, Dudok de Wit's direction references Rousseau's idea of the noble savages. As the man stops fighting against the inevitable, he starts an intimate but simple life with the woman. Their connection is not achieved through language or flirtation, but by simply surviving together. Working to support each other by obeying the rules of land and sea they also create new life, a baby boy. This child is free of the violent impulses and resistance we first saw in the man. He is free from society's shackles that this family is now isolated from. The French naturalist philosopher Antoinette Des Houlières spoke of the alienation from nature, as the man had experienced, in her work *The Stream*:

*It is humanity itself that tells us that by a just choice  
Heaven placed, when it formed human beings,  
the other beings under its laws.  
Let us not flatter ourselves.  
We are their tyrants rather than their kings.  
Why do we torture you [the streams]?  
Why do we shut you up in a hundred canals?*

*And why do we reverse the order of nature  
By forcing you to spring up into the air?*<sup>5</sup>

In *The Red Turtle*, these tortured streams show their true power in the form of a giant tsunami that washes over all life on the island. The panicked child looks for his parents in the chaos that follows, at first finding only the injured mother. The settled sea offers a helping hand in the form of two turtles that work together with the boy to locate his father, eventually bringing both humans back to shore. This turn of events demonstrates the reached harmony between man and sea; the man is accepted as worthy of saving.

The humanity described by Des Houlières is only observed in the previous phase of the stranded man. After learning his place as part of nature, the feelings of vengefulness and pride vanish. We can observe this not only in the way he treats the island, but also in the way he treats the woman—as an equal, not an object of desire. She is obviously different and foreign, but not incomprehensible in her motives.

Whether the woman is real or a figment of the man's imagination is irrelevant; what is important is her meaning for the man, and by extension, the audience. Born from blind anger, violence and the remorse that follows, the woman returns to the sea after fulfilling her goal on the island that is Eden and Inferno intertwined.

For its contemporary audience, *The Red Turtle* serves as a reminder. In a world where the climate crisis is raising, yet it is one of the ongoing apocalypses, it is easy to feel like everything is falling apart. The modern-day plague and the surging popularity of politics that values capital over human dignity, limit the ways in which

5 Conley, *The Suspicion of Virtue: Women Philosophers in Neoclassical France*, 62.

we feel and function as humans.<sup>6</sup> Though these environmental, political and socio-economic realities might have a numbing effect on the mind, they can still be detected as underlying currents in most of our communication; the anxiety usually raises its head in every conversation having to do with the abstract future. The end might feel nearer than ever; still, most of us somehow return to completing our daily tasks while waiting for the next wave of what's to come. In their scarcity and absoluteness, the islands we see in film are akin to the homes we were all banished to during the waves of a pandemic. Living in these conditions can feel increasingly morbid. However, we must pay attention and remember the most profound connection we have is that to the nature we all share.

#### ISOLATION AND COMMUNITY: WHALE RIDER

Niki Caro's *Whale Rider* (2002) is based on a 1987 novel by the same name written by Witi Ihimaera. It portrays the small Whangara community residing on the North Island of New Zealand, kept together largely by their shared history of isolation. The story is built around a quest of finding a new leader for the people of this settlement. Koro Apirana (Rawiri Paratene) is the aging patriarch of the community. Traditionally, the responsibility of continuing his work would be given to his male descendants, but after the refusal of both of his sons Koro is left with a single grandchild, a twelve-year-old girl called Paikea Apirana (Keisha Castle-Hughes). Paikea is gifted and eager to learn about the responsibilities of a

6 Read, "Can Poverty Drive You Mad? 'Schizophrenia', Socio-Economic Status and the Case for Primary Prevention," 7-19.

Following pages:

Jakob Johannsen, *Kuusiluoto Island* (Helsinki, Finland), 2019, C-print, 40x55 cm





leader, but her attempts to prove herself to her grandfather seem doomed due to her gender.

*Whale Rider* is a cinematic study of an isolated culture. In its depiction of Māori tradition, we witness a clash between two interpretations: the young Paikea sees the surrounding society as a creation of the legends that molded it, while seeking recognition and acceptance in order to become her grandfather's successor; and the second is to bring to life the legends that created Whangara. Koro continuously dismisses her as he desperately wants to give the reigns to almost anyone but her. In his mind, the tradition of patriarchy is fixed. The dynamics between these two is very flammable, leading to public humiliation for Paikea every time she gets caught in her silent resistance. Nevertheless, even when confronted, she never sheds a tear in front of her grandfather.

Koro's struggle to create conservative continuity blinds him. Refusing to give up after failing to convince his sons to take on his duties, he takes on the challenge of teaching Māori traditions to young boys—his only hope in trying to find the next community leader. It is evident that his efforts in forcing chiefs out of uninterested preteens are doomed, but for him coming to grips with this realization would be too crushing, it would make him a failure. In a society troubled by lack of jobs, absent fathers and a general lack of direction, Koro continues to carry a whale's tooth. For the villagers, this tooth is a *Rei Puta*, a symbol of strength and responsibility. Koro is the one who must find another who has the jaw to wield it.

Paikea's relationship to the sea starts early, as she learns the story of her ancestors and the fact that her name originates from that of a legendary leader in the Māori folklore. Her namesake is widely recognized in the oral tradition as the (male) hero who arrived to

the shore of New Zealand on the back of a humpback whale, after surviving a massacre at sea. This knowledge binds Paikea to the island. Thus, as she tries to leave for Europe with her father, she hears the whales beneath the sea surface, they cry out to the girl, asking her not to go. Paikea gets out of the car, listens and decides to obey their call.

In her everyday life, Paikea mostly struggles to form human connections. Each experience of rejection by her grandfather or the other kids at school seems to add to the value she gives the sea and its precious giants. The little girl is puzzled by the dynamics in her family, and often ends up alone, gazing at waves. She sees her father leaving for a new life in Germany, and her uncle giving up by washing his hands from any responsibility. Paikea looks for hope in the glorious legends kept alive by the older folk. Like all children, she too wants answers; she wants to know where the whale that brought her people to the island originally came from.

As the story develops, we see old Koro slowly facing his defeat. Though he gives his all to push the kids to become future leaders, none of the boys can complete their final challenge of retrieving the valuable whale tooth from the seabed. He has, quite literally, thrown away his strength, trusting someone else would continue to carry his torch. This trust is unintentionally betrayed by the young boys who were never really up to the task. Unable to see other options to his patriarchal approach, he turns inwards. The once powerful man is reduced to a stiff body on a bed, staring at nothing. Paikea, in turn, is scared of this drastic change. She seeks guidance from her grandmother and once again uses her connection to the sea to understand the man's despair. As we dive with the camera, we hear her explain, "*It's quiet down deep. Koro needed quiet. That's what Nanny said. He didn't want to talk anymore. He just wanted to go down and down.*"

John Reid and Matthew Rout describe the nuances of Māori value systems, utilizing the term Reactionary Traditionalism. The writers refer to an ideological response to colonization that supposedly incites indigenous people to dissociate economically from modernity.<sup>7</sup> In this mindset, the indigenous culture is seen as the antithesis of Western Capitalism. In *Whale Rider* we see this point of view exaggerated by the character of the grandfather as he actively despises others who leave the community. When discussing the people making up this community, he reveals a collectivist ideology—Koro describes his people as a rope; a strong instrument made of small threads, used to pursue a common goal of retaining tradition.

Through Leon Narbey's cinematography we see the consequences of reactionary traditionalism. The scenery is far from glorious, opting to focus on the muddy town and its run-down homes instead of the amazing New Zealand nature expected by the audience. Here we witness a group that, in fear of outside forces taking power, has chosen to further isolate itself from Western society. Statistically, any indigenous minority is right in fearing the results of welcoming capitalist ideology, since there is a strong chance that assimilation means only subjugation. In many of the characters of *Whale Rider* we see the paralyzing effects of this shared anxiety: employment rates run low, families are broken, and alcohol abuse is common. Without a common goal, the people of this village seem lost in their own home.

Niki Caro's narrative, both as a scriptwriter and director, emphasizes this aberration in the third act of the film. As Paikea's

7 Reid, Rout, "Māori tribal economy: Rethinking the original economic institutions", 84-103.

emotions finally burst in a speech she gives at the end of a school performance, her grandfather is absent—he is alone on the shore. He finds a herd of beached whales, the ancient ones he had been calling out to for guidance after the loss of his Rei Puta. Seemingly, they have come to the village shoreline to complete the final mission of death. The Whangara community is dependent on humpback whales in forming their identity through a shared history with the marine mammals. Therefore, their possible death also means the death of a culture—one can't exist without the other. It is clear that the spirit of Whangara is held by both humans and whales. Following in the footsteps of her ancestors, Paikea saves the whales: silently, she climbs on the back of the leading whale, taking a deep breath before diving together into the dark blue sea. The pair is quickly followed by the rest of the pack, as all the humpbacks turn back home. Paikea has fulfilled her inherited fate. The whales are saved, the community comes together, and Koro finally truly recognizes his granddaughter's potential. After a while, the whales return Paikea to her human tribe that now recognizes the girl as their leader, the one to carry their Rei Puta.

The story also seems to present a larger thesis for minorities that distance themselves from Western capitalist values, but in the end this thought is left somewhat unfinished. It seems that an isolated community can never completely distance itself from outside influences, and to renew old tradition is to grow with the times; the patriarch grows to understand and support female leadership, even when it goes against his tradition. Perhaps the happy ending reached by Paikea, Koro and the people of Whangara is not to be taken as a working model for similar real-life situations, but instead to be read as a celebration of the interspecies relations we have largely grown to ignore.

