

Seulement (pour) les Animots

Investigating the human / animal / food construct
through an art practice that is also a research.

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My theoretical background

Animot is a chimaera word by Jacques Derrida which names the entanglement of the animal and the word, and questions the animal from the point of view of language.¹ Animals do not speak, we say, but is this really so? Animals speak in children literature and used to speak in ancient fables, where varying degrees of anthropomorphism are often displayed, from an all-encompassing one², where animals interact with humans as if they were humans, to a more nostalgic one³, where the equality human-animal is portrayed as accessible only to a child. According to Erica Fudge, there is a sense of melancholy here, involving the recognition that growing up is also growing away from animals, establishing a distance from the natural world that can never be bridged again. Though less direct, this form of anthropomorphism is troubling, as it seems to imply that we may have lost something, and because of this loss we may be living lives that are more destructive than we can imagine. If we could hear animals speak to each other and to us, could we still do what we do to them?

It is really since Descartes that animals do not speak to us anymore, or we have completely lost the capability to understand their language. For Descartes animals were machines, automatons. They lacked mind and therefore they lacked soul, because mind and soul were inseparable in his thought. The implication of this theoretical position for our relationship with animals is twofold:

- 1) A hardline division between humans and animals is established, based on possession or lack of cognitive abilities.
- 2) A hardline division between response and reaction is established, for which reaction entails lack of ethical responsibility and also impossibility to experience pain.

From the seminal texts of Derrida and Deleuze-Guattari, to Peter Singer, Tom Regan, and more recent authors such as Donna Haraway and Martha Nussbaum, the flourishing of Animal Studies and Animal Theory can be seen as an attempt, done mainly through language, to dismantle the above two pillars of the Cartesian philosophy, which still sustain quite a lot of Western thought. In order to clarify my own theoretical position, I will summarise and discuss some of the questions that have been debated.

Language and the duality human / animal.

The animal is a word, it is a concept and it is also the extension of this concept, the large and variegated multitude of living organisms that biology characterises as heterotroph.

In 'The Animal That Therefore I Am', the main trope of Derrida is the gaze of the animal (*l'animal qui nous regarde* - which can be translated both as 'the animal looking at us' and 'the animal that is our concern') and immediately connected to it is the question asking whether it is

¹ "When spoken, 'animot' is a homonym of the French plural 'animaux'. When written, it draws attention to the fact this is just a word - or 'mot' in French." Ryan (2015), p. 93.

² See for example the classical *The Wind in the Willows*, by Kenneth Grahame.

³ See for example *Charlotte's Web*, by E. B. White.

the real animal we are talking about, or the word/concept 'animal', which "is an appellation that men have instituted, a name they have given themselves the right and the authority to give to another living creature [à l'autre vivant]."⁴ Derrida will come back again and again on this intrinsic 'violence' of language.

Giving names, hence by extension using words and language, brings about an irremediable violence, which has a double nature. It is a foreshadowing of mourning because "every case of naming involves announcing a death to come in the surviving of a ghost, the longevity of a name that survives whoever carries that name. Whoever receives a name feels mortal or dying precisely because the name seeks to save him, to call him and thus assure his survival."⁵ Moreover, giving names instaures an 'abyssal rupture' which erases all differences: "Confined within this catch-all concept, within this vast encampment of the animal, in this general singular [...] are *all the living things* that man does not recognize as his fellows, his neighbours, or his brothers. And that is so in spite of the infinite space that separates the lizard from the dog, the protozoon from the dolphin, the shark from the lamb, [etc.]"⁶ This 'abyssal rupture' grounds one form of the duality human / animal.

Man is often set apart from animals (nonhuman life) because of the faculty of language, which is also connected to reason and to the capacity of ethical judgement. On the contrary, animals have often been conceptualised in terms of lack. To challenge this form of anthropocentrism, one needs to observe real animals in great detail, share their life, enjoy their companionship when possible, and realise that many vital characteristics are shared between humans and animals, though expressed in different ways. I definitely agree with this call to pay attention to the particular, which I find resonating with the notions of 'affect-animals' and 'becoming-animal' by Deleuze-Guattari, and 'becoming-with' and 'companion-species' by Donna Haraway.⁷

Reaction vs response

Derrida opens up our conceptualization of animal life not only by asking whether the animal thinks, produces representations or has a language (characteristics that are often used to mark our distinction / specificity / specialty from animals) but also by asking "Does the animal die? Does it cry? Does it grieve? Does it get bored? Does it lie? Does it forgive? (I would add: does it promise?) Does it play? Does it offer? Does it give?"⁸ and also whether the animal 'can see me

⁴ Derrida (2008), p. 392.

⁵ Ibid. p. 389.

⁶ Ibid. p. 402.

