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Animal Promises

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Abstract

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The central focus of this paper is the relationship between humans and animals and the way in which it is governed by a system of binary opposition. The idea that humans are fundamentally different from and superior to animals has a philosophical history dating back to René Descartes and the Judeo-Christian Bible. As an alternative to binary opposition a new way of thinking can be called “categorical blurring”, which involves removing the focus on overarching categories to emphasize that identity is created in *relation* to other creatures and not in opposition to them. I utilize categorical blurring as a methodological approach for creating paintings as a way to express that humans are tangled up with animals in a relation that is mutual and co-constitutive. Animal body parts spill over into human body parts in these paintings, signaling that there is no human without the animal, no animal without the human.

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For Junk

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Introduction

My life is marked with experiences with animals that have felt very profound to me. One such experience took place in my village in the south of Israel in the early 90s. Stray dogs appeared in the village and the children played with them. Each child would call a stray their “own dog”, and although forbidden from living in any of the homes, the dogs were played with and fed daily by the children. I called my dog Lady, and what we did together remains vague to me but her death does not. The authorities, upon hearing of these opportunistic creatures, put out bowls of poisoned milk. As I sat crying, Lady’s furry body began to convulse as the poison made her do a sort of dance before becoming stiff forever. I knew that I had lost not just some *thing*; I lost my friend.

What makes a creature *killable*? In this thesis I argue that binary thinking positions humans against and above other animals, and I propose the tactic of categorical blurring to challenge such binary opposition. The story of Lady is fitting because it illustrates a particular relationship to animals that I see as couched in rigid categories of thought that determine not just who lives and who dies, but *how* creatures live and *how* they die. Lady existed in limbo. She was not officially a pet, and she was not a working dog. Lady was considered vermin; she was killable.

That certain animals are treated like children and others are considered disposable is one of the paradoxes surrounding the human relationship with animals. Historical

genocides of humans include “animalizing” groups of people that are undesirable, of placing them into the inferior category of the animal. This illustrates the way binary oppositions play a role in supporting exclusion, abuse, and extermination of animals and humans alike.

The first section of this thesis serves as an introduction to the binary of human versus animal and the biblical and Cartesian narratives that endorse this divide. The second section aims to challenge the idea of binary opposition and the myth of human exceptionalism, and provides an alternative account of how identities form. This is done through a discussion of selected contemporary philosophers who focus on animals, including Jakob von Uexküll, Jacques Derrida, and Donna Haraway. The third and final section includes an analysis of the paintings that comprise *Animal Promises*. It also positions my paintings within the philosophical discourse of the second chapter, and identifies allies in contemporary artistic practice.

The paintings in *Animal Promises* are created through the method of collage, which gives them a patchwork or mosaic quality. Animal parts spill over into human parts, edges blur and bodies flow into each other in these paintings. The blurring and connection of painted forms serves as an allegory for the co-constitution of humans and animals while the collage method creates a jumbled pictorial space, undermining a linear or definitive reading of each painting. The paintings in *Animal Promises* are meant to challenge the inherited categorical opposition of human and animal, and provide the

viewer with an alternative way of looking at the human-animal relationship. Using a strategy of blurring that is philosophical and artistic, I want to show that individuals are created *through* their relationship with others and not in opposition to them.

The idea of categorical blurring appears in Rosalind Krauss'¹ concept of *formlessness*, which she developed in her defense of surrealism in the book *Bachelors*.² For Krauss, formlessness entails confusion of traditionally accepted oppositions including high and low, male and female, self and other, inside and outside. An image or sculpture can be called formless when it displays characteristics of both categories at the same time. Krauss argues that this confusion in surrealist photography was achieved through the presentation of forms as fluctuating in their identity, or inhabiting two categories at the same time. For example, a woman's upturned head in Man Ray's photograph *Anatomies* (1929) resembles a phallus while a men's hat in *Untitled* (1933) looks suspiciously like a vagina; In *Self Portrait* (1927), Claude Cahun in front of a mirror looks feminine on one side and masculine on the other. Krauss refers to this strategy as "categorical blurring", "alteration", "declassing" and "deategorizing". Krauss is especially interested in surrealist photographs that achieve formlessness through categorical blurring that does not depend on actual photographic blurriness or trick

¹ Rosalind Krauss is an American art historian and critic focusing on 20th century art and the transition from modernism to postmodernism. Krauss makes use of deconstructionist, feminist and psychoanalytical discourses in her criticism. In *Bachelors* she discusses nine women artists and demonstrates how each artist "feminized" the male gaze. Mary Hamel-Schwulst, "Bachelors: Essays on nine women 'bachelors' who challenged masculinist aesthetics," *Library Journal* 124, no. 3 (1999): 147.

² Rosalind E. Krauss, *Bachelors* (Cambridge and London: The MIT Press, 1999), 5.

effects. The woman's head in Man Ray's *Anatomies* is not hazy or vague, the photograph is crisp; the confusion is achieved through shape and framing.

In this thesis, Krauss' concept of categorical blurring is used, but slightly differently. While Krauss places emphasis on surrealist photographs that did not use trick effects to achieve blurring, these methods inform the paintings in *Animal Promises*. Techniques like double exposure, montage, collage, solarization, and sandwich printing were used by the Surrealists to create images and bodies that are sometimes hazy, other times fractured, layered, and warped. *Animal Promises* is in a way an experiment in using photo-based collage as a source for painting.

I believe that binary opposition is inadequate for describing the world because humans and animals are created through their interaction with the environment and other creatures. Rather than each being the opposite of the other, humans and animals function in a relation that is interdependent, co-constitutive, dynamic, entangled, and ongoing. I propose blurring as an artistic and theoretical method to remove the singular, hard line between humans and animals. The removal of strict categories, or the blurring of the border between them, does not imply a removal of difference or detail. Rather, once overarching categories are not a crutch for understanding, more effort is required to see the individuals that were overlooked or oversimplified when the category provided explanation. With the paintings in *Animal Promises* and the following investigation, I

hope to encourage viewers and readers to look attentively and closely at the details of the intertwined and complex relationship between humans and animals.

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

It is impossible to know when the strict separation of humans from animals arose, and it has even been speculated that it coincided with the very beginning of language and symbolic thought.³ I will return to this idea later, but for now wish to look at the roots of this opposition – *human* versus *animal* - and the emergence of the myth of human exceptionalism. The consequences of this myth appear persistently in the mistreatment of animals in factory farms, the widespread degradation of wildlife habitats, and the keeping of domestic pets. Human control over animals is occurring on a scale unprecedented in history. When and how did this kind of dualistic thinking arise as a widely accepted world-view? How and why did humans become categorically superior? In this section I will address these questions through an analysis of how binary oppositions function and through a discussion of the Judeo-Christian Bible and René Descartes. This account of

³ In “The Concept of Enlightenment” philosophers Adorno and Horkheimer state that the schism between humans and nature reaches as far back as language. Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer. “The Concept of Enlightenment,” in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 1-35.

the dualism's origin is meant to provide context for a strategy of "blurring" that I propose as an alternative to dualism and opposition.

