

GROUNDING THE PREDICAMENT AND THE POSSIBILITY TO RE-ORIENT, UNKNOWN PIG

LAURI ASANTI

independent researcher
lauriasanti@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This visual essay explores confronting the question of banal everyday exploitation of non-human animals through critical question-posing and, especially, by juxtaposing a video and text in an awkwardly confrontational pairing. Speciesism is a way to bypass emotions on a societal level. The article aims to open new possibilities for reconsidering this separation between humans and nonhuman animals. It is proposed that the virtualization of pictures of animals is a form of exploitation that creates a distance between us and the cruelty. The question is, have we become all too human altogether, and what is the essence of this human exceptionalism from non-human animals? The essay concludes by proposing a more relational ontology that is needed to get closer to the ethical relations with non-human animals.

KEYWORDS

posthumanism, relational ontology, non-human animal, speciesism, exploitation, suffering, other, re-orient

DOI

<https://doi.org/10.54916/rae.126187>

DATE OF PUBLICATION

27.02.2023



HEART IS NOT JUST A HEART

Life in the year 2022 feels more uncertain than in the past. Global warming, anxiety about mass extinctions, the Covid-19 pandemic, the swine flu, and the zoonoses are all here (Kallio-Tavin, 2021). The basic problem of zoonoses, any disease or infection transmitted from vertebrate animals to humans, is their unpredictable behavior. One of the biggest problems of this is non-human animal farming in general. To live with zoonoses and farm animals; these together generate more difficulties, for example, unforeseen viruses. All this comes with a society that consumes more meat than is healthy to consume on a daily basis. As I understand it, it is an illusion that we humans need any meat at all in our diets. However, it is one of the most persistent norms that pertains to Western diets.

The statistics of the meat industries, the “meat barometer” sponsored by the biggest meat companies in Finland, Atria, HKScan, and Snellman, states that 41% of Finnish people eat pork daily (Lihatiedotusyhdistys, 2021). Although the meat-eating trend is slowing down due to more variable vegan and vegetable-based food choices, there still seems to be a need for mass production, as indicated by the massive amount of pork meat eaten in Finland in 2021. On the other hand, a pig is a wise non-human animal, wiser than a dog, but culturally, we humans have decided to eat the pig rather than the dog and made the dog our companion (Haraway, 2016).

This text is about the confrontation of the suffering of non-human animals and how to re-orient oneself in relation to the paradox of non-human animals not being sentient. The text points out the philosophically rooted construction of speciesism and human exceptionalism. It also suggests that the emotional bypass due to the cartesian-rooted division of humans and non-human animals has produced the predicament. Via a posthuman paradigm, it is possible to open a more relational ontology, which is a process of re-building the subject of non-human animals and humans.

The visual essay combines text and video. The text is part of my Master’s thesis in art education (Asanti, 2022), which is about human and non-human animal relations in wild animal photography. My key question in the thesis focused on exploring the subject-object binary position that is always present when photographing wild animals.

Photography is then understood as a possible gesture for getting closer to a wild animal, and through asking what kind of horizons this gesture of getting closer opens for examination.

For the audio in this essay, I have used a young child’s voice that reads a text I have written. This practice is based on the idea that words make worlds: The young person I invited to read the text can hardly read, and for me, the almost capable reader stands as a metaphor representing myself as I contemplate how to re-relate myself to the flesh and meat of non-human animal mass production, the climate crisis, farm animal cruelty, and eventually, a systematically carried out murders on a daily basis.

In this essay, I attempt to re-relate to the paradox of everyday exploitation as a norm related to our relationships with animals. More specifically, the cruel everydayness of animal exploitation at the societal level and the capitalistic system that is creating the mechanics of killing (Kallio-Tavin, 2019). On a personal and professional level, I am struggling with human ethics that seem banal: We are not supposed to kill, but certain species are allowed to be killed without much concern or consideration. Further, our well-being is created by the banal cruelty of exploiting non-human animals.

