

PUSH/PULL

ISSUE FIVE // ENTERING THE SPACE OF THE ABSENT REFERENT

Editor's Statement

Non-human animals* are a ubiquitous source of symbolism and reference across cultures. However, in Western media, news, and everyday interactions, this recurrent, often unquestioned use of animals, can take on an unsettling undertone: the Syrian crisis as a “human slaughterhouse;” Trump’s immigration ban as a “mass dragnet exclusion;” enslaved people forced to mate “like cattle;” or “fat pig” as a sexist slur. Once you identify one of these metaphors, you start to notice them everywhere.

The absent referent is defined in linguistics as a sign that has an empty, contingent, paradoxical, or undefined referent. For this issue of PUSH/PULL, contributors used this concept as a lens to examine the relations between humans and animals. The issue is inspired by Carol Adams who, in *The Sexual Politics of Meat*, uses the term to describe the noun “meat” as a reference to an animal, defining he/she through his/her consumable flesh, that simultaneously negates the individuality and life experience of that animal.

Using animals as absent referents in our everyday language is problematic because of the contrast between their presence as objects of reference, and their increasing absence from our spaces of interaction and consideration. The metaphors that describe the subjugation of humans by other humans through animal oppression perpetually obscure and abstract the animals’ experience.

And yet, the marginalization of humans and animals are fundamentally linked, not only by the justification of one by the other, but by the ideological dualism between the “self” and “other” that is used to rationalize structures of power and value hierarchy. By filling the empty space of these referents through the imaginative and empathetic power of art, we can reaffirm the the subjectivity of animals, and potentially see more deeply the entanglements of human and animal injustices.

*written as “animals” for the rest of this text

ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTORS

Joseph Moore, a NYC-based artist working in photography, video, and new media, pairs text and video that critically engages with the act of “oversight.” Compiled from live web camera streaming of animals in different environments, these time-lapse videos elicit the lulling apathy that we can feel as viewers and voyeurs in observing animals, mechanized and without meaningful acts of connection.

Aida Šehović, a current Culture Push Fellow, contributes a written and visual piece that centers on a personal experience in considering the connections between violence against women and non-human animals.

Terike Haapoja, a Finland-born, NYC-based visual artist, gives a virtual tour through image and text, of the Museum for Nonhumanity, a mobile museum that presents the history of the distinction between humans and other animals, and the way this imaginary boundary has been used to oppress human and nonhuman beings.

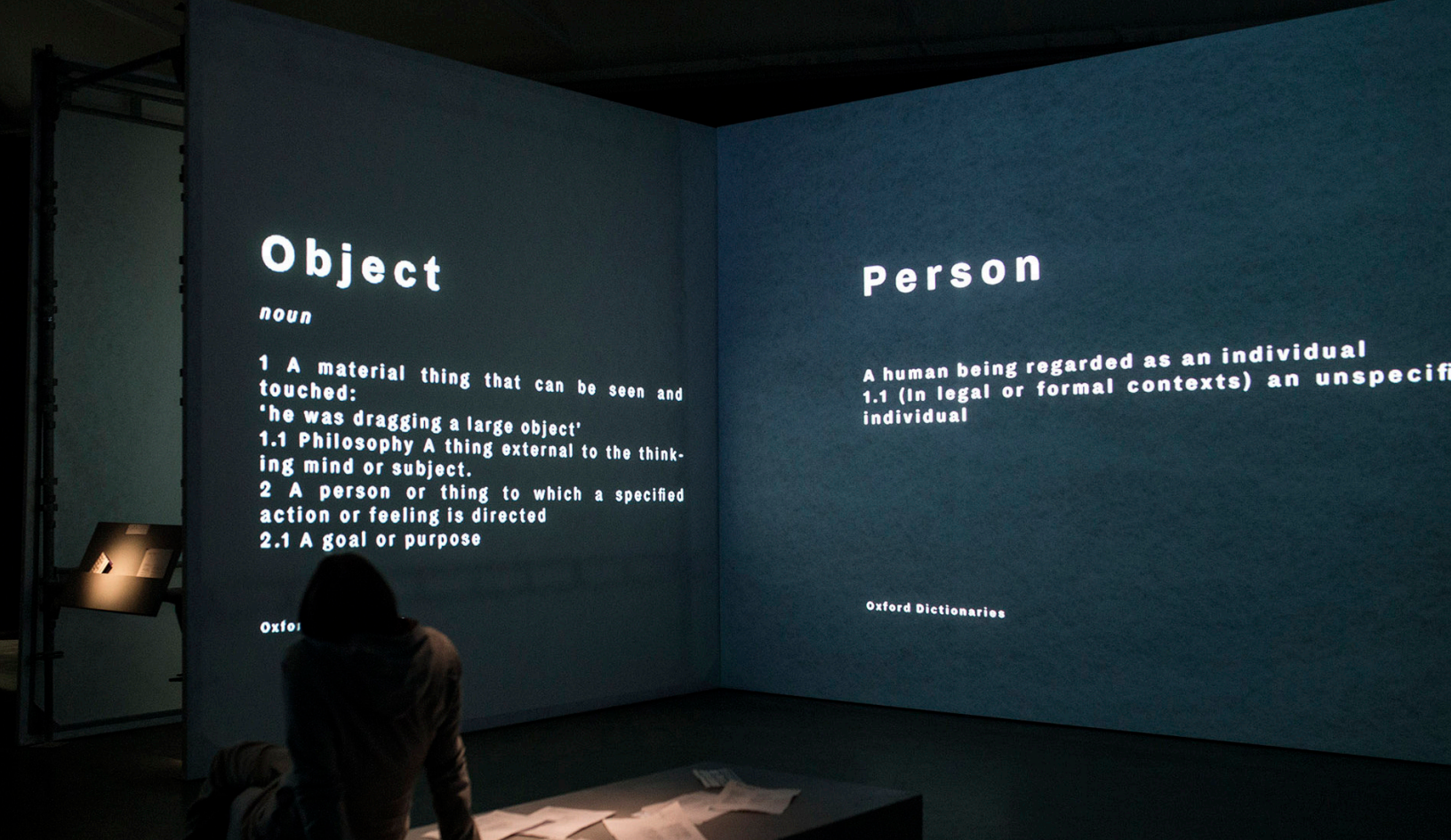
Linnea Ryshke, a painter and the Administrative Director at Culture Push, examines skin as a physical, symbolic, and cultural object, through creating paint “skins”--films of dried acrylic paint. Through visual metaphor and text, she considers the way colloquial language and phrases scar, confine and wound those considered “other” in contemporary Western culture.

