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The Art for the Other, Again

Curated by Gabi Scardi



Giovanni Aloi is an art historian in modern and contemporary art whose research focuses on the Anthropocene and new conceptions of nature in art. Aloi currently teaches at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and Sotheby's Institute of Art New York and London. He is the Editor in Chief of *Antennae: The Journal of Nature in Visual Culture* (www.antennae.org.uk). He is the author of *Art & Animals* (2011) and *Speculative Taxidermy: Natural History, Animal Surfaces, and Art in the Anthropocene* (2018), *Why Look at Plants? - The Vegetal World in Contemporary Art* (2019) and *Lucian Freud -Herbarium* (2019). With Caroline Picard, Aloi is the co-editor of the University of Minnesota Press series *Art after Nature*.

**ANIMAL STUDIES AND ART.
ELEPHANTS IN THE ROOM
GIOVANNI ALOI**

We are all familiar with this figure of speech in which the elephant symbolizes an issue that many are aware of but that it is not openly addressed by anybody. As such, this metaphor well captures the essence of a cultural state of paralysis—the paradoxical impossibility of saying what many are nonetheless able to see. In this paper, I will argue that there are far too many elephants in the room of animal studies and contemporary art; perhaps too many to continue ignoring them, and too many to allow a productive discussion of contemporary art to move forward in such space.

As it will be seen, some of the elephants I identify here are relatively small and mainly bound to animal studies, whilst others are larger in size and encompass more than one discipline at once. Some will only appear as elephants in the room to art historians or art students. To other readers, this may be the first time these elephants are encountered. I have become aware of the presence

of the aforementioned elephants over fifteen years of teaching, conferencing, publishing, and closely working with colleagues on more than thirty issues of *Antennae* thus far. Since the very beginning, animal studies has been for me an opportunity to rethink everything I learned about myself, humanity, animals, and our relationships with other life-forms and ecosystems. In consequence I greatly value the importance of constantly striving to push thinking further, beyond the boundaries of discipline specific methodologies, preconceived certainties, and established value frameworks.

Over ten years ago, I embraced animal studies along with the promise that it could bring substantial societal changes beyond academia, thus, in my opinion, animal studies discussions cannot afford to stagnate in circular, performative displays of academic knowledge that fail to substantially advance thinking and acting in our everyday lives. Most importantly, in specific relation to the subject of contemporary art, I feel that failing to move discussions forward will cause us to waste the opportunity to capitalize on the real potential that contemporary art could bring

to a productive re-thinking of human animal relations.

The key arguments explored in the first part of this paper address the inherent challenges, contradictions, and paradoxes that artists and art historians alike have to face when working with animals and art within current animal studies sets of values. It is in this section that the elephants in the room of animal studies will be identified. For the sake of clarity, I have focused my discussion on four elephants that I have named as follows: Accusation, Visibility, Responsibility, and Art Materials. The second part of this paper focuses more specifically on contemporary art, animal studies and the need to overcome circularities of argument for the purpose of integrating animal studies perspective with broader contemporary art theory and practices.

As it will become clearer later on, and as many of us know, being an artist, an art historian, or a scholar of visual cultures in animal studies is not an easy task. Making art, and discussing art, are activities entangled in a series of paradoxes and inherent contradictions that ultimately require the crafting of complex

ethicalities. These ethicalities, I argue, may not necessarily match the preset ethical parameters of animal rights or vegan agendas. Yet, this does not equate to say that such theoretical frameworks should be perceived as incompatible. However, it will also be particularly important to recognize the incompatibilities between these frameworks for the purpose of avoiding the circularities of discussion that I have already mentioned. This constitutes another challenge in animal studies, namely the possibility or impossibility to coherently adhering to one or more ethical registers that may simultaneously do justice to animals, animal representation, and the methodological frameworks of different disciplines in the humanities.

ACCUSATION

The first elephants I would like to expose are all related to the publication output and conferencing side of animal studies. The most conspicuous elephant in the room is the one I have named Accusation. Those of you who have followed the events that have characterized the past twenty years of contemporary art through animal studies lenses

have probably noticed a recurrent and predominantly negative tone. I am referring more specifically to the trend of publishing papers that predominantly denounce a lack of ethicality in the treatment of animals in contemporary art. By no stretch of the imagination I am here implying that this may constitute an example of bad academic practice. Nonetheless, I am concerned that the productivities at stake in this approach may be limited and that this type of work doesn't do justice to contemporary art.

As it is known, animal rights and animal welfare contributions have been extremely valuable in preventing cruelty in the gallery space, and in some occasions the intercession of animal rights groups has proved essential to prevent animal death from taking place in the name of art. Marco Evaristti's *Helena* (2000), Kim Jones' *The Rat Piece* (1976), Newton Harrison's *Portable Fish Farm* (1971), Huang Yong Ping *Theatre of the World* (1993), and Adel Abdessemed *Don't Trust Me* (2007), have all been competently addressed from multiple perspectives—discussing these examples without recurring to an animal rights framework of some

description would indeed constitute an ethical problem. Let's be clear: the contribution of animal rights to contemporary art has been of paramount importance. Yet, I am concerned that the continuous pointing out of the actual, or presumed, inappropriateness of animal treatment in art may be currently considered by some to be the main, or sole responsibility of an animal studies critique of art. Over the past few years, I have noticed a tendency from certain animal studies voices to exclusively focus on these negative instances as if animal studies constituted a sort of cultural 'policing body'. I argue that this approach is reductive. Spotting the mistreated animal, or denouncing the alleged misrepresentation of animals in art should be understood as only one of the potentialities of animalstudies within the artistic remit.

It is also important to note that the majority of the aforementioned examples of animal cruelty in art cannot be considered academically valid or representative of broader realities of a field as complex as contemporary art. A conspicuous number of recent publications on animals in art have focused on old

examples in which animals have been epistemology.

mistreated or killed in the gallery space. Some of these examples happen to be almost fifty years old and have been already amply discussed and criticized over the past twenty years. I am personally unsure about what else may be said about them apart from reassessing their evidently inappropriate use of animals in an artistic context. Nonetheless these examples keep surfacing here and there, touted as indisputable testimony to contemporary art's recklessness towards animals in general.

It is important to remember that such examples constitute isolated instances in the history of modern and contemporary art, and that most of them have been well forgotten or were entirely ignored by art history scholars in the first place due to an essential lack of artistic merit. The animal studies retrieval of these works of art and artists can be considered informative, interesting to some degree, and it has sometimes raised valuable ethical questions. Yet, continuing to focus our attention on these examples provides a distorted and unnecessary negative perception of what contemporary art uniquely can contribute to animal studies

Similarly, I am also weary of essays and conference papers in which scholars have focused on the very questionable work of undergraduate art students in which animal cruelty is committed. The examples of the Canadian students who captured and tortured a cat in 2001, or the ones who decapitated a chicken in 2013, are some of the most recurrent.¹ These examples, although extremely regrettable, cannot be deemed representative of contemporary art either—however, they have been frequently used to support cases condemning the lack of ethicality of artists in general and to undermine the potential of contemporary art to contribute to animal studies discussions.

It is with some sadness that we have to acknowledge that, unfortunately, teenagers are too often involved in animal cruelty—this is the real issue. Facebook and other social media are filled with seriously disturbing videos and images of children torturing animals—this phenomenon is worryingly widespread, culturally as

¹ BBC, (2004) 'Fur flies over cat-killing film', [online] in BBC News, available at: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/entertainment/3657582.stm> [accessed on August 8th 2014]

well as geographically. The fact that a handful of art students thought it was a brilliant idea to kill an animal in the name of art, should not be used to discredit contemporary art at large in an academic context.