## ISOLATION, MAN ON MAN: THE LIGHTHOUSE

In Robert Eggers's *The Lighthouse* (2019) we see two men isolated on a small rock in the North Atlantic. Working in hellish conditions and surrounded by dark ocean, the two eventually become stranded. As they run out of food, the pair turns to every possible measure (drinking, dancing, fighting etc.) to stay alive and on top of each other: the sea is stormy and cruel, and it forces the men to face each other as it pushes a severed head ashore when escalation of the conflict occurs. This explosive dynamics between the characters of Wake (Willem Dafoe) and Winslow (Robert Pattinson) can be studied as a dissection of how men behave in such relentless conditions when constantly reminded of their animalistic nature, and in the absence of women.

The female presence appears only in the repeated appearances of a mermaid in Winslow's hallucinations. This image provides a sense of warmth and escape for Winslow, supplying him with relief needed to endure yet another day under Wake's bossiness. In fulfilling his duties as the supervisor, Wake is a tyrant. He continually pushes his employee to the ultimate limit, lapsing into petty cruelty and manipulation. Deprived of rest and nourishment and extremely overworked, Winslow is cornered. As the film progresses, so does Winslow's isolation from the mermaid. Yet, he only becomes truly dangerous when he starts seeing whom he despises (Wake) in what previously provided him with psychological shelter (the mermaid). This shift is shown in an imagined sex scene involving all three, that plays a crucial role in Winslow's mental breakdown and leads to violent destruction. It is noteworthy that the point of Winslow crossing the threshold of sanity was the act of killing of a Seagull.

According to Hegel's master-slave dialectic, conflict is encountered when two individuals cannot recognize each other as equals.

One's mere existence is proven by the recognition of another, but the recognition provided by a slave is never enough for the master.<sup>8</sup> In *The Lighthouse*, neither of the characters' existence can fully be realized because they crave recognition from the other whom they perceive as less than human.

In societies valuing consumption, mental health is seen as a private matter.<sup>9</sup> Competition is heightened by having replaceable workers work on zero-hour contracts. So-called essential workers internalize responsibility for things they cannot control, like their mental state in an isolated and chaotic (or unsafe) environment. Similarly, both characters of this film are summoned to the island to fulfill a task. They are expected to do whatever is necessary to keep the lighthouse working and merchant and whaling ships from sinking, no matter the conditions they face. Their work is deemed essential but the compensation never arrives. Statistically, extended experiences of loneliness cannot only lead to mental and physical illness, but also to violence. This story is an example of the reactive forces of capitalism creating anxiety through bodily, emotional and sexual repression that operates through a redirection of affect.<sup>10</sup> The hatred built up by repeated experiences of subjective injustice infect the way Winslow sees his manager, leading to fatal consequences.

What pushed these men to this line of work was not only their respective individual pasts but also the system in which the workers operate, as their choices were limited to begin with. From Winslow's actions it is clear he seeks revenge. Before he directs his rage at another human, his first brutal act is done to a seagull. This act

8 Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, paragraph 179.

9 McMahon, "Vital Forces: Marx and the Tension of Capitalist Affect."

10 Kingsmith, "High Anxiety: Capitalism and Schizoanalysis."

portrays the perplexity in Winslow's experience of injustice; to some extent he is aware that the wrongfulness of the actions done by his superior are not simply due to the superior's inherent wickedness. There is a larger system at play, but on this particular rock that doesn't matter. It seems that, for Winslow, it is somehow safer to unload his frustrations by killing a part of nature, in his mind this act is free from consequences. Yet, this deed both brings more instability to the already shaky relationship between the men, and simultaneously serves as the har bringer of the storm—both men are now forced to face the lethal wrath of the sea. The men are strong enough to fight each other, but against nature's fury they are impotent. The only reachable relief is the fleeting catharsis that follows the ultimate destruction.

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## Following pages:

Assaf Evron, Untitled 1, 2014, Gelatin silver print, 9x11 cm  
 Untitled 2, 2014, Gelatin silver print, 8x18 cm







Assaf Evron, French Colonies, Maroc, 1930 / 2014, Inkjet  
print on rice paper with oak frame, 178x117 cm

MOHAMED SLEIMAN LABAT & PEKKA NISKANEN

## **Family Gardens An Emerging Discourse In The Sahrawi Community**

For centuries, the Sahrawi have been pastoralist nomads living in Western Sahara.<sup>1</sup> The nomadic lifestyle they were leading was comprised of several traditions and rituals adapted to the surrounding desert environment.

Small scale family gardens started to emerge in the Sahrawi community in the Hamada Desert, southwest Algeria around 2002,<sup>2</sup> and they have been increasing in numbers ever since. Currently, there are over one thousand small scale gardens spread through the five Sahrawi refugee camps. Leading figures in the process are Sahrawi agricultural engineers and farmers who have been researching and developing the garden practices in this special

1 Wilson, "Ambiguities of Space and Control", 15; Volpato et al., Ethnoveterinary of Sahrawi Pastoralists of Western Sahara, 12.

2 Taleb Brahim, interviewed by Mohamed Sleiman Labat, 26.05.2020, Motif Art Studio Archive [Original File: Audio Segments 05.20/N°6].

location and context.<sup>3</sup> This phenomenon is marking a shift in perspective in the Sahrawi community. It is redefining diet perception in the refugee camps, and takes part in the process of creating a new discourse and narrative for the Sahrawi.

The family gardens are emerging in a structured approach through training and workshops to provide and disseminate the knowledge needed for them to succeed.<sup>4</sup> As we study the family gardens, food cultures and habits of the Sahrawi, one of the central parts seems to be an aim to have a self-sufficient way of living. Gardens and agricultural knowledge are starting to change people's perception about food production, which is essential for this community that has been dependent on international aid since their arrival to the refugee camps in Algeria in 1975.

#### SAHRAWI FAMILY GARDEN AS A DISCOURSE

Discourse is a manifold term that can be understood from several perspectives. One is based on Foucault's discursive theory and the concept of discursive formation. Discourse could be condensed to mean a certain way of speaking or describing the chosen object of knowledge. Foucault's archaeological method seeks to pinpoint the time and place when a certain discourse emerged and how that discourse became meaningful and powerful at a certain historical moment.<sup>5</sup> In our research we name the Sahrawi family garden as a discourse.

The non-discursive area is part of the power and authority structure that formulates the discursive knowledge.<sup>6</sup> In the *Archaeology of Knowledge*, Foucault names "institutions, political

events, economic practices and processes" to be non-discursive practices.<sup>7</sup> The non-discursive is a practice of a certain discipline, and discourse is knowledge formation about a certain specific area, like gardening.<sup>8</sup> That is to say, the gardening knowledge is a discourse that has a central role in the non-discursive practices of gardening. In our research, we will name the Sahrawi family garden practices as a central non-discursive practice. However, we don't make a hierarchical distinction between discursive and non-discursive while bringing up the Sahrawi knowledge production. The distinction between discursive and non-discursive is useful only to a certain extent as we view the knowledge and practices around the family gardens.

The archival materials, interviews and documentation of oral knowledge are part of the Sahrawi discourse. This includes the Sahrawi oral poems, the *Nomadic Calendar*,<sup>9</sup> the stories, the recorded interviews and testimonies. There is little research on the family garden phenomenon in the Hamada Desert and documentation of such histories helps bring the subject to be researched and analyzed. Sleiman Labat has conducted interviews and collected different oral histories in the Sahrawi community through video and audio materials as part of Motif Art Studio's Archive. These interviews and other archives are our primary research material to view the phenomena and discourse from the perspective and position of the Sahrawi.<sup>10</sup>

3 Brahim, "Cultivating Hope for Western Sahara", 55-56.

4 Van Cotthem, "Family Gardens in the Sahara Desert of Algeria."

5 Moon, "Narrating Political Reconciliation", 48.

6 Bacci and Bonham, *Reclaiming Discursive Practices as an Analytic focus*, 182.

7 Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language*, 162.

8 Bacci and Bonham, *Reclaiming Discursive Practices as an Analytic focus*, 182.

9 The Sahrawi nomads had a special calendar in which the years are given names of events, plants, geographic referents or natural phenomena. The *Nomadic Calendar* preserves knowledge of history, geography, plants and natural phenomena.

10 Motif Art Studio is a space for art creation and art education in Samara Camp, southwest Algeria.

### FROM NOMADIC TO SEDENTARIZED CAMPS – CHANGES IN THE SAHRAWI FOOD CULTURE

The Sahrawi, literally, people of the desert, are the indigenous nomadic pastoralists of Western Sahara. For centuries, they roamed the desert in different tribal groupings and clusters, raising camel herds and goats. They speak Hassaniya,<sup>11</sup> an oral dialect descending from Arabic and the Amazigh language.<sup>12</sup> In the Berlin Conference of 1884, Western Sahara became a Spanish Colony,<sup>13</sup> and Spain ruled the area until 1975. After Spain relinquished control, Morocco and Mauritania seized the territory. In 1973, a liberation movement called the POLISARIO Front was established to resist the Spanish and later the Mauritanian and Moroccan occupation.<sup>14</sup> The 16 year war, which took place between 1975 and 1991, caused the displacement of the majority of the Sahrawi and made them seek refuge in Algeria. There they started building camps from fabric tents and mud houses. As the camps grew larger with the increase in population, the Sahrawi refugees built hospitals, schools and other facilities.<sup>15</sup> These geopolitical factors that led to the relocation

11 Hassaniya is spoken mainly in Western Sahara, Mauritania small parts of Morocco and Algeria and other neighboring countries.

12 Zbeir, *Réflexions sur le Dialecte Hassaniya*, 3.

13 Colonialism is a discourse and a western metanarrative that overlooked and foreshadowed the narratives in the colonized areas. A typical feature of colonialism is to take control over areas and natural resources that belong to the people living in that area. Colonialist power almost routinely changes the political, social and cultural system of the colonized territory. (Loomba, 2005, pp. 2, 6.) The West has destroyed during the course of history perspectives of others in the name of colonialism and unifying perspectives that are promoted as western rationality and progress.

14 Zunes and Mundy, *Western Sahara, War, Nationalism & Conflict Irresolution*, 99-101.

15 Leite et al., "The Western Sahara Conflict, The Role of Natural Resources in Decolonization", 13.

of a nomadic community into settled refugee camps highlights the process of sedentarization.

