



## CHAPTER 5

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# Killing Them Softly: Nonhuman Animal Relationships and Limitations of Ethics

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### INTRODUCTION

Contemporary art includes numerous examples of art projects dealing with the theme of killing an animal. Works that occupy a location of reinforcing human emotions violently are often condemned, promptly dismissed, and tabooed. It seems that in these tabooed artworks, the killing of an animal is not the ethically problematic area because, as we know based on daily human behavior, there seem to be little ethical problems around humankind killing other species. The reasons for questioning these artworks are more complex and layered than just the killing of an animal. The essence of these artworks speaks against ethics and what is usually highly valued in humanism. Based on people's reactions to these artworks, they seem to violate humanism in ways that strongly hurt people's emotions and feelings. It is curious to ponder how upsetting these artworks are to people, even though the same people take part in the daily mass killing of which we all are a part.

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K. Tavin et al. (eds.), *Art, Excess, and Education*, Palgrave Studies in Educational Futures, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-21828-7\\_5](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-21828-7_5)

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This “noncriminal putting to death” (Wolfe 2003, p. 7) includes hunting, domestic subjection, and exploitation in the production of meat, medicine, clothing, energy, and transportation in most human efforts in industries, agriculture, zoological, ethological, biological and genetic consumption, and experimentation. As Derrida (2008) describes:

All that is all too well-known; we have no need to take it further. However one interprets is, whatever practical, technical, scientific, juridical, ethical, or political consequence one draws from it, no one can today deny this event—that is, the *unprecedented* proportions of this subjection of the animal. (p. 25)

Humankind would not have accomplished its achievements in any scientific or any other area if there seemed to be an ethical problem with animal killing. The tabooed contemporary artwork has another type of ethical problem than just the killing of an animal. The problem concerns moral questions around the artists’ intentions and their possibly *evil minds*. The first question is: Was it necessary? Killing just for art doesn’t seem to be as justified as killing for some other reason. The second question is: How could they do it? The methods by which the artist has performed the killing seem crucial. The easy assumption is that there must be something terribly wrong with the person who calls themselves an artist. The artist’s intentions are then viewed with suspicion and the doomed artist becomes monstrous to them.

From an ethical humanistic perspective, we are not supposed to kill if someone else is in front of us (Lévinas 2009). Monstrousness is connected to a singular person’s ability to abandon ethical responsibility and perform an action that is cruel. The humanist perspectives discussed in this chapter lean on Lévinasian ethics on encountering with the other. As Lévinas asserted, the “face is what forbids us to kill” (2009, p. 86). In front of another living being, be it a critter or a person, we are open, exposed, and receptive. There is an ethical demand in the other’s existence that interferes with our own liberty and freedom, limiting our violence, and it is difficult to refuse the responsibility that this limitation imposes (Jagodzinski 2002). Somehow, we have liberated people who work in farming, or in any step in the meat and other industries, from this requirement. This double-standard position seems to trouble humankind surprisingly little.

In what follows, four contemporary artworks that address ethical questions on human/nonhuman animal violence are discussed. Guillermo Vargas, aka Habacuc, in 2007, tied a dog to a gallery wall to supposedly starve to death, a work called *Exposición N° 1*, which, according to the

artist was to demonstrate people's hypocrisy about dogs starving to death in the streets of Nicaragua. Teemu Mäki, in 1995, killed a cat in his video artwork, *My Way, a Work in Progress*, to make a point about institutionalized objective violence. Both Habacuc and Mäki aimed at discussing audience reactions to contemporary art, as well as discussing societal grievances. The audience, in both cases, seem to react as if the artists performed the killings for fun, or because they had no sense of ethics (psychopaths perhaps), or at least without any compelling reason (e.g. eating an animal). I will discuss these two artworks together with two less violent, but still troublesome, artworks, Pekka Jylhä's *The Table That Wanted to Go Back to Being a Pond* and Huang Yong Ping's installation, *Theater of the World*. Both artworks are from the 1990s but have been presented in museums recently. In this chapter, I will discuss these monstrous artworks in the light of humanism, its ethics, and its possible hypocrisy.