⁷ To account for animal encounters that are individually and historically located, Haraway explicitly draws on her own everyday personal exchange with animals. See for example the story of her playing an agility sport with Cayenne, her Australian Shepherd. The concept of becoming-with accounts for how ordinary multispecies collectives are part of a naturalcultural framework of becoming. It emphasises the non-hierarchical and non-oppositional relations between human and nonhuman, nature and culture, because for Haraway ontology should never allow for one species or category of being to have control over another. 'Companion species' names the fact that the foundation of being consists in multiple stories of cross-species entanglements. See Haraway (2003) and Ryan (2015), chapter 3.

⁸ Derrida (2008), p. 90.

naked' or 'see itself naked.' Raising such questions about animality shows a willingness to shift perspective from human views of animals to animals' views of humans and of themselves, thus undermining human-centred perspectives and beliefs of superiority. A similar approach was taken by Montaigne in his 'Apology for Raymond Sebond.' In particular, Derrida follows Montaigne in suggesting that animals have a capacity to respond. And how is the animal responding to our human exercise of power?

The past two centuries have seen an unprecedented transformation of farming which relies more and more on the exploitation and enslaving of animals, in the service of the so-called human well-being of man. The proportions of the subjection of the animal to man in this respect unprecedented and alarmingly accelerating. The response of the animal to this exercise of power is suffering. The suffering of the animal is undeniable, and this impossibility to deny opens the space for compassion: "yes, they suffer, like us who suffer for them and with them." Over the matter of compassion and pity a war is being waged. In order to think this war, the methodology proposed by Derrida involves language again. First of all, the violence of language has to be embraced (because it cannot be denied) but at the same time challenged. The animal must therefore be thought of in its specificity. And secondly the absence of language needs to be thought of as something other than a privation. Discovering and creating such a chimerical thinking can be considered to be Derrida's legacy and injunction to philosophers, poets and artists.

Viewing animals as being capable of a true response not only challenges the Cartesian idea that animals are mere automata, it also undermines the anthropocentric assumption that somehow the human species has priority over the rest of the existing lifeforms. What are the theoretical consequences of anti-anthropocentrism? Anti-anthropocentrism exposes man as a representative of a species which has actually become realised as a hierarchical, hegemonic and generally violent species, often acting in total disregard of all other lifeforms. The uniqueness of such species is now challenged by a combination of scientific discoveries and more widespread awareness of global concerns (economical and ecological.) The question becomes: how to take distance from one's own species? Disloyalty to one's own species is not easy, and the reaction to taking distance from it depends on the terms of one's engagement with it. It may also depend on one's relationship to contemporary technological developments as well as one's engagements with the non-human others. I tend to define my own disloyalty towards the human species in terms of my engagement with the non-human: I perceive the treatment of the animals as unfair and their suffering as so disproportionate, that a sort of metaphorical 'betrayal' of my own species is required in order to re-equalize the terms.

The construct human / animal / food

Within the field of Animal Studies and Animal Theory as I summarised in the previous section, my research interest is currently evolving around the construct human / animal / food. A 'construct' is an idea or theory containing various conceptual elements, typically one considered to be subjective and not based on empirical evidence. For me, the human / animal / food construct names the entanglement of nature and culture via a conceptualization of the animal as

'livestock,' which is an odd way to categorise living beings that become part of our human life precisely as a result of their death.

The concept of animal is polysemic, which means that it takes on different meanings depending on how it is opposed to the human. This implies, among others, that there is no 'natural concept of animal,' or there are many concepts of animal, each of which appears to be natural if taken in isolation from the others, but whenever we look at them at the same time the overall picture becomes very controversial, and claims of 'naturalness' must be dropped, because the different views on animals are often contradictory. Also, every possible choice for definition of animal entails a definition of ourselves and sheds light on what we take ourselves to be. How do we - as humans - want to define ourselves?

The concept of animal as 'livestock' is dominant in our Western culture, but paradoxically it is coupled with the concept of animal as pet. By investigating these two possibilities that we have for looking at animals, the idea is to uncover a conceptual space which may also contain the animal as the relevant other. The animals that we most frequently encounter are usually those that have been domesticated for agricultural or familial life: either livestock or pets. Both share a long history of interrelationships with us, because they have been tamed thousands of years ago (for example, it seems that dogs have been domesticated anywhere between 30.000 and 100.000 years ago.) Here it is interesting to notice that the "widespread ownership of animals with ... no utilitarian function (pets), emerges as a category during the 16th century, a time when domestic livestock ... were being removed from the home."⁹ So, at the same time as one animal - the livestock, domestic and edible - is removed from close contact with the humans, another one - the pet, also domestic but highly individualised, hence inedible - enters in such close contact, and starts sharing the attributes of fellowship and companionship.