Carolyn Hall, a historical marine biologist and freelance dancer, discusses how the commodity market allows for the “moral abandonment” of fish as sentient creatures apart of ecosystems that interlock with our own. Through a historical and analytical lens, she situates the problem of contemporary fishing practices as emanating from an increase in mechanization and industrialization, and as lacking in understanding the relationality of all life.

The Environmental Performance Agency, an artist collective based out of Crown Heights, Brooklyn, provides an account of their approach to confronting the ongoing presence of rats in their urban weeds garden. Presented as a nonlinear story, the piece integrates observational field notes, research, and critical commentary on the politics of pest management and rat-human relations.

MUSEUM OF NONHUMANITY DECLARES THAT DEHUMANIZATION IS HISTORY

BY TERIKE HAAPOJA AND LAURA GUSTAFSSON



A new temporary museum is touring the world. The museum's 70 minute exhibit presents the history of the distinction between humans and other animals, and the way that this imaginary boundary has been used to oppress human and nonhuman beings. Throughout history, declaring a group to be nonhuman or subhuman has been an effective tool for justifying slavery, oppression and genocide. Conversely, differentiating humans from other species has paved the way for the abuse of natural resources and other animals. In each location the museum hosts an extensive lecture program in which civil-rights and animal-rights organizations, academics, artists, and activists propose paths to a more inclusive society.

Museum of Nonhumanity stands as a monument to the call to make dehumanization history and to the start of a new, more inclusive era. Museum of Nonhumanity opened first in Helsinki, Finland, in 2016, and has since opened also in Santarcangelo, Italy and Momentum Biennale, Norway. The project was launched by History of Others, a collaboration between the writer Laura Gustafsson and the visual artist Terike Haapoja.

Examples of Exhibition Texts:

(a) In determining the meaning of any Act of Congress, or of any ruling, regulation, or interpretation of the various administrative bureaus and agencies of the United States, the words “person”, “human being”, “child”, and “individual”, shall include every infant member of the species homo sapiens who is born alive at any stage of development.

(b) As used in this section, the term “born alive”, with respect to a member of the species homo sapiens, means the complete expulsion or extraction from his or her mother of that member, at any stage of development, who after such expulsion or extraction breathes or has a beating heart, pulsation of the umbilical cord, or definite movement of voluntary muscles, regardless of whether the umbilical cord has been cut, and regardless of whether the expulsion or extraction occurs as a result of natural or induced labor, cesarean section, or induced abortion.

(c) Nothing in this section shall be construed to affirm, deny, expand, or contract any legal status or legal right applicable to any member of the species homo sapiens at any point prior to being “born alive” as defined in this section.

Constitution of the United States, General Provisions: “Person”, “human being”, “child”, and “individual” as including born-alive infant.



Thing

noun

1 An object that one need not, cannot, or does not wish to give a specific name to.

1.1 (things) Personal belongings or clothing.

2 An inanimate material object as distinct from a living sentient being.

2.1 (with adjective) A living creature or plant.

'the sea is the primal source of all living things on earth'

2.2 (with adjective) Used to express one's feelings of pity, affection, approval, or contempt for a person or animal.