VISIBILITY AND THE LOGIC OF WITNESSING

The second elephant in the room I wish to address is called Visibility—this is a much bigger elephant than Accusation, and it is probably an older one too. As it is well known, over the past twenty or thirty years, the frequency with which one is likely to encounter an animal body in the gallery space has undeniably increased. Summarily, it can be argued that, when it comes to contemporary art, animal studies has been predominantly interested in the following manifestations in the gallery space:

- 1) The presence of dead/preserved animals
- 2) The presence of live animals
- 3) The killing of animals

These constitute instances in which animal bodies acquire a substantial

visibility by the hands of artists.

The main objections raised by posthumanism against humanism involve the rejection of ethics based on ability/intelligence² and the preponderant role that visuality has played in the epistemology of Western culture. These two parameters have been shown to play a fundamental role in the production of the human as a finite and separate entity from nature.

As the underlying proposition to the formation of the humanist subject, visibility has historically been linked to the ability the human has to objectify. However, through the recent history of technological, scientific research, the primacy of ocular consumption has been over and over disputed as insufficient or limited. This shift has impacted our conception of visuality in radical ways. In my impression, animal studies appears to be currently split in two large groups, one which has embraced posthumanism and its distrust for visibility as a truth-constructing tool and one which is inherently reliant on visibility as a main epistemological tool. In *What*

² Wolfe, C. (2010) *What is Posthumanism?* (London and Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press), p. 141

is Posthumanism? Cary Wolfe argues against the intrinsic objectifying ability of visuality in the attempt of disrupting the dialectical dichotomic relationship between object and subject—a shift that should enable us to move beyond the set trajectories of humanism and the ‘inherent violence’ that shaped it.³

The omniscience of vision in the structuring of animal studies arguments has thus been pivotal to the development of the field. The epistemic division between those who rely on visibility and those who don’t (at least as much) causes

3 In *What Is Posthumanism?* Wolfe uses the example of Renaissance central perspective along with its panoptic construction of space providing normative modes of humanist subjectivity and asks what the relationship between current philosophical and artistic representationalism may entail. Wolfe’s argument is structured around a comparison of the *modus operandi* of contemporary artists Sue Coe and Eduardo Kac and substantially constitutes a critique of human visuality as the predominant humanist epistemic modality in human-animal relations. It is important to note that Wolfe’s question centers around the ethicality involved in making art — the positioning of the artist as producer of representation, Wolfe argues, is capable of overshadowing the overall, ultimate signification of the work. Therefore, despite Coe’s ethic-activist drive which clearly motivates the artist, her illustration work is cast by Wolfe as overtly reliant upon a melodramatic theatricality which defaces the animal through a reduction into the very material contingency and epistemic operations imposed by the medium: the flat, horizontality of the paper upon which it is drawn. In opposition, Kac’s transgenic, multimedia projects capitalize upon a disavowal of the ‘representationalist violence’ involved in Coe’s work, and are therefore more attuned with the positioning of the human in posthumanism.

serious limitations to discourse and irreconcilable disagreements. This is not to say that all scholars involved in animal studies should conform to the theoretical demise of vision as preponderant epistemic tool in human-animal relations, but that it would perhaps be productive to clearly acknowledge the complex, and at times contradictory roles, which visuality plays in animal studies discourses. More specifically, it would be important to acknowledge that the discursive registers of animal rights and veganism, although different from each other, generally rely on an intrinsic logic of witnessing that inherently supports the ethical structure of choice and judgment.

This logic of witnessing, one heavily relying on visuality, has proposed a range of productive opportunities in contemporary art, but it has also limited discourse to a serious degree, especially when the emergence of new registers of biopolitics and materiality is considered. So this is not to say that animal rights and vegan ethics are inherently flawed, but my invitation to reconsider some aspects of the visuality upon which their agendas rely should be understood as an acknowledgment

that times and perspectives do change and that frameworks need to be updated according to such shifts in order to retain relevance in contemporary discourses. It's still true to say that the visibility of the animal body in the gallery space attracts much more attention and criticism than other creative instances in which animal bodies are absent or have been processed.

Damien Hirst, possibly the most (in) famous artist to employ animals in art, has attracted much accusation in animal studies and perhaps far too much has been said and written about the artist's use of half a dozen cows featured in his works from the early 1990s. Meanwhile, I have all along been left to wonder about the importance of the 32,500,000 cows that are usually killed in the US alone behind the closed doors of slaughterhouses; the 90,277 that are killed every day there; and 3,671 will have died by the time you are finished reading this paper.⁴ This paradox poses questions about the effective role visibility plays in our image-saturated culture and the ethical responses it triggers. What is the relationship between visibility

and ethicality in relation to animal death? I will address different logics of visibility in the remainder of this paper by focusing on works of art that deliberately capitalize on the display of animal bodies for the purpose of challenging systems of belief, value systems, and ethical parameters.

For the time being, it is however important to assess that Damien Hirst's works of art involving dissected cows are not the instigator of mass-farming or massslaughter, they surely constitute their representational manifestation—the manifestation that most of us don't see as slaughtering happens behind closed doors and meat arrives in supermarkets neatly packaged and conveniently disembodied in polystyrene trays covered in cellophane. Hirst's dissected cows subvert the naturalized aesthetics of visibilities and invisibilities in biocapital through an unsettling conflation of both, the slaughterhouse and scientific dissecting.

These works of art simply show us what society does not want to see—they don't invent or suggest new social practices—they simply reveal existing and past ones to us. In doing so, these works may not point to an

⁴ USDA, (2014) Livestock Slaughter 2013 Summary, National Agricultural Statistics Services, p.8

alternative way forward, but they neither promote or instigate animal cruelty. As already pointed out by Susan McHugh in relation to another work by Hirst titled *This Little Piggy Went to Market, This Little Piggy Stayed at Home* which functions along similar aesthetic lines of the divided cows pieces: “Hirst’s Piggy might be seen to concern not the hopes but the failures of people-pig relationships in urban industrial economies, wherein we might least expect them to persist. But it also seems possible that these and other porcine figures leverage different negotiations of image and narrative”.⁵

It is also important to remember that Hirst’s cows are ethically sourced—the ones he uses are animals that have died due to disease and whose bodies would be otherwise destroyed. To simply read Hirst’s use of cows as a disrespectful and gratuitous display of animal death is to entirely miss the point of what these works tell us about our exploitative, transhistorical relationships with animals; our desire to know how animal metabolisms work; our interest to map ours against theirs and to learn from the differences and similarities we encounter; our wish

⁵ McHugh, S. (2010) ‘Clever pigs, failing piggeries’ in *Antennae*, issue 12, Spring, p.19

to consume their meat but not be exposed to their suffering and death. Simultaneously, whether we like it or not, these works remind us of the cost of animal life that lies at the foundation of our culture, knowledge, and progress. The materiality proposed by the bodies of the cows in the vitrines and the exposure of their internal organs constitutes a shocking wake up call in the face of the relentless desensitization perpetrated by the world of virtual realities that surrounds us.

Acknowledging all this, does not equate to praising Hirst’s use of animals in his work. But the intensity with which they impose themselves on popular culture demands a scrutiny animal studies should be carefully pondering beyond the simple and reductive gesture of accusation. It is my impression that many people dislike Hirst’s work outright simply because of its financial success and popularity. I will not spend many words on this matter besides issuing warning that such attitudes implicitly speak volumes about one’s elitist, bourgeois, and hypocritical relation to culture, popular culture, and money.