Some authors have been extremely critical of the asymmetric relation between humans and their pets (e.g. Gary Francione, M. Spiegel or John Berger). However, to present only a negative view of such a relation would be to ignore the importance of our encounters with pets and the possibilities to think of nonhuman life that are based on such encounters.¹⁰

As for myself, I am keen in embracing the view of authors such as Haraway, who suggests that we should think of our pets in terms of 'significant others.' Significant otherness implies disparate inherited stories and a necessary joint future, and questions how it is possible to get together, while being rooted in different living practices. It implies being committed to taking differences seriously, through on-the-ground work, cobbling together non-harmonious agencies.

In general animals present a challenge for us humans: they are similar to us (they have feelings, they can communicate) and they differ (their thoughts are often inscrutable, and we do not understand or we misunderstand their language). This engenders on one side a fascination and desire for communication. But alongside fascination there is also fear and disgust, "fear and disgust of being recognized by them through contact."¹¹ The disgust is directed towards the animals, but it is really about ourselves: it's the horror at the fact that there is a kinship between us and them. Keeping in mind that, usually, one does not eat one's companion animals, nor gets

⁹ Fudge (2002), p. 28.

¹⁰ For a thorough discussion, see Ryan (2015), chapter 4.

¹¹ Fudge (2002), p. 9.

eaten by them, this tension between fascination and disgust becomes particularly strong when food is also involved: once the equation animal = food is posed, there is no way of escaping the fact that we humans too, as animals, are potential food. And here I mean it literally, along the lines of “A Modest Proposal For Preventing the Children of Poor People From Being a Burthen to Their Parents or Country, and For Making them Beneficial to the Publick,” published anonymously by Jonathan Swift in 1729.

By showing my own body (through a series of porcelain body casts) as food I am asking the audience not only to try and blur the categories human / animal in a way that is counterintuitive but logically plausible, whenever animals are not judged worth of consideration as significant others (as is the case in our contemporary culture, which contains and justify industrial animal husbandry.) I am also asking to reflect on the image of the human that emerges when human beings, with their actions, subject and objectify other living things (be they other humans or not). Is this what I / we want to be? At the end, following Elizabeth Costello, the fictional character of J. M. Coetzee in “The lives of animals”, I have only one good reason to refuse to eat animal meat and to avoid animal-derived products as much as possible: to save my soul.

My artistic practice as art and research

I think of artistic research as art through research, where research and art are just two sides of one same coin, with Art naming the practice, the doing, the getting your hands dirty at it, and Research naming the theory, the looking at, the contemplation and the examining, which eventually coalesces also in a set of statements describing the view. Writing is therefore an important part of my artistic system.

I definitely see my work and my research process as tightly interwoven, so it really makes sense to me to present both of them, and I am willing to do so. I also believe that my work looks stronger if presented ‘within’ the research process, as a temporary and never definitive output of it.

Thoughts on artistic research

When I started the master, I was intrigued by the possibility of combining art and research and I wondered whether this could be understood in a procedural way, as for example in the work of Robert Ryman. In her book *Robert Ryman - Used Paint*, Suzanne Hudson analyses the work of Ryman from the point of view of John Dewey¹² pragmatism and suggests that Ryman should be

¹² John Dewey (1859 - 1952) is an American philosopher and psychologist, known as one of the earliest developers of pragmatism, a view that was in favour of a naturalistic approach to knowledge, understood as arising from an active adaptation of the human organism to its environment. The Black Mountain College, which hosted among others Robert Rauschenberg and John Cage, was ideologically organised around the holistic education principles of Dewey, according to which great emphasis was put on balancing education, art, and cooperative labour.

interpreted as a pragmatist.¹³ Dewey emphasised the fact that acquiring knowledge is always an interplay between doing, experimenting, and getting the idea of what is done, by framing your experiment within a theory. Hudson believes that all of Ryman paintings can be seen as experiments testing a sort of very general theory of painting, in which the options that generate actions to produce a painting are the painted sign, the support, the edge and the wall (on which the painting is hanging.) Each painting tests some ideas, and the results generate possibilities for further paintings.

This idea of an artwork being a test for a set of theoretical ideas appealed to me because it suggested the possibility of measuring the potential impact of an artwork onto an audience. And what I also found appealing was the idea of relying on a sort of production process, where one artwork unfolds out of a preceding one, almost in a mechanical way, thus giving the artist a path to follow, sometimes even blindly, when inspiration seems not to be there.¹⁴ I believe that some traces of these thoughts remain in my actual artistic practice, for example when I decided to collect the feedback of the audience on my work 'Promise me', or in the way my work "Amuse-gueules" developed out of my previous work "Now Eat Me," which also resulted from a series of experiments (and mistakes) that I did when casting my own face in porcelain.