### SAHRAWI NOMADIC DIET

As nomads, the Sahrawi had a pastoralist diet based on the limited food resources available in their environment. In pastoralist systems people depend heavily on herding animals and moving with them to different grazing areas. In the interviews,<sup>16</sup> several people speak about diets based on meat from camels, goats and sheep. The Sahrawi also cultivated wheat and barley, exclusively during the rainy season and mainly around the areas where the valleys collect water. After harvest, the wheat was stored in *Matmura*<sup>17</sup> for times of drought, when camels and goats cannot produce milk. Camels provided meat, milk and fat for food as well as for various medicinal uses, not to mention the transportation uses.<sup>18</sup>

In the oral Sahrawi poems, the testimonies and the Nomadic Calendar of Sahrawi, we can trace mentions of plants, farming seasons, greenery and draughts. We find many years in the Nomadic Calendar named after plants<sup>19</sup> and seasonal farming:

16 Sulaiman Labat Abd, 15.07.2015; Mohamed Mbarek Said, interviewed by Mohamed Sleiman Labat 20.02.2019, Motif Art Studio Archive [Original File: Audio segments 07.15/N°01].

17 *Matmura* is a pit in the ground 2 or 3 meters deep, larger at the bottom, burned and then plastered with fine sand and straws. Harvested wheat can be preserved there for several months. (Mohamed Mbarek Said, interviewed by Mohamed Sleiman Labat 20.02.2019, Motif Art Studio Archive [Original File: Audio segments 07.15/N°08].)

18 Sahrawi Nomads navigate the desert geography through plant tastes in the camel milk. When camels digest wild plants, the plant substance is released in the milk with a certain distinct taste. To the nomads, this could indicate the location of the grazing areas. (Sulaiman Labat Abd, interviewed by Mohamed Sleiman Labat 15.07.2015 [Original File: Audio segments 10.14/N°01]).

19 In the rainy season, the nomads collect certain plants for medicinal uses, they

The Year of Yelma (1939) a local plant the animals eat. It was plenty that year.

The Year of Saba (1951) a prosperous year in which the nomads planted wheat. Each grain produced up to 12 wheat spikes, something that was unusual to them.

The Year of Tafsa (1958) a little plant that appeared all over the place in that year.<sup>20</sup>

Harvesting wheat in the rainy season also comes up in the *Tishash* poem by Badi Mohamed Salem, a prominent Sahrawi nomadic poet.

*“Or in the watering season,  
when the wheat is still to produce its seed,  
I am there in the midst of the life of the camp,  
doing some little thing about which you do not need to ask.”*<sup>21</sup>

In the recorded interviews, Fatimatu Said makes a distinction between the pastoralist diet she grew up with as a nomad in Western Sahara, and the new diet in the camps based on the emergency food aid. Said also attributes certain health issues to the shift

dry them and preserve them, some of these wild plants or their fruits are edible. The nomadic kids go out to collect them. They sing their names and how sweet they taste. The plants' names and their tastes rhyme in Hassaniya.

“Taydum is delicious in soup

Ashakan is sweet wherever you find it

And if you fill your stomach with Habrazza, it could blow up”

(Fatimatu Said, Interview 03.06.2020, Motif Art Studio [Original File: Audio segments 05.20/N° 4]).

20 The Nomadic Calendar, Narrated by Sayd Ramdan & documented by Sulaiman Labat Abd) Motif Art Studio Archive [Original File: Document N° 7, p. 3, 1993].

21 Berkson and Sulaiman, *Settled Wanderers, the Poetry of Western Sahara*, 93.

from the old diet to the new one. She said, “We didn’t know about certain health problems related to food when we were nomads, we didn’t know about stomachache, diabetes and blood pressure, we were healthy”.<sup>22</sup> The Sahrawi dislocation to Algeria was paralleled by a dietary shift from the indigenous diet in Western Sahara to the new diet in the camps based on food from international aid.<sup>23</sup>

Algeria has hosted the refugees coming from Western Sahara since 1975 and since their arrival in the refugee camps in Tindouf, southwest Algeria, the Sahrawi have been dependent on international aid. In 1986, the World Food Programme (WFP) began to assist Western Sahara refugees with basic food.<sup>24</sup> When the UN and other international aid organizations and agencies deliver food to the camps, the Sahrawi Red Croissant<sup>25</sup> then distributes the food on monthly ratios between the families in the camps. WFP provides about 134,000 rations to meet the basic nutritional needs of food insecure refugees.<sup>26</sup> “The distributed monthly food baskets are calculated according to the minimum number of kilocalories required by the human body and mainly consist of dry foods such as cereals and legumes, sugar and oil”.<sup>27</sup> The Sahrawi refugees are

22 Fatimatu Said, interviewed by Mohamed Sleiman Labat, 03.06.2020, Motif Art Studio Archive [Original File: Audio segments 05.20/N° 4].

23 It is the norm in the Sahrawi community that the family members eat together at home, often sharing the meal in one dish. A few restaurants emerged in the camps recently where menus contain pizza, sandwiches and some ordinary dishes of lentils, beans and vegetable soup. For many, it’s somewhat a strange act to go to eat at a restaurant. Some young people who usually study in Algerian high schools stop by at the local restaurants for a sandwich or a pizza.

24 World Food Programme, “Food Security Assessment for Saharawi Refugees”, 8.

25 The Sahrawi Red Croissant is a Sahrawi NGO that is in charge of coordinating humanitarian aid in the Sahrawi refugee camps. It was founded in 1975 (Digital Source: Media Luna Roja Saharaui [MLRS]).

26 World Food Programme, “WFP Algeria, Country Brief April 2020.”

27 Brahim, “Cultivating Hope for Western Sahara”, 55.



dependent on food aid designed to deal with emergencies. Poor diet diversification has caused widespread acute malnutrition, stunting and anemia, especially among women and children. This is directly linked to consistent food patterns which are decreasing.<sup>28</sup> The reduction of monthly food rations has been of particular concern over the recent years, given its impact on the health of Sahrawi refugees.<sup>29</sup> A field study concluded that only one third of the refugees had adequate dietary diversity. The Sahrawi are probably at the risk of low dietary adequacy.<sup>30</sup> This leads to a great need in creating local possibilities to access fresh vegetables and food to solve such health problems. Family gardens is one way to do so.<sup>31</sup>

28 L'organizzazione di Africa'70. "I paesi: Algeria - Campi Profughi Sahrawi."

29 UNHCR, "The UN Refugee Agency. Operational Update, Algeria."

30 Morseth et al, "Dietary Diversity is Related to Socioeconomic Status Among Adult Sahrawi Refugees Living in Algeria", 7.

31 There have been several food art projects outside the refugee camps in Europe that have been based on the diet of the Sahrawi. Niskanen and Sleiman Labat had a Food Ethics Course in the Art School MAA, Helsinki during the autumn semester 2019. Sleiman Labat prepared a vegan couscous meal together with the art school students. A USA artist Robin Khan took part in dOCUMENTA(13) 2012 with her installation and community art project The Art of Sahrawi Cooking. Khan has described the Sahrawi tent she installed at Kassel park to be "a Sahrawi home-in-exile". Her project was based on a cookbook, Dining in Refugee Camps: The Art of Sahrawi Cooking, she had produced two years before dOCUMENTA(13). She had gathered the material for the book during her month-long trip to the Tindouf refugee camps in Algeria 2009. In an interview, A Woman's Place, Khan states that "They [Sahrawi] can't grow food and they have to rely on humanitarian aid for survival". (Digital Source: Bailey 2013. "A Woman's Place? Robin Kahn in conversation with Stephanie Bailey". Ibraaz. 004 / 29 March 2013) There was a limited number of family gardens in the Sahrawi refugee camps ten years ago. The Sahrawi TV has a cooking show Cooking With Dignity hosted by Haha Ahmed Kaid Salah since 2011. It has been aired in a weekly or monthly format usually following the evening news at 21:30. (Meyer-Seipp 2018. "Haha, Sahrawi refugee turned TV chef finds the recipe for success." World Food Programme Insight. Dec 19, 2018).

## FAMILY GARDENS IN THE SAHRAWI REFUGEE CAMPS

The Sahrawi refugee camps are the outcome of the Moroccan occupation of Western Sahara and, subsequently, the dislocation of the Sahrawi people. The family garden discourse could be understood as part of this wider discourse, parallel to it or a consequence of it.

According to the United Nation High Commissioner for Refugees (INHCR),<sup>32</sup> there are around 173,600 refugees currently in five camps, Awserd, Boujdour, Dakhla, Laayoun and Samara,<sup>33</sup> near the town of Tindouf, Algeria, approximately 2,000 km southwest of the capital Algiers. It is an isolated, arid region with periods of extreme heat, where the desert temperatures range from very low at night to extremely high in the daytime – the peak in the summer can reach up to 51 degrees Celsius.<sup>34</sup> The agro-ecological environment is harsh, water sources are scarce and heavily mineralized.

The family gardens are spread over the five main camps.<sup>35</sup> Water sources availability usually determines where the biggest number of gardens could be found. Two of the five camps, Dakhla and Laayoun have access to underground water through wells.<sup>36</sup> There are more family gardens in these two camps than in Samara, Awserd and

32 World Food Programme, "Food Security Assessment for Saharawi Refugees."

33 The Sahrawi named the refugee camps in Algeria after major cities, villages and places in Western Sahara to keep a cultural connection with their homeland.

34 SandShip Meteorological Station Archive, Climatic Data (2018), Auserd Camp, Algeria.

35 Taleb Brahim, interviewed by Mohamed Sleiman Labat, 28.05.2020, Motif Art Studio Archive [Original File: Audio Segments 05.20/N°6].