Oxford Dictionaries



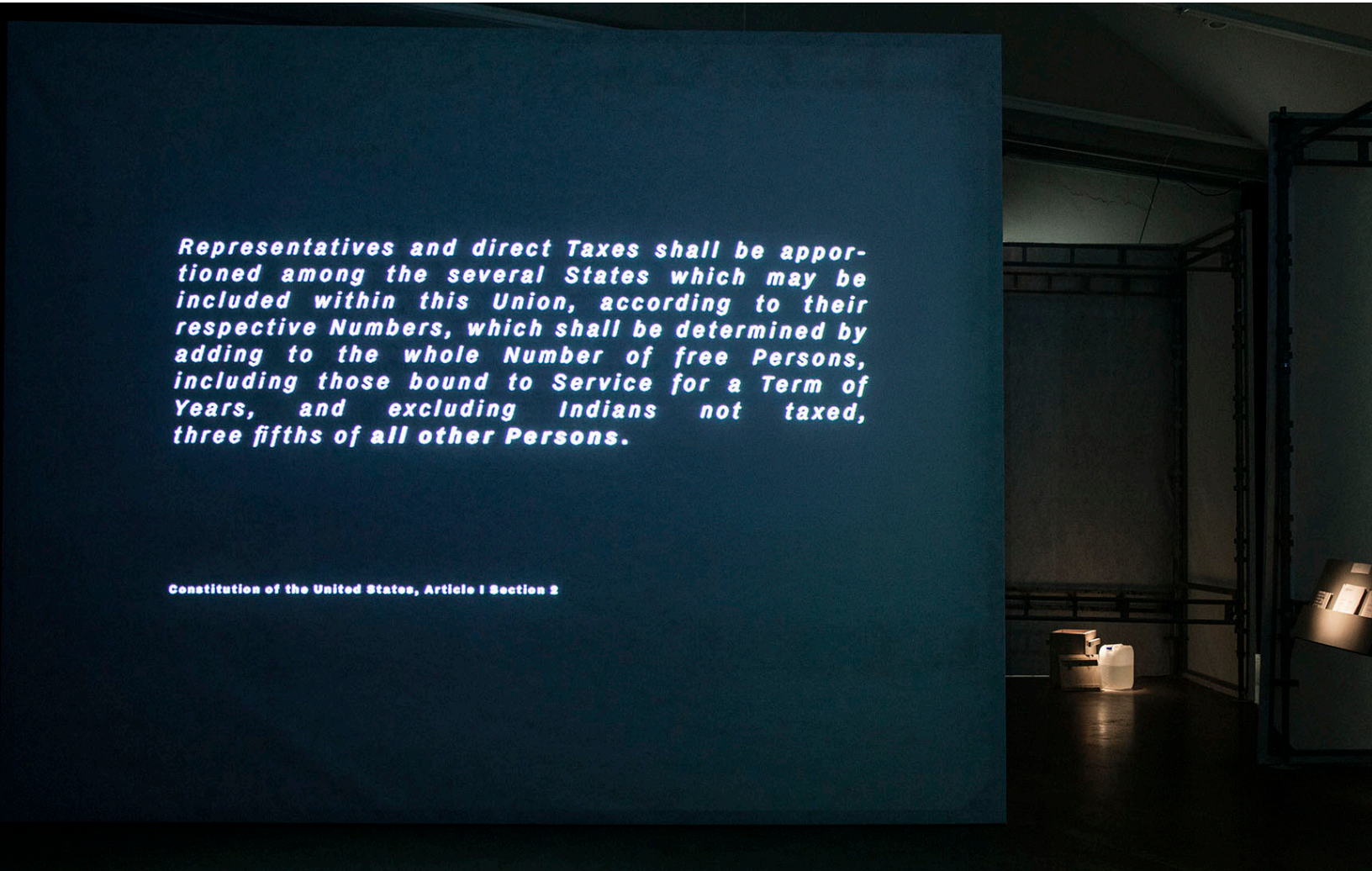
Immortal soul

...if they thought as we do, they would have an immortal soul like us. This is unlikely, because there is no reason to believe it of some animals without believing it of all, and many of them such as oysters and sponges are too imperfect for this to be credible.

René Descartes to the Marquess of Newcastle, November 23 1646

But the question of whether to count slaves in the population was abrasive. After some contention, antislavery forces gave way to a compromise by which three-fifths of the slaves would be counted as population for purposes of representation (and direct taxation). Slave states would thus be perpetually overrepresented in national politics; provision was also added for a law permitting the recapture of fugitive slaves, though in deference to republican scruples the word slaves was not used.

Encyclopædia Britannica



Representatives and direct Taxes shall be apportioned among the several States which may be included within this Union, according to their respective Numbers, which shall be determined by adding to the whole Number of free Persons, including those bound to Service for a Term of Years, and excluding Indians not taxed, three fifths of all other Persons.

Constitution of the United States, Article I Section 2

The difference between man and woman is the difference between animal and plant; the animal is closer in character to man, the plant to woman

G.W.F. Hegel: Elements of the Philosophy of Right, 1820

Person

noun

A human being regarded as an individual.

1.1 (In legal or formal contexts) an unspecified individual.

Oxford Dictionaries

Tender

adjective

1 Showing gentleness, kindness, and affection:

'he was being so kind and tender'

2 (Of a part of the body) sensitive to pain:

'the pale, tender skin of her forearm'

2.1 (Of a plant) easily injured by severe weather and therefore needing protection.

2.2 Requiring tact or careful handling.

3 (Of food) easy to cut or chew; not tough.

4 Young, inexperienced, or vulnerable.

Oxford Dictionaries

...tame animals have a better nature than wild, and all tame animals are better off when they are ruled by man; for then they are preserved. Again, the male is by nature superior, and the female inferior; and the one rules, and the other is ruled; this principle, of necessity, extends to all mankind.

Where then there is such a difference as that between soul and body, or between men and animals (as in the case of those whose business is to use their body, and who can do nothing better), the lower sort are by nature slaves, and it is better for them as for all inferiors that they should be under the rule of a master.

Aristotle: Politics, 350 B.C.E



Museum

noun

A building in which objects of historical, scientific, artistic, or cultural interest are stored and exhibited.

Oxford Dictionaries

OVERSIGHT/THE ANIMALS

BY JOSEPH MOORE

oversight, n.

2. a. The action of overseeing something; supervision, inspection, authority, management ...

3. b. An accidental omission; a mistake made through inadvertence or negligence. Also: a person or thing which is passed over.

Oversight/The Animals is a series of videos I began in 2014. These works are made using unsecured web cameras that feature the lives of non-human animals in their environments. Utilizing a variety of techniques to discover these feeds, I then record the video streams using software I developed. Each recording is done for 24 hours at 1 frame every 10 seconds. This amounts to approximately 8600 images. From these images I create a time-lapse video, compressing 24 hours into 5 minutes and 45 seconds. Through this work I wish to foreground the non-human animal and its historical relationship to photography, cinema, and certain methods of camera assisted analysis and control in development since the 19th



century. My interest in aspects of sequence, temporality, and medium specificity also figure heavily in the work.

Taken in the context of IP cameras or “netcams,” the auto-antonym oversight in the title of the series describes an important contradiction in this technology. These cameras are found in domestic settings such as houses and apartment buildings; in places of work such as restaurants and shops; settings of industrial production; and in environments of leisure, such as parks, etc. The cameras work within a disciplinary system of oversight, inspection, authority, and management that applies to both human and non-human laborers; a tool within the standardization of work and leisure time. At the same time these often poorly secured, unsecured, or incorrectly secured devices inadvertently allow an unintended audience to view their transmissions, an oversight that undoes the imagined security associated with these devices when they are marketed as “security cameras.” Here, in this breakdown of security and privacy, there is an opportunity to access a small part of the lives of non-humans and of an occluded co-existence between the human and non-human, one normally hidden from view: hidden because the images are often intended for a select audience, but also hidden by the different temporalities through which a world can unfold. While this back-door does not give us direct access to the world of the other, it potentially reveals some of the techniques by which life becomes systematized and observed.

The part of the definition for oversight that reads: “A person or thing which is passed over,” brings to mind other reasons for not seeing, a passing over due to forgetting, disavowal, or lack of recognition. Cheap labor is cheap enough to forget or unrecognized because culturally and historically bound practices of seeing are tuned in ways to perpetuate capital’s systemic violence. The video feeds I find picture many such instances of under and under-recognized human and non-human animal labor. These expand beyond the most obvious places of non-human labor, such as the farm, and include domestic spaces of affective labor in the family home, the non-human animal performers at zoos and carnivals, and the animals engaged in scientific inquiry as subjects in a laboratory.