Besides Ryman, two other artists that I believe have been influential in the development of my ideas about art have been Francis Bacon and Marina Abramovic.

Interviews with Francis Bacon is based on the transcripts of nine interviews that David Sylvester made with Bacon, between 1962 and 1986. They give a huge insight on Bacon's way of working. I would like to cite only one sentence. In the second interview, speaking of his Crucifixion of 1965, Bacon says: "Well, of course, we are meat, we are potential carcasses. If I go into a butcher's shop I always think it's surprising that I wasn't there instead of the animal." It is a thought that occurs to me as well, and I think it is very true: we are now at the top of the food chain, and we keep hiding the implications of this being at the top. And what really puzzles me is that we were not meant to be where we are. Because when the genus Homo appeared, we were very low in the food chain. We were savannah underdogs: we used our early stone tools to crash marrow out of the bones of dead animals, because the lions served themselves first, and then it was the turn of the hyenas and jackals to scavenge the leftovers, and when it was our turn, only the bones were left.¹⁵ Now we are solidly at the top of the food chain, but this escalation keeps haunting me, above all the hidden implications of this being at the top.

As for Marina Abramovic, I'd like to cite only one work of hers, the 1974 performance *Rhythm 0*, in which she presented the audience with a set of 72 objects ranging from a rose, to scissors, a scalpel, and a loaded gun, and then allowed the audience to do to her - as an object - whatever they wished, during a time frame of six hours. Apparently the atmosphere escalated, becoming really aggressive towards the end, with people leaving behind their social constraints

¹³ In art history Ryman is usually associated with minimalism, conceptualism and abstraction. But Ryman himself always spoke of his paintings as objects, as material things.

¹⁴ Producing art methodically, with its implicit suggestion of repetition and rationality, seems to introduce a polarity between an apollonian versus a dionysian kind of art, the need to order versus the need to let it flow. I do not think that this is the case, and I do not dislike producing art in a more random way. I only think that the ability to work in a structured way is sometimes the only way to fight back the sense of panic that gets hold of me when I doubt the meaning of what I am doing. It's a mechanism of defence.

¹⁵ See Harari (2011), chapter 2.

and pushing the limits of their impunity. Of this performance it is said that among other things it is meant to test the relationship between performer and audience, and Abramovic herself said that she wanted to know how far could the audience go. I am also fascinated by such a relationship, which is undoubtedly a relationship of power, but as for myself I am more curious about the reverse question, asking how far can the artist go in exercising his/her power onto the audience.

Though some aspects of my initial ideas about artistic research (AR) are still present in my artistic practice, after two years of study, I have now come to a conception of AR that is closer to the notion of 'radical critique' and 'active entanglement'. The notion of 'radical critique' was already present in the research proposal that I submitted to apply for the master, titled "Disturbing Views - Devoting Art to Radical Critique" in which I wrote: "During the MA Fine Art program, I would like to address the concept of 'disturbance' when applied to visual art. I am interested in understanding the mechanisms of disturbing imagery, and I also want to explore the possibilities of creating disturbing artworks in order to give my art a critical function, to denounce various forms of contemporary atrocities. This is what I mean by "devoting art to radical critique". I use the term 'radical critique' in the sense of Marx and Horkheimer, to mean that besides or along with a process of understanding (which involves also an unveiling of hidden presuppositions, thus establishing the limitations of a body of knowledge), a pragmatic dimension is also needed (which aims at social transformation.)"¹⁶

These themes, accompanied by the theme of language, come back in my Document 0, where I wrote: "A view is something that is seen, but it is also a mental outlook, a frame of mind. The title that I am still using for my research is 'Disturbing Views - Devoting Art to Radical Critique': it points both to the fact that I am moved by disturbing pictures, and to the fact that I am willing to take a specific point of view, which might be disturbing to some. The images that I keep having in mind and that moves me (both in the sense of making me advance, and upsetting me) range from animals being slaughtered while still conscious, to wrecked natural sites because of human activity. They are actually images that I do not want to see. And besides those images, I have language, meaningful sentences that come from what I read. Not the sound or the shape of the words, but their meaning, and the meaning is what I like, because I think it is the meaning that could eventually undo the images, literally erase them."

At the beginning I was not sure that devoting art to radical critique was among the practices of contemporary art, because I had never come across institutional critique. But then I discovered that places like BAK not only favour this approach but actually encourage it. In this sense, the initial lectures by Maria Hlavajova have been influential for me, helping me develop and deepen my theoretical position, and leading me to realise that an art devoted to 'radical critique' is involved with the world and with its urgencies.