36 Rahmasary, "Water and Sanitation During Emergency", 5; OXFAM Briefing Paper, "40 Years of Exile", 11.

Following pages:

Mohamed Sleiman Labat, Samara Camp, 2020, Digital photography



Boujdour, where underground water is hard to reach. These camps receive desalinated water through a distribution system by water truck delivery.<sup>37</sup>

A family garden itself is usually a small scale piece of land designated to grow food by a family. The families are growing basic ordinary vegetables and herbs such as tomatoes, onions, carrots, coriander, mint, basil, etc. They speak about the importance of simply “growing our own food”.<sup>38</sup> The sizes of family gardens vary, and range from a couple of meters to over 10 meters. The gardens are not placed next to each other, they are located at every family’s compound. Each family chooses the location of their garden and builds a mud wall to determine the gardens’ borders and to protect it from sandstorms and goats. For example, families in Laiun and Dakhla may decide to set their gardens close to the wells where they could easily water the garden.<sup>39</sup> They receive material support<sup>40</sup> in the form of garden tools, water bladders, irrigation system, green houses, seeds as well as training and workshops by Taleb Brahim and his team of assistants. Brahim is the National Director of the Home Gardens Projects with the Sahrawi Ministry of Economic Development.<sup>41</sup> His position, expertise and

knowledge enable him to research and develop the gardens in such an environment. He also acts as a consultant to the World Food Programme and other international NGOs in different agriculture practices.

The garden discourse draws from the ethnobiological knowledge of the Sahrawi<sup>42</sup> in combination with some permaculture design methods. According to Bill Mollison, Permaculture is a sustainable methodology of working in harmony with nature. Permanent agriculture is to design and maintain agricultural activities while respecting other ecosystems, their diversity, stability and resilience.<sup>43</sup> As part of the gardening methods that Brahim follows, he combines permaculture methods with ethnobiological knowledge from the nomadic practices and knowledge of plants and their uses – He emphasizes the importance of traditional diverse agriculture. For instance, organic fertilizers are used instead of chemical fertilizers or pesticides,<sup>44</sup> and by integrating the livestock into the gardening system, Brahim can use compost from animal manure or bio liquid fertilizers prepared through a process of anaerobic fermentation

37 Taleb Brahim, interviewed by Mohamed Sleiman Labat, 26.05.2020, Motif Art Studio Archive [Original File: Audio Segments 05.20/N°6].

38 Yuguiha Mohamed Mbarek, 17.04.2019, Motif Art Studio Archive [Original File: Audio Segments 05.20/ N° 7]; Mohamed Salem Mohamed Ali, both interviewed by Mohamed Sleiman Labat, 31.5.2020, Motif Art Studio Archive [Original Files: Audio Segments 03.19/N° 5].

39 Taleb Brahim, interviewed by Mohamed Sleiman Labat, 26.05.2020, Motif Art Studio Archive [Original File: Audio Segments 05.20/N°6].

40 Several NGOs have been funding and supporting the family, community and hydroponic gardens in the camps; WFP, OXFAM International, NFI, CERAI, ASE and SUKS.

41 The Sahrawi Ministry of Economic Development is part of SADR; the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic, a government in exile with institutions, ministries

and some diplomatic relations. It’s a member state of the African Union, but it’s not recognized in Europe or North America. The POLISARIO Front organizes and runs the affairs of the Sahrawi refugee camps in Tindouf. The UN recognizes it as the representative of the Sahrawi. The POLISARIO Front declared the SADR in Feb 1976. (Wilson, “Ambiguities of Space and Control”, 12; African Union, “Member States”).

42 Ethnobiology is the study of the biological knowledge of particular ethnic groups – cultural knowledge about plants and animals and their interrelationships.” (Anderson, “Ethnobiology: Overview of a Growing Field”, 1).

43 Mollison, *Permaculture: A Designers’ Manual*, ix.

44 Western Sahara has some of the world’s biggest phosphate reserves. Phosphate rocks from Western Sahara are used to make fertilizers for agricultural activities. It gets shipped to many places around the world without the consent of the Sahrawi. (Western Sahara Resource Watch Report, “P for Plunder: Morocco’s Exports of Phosphates from Occupied Western Sahara”, 9).

and other kitchen waste ingredients as well as some Sahrawi folk medicines as pesticides.<sup>45</sup>

The gardening practice does not seem to aim at any exotification of the phenomenon. It simply refers to how locally created gardens can help provide food for immediate family consumption. The process, however, is allowing more interaction with the plants on a daily basis. As we look into the discourse and phenomena of family gardens and how it marks a shift in practice among the Sahrawi, the whole experience seems to narrow the distance between the Sahrawi and plants by growing their own food, allowing a connection and a dialogue between people and plants. The Sahrawi are experiencing new relations with plants as they interact with vegetables and herbs in the gardens. Sometimes the plants are placed inside the house. Such is the case of Yauguiha Mohamed<sup>46</sup> who integrates the garden with her house compound as she desires to have some plants for aesthetics. The placement of plants inside the house is allowing them to co-inhabit the space. The decision of where to place plants in regard to where people live highlights intimate habitat overlap between plants and people. The family gardens offer a poetic experience to the Sahrawi who have a long tradition of oral poems. Poetry is an important part of their everyday life.<sup>47</sup>

In the new Sahrawi garden discourse, there seem to be different levels of discursive and non-discursive practices – rational as well as poetic. Some practitioners of the family gardens in the interviews express their connection with the garden on a practical

level. Some highlight the knowledge they accumulate throughout their practice and strongly express the importance of the intended results such as obtaining food, accessing healthy diet and achieving self-sufficiency. While others talk about poetics in the gardening practice. They bring up the desire for different colors, smells and tastes. The Hamada desert, where the Sahrawi live, is a very harsh, hot and dry environment, with no vegetation. Therefore, there are very few stimulating colors. The desire to experience multisensory pleasure in the garden has been mentioned by some gardeners, but the majority simply stress the importance of growing their own food.

In the beginning of the phenomenon, Taleb Brahim has developed theoretical knowledge and practices to maintain the gardens. The theories and practices developed by Brahim and other farming practitioners have become rule-based knowledge in the Sahrawi gardening community. The Sahrawi family garden discourse has had meaningful input from the non-discursive practices of the participants. Together with the theoretical knowledge, they form the core of the Sahrawi family garden discourse. The challenging geographic, climatic and cultural context created some obstacles to the family garden experience. Brahim speaks about the concrete obstacles like water shortage, high temperatures, sandstorms, lack of fertile soil and the difficult task of convincing a population of a nomadic background to farm.<sup>48</sup>

45 Taleb Brahim, interviewed by Mohamed Sleiman Labat, 26.05.2020, Motif Art Studio Archive [Original File: Audio Segments 05.20/N°6].

46 Yuguia Mohamed Mbarek, interviewed by Mohamed Sleiman Labat, 17.04.2019 Motif Art Studio Archive [Original File: Video & Audio Segments 03.19/N° 5].

47 Awah, "Oral Literature and Transmission in the Sahara", 60.

48 Brahim, "Cultivating Hope for Western Sahara", 55-56; Taleb Brahim, interviewed by Mohamed Sleiman Labat, 26.05.2020, Motif Art Studio Archive [Original File: Audio Segments 05.20/N°6].

### HYDROPONIC AGRICULTURE

Hydroponic agriculture has been introduced to the camps very recently. In 2017, Brahim started his own initial experimental hydroponic system to test the possibility of producing green fodder in the camps to feed goats and sheep.<sup>49</sup> Hydroponic agriculture is a soil free farming system that is designed with a structure of several floors on top of each other. The containers of wheat green fodders are riddled with holes to allow water to drip from one floor to the other and collect in the bottom. Hydroponic systems are integrated in some family garden locations so that the water that goes through the different fodder floors and gathers in the bottom can also water other vegetables planted in the soil. This method helps maximize the use of water as the hydroponic model uses 90% less water than non-hydroponic agriculture. The small-scale hydroponic systems provide 15 kg of green fodder a day to feed the animals.<sup>50</sup> The initial hydroponic model provided by WFP was a high-tech unit that costs USD \$40,000 but Brahim researched and devised a locally made low-tech model at the cost of only USD \$250.<sup>51</sup>

Normally, goats and sheep in the camps eat only leftovers, cardboard or trash and the idea was to provide them with nutritious food to help them produce more milk. Hydroponic gardens are an example of how practices guided by thought and action produce and shape knowledge and direct our perception and observation of the world in a particular way.

49 Porges, "Environmental challenges and local strategies in Western Sahara.", 9.

50 World Food Programme, "How to Grow Green Deep in the Sahara Desert."

51 Taleb Brahim, interviewed by Mohamed Sleiman Labat, 26.05.2020, Motif Art Studio Archive [Original File: Audio Segments 05.20/N°6].

### A SHADE HOUSE IN THE BACK OF A LAND ROVER

The knowledge and practices evolving around the family gardens help develop a protected/controlled agriculture practice. This includes creating methods to protect the plants from different natural elements such as strong sunlight and desert temperatures that can harm certain plants. Garden practitioners have resorted to various methods to provide this protection. They use structures from common cane, fabrics, mesh nets, and trees as wind breakers. Shade houses can be found in some hot areas.<sup>52</sup> Mohamed Salem Mohamed Aly is a 19-year-old gardener in Samara Camp and together with his father, Mohamed Aly Mohamed who is a mechanic they use the back of an old Land Rover as a shade house in the summer to protect coriander from the sun.<sup>53</sup> At some point during the summer when the heat becomes extreme, the coriander can't survive even in the Land Rover shade house. When the car is not used for coriander, Mohamed Salem uses it to protect chicken. Creating shade houses in the garden is part of the non-discursive practices that help develop the knowledge of responding to the natural elements. Understanding the different factors effecting the process helps improve response, namely, providing protection from the sun and sandstorms.

The family gardens, hydroponic gardens and the shade houses are not the only types of agricultural activities taking place in the Sahrawi refugee camps. Since the 1980s, there have been community gardens in every camp. They helped produce vegetables for the community although they faced certain challenges. Nowadays, there are also communal gardens in some institutions and ministries.