Like the works of pop art by Andy

Warhol which can be seen to be art historically linked to Hirst's, pieces such as *Mother and Child Divided* propose a critique of consumerism embedded in the very materiality and representational paradigms they employ. They further extend Warhol's own research and experimentation in the values of shock and death by proposing an updated rendition that surpasses what photographic evidence had achieved in the pop art of the 60s. Like most works of contemporary art, Hirst's essentially constitute unstable entities open to interpretation. There isn't one set or predominant meaning to the core of the presented text.

It is however important to bear in mind that beyond their roots in the economies of the consumption they embody, Hirst's 'divided cows' constitute an uncomfortable sight because they remind us that the medicines we all take to overcome deadly diseases and to prolong our own lives indeed do come from animal sacrifices. To reduce Hirst's cabinets to hollow spectacles, entertainment, or freak shows, is to deny what we all have to face: that ultimately, in the history of the western world, the production of knowledge— knowledge that may

eventually save human and animal lives alike—inescapably relies upon acts of controlled violence. These are the multiple material histories of concealed violence intertwine in Hirst's cabinets. These works dismantle the pretense supported in Western culture that "the material exploitation of labor, as well as of nature, is a thing of the past"⁶ and bring the abrasive materiality of animal death, which lies at the root of the capitalist system, right in front of the very eyes of the middle and upper class consumers who visit art galleries.

Contemporary art deliberately meddles with the contradictions and paradoxes that make life what it is. It aims to disrupt the seemingly stable, ordered and polished surfaces constructed by naturalized social conceptions and relations—and this is one of the main strengths contemporary art has to offer to an animal studies framework. There is much to learn from what Hirst shows us with some of his pieces involving preserved animals, but it is my impression that staunch resistance from animal right and vegan animal studies groups to even consider

6 Shukin, N. (2009) *Animal Capital—Rendering Life in Biopolitical Times*, (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press), p.43

that any knowledge about animals it is important to make these works can be drawn from these works, of art work for us. generates circularities of argument and epistemic dead ends.

Whether we like it or not, Hirst (and other internationally known artists whose work involves animals) has carved a very solid place in art history books and will be remembered as a major artist who strongly impacted upon practice and theory alike. To tease out a productive human-animal text from these works is one of the important responsibilities that animal studies oriented critique should seriously consider. Are we under the illusion that if animal studies scholars will ignore these works, or simply produce accusatory texts with little art historical merit, nobody else out there will write about them? Unfortunately this is not the case. It is enough to take a look at the extensive coverage Hirst regularly receives to notice that animals in his work are very poorly addressed, if not at all undermined by art critics and historians alike. On the other hand, a damning animal rights based critique of Hirst's work, simply does not constitute a valid art historical inquiry and will not leave a trace in any artistic discourse about these works. This is why I argue that

As a practicing lecturer in modern and contemporary art, I have the responsibility to talk to my students about the work of Hirst from different perspectives that, as far as it is possible, should do justice to the artist, the works of art, art historical/visual cultures theoretical approaches, and an animal studies critique. Simultaneously, I cannot impose a purely animal rights based analysis of these works upon students, as this would be reductive to the range of perspectives that an art historian must evaluate.

Despite the original intention of the artist, it is important to realize that we can still learn valuable lessons about human-animal relations and, most importantly, we can allow others to make up their own minds about the ethical stands required without imposing overriding ethical standards upon works of art prior to allowing these to speak. The analysis of Hirst's butterfly paintings that became central to my paper titled 'On a Wing and a Prayer', (which also examines the work of Mat Collishaw) and to which I will later return, stemmed from this exact need—that

of ‘making the most’ out of popular hypocrisy. Like for gender studies, works of art involving animals by where much attention has been showing how much we can still learn paid to issues of representation, about human-animal relations from most scholarly critique of the them, even if at first these works may representation of animals in not seem to propose positive leads. classical painting has focused on Furthermore, as an art historian form, style, and composition. In who constantly attempts to mediate both instances, attention has been different ethical and methodological paid to objectification or presumed lenses in the academic and public ‘liberation’ of that which has discussion of animals in art, I been traditionally subjugated by categorically refuse to make the anthropocentric, patriarchal blanket condemnations of artworks tradition of classical art. In relation involving dead animal bodies. I to this specific point, I wish to argue argue that each case deserves to be that this line of critique cannot suffice carefully pondered and analyzed for when animals are most regularly not reasons that I will outline further in only involved in the representational this paper. plane, but also embedded in the very materials of which the painting itself is made. A serious and credible animal studies-informed, ethical stance cannot afford to conveniently choose its arguments. Visibility still elephant that is closely related lurks in the room as an issue that to visibility—this one haunts art requires to be seriously addressed. history just as much as it haunts animal studies: Art Materials.

ART MATERIALS

It is now important to momentarily turn our attention to another elephant that is closely related to visibility—this one haunts art history just as much as it haunts animal studies: Art Materials.

First of all, it is appropriate to acknowledge that classical art does not receive bad press in the animal studies. I have found this phenomenon of interest as, I have to admit, it seems to be characterized by a certain methodological/ethical

and some artworks produced in the context of feminism which have deliberately emphasized the importance of materiality in art, critically focusing, for instance, on the gender-specific essence of some materials like textiles and ceramics

An interesting parallel can be provided by feminist critique and some artworks produced in the context of feminism which have deliberately emphasized the importance of materiality in art, critically focusing, for instance, on the gender-specific essence of some materials like textiles and ceramics

which came to be an integral part of some art in the 60s and 70s.⁷ However, a substantially obvious difference exists between the classical art which objectified women and the works of art informed by feminist ideals that aimed at denouncing such a state of affairs: no women were killed in the making of classical works of art—in the making of classical paintings women were most regularly simply undressed.⁸

The paradox we face upon writing about art and in making art is that inequalities in the lives of humans and animals are apparent everywhere. Whether they representationally appear on the canvas or not, animal products are in the mix of the materials used for the making of the objects we discuss—they have been rendered invisible, but they are undeniably present.

7 One of the most impressive examples of the importance of materials in art addressing gender and femininity more specifically can be found in *The Dinner Party* (1979) by Judy Chicago where embroidery as well as ceramics play key roles in the work. Tracy Emin is an example of contemporary artist engaging with that tradition through the making of her famous quilts and embroidery works. Deepwell, .. (1995) *New Feminist Art Criticism: Critical Strategies*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press)

8 But as Susan McHugh pointed out in one of our conversations on this subject: “their existence as living, thinking, creative subjects— not to mention as Old Mistresses providing the domestic labor that freed the Old Masters to create—is compromised by this comparably objectifying representational pattern”

These animal deaths, like the visible ones that attract much attention in contemporary art, they cannot be ignored, especially as a renewed attention to materiality is becoming more and more prominent in different animal studies approaches.

A SHIFT FROM MEDIUM TO MATERIALITY?

Art history has been characterized by a problematic relationship with the treatment of art materials. At times, these have been considered to be the exclusive domain of artists. As I have already mentioned, historians have traditionally focused on the representational plane, elucidating the symbolism hidden in beautifully executed works of art, discussing formal and contextual aspects alike. They have predominantly engaged with art materials for the purpose of assessing the exclusivity of artistic production, (in the case of the use of precious materials, for instance), to draw a metanarrative of artistic achievement, or to elevate the technical abilities of artists to the rank of the genius. Yet, not much attention has been dedicated to art materials beyond the technicalities involved in making the image materialize.