The module on AR, by Henk Slager, covered a general introduction to the field by Vytautas Michelkevičius and many key texts, ranging from seminal works such as "Research in

¹⁶ Marx explicitly developed the Kantian notion of critique into the critique of ideology and linked it with the practice of social revolution, as stated in the famous 11th of his Theses on Feuerbach: "The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to change it." Horkheimer described a social theory as critical insofar as it seeks "to liberate human beings from the circumstances that enslave them." (1982), p. 244

Art and Design” by Christopher Frayling, to more recent investigations by Simon Sheikh, Irit Rogoff and also Henk Slager.

Although the term AR has been around since the 90s, it still raises more questions than providing a commonly understood and shared semantic field. AR is often discussed in relation to art practice, so one of the first steps to clarify AR involves clarifying the relationship of theory and practice. [Borgdorff, 2012] suggests 4 types of relationships: instrumental, interpretive, performative and immanent, and I think that in my work some aspects from these 4 types are present: I have been using theory in an instrumental way as technical know-how serving my art practice - within the ceramic workshop, for example - and also in an interpretive way as philosophical knowledge, above all critical theory, providing reflections and understanding of my art practice and of my motivation for undertaking such a practice. My involvement with issues of animal rights and with questions of art and ethics brings my art practice close to a performative and immanent relationship with theory, which stresses the ‘world constitution’ potential of art, and the idea that an art practice is not innocent, it takes sides, and encompasses a certain vision of the world, or even better a certain way of imagining a new world.

AR puts together two terms that in a positivist tradition may seem antithetical: art and research. It is relevant to address this apparently simple terminological problem because, although many would agree that the opposition practice/working vs theory/thinking is outdated, it remains resilient in the academic milieu. Assuming that we kind of know what art is, given the fact that we are within an art academy, the question is: what is research, then? Sheikh in “Towards the exhibition as research” (2015) observes that the meaning of the term ‘research’ in English varies from ‘recherche’ to ‘Forschung’, depending on the context. I recognize myself in the ‘recherche’ and in this sense doing artistic research resembles the work of a journalist, looking for stories and being involved in an exploration of sources, a collecting of facts but also the construction of a perspective on these facts, eventually leading to the shaping or construction of a new reality. My research methodology involves also a deep involvement with an urgency. In this sense, I would say that first the research informs the practice, then the research and the practice together inform the life: I truly see my art practice also as a personal commitment to a cause. I believe that an example of this is given by my involvement with the construct human / animal / food. In this sense AR resonates with the notion of ‘radical critique’ that I discussed above, and also with the notion of ‘epistemic disobedience.’

I like the notion of ‘epistemic disobedience’ because it conflates a reference to a theory of knowledge - with its investigation of the conditions of production, justification and rationale for knowledge - with the idea that it is always possible to counteract what is assumed to be the ‘accepted paradigm’ for a ‘normal’ production and justification of knowledge. When the notion of epistemic disobedience is applied to the internal relationship between art and the art domain, the result is often what is called ‘institutional critique’, where the artistic practice becomes the act of critiquing an artistic institution, be it a museum, an art gallery or nowadays an art academy and the institutionalised programs it offers. Such an art practice is by definition wary of any institutionalisation of research and calls for the critical assessment of knowledge and the institutions producing it, rejecting any naive attempt of trying to comply with scientific standards. However, if the practice of epistemic disobedience is turned outside the art domain (as in the case of animal studies or environmental studies), then the art institution may create room for

independent artistic forms. In this sense, I would say that whenever the institutional framework allows for such disobedience manoeuvres, for example through the practice of loopholing, as heralded by Maria Hlavajova, artistic director of BAK, then its structure can be very valuable, because it may provide funding, space for intellectual dialogue and an already consolidated network for dissemination.

My artistic practice

My practice involves drawing, working with ceramics and writing. Part of my work consists in elucidating and re-arranging scientific data into artistic inscriptions, which often take the form of texts. This is when writing becomes a form of registering process, a way of keeping track of the research itself. I also like to imagine complex settings to test the transmission of knowledge, often in a sort of pseudo-educational way. Sometimes those settings are actualized in a product, and sometimes they remain only on paper, impossible to realise. I believe that all of these elements, taken together, constitute my artistic system.

Broadly speaking, I am interested in the significant otherness of living organisms that are not humans, and in the ethical consequences of taking seriously into account such otherness. “The Story of A Ginkgo biloba”, my final project for year one of the master, was focused around an old Ginkgo tree (the oldest in Europe), and searched for ways to let its unicity and specificity emerge. I extensively researched the biology of plants in general and of the Ginkgoaceae in particular. This scientific knowledge has been first incorporated into a story, told in two voices (the Ginkgo voice, and my own human voice), then illustrated in a series of collages. The story concentrated on the significance of the root system for the tree and the final installation involved the visualisation of the actual root system (its real extension and the positioning and direction of the main roots) by means of woven sculptures (by Nandini) and paper threads (by myself.) For the second year of the master, I decided to apply a similar methodology to debunk the concept of animal as livestock, within the context of the food production chain.