52 Peter, Basics of Horticulture, 231.

53 Mohamed Salem Mohamed Ali, interviewed by Mohamed Sleiman Labat, 31.5.2020, Motif Art Studio Archive. [Original File: Audio Segments] [05.20/ N° 7].



At the beginning of the planting season, people working in such institutions go out to the field and work the land. The food produced in such gardens is intended for the consumption of the institution workers.<sup>54</sup>

Ploughing the land and preparing the soil, setting the irrigation systems, planting the seeds, building protective walls against the wind and goats, creating protective shades and harvesting are all activities that have developed over the years to enhance the gardening practice in the camps. Families often resort to discarded materials and reuse scraps of wood, metal and fabric for construction. Such non-discursive practices come up in the discussions between the families in some formal and informal sessions of interaction. In Brahim and his assistants' workshops participants share knowledge and tips of how they respond to certain challenges, participants tell about their personal solutions, others may replicate the solutions, adapt them, modify them and improve them.

### CONCLUSIONS

In the discourse of the Sahrawi family gardens, the Sahrawi desert knowledge and western gardening knowledge meet and fuse into a new discourse that could be named as the local Hamada desert Sahrawi gardening discourse. The sedentarization process of the Sahrawi highlights the societal, political and environmental transition the Sahrawi went through from a nomadic community into settled/sedentary refugee camps. The way of life in the Sahrawi refugee camps is a result of diverse cultural, economic and political forces that reshaped the Sahrawi pastoralist nomads into settled refugees. This way of life has been going on for 47 years. The Sahrawi have

lost much of their material and immaterial traditions<sup>55</sup> throughout the process of becoming refugees. The new phase of their existence in the new context requires acquiring a novel set of skills and habits to adapt to their situation. The family gardens are helping the Sahrawi establish relationships with plants and food. They are making their own interpretations of plants and food especially with regard to food sovereignty and self-sufficiency. The practice and discourse of family gardening is helping develop new knowledge and solutions fit to the context of the refugee camps.

The family gardens in Hamada desert started to emerge when poor diet adequacy and malnutrition intensified among the Sahrawi who live as refugees in a limited piece of barren land. The family gardens helped respond to these health issues caused by the poor diet based on the international aid. The Sahrawi discourse of place, nature and time is strongly related to the desert knowledge as opposed to the new culture that stresses the diverse institutions and their role in the development of the diasporic culture in the camps. The new phenomenon of family gardens is introducing such changes as self-sufficient food production, dietary change and contact with plants. They are improving the life and food quality of the Sahrawi refugees and consequently, their health. The emerging agricultural knowledge and permaculture practices will continue to spread in the camps. The family garden discourse will build a new narrative of food culture and perception in the Sahrawi community.

Accumulation of knowledge and experimentation around this discourse will give birth to stronger non-discursive practices in the

54 L'organizzazione di Africa'70, "Orti agro-ecologici comunitari nelle tendopoli Sahrawi."

55 Material traditions refer to the objects, plants and landscapes and artifacts from materials native to Western Sahara that the Sahrawi cannot have access to because of the dislocation, immaterial traditions lost in the process of displacement refer to the oral histories, narrations and the desert wisdom that was lost through it all.

form of locally devised solutions and inventions customized to suit the environment. The family gardens will become more feasible with the development of such solutions.

**Niskanen and Sleiman Labat** work in a three year PhosFATE research group funded by Kone Foundation. They created a small-scale garden at a host family in Helsinki where they experiment with growing different vegetables in parallel to the family gardens in the Hamada desert. The artists are using the garden as a meeting point to experience small scale food production practices. The experience is a lab used to study certain aspects of the practice and to develop some solutions regarding the two different environments and how plants adapt to them. They practice and discuss the use of organic methods that avoids the usage of processed fertilizers from phosphate and/or other chemicals. The artists experiment with new and old low-tech methodologies of watering and water preservation. The practice is part of a discussion with some of the gardeners in the camps. The discussions about different aspects of the practice deepen the research and open new questions and ways to relate to plants. The artists received funding for their project from the following institutions: Kone Foundation, Saastamoinen Foundation, Perpetium Mobile.

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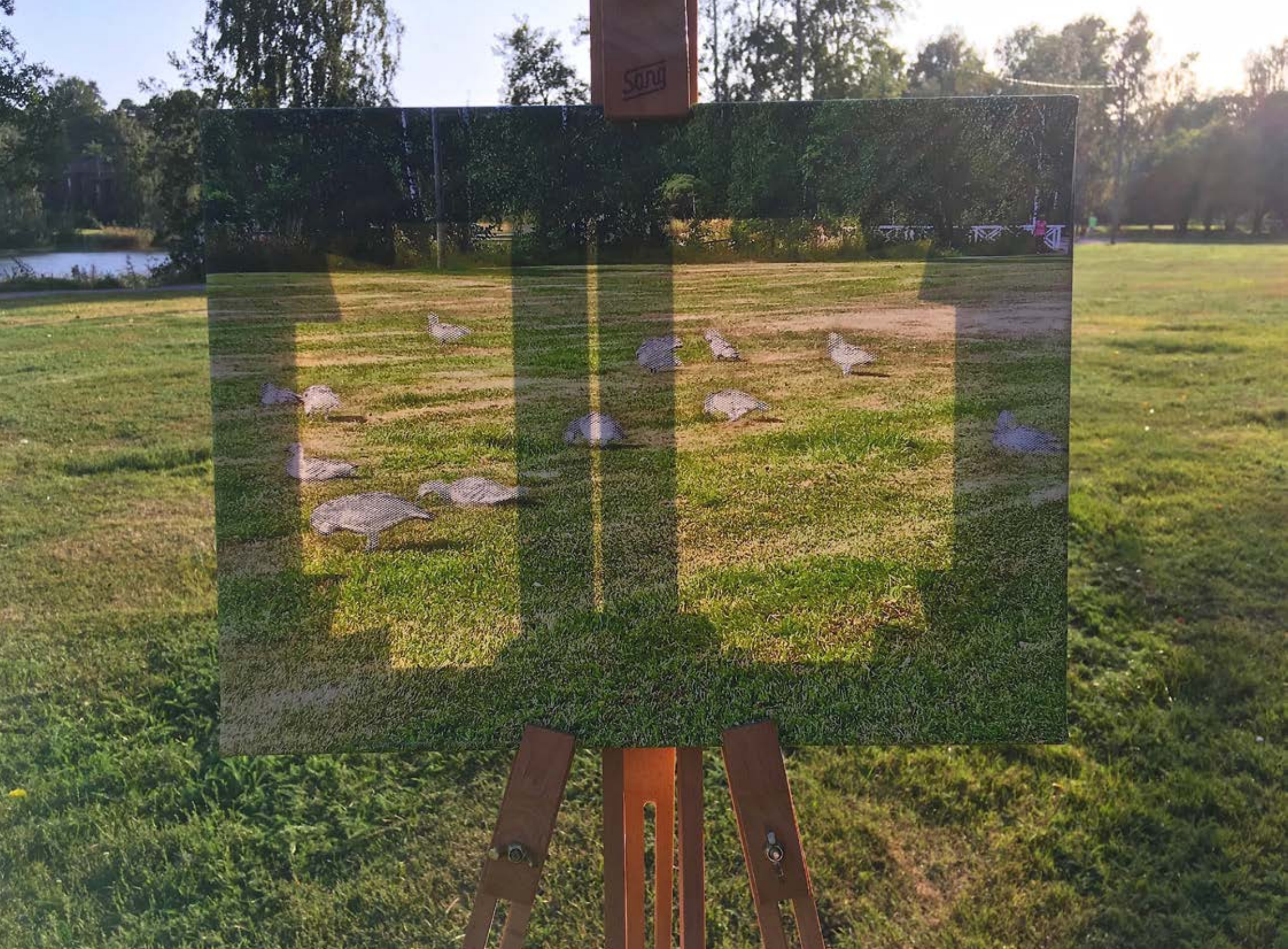
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PhosFATE -research group

Following pages:

Mia Seppälä, De-painted Barnacle Geese, 2019, Off-painting (digital photograph printed on canvas, water, brush), 30x40 cm









MARTE KIESSLING

## The lost continent of Mu or the search for paradise

Humanity has long desired for a paradise, the mystical place from which we feel exiled and where we long to return. The mythical or religious paradise are desirable goals for humans in the search for “ideal” places that are believed to be lost, such as Atlantis or the continent Mu. What type of dreams, wishes and hopes are behind these utopias, these ideals and hence these goals of Mankind?

I have a fantasy. This fantasy is constantly shifting, moving from reality to fiction, through texts I read and my own inventions, gathering from films and mythology and reflecting my idea of the “ideal”, manifesting feelings of dystopia and allowing me to imagine a positive “end” of the world.

This place I constantly re-arrange does not have a specific form, but it has a name. I call it my own private Mu, the lost continent. Mu is an island, an archipelago, somewhere at the “end of the world”. Meaning, far away from anywhere occupied by humans, at the end

Marte Kiessling, *Monkey*, 2020, Collage and acrylic paint on paper, 21x29.7 cm



of times, but simultaneously, at the beginning of something new, something better, or at least of something I personally think could be a solution.

Mu starts out simple—it's a paradisiac island in the middle of the ocean, full of lush green forest, white beaches and clear water, where I can live out my days in peace, sometimes alone, sometimes with others, depending on what my current mood tells me. But Mu can be so much more than that. In my mind, I see a community in a distant future, where there is no war, no climate crisis, no discrimination, but a new form of communal living, one that does not harm mankind, nor the world we live in. Mu is the name that I give to this place, this utopian haven, which others might even refer to as paradise. The place we all hope to reach one day. And—depending on our belief—if not in reality, then maybe at least in our imagination.

