

Boutique meats: it could happen to you

By Hana Janeckova



Old Heritage Breeds and Associated Products

Recently, rightwing British newspaper The Daily Telegraph¹ reported another scandal of the snowflake millennial generation. Millennials hate touching raw meat, therefore they buy it in touch-free packing called doypacks, cleaned up and ready to be thrown in the pan, or chicken in ready-to-be-roasted bags. Ingesting cooked meat, raw chicken sashimi, the stringy textures of cow's muscle between one's teeth—flooded with the hormones mammals produce when dying—does not seem to bother them as much as a pile of an animal matter spread on the chopping board. The raw, glistening textures of uncooked meat displayed under the light of the meat counter, the thought of cutting up flesh, rises bouts of nausea and anxiety.

We can only speculate about what anxieties this aversion to touching the meat we will ingest the very next moment might represent. In the following text I would like to think through affects of consumption, the killing of animals both as a ritual and labour and how these things are represented, to discuss how we construct the boundaries between the human and nonhuman, living and dead. Large scale industrial farming, with its cattle yards, battery chickens and

¹<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2018/04/15/sainsburys-introduces-touch-free-meat-packets-appease-squeamish/>

extraction of value at the lowest possible cost, is based on our acceptance of animal killing as a way of positioning ourselves in the world. Philosophy in particular has something to say about this presence of animal slaughter in our life. In Heidegger's theory of being, its force is derived from the taking of animal life. To put this very simply, for both Sartre and Heidegger the idea of death shapes us and is always ahead of us, sacralised.² At the very same time the slaughter of an animal by our own hand is formative to our understanding of ourselves, to our being. Through this emphasis on the finitude, our subjectivity is constituted through the constant awareness of death, Thanatos fuelling it with affects of loss and melanchony.

Even a bullet in the head of a pig reared on an organic farm must be understood as part of this circle of violence. The animal is aware it is going to die days ahead of its slaughter, slight changes in his routine rise an alarm in his self-preserving instincts, making him release anxiety fuelled hormones into his bloodstream. Rossi Braidotti writes that "since antiquity animals have constituted sort of the zoo proletariat in a species hierarchy run by the humans. They have been exploited for hard labour as natural slaves and logistical support for humans prior and throughout the mechanical age."³

But when does the flesh of the body become a consumable, when and how does it become food? The pork of pigs, beef of cows, fat of whales and silk of caterpillars; here the animal is turned into industrialised material⁴. Ducts, tendons in the muscle, surfaces of red veins resembling a cracked, dried up river estuary, alcoves and dimples of chicken skin; once separated and abstracted from the animal meat is widely associative and charged. It can resemble silicone breast implants as well as rugged landscapes. But meat can also produce highly specific responses and affects that are deeply familiar and connected to an embedded fear of the body, its liquids, porosity and penetrability; a fear of contamination, of unstable boundaries of the self.⁵

What can art propose in this scheme of violence and alienation, where animal slaughter forms our everyday experience of food consumption? In Jesse Darling's [Plastic bags \(2013\)](#) a free supermarket shopping bag is cut up and taped up to the wall resembling a battery chicken, the toxicity and dispensability of a plastic bag in tension with its promise of hygiene and the comforts of shopping in late capitalism. This simply made piece of work—produced when the artist was working in low-paid jobs as a student in London—testifies to complexities of the cheap labour of both animal and human proletariat. But *Plastic bags*—like the doypacks—can

² This position, represented in the contemporary theory by G. Agamben's concept of 'bare life' has been widely debated and criticised, especially in recent posthumanist thought. Philosophical positions of Deleuze&Guattari, P. Glissant or Nietzsche all attempted to defy existentialist obsession with death and animal annihilation.

³ Braidotti R. *Nomadic Ethics* pp. 368

⁴ Other more pronounced manifestations of 'unnatural' human control over animal life are well known for example the clone Dolly the sheep and OncoMouse.

⁵ Feminist theorist Margrit Shildrick, in her seminal text *Leaky Bodies* considers a touch as a membrane of penetrability, testifying to unstable bodily boundaries of the self, dismantling the position of individual self determined humanist subject.

also serve as a tool for understanding our complicated relationship with human-animal hierarchies and consumption. By not participating in the chain of human hands that have touched meat, we seek to disengage in the chain of labour and violence where chicken had to be killed, scrubbed, portioned with tiny feathers often stubbornly *stuck* on the final product. In Darling's *Plastic bags* it is the proximity of the corpse in our daytoday lives that artist shows in a quick and immediate gesture.

While the corpse is gone, it is the presence of technologised death and ritualistic violence connected with meat consumption that is prominent in British-Kurdish artist Jala Wahid's sculptures and installations. Severed heads of cattle, stomachs of pigs and highly textured intestines are presented on [Wahid's Instagram](#). Photographed and filtered to high definition and colour, yet rendered almost beyond recognition, the meat market is for Wahid the site of tradition and sacralised violence. In her images and sculptures, a highly seductive alliance is struck between the formal properties of her materials—such as intestinal bile, human milk, fruit and gelatine, as well as jesmonite, steel and ceramic—and explored through a relentless reworking of surfaces. Sheen, gloss, intensity of colour and meticulous detail are symptomatic of her highly sexualised objects, torsos, body parts and moving image works underlined by a hypnotic use of sound and text.