THE MEAT IS THE MATTER

A skull of a dead animal and a young child’s voice is an intentionally banal combination: it is almost a kitsch pairing to read aphorisms of the skull as if it is nothing exceptional. The act of recording the child narrator is an almost desperate act for trying to raise emotions. To me, the heart of the matter is in the act of looking. The act of looking in itself is



Figure 1: Unknown pig, Lauri Asanti, video still, [<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5-loAsQ8d8w>], 2022.

a combination of emotions and acts of reasoning, which I cannot separate in my mind. Where in this act is the feeling, and what is there as a reason?

I ponder how we can kill and be beneficiaries when these acts depend on the suffering and occur at the expense of non-human others. What seems to be at stake here is an open-heart surgery—a bypassing of emotions. Deep in my heart, I believe that humans can do better, but not as long as a group of other sentient beings is being oppressed without much consideration and with cold calculations and metrics.

What I intended to show in this artwork is the cartesian gap between a body and soul that creates a bypass surgery of emotions and thoughts. The non-human animal in this, the pig, stands as a ritual of interrelating emotions and actions, the feelings that cannot be separated from the act. To me, watching or looking at the non-human unknown seems the same as trying to bypass emotions and rational reasoning. Meat is not alive. It has, by some miracle, been turned into an object.

DISTINCTION, SPECIESISM AND EXCEPTIONALISM, SAMENESS

Western civilization is based on politics, which was first established in ancient Greece, the polis, meaning the city of humans (Arendt, 2002). Arendt, in *Vita Activa*, describes the shifting from action to speech. In Plato's first dialogue, *Apologia* (1977), the first sentence of the opening scene addresses men: "How you, men of Athen's..." (p. 3) and then moves on to describe the now identified problems of speciesism, colonialism, sexism, and separation. This sets the roots and foundation of Eurocentrism. What was excluded from the polis has been excluded ever since: The people living in distant lands, animals and women were perceived as barbarians (Arendt, 2002). This origination of distinction brings me back to my interest in this essay, the non-human animal that is not included but rather seen as separate and lesser. This continued gap between man and non-human animal is built into the modern capitalistic world. The other ways of knowing continue to be separated, silenced, and selectively used.

Seeing a dead non-human animal, a non-human animal that has been shot dead in the forehead with a bolt-action gun rises difficult emotions. However, at that point, the animal is dead and

assumed to be past suffering. The anthropomorphic systemic factory-like killing machine of animals is producing non-human genocide (Derrida, 2019). What is at stake here, is not just altering the genome so that it is easier to kill but the commodification of life as murder so that it is easier to kill more. The bolt-action gun is the final instrument at the end of the paradoxical production line. The difficulty of seeing a murdered non-human animal evokes deep emotions, so deep that they are difficult to address, as they bring one to the profound questions of how to relate to the suffering of the Other, and how to make the effort of trying to re-orient oneself into making a change ontologically and emotionally (Derrida, 2019).

Human exceptionalism is often constructed the same way as other privileged groups are formed and defined: as a group that has special skills or features (Singer, 1990). In comparing to animals, this special distinction is a skill, such as tool making. Narrowly defined, a pig is unable to make tools, which then could be used to distinct it as separate and different from us. Further, if a group, such as pigs, is not capable of communicating with us, what ways do we humans have to take this group of others seriously? I propose to think what is common with the human and the non-human animal, and that is our cognitive skills. Being sentient is a special skill, it means being able to feel. Pigs and other non-human animals are sentient beings and being sentient closely relates humans and animals. Sentient means being able to suffer as well as other feelings that also a human is capable of feeling: Pain, stress, and discomfort.

LOOKING AT THE DEAD, UNKNOWN PIG

In the video, I am trying to re-orient the sadness and sorrow that rises while looking at a dead farm non-human animal skull, and through this, trying to re-relate to what I am looking at within myself. Therefore, the title "The Unknown Pig." That is self-referential. I aim to perceive and comprehend the pig as something other than just a pig. Not as a metaphor but as a subject that is brutally treated, exploited, genetically modified, and eventually murdered. The connection between myself and the animal is mostly strongly created through shame and pain, the overall abstract sense of discomfort and stress while facing the dead animal, and also facing these processes within myself.