A binary opposition functions to distinguish between things that appear to be fundamentally different from one another, such as humans and animals, reason and instinct, truth and fiction, inside and outside, male and female. The differences are real; there are tangible, important differences between things in the world. A mouth cannot walk and legs cannot chew food; likewise, a bee cannot live underwater and a seal cannot design a spaceship. A dualism or binary opposition utilizes these observed differences to create rigid, overarching categories that are exclusive to one another. These categories, once entrenched, act as the authoritative explanation for difference, as one half is defined by being not the other, creating a self-explanatory and contradictory loop. A binary opposition is contradictory because one half of the opposition cannot exist without the other, and yet they are opposites.

In a strict dualism, two categories are placed in opposition to each other and typically a qualitative judgment follows. Boy is *better* than girl, high is *better* than low, truth is *better* than fiction, human is *better* than animal. In the worldview espoused by the Judeo-Christian Bible and scientific philosophy of René Descartes⁴, the human is rational

⁴ René Descartes was an influential mathematician, natural scientist and metaphysician writing between 1618 and 1650. In mathematics he developed techniques which enabled analytic geometry while in metaphysics he is known for the mind-body problem, a division of the natural world into two parts, the material body and the immaterial mind. Descartes is known for his theory that animal bodies are machines, and function according to the laws of matter. Gary Hatfield, "René Descartes," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2015 Edition).

and therefore made of an entirely different substance than the animal. The category “animal” throws the extremely varied creatures of the earth into one enormous bag with the label *non-human*. The creature that thinks is a superior creature; all others are just *beasts*, mere *animals*. This explanation is categorical, definitive, unquestionable, and final. It is a concrete wall separating beings thought of as opposites, with humans, as extraordinary creatures, in a state of permanent exception.

In Genesis, God grants humans absolute dominion over animals and over all of nature. First Adam gives the animals names, and then is given God’s command to “rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground.”⁵ The definitive break from animals comes when Adam and Eve sew fig leaves for aprons because they have found reason - knowledge of good and evil - and become ashamed. Here, it is knowledge that separates human from animal, since before reason they walked naked among the beasts they had named and felt no shame and no difference.

Inaugurated in part by the mathematician and philosopher René Descartes, Enlightenment thinking emphasizes reason and the sciences as the appropriate ways to understand the world. Descartes writes that human reason and the truths known by reason and mathematics were given to humans by God, and are the only things that can be

⁵ Gn 1:28, *Holy Bible, New International Version* (Colorado: Biblica, 2011).

known for certain.⁶ Truth and reason are superior to animal instinct and their mechanical bodily movement and provide access to virtue, happiness, and knowledge of God.

Descartes believed that thought and matter are completely different, and since animals have no thought, they are completely different from humans. Animals only have bodily “spirit”, an internal fire that causes them to move according to the laws of mechanics; the animal is like a *clock* that can be analyzed and understood by humans. Moreover, animals do not even have instincts or any learned behavior, because their operations are like that of a loom or shovel, which is to say, the animal is machine.⁷ Descartes argues that animals do not have speech, they cannot show that they think, and they cannot make themselves understood to us, all of which shows “not only that beasts have less reason than human beings but that they have none at all.”⁸ The conception of animals as machines, and the treatment of human thought as the most important, indeed the only true thing, was codified by Descartes at the birth of the modern sciences.

Descartes’ influential elevation of humans is pre-dated by a heterogeneous array of philosophers and theologians who did not espouse this view. St Francis of Assisi, the patron saint of the environment, believed that humans and animals are essentially the same.⁹ Pythagoras claimed that his soul had once animated animals and even plants.¹⁰

⁶ René Descartes, “Reply to Sixth Set of Objections,” in *Meditations, Objections, and Replies*, trans. Roger Ariew and Donald Cress (Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett Publishing, 2006), 197.

⁷ Gilbert Simondon, *Two Lessons on Animal and Man*, trans. Drew S. Burk (Minneapolis: Univocal, 2011), 74.

⁸ René Descartes, *Discourse on Method*, trans. Desmond M. Clark (London: Penguin Books, 2003), Part V, 41.

⁹ André Vauchez, “Francis, Nature, and the World,” in *Francis of Assisi, The Life and Afterlife of a Medieval Saint*, trans. Michael F. Cusato (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2012), 275.

And yet others, like Descartes, categorically separated humans from all animals, elevating them to an exclusive position as superior beings. For the latter camp, the exceptional feature of humans was rational thought or knowledge of God, which for some philosophers were synonymous.

It is difficult to know how prehistoric people and early civilizations categorized animals in relation to humans, but it is certain that animals crossed paths with humans in an enormously heterogeneous and varied way. They were hunted for food and clothing, feared as predators, sacrificed to the gods, domesticated for protection and companionship, and featured prominently in tales and myths as metaphors and symbols. The oldest artifacts reveal a close and tightly intertwined relationship. Paleolithic caves at Chauvet and Lascaux contain realistic line drawings depicting animals and human-animal hybrids. During his reign from 883-859 BC, the Assyrian ruler Ashurnasirpal had himself sculpted as a colossal human-headed winged lion, and the Egyptian Pharaoh Khafre was protected by the god Horus who appears in sculptures in the form of a falcon. John Berger writes that in Homer's *Iliad* from the eighth century BC, animal suffering and emotions are described in an identical way to that of humans.¹¹

¹⁰ Simondon, "Two Lessons," 33.

¹¹ John Berger, *About Looking* (New York: Vintage International, 1980), 9.

Gilbert Simondon¹² argues that many philosophies from Antiquity support a notion of continuity between humans and animals rather than the essential difference that developed in the Judeo-Christian doctrines and Descartes' philosophy.¹³ In contrast to Simondon, Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer¹⁴ argue that the opposition of humans and animals and nature predated Descartes and the Bible. It was not the Enlightenment and Descartes that ushered in a strict separation of humans from nature as a new phenomenon, but it was merely a continuation and intensification of the separation already in existence in religion and mythology.¹⁵ Adorno and Horkheimer argue that although mythology allowed for several gods rather than one, myth still involves a distancing of subject and object, because things in nature like wind or animals are also gods or demons at the same time. Therefore, they suggest that the schism between humans and animals reaches as far back as language and symbolic thought when "the tree is no longer approached merely as tree, but as evidence for an Other, as the location of *spirit*, language expresses the contradiction that something is itself and at one and the same time something other than itself, identical and not identical".¹⁶ This points to a

¹² Gilbert Simondon was a French continental philosopher writing from the 1930's until 1989. He is known for his theory of individuation, an account of how a person becomes an individual that is different from other things and people. In *Two Lessons on Animal and Man* Simondon questions the legitimacy of the way in which humans are differentiated from all other animals. Aislinn O'Donnell, "Gilbert Simondon: Two Lessons on Animal and Man," *Philosophy in Review* 33.5, (2013): 406.

¹³ Simondon, "Two Lessons," 59.

¹⁴ Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer were 20th century German continental philosophers accredited with developing Frankfurt School critical theory. A central theme in their work is a critique of reason, the sciences, and many aspects of human social life, with an emphasis on suffering, emancipation and compassion. Lambert Zuidervaart "Theodor W. Adorno," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, (2011). J.C Berendzen, "Max Horkheimer," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (2013).