### MONSTROUS ARTISTS

Guillermo Vargas, better known as Habacuc, presented a critical commentary on human double standards and cultural prejudice with his art project, *Exposición N° 1*, exhibited at the Códice Gallery in Managua, Nicaragua, in 2007. He tethered a dog to the gallery wall and assumingly did not provide food or water for the dog. On the wall was written "Eres Lo Que Lees"—"You Are What You Read"—written in dog biscuits. As a part of the display, the artist played the Sandinista (socialist political party, Sandinista National Liberation Front) anthem backward and set 175 pieces of crack cocaine alight in a massive incense burner. According to some media sources (e.g. Couzens 2008), Habacuc "wanted to test the public's reaction" (para 3), and was pointing out how none of the exhibition visitors intervened to stop the animal's suffering.

This demonstration of people's daily hypocrisy for not caring about dogs starving to death was not the only idea of the art work, according to Habacuc (Yanez 2010). His work was inspired by the drug-related death of a poor Nicaraguan addict, who was killed by two dogs. The key questions of *Exposición N° 1* were focused on societal negligence and ignorance. The assumingly privileged gallery guests did not try to free the dog, feed the dog, call the police, or do anything to help the dog. Instead, people behaved exactly as they always behave. They were having wine and snacks, at the same time as homeless people and stray dogs were dying on the streets of Managua. However, afterward they signed an Internet petition to

prevent Habacuc from participating in the 2008 Bienal Centroamericana in Honduras. Although the petition received over four million signatures, and resulted in millions of furious people, not much has been done to save stray dogs. In addition, Habacuc signed the petition himself (Yanez 2010), perhaps pointing out that nobody is an outsider in the societal ignorance and structural violence.

Habacuc has not publicly clarified the dog's destiny. Juanita Bermúdez, the director of the Códice Gallery, stated that the dog was fed regularly (mainly by Habacuc) and was only tied up for three hours on one day before it escaped (Couzens 2008; Yanez 2010). What happened to the dog is not or should not, for the central thesis of this chapter, be the key ethical matter. While it might sound cruel to say so, it would be more important to consider how it is so easy for humankind to ignore violence and abuse when it is not happening in front of our faces, even though we are well aware of it. As David Yanez (2010) writes:

*Exposición No 1* is one component of a larger work of art called *Eres lo que lees*, which employs misinformation and manipulates mass media via the Internet. One of the aims of this project was to demonstrate the hypocrisy in real world and art world ethics. Take a dog off the streets and put it into a gallery and it becomes an ethical phenomenon, while stray dogs and most real human suffering are ignored or given minimal attention. (para 8)

Teemu Mäki tried to bring the mechanisms of objective violence to people's notion with his work *My Way, a Work in Progress* (1995). In this 90-minute-long video artwork, he killed the cat with an ax and masturbated onto its dead body. The aim was to show an example of subjective violence, a type of monstrous and extreme violence that exists without any particular explanation and without any meaning (Mäki 2005). Subjective violence, such as war, animal slaughter, starvation, and ecocatastrophe was contrasted in the video against objective violence, the type of violence people participate in daily through politics and the consumerist structures of capitalism. Mäki's point was to discuss how millions are killed because the rest of us desire new clothes and cheap gasoline, but fewer get killed through subjective violent attacks, although those are usually the discussed examples of violence.

The political intention of the work aimed to influence a larger audience and shake their normative thinking. Mäki (2007) wanted to purposefully produce an artwork where people have difficulties identifying themselves. As I have earlier described (Tavin and Kallio-Tavin 2014)

Without a kind and virtuous character to identify with, Mäki hoped that the spectator would be disturbed by the video and would not be able to escape its ethical accusations; this would hopefully lead the audience to doubts and distress and, finally, to change. (p. 432)

This is not what happened for the most part. The audience reaction was pure anger, rage, and ultimately defense. The otherness of the artwork is too extreme, too monstrous—even though it is only in people’s imaginations, as the work has not been displayed publicly—to be able to effect ethical consideration to generate change.

Most audience reactions were from the cruelty of the artist’s actions, and from the idea that the cat was not just killed but suffered, and was perhaps even tortured. The legal consequences Mäki faced had, in fact, to do with lack of speed in the killing. It turned out that the axe was not sharp enough and the killer was not experienced enough. The difference in speed was just in seconds, but it never the less exceeded the law. Those painful seconds were the ones that counted.

Mäki’s infamous artwork’s finale, the 11th version, was completed 25 years ago (the first version of the work was made as early as 1988). During those decades, his audience had not largely been able to align with his criticism on institutionalized objective violence. Instead they “see” the little cat in their mind, even though *My Way, a Work in Progress* has never been shown in public. The video work was prohibited from display by the Finnish Board of Film Classification, defined as immoral and brutalizing (Mäki 2007). Within the past 25 years the world has not become less violent, and the form of objective violence has grown even more systematic and hurtful. In addition, the hypocritical statements have remained the same. Thinking in this way, Mäki’s video artwork is still topical and its statements are still valid.