That said, it is also important to remember that there are three specific and interrelated moments in modern aesthetics and art criticism in which a renewed interest for the essence of media and materiality was given some consideration. These are the Greenbergian conception of medium specificity, according to which a work of art must incorporate a critical and conscious approach to the specific qualities of the medium it is made of;⁹ Marshall McLuhan's thesis that the medium of which an artistic/mediatic object comprises constitutes a message which is equally important or even more important than the syntagmatic content proposed by such object;¹⁰ and Rosalind Krauss' theorization of the post-medium condition acknowledging the importance of the new art movements surpassing Greenberg's theory on medium specificity in postmodern art.¹¹

Although all three contributions constitute in one way or another an attempt to move closer to a discussion of medium specificity

involving a discourse of materiality, they all in different ways fall short of such serious engagement simply by placing the term medium at the center of their arguments. In the work of all three authors, the term medium operates a concealment of the specific materialities of works of art through a form of transcendentalism. Thus, the medium is simultaneously material and immaterial; it is equally singular and plural: singular in linguistic terms, and plural in that it conflates and simultaneously flattens the specific materialities of many different styles in paintings, sculptures, or installations.

I argue that the inclusion of visible animal bodies within the materialities of different artistic media constitutes one of the most important revolutions in the history of art materials and art criticism because it constitutes the first, serious opportunity in art to think about non-man-made materiality beyond the symbolic registers of representation—making the animal body visible constitutes an interdisciplinary, critical manoeuvre of great importance. The presence of visible animal materials along those that have been traditionally used

9 Greenberg, C. (1960) 'Modernist Painting', in *Modern Art and Modernism: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Frascina, F. and Harrison, C. (London: Sage) 1982

10 McLuhan, M. (1967) *The Medium is the Message*, (London: Penguin Books)

11 Krauss, R. (1999) *A Voyage on the North Sea: Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition*

by artists, causes a decentering of engagement”¹⁴ with the question of the anthropocentric art historical gaze, triggering a diffraction of methodological certainties into more experimental approaches. It is in this context that the emergence of Bio Art can be understood as substantially challenging, not simply to animal studies discourses but to those of art making, art history, and visual cultures.¹²

THE BIOPOLITICS OF REPRESENTATION

A more consistent shift towards the importance of materiality within an animal studies context has been proposed in Nicole Shukin’s groundbreaking book *Animal Capital*. Shukin argues in favor of the recovery of “material histories of economic and symbolic powers”¹³ in cultural discourses challenging the animal studies’ emphasis on visibility and representation. Central to her main argument is the concept of “animal capital”, a paradigm constituting a “resolutely materialist

the animal—the possibility to think beyond the visual dimension of the representational plane, to give equal importance to “semiotic currency of animal signs and the carnal traffic in animal substances”.¹⁵ We can therefore attempt to transpose Shukin’s concept of animal capital to an art historical context to bring into question what has generally been ignored by art historians thus far: that animal representation is enmeshed to the carnal consumption or assimilation of animal matter. Materialist critique, Shukin argues, has been sidestepped by philosophical enquiry—and she may have a point indeed.¹⁶

Much of the main argument in the first few chapters revolves around the adoption of the term *rendering* which connotes the dual level of consumption characterizing certain instances of animal capital as a process.¹⁸ Rendering means ‘to represent something’: the animal form works as a symbol within a representational trope. But in Shukin’s argument ‘rendering’ also means ‘boiling down’ or ‘repurposing’ animal matter as an

12 This paper is not concerned with Bio Art for the simple reason that addressing this subject in a competent way would require a different framework and a different argument. The absence of Bio Art in this essay should be considered intentional to the purpose of keeping the focus on a specific and more traditional approach to art making.

13 Shukin, N. (2009), pp. 1-48

14 Ibid, p.6

15 Ibid, p.7

16 Ibid, p.12

intrinsic part of the materiality of the representation itself. This double entendre of rendering opens the opportunity to think about human-animal relations in terms of the biopolitics of representation, providing an alternative to the purely aesthetic analysis of representation itself.¹⁷

Shukin's conception of rendering is formulated through a discussion of early film. Her focus centers on the ability film has to represent animal-form while simultaneously being constituted of gelatin derived from processed animal tissue. In the materiality of the representational medium, therefore lie invisible histories of animal violence and death that we simply cannot ignore when discussing works of art through animal studies ethical lenses. As it will be seen, acknowledging the importance of art materials within a biopolitical sphere that recovers animal death, triggers an ethical chain-reaction demanding our attention.

Shukin's conception of rendering helps us to do just that by

uncomfortably wedging itself between prominent problematics in animal studies—the dichotomy between the materialist approach of animal rights and vegan agendas, and the pure poststructuralist rendering of animals as signifiers—at stake is the possibility or impossibility to productively interlink these polarities. It is indeed this dichotomy that provokes much of the friction between different groups in animal studies—between those who think and work with live animals and those who think and work with representation.¹⁸ And it is this polarity, I argue, that needs to be carefully tuned for the purpose of producing more balanced views on human-animal relations.

VISIBILITY, INVISIBILITY AND MATERIALITY

At this point, it is worth noting that not only art materials have been a conspicuous elephant in the room of art history, and that the new animal presence in contemporary art has equally been poorly dealt with by history of art. Most regularly, art

¹⁷ It is in this sense that Hirst's cows, in opposition to general attitudes, can be actually understood to propose a level of honesty with regards to their materiality.

¹⁸ The use of the term representation is here deliberately used in a simplistic way—in the way it is generally understood to represent images, visual or literary, of animals in opposition to undeniable materiality and realness of living animals.

Hirst, Joseph Beuys, Oleg Kulik, Mat Collishaw, and other artists have reduced animal presence in the work of these artists to the analysis of symbolic meaning or formalism. This approach is clearly flawed, as in many cases, this line of enquiry bypasses a more complex investment the artist may have with animals in their work.

Wherever possible, *Antennae's* role as the only visual cultures journal seriously concerned with animals in art has focused on addressing this shortcoming. This sidelining of animal-oriented critique in mainstream art historical analysis is indeed problematic. Yet, I'd like to propose that this phenomenon may be caused by a fear art historians have to shift the analytical framework from semantics to ethics, a shift according to which the ethical sphere may obliterate the artistic merit of the work itself. Beyond the shadow of sheer disciplinary anthropocentrism, it is also quite likely that the bypassing of animal-oriented critique in history of art is motivated by the difficulties involved in mediating different agendas and the challenges involved in doing justice to them all.

Questions about the importance of considering the materiality of artworks have more recently just began to timidly emerge.¹⁹ As confirmed by James Elkins, art history has traditionally taken interest in the materiality of works of art on a general and abstract level.²⁰ This contingency, according to the author, has been predominantly caused by a reliance on phenomenology, especially capitalizing on Merleau-Ponty, Sartre, and Husserl.²¹

However, Elkins emphasizes that the changing scenery of contemporary artistic production is one in which the materiality of a work of art can no longer be ignored. Elkins' argument draws from the convening of a conference titled *What Is An Image?* At this conference, the discussion focused on Elkin's book titled *What Painting Is*, in which the author took

19 Ron Broglio's *Surface Encounters: Thinking With Animal and Art* has already placed on the map some important consideration on the materiality, its effective and metaphorical flatness. The volume *Visuality/Materiality*, published in 2012 more directly addressed a range of problematics on this subject within a broader art historical/visual cultures framework. Rose, G. and Tolia-Kelly, D., P. (eds.) (2012) *Visuality/Materiality—Images, Objects and Practices*, (Farnham: Ashgate)

20 Elkins, J. (2008) 'On Some Limits of Materiality in Art History', 31: *Das Magazin des Instituts für Theorie* [Zurich] 12 pp. 25–30. Special Issue Neuner, S. and Gelshorn, J. (eds.) *Taktilität: Sinneserfahrung als Grenzerfahrung*, p.25

21 Ibid

seriously the task of closely analyzing magnified sections of paintings in the order of 70mm across.²² To Elkins such close inspection of the painterly surface prevented any connection with art historical accounts of the painting. In other words, too close inspection hindered visibility, or more accurately, replaced one register of epistemic visibility with another.