¹⁵ Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer. "The Concept of Enlightenment," in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 1-35.

¹⁶ Adorno and Horkheimer, "Concept of Enlightenment," 15.

twofold remove, first away from the unique, individual tree when it is named “tree”, and once more when the tree comes to be a god or to also contain spirit. The individual vanishes into the concept.¹⁷

It is plausible that language and metaphor encourage binary divisions as a way of accounting for difference, and for creating concepts. Making distinctions is integral and necessary to language, as in when we name a tree “tree” and discern that it is not a “fox”. Language and the very act of naming at once enact a distancing and signal their own limit, for once a thing is named it is pinned down, boxed in, contained, labeled.¹⁸ The moment a child thinks of the “I” as it recognizes its own body as distinct from its environment, from mother and father, from trees and from animals, there may already be too great a distance to overcome between the human and its environment. Thus the human capacity for language and abstraction can be seen as both enabling, as a tool for conceptual thinking, and limiting, as a mechanism that separates the human out of nature, and objectifies nature.

The consequences of looking at the world through the lens of binary opposition are not small and include neglect of the individual connections between people and animals and failing to see identity in a more dynamic way than in opposition. The myth of human exceptionalism and the categorical consideration of animals as lower in value

¹⁷ Jean Baudrillard, in *Why Hasn't Everything Already Disappeared?* (2009) takes up the idea of naming as a sort of vanishing. The individual disappears into the concept, and in a double movement, the concept vanishes into the individual. Dreams, fantasies, and concepts vanish once they become facts.

¹⁸ Jacques Derrida, in *The Animal That Therefore I Am* (2008) equates naming with a kind of death, since the name will always outlive the mortal creature.

fuels the atrocities inflicted by humans upon animals, and perhaps upon other human beings.

A recent exposition in *National Geographic* includes interviews with American cattle farmers operating feedlots. “One thing I know is, we’re humans, and they’re animals. We have domesticated them for our purpose,” says Paul Defoor, CEO of Cactus Feeders, the world’s second-largest cattle feeding company.¹⁹ Binary oppositions and sweeping categories as prescribed in Genesis and by Descartes echo in the words of Defoor. In light of the long, entrenched, and consequential history of the myth of human exceptionalism, I ask: is there another way of thinking beyond binary oppositions? The following section presents a possible alternative.

I BLUR THEREFORE I AM

As twentieth-century philosophy began to challenge the traditions of the Enlightenment, the categorical divisions between human and animal were reconsidered. The question of animal subjectivity was addressed in the 1920s and 30s by the biologist-

¹⁹ Defoor quoted in Robert Kunzig, “Carnivore’s Dilemma,” *National Geographic*. November (2014), accessed January 13, 2015.
<http://www.nationalgeographic.com/foodfeatures/meat/>.

philosopher Jakob von Uexküll²⁰, who influenced subsequent thinkers such as Giorgio Agamben in *The Open: Man and Animal*. Jacques Derrida²¹ makes animals a central concern in many of his essays and lectures throughout the 1990s, and his 1997 Cérisy conference address became the book *The Animal that Therefore I Am*. Finally, Donna Haraway²² focuses on animals with a perspective informed by science, feminism and philosophy in her 2003 *Companion Species Manifesto* and later expanded version of the manifesto *When Species Meet*.

In *A Foray into the Worlds of Animals and Humans*, Jakob von Uexküll challenges Descartes' assertion that animals are machines with a declaration that every living thing is not a machine but a *subject*. Uexküll calls every animal a “machine operator”²³ rather than a machine, and in this basic way the animal is exactly like the human, only with a more limited set of things it perceives and actions it can effect. Like a

²⁰ Jakob von Uexküll was a late 19th, early 20th century German biologist and philosopher. Uexküll is known for developing the theory of *Umwelt*, or environment, which studies the way organisms influence their environment, their subjective perception of their environment, and the way they make meaning according to their perceptions. Stephen Moller, "Uexküll, Jakob Johann Baron Von," *Biographical Dictionary of 20th Century Philosophers*, (London: Routledge, 2002).

²¹ Jacques Derrida was a French continental philosopher whose writings span from the early 1970's until his death in 2004. Derrida is associated with post-structuralist philosophy and with a method of analysis he established called “deconstruction”. Derridean deconstruction in part seeks to re-conceive the nature of self-consciousness, and works towards preventing violence by advocating for justice and sympathy. Central concerns for Derrida are the binary relationships that exist in language and finding new ways of thinking that can account for paradox, namely that something can be the opposite of something else yet depend on the existence of the other. Leonard Lawlor, "Jacques Derrida," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (2014).

²² Donna J. Haraway is an American scholar that brings together the fields of science, technology, feminism and Marxism. Haraway's central focus is an interrogation of technoscience and the ways in which science and technology exist in a social context and cannot be abstracted from a social context. The figure of the cyborg for Haraway is a hybrid of technology and nature as well as human and animal that disrupts the boundaries of nature and culture. Shannon Sullivan, "Intersections Between Pragmatist and Continental Feminism," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (2015).

²³ Jakob von Uexküll, *A Foray Into the Worlds of Animals and Humans*, trans. Joseph O'Neil (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 45.

bell that must be swung a certain way to make the bell-sound, the animal is the bell operator rather than the bell itself, since the animal must *notice* a stimulus before acting in response.²⁴ The bell only works if *someone* rings it.

Uexküll demonstrates how a tick is not only a subject, but also intrinsically bound up with its environment and cannot be extracted from it, or even conceived of as separate from its environment or its object, the mammal. Each animal's perception organs are oriented toward very specific signs in the environment. For example, the tick only operates on the stimuli of butyric acid, warmth, and the felt texture of mammal fur. Of all the features of mammals, and of the whole world surrounding the tick, only those three stimuli exist to the tick and plug into its perception. The mammal is changed through its skin being pierced, while the tick is changed as it fills with blood, falls off the mammal, and dies having laid eggs. The subject and object are thus created *through* their entanglement since the tick could not be active in its environment without the blood of the mammal. And so, writes Uexküll, "subject and object are interconnected with each other and form an orderly whole."²⁵ The subject and object fit together so snugly that it could be said the tick and mammal were "made for each other."

Uexküll concludes with an example of an oak tree that is used by different animals in many different ways. The same object (itself a subject) provides a myriad of different environments but is "never known by all the subjects of these environments and

²⁴ Uexküll, "A Foray," 47.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 49.

never knowable for them.”²⁶ This is because every creature “sees” in its own way and has its own relationship with the oak. This type of thinking suggests that animals know things we don’t know, things we can never know, and in doing so invalidates Descartes’ philosophy, dislodging Man from his spot as the only thinking creature.

If humans concede that we are limited by our senses and the specific qualities of objects that become signals for us, we concede to a multiplicity of worlds that we do not and can never fully know. This line of thinking made *A Foray* into a foundational text for posthumanist thought, because it illuminates an infinite number of different worlds where things are only felt and not seen, ones that contain only one smell, or ones where objects look completely different than they do to us. It shows that there are different worlds right here in our environment, and they will always remain mysterious to us.