It is curious to consider these two artworks in the light of multiple artworks and other animal displays, such as natural history museums, which include killed animals, as it is clear that usually these animals have been killed, not found dead. In addition, they have been killed for art and most often for science, which is probably acceptable. Animal collections have been, after all, a significant part of the history of human education. Nobody protested when Pekka Jylhä presented his artwork *The Table That Wanted to Go Back to Being a Pond*, 1994–1995, at the Rovaniemi art museum, Korindi, in 2017. The artwork consists of three taxidermy seagulls and a glass board (see Fig. 5.1). The only reason this artwork was



**Fig. 5.1** *Pöytä joka halusi takaisin lammeksi* (The Table That Wanted to Go Back to Being a Pond), Jenny and Antti Wihuri foundation's collection, Rovaniemi Art Museum. (Image by Mira Kallio-Tavin)

in the news was for the poor condition of the seagulls, which were acting as the table legs. The artwork was in a danger of being removed from the museum collection and demolished. Jylhä wanted to remake the 20-year-old artwork, because otherwise it would have been “bad” and “sad” as he put it (YLE 2016). Interestingly, neither the artist nor the media mentions anything sad about the animals killed for this artwork. Perhaps this is because the killing was not shown as part of the artwork. Or perhaps shooting seagulls for art production is close enough to hunting, which is after all often considered an enlightening sport for privileged people, or an otherwise dignified practice.

Recently, the use of live animals in exhibits has been seen with suspicion. One example of this is the Guggenheim exhibition in 2017, *Art and China After 1989: Theater of the World*, curated by Alexandra Munroe. Huang Yong Ping's two-part installation *Theater of the World* from 1993

was built as an architectural arena of life. The plan was to include snakes, insects, lizards, and turtles inside of the cage sculptures, formed as Chinese bronze sculptures of mythological animal forms. The concept of the artwork was that the animals would “battle each other to the death.” Huang’s design referred to the Benthamian panopticon (later taken up by Foucault): the metaphorical control in modern societies. It also referred to the Daoist methodological hybrid creature with the head of a snake and body of a tortoise. The museum, the artist, and the curator decided to act upon the protests directed to the Guggenheim and not include the animals in the work. It is somewhat unclear, though, whether the museum was worried more about the animals’ well-being or the museum visitors and staff from their statement:

Due to explicit and repeated threats of violence in reaction to the incorporation of live animals in the creation of this work, the Guggenheim is not presenting it as originally planned. Freedom of expression has always been and will remain a central value of the Guggenheim, but so is the physical safety of its visitors and staff. We deeply regret that, in this case, those values were in irreconcilable conflict. (Curated text on the Guggenheim NY wall, 2017)

Assuming the conditions for the animals would be confirmed, it makes sense to ponder, for the sake of possible hypocrisy, how museum conditions differ from caging animals in zoo conditions. Perhaps something that has been called “artists’ freedom,” or “freedom of expression” in the artist’s profession appears as recklessness. There might be an idea that it is better if artists do not include living animals in their artworks, as they might not be responsible enough to consider their well-being. Throughout history there have been stories of irresponsible and adventurous artists, which have been connected to virtuosity and genius, perhaps even monstrousness, something that is difficult to control. Perhaps on the reverse side of genius, there lurks a possibility of evil.

### THE ETHICS OF LOVING AND KILLING AN ANIMAL

Many viewers feel that they could never do *such a thing*, as killing an animal on purpose, in front of viewers, just for art. At the core of humanist thinking is ethics, which Lévinas (2009) described through the idea of the other’s face. Lévinas explained how it is particularly the other person’s face

that stops us from killing (Lévinas 2009). When in front of the other, and when witnessing the other's suffering, it is against ethical human nature not to help the other. From another perspective, one individual cannot be sacrificed for many. This idea of human dignity is at the core of legal doctrine in most national and international laws and legislations. For example, the idea of killing one, even if it is to save thousands, is against ethical actions, as it is against the laws and legislations. The question in hand is to ponder whether the ethical encountering face to face has become so crucial for humankind that perhaps more covered violating practices seem secondary for critical consideration and are therefore bypassed without further speculation.