Dramatically reducing the distance between viewer and object derailed affirmative signification in paintings that were structured to produce a sense of affirmation in the viewer.²³ Through Elkins' analysis, history was revealed as a matter of distance between the object of scrutiny and the gaze. Elkins' 'close up inspection' of the painterly surface replaced historicity with materiality, opening the possibility for articulating what usually remains unuttered in art historical discourses.

In this case, it is important to remember that the epistemic coordinates between gaze and

22 Ibid

23 The concept of affirmation is here used in a Foucauldian sense, in the way the author uses this in his essays on Magritte and Manet. Foucault, M. (1983) *This is Not a Pipe*, (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press); Foucault, M. and Bourriaud, N. (1971/2009) *Manet and the Object of Painting*, (London: Tate Publishing) 2011

object, and the subsequent silencing of art materials within the semantic paradigms of works of art were historically formed through the practices and theories of classical art and more relevantly to modern art by Neoclassicism. Jean-August-Dominique Ingres' point of view on painting and materiality, for instance, clearly reflected popular positions on the relationship between the two.

The master of neoclassical taste in nineteenth century Paris believed that the painter's manipulation of materials should be entirely concealed from the gaze, allowing the image to surface beyond the materiality that enables its visibility. "Touch should not be apparent... Instead of the object represented, it makes you see the painter's technique; in the place of thought, it proclaims the hand".²⁴

The materiality of painting was thus muted within the semantic structure of the image and conceived of as a domain outside art historical interpretation as that which belongs to the realm of production. Thus, Elkins argues that, "[t]here is no account of the materiality of physicality of an artwork that

24 6 Ingres, J. A. D. (1870) 'Notes, 1813-27', in Delaborde, H (1870) *Ingres, Sa Vie, Ses Travaux, Sa Doctrine*, (Paris: Plon) pp.93-177

contains an argument about the limits of historical or critical attention to materiality, and therefore there is no reason not to press on, taking physicality as seriously as possible, spending as much time with it as possible, finding as many words for it as possible."²⁵

Furthering his argument, he also acknowledges that it is a form of anxiety to prevent us from seriously embracing this task. This anxiety, Elkins argues, is exacerbated by an inherent interest in keeping the status quo and a fear of what one may say.²⁶ "In art history, it is a topos, a commonplace, to assert that the discipline is interested in materiality and physicality. But it is a fact, an unpleasant one, that the overwhelming majority of art historians and critics do not want to explore beyond the point where writing becomes more difficult".²⁷

In light of these emerging preoccupations with materiality in the field of art and animal studies, I argue that taking the materiality of contemporary art as well as that of classical painting seriously may mean, at least from an animal studies

perspective, to also acknowledge concealed animal deaths: the animal renderings which made the representation itself possible. Those who find the incorporation of a visible dead animal body in a work of contemporary art unacceptable, should indeed give a thought to the animal deaths that are normally embedded in a classical painting. In other words, if one finds Hirst's use of dead animals unethical, one should also be compelled to explain why the same criteria may not apply to a work of art from five hundred years ago that actually contains hundreds of different concealed dead animals.

TRANSUBSTANTIATION IN CLASSICAL PAINTING

The term transubstantiation, one etymologically linked to the Catholic Church, implies the transformation of one material into another. Transubstantiation played key role in the miraculous—the possibility of transcending the boundaries and essence of materiality which manifested the greatness of God through its ability to subvert physical laws. It is possible to argue that classical painting has implicitly relied on the processes of

25 Elkins, J. (2008)
26 Ibid
27 Ibid.

transubstantiation for the purpose of producing images in which the 'material paint', had to be transformed into another material, at least mimetically. Thus in professionally executed classical paintings, blue paint becomes water, pink hues of paint become human flesh and greens, purples, and reds become velvety or silky fabrics. Beneath this first order of transubstantiation lies however a second and more hidden one related to Shukin's conception of rendering: a form of transubstantiation involving animal death. It now seems appropriate to identify the animals that were regularly rendered for the purpose of producing many of the images we admire today.

insects are culturally considered parasites—too many of them would harm agricultural production, therefore, their harvesting and killing has never posed ethical problems. However, scale insects are not the only animals to have been used in the making of paintings. *Purpura patula* or *Purpura capillus*, a mollusk once common in the Mediterranean was used to produce a purple hue that was extremely expensive.²⁹ The colour was extracted from a small cyst in the mollusk and according to the Windsor and Newton's historical archive, huge quantities were required for the production of the dye. "In 1908, P. Friedlander collected just 1.4 grams of pure dye from 12.000 mollusks".³⁰

It is generally known that during the Renaissance, increased commerce with India and the discovery of America led to the introduction of new red pigments derived from scale insects. *Coccus cacti*, a scale insect parasitizing cacti leaves was dried and crushed for the purpose of producing a red dye.²⁸ *Kermes vermilio*, and *Kerria lacca*, scale insects of different species were used in similar ways. Of course, it is important to remember that scale

Whether we care or not for the deaths of mollusks, (another animal that does not return the gaze) my concern is more directly related to the environmental impact that such practices must have had on the ecosystems from which the animals were removed. Winsor and Newton's archive states that "spoil heaps of the shells can still be seen on the sites of ancient dye works around

28 Church, A., H (1901) *The Chemistry of Pinks and Painting*, (London: Seeley Company) p.185

29 Ibid. p. 302

30 Winsor & Newton, 'Articles and Inspiration' [online] <<http://www.winsornewton.com/uk/discover/articles-and-inspiration>> [Accessed on 12th August 2014]

the Mediterranean.”³¹

Attempting to visualize the amount of mollusks killed for the purpose of producing such meager amount of pigment constitutes a challenge in itself—evaluating the disastrous ecological impact such practices may have born upon local ecosystems appears equally difficult.

Besides mollusks, eggs also constituted a common ingredient used in the mixing of pigments. First in what was called ‘egg tempera’ during the middle ages in Italy and other areas in Europe and thereafter in the Renaissance, until the widespread adoption of oil paint in the early 1500s. Egg slowed down the pigments’ drying times allowing artists to better apply colour and to gain more control over layering of different hues. At times, beeswax was also used for similar ends.³² Gelatinous extracts from the bladders of sturgeons were generally used as a mixing agent in oil paint, whilst fish glue was also used in some countries.³³

Perhaps less known to the non-

specialist is that rabbits also made their way into classical painting as a priming agent.³⁴ Rabbit bones, tendons, and cartilage would be boiled down for the purpose of producing glue which was applied to the canvas prior to paint. It prepared its surface to receive the pigment and to deal with the humidity of the applied colour. It is important to note that in Italy and central Europe alike, rabbits were regularly cooked for food, rather than kept as pets as it happens today in other countries. Alternatively, glue extracted from horse hooves also served a similar role. And of course, having focused so much on the materiality of painting itself, it would be wrong to forget the mammals killed for the purpose of producing paintbrushes. Hairs and bristles of horses, boars, rabbits, hogs, oxen, squirrels, goats, and badgers were routinely used to produce a vast range of brushes available in different degrees of size and softness.³⁵