Uexküll’s theory argues that animals are subjects, and that subject and object are not opposite or even separate things. Subject and object form a circle rather than two opposing points - they complete one another. As such, there is blurring between subject and object because an animal or human can be a subject in their own right and an object for another animal or human at the same time. There is also blurring in the sense that an animal cannot be considered independently of its environment, because its perception is structured to attach into objects in its environment. It follows that the categories *subject* and *object*, *individual* and *environment*, *self* and *other*, cannot be mutually exclusive, and

²⁶ Ibid., 132.

fall short if they are treated as opposites. Animals “plug into” their environments to such an extent that it is erroneous to think of them as somehow “other” than their environments. We are reminded of the inadequacy of individual words and of the oppositional paradigm. There is no environment without the individual, and there is no individual without the environment; there is a connected web and points of meeting.

This opens up two avenues that are contradictory but must be accepted at the same time, which both Derrida and Haraway address. If the boundary between self and other is blurry, wouldn't hunting be like eating one's self? And if we agree that animals are subjects with their own meaningful world, would we not be hunting subjects that resemble us? The opposite stance is that the hunter is made for the elk just like the tick for the mammal; we do not moralize the tick's eating, nor should we our own. Uexküll's theory naturalizes killing animals *and* allows them to be subjects with importance. Animals are important *and* we kill them. Derrida and Haraway discuss such contradictions in their account of animals, and agree that the *way* in which we presently treat and kill animals is unethical and unacceptable, not that hunting or killing is morally wrong.

The consideration of his cat's point of view is of utmost interest for Derrida. In *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, he finds himself naked in front of his cat, suffering a

terrible bout of shame and embarrassment.²⁷ He admits that he can never truly know what his cat is thinking about his nudity, proceeds to analyze himself, and wonders what the cause of his shame might be. He locates the roots of his shame in the Bible's myth of human exceptionalism and in language itself, which has set up a cruel string of contradictions and dualisms that render his cat naked but not naked, and himself as naked only because he wears clothes. Nudity, shame, modesty, language, and naming form the core of Derrida's winding argument, which takes the Bible and Descartes as its primary opponents.

The two causes of human self-declared superiority for Derrida originate in the Bible, when in Genesis Adam "called out the animals' names *before* the fall, still naked but before being ashamed of his nudity."²⁸ God gave humans the unimpeachable right to name and use animals, and the burden of shame for our mortal nudity as punishment for eating from the tree of knowledge. In this tale, knowledge is tightly bound up with nudity and to know is to cover up. The system of values this activates is doubly against animals. First, there is the total control given to Adam through the power of language and the power of being the one who names (animals cannot speak or name themselves). Second, the distinction of clothes serves as a marker that separates humans from animals and represents knowledge and reasoning (animals cannot be immodest). Derrida argues that "[what] is proper to man, his subjugating superiority over the animal, his very becoming-

²⁷ Jacques Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, trans. David Willis (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 4.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 21.

subject ... would derive from this default in propriety”.²⁹ Humans can be improper while animals cannot. Through their reason, humans choose between modesty and immodesty, and although nudity and shame are God’s punishments for that, it is also these that cleave humans from animals and ensure their superiority. Not only do animals not speak, they do not know modesty, which is to say, they do not reason.

Derrida comes to a similar conclusion as Uexküll 63 years after the publication of *A Foray*. Uexküll writes that the objective world is “forever unknowable behind all of the worlds it produces, the subject - Nature - conceals itself.”³⁰ At the very end of his address, Derrida mounts a similar retort to Heidegger, who wrote that the difference between the animal and the human is that the animal cannot apprehend things “as such”, that the dog can use the stairs or look at the sun but it cannot think about them “as they are”. Derrida suggests that the human cannot know things “as such” either. If Heidegger called the dog “deprived” because it understands things only as it relates to itself - it does not think about what the stairs are like in its own absence, objectively - then for Derrida the human “is, in a way, similarly ‘deprived’ ... and there is no pure and simple ‘as such’.”³¹ Humans cannot “take themselves off”; they cannot step outside of human perception of the world and know things objectively; this explains the title *The Animal That Therefore I Am*. Derrida seems to be saying: humans are animals, and human knowledge is limited like an animal’s. Humans attempt to think of the objective, and yet

²⁹ Ibid., 45.

³⁰ Uexküll, “A Foray,” 135.

³¹ Derrida, “The Animal,” 160.

nature remains mysterious. The human can try to know the elm tree “as such”, with measurements, facts, and statistics, but this knowledge is still limited because it cannot capture the tick’s experience.

It is precisely this barrier to our knowledge that makes the question of response interesting to Derrida. In humanist-Cartesian philosophy, response as opposed to reflex is the way of differentiating human intelligence from animal instinct, and it is used to discount any communication we receive from animals. The lack of certainty on the human’s part as to whether the animal is responding is a symptom of this abyss - the mysterious, unknowable perspective of the animal. Animals do not have human language, and thus cannot respond in the way humans understand. And so, *we* are the ones who speak, and who give the animals their names, yet take away their capacity to speak since we cannot understand what they are saying. Behind the gaze of Derrida’s cat there remains “a bottomlessness, at the same time innocent and cruel perhaps, perhaps sensitive and impassive, good and bad, uninterpretable, unreadable, undecidable, abyssal and secret.”³² Derrida has no clue what his cat is thinking.

At a critical point in the text, Derrida abandons the question of whether animals can respond and asks whether they can *suffer*. “No one can deny the suffering, fear, or panic, the terror or fright, that can seize certain animals and that we humans can

³² Ibid., 12.

witness... ‘Can they suffer?’ leaves no room for doubt.”³³ Here Derrida steps outside the history of philosophy and makes clear his disgust with the cruelty inflicted on animals. He demands compassion and pity for animals, also compassion and pity as sentiments, as ways of being, and states that it is our responsibility, obligation and necessity to think about this issue, and to think about what *thinking* means. Beyond this, Derrida gives little mention to practical concerns regarding animals and devotes the rest of his address to the biblically-informed human capacities for shame and naming, and demonstrates how many other philosophers who may have called themselves anti-Cartesian were nevertheless Cartesian in their opinion on animals. It is here that Haraway picks up on the practical, fleshly line of thinking that Derrida does not follow with the question of suffering.

For Haraway, the capacity of animals to suffer is so obvious that she does not spend much time discussing its chemistry. Instead, she focuses on the human response to animal suffering and addresses the many contexts in which animals suffer as a result of human life with them. In both *Companion Species Manifesto* and *When Species Meet*, she urges that humans must truly look at animals and respond actively to their suffering through accepting “response-ability”.³⁴ To accept our capacity to respond would mean for humans to look carefully at animals, scrutinize the way they are used, learn about the context and web of relations that makes them possible, and minimize their suffering. Haraway attacks Derrida and Deleuze and Guattari with the accusation that they are

³³ Ibid., 28.