The term Lost Continent of Mu was first used by Augustus Le Plongeon,<sup>1</sup> a British-American photographer, archaeologist, antiquarian and author who was one of the first to study the Maya ruins of America.<sup>2</sup> He himself got the name from a translation error made by Charles Étienne Brasseur de Bourbourg, who translated the “Troano Codex”,<sup>3</sup> one of three surviving pre-Columbian Maya books. He believed that a word within the said text, which he thought to be read as Mu, referred to a land submerged by a catastrophe.

1 Le Plongeon. “Alice 1841-1937, “Augustus and Alice Dixon Le Plongeon papers, 1763-1937, bulk 1860-1910.”

2 Augustus Le Plongeon's findings were later dismissed by nearly all Mayan scholars and his findings served as a base to many pseudo-scientific theories [editor's note]. See: Desmond. “Of Facts and Hearsay: Bringing Augustus Le Plongeon into Focus.” 139-150.

3 Wauchope. *Handbook of Middle American Indians*, 319-320.

*In our journey westward across the Atlantic we shall pass in sight of that spot where once existed the pride and life of the ocean, the Land of Mu, which, at the epoch that we have been considering, had not yet been visited by the wrath of Human, that lord of volcanic fires to whose fury it afterward fell a victim. The description of that land given to Solon by Sonchis, priest at Sais; its destruction by earthquakes, and submergence, recorded by Plato in his Timaeus, have been told and retold so many times that it is useless to encumber these pages with a repetition of it.*<sup>4</sup>

Hence, Le Plongeon decided that Mu had been a continent peopled by an advanced civilization that in ancient times, sank into the Atlantic Ocean. He later claimed that Queen Moo, a refugee from the sunken continent, was the founder of the ancient Egyptian civilization.<sup>5</sup> Unfortunately for adherents to the idea, there is no empirical evidence to support Mu's existence or the theories of its demise. But nevertheless, the idea of Mu as a place was picked up by many in the following decades, may it be in the form of research or fiction. There are even claims for archaeological evidence of the existence of such a place and that its remnants can be found hidden on the ocean bed. Having said that, modern geological knowledge rules out lost continents of any significant size altogether.

In 1926, British occult writer, inventor, engineer, and fisherman James Churchward published a series of books beginning with the title *Lost Continent of Mu, the Motherland of Man*, in which he describes Mu as a lost continent in the Pacific Ocean, previously identified as Lemuria, a hypothetical lost land and the imagined place of origin of the lemurs. Churchward claimed to have had the opportunity to see ancient clay tablets in India, translated especially

4 Le Plongeon. *Queen Mōo & The Egyptian Sphinx*, 277.

5 De Camp. *Lost Continents: Atlantis Theme in History, Science and Literature*, 153.

for him by a high-ranking temple priest, which were written in the continent of Mu itself. Allegedly able to learn the language the tablets were written in himself; Churchward said them to originate in the very place where man first appeared, Mu. According to him, the people living on these lost lands were called the Naacal, and numbered as high as 64 million. Their civilization, which flourished 50,000 years ago, was more technologically advanced than the one of Churchward's own time (late 19th to early 20th century), and that the ancient civilizations of India, Babylon, Persia, Egypt and the Mayas were merely the decayed remnants of Naacal colonies.<sup>6</sup> Churchward allegedly found numerous pieces of evidence to support his idea, may it be in the bible or ancient Hindu texts, symbols in different cultures around the world and—as many others—in the megalithic art in Polynesia.<sup>7</sup>

Many followed this idea, among them religious writer John Newbrough, Max Heindel, a Danish-American occultist, Louis Jacolliot, a French attorney and occultist who specialized in the translation of Sanskrit, even Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, founder of the Turkish Republic, who considered Mu as the possible location of the Turks' original homeland.<sup>8</sup>

Nevertheless, one question remains: why do humans have such fascination with these places, may it be Atlantis, Lemuria, Mu or any other lost colony or continent? Might it be the hope that there is, or better was, a truly better place, an advanced society, which is sadly gone, but might hold the key for a better world or life for us? So, might it even be the biblical paradise that we left behind and ever since desperately hope to find our way back to?

6 Churchward. *Lost Continent of Mu, the Motherland of Man*.

7 Churchward. *The Sacred Symbols of Mu*. 165-189.

8 Foss. *Mustafa Kemal Atatürk*, 77-98.

If we take a closer look at these conceptualized lost continents, we can clearly see that the ideas are always intricately connected to the personal ideals of the respective writers. Churchward, who leaning towards the idea of white people's superiority, proposed that the Nacaal society was dominated by a white race superior in many respects to our own. His research supports a quasi-Christian belief system and white supremacy which denounces science and evolution.<sup>9</sup>

Another well known idea follows Thomas More's book *Utopia*, a work of fiction and socio-political satire published in 1516. More wrote the book from his own perspective, using himself as the narrator. Nowadays we all like to use the term Utopia as an imagined community or society that possesses highly desirable or nearly perfect qualities for its inhabitants. More describes Utopia as a socialist state with clear rules and severe punishments, male leadership, no private property and slavery. But at the same time, it has a welfare state, free hospitals, and priests are allowed to marry.<sup>10</sup> Even women get some rights in his society, their role, even though restricted, can be seen as more liberal from a contemporary point of view. Hence, we see not only a reflection of the ideas of his time, but also More's personal beliefs and dreams for an ideal society.

Not all ideas behind lost continents can be related to ideals in the form of imagined societies, some have more of an geological background, at least in their origin. Lemuria, to pick one example, was hypothesized to be a land bridge, now sunken, and its existence would constitute an explanation for certain discontinuities in biogeography. Nowadays we know that the idea of Lemuria's existence has been rendered obsolete by modern theories of plate tectonics,

9 Churchward. *Lost Continent of Mu, the Motherland of Man*.

10 Duncombe. *Open Utopia*, introduction.

but since other sunken continents such as Zealandia, in the Pacific, Mauritia and the Kerguelen Plateau in the Indian Ocean did actually exist, the general thought of Lemuria seems plausible.<sup>11</sup> Zoologist and biogeographer Philip Sclater wrote in his 1864 essay *The Mammals of Madagascar*, published in *The Quarterly Journal of Science*:<sup>12</sup>

*The anomalies of the mammal fauna of Madagascar can best be explained by supposing that [...] a large continent occupied parts of the Atlantic and Indian Oceans [...] that this continent was broken up into islands, of which some have become amalgamated with [...] Africa, some [...] with what is now Asia; and that in Madagascar and the Mascarene Islands we have existing relics of this great continent, for which [...] I should propose the name Lemuria.*<sup>13</sup>

Even though Sclater's idea is based on scientific research, the idea was adopted by occultists and consequently has been incorporated into pop culture.

Is there a pattern to be found here? Even ideas based on the development of life on our planet, the development of species, are morphed by humans for their own benefit, rather than this of other species. A prime example is the specific case of the lemurs, which is not even entirely wrong, since the continents of India and Madagascar once were in fact connected (as Gondwana, the supercontinent, not Lemuria, but almost). Ancient "Lemurians", as described by Helena Blavatsky, the Russian occultist, philosopher, and author, were divided into seven Root Races.<sup>14</sup> She describes the

11 Mortimer et al. "Zealandia: Earth's hidden continent." 27-35.

12 Nield, *Supercontinent: Ten billion years in the life of our planet*, 38-39.

13 Ibid., 38.

14 Lachman. *Madame Blavatsky: The mother of modern spirituality*, 256.

development of these Root Races in vivid detail in the second volume (Anthropogenesis) of her book *The Secret Doctrine*, published in 1888. The first root race according to Blavatsky was the ethereal, the second had somewhat more physical bodies and lived in Hyperborea, the third root race, the first to be truly human, is said to have existed on the lost continent of Lemuria and the fourth root race is said to have developed in Atlantis.<sup>15</sup> She writes:

*The real line of evolution differs from the Darwinian, and the two systems are irreconcilable [...] except when the latter is divorced from the dogma of 'Natural Selection' [...] by 'Man' the divine Monad is meant, and not the thinking Entity, much less his physical body [...] Occultism rejects the idea that Nature developed man from the ape, or even from an ancestor common to both, but traces, on the contrary, some of the most anthropoid species to the Third Race man.*<sup>16</sup>

Later she states, "the 'ancestor' of the present anthropoid animal, the ape, is the direct production of the yet mindless Man, who desecrated his human dignity by putting himself physically on the level of an animal."<sup>17</sup>

In my personal opinion, these ideas can be seen as a form of invented interspecies relations, an idea that I follow in my artistic work, as well as in my imagination and my personal dream of Mu. My own private Mu is inhabited by a differing selection of animals, which in accordance with where my imagination takes me—can talk, live together in harmony—instead of human companions, which rarely exist in my personal Utopia. I am aware that I give these

15 Blavatsky. *The Secret Doctrine Volume II: Anthropogenesis*.

16 Ibid., 86.

17 Ibid., 87.

creatures human behaviours, and therefore “humanise” them according to my needs. But I also imagine something else: interspecies relations developed according to a changed environment, able to adapt to a surrounding that might be non-natural, as it could be the result of human interference. Still, in my dream nature is able to adapt and survive.

Many religions see the thought of a paradise as the goal for earthly righteous behaviour. The basic perceptions of most religions do not differ much. At the end, paradise is an ultimate goal. But did this place already exist? Is it possible to create it here and now? Or does this idea exist only in our minds, in the depth of our dreams and hopes, sets of rules and stories we hear as children? Maybe paradise and Mu are two opposing ideas, since one of them seems to be lost forever and the other could still be reached at the end of times.

In my fantasy, there is no difference between paradise and Mu. In my fantasy, Mu is merely the projection bias for a multitude of ideas. The idea of being stranded on an island and making the best of it, finding peace, tranquillity and a sense of community in accordance with nature. In my dream, humanity does not exist anymore, only on isolated islands, and I imagine that we regroup to find possibilities for a better tomorrow. A metaphor for what I am trying to express could be the end of the first part of the book *The Neverending Story* by Michael Ende, a fantasy novel first published in 1979, where the protagonist receives the ability to reinvent “Fantasia”, the storybook country which was destroyed by lack of human interest.<sup>18</sup> In my dream of Mu, I give myself the same role, the ability to re-invent the world.