After reading the book “Animal” by Erica Fudge, and “The companion species manifesto: dogs people and significant otherness” by Donna Haraway, I started working around the contradiction implicit in the fact that, at the same time, on the one hand we live with animals, we even name some of them, but on the other hand we use them as if they were inanimate, as if they were objects. Moreover, the illogic of this relationship is one that, on a day to day basis, we choose to evade, even refuse to acknowledge as present. I believe that this contradiction raises questions about the ways in which we use animals, so that we need to rethink our relationships with them.

As I already explained in the first section of this essay, the theoretical background for my artistic research practice is given by the recent developments of Animal Studies and Animal Theory, but my focus is on the construct human /animal / food. In this context, I have tried with my art to explore the possibility of communicating critical knowledge to a broad audience, while also involving the audience in a process of gaining awareness which could eventually lead to change in behaviour. This links to the conception of artistic research as radical critique and active entanglement that I discussed above. It presupposes certain ideas about art, its function in society and its potential. I think that artists have a very special status within society: because

of the way they feel, they often work as mirrors of their environment.¹⁷ What they mirror however can become distorted, and provide a starting point for a process of ‘unlearning’, ‘de-centering’ or ‘de-naturalizing’, which means to bring disruption to the field of naturalised ideas by confronting a dominant model with other proposals, and by looking at the history of the dominant model itself. Along these lines I could say that with my art I have been working on denaturalising the concept of ‘animal’.

“Promise me” is a sculptural object but it is also a game that will be played by me, and those in the audience that are also willing to play, during the final graduation show. As part of the game, players are asked to make promises to perform a certain behaviour in the near future, involving eating patterns (like “I promise you I will not eat meat for 3 days” or “I promise you I will try a vegan drink”). I made the initial concept for this work with paper, but the final work has been realised in earthenware and porcelain. The cards are made combining 80 g/m² drawing paper with a thicker, canvas-like handmade paper, which I myself produced several years ago, in a workshop on paper making. The evolution of the game on the board will constitute a set of possible realisations of the artwork itself, imagined as an interaction between the artist and her public. Drawing tables explaining the game and some short stories that incorporate the knowledge that I am gathering on the transportation and slaughtering of pigs are also presented alongside the sculpture/game, as part of the research process.

“Amuse-gueules” is also a sculptural object, consisting of a dining table set with human body parts cast in porcelain and presented as food. Most casts are from my own body: my face, my right and left hand fingers, my toes, my ears, my breast, but also a heart and a brain (from life size medical models.) All the casts are arranged on the plates, and not fused with them, as in a previous work, so that the body parts can be examined and manipulated. The process for making porcelain objects out of body parts is quite long: first a silicone or alginate mould has to be done for the specific body part; then one or more plaster positives are cast out of this first mould; then a second mould, in plaster, has to be done for each positive; and finally porcelain or clay can be poured in the plaster mould to obtain the final ceramic object. Some of the final objects are flattened, thus resembling human skin that has been sliced away. The idea to experiment with the right timing to extract the porcelain cast from the mould is really the result of chance. While making a porcelain cast of my own face, I extracted the porcelain from the mould too early so that, instead of keeping its shape, it flattened on the table giving the impression of skin taken away from my face. It immediately made me think of a slice of ham, but coming from myself instead of a pig, like a sort of human ham slice. I also perceived the possibility to cast body parts and present them as food as connected to the conceptual process of denaturalising the concept of animal, and to the critique of carnivore food that I had in mind. One short story detailing the quasi-scientific possibility to produce real, skin-based amuse-gueules from human skin, flayed from people that have been especially bred for such purpose, is also presented alongside the sculpture, as part of the research process.

“Promise me” and “Amuse-gueules” are largely made of porcelain, which is a material that came to me by chance. Before starting the master I did not really know what it meant to

¹⁷ This is an old view: Hegel believed that art reflected, by its very nature, the culture of the time in which it was created. G. B. Shaw said: “You use a glass mirror to see your face: you use works of art to see your soul.”

work with it, but it attracted me, because it is a very ancient craft, so I decided to enroll in the ceramics workshop. By working with it, I started to like its plasticity, its tactile texture, and its translucent look. I also liked the fact that, as a material, porcelain is hard and fragile at the same time. It is really fragile before being fired. Once fired it is quite resistant, but because it is often made into very thin surfaces, it has the reputation of being fragile. This makes it a metaphor of what I am trying to do when I ask people to make promises, because promises are strong and fragile at the same time. Later on, for my project involving body parts casts, I was looking for a suitable material for a dinner setting. Porcelain is connected to food, not only because it is often used to make dishware, but also because most of the tools involved in the process of creating clay, earthenware or porcelain objects are very similar to, if not the same tools that are used when cooking. This is among the reasons I decided to use it also in my work "Amuse-gueules".