³⁴ Donna J. Haraway, *When Species Meet* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 88.

overly abstract about an issue that affects real, individual, flesh-and-bones animals. Haraway argues that “Derrida’s actual little cat is decidedly not invited into this encounter. No earthly animal would look twice at these authors...”³⁵

One *actual* context for animals’ suffering is the laboratory. Haraway argues that experimentation on animals remains a necessity because it is necessary to use a model organism. Furthermore, she argues that it would be criminal for humans to have the ability to save people and cure diseases but refuse to do so because it would mean killing animals. She calls such relationships “relations of use” which are always unequal, but necessary to life. “Try as we might to distance ourselves, there is no way of living that is not also a way of someone, not just something, else dying differentially.”³⁶ Haraway accepts that in order to live, mortal beings must use the bodies of other beings; the question for her is *how* that’s done.

Haraway argues that humans have to get better at killing and also get better at dying. “Humans must learn to kill responsibly.”³⁷ Not all of the research being done on animals is absolutely necessary, and it’s possible that not all human ailments need to be cured and therefore require animal testing. Haraway describes a decision-making process that would determine whether research is necessary and for the greater good. A cost-benefit analysis can determine research to be good, but the reasons can never be perfect,

³⁵ Ibid., 28.

³⁶ Ibid., 80.

³⁷ Ibid., 81.

or absolve humans of guilt; “there will never be sufficient reason”³⁸. Killing is always wicked, she writes, and we must still ask for forgiveness when we use animals unequally. She condemns the methods of most current laboratory and slaughterhouse practices, but states that it can and must be done respectfully, and only on a much smaller scale than now. Haraway abandons categorical statements that animals are fundamentally different than humans and therefore are “killable,” or that animals are categorically equal to humans and therefore cannot be used unequally. What is between these categories, one of absolute difference, the other of absolute sameness, is what she calls “companion species”, and this means learning to live together and to take responsibility for individuals and kinds of animals, their histories, suffering, and joy.

Haraway and Derrida share a belief in the inadequacy of categorical opposition. In her discussion of killing, Haraway quotes Derrida on the injustice of naming and the oppositions that emerge as a consequence of naming and categorizing. He asserts that the “general and common category of the animal is not simply a sin ... it is also a crime”³⁹; Haraway adds, “only human beings can be murdered... every living being except Man can be killed but not murdered. To make Man merely killable is the height of moral outrage; indeed, it is the definition of genocide.”⁴⁰ She thus suggests that the commandment “thou shalt not kill” should be changed to Thou Shalt Not Make Killable, and this would entail living responsibly with the necessity and labor of killing while

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Derrida quoted in Haraway, “When Species Meet,” 78.

⁴⁰ Haraway, “When Species Meet.” 78.

developing the capacity to respond in “relentless historical, nonteleological, multispecies contingency.”⁴¹ Haraway is interested in knowing the particular, situated, historically created existence of individual animals, and of exercising heartfelt response. Adequate responses to suffering would include ensuring that animal pain is minimal and necessary, and that the lives of lab animals are as fulfilling as possible, and more generally supporting practices that are ethical and opposing practices that are not, and taking personal and collective action.

In addition to the important matter of animal suffering, Haraway makes lots of space for the joy of living with animals and being in companion species entanglements. She asks: “What if work and play, not just pity, open up when the possibility of mutual response, without names, is taken seriously ... What if a usable word for this is *joy*?”⁴² For Haraway, mutual response does not mean an equal capacity to respond, but entails the different levels of response and response-ability of different creatures. There are many examples cited by Haraway of healthy and responsible human-animal relationships that she says deserve a future. One such case is the story of dogs, and in particular Landscape Guardian Dogs, the best of which is the Pyrenees breed.

The story of how dogs and people became entangled is widely believed to have begun when some wolves started coming close to human settlements to eat their garbage. The wolves that could tolerate this proximity bred with similar wolves and gradually

⁴¹ Ibid., 80.

⁴² Ibid., 22.

became behaviorally different from other wolves, though they remained genetically identical. A process of co-adaptation occurred between humans and wolves as humans began taking them in and encouraging them to act as alarm and guarding helpers. This kind of combination or blurring of “natural” wolves and “cultural” humans is what prompted Haraway to develop hybrid words such as *natureculture*, a combination of traditionally opposite terms. It would be a mistake to think of humans as cultural and in opposition to the natural world, when in reality human culture is intertwined and blurred with animals and nature, and both became who they are through their relationship with the other. Haraway’s strategy for expressing this reality is to create a new word by removing the space or boundary between two words, literally blurring them together. There is no strict distinction between nature and culture for Haraway, and she focuses on inheriting the histories of our shared lives with dogs along with all the situated and embodied details. “Companion species cannot afford evolutionary, personal, or historical amnesia,”⁴³ she writes.

Pyrenees dogs originated from Basque Pyrenean mountain dogs that were nearly wiped out in Europe during both world wars. After the wars, the breed was taken to the United States and kept alive by Pyr enthusiasts, mostly white middle-class women who enjoy and breed show dogs. The original dogs were regionally distinct and their type formed as a result of the functional standards that shepherds sought, ecological

⁴³ Donna J. Haraway, *Companion Species Manifesto* (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2003), 83.

conditions, and the dogs' own choices to breed with neighboring populations.⁴⁴ No one factor created the breed; it was created through a complex series of relationships. The result is a type of dog that is best at protecting herds from predators by patrolling boundaries, barking at intruders, and sometimes killing them. Haraway notes that a dog with little joy in chasing, no passion for territory, and no interest in working with humans cannot be shown how to herd and guard. She emphasizes that the phenomenon, although not entirely optional for the dogs, requires willingness and a type of agreement on their part.

Haraway sees every sign of the dogs' enjoyment of their job, on which they lounge among the herds during the day and patrol at night. A good guarding dog with responsible ranchers makes for a functional and positive companion species experience. Haraway emphasizes that the beauty of working dogs is that their worth is not calculated by how much they love their owners, in the frequent manner of domestic pets. The dogs are not pretend-children for their human owners, but useful, talented, and trusted co-workers.

The re-education of the breed for practical use on ranches in America was a response to the ban on poisons in the 1970s as a method of dealing with coyotes and newly re-introduced wolf populations. Ranchers were encouraged to switch to using guardian dogs and so worked closely with the dog fanciers who had kept the breed going.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 67.

All these layers - of places and types of animals, “natural” and “cultural” breedings, migrations, policies, stories, work and joy - make up what Haraway calls “naturecultures”, “companion species”, and “material-semiotic knots”.⁴⁵ Stories are bound up with bodies, which are bound up with other bodies, and together they form a complex web of opportunity, unequal use, play, love and companionship.

The complex history of dogs and Haraway’s detailed account of the layers of relationships that make individual dogs and types of dogs possible represents her general approach to inheriting histories and learning to act responsibly. History matters for Haraway. There are problems with “pure” breeding, including shrinking genetic diversity and resultant health problems, but it can all be done carefully, she argues. There are good breeders and brilliant kinds of dogs, and there are puppy mills, operations that are damaging to canines and people alike. Put simply, it is everyone’s responsibility to know the histories of animals and the local and global webs they are part of, to reject Cartesian oppositions, and to actively support positive cross-species relationship. To look away from the categories of human and animal means to look at a multiplicity, and although this can look blurry from far away, the closer one gets the more details emerge in all their historically-specific complexity.