The mise-en-scène found in the human-built environments designed to house these non-human animal laborers often reveal certain discursive practices at work particularly in notions of nature and culture, and a dialectical relationship between preservation and destruction. While related to early photography and pre-cinema, many of the images from Oversight/The Animals appear quite different from images of motion studies, particularly those of the 19th and most of the 20th century. Early motion studies positioned the subject set against a monochrome background of black or white, or painted with a series of grid lines. Outside of the laboratory recordings, zoos are one place where painted backgrounds persist. These painted backgrounds make the space seem more expansive and less constricting, often employing trompe-l'oeil effects. Additionally, the backgrounds deliver images of a given animal's natural habitat, e.g. flora and fauna not found in the area of a given performance venue. Particularly in zoos, the setting of the scene corresponds to an aesthetics that attempts to reconcile Naturalism and the laboratory.

The more elaborated re-creation of an African landscape in one video feed of a zoo housing giraffes stands in perceived contradistinction to an “osprey cam,” another feed in which an osprey's nest is seen with advertising for an energy supply company; the blatant commodification of life in the latter, the more subtle in the former. These two images share an ideology of instrumentalized nature and with it the idea that capitalist industry and mechanisms based around private property will ultimately, in some fashion, preserve the “natural” world while nonetheless reducing it to plastic recreations and images.



Other instances expose something different about the use of environment. Such is the case when the focus of the feed is a mechanism regulating temperature, movement, and so forth. The shot in this case often assists in the functioning of some technology, for example, by helping a supervisor check for breakdowns. In another case, the camera highlights a technology within the environment in order to valorize it. This second case is seen when the primary object being sold is equipment, e.g. milking stations, chicken feed dispensaries, systems of gates and cages, etc. These spaces are regularly “hosed down” and cleaned to keep excrement from accumulating too much where it would draw attention to bodily functions rather than their management. Here, the non-human animal is a prop character, interchangeable with tokens of the same type, and most obviously a part overwhelmed within the whole.

While the above text articulates some of my thoughts regarding scenes in Oversight/The Animals, there is much that slips outside these brief notes, just as in a simplified description, video records a series of frames and not what falls between them; a discreet system that relies on perceptual phenomena to give the impression of continuous motion. There is always some amount of time that is unaccounted for. This time unaccounted for is even more present when the record of a day is compressed down to minutes. In this compression the shape of a day with its various changes and repetitions is made visible, and something hidden is seen. I often feel a sense of awe and mystery alongside revulsion when viewing these recordings. I wish to see a site of resistance in these missing moments and the potential for a re-enchantment of life through these feelings. But this unaccounted for time also speaks to a system of exploitation whose logic works through concealment as much as disclosure, through surplus as much as lack.

CAN YOU BE A FEMINIST AND STILL EAT MEAT?

BY AIDA ŠEHOVIĆ

Earlier this summer I was visiting my family in Vermont. One Thursday afternoon, my recently retired father and I ended up going to a local movie theater to kill time until the rest of our family returned from work. Everyone was coming over for dinner later that evening.

We chose to see *Wind River* without knowing much about the movie except that one of the lead characters was an actor we both liked. We usually disagree on this issue. *Wind River* is a deeply disturbing movie containing a graphic rape scene of a young Native American woman. The movie is based on real events.

During the car ride back home, as we were both still trying to reconcile how we felt about the Hollywood representation of violence we had just witnessed, my father asked himself out loud:

“What kind of animals would do something like that?
What kind of an animal would you have to be?”

I didn't know how to respond. I was overwhelmed with rage, frustration and fear.

[The men who assaulted and raped the young Native American woman in the movie are white men. They also beat her white boyfriend - who happens to be their fellow coworker - to death. In a previous scene the white female FBI agent who is trying to solve the crime shoots a Native American drug addict to death with several bullets. The movie opens with one of the main protagonists - a white male animal tracker - killing a coyote that was preparing to attack sheep.]

LIVESTOCK: animals kept or raised for use or pleasure; especially - farm animals kept for use and profit (first known use: circa 1687)

I am still in the car with my father. I wonder if this is the first rape scene we have ever seen together in a movie. Probably not. My father has four daughters. At some point after the war that forced us to immigrate to this country, I found out that my parents decided that we needed to leave our hometown immediately after receiving threatening phone calls from men who claimed to know the names of my sisters and I, and the schools we went to. We left with our mother shortly after, and reunited with my father in another country a year later.

My father grilled some meat for everyone for dinner. And some vegetables for me. I am the only person in my family who has stopped eating dead animals.

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ENFLESHMENT

BY LINNEA RYSHKE

enflesh

verb

1. to grow flesh or give a flesh-like form to
2. to clothe with or as if with flesh
3. to ingrain

Merriam-Webster Dictionary



I have made these acrylic paint skins--
plastic metaphors--
to try to understand
how the language used
to talk about an "other"
lives in and on the body.

This language,
reflective of the unconscious
ideologies of the dominant
Western culture,
and re-occurring and casual in its use,
has enfleshed consequences.



Words, toothed and sharpened, scarred
onto bodies,
a cultural mutilation.

Words projected by some onto "others"
as if the "other" was just
a blank canvas
of skin.