On the other hand, humankind has spent much time and effort taking the killing, exploitation, and suffering out of plain sight. This is the argument that Mäki and Habacuc tried to make by setting nonhuman animal suffering right in front of our gaze. Sacrificing one animal in order to improve a thousand others' lives was condemned by millions of people who considered themselves animal lovers, but, on the other hand, were taking part in the daily "noncriminal putting to death" (Wolfe 2003, p. 7) of animals. This double-standard position was taken up as early as in the times of the early animal rights movements by Peter Singer (1990), who paid attention in his writings on animal rights to how people who are interested in animal rights are often considered to be animal lovers. He emphasized that this is not, however, the best basis for animal liberation. Taking care of animals and taking animal rights seriously should not be based on loving—or hating, or actually on any emotion. Hence, civil rights were not based on minorities' cuteness or cuddliness. We can see how little, if any, influence there is on the human emotional animal relationship with animal rights. For example, people who own and love their pets often eat meat, produced in painful and suffering conditions. The ethical and responsible human relationship with animals becomes curious, even problematic, if it depends on human feelings or experiences of ownership, which all together remind us of slavery more than an equal relationship.

Singer (1990) describes how he was not particularly interested in animals, did not "love" them, or did not own any. But, he wanted animals to be "treated as the independent sentient beings that they are, not as a means to human ends" (Singer 1990, p. ii). Similarly, Wolfe (2003) writes:



We need to understand that the ethical and philosophical urgency of confronting the institution of speciesism and crafting a posthumanist theory of the subject *has nothing to do with whether you like animals*. (p. 7)

Singer (1990) emphasized the equality between different animal species and did not have any sentimental judgment to differ the slaughter for meat of dogs from pigs. The equality of species leads us to ponder the reasons for justification for killing animals in different contexts. According to Singer, there should be no hesitation in killing an animal for tastier food or more fashionable shoes. But killing for art, for example, seems quite prohibited (see e.g. Tavin and Kallio-Tavin 2014). Generally, people consider artworks that include an animal's killing extremely unethical and cruel. From a speciesism critical viewpoint, it is crucial to consider what makes it possible for most people to accept and be part of institutional, structural, and daily killing for multiple products for human goods, but be critical toward singular cases of killing for artistic purposes, even when the killing is done in order to make an ethical point. Perhaps, "eating well," as Derrida (2008) puts it, is more important than accepting an idea that humanism and ethics might not after all offer a sustainable and sufficient ethical argument.

Humanist philosophers have spent a considerable amount of time and effort clarifying how and why humankind is different from other animals, to sustain the human-centered approach to speciesism. As Derrida (2008) states, Aristotle, Descartes, Kant, Heidegger, Lévinas and Lacan, and many others have explored human separation from animal species based on power, capability, and attributes, as their ability to give, to bury one's dead, to work, and to invent a technique. Some have emphasized the human ability "to respect the rights of others, and to possess a sense of justice" (Singer 1990, p. 8). In his *Letter on Humanism*, written in 1947, Heidegger (1977) explored the question of the *abyss* separating humans from other species. According to Mitchell (2003), Wittgenstein, Cavell, Lyotard, Deleuze and Guatarri, in addition to Lévinas and Derrida, have all "radically reshaped the traditional view of 'the' animal as a straightforward antithesis and counterpart to 'the' human" (p. xii). Humankind has been explained as different from other species because of intelligence and subjectivity, which are linked to language (Wolfe 2010). Wittgenstein stressed the meaning of language as a distinguishing factor with his well-known text: "If a lion could talk, we could not understand him" (Kenny 1994, p. 213). Sometimes the separation has been described through

different nervous systems and different experiences of pain, memory, or lack of memory, different emotions and, as Descartes especially emphasized, the ability to share experiences on those matters, meaning the socio-cultural part of human life. The boundaries of these ideas are pushed every now and then, for example, when it was discovered that chimpanzees and dolphins could be taught language.

Jeremy Bentham's well-known statement on the principles of morals and legislation on animals (1789) has been the leading ideology for animal rights: "The question is not, Can they reason? nor Can they talk? but, Can they suffer?" (Derrida 2008, p. 27; Singer 1990, p. 7). The question of animal suffering and minimizing pain, including psychological pain and stress, has become a measure of ethical human actions toward animals. Beings who can demonstrate an interest in avoiding suffering should have rights to be protected, regardless of their species (Wolfe 2003).

The question of nonhuman animal suffering might have offered another option for nonhuman animal killing. As a consequence, humankind has defined what can be counted as a legitimate amount of suffering for non-human animals and what cannot. If killing is done without suffering, it is accepted. The fact that lives are ending is not as crucial as the fact that there is little to no suffering. Perhaps daily killing, even in masses, is accepted as long as killing is clean, smooth, soft and quick, and done professionally, and certainly not with a dull axe.