The entanglement and dependence of subject and object that arises in the philosophies of Uexküll, Derrida and Haraway can be described as a state of biological

⁴⁵ Haraway, “When Species Meet.” 4.

blurring, where it is impossible to draw crisp lines around individuals because they are constituted through their relationship to others. The biological blurring described by Uexküll supports a blurring at the level of language because the terms “self” and “other” are revealed to be inadequate to describe the world, especially when they are treated as opposites. The limits of language and especially of the category “Animal” led Derrida to determine that humans cannot “take themselves off”⁴⁶ and cannot know what the animal is thinking. This abyss, is blurry such that we cannot say anything definitive about it, because we cannot see it clearly. For Haraway, blurring is a device used in her invention of words such as *natureculture*, in which two opposing terms are literally fused together.

PIECES AND WHOLE, COLLAGE AND PAINT: BLURRING AS METHOD

The paintings in the series and thesis exhibition *Animal Promises* depict bits and pieces of animal and human bodies. In their busy collage aesthetic and small moments of abstraction they form affinities with such artists as Robert Rauschenberg and Cecily Brown. Through a description and analysis of several paintings from *Animal Promises*, as

⁴⁶ Derrida, “The Animal,” 14.

well as an analysis of the work of selected contemporary artists, I argue that these paintings function in three ways. First, they act as an allegory for the co-constitution and entanglement of earthly humans and animals through the treatment of the canvas as a space that holds many connected fragments of images. Second, the paintings blur the boundaries between truth and fiction, life and art, through a reliance on images from popular media – a way of bringing the outside world in. Third, they weaken the ability to know or understand the meaning of an image through the use of the collage method, which creates a jumbled, uncertain pictorial space with no clear narrative. Together, those functions challenge the validity of the inherited categorical oppositions human versus animal, truth versus fiction, and life versus art.

The paintings that comprise the series *Animal Promises* do not lend themselves to a straightforward reading. They feature small colorful fragments of painted areas that fill the canvas and border one another in a style reminiscent of collage. In *Snow Fur* (2015) (Fig. 1) a white hind leg of a furry animal nudges up to an ape-like open mouth and some branches in the top left of the canvas. A beard appears among the branches, beside which a pair of hands clutch shut a furry jacket. An upside-down nose borders a pair of shadowy perked rabbit ears. Some of the small vignettes are recognizable, while others remain indecipherable lapses in the order of representation.

The paintings are a modest and consistent size, sharing standard dimensions of 50 by 40 centimeters. The dense patchwork of forms on the canvases, their fairly small size,

and the jumbled pieces of half-recognizable imagery draw the viewer in for a closer look. At close range, the collaged patchwork of fragments visually breaks down into marks of paint that range in size and thickness.



Figure 1. Anna Kovler, *Snow Fur*, 2015, oil on canvas, 50 x 40 cm.

Lion's Den (2015) (Fig. 2) is warm-hued and packed tight with pieces of disparate bodies and creatures. Patches of leopard print overlap with human hands, a human thigh and knee extend at the ankle bone into an animal hoof, a partial smiling human face borders an area of paint that is hard to decipher. Extracted from their sources and

translated into paint, the pieces of human and animal bodies enter into new relations with their new neighbors on the surface of the canvas.



Figure 2. Anna Kovler, *Lion's Den*, 2015, oil on canvas, 50 x 40 cm.

In the painting *Good Morning Rooster* (2015) (Fig. 3), the collaged image fragments fit together like a lock-and-key. The stem of an upside-down rose extends into a depiction of a leopard where it becomes the shadow outlining its hind leg, while the neck and head of the leopard transition into a human limb. Part of an elephant lying in the snow, an image appropriated from a painting by Will Gorlitz, borders onto the painted likeness of an Allyson Mitchell sculpture, a furry “she-beast” in red underpants. Below that, the orange feathers of an upside-down rooster creep into the space above it, where

between the leopard's legs the plumes become fiery blades of grass in that right-side-up painted fragment.

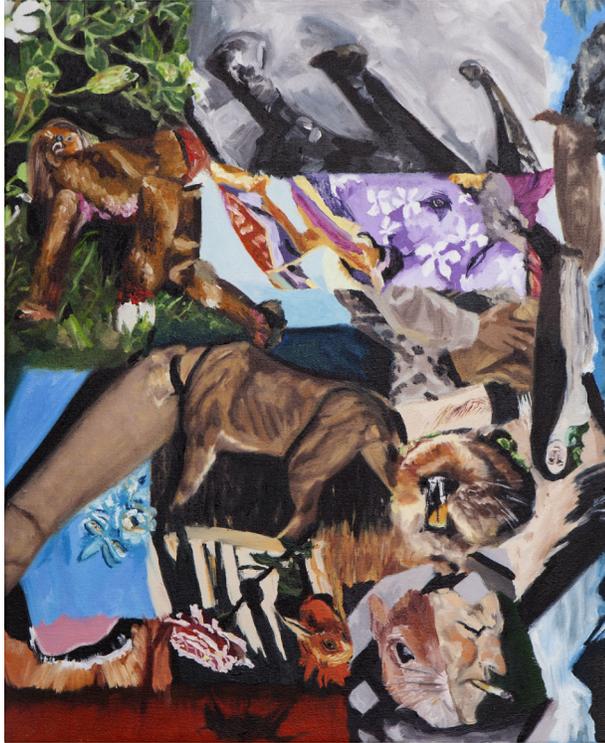


Figure 3. Anna Kovler, *Good Morning Rooster*, 2015, oil on canvas, 50 x 40 cm.

There is a mish-mash of forms in these paintings that overlap and weave into each other, giving the impression that they can somehow be deciphered, if only the connections between all the pieces were understood. Yet the patchwork resists confident interpretation, as there is no obvious reason for the juxtapositions of individual images, and no possible single meaning. What is known for certain is that there are human parts and animal parts, and they are beside, atop, and beneath one another; they relate through their proximity and attachments, through their shared environment.

All of this connectedness brings to mind Uexküll's description of the oak tree. Like the many creatures that share the oak tree but can never know its importance to other animals, the fragments of images in a collage share the space of the canvas but occupy it in their own way. Like the tick and mammal, the depicted pieces of humans and animals remain individual while blurring into the mosaic of their environment. They are individual and also comprise an orderly whole - they are *self* and *other* at the same time. The collaged fragments *require* each other for the whole painting to be created, there could be no collection of images without each individual image, and their differences allow for an interesting and complex visual space.

This use of images from the "real world" hopes to motivate contemplation of the current interaction between people and animals and all the layers and complexity this entails. The blurring of human bodies and animal bodies, of "nature" and "culture," in these paintings elicits the question: how do humans and animals fit together in contemporary society? How do humans and animals relate, and what are the borders between them? The appropriated art images, such as those of Will Gorlitz and Allyson Mitchell, add the question: how do stories and pictures tie in with real fleshly creatures?