The act of killing and the eroticism in the act of killing is under the veil of the present moment, and it is tempting to ask who has killed the pig and why? Bolt action gun has pierced the bone that surrounds and protects the brain, and it has not been set in the middle of the skull, between the eyes, as it is supposed to when executing an animal individual. Maybe the pig has struggled, or maybe the act has been emotionally stressful. Maybe it is just a result of simple carelessness. Being interested in the act of looking can be categorized as a Cartesian way of being in the world because it creates the subject-object binary position, resulting in a form of oppression. Considering the somewhat voyeuristic, even erotic tension and character of looking and recording, did the animal have the will to be videographed? By creating a skull as piece of an object not capable to rot in peace and finally being consumed by dendrites, I have violently stopped time. The child narrator reading the words, that she is almost unable to understand the meaning of the words is begging the question: how far apart are the cognitive skills of this child and the pig?

THE OTHERS ARE LURKING IN EVERYDAYNESS

Being sentient, to me, also means being joyful and being able to make change. Does being sentient also and essentially mean to be just and fair? Piglets are social and while they eat, the sound of munching they make is adorable, they seem to really enjoy eating their food, be it leftovers or something else. As a father of two, I cannot

resist the temptation to call my children piglets once in a while when table manners are not followed. Other humans who are not accustomed to or able to follow tight, bourgeois manners are very easily categorized as primitive. To provoke, I use the word primitive here in the sense of the Enlightenment to describe it as non-Western, meaning European human other. Almost as Shakespeare uses it in the *Tempest*, to describe the Caliban whose mouth was filled with mud. But what happened is that the projector himself is not capable of understanding the nuances of the behavior of the unknown or other. He looks at the other as lacking the qualities that he himself bears. And the category even lower than the primitive is the animal.

HUMAN, RELATIONAL ONTOLOGY

The opposition to Man as an ideal, posthumanism tries to build a more just subject that is not created by the rules of Enlightened Vitruvian. What is this that is constructed of 90% other than the human genome and still calls him or themselves man, human? Donna Haraway (2008) writes in their book *When species meet*, in part I “We have never been human” (p. 3).

Culturally, to be human is to be separated from nature by language, culture, and the use of tools (Aaltola & Koskinen, 2013). The list of differences from animals is almost endless. Religions as transcendental ideas of man and its Creator is not so far from seeing your own genome mapped and analyzed, even the epigenetic forms included.

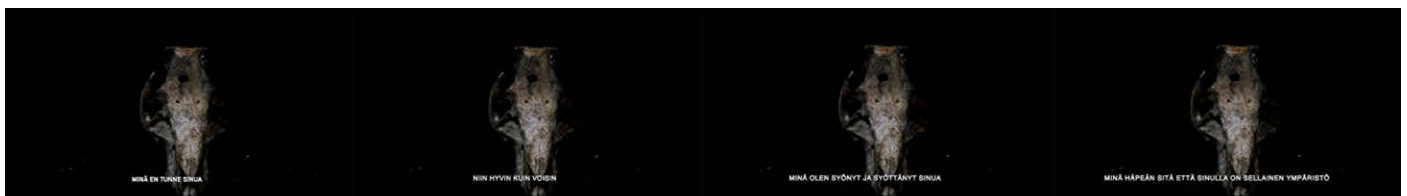


Figure 2 (above): *Unknown pig*, Lauri Asanti, video still [<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5-loAsQ8d8w>], 2022. The text reads: I don't know you | as well as I could | I have eaten and fed you | I am ashamed that you have that kind of environment

Figure 3 (below): *Unknown pig*, Lauri Asanti, video still [<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5-loAsQ8d8w>], 2022. The text reads: And you further on produce offspring | who produce offspring in additions in all of the above | I don't know you like should | so that you are whole living being

Looking at all that data on a computer screen, all it says is: This is your determined destiny, this is you.