"Brainmeatwashing" consists of a series of sketches visualising a succession of four spaces / rooms through which I am imagining the audience to follow an obligatory path, each room representing a sort of emblematic step in the food chain. Taken together, the four spaces are meant to constitute a large Pavlovian conditioning structure, which will induce in the unaware spectators / participants a conditioned nausea at the sight / smell of meat. For obvious reasons, the project remains as a sketch, impossible to realise. To "brainwash" means to pressurise someone into adopting some radically different beliefs, by using systematic and often forcible means. Often, the idea is to attempt, through prolonged stress, to break down an individual's physical and mental defences. The indoctrination performed by brainwashing is usually associated with military and political interrogations, and with religious conversion. Pavlovian conditioning can also be seen as a form of brainwashing. The reference to brainwashing in my art project is meant to highlight the fact that, as an artist, I am imagining to use some form of violence on the viewer, to force a change in beliefs.

The first room, the Labyrinth, involves restraints on the body, mimicking the restraints that livestock suffer during their short existence. The second room, the Foul Room, involves display and contact with bodily wastes, to mimic the degradation imposed on livestock because of overcrowding. The third room, the Kill Floor, will make the viewer experience the act of slaughtering. The fourth room, the Dinner Table, involves the display of the results of the slaughtering as dead matter / food.

Overall, the work aims at denouncing the atrocities perpetrated with the 'machinization' of the animals employed in the human food chain, possibly generating in the viewer an overwhelming feeling of disgust. The message that I would like to pass on the viewer is that, whenever meat is involved, the human food chain shows traits of abjection. The production of meat involves abject processes and the result of an abject act of production keeps a halo of abjection around it. Whenever we consume such a result, it becomes literally part of us, and the halo of abjection becomes part of us too.

On art and ethics

Overall, my work embodies a specific ethical scenario. I am aware of this, and I believe it is important to discuss such scenario and also to clarify the ideas of human (and animal) that are

involved in it. As part of this discussion, issues can be tackled such as the existence (or not) of ethical boundaries for art involving animals, or whether (or not) to use the disturbing imagery often involved in the exploitation of the livestock.

The animals employed in the human food chain are not even called animals. They are called “livestock”, which means living organisms kept and raised for use and profit. The scale of industrial animal husbandry is in the order of billions, with industrial slaughtering plants able to produce thousands of carcasses per day. Livestock are not seen as creatures able to feel pain and distress, but as cogs in a machine, often mass-produced in factory-like facilities, with their bodies restrained and shaped to satisfy industrial needs. Why not just show people photographs of stockyards, slaughterhouses, and the killing floor to make visible and denounce what is hidden? Addressing this last question is important because the answer should give insight on how aesthetic strategies and political commitments can become complexly entangled.

Documentary imagery in support of animal rights is without doubt disturbing in its immediacy, but also open to ambiguous reading. On the one hand the visual may enhance moral perception, but on the other hand it can also be abused to arouse sick passions. The stylistic affinity with low-budget exploitation documentary films can also entail voyeuristic and sadistic pleasure.¹⁸

In order to denaturalise the concept of ‘animal’, my work has been focusing on different aspects and established boundaries within the construct human / animal / food, also addressing the various contexts where this threefold relation is made explicit, such as the industrial food processing chain and the table. The notion of animal as food requires difference and distance from the notion of human being, because usually the consumption of human flesh is forbidden. However, it is also grounded on the biological concepts of heterotrophy and predation, which paradoxically instate a similarity: we are heterotrophic (but so are all animals, by definition) and we are predators of course, but we are also potentially preys. Part of my work can be read as exploring this paradox, while at the same time trying to remain faithful to my own beliefs (my moral choice to respect animal rights and my way of thinking of animals as fellows, a bit along the lines of Haraway's notion of companion species.) I think this explains why on the one hand some elements of the violence that I critique are still present in my works, but at the same time these elements involve a violence which is turned towards the humans, and not towards the animals, as is the case in certain controversial works, for example by Tinkebell or Evaristi.

The work “Helena” by Chilean artist Marco Evaristi was first exhibited in the Trapholt Art Museum in Kolding, Denmark, in February 2000. It consisted of ten Moulinex kitchen blenders, placed on a single table in the gallery space and visibly connected to the mains. Each blender was filled with water, in which a single living goldfish was swimming. Visitors to the exhibition were free to switch on any blender, “transforming the content to fish soup.” At least one visitor chose to do so, killing two goldfish. After complaints from Friends of the Animals, the blenders were unplugged, but the installation (and the goldfish) remained on display.