18 Ende, *The neverending story*.

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Following pages:

Piotr Kołakowski, *Short Story About Love*, 2015, Lithographic prints, 15.5x18 cm







LEA KANTONEN

## A letter to Rosita and the mango

### An etude on knowing and doubting together

TRANSLATION BY HANNAH OURAMO

Collaborative knowledge production is an essential part of the methods of community-based art and indigenous studies. Making and researching community-based art with collaborators that represent different ontologies requires respect for different understandings of knowledge, in Arturo Escobar's words *pluriversal* knowing. Close collaboration with an artist colleague living in a different world and having a different understanding of knowledge, can destabilise my own understanding and make me doubt my own beliefs. Doubting together is fragile and inquisitive intimacy, reflexivity practiced together. In this etude, I consider how to describe a long collaborative process without attempting to define the nature of my collaborators and without revealing their secrets. I let doubt extend into the narration. I recount how it has felt to encounter the Wixaritari's (sing.

Pyy-Pekka Kantonen, Food offerings at the communal harvest ceremony  
Tatei Neixa, 2020, Digital photography

Wixárika) ontological knowledge of plants, life, ancestors, and art, and how the encounters have changed me.

In this writing, I enter into fictional correspondence with two characters about ontological knowledge, its transmission and putting it into question. The events and memories recounted in the letters take place in the indigenous Wixárika communities in Mexico. The ontological networks of relations of the Wixaritari include not only humans but also plants, other animals and ancestors. The transmission of indigenous knowledge from ancestors to future generations is understood as the most important task among the Wixaritari, since ancestors hold the world together. This is why autonomous administrative and cultural systems operate in the Wixarika communities, in which young and middle-aged community members, chosen by village elders, are introduced to traditional knowledge, skills and communal tasks.

Rosita, you once wondered whether the *maraakate*<sup>1</sup> really hear the voices of the ancestors, or if they just behave as if they do. By then you had been chosen to the *rukuriikame*<sup>2</sup> together with your husband, and you were well on your way to becoming a *maraakame* or at least an assistant to one. You admitted not ever having heard the voices of the ancestors, not even after eating the *hikuri*.<sup>3</sup> It felt good that you didn't conceal your uncertainty from me, a *teiwari*,

1 The *maraakate* (sing. *maraakame*) are experts of Wixárika culture and initiated shaman priests. Neurath 2011.

2 The members of the *rukuriikate* ritual community, the *rukuriikames*, are chosen every fifth year by the community elders. They organise communal ceremonies related to the cycles of corn for five years, after which they have the possibility to seek initiation. See: Neurath 2011, 25.

3 *Hikuri*, or the peyote, is a hallucinogenic cactus and one of the ancestors of the Wixaritari. In addition to appearing as a cactus, it can also take the form of corn or deer.

a non-Wixárika. I too doubted the voices of my own ancestors, as I as a young Christian artist interested in liberation theology<sup>4</sup> visited your village for the first time in the 1980s. It was in your village that I let go of the Christian revivalism taught to me by my relatives. You had not been born yet.

I fall asleep to the rustling and dripping. In the darkness I wake up to the water rinsing my smooth skin. The lightning flashes and I am slammed against the tree trunk. I stay calm; it is not yet my time.

#### DOUBTING

Rosita, I write to you<sup>5</sup> since you have been on my mind during the past few days. I have watched the video in which you present the *tuutus* or floral embroideries of your relatives and explain their meanings. I feel at home listening to your voice. I translate our discussions into Finnish and English and read books written by other researchers on indigenous peoples, ontology, plants and animals. I would like to ask what you think of them, but I cannot be in contact with you now. It is wet season in your community. The roads are muddy, electricity is cut, and telephones don't work. I hope you have survived the coronavirus and stayed healthy, and I hope the cartels stay far away from your village. Is your old mother still alive? I carry my crafts in a bag embroidered by her. It has turquoise *tuutus* on a pink and green background.

I may not have told you and maybe I haven't realised myself what profound changes visiting your village during the past decades

4 On liberation theology see e.g. Gutiérrez 1990.

5 Rosita is a pseudonym under which I have combined the experiences of several Wirárika women whom I know and have interviewed. Rosita's yard, in the way that I describe it here, does not exist, but there are several yards in the Wirárika and Naayeri villages in the Sierra Madre mountains that resemble it.

have brought about in me: first I began to question my revivalist faith and then my art. I understood that Protestant values are one among many systems of value, and even they are never one but many. Likewise, the western artworld, which I had been educated in and had been recognised as a member of, was just one artworld among many others, and you, Rosita, create and make choices according to entirely different artistic values than I do. When I ask why you choose a certain shape or colour, your answers surprise me every time.

During the past hundred years, your village has been visited by revolutionaries, anti-revolutionary Cristeros, Jesuits, Seventh-day Adventists, teachers, anthropologists, representatives of several universities and NGOs, and during the last years also by community-based artists. Everyone wants to bring you development and a better life. You never converted to Christianity, even though the Jesuits were persistent in their missionary work among your people. You took your children away from state schools where teachers taught them unfamiliar values and spoke disrespectfully of your ancestors.<sup>6</sup> Finally, you decided to establish your own school.<sup>7</sup>

Community-based art has much in common with liberation theology.<sup>8</sup> Aided by it, people learn to approach their own lives in a particular communal framework, and its aim is to provide people's lives with creativity, reflexivity, purposefulness and a sense of meaning. You already had your own visual arts, continuing the pre-Columbian visual tradition, yet being thoroughly modern at the same time,<sup>9</sup>

6 Morris 2017.

7 There are several autonomous Wixárika and Naayeri schools on the Western Sierra Madre Mountains. Aguinaga 2010; Liffman 2011; Rojas 2012.

8 Many practitioners of liberation theology and community-based art have been greatly influenced by the *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* by Paulo Freire (1970).

9 Neurath 2013: 17, 60, 86.

and your *rukuriikate* community in which the *maraakate* taught the younger members communal philosophy, arts and healing. With the help of universities and NGOs, you have been able to get the bilingual and bicultural school – founded in your village – to work and in addition to the typical school subjects you teach indigenous rights, histories, arts and culture.<sup>10</sup> You have preserved the ancestral knowledge about your kinship with many different kinds of beings dating from the precolonial times.<sup>11</sup> Plants, animals, rivers and springs are your ancestors. In addition, you have taken some of the gods of other peoples also as your ancestors. Your ancestors multiply and change as the world around you changes.<sup>12</sup>

I came to your community for the first time because I was interested in the paintings and sculptures that you bring as sacrifices to your sacred sites. I felt I had nothing to give to your people. You did not need community-based arts in order to understand your place as a community. Still, you invited me to your school to prepare for the international meeting on indigenous land rights.<sup>13</sup> You invited me to join the planning of a community museum, and as part of the planning process I began to organise workshops with

10 Rojas 2012: 88–89; L. Kantonen 2019.

11 In the book *Beyond Nature and Culture* (Chicago: Chicago University Press 2013), Philippe Descola categorises different ontological understandings according to the way humans and non-humans are divided into different groups. Johannes Neurath (2011) has pointed out, however, that the Wixáritari's notion of ontology is not uniform and therefore cannot be fully categorised by any one of Descola's four groups. Initiated Wixáritari understand the interrelationships between humans and other beings in very different ways than those who are not initiated, also the Wixáritari living in or coming from different communities may have different ideas of the world.

12 According to Rojas (2012, 57) the Wixáritari have adopted elements from the surrounding peoples' cultures and at the same time strengthened their own. See also Medina 2012 (passim.).

13 The international land rights meeting Taller de la Tierra was organised in 2002.

the artists in your community. You built a *xiriki* shrine in the yard of the museum. When it was still being built, I asked you whether the ancestors will arrive once it is completed. You replied that the ancestors are shaped and called forth by people. If an object in the museum, be it an everyday object, a stone or a digital file, is taken care of daily, it is fed and sacred corn is sacrificed to it; the object may become an ancestor.<sup>14</sup>

I have thought about your reply for several years.

#### THE YARD OF THE ONE WITH THE BEAUTIFUL VOICE

In the morning a coil of smoke reaches me. The piercing calls of the rooster set the pace of the steady scrape of the mill stone. The One with the Beautiful Voice moves right below me. Many folds of fabric move about different parts of their body. On their head a scarf the colour of smoke and beneath it the glint of pearls the same size as those dropping off my skin. Under them the waves of a hem, as bright green as I am, constantly in motion.

Another, lower and rounder human comes to the One with the Beautiful Voice. They move together, grind the mill, shape balls out of the powdered paste, flatten them between their hands, lift them onto the pan to roast and place them steaming under a cloth. The smells of roasting corn and smoke rise up to where I am.

I hear the stomp and slap of big and small feet when everyone walks close to the walls, in the dryness of the eaves towards the outdoor rooms, back to their own rooms and from there to the kitchen shelter. The central yard is muddy after the rain. The master of the house is the first to appear from under the canopies. They bound

up the stairs in their freshly polished ochre-coloured snake leather boots, open the gate in the upper yard, make the water gush into a tin bucket, and let the horse drink. I watch from up here; how gently they brush the horse, talk to it and stroke its muzzle. Then they test start the motor of their four-wheel drive; they check the coolant and oils. At the breakfast table, they greet their spouse with the beautiful voice.

The car revs up under the hill and Sweeping in the Morning gets in while still braiding their hair. A low and round human sits down diagonally under me and lets Talkative drink the milk that rises up from them and into their avid little mouth. The young human with a skirt but no *xikuri* scarf on their head, comes out from the guest room, runs past me to the upper yard, out the gate and down the hill. I can follow their running until they are far off. Their steps are different, longer and somehow more stomping than the other children's, who run in bright colours into the same direction. The One with the Beautiful Voice hurries down the same route down the hill, and suddenly the yard below me is empty.