The abstraction of a black man
Predator, Criminal, Ape,
Primitive, Subhuman

The abstraction of an immigrant
Rapist, Alien, Uncivilized,
Laborer, Subhuman

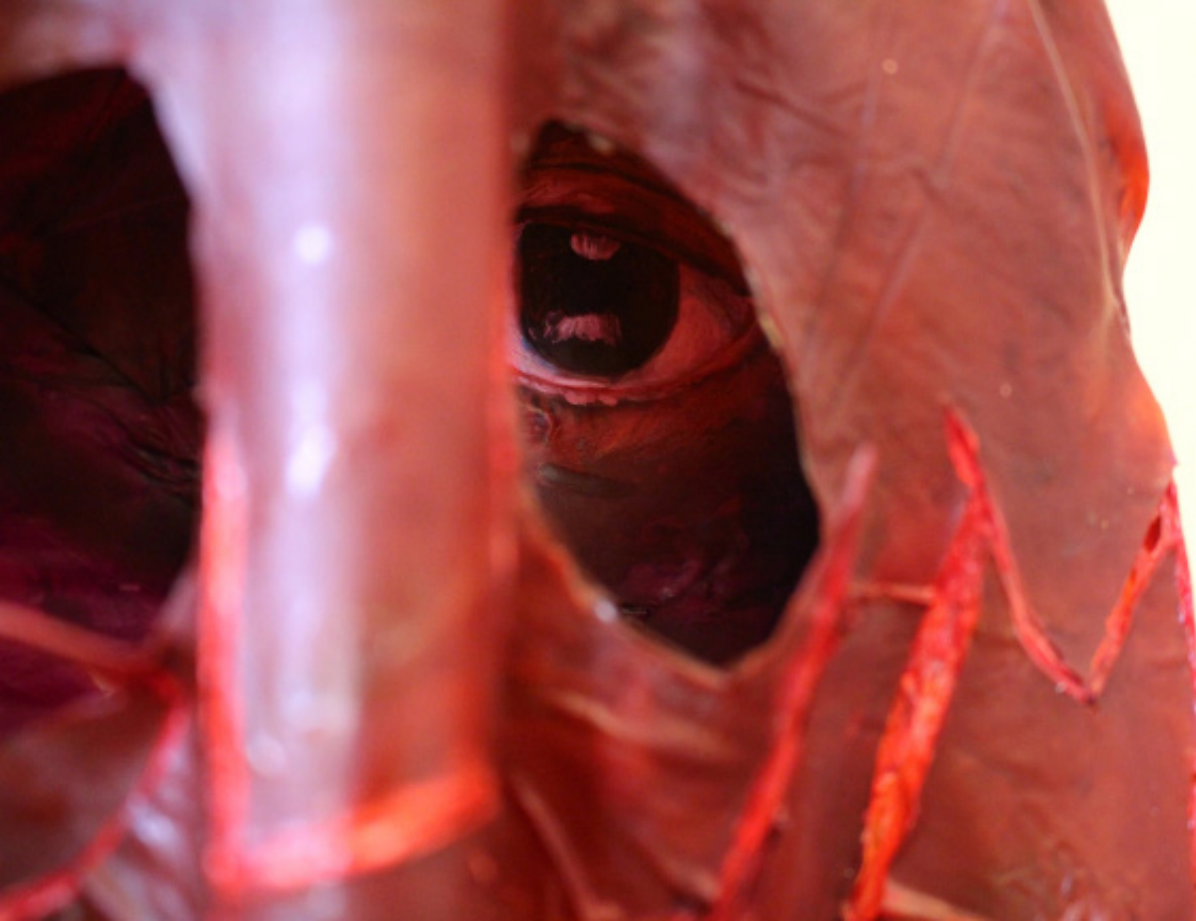
The abstraction of a pig
Beast, Greedy, Property,
Stock, Subhuman



The abstraction of a chicken
Alien, Coward,
Automaton, Bird Brained, Subhuman

The closer to an animal,
or rather farther from “human,”
the less inherent value

Individuals reduced to
a singular amorphous body
ghostly, veiled.



I don't mean to equate or simplify, as each being and group of beings has their own intricate history, their own experiences, their own fights.

But I hope to probe at and excavate for why the language we use emphatically denies the personhood, agency, profound beingness of those (humans and non-humans) who are systemically kept out of the realm of respect.



Can a presence,
of subjectivity, value, worth
be brought into
this language and
the conceptions
that form it?

Can the skin
be reclaimed as an organ of
touch, of contact?
Warmed from the soul
underneath
Porous and sensitive to those
around us.



The potential
for empathic connection
with other life-worlds
lies behind, underneath
The surface layer
where the anima lives.

Anima:
the root of the word “animal,”
meaning

a current of air;

earthly breath;

the soul.

FISHERIES AND THE ABSENT REFERENT

BY CAROLYN HALL

I am an historical marine ecologist, and while thinking about the concept of “the absent referent” from the perspective of our relationship to fish and fisheries, I was struck by the juxtaposition of two quotes:

“The absent referent is ... to keep something from being seen as having been someone, to allow for the moral abandonment of another being.”

Carol J. Adams, *The Sexual Politics of Meat*

“Our own interest lay in relationships of animal to animal. If one observes in this relational sense, it seems apparent that species are only commas in a sentence, that each species is at once the point and the base of a pyramid, that all life is relational to the point where an Einsteinian relativity seems to emerge.... It is advisable to look from the tide pool to the stars and then back to the tide pool again.”

John Steinbeck, *The Log from the Sea of Cortez*

Somewhere at the intersection of these two ideas is an approach to understanding the evolution of fisheries management in the United States. The fisheries industry is undergoing a gradual transformation from the “moral abandonment” of fish in terms of not considering them “beings,” to the still-developing recognition that “each species is at once the point and the base of a pyramid, that all life is relational.” More expansively, we could think of this as a way to view our shifting approaches to all natural resource management as it pertains to mineral, plant, and animal (human or otherwise) – but for the sake of argument, let’s stick with fish.

Fish have been a commodity for thousands of years, yet many people in industrialized nations that regularly include fish in their diet have little idea (and probably don’t care) what the animal they are eating may have looked like when it was whole and alive, or, for that matter, where it came from. This is unlike the significantly more recognizable source/meat relationships of beef/cow, pork/pig, or poultry/chicken where people are at least somewhat familiar with the living animal even though they probably prefer not to think about that when eating the flesh. But fish? Maybe one can picture a shark or a goldfish, but a living swordfish? A swimming shrimp? Tilapia? Where is the recognition of the living being – of having been “someone?”

Before the industrialization of fisheries, people were generally more familiar with and respectful of the whole living animals, and their waters, before they became pieces of fish on our plates. But as human society became increasingly mechanized and money driven, people became more and more removed from the natural



MAYOR LA GUARDIA WITH A 300 POUND HALIBUT AT THE FULTON FISH MARKET IN NYC IN 1939, LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

resources that paradoxically allowed for such “advancement.” That earlier familiarity and relative symbiosis was replaced by objectification, fragmentation, and disembodied mass consumption.

“Objectification permits an oppressor to view another being as an object. Once objectified, a being can be fragmented. Once fragmented, consumption happens. The consumption of a being, and the consumption of the meaning, and the consumption of the meaning of that being’s death, so that the referent point of meat changes.”

Carol J. Adams, *The Sexual Politics of Meat*



COD FISH AT THE FULTON FISH MARKET IN NYC 1943, LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

Coordinated, federal government-funded fisheries management began in the United States in 1870 when the US Commission of Fish and Fisheries was formed. Concern had been building state by state in the late 1860s as increasingly more fisheries were being declared “exhausted.” The fish just weren’t showing up in the numbers they used to. This was critical because fisheries were a cornerstone of the US economy. As a result, intense research on “relevant” species began – relevant meaning species of economic importance for food, trade, profit. Species like salmon, oysters, cod. Those aquatic beings in demand for human consumption.