As an art historian/visual cultures scholar, I cannot afford to ignore these animal killings just because they took place in the past and

31 Ibid.

32 Elkins, J. (2000) *What Painting Is*, (Abingdon: Taylor and Francis), p.18

33 Ibid.

34 Ibid.

35 7 Gentens, R. J. and Stout, G. L. Stout (2012) *Painting Materials: A Short Encyclopedia*, (Chelmsford: Courier Corporation), p.281

because the animal bodies involved have been rendered invisible. It is thus for this reason that at the same time I cannot vehemently condemn the use of animals in contemporary art without acknowledging an underling hypocrisy. This is the conundrum that art historians engaging in animal studies should carefully consider. The vast majority of artistic production in western art has always involved the killing and rendering of animals. And it is important to stress that animal-killing that appended in the past, matters just as much as that taking place today.³⁶

In light of all this, attempting to find a honest positioning within the practices of a discipline in which animal-killing has constituted the essential modus operandi through which the vast majority of its objects have been produced, is not an easy task and I have no qualms in stating that animal studies critiques of art have up until now most regularly

³⁶ We are reminded of this by groups of animal rights oriented scholars who rightly abhor the death of Topsy the elephant, which was electrocuted in 1903 to advertise the efficiency of DC electrical current systems, and of other case studies that are usually recovered from past histories to document the unfairness that has dominated human-animal relations. Think of the animal cruelty committed by the 50mans in the Coliseum, or the hoards of animals slaughtered at Smithfield Market in London during the Victorian period. Animal studies critiques have addressed these instances condemning events and participants despite the historical distance that separates us from them.

only talked about animal deaths in relation to animal visibility. Mediating these inherent complexities is not impossible, but as I mentioned earlier, the ethicality required of such tasks is complex and it may not perfectly overlap with the ethical agenda of animal rights or vegan voices that more regularly dismiss contemporary art.

A MATTER OF CHOICE?

A few months ago, I happened to discuss the issue of animal deaths concealed in classical art with an animal rights oriented art historian who has only recently become involved in animal studies. His objection to my argument was that “Renaissance artists did not have a choice”. I disagreed. This is a recurrent excuse based on misinformation that has been persistently used for the very purpose of denying the importance of animal death when convenient to certain arguments and agendas.

During the Renaissance, pigments were derived from minerals and vegetable matter just as much as they were produced from animal bodies. If artists, including Leonardo, who seemed to be very compassionate to animals, had seriously considered

animal death intolerable, they would have researched ways to develop pigment-production without killing any animals at all.³⁷ This would have technically been entirely possible. The choice of killing or not killing animals has always been with us and this is very visible in the choices artists made not to kill pets for the purpose of making pigments or other artistic tools. Artists had a choice in the Renaissance just as much a choice today: back then, like today, it was culturally accepted to kill some animals whilst it was not fine to kill others.³⁸

Most importantly, drawing from social history of art and its focus on patronage, we know that Renaissance artists lived in an economic/social reality that was much more complex and ridden with contradictions than the 'fable' of mythology that popular art history would like us to believe. Far from the romanticized portrayal of transcendental geniuses

37 Lutwack, L. (1994) *Birds in Literature*, (Gainesville: University Press of Florida), p.152

38 The value of animal life has always been a key factor in human actions throughout history and the symbolism with which certain animals have been invested and other animals are completely extraneous to, is a testimony of that. The rise of animal rights in the nineteenth century can be better understood as a phenomenon related to the new conceptions of identity and the law that restructured society through the dramatic socio-cultural changes caused by the industrial revolution.

entirely driven by the sublimity of burning artistic passions they struggled to bridle, Renaissance artists worked in a hyper-competitive professional field, one substantially defined by money and power.³⁹ Artists competed for attention in the attempt of securing the most prestigious and lucrative contracts—and it wasn't just their reputations that were at stake. They craved the safety, comfort, and admiration that could only be provided by and within the shelter of the court. The need to kill animals for their work was predominantly dictated by the need to meet the high standards imposed by the system of patronage and markets that validated their work. Hirst and other artists are paradoxically working within a system that bears substantial similarities to that which operated in the Renaissance.

Ultimately, it is also important to consider that artists also had the choice to not paint at all. If Leonardo seriously valued animal life, as some accounts claim, he could have simply renounced painting altogether; but he didn't. Like others, he painted,

39 For more information please see Hauser, A. (1951) *The Social History of Art*, 4 vols. (London and New York: Routledge) 1999 and Baxandall, M. (1980) *The Limewood of Renaissance Germany*, (New Haven: Yale University Press)

albeit sparingly, for the purpose of gaining the benevolence, protection, and wealth he craved in order to elevate himself from a life of poverty and disease in Renaissance Italy. As it is well known, he moved from court to court in order to fulfill his ambition to craft the most effective and lethal war machines human kind had ever seen, not to spread love and respect for animals.⁴⁰ An art historian seriously engaging in an animal studies informed critique has a duty to highlight these inherent complexities and contradictions, which nonetheless make of these artists the great personalities we admire today.

I have thus far exclusively concentrated on classical painting for the purpose of focusing my argument, yet, it is also important to remember that animal death systematically occurs in the making of some of the most celebrated illustrations of natural history. A hidden link exists between animal death and natural illustration which most regularly goes unnoticed in the discussion of the works of extremely well known

40 Kemp, M. (2001) *Leonardo on Painting: An Anthology of Writings by Leonardo da Vinci, With a Selection of Documents Relating to His Career as an Artist*, (New Haven: Yale University Press)

and admired artists such as John James Audubon and Maria Sibylla Merian. The beautiful illustrations of animals they both produced, can be paralleled to the processes involved in the making of taxidermy— animal death is required for the purpose of constructing an aestheticized vision of livingness. The defining difference between taxidermy and illustration lies however entirely on the surface. Whilst the former ambiguously betrays the affirmative statement of livingness it presents through the implementation of animal skin, natural history illustration used to discard and concealed any animal remains in a complex play of substitution and flattening.

As Maria Sibylla Merian revealed in a letter, the killing of butterflies for the purpose of drawing them was never a pleasant practice: “If one wishes to ...kill butterflies quickly, then one must hold the point of a darning needle in a flame, thus making it hot or glowing red, and stick it into the butterfly. They die immediately with no damage to their wings.”⁴¹

As it is also known, Audubon’s

41 Maria Sibylla Merian quoted in Neri, J. (2011) *The Insect and The Image: Visual Nature in Early Modern Europe*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press), p.161

technique did not rely on drawing live animals either, but on posing freshly killed birds, sometimes hundreds for the purpose of painting one plate.⁴² Audubon would run sharpened wires through the birds' still-warm bodies to pose the animals as required by the aesthetic imposition of the discipline.

This example proposes another ethical blind spot; another instance in which animal killing has been concealed and simultaneously representationally resurrected leaving behind no trace of the processes involving animal death that were originally necessary for the image to appear. And it is worth here noting that like for classical painting, the pigments used by Merian and Audubon also contained animal matter, therefore proposing a double level of complexity. In light of this argument, it is also important to remember that today's art materials are not entirely purged of animal matter either. In all honesty I am left to wonder how many artists who engage with animal studies critiques on a representational level also carefully check that animal exploitation may have not taken

42 Fiamengo, J. A. (2007) *Other Selves: Animals in The Canadian Literary and Imagination*, (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press), p.69

place in the making of the very materials they use.⁴³

RESPONSIBILITY AND CONTEMPORARY ART

I will once more return to an example of Damien Hirst's work for the purpose of suggesting a productive path that involves considering animal capital, biopolitics, and art. It is important to clarify that this paper does not aim to defend Hirst's work on ethical grounds but that, for the purpose of clarity, it uses his work as a clear and polarizing example of popular art employing animals. Hirst's works of art are comparatively simpler and correlatively more resonant amongst large audiences than the ones of more complex conceptual artists we have familiarized with in animal studies discussions.