## THE PEDAGOGICAL POTENTIALITY OF THE MONSTROUS

Animal oppression is still often a taboo within higher education and neo-liberal capitalist societies (Fraser and Taylor 2016). Similarly to other big ethical questions, such as distribution of food and water, migration and racism, human utility toward nonhuman animals seems to be too difficult question to comprehend and is therefore often bypassed.

*Critical animal studies* (CAS) works against speciesism, and suggests ethically challenging perspectives to the social movement, adding to and partially aligning with disability studies, after the civil rights movement, feminism, environmentalism, and LBGT activism (Wolfe 2010). Speciesism is a matter of prejudice or a biased attitude in favor of the interest of members of one's own species against those of other species. Educational fields such as art education have a long tradition of taking standpoints on critical social issues and working actively against sexism, ableism, classism, racism, and other types of prejudice. Ethically thinking, critical animal studies

perspectives should be part of contemporary art education. Questions on speciesism, animal rights, and sustainable food production, for example, are part of the ethical responsibility of inhabiting this globe. Many contemporary artists discuss human–nonhuman animal issues in their artworks. It would make sense to bring this conversation into museums and other cultural institutions, similarly to other forms of oppression (see e.g. Bayer et al. 2018).

Lévinas (2008) described how the human ethical relationship is closely connected to a situation where the human connection is in the vicinity, such as in a face-to-face situation. Humankind is not able easily to carry out ethical situations that are not in our neighborhood, or in our own backyard. Similarly, as a humanitarian crisis on another continent seems distant and abstract for so many, animal suffering does not seem to touch people deeply, who might otherwise even consider themselves animal lovers. Somehow the Western capitalist society structure assures a certain ethical apathy, when it comes to faraway people (no matter how “small” the world has become through globalization, traveling opportunities and digitalization) and nonhuman animals. As Fraser and Taylor (2016) state, it is capitalism in society that is the main reason for animals suffering.

The fact that both the artists Mäki and Habacuc and the Guggenheim museum received massive numbers of hate letters and death threats is another indicator to show how poorly the thoughts of humanistic ethics work as critique of these artworks. The potentiality of monstrous actions might be more powerful than it may first seem. Although the first reaction is rejection, something deeper might grow to evoke reactions; probably not the same reactions that the artists are claiming to seek, but perhaps ones that are able to express something important about our societies. They might also cause friction in the belief system we call humanism. McCormack (2015) suggests our moment in an economic, political, social, and cultural environment involves a resurgence of the monstrous, and inviting it to take different forms. She states:

Many scholars argue that the monster is precisely a figure of crisis, instilling fear, anxiety and panic. Yet, while the monster may seem to mirror contemporary socio-political discourses and practices, it’s always in excess of these constraining parameters. It leaks, oozes and refuses to be contained by the normative, often damaging, demands of state-induced terror. These monsters demand we look beyond what we thought were the limits of the normal, of contemporary thought and of relationality, opening up to other possibilities and perhaps other worlds. (para 5)

The polarized world we live in, as in part resulting from humanism, is quick to judge monstrous actions as evil. Without advertising anarchism and terrorism, it is important to discuss the dimensions and complexities of the varieties of ethical behavior. Perhaps the people who got so angry with Habacuc's and Mäki's work are not so worried about the animals as they are about ourselves. The question becomes, what does cruelty toward one animal do to *me*, as a gallery visitor or as an art viewer? The humanistic gaze of the world might be tainted and it might become impossible to stay pure in this complex world.

## CONCLUSIONS

Mäki's and Habacuc's artworks address the extreme boundaries of human ethics, and often leave people with defensive reactions, claiming the artists are abandoning their ethical responsibility. It is curious to ponder the amount of hate and violence expressed in the name of morality. The deep offense and strong fury these particular artworks evoke might insult, more than anything else, the art audience's humanity, rather than being based on a true interest toward nonhuman animals.

In so many ways, these artworks pinpoint the limitations of humanism: what can be done for hundreds, thousands and millions of individuals cannot be done for one, and what we witness happening in front of our eyes seems much more true, important, and serious than something we know as certainly happening, but just not in face-to-face proximity. Habacuc's and Mäki's artworks raise questions that should not have just one answers, although the audience has not often accepted the challenge, but instead has made it very clear that they can only tolerate one kind of answer.

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