Her sculptures of organs and innards, covered in gelatine and petroleum jelly are rendered hyperreal, resembling high definition cinema formats. Yet in Wahid's work the flesh never truly turns to meat. hough consumption and desire are clearly articulated in the perfect forms, it never

becomes 'food'. The language of the implicit violence of animal slaughter is presented by the refusal to fully disclose, please and satisfy, the sensations we often associate with meat consumption.

In the sculpture *Red Forever Approaching Obsidian* (2019) a large, deep carmine form in the shape of liver is positioned against floor of the [Sophie Taipenner gallery](#), partially encased in a lurid latex wrapping. The latex, with its reference to sex shops and nightclubs, is neatly tightly wrapped around half of the sculpture, in a clean boundary. Its ambivalence sits in the allusion to an interiority and interchangeability of human and nonhuman bodies with the inorganic matter that obsidian as a volcanic stone represents. These innermost elements of life, organs as well as volcanic stones are often concealed to our eyes, before they erupt to the surface. In Wahid's work they are exposed bare and removed from their contexts in specifically light coloured and scented environments.

The artifice of the 'organic' is in Wahid's work expressed by exaggeration and excess of highly detailed surfaces and colours, as well as in the suggestive title alluding to an aspiration to escape nature and to join in the longevity of inorganic life. We recognise that the erotics of meat and erotics of latex are very much like each other, united by colour, they are both equally alien, artificial and inhuman while at the same time instantly recognisable. Much can be said about Wahid's work, such as the way the violence of gaze, ritual and tradition are mediated. For the purposes of this text, though, what is important is the denaturalisation and distortion of paths of desire and consumption that we consider 'naturally' pleasurable. The violence of animal slaughter is never reconciled through an act of pleasurable consumption. In turning towards synthetic materials such as latex and oil, fluidly merging with the biological matter can be understood as an attempt to become less human, embracing new subjectivities that can be formed by re-conceptualising existentialist ontology of death and killing with and through technological mediation.

Inhuman care

The tensions in our relationship to consuming animals are multifaceted and contradictory; we ingest, feeling a repulsion to touch, rejecting looking at meat yet relishing the taste, revealing a complicated relationship to the natural. Clean meat can be seen as a return to origin, to the place of full satiety. Yet, even though this may seem oppositional, consuming touch-free clean meat in doypacks is a very similar affective response to our desire to feel in control of what we ingest by eating natural, 'clean', organic meat. But maintaining such lifestyle comforts as clean or happy meat, eggs and dairy necessarily come at the cost of exclusion. As much as we can idealize going back to 'nature', with eco-communities living in a countryside full of small, organic farms, with progressing climate change and increasing food and water scarcities even the most optimistic recognise the unattainability of this vision for everyone.

We must discuss this exclusion, who is excluded, who will not be able to participate. How not to remove the others that don't or can't fit in is a painstaking and long term process of evaluation. It is here where terms of feminist theory such as Mia Mingus' 'access intimacy' where intimacy is a clue to "healthy relationships of care' and Ngoc Loan Trân's 'compassionate accountability' come to the fore.⁶ Alternatives to these strategies of care are ominous. The mass murderer in El Paso declared in his manifesto his enthusiasm and awareness of an environmental agenda, as well as the restriction of resources in America, as a motivation for his mass shootings. In his eco-fascist views, Americans are incapable to change their lifestyle, to survive there must be necessarily less of them and those who qualify for precious resources and an '*American way of life*' are those who most aptly fit ideas of the right to the land of extreme rightwing nationalism.⁷ Without a profound self-questioning of the way we distribute resources environmental agenda is a licence for violent eco-fascist exclusion of immigrants, ethnic minorities, single mothers and others deemed unsuitable.

While America and its gun culture can seem miles away, we must remind ourselves that we live in Fortress Europe where Czech, Polish and Hungarian state leaders refused help to Syrian children exactly for the same reasons, refusal to share the pleasures of consumption and lifestyle that are 'naturally' our own. Animals have had a peculiar role in islamophobia where the same people who loudly use 'animal welfare' to explain their disgust at 'inhumane' halal killings⁸ at the very same time think nothing of consuming animal products from large-scale industrial farming which causes animals to suffer intolerably all their lives. At the very same time populations levels of Amazonian tribes are controlled to make more space for the cattle.⁹ We must recognise that if the good life and good death of 'our' animals, commons and communities is happening concurrently with dehumanisation of people then we have to rethink foundational principles of the way we live.

These disconnection and contradictions end literally on our plate, where meat should be just a product but it testifies to the life and killing of animals; it is also a reminder of a corpse. At our dinner table, it often manifests as privileged spectacle, neurosis and anxiety of capitalist food consumption. For the future, to trouble associations of death as a sacred end of our life and animal killing as a way of being human might be the only way out of this impasse. Instead of focussing on '*inhumane treatment*' I propose something completely unnatural, let's try to think about the world, animals and others with completely alien, inhuman, intimate and synthetic care.

⁶ Byrne John and coll. Ed (2018) Constituent Museum. Adelita Husni Bey in conversation with Tiziana Terranova, Sean Dockrey and John Hill

⁷https://www.worldcrunch.com/opinion-analysis/ecofascism-when-far-right-ideology-fuses-with-ecology?utm_source=dlvr.it&utm_medium=twitter

⁸ Here I am referring to a heated Facebook discussion over a kebab shop in Letná, Prague serving halal meat.

⁹<https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2019/aug/29/brazil-amazon-wildfires-indigenous-reserves-remote-areas>