I hang on my branch from spring to winter. I change colour from hot green to more yellowish and orange. I get wet during the nights and dry during the days, until the night rains slowly end and the air gets drier. I soften from the inside, and in places under my skin more space starts to form. During the nights, as I sway on my branch, my skin chafes against my flesh and I feel pleasure. I start to imagine how I am being devoured. How I am ground in the mouth and how I melt in the guts.

In the afternoons, They Who Sing on the Left is the first to return to the yard. They spread sticks and leaves that have dropped from my mother around them and build fences from them for their plastic horses. Perhaps one day I will drop right in front of them

14 Kantonen & Kantonen 2017, 52.

and they will notice me. I have no other significance than to get to feed the new generations and prepare them for walking these paths on the same slopes on which their ancestral mothers grew up, just like mine.

In the upper yard, on the other side from the rooms of the master and mistress of the house, cars are humming in and out of the gate. Boxes are loaded into piles and carted away. Corn is alternately dried and soaked. Animals are slaughtered and skinned. If they skin Our Big Brother Deer the men cry, a fire is lit in front of the *xiriki* shrine, the family and guests sit by it and the *maraakame* sings all night. My sibling mangoes who have thrown themselves into the yard are lifted into baskets and offered to the guests. I am not yet ready.

In the afternoons a large figure slips unnoticed through the neighbour's gate and I shiver. They bring with them clothes in a bag, and soon the clothes are thrown over metal wires stretched over the neighbour's yard and there they drip water in the sunlight. I don't like their rhythm. In the fading light of the afternoon, they move up the hill, slip into the house that is visible behind the radio station, and soon a queue forms in front of the house. Young humans and some older humans go tensely in, one by one and come back out after a moment. The One with the Beautiful Voice is quiet all next day. If they would only look up and see me! I would wave to them like mangoes do and make them happy.

The corn cobs ripen to be white, yellow, red, blue and motley purple, and I too ripen, and soon the harvest will be celebrated at the *xiriki* in the upper yard. I dream of Sweeping in the morning and They Who Sing on the Left finding me at dawn and shrieking with joy. The One with the Beautiful Voice pours water on me and dries me carefully so that I won't get any dents. The child with no

*xikuri* lifts me into a basket with oranges, lemons, fragrant blue tortillas and the master's can of beer that was fetched from the store. They give their verdict: "tsinakaxi tsimupe pe", the lemons are small. I, on the other hand, am big, juicy and proud. The master looks at me appreciatively and asks a young, round human to take me to the altar by the candles. My scent mixes with the smell of deer blood. The children take turns to take a bite out of me. In their bellies, I merge into Our Big Brother Deer and Our Mother Five Coloured Corncobs.

#### PERMISSION TO WRITE

Rosita, your knowledge of food and crafts is valued in your community. You work at the school as a cook. I have visited your school and your home countless times. I have made crafts with you and learnt to observe spiders, since they warn you of scorpions. Lizards are your helper animals that help you knit and embroider with precision and speed.<sup>15</sup> Could I write a story about you, your yard, the plants and the animals? Who has the right to tell your story? Who gives me permission to do so?

You suggested that we go and ask permission for our artistic research from Spider Stone.<sup>16</sup> We descended into the valley with your uncle, a middle-aged *maraakame*. You had prepared a sacrificial bowl for the stone out of pumpkin skin, onto the walls of which you had moulded out of beeswax our image as a tiny relief.

I have spent many afternoons on your yard after school. We sit on the floor, craft and let the children climb into our laps and

15 On the helper animals of the Wixárika women who seek initiation, see Schaefer 1989; De la Cruz 2014.

16 I have changed the names of most people and sacred places.



onto our shoulders. We wash laundry and hang it out to dry. We don't talk much, we are far too tired for the midst of our everyday activities, you constantly observe the messages brought to you by plants, animals and changes in the weather, and sometimes you briefly explain what instruction or warning they give. Your children teach me Wixárika and I gradually learn some of the most common phrases. Our time in the yard, my notes, filming video, facilitating workshops, making performances with the teachers and writing these letters could be called artistic research. What is the meaning of my research to you, to your community, or to any art community?

You told me many years ago that the ancestors wanted a museum because a museum will preserve their knowledge for the generations to come. If something is sometimes forgotten, it can be recalled through the study of artifacts and recordings. In your world, artworks can be alive. They can turn stones, pilgrims and the members of the *rukuriikate* into ancestors, they might turn into ancestors themselves, they can prevent accidents from happening or cause them, and open up ways to other worlds. Crafts and sculptures, and even digital images can come to life if they are taken care of and corn is sacrificed to them. Living images are, however, unpredictable.<sup>17</sup>

What right do I have to write of your beliefs and doubts,<sup>18</sup> your art and your calling? I do not know what it's like to be a Wixárika woman, an artisan and a *rukuriikame*. When I have once started to doubt, I cannot stop. I told you when I last visited that I doubt telling your story and even more so I doubt the use of ancestors as narrators of my story. I did not want to generalise our thoughts to

17 Neurath 2013, *passim*.

18 According to Johannes Neurath (2013, 16), doubting belongs to ways in which the Wixaritari know.

concern other Wixaritari,<sup>19</sup> as others might think differently. I was also sceptical about making my own story central to the research, as it is not relevant in terms of indigenous ontology. I wanted to write about the continuum of Wixárika knowledge and the everyday. I waved my hand towards a nearby fruit tree and said that I would rather tell your story as a fruit.

- Rosita, me gustaría escribir tu historia. Cada día hago notas de nuestras conversaciones. Me das permiso de usarlos en mis investigaciones?
- Si, puedes usarlos, si me das un seudónimo.
- Realmente me daría pena escribir directamente sobre tí porque no soy wixárika y no conozco como te sientes. Pero podría escribir como si yo fuera un mango que esta siguiendo tu vida.
- Bueno, como un mango sí puedes escribir.
- Aunque aquí no crecen mangos.
- Pues, los mangos crecen un poquito más abajo.<sup>20</sup>

19 I have previously considered, together with the Sámi researchers Hanna Guttorm and Britt Kramvig, writing based on diverse and pluralist ontological knowledge and the ethics of such writing. It may be an ethical choice of the researcher to refrain from making generalisations, to tell stories based on their own experience, their own learning and change. Guttorm et al. 2019.

20 – Rosita, I would like to write your story. I make notes daily about our conversations. May I use them in my research?  
 – Yes you may, if you use a pseudonym for me.  
 – I would find it troublesome to write about you directly, since I am not Wixárika and I don't know how you feel. But I could write about you as if I were mango that followed your life.  
 – You can write as a mango.  
 – Except that there are no mangoes here.  
 – Well, mangoes grow a bit lower down in the valley.

My dearest Mango, from the tree top you see both near and far and you observe your surroundings tirelessly. Like a researcher you make observations, even if you don't always understand what you are seeing. You are just a fruit, not an ancestor, like the corn or *hikuri cactus*. *You don't assert anything loudly, and you have no strong beliefs. Still, you know your job: you want to feed the Wixárika children and make sure that their life continues after yours. You also know that these yards are crossed by others who wish to feed them. Be careful!*

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Pyry-Pekka Kantonen, On a pilgrimage, 2020, Digital photography



## Acknowledgements

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This book accompanies the international group exhibition 'Cooking for the Apocalypse', taking place during November-December 2020 at Exhibition Laboratory, Helsinki.

We wish to thank everyone involved in organising this exhibition, investing time and effort to bring this collective vision into being.

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Jakob Johannsen, *Snow Fish*, (Helsinki, Finland), 2020, C-print, 50x75 cm





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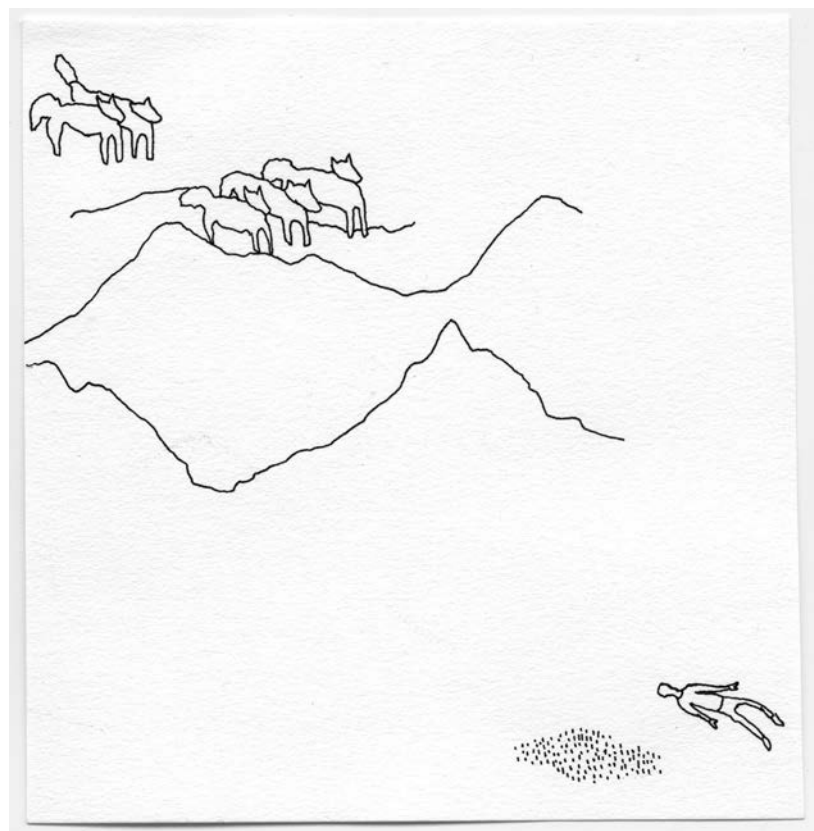
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Featuring original artworks and writings of 34 prominent artists and researchers, 'Eco Noir: A companion for Precarious Times' is a textual and visual collaborative exploration of interspecies relations in time of crisis.

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