The relation between the real and fictional, story and fact, is a traditional opposition like the opposition between the categories of "human" and "animal". In the Cartesian tradition, a statement is either true or false, a creature either human or not. This

divide plays a prominent role in the history of painting, specifically in the movement towards abstraction, beginning with Kazimir Malevich and reaching a peak with minimalist hard-edge abstraction and Clement Greenberg's theories of medium purity. An ideal painting for Greenberg would not attempt to tell a story, or pretend to be an object in the world other than itself.⁴⁷ Abstraction, for Greenberg, was a way for paintings to tell the truth.

Questioning the categorical opposition between facts and stories is a key part of Haraway's project of undermining the categories of human and animal. For her, creatures are tangled up with each other in "material-semiotic" knots, in which the stories we tell are just as real as the facts. She argues that real bodily material existence is tangled up with the literary, metaphor, art, fiction, and imagination.⁴⁸ "The machinic and the textual are internal to the organic and vice versa in irreversible ways ... the sign and flesh are one."⁴⁹ If we agree with Haraway that stories and pictures are as real as "real life," then we concede that art is intertwined with life and not somewhere outside of it, that paintings are facts and facts are paintings.

In *Animal Promises*, the human and animal, as well as the real and imaginary, coexist on the same painted plane. Image fragments with a recognizable representational agenda nudge up to patches of abstract marks that do not mimic reality but are just "real"

⁴⁷ Clement Greenberg, "Towards a Newer Laocoon," *Partisan Review* VIII, no. 4 (1940): 296-310, accessed February 23, 2015,

<http://www.mariabuszek.com/ucd/ContemporaryArt/Readings/GrnbrgLaocoon.pdf>

⁴⁸ Haraway, "When Species Meet," 4.

⁴⁹ Haraway, "Manifesto," 17.

paint, abstract marks, or paint as itself. Their close proximity reveals that the representational pieces are made of the same substance as the abstract ones, and paint comes together to create both truth and lies. Indeed, the figurative is simply a collection of paint strokes that on their own would hardly look like a leg or tail. The human and animal, the real and imaginary, are equally constituted in these paintings. They are made of the same substance, and the limits between them blur in a movement that dislodges the superiority of one over the other and challenges their categorical opposition.

My painting process begins with images I find in nature magazines and on the Internet. The cut pieces are always only parts of a human or animal, isolated and extracted from the original. A nose is cut out from a whole face, the tip of a dog's tongue extracted from the whole dog, a lion's mane isolated from the rest of its body. The pieces are chosen and arranged according to "alliances" between them such as texture, color, and shape. This collage is then used as the source for the painting. In translation from print to paint, the borders between the fragments must be negotiated. An edge can be painted as a rough line or a gradual fade, and this is decided intuitively and in response to individual borders. In the act of painting, the collage elements become connected through similarities in color and brush marks that drag across two fragments, connecting them. The interconnectedness of humans and animals is therefore physically manifested through affinities of color, mode of application, and the literal spilling of discreet forms into other forms.

The use of collage as a generative method for these paintings creates an opportunity for assembling compositions quickly with access to stacks of magazines and printouts from Internet image searches. The hunt for suitable imagery includes poring over National Geographic magazines, art magazines and culture magazines, and choosing what will be cut intuitively. At times I try to isolate the smallest fragment of a human or animal so that it can still be recognized. Alternatively, sometimes I choose and cut a piece that makes the identity of the source ambiguous. The result is an interplay between recognition and confoundedness which the viewer must navigate as they attempt to make sense of the collage. I then play around with arranging the cut fragments into compositions, and the easily moveable pieces allow for freedom and flexibility in the initial stages of each painting.

Once the collage composition is resolved the loose pieces are glued down. While the collage remains fixed, the painting is flexible. If a fragment is not translating well in paint then it is erased and replaced with something new. There is no restriction on how much a painting can stray from the collage source, and sometimes the altered fragments become the most successful.

The collage method allows for working with representations of the “real” world and putting fragments into conversation that would not otherwise be together. The aesthetic of National Geographic is one where believability, coherence, and truth are principles for the photographs and stories told, and the project of disassembling these

images and reassembling them into new configurations undermines the discreet nature of the depicted animals, humans, and environments. The act of weaving and juxtaposing these pieces, which defines the collage process, thus imparts a feeling of the simultaneous existence of different realities and a physical manifestation of their connectedness. A tiger from one page of a magazine can become connected with a woman's hair from another page, forming a relationship between the two that was not previously there, or was there all along but isn't recognized.

My method of working includes the actions of visual research, selection, cutting, arranging, juxtaposition, pasting, analyzing, interpreting, approximating, inventing, responding, judging, and a lot of looking. To paint the likeness of something requires looking very closely at the individual source, the colors and shades that comprise every nuance of its appearance. Perhaps this close and attentive looking is similar to what Haraway's "response-ability" would require. Individual pieces must be scrutinized on their own, at their borders with others, and as part of a whole. Of course a painting should not be confused with action and solidarity, but if stories and pictures are *real*, these paintings and the discourse they are part of can act to subvert inherited categorical oppositions, which in turn can improve relationships in the flesh.

Animal imagery is appearing with increasing frequency in contemporary art and it comes in different forms. Perhaps the resurgence is a sign of heightened interest in and awareness of the plight of animals. Human-animal hybrids are extremely popular, as in

the work of Stephen Appleby-Barr, Brian Donnelley, Liu Xue, or Patricia Piccinini, all of whom rely to a large extent on anthropomorphic alterations. There are activist art projects such as Olly & Suzi's animal collaborations, which draw attention to vanishing species of wildlife like sharks and rhinos. Olly & Suzi track down wild animals, draw them in-situ, and give the piece to the wild animals depicted, who mark it by biting it, urinating on it, and sometimes taking off with the whole thing.⁵⁰ In his discussion of animal imagery in postmodern art, Steve Baker positions Olly & Suzi on one end of the spectrum, which he sees as ecologically engaged, "animal endorsing" art that aligns itself with conservationism or animal advocacy. On the other end is art that is theoretical, historical, and skeptical of "culture's means of constructing and classifying the animal in order to make it meaningful to the human."⁵¹ Baker uses Mark Dion's ironic and witty installations to illustrate the latter "skeptical" approach. Dion arranges animal-themed objects and live animals in situations that reference taxonomic classification and point to the disconnection between categories and life in the flesh. While there are many differences between the environmentalist and theoretical methods, Baker argues that they share a common interrogation of the concept of "truth" and a similarity in how they position themselves as artists.

Stylistically, *Animal Promises* has an affinity with historical collage paintings like those of Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque, Dada collages such as those of Hannah Höch, and Surrealist Photomontages. There are also similarities with the paintings of

⁵⁰ Steve Baker, *The Postmodern Animal* (London, UK, Reaktion Books. 2000), 12.

⁵¹ Baker, "Animal," 9.