This research led to attempts at protection and artificial propagation of these species, but the efforts were isolated, targeted to look only at a particular species in a vacuum, and to study its habits in relation to our practices – hunt, capture, sell. Other secondary species were only added to research and protection plans if the primary targeted species continued to fail – which they did. In fact, oftentimes the replacement fish were sold under false identities to make them seem familiar and palatable (a practice still in use today). Those secondaries were needed as replacements for the lost commodity, not out of a holistic investigation of the fish community or even for their individual uniqueness, but to fulfill a desperate need to maintain the human supply.

Early voices that decried these destructive practices of over consumption were met with resistance, denial, violence, and practical “solutions” to artificially extend production. Our management approach was based solely on the objectified fish’s value as edible or tradable – not valued as a living creature, as an integral part of an ecosystem with an exchange of life and death in a full community, a full bio-geo-chemical world that gives us humans (and the planet) life. That world we so quickly disregard and see as our territory to dominate, abuse, use, OWN. And in doing so, harm ourselves: “... all life is relational.”

So...we marched on through decades of attempts to manipulate fish populations and find greater quantities in order to keep not only our fishing nets full, but also our banks’ coffers. In New York State, the number of species caught to fulfill the hundreds-of-millions-of-dollars fish industry nearly doubled from 41 species in 1890 to 77 species in 1950. Fishing fleets searched further off-shore for their game. Equipment became high tech with diesel engines, radar, sonar, freezers and refrigeration on the boats, and planes assisting from above to spot schools of fish from the air.



PHOTO BY CAROLYN HALL. A TANGLE OF FISH FROM OFF THE SOUTH SHORE OF LONG ISLAND

Until the fish gave out.

Suddenly in the 1960s overfishing along with pollution, development, and unchecked competition for natural resources on land and at sea caused the fisheries to again be exhausted, on an even larger scale than a hundred years before. The failure, the loss of revenue, and the loss of jobs required a reckoning. In the 1970s the government responded with the Environmental Protection Agency, the Endangered Species Act, the Clean Water Act, the Marine Mammal Protection Act, and a comprehensive Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act. Fishery Conservation. Great, but what did conservation mean? Here it meant a conservation of the fisheries so the industry could expand - not really a conservation of the fish, themselves. All efforts still focused on adjusting hunting and catching tactics for maintaining human profit and consumption. Consumption of the nameless, faceless flesh. The absent referent.

But the idea of conservation as part of management had been introduced and a movement had begun. A slow shift in management, in conservation, began to appear.

In 1996, the Sustainable Fisheries Act emphasized conserving individual fish populations, improving the living communities of particular fish, rather than merely focusing on the fisheries. Yes, the goal was still to find ways to keep US catch counts up, but the research included more of what the fish needed in their environment (prey, habitat, migration) in addition to what humans needed. Management was trying to find a sustainable balance between our consumption demand and the fish's needs to maintain a healthy population. However, the approach still isolated its focus to species deemed valuable. Still primarily targeted fish independent of other species. Still not seeing the big picture and mostly neglecting the roles of other "unimportant" species. Not quite grasping ecosystem interconnectedness and definitely neglecting our role, as humans, in the system. Still focusing on "them" as separate from "us."

Then in the 2000s the concept of Ecosystem-based management was proposed. The idea was to base management decisions, and subsequent regulations, on the interdependence of any given being and its predators, prey, habitat, and its young and elders. In short, its all-encompassing relationships to its world. And, of utmost importance, who was finally included as a major player in the ecosystem? Humans. The long overdue realization was that we are part of the fishes' ecosystem and they are part of ours. And the living animal that is a fish would no longer be absent, it would represent itself, rather than being represented by a block of flesh. It's a beautiful concept. As the gears of management begin to crank towards implementing this approach, many new and important questions are being asked: How do we quantify the economic value of a living fish in the wild? Of a thriving population? Of a community of interdependent aquatic creatures? Of a healthy estuary? Of an open, undammed river? Of a forested watershed? Of the deep ocean? These questions represent the complexity we are grappling with in order to balance the value of an important-to-us "being" in that being's complete ecosystem with the practice of industrial capitalism and consumption. How can both values and practices co-exist?

And this is where we are now. Both of these values **MUST** co-exist. We will not stop harvesting and eating fish but we need to find a sustainable way to do so that honors the living beings' actions and connections on the planet. A fish's small role in a watershed can feed us through properly managed harvest, but the role is also one that hydrates us and maintains chemical and biological balances that we, and all other living things, depend on. From the tide pool to the stars and back again, each fish "is at once the point and the base of a pyramid," and we humans exist within that pyramid and are also simultaneously the point and base. If we isolate one being, we run the risk of relegating it to absence and possible extinction thereby making the pyramid unsteady. That fish (or any living creature or natural resource) in its natural state of being "someone" is a cornerstone of our future survival - not just of our economic security. It is much easier to commodify it by keeping it absent, preferring the nameless, odorless, colorless frozen blocks of referent flesh, but we can no longer, in good conscience, do that. And as a final point, if we extrapolate this argument out even further, the objectification, fragmentation, and consumption of such reduced beings makes us fragile and weak. We lose morality, compassion, connection, diversity, complexity, understanding, and wonder. We forget how to value community, how to be one of many, how to appreciate the relationships of animal to animal. We are, after all, just another animal.



PHOTO BY ADRIAN JORDAAN. CAROLYN HALL HOLDING AN ALEWIFE

MAINTENANCE AS CARE AT THE ENVIRONMENTAL PERFORMANCE AGENCY (EPA)

BY EPA AGENTS, ANDREA HAENGGI AND CHRISTOPHER KENNEDY

The Environmental Performance Agency (EPA) is an artist collective founded in 2017 and named in response to proposed defunding of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. Appropriating the acronym EPA, the collective's primary goal is to shift thinking around the terms environment, performance, and agency - using artistic, social, and embodied practices to advocate for the agency of all living performers co-creating our environment, specifically through the lens of spontaneous urban plants, native or migrant. This piece is a reflection on the ongoing presence of rats in our urban weeds garden in Crown Heights, Brooklyn. The story is told nonlinearly through observational field notes, research, and critical commentary on the politics of pest management and rat-human relations.