The piece has come to be seen by some as exemplifying art's cynical manipulation of animals, but it can also be subjected to more generous readings. It can be analysed as an installation involving performative elements, and raising moral/ethical questions, because the

¹⁸ See also Sontag (2003).

artist seems to be concerned by what he sees happening around him in society, the fact that there are double standards regarding morality. When questioned, Evaristi described the reactions to the death of a couple of fish as surprising, since we are surrounded by problems that are much more serious. We are passive in front of the news, but there is a big stir created by his artwork.

In a certain sense, “Helena” by Evaristi is comparable to “Save the Male!” by Dutch artist Tinkebell. In June 2007, formal questions were raised within the Dutch parliament by the Partij voor de Dieren because of a project by Tinkebell in which, during an eco-design fair in Platform 21 in Amsterdam, she offered people to buy 60 male live chicks or otherwise dump the chicks into a shredder, to show how male chicks are treated in the bioindustry. Referring to her project, in her website she discusses the double morality that is in play here, by pointing out that “she questions why millions of male chicks are brutally killed everyday, but she gets arrested for threatening to do the same in public.”

Both Evaristi and Tinkebell use their art in a provoking way in order to exemplify the blind spots of our modern society and its idiosyncrasies. By making the audience aware (through their becoming upset) of their double morality standards, the artists believe they are pushing people towards reflection at least, and possibly action. Personally, I have a problem with this sympathetic reading of artworks that involve actual physical violence towards nonhuman animals, above all when the stated concern of the artist is the condition of the nonhuman animal (as in the case of Tinkebell.) On the one hand, I agree that blurring the difference between reality and representation always brings to the artwork a disturbing directness which causes a strong impact on the audience. But on the other hand I also believe that doing so can be read as sadistic and voyeuristic, it can be read as exploitation of violence in order to attract attention, violence as a form of attention seeking. In this sense, for sure the artwork becomes edgy, but is this the edge I would like to walk on as an artist? Speaking for myself, I would say that as an artist I would not want to create space for such a misunderstanding within one of my works. So, for sure, I would ask myself: is there another way, maybe a more sophisticated way, to express what I want to express, without having to kill animals? It is also important to notice here that the possibility to blur the border between reality and representation is possible only thanks to the existence of a grey area surrounding questions of ethical treatment of animals. It is clear that the same would not apply in the case of humans. For example, let’s assume that, in order to show the hypocrisy of European towards the migrants crisis, I bring on stage a child migrant that I took from a refugee centre, and I drown him in a bucket of salted water, as part of a performance (referring to the undeniable fact that many migrants lose their lives while crossing the Mediterranean sea.). I greatly doubt that I could get away with my action, without being prosecuted for, I don’t know, premeditated murder to say the least.

After the advent of the animal liberation¹⁹ I believe that whenever art engages with animals, aesthetics and relational ethics should coalesce and it becomes a responsibility of the viewer (and the artist) to consider also ethical questions in interpreting the work of art: “It is not [I would say: not anymore] only about looking as a form of perception, but listening, receiving

¹⁹ See Singer (1995).

and working with the art to actively consider what it asks of us.”²⁰ Using animals in artworks as Evaristi and Tinkebell do implies adopting a view in which humans are allowed to exert an abuse of power over other sentient beings. I profoundly disagree with such a view.

I will now clarify the role played by my works with respect to the ethical scenario described above. “Promise me” reflects on how to mediate the ethical scenario that I have in mind to the viewer / audience, at the same time raising the question of what an audience promise could mean in the context of art. It can also be read as a form of engagement or as a proof of my will to engage with the audience, not only to present but also to question my ethical scenario. “Amuse-gueules” experiments with the blurring of the three categories human / animal / food and questions how aesthetics might function in relation to the message I want to transmit. Finally, “Brainmeatwashing” and the short stories that accompany my works raise the issue of why I use elements of what I critique within my work, which has been discussed above.²¹

On a different line of interpretation, I believe that my works can also be read as options for the animal to contrast what has been done to it. How do you contrast what is done to the animal, remaining within human terms? “Promise me” is an appeal to the good will of the individual human. “Amuse-gueules” is meant to scare by means of a nasty fiction which brings to its limit the assumptions that are hidden behind industrial farming. And “Brainmeatwashing” describe the possibility of putting into place a brutal form of unlearning which is obtained through conditioning. These options remain ‘within human terms’ because art is a human thing, hence what I am doing will be consumed by humans. However, the reason why I am doing it is for the animals. And this is why I would like to entitle my project “Seulement pour les Animots.”

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²⁰ Sutton (2017) p. 54.

²¹ Some of these questions have been discussed above and in my previous document 1.0 April 2018, in the section about the ethical layer of my research subject.

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