Robert Rauschenberg and Cecily Brown. Rauschenberg is famous for combining painting, sculpture and everyday objects, as well as using the image transfer method to create collage-paintings for which images became the medium.⁵² Rauschenberg believed that art must include the outside world, and challenged the categorical Greenbergian divisions between artistic media. His combines, collages, and transfer drawings have the characteristic of a patchwork of images or objects that come together to form a whole.

His work often references mundane social life as well as political figures and movements including the war in Vietnam, Richard Nixon and Malcolm X.⁵³ The collage aesthetic of disparate images that fill an entire canvas connect Rauschenberg's work to the paintings in *Animal Promises*. In addition, his insistence that art and life are not separate entities, manifested in his choice to make art about world events, ties his work to these paintings.⁵⁴ *Animal Promises* is a fusion of everyday realities, of life and fact, with the imaginary and physical world of art. Like Rauschenberg, these paintings argue that there is no "pure painting", there is no art outside of life or life outside of art - the sign and the flesh are one, as Haraway would say.

The paintings of Cecily Brown are a mish-mash of body parts that oscillate between abstraction and representation. Her compositions go right to the edge of the canvas, giving them a collage-like, huddled quality. Brown's imagery derives from

⁵² Jerry Saltz, "Our Picasso?" *The Village Voice*, January 3, 2006, <http://www.villagevoice.com/2006-01-03/art/our-picasso/>

⁵³ Roberta Smith, "A Rarely Seen Side of a Ruschenberg Shift," *The New York Times*, March 8, 2007, http://www.nytimes.com/2007/03/08/arts/design/08raus.html?_r=0

⁵⁴ Barbara Rose, *Rauschenberg* (New York, Random House. 1987).

pornographic magazines, cartoons, and canonical paintings which are then heavily distorted, and traces of which make scarce appearances: “a glimpse of open thigh here, a raised knee there, a breast or enormous phallus elsewhere,”⁵⁵ reads a *New York Times* review. Expressionistic abstract paint marks compose most of Brown’s paintings, their fleshy or mint green tones standing in for body parts or the surrounding foliage in scenes that intimate outdoor Bacchanal revelry. Sometimes it looks as though a group portrait has been put through a blender for a few seconds - there can be only thwarted attempts at deciphering what is going on in most of her canvases. Brown states that she “wants to catch something in the act of becoming something else”⁵⁶, and the paintings, with their vigorous brushwork, deny any fixed identity to the bodies or scenes.

It is this impossibility of knowing that connects Brown’s paintings with those of *Animal Promises*. Brown is quoted as saying, “I wanted it to be impossible for the viewer to know where they stood in relation to the action.”⁵⁷ By playing with pictorial space, obscuring the vantage point of the viewer, and offering only subtle hints at the content of the painting, Brown subverts the sureness of the viewer to know.⁵⁸ She uses paint to subvert knowledge acquired through looking. The human figure is “confined, dissected and merged into a melting ground” as well as “part of recognizable landscapes and

⁵⁵ Roberta Smith, “Art In Review; Cecily Brown,” *New York Times*, January 21, 2000, <http://www.nytimes.com/2000/01/21/arts/art-in-review-cecily-brown.html>

⁵⁶ Brown quoted in Molly Warnock, “Cecily Brown,” *Artforum International* 47, no 5 (2009).

⁵⁷ Brown quoted in Suzanne Cotter, “Seeing Double,” in *Cecily Brown: Paintings* (Oxford: Modern Art Oxford, 2005), 41.

⁵⁸ Suzanne Cotter, “Seeing Double,” in *Cecily Brown: Paintings* (Oxford, Modern Art Oxford, 2005), 43.

interiors.”⁵⁹ There are suggested forms and partial figures, but they are only suggestions, as different viewers will see different things in these paintings. Suzanne Cotter argues that Brown’s paintings play with the notions of real and imagined. Some parts of the paintings recede, creating pictorial space, while others are thick with blocks of paint that act as an “intrusion into the real”.⁶⁰ Cotter argues that Brown’s paintings operate somewhere between the two, between fact and mystery.

The paintings in *Animal Promises* are created through the method of collage and translation, pulling fragments from the world of images and throwing them into close contact with one another. In both content and form, story and paint, they suggest that individuals are inextricably bound up with their environment and with each other. The subject needs its object to be what it is and vice versa. Paint, as a medium for translation and connection, allows for the entanglement of humans and animals as a physical manifestation on the surface of the canvas. These paintings operate on the conviction that truth and fiction are not categorically different and are not opposites. Rather, the pictorial is in a co-shaping relationship with facts and truth in *Animal Promises* as they tell the complicated tale of people and animals without the limitations of language and without names.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Cotter, “Seeing Double,” 44.

Conclusion

My interest in animals has taken a variety of forms in my studio practice over the years. The artwork has guided my philosophical investigation, and this investigation in turn influences the artwork. The series of paintings I made just before entering the IAMM program featured poodles that had been dyed, dressed up and altered by their owners. The painting style was crisp, and the idea I wanted to emphasize was the extreme control exercised by humans over their dogs. After ruminating on the interconnectedness of humans and dogs and the fact that both parties are created through their relationship, the pink poodles seemed inadequate to capture this complexity. These paintings were a reminder of the outrageousness of some pet owners and the inability of dogs to control their own lives, but they did not offer an alternative.

The process of researching and reflecting on the human-animal relationship from a philosophical perspective encouraged me to formulate a clear idea of how I see the present reality, how I think it could improve, and what sort of painting methodology would communicate this. It was also important for me to figure out whether eating and using animals is something I can endorse. I realized that talking about and making pictures of animals would require addressing difficult topics like suffering, killing and eating, while creating space for love, responsibility and companionship.

The contradictory loop that is created by binary oppositions continues to perplex me despite the insights gained through my research. My discussion of language and in particular Adorno and Horkheimer's statement about the contradiction inherent in symbolic thought, metaphor, and language complicate my own reliance on language in the attempt to solve a problem. I recognize myself as a distinct individual and I also recognize my dependence on animals, and the formation of my identity through our relationship. I am self and other at the same time, and this paradox is fascinating.

The failure of my thoughts to reach a logical conclusion could mean that the answer cannot yet be named, for if it was named it would be limited, constricted, rendered impotent to answer the question at hand. As a consequence of my confusion, and a profound dumbfoundedness that overtakes me when I consider this paradox, I have made and continue to make work that ends up illustrating the binary division between humans and animals. My mind slips into and is entertained by the cyclical consideration of difference and dependence, individuality and connectedness, self and other, human and animal.

In this thesis I have presented the concept of categorical blurring and the method of collage as promising ways of grappling with the complex relationship between people and animals. However, a conceptual solution is inevitably limited by the objectifying facet of language, and by my specific perception as a human being. I believe that unlike concepts, paint and other artistic media have the potential to reach and express ideas

without the limitation of language. I am therefore dedicated to continuing to experiment with the collage technique in my paintings in the hopes of connecting with a different kind of knowledge and sharing this with viewers. I am fascinated with the mystery that nature and animals have despite human efforts to objectify, calculate and understand them. And yet I do want to understand animals, and I believe that research is important for deeper knowledge. The balance between seeking knowledge and being aware of the limitations and inadequacies of knowledge is part of the paradox that animals represent.

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