Field Note: August 20, 2017

Today, we buried a "toxic" rat in the EPA garden.

Despite our initial hesitation, we view this as a performative act of remediation.

The choice not to place the rat in the trash was not an easy one. We at the Environmental Performance Agency (EPA) did not want to leave a toxic urban street rat on top of the soil, nor did we want some other animal to eat it, or to allow the soil in our lot to be impacted further.

We also did not want to outsource the problem to a landfill, "out of sight, out of mind". With the act of burial on-site, it would remain on the property, interred with the rocks and cement and iron and plastic bags and the rubble of a residential building that was most likely demolished in the 1960s. We marked the spot with a sprig of mugwort (*Artemisia vulgaris*).



IMAGE: A NORWAY RAT FOUND IN THE EPA URBAN WEEDS GARDEN, AND THE ACT OF BURIAL

We knew the rat had been poisoned because it had white powder on its hind quarters and behind. Caesar, not the Roman emperor, but our landlord's state licensed pest control expert had dumped an anticoagulant rodenticide in one of the nearby burrows. An anticoagulant is a blood thinner such as coumadin, which is widely prescribed to prevent strokes in people with arterial blockages. It was a rat poison before it became a common medicine and Caesar told us that rats who ingest anticoagulants will stumble around for a few days, disoriented and become increasingly weak, before they die.

A healthy rat, Caesar told us, needs borders – fences, walls, street curbs, buildings – to orient themselves. A rat is a creature of habit, and will run along the same path many times, leaving dark greasy track marks, urine and droppings along the route to communicate with their sisters and brothers.

The EPA headquarters is a former garage and “vacant” lot in Central Brooklyn on Pacific Street between Classon and Franklin Avenues. For the past four decades, the area has been home to a variety of auto repair shops, small manufacturing facilities, and sidewalk mechanics. However, in recent years, pressure from developers has displaced many of these merchants. In early spring there was a big change on our block: a depot for old yellow school buses was suddenly cleaned and the cracked weedy ground leveled and surfaced with asphalt. It is now a truck rental business. The lot next door, separated only by a corrugated metal fence, also became an outdoor party space. The landlord also ripped out the innards of a bar that had been running in the shanty formerly occupied by Soldier, a tire repairman, leaving garbage and debris. The same landlord also evicted Milton, a truck mechanic who had been on the block for 15 years, and ripped apart his shanty.

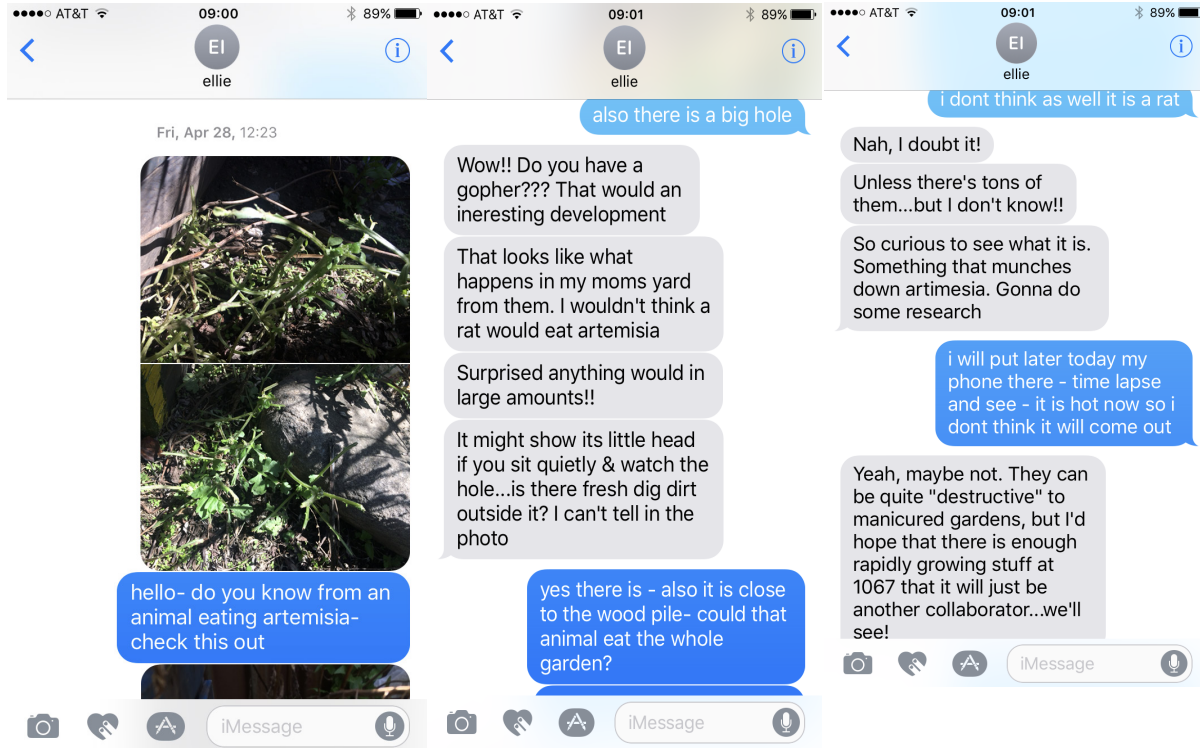
As each site is disturbed, the rat population has in turn responded by relocating or finding new spaces to thrive.



IMAGE: THE WEEDY GROUND ACROSS FROM THE EPA ENTRANCE GETS LEVELED AND SURFACED WITH ASPHALT

Field Note: April 28th, 2017

As EPA artist andrea (haenggi) started her morning routine of observing and moving with the urban weeds, she noticed a patch of mugwort disturbed and possibly eaten by a small mammal. Andrea started a text chain with Ellie Irons another EPA agent to get her opinion:



After the exchange, they decided to just observe the disturbed site and leave everything as it was.

Field Note: June 1, 2017

A month later we witnessed rats running back and forth along the gate. Meanwhile, further disturbance to lots on the block continued. Garbage from an adjacent rental hall and a nearby beer garden mounted on the sidewalk. Another vacant lot across the street was also rented by a carting company, to store private garbage trucks.