The overall human need to define what is human and what is other, is a paradox and can never really be answered (Agamben, 2003). In human life, there is something of the other. This is what Agamben (2003) has defined as the question of the human-animal -relation as “silence, caesura” (p. 38). Neither in religion nor philosophy is the animal defined as other than silence (Agamben, 2003).

The animal in the human is lurking in the human genome. The taxonomy of the human category was created by Linne in 1800 *Systema naturae* as a form of separation from apes. Darwin, of course, put us humans back to where we have been in relation to all others ever since (Braidotti, 2013). The question of the human taxonomical placement also seems to be related to the question of the genome. It would be simple to say we are human because of the human DNA, the very matter that makes us human and defines us as such, but it would be wrong (Haraway, 2016). Even in the 10% of our genome that is ‘us,’ there is a slight possibility of growing a tail or so much hair that we will not fit on the tight ideal of the Vitruvian man (Haraway, 2008). Atavism is a genetic phenomenon in the human genome that might come up with something that has been hidden for generations. In the very essence, the tiniest part of the genome that makes us humans can bring out what could be seen as monstrous deformation compared to the norm or ideal. Thus, the animal is essentially inside us (Nietzsche, 1972).

TAKING SUFFERING SERIOUSLY

The disappearance or virtualization of animals began when time was separated from the rhythm of the Sun, and different time zones were created. The destruction of time began when timetables were created. The cities emerged, railroads and others technological instruments were created just to watch or follow time. The time is out of joint, as is said in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, but to be more precise, the time was taken out of joint when humans created the globalized, interconnected society. At the same time, time was connected to the mechanics of power and this interconnection meant disconnection from the Sun’s time. With this process, humans were connected to a more abstract human-made society that we have lived in ever since (Solnit, 2004). This disconnection

from nature and the idealization of it created national parks and zoos. Virtualization of time, animals, and nature meant that the representation of the animal became more real than the animal itself.

In Kristo Muurimaa’s (2018) photo book, *Eläintehtaat*, a closing statement of this activist, pictures show the everyday cruelty present in animal farming. The force and power of Muurimaa’s images is that he shows something that is hidden. Muurimaa photographs the horrible conditions in which the farm animals are forced to live their lives. They do not have the right to be loved by their kin, looked at by others or even possess the right to dig dirt with their noses: typical behavior is not allowed. The cruelty and virtualization of the animal Other takes a form in which the photos are fighting with each other. The public’s reaction to Muurimaa’s documentation was not to make pigs’ life in animal farms more convenient and ethical, respecting their needs and characteristic behavior, but instead the farmers organized a campaign that was purposefully showing that cruelty does not exist (Muurimaa & Kerola, 2018). The suffering was virtualized, the battle of the images loaded with values started the battle against each other: On one side was the activist with his campaign and on the opposite side was the animal farming industry.

POSTHUMANISM IS A PROJECT OF BUILDING A NEW SUBJECT: GROUNDING THE PREDICAMENT AND THE POSSIBILITY TO RE-ORIENT

Another ontological viewpoint is to relate to the world and its entities through posthumanism and relational ontology. That is, through the ontology of race, animals, and sex. In the beginning, we are already many, “sympoietic,” instead of one “autopoietic” (Haraway, 2016, p. 58). We are not self-generated organisms that have no relation towards or with other living beings, as it is in the case of the genome. What is common between every living thing is life (Braidotti, 2013). We are interdependent and the origin of us is not one but many. We are already in a relationship to our surroundings and other beings without the conscious effort being in relation. Sympoietic means that we come to be in the process of becoming and therefore it is relational, not individual, self-standing. Our essence is then interdependent and relational from the beginning.

As posthumanism, according to Braidotti (2013) and Haraway (2016), means ontologically rebuilding the subject as human; not man, but something else that is becoming. This means there should be an effort to leave the feelings of shame and guilt aside after confronting them. Through this, the building block of new collective emotion may rise. Posthuman ontology replaces the being that is actualized in a certain oneness with a more relational ontology. The objects in Rosi Braidotti's (2013) posthuman are constituted already as forms of social construction.