I argue that this directness makes his work didactically useful. Thus, I'd like to clarify that I am not arguing that Hirst's work constitutes a deliberate contribution to animal studies, but I instead argue that, despite this, his works of art can tell us more than

43 There are some good books which explain what ingredients are in which art supplies. Amongst others, *The Artist's Handbook of Materials and Techniques* by Ralph Mayer (it has a great section on pigments in particular), and *Color* by Victoria Finlay are very detailed.

what we already think we know of the work of art—in other words, about human-animal-environment it becomes interesting to trace the relations if a materialist thread is biopolitics involved in the animal followed. capital at stake. This approach

Whether some may like it or not, Marxist informed art historical Hirst has carved a very solid place methodologies such as Hauser's in the history of art book and will be social history of art or Baxandall's remembered as a major artist who care for materials, contracts, strongly impacted practice, markets, commissioning, and markets in the and theory alike. As I have explained discussion of art making. But in any earlier, being an art historian who case it involves moving beyond the regularly works with students, I analysis of representation for the have an obligation to address his art. purpose of better understanding the A respectable history of art course nature and context of human-animal must feature, at least for the sake of relation involved in the making of exhaustiveness, the key artists of a the work of art.

specific period and Hirst surely was a key artist of the late postmodern From this perspective, the period (besides being one of today's materiality of the work of art most famous artists). Having to think becomes a trace of human-animal about how to present his work to relations, the platform upon which my students in ways that balance the encounter between artist ethical questioning and art historical and animal expands into infinite critique has brought me to focus on networks of human-animal relations. This material culture of artistic his work and that of other artists production based on evaluating the that are usually ostracized in animal links between the interaction of studies texts. labour and art materials connects

A productive strategy in he dead animals to living animals, case of animal bodies visible in representations of biopolitics, social contemporary art is that of tracing realities involving faraway but the histories of production and interconnected geographical areas, consumption that have led the animal and considerations of environmental bodies in question to become part attitudes, and actions and ethics in

the *Anthropocene*.

A good example of this approach can be provided by an analysis of such relations in Hirst's 'butterfly wing paintings'.

The relationships between beauty, art, animal death and scientific epistemology are complex and constitute a consistent theme in Hirst's body of work. In 2003, the artist faced renewed criticism for a body of work involving butterfly wings. Generally known as 'kaleidoscopic paintings' the series counts a vast number of differently sized and shaped canvases upon which butterfly wings from a multitude of tropical species have been detached from the insects' bodies and arranged on the canvas to produce the overall effect of a stained glass window. All compositional arrangements present levels of entropic harmony structured around symmetrically repeated geometrical patterns.⁴⁴

What at first appears to be chaotic

⁴⁴ My essay 'On a wing and a prayer: Butterflies in contemporary art' addresses in depth the aesthetics involved in the use of butterfly wings in Hirst's and Collishaw's work. The analysis of this work on these pages proposes a complementary reading addressing the materiality of the wings more substantially beyond the

and random is quickly revealed as perfectly ordered, and modularly inscribed within itself. Once again, Hirst's images propose carnal and symbolic tensions between life and death that were traditionally explored in the still-life genre of painting during the seventeenth century — however, here everything is exasperated by the implementation of real butterfly wings. The vast geometrized arrangements are elusive for, in a game of kaleidoscopic optical illusions, harmonic compositions continuously emerge and dissolve from apparent chaos. As they reposition on the canvas, they outline multiple and interlaced symmetrical patterns.

Beauty and horror coexist in these ambiguous pictorial dimensions: they propose a tension difficult to emotionally manage. How can so much beauty be the product of so much death? Like in taxidermy, the animal surface featured in the artwork functions as an undeniable index of animal death— there is no ambiguity about this. Here too, like in his dissected cows, we are

registers of representation. Aloï, (2014) 'On a wing and a prayer: Butterflies in contemporary art' in *The Routledge Handbook of Human-Animal Studies*, (London and New York: Routledge) pp.68-83

confronted by two historic epistemic registers of visibility at once: the systematic and rationalized aesthetic of entomological collecting and a decorative freedom of baroque exuberance evoking the kaleidoscopic opticality that dazzled nineteenth century audiences.

The curiosity of the gaze for nature's work is here painfully exposed through the reminder that any act of epistemological value in science and natural history involves (and always has) an inescapable violence on animals (and plants). And it also reminds us that aesthetic beauty can paradoxically derive from acts of violence. It shows us how visual consumption has and still today plays a key role in our relationships with animals. What's terrifying when standing in front of these canvases is therefore not just what we see in front of us, the detached wings of dead butterflies, but what we see in the reflections of ourselves: the dramatic contradictions involved in what it means to be a human-animal amongst other animals.

Let's however return to the point I have elucidated earlier about the importance of implementing an analysis of the materiality of works

of art as an intrinsic element of animal studies informed enquiry of art. As I have already stated, it is important to move beyond a simple analysis of representation and to more carefully consider the implications born by the materiality of the animals that have been deliberately included by the artist in the work of art. Hirst could have asked his assistants to paint butterfly wings on the canvas, or he could have used photographs. But animal materiality constitutes the unstable element in the paintings—the one element that is part of representation but that simultaneously exceeds the representational register.

Moving beyond representation and questioning the relationship between representation and the sociocultural, biopolitical context that has brought the work to appear in the first place will provide some valuable leads to the discussion of these works.

In the introduction to *A Contribution To The Critique of Political Economy*, Marx had already argued in favour of the necessity to link representation with the culture that produced it.⁴⁵ However it was Trotsky who later on rejected formalism as an attempt

⁴⁵ Marx, K. (1904) *A Contribution To The Critique of Political Economy*, (Chicago: Charles

to isolate representation from the socio-historical relationships that produced it.⁴⁶ These arguments focused on the possibility that art could serve political ends through the representation of models embodying ideologies that aimed at challenging bourgeois values. Through the ambiguity and openness of his works of art, Hirst poses a similar challenge to his audiences, questioning the boundaries of taste, the links between beauty and death, the ethicality of beauty in art and everyday life, the amounts of money one would pay to possess a work of art that will inexorably deteriorate within the owner's own lifetime-span—Illuminating critiques about Hirst's attitude to markets and his own buyers have been circulating for years.⁴⁷

However, beyond these aspects and from an animal studies

H. Kerr)

46 Trotsky, L. (1924) *Literature and Revolution*, (Chicago: Haymarket Books) 1925, pp.15-16

47 Craig-Martin, M. (2012) 'My pupil Damien Hirst: Michael Craig Martin on the making of art's wunderkind', [online] in *The Independent*, Friday 30th of March, <http://www.independent.co.uk/artsentertainment/art/features/my-pupil-damien-hirst-michaelcraigmartin-on-the-making-of-arts-wunderkind-7600564.html> [Accessed online on 20th of November 2014]

perspective, there is much more to learn in overcoming the obstacles of representation by looking at the examples of art historians such as Michael Baxandall whose contribution to the field addressed ways in which artists' choices were informed by local social relations, patronage, generally accepted taste, and the materiality of art materials.⁴⁸ Baxandall's tracing back of the financial transactions that enabled the emergence of a work of art in Renaissance art, provides us with a form of enquiry that links representation to a web of relations underlined by the biopolitical.