In most cultures, rats are viewed as undesirable, dirty, and often labeled as pests. The term rat is also synonymous with a number of derogatory phrases. We call people a “rat” when they deceive us (eg. “rat them out”) or when they do something nasty (eg. “you dirty rat”). However, our experience at the EPA has inspired some caution in making these assumptions. We’ve begun to consider how humans are complicit in our vilification of the world’s most successful mammal, and also how increased development and urbanization have both facilitated and accelerated the disturbance of rat colonies and systems for generations. More importantly, we see our interaction with rats as a larger extension of our shared ecological crisis and collective dismissal of the shared challenges we face.

Field Note: June 6, 2017

In early June, EPA agent Catherine Grau and andrea began to notice the effects of ongoing disturbance and displacement in the neighborhood. We saw rats scurrying through the garden, yet again.

Looking closer, we uncovered a series of holes and tunnels that straddled the corrugated metal wall on the eastern side of the urban weeds garden. As each site is disturbed, the rats relocate and find new spaces to establish their colony.

According, The NYC Department of Health (2017) there are six different “Active Rat Signs”, which we slowly saw evidence of throughout the summer:

- 1) fresh tracks
- 2) fresh droppings
- 3) active burrows
- 4) active runways and rub marks
- 5) fresh gnawing marks
- 6) live rats



IMAGE: EVIDENCE OF RATS IN THE EPA URBAN WEEDS GARDEN

And so we debated: what to do? Should we save them, should we try to trap them? After some contemplation, Catherine and andrea began to fill the holes with rocks, cement and chicken wire in an effort to redirect the rats. Yet, tunnels re-appeared and the rats continued to present themselves. In the process, we learned that “to smell a rat” is not just an expression. When you dig up the soil around a rat tunnel, there’s a distinctive odor. It’s a stench easily confused with rot and decay – deep, dank, dark, and puzzling.

We decided to check-in with neighbors, and investigate changes in surrounding lots that had been disturbed. As we peered into the sites bordering our garden, we began to speculate that the gentrification of the neighborhood resulted in a redistribution of the rat population, with the main rat burrow in our neighbor’s site. Eventually, we called the landlord who sent an exterminator named Caesar.

EPA - Infestation Report

06/08

Signs of rat infestation:

- ① visual contact (Ellie)
9:30 am. 06/08 - scurrying in the mugwort bushes
- ② rat poop by the headquarter door
- ③ audible - burrowing in the mugwort bushes
on the metal fence side of lot (Andrea) 06/07
- ④ holes along east fence (from street to house)
 - I.) street entrance - not a hole (nest) but tunnel to street = EXIT
 - II.) Nest 1. ~ 30 ft. in. significant burrowing and earth piled up. signs of paths along the fence
 - III.) tunnel for nest 1. } closed with rocks - 2 ft. apart
 - IV.) tunnel for nest 1. }
 - V.) tunnel to other lot (seems unrelated to nest)
 - VI.) tunnel 5. - very active
 - VII.) Nest 6. - rat poop (observed by Rob)
 - VIII.) tunnel 7.
 - IX.) Nest 8. fresh and active
 - ~~X.) Nest 9. fresh and active~~
- ⑤ trash in lot nextdoor - clear signs of rat feeding grounds
- ⑥ 3 more sightings - rats on the wood pile

The Norway rat or street rat is a familiar sight for most New Yorkers. With an estimated population of over 2 million in New York alone, rats are considered to be one of the most successful mammals on the planet. (Mosendz, 2014)

While one would assume the Norway rat is indeed from Scandinavia, most scientists agree the genus *Rattus* of the Muridae family actually appeared about 3.5 - 5 million years ago in Northern Asia. Since its rise the genus has undergone 2 incidents of speciation, with about 50 species within the genus today. The etymology of the Norway rat also has a curious history and origin. Several common names have been used over time including the brown rat, wharf rat, common rat, street rat, or “Hanover Rat,” used since the early part of the 18th century. In 1769, British naturalist John Berkenhout began using the common name Norway rat or *Rattus norvegicus*, speculating that the small mammals had arrived in England by hitching a ride on cargo ships from Norway in 1728. (Hanson, 2003)

We now know the Norway rat is not native to Norway, but is most likely from a region along the North China and Mongolian border. Today this particular species is found in many parts of the world including India, Japan, the Mediterranean and North America. As human settlements spread across the globe, Norway rats began to cohabitate with humans and settled along migratory routes. In times of famine, rat catchers were even known to hunt and harvest the small rodents for food.



IMAGE: NEIGHBORHOOD PARTY SPACE DISPOSAL OF WASTE

According to scientists like Jason Munsie-South (Bradley, 2015), we still do not have a complete understanding of how rats evolved from a bioregional mammal to an unwanted human companion. Although the Norway rat is now found in habitats across the world, they rarely move far from their colonies and may spend their whole lives within a 600-foot radius. This gives us some insight into what could potentially be the rats “birthplace” along Pacific Street, and how displacement impacted the colony.

In reflecting on our experience, Catherine noted our struggles with the rats are perhaps a mirror of how we respond to ecological crisis, assuming a defensive position and privileging short term and intensive responses -- dumping chemicals to rid of an unwanted pest, placing the waste elsewhere, or even blowing it up. Yet, what would it mean to take a long-term perspective? To address the rat issue in concert with the neighborhood, to imagine a long-term gesture toward care, maintenance, and cultivation of multispecies life and entanglements? While we may not be able to answer all of these questions, we at the EPA are dedicated to creating space for more life, especially in this time of extinction. We invite you to join us as agents for multispecies alliance -- visit us online at environmentalperformanceagency.com and we'll see you in the streets!

Postscript

Field Note: September 12, 2017

Since writing this initial piece the rats have re-appeared. For two weeks EPA agents have noticed rat carcasses in the garden, dismembered and found in a small patch meant for mycoremediation. Measuring 1 square foot, the site is covered with sawdust from a furniture company down the street and inoculated with pearl oyster mushrooms. We speculate the EPA Garden has now attracted an owl or hawk who perhaps views our little mushroom patch as a dry grassy habitat that is perfect for nightly or early morning feeding. With this new development, we certainly have evidence of even more complex ecological interactions inside our urban weeds garden. Stay tuned for more updates on the continuing rat saga!

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