The question remaining then is: Are humans all too human altogether and what has produced the essence of human exceptionalism from nonhuman animals? The transcendent idea of body is an ideal. Exploring the moral genealogy of Christian transcendence as a concept of man and its morals, Nietzsche's (1972) project was to remove Christian ideals, and replace them with new ideals of a man to come. This was the process of an eternal reoccurrence, the form of becoming.

My point of view is that shame and the feeling of guilt and discomfort while looking at an animal suffering is a great motivator. We as humans do not need to hide behind the ruins of fully capitalized animal carcasses and suffering: We need to go and be more animal, experience, or rather face, the suffering we are causing. Nietzsche of course was very interested in the animal and the man as a form of becoming. This involves a new man that is totally different and subject to just a taxonomical category. The whole beauty of eternal reoccurrence is not to transform former ideals with emptiness, in formless nihilism. Instead, it is to think and make a change (Ylirisku, 2021).

CLOSING

The two worlds of "human" and "animal" have been entangled in a relationship for a long time. When we begin to question the categories that separate beings into humans and animals, distinguishing into one or the other, we begin to demolish this separation. What might this newly formed ontologically relational conception then entail? Should and will there be human rights to pigs and what would need to be taken into consideration if there are rights that apply equally to all sentient beings? Pigs need to have a freedom to live their lives as they want. Also, every pig is different, and individual as much as a human is or is not an individual. Pigs and farm animals need

more space and the recognition that they are also individual and have special needs just as we humans have, such as need to explore or a need for closeness with others. The banal cruelty of everydayness as a form of exploitation needs to be studied systematically and with brute honesty. It is true that what makes us human is how we treat those who do not share the same language and species realm. Perhaps ironically, more equal and more empathetic non-human animal-human relations are needed for humans to learn more humane ontologies.

REFERENCES

- Aaltola, E., & Koskinen, J. (2013). *Johdatus eläinfilosofiaan* [An Introduction to Animal Philosophy]. Gaudeamus.
- Agamben, G. (2003). *The open: Man and animal*. Stanford University Press.
- Arendt, H. (2002). *Vita activa: Ihmisenä olemisen ehdot* [The Human Condition] (R. Oittinen & Virtanen E., Trans.). Vastapaino.
- Braidotti, R. (2013). *The posthuman*. Polity.
- Derrida, J. (2019). *Eläin, joka siis olen* [L'animal que donc je suis] (M-L. Mallet & A. Tuomikoski, Trans.). Tutkijaliitto.
- Haraway, D. (2016). *Staying with the trouble: Making kin in the chthulucene*. Duke University Press.
- Lihatiedotusyhdistys ry (2021). Lihatiedotus [Meat information]. Lihatiedotus. <https://www.lihatiedotus.fi/lihatiedotus.html>
- Kallio-Tavin, M. (2019). Killing them softly: Nonhuman animal relationships and limitations of ethics. In K. Tavin, M. Kallio-Tavin & M. Ryyänen (Eds.), *Art, excess, and education: Historical and discursive contexts* (pp.79–91). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Kallio-Tavin, M. (2021, March 4–7). Pandemic posthuman: Theoretical-material implications of a pandemic for art and art education [Paper presentation]. National Art Education Association Annual Convention (NAEA), New York, United States.
- Muurimaa, K, & Kerola, J. (2018). *Eläintehtaat: Suomalaisten aalakuvausten tarina* [Animal factories: The story of Finnish alascapes]. Into.
- Nietzsche, F. (1972). *Iloinen tiede* [Die fröhliche Wissenschaft] (J. A. Hollo, A. Peromies & T. Lyy, Trans.). Otava.
- Plato. (1977). *Teokset* [Works]. 1 (M. Itkonen-Kaila, M. Tyni & K. Hirvonen, Trans.). Otava.
- Solnit, R. (2004). *Motion studies: Time, space and Eadweard Muybridge*. Bloomsbury.
- Ylirisku, H. (2021). *Reorienting environmental art education*. Aalto ARTS Books. <http://urn.fi/URN:ISBN:978-952-64-0245-1>