Researching how Hirst procures butterfly wings for the making of his works constitutes the first step of such analytical process. Following this line of thinking, I learnt that in 2003, Hirst became the UK's largest importer of tropical butterflies.⁴⁹ The butterflies he uses, like most of the other animals featured in his work are 'ethically sourced'—they are purchased from butterfly farms in the tropics. Becoming aware of this aspect of his practice led me to

48 Baxandall, M. (1980)

49 Januszczak, W. (2003) 'Enfant Terrible—Interview: Damien Hirst', [online] in *Waldemar TV* <<http://www.waldemar.tv/2003/08/enfant-terrible/>> [Accessed online on 24th March 2014]

further research butterfly farms, how they operate, and how they impact on economies and the environment alike. It is thus that I became aware of two orders of butterfly trade, a legal one and an illegal one. The legal trade of butterflies is currently worth \$100 million dollars and it is mainly operated by butterfly farms in the tropics.⁵⁰ However, alongside it, a \$200 million dollars butterfly smuggling trade still thrives. It is claimed that the illegal trade is prevented from developing further by its regulated counterpart.

Although it may sound new to some, butterfly collecting is still very much practiced and some collectors are prepared to pay huge sums for a single pristine specimen of a bird-wing butterfly. Butterfly smuggling and the illegal trading of butterflies has over the past few years inspired a number of quite successful books.⁵¹

50 Parsons, M. J. (1992) 'The butterfly farming and trading industry in the Indo-Australian region and its role on tropical forest conservation', in *Tropical Lepidoptera*, Vol.3, supplement 1., 1992, pp.1-31

51 Amongst others, see Speart, J. (2012) *Winged Obsession, The Pursuit of the Most Notorious Butterfly Smuggler*, (New York: Harper Collins) and Laufer, P. (2010) *The Dangerous World of Butterflies: The Startling Subculture of Criminals, Collectors and Conservationists*, (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield)

Although matters may not seem positive by any stretch of the imagination, there is more to be considered here. Some animal rights groups would object to the systematic farming of butterflies, just as they do to sheep, or cow farming. The concept is after all structurally the same: animals are systematically bred, killed and sold for the purpose of consumption—the process constitutes a form of exploitation.

However, butterfly farms have been set up with the main purpose of preserving the eco-systems in which the wild butterflies live by bringing to an end the mass-harvesting that used to take place during Victorian times and until the 60s and 70s.⁵² It has been proved that by providing a legal and regulated alternative supply of butterflies to markets around the world, butterfly farms effectively contribute to the preservation of eco-system and the containment of the killing of wild butterflies.⁵³ Butterfly farms, have been also shown to provide employment for the locals who previously engaged in poaching or had no work alternatives

52 Hancock, M., W. (2007) *Boffin's Books and Darwin's Finches: Victorian cultures of collecting*, (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas), p.214

53 Parsons, M. J. (1992)

and could be at risk of becoming involved in criminal activities of other kinds. Thus, local economies are supported by butterfly farms and ecosystems are preserved as a result. This is a rather important point in the problematic of responsibility towards animals and ecosystems alike.⁵⁴

Far too often, human-animal relations in animal studies critiques exclusively favor the welfare of individual animals, failing to consider that human and animal welfare are more regularly closely and inextricably interlinked. Ethical questions with regards to the killing o individual butterflies in the making

54 At this stage some may be wondering if many visitors to a Hirst exhibition would be likely to go down the path of researching the artist's use of butterflies in his work in the way I have done. My honest answer is: probably not. But it would be wrong to expect the average gallery goer to delve extremely deep in everything they see: that's what art historians are for. To better understand my point, just think about Roger Fry's or Clement Greenberg's texts on Cubism and collage. The average gallery goer has likely not read those texts and will look at cubism from different perspectives. They may never think of certain aspects of Cubism and collage until the desire to know more emerges in them, at which point, they may find the texts by Greenberg and Fry and implement their perspectives on these styles and media. Art historians are important because they provide alternative theorizations to works of art, like artists see potentialities in materials, or ideas, art historians see potentialities in ideas and works of art.

of Hirst's work are still important and pertinent. Yet it is also possible to see how the systematic death of the butterflies whose wings we see in his work supports a network that prevents loss of animal and plant loss, along with financially benefitting the social realities that inhabit such areas.

But here's where we encounter another issue related to an animal rights approach to animal studies and art. Is it the death of individual animals that we so strongly object too, or is it the destruction of ecosystems around the world and the implicit killing of multiple animals and plants species that we care for? Are both concerns incompatible? Just let me clarify that in an ideal world, butterflies would not be killed at all. Yet, our world is far from ideal and it seems like every decision comes at a cost. I am sometimes under the impression that animal studies arguments tend toward a utopianism that inherently undercuts the original validity the arguments proposed. In theory, we may be all very willing to engage in posthumanist thinking but out there, the world we live in seems to be still far from applying theory to practice.⁵⁵

55 For a critique of Wolfe's argument on posthumanism and art see Baker, S. (2012) *Artist*

It is important to clarify that I am not stating that in producing his butterfly paintings, Hirst may be supporting the environment—yet, in a way he is just doing that. The networks that have been unveiled in this analysis constitute entities that we can act upon, campaign against, or support, depending on our personal ethical orientations and agendas. Would he have painted butterfly wings on a canvas (upon which rendered animal bodies have been applied but made invisible) had induced the same curiosity and will to research: my answer is no. The irreducible materiality of animal matter displayed in contemporary art is that which in its transgressive instability triggers the senses and pushes the will to explain and understand current affairs in human-animal relations.

Learning about the making of the paintings and tracing back of the origin of animal materialities in the work of art has made to emerge a current problematic important to human-animal relationships within an ecological context. Hirst may have never meant for this to be the case, but that should not stop us from following this lead. Artist's / Animal, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press) pp.236-239

intentionality does not provide the sole, or the most important, reading of a work of art. Nothing is closed, nothing is locked, and nothing is irrevocably defined by the word of the artist or by that of the art historian. All that exists are different and equally valid interpretations and ways of interpreting works of art. Does this approach add anything to the semantic level of the work of art? Yes, it does. In contemporary art materialities are taken very seriously in the knowledge that an artist's choice to use one material in opposition to another constitutes a signifying choice in the syntagmatic paradigm of the work of art itself. Confronted by the hermeneutical openness of contemporary works of art, materialities cannot be contained within symbolic representational analysis.⁵⁶

This is what Elkins claims to be the moment in which writing becomes difficult as it takes the art historian out of the safe traditions of art history writing. Focusing on materialities most regularly bridges the register of representation with the

56 In the early 1900s, Duchamp already introduced a challenge in considering materiality through the creation of ready-made art in which the materiality of an everyday-machine made object enters the gallery space.

contradictions of the outside world, and this, I argue, constitutes one of the most important potentialities harbored in an analysis that not only pays attention to the representational register but that also considers the nature of the inclusion of materials in the work of art as part of the representational register. Is this an approach that may prove fruitful in discussing all contemporary artworks, one may ask? My answer is no. The challenge is to forge a methodological approach specific to each work of art for the purpose of maximizing what could be said about, with, and around that specific work of art. Along with the demise of metanarratives heralded by postmodernism, and the challenge of vision's prominence in epistemology (something that I think is still not entirely possible) should also come an abandonment of the reliance we have thus far placed on subject specific methodological lenses in favor of encountering the work of art on a different and new ground every time. This is where writing becomes difficult

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