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Masteressay,
Jo Mikkell Sjaastad Huse

KHiO, The Academy of Fine Art, 2019

(The text that you have in front of you is to be considered a type of short form prose poetry, a relatively narrative suite consisting of semi-fictionalised events. The topics presented in the text have been present in my practice over the last years (throughout bachelor and master) - and are meant as an abstract/concrete deepdive into some different aspects and thoughts that occur when working with the situation of the animal as an entrance point to philosophical, ethical, existential and artistic questions. Assessing our own species with other species as proxy or tool.)

animal_follower1

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en eller annen gang om vinteren på vei inn i 2018 lager jeg en ny instagramkonto som jeg kaller animal_followerⁱ som utelukkende skal følge dyr, et forsøk på å rømme fra min personlige verden befolket av folk. jeg har en opplevelse av å fungere stadig dårligere, uten at jeg vet hvor tydelig det er for de jeg møter hver dag. det sosiale livet føles som et point-and-click-eventyr hvor setningene som utveksles eksisterer fra før, at interaksjonene finner sted innenfor et slags rammeverk og uansett om jeg gjentar meg selv eller sier noe nytt føles det som konstante repetisjoner av de samme regelmessige systemene, en løgn, kanskje. impostor syndrome med redsel for at alle skal innse at jeg ikke er en ekte person, liksom ikke en del av denne arten i det hele tatt.

det første jeg gjør er å følge et hestesanctuary som heter walkin n circles ranchⁱⁱ. jeg scroller meg frem til det første bildet kontoen har lagt ut - et bilde av en hest med luggen som ligger skrått over pannen, et alvorlig eller uforståelig blikk. hesten lener seg ut over et gjerde som også kan skimtes ute av fokus dypere inne i bildet. innhegningen, det inngjerdete området hvor hesten får eksistere. nesten alle fotografiene fra walkin n circles ranch er heget inn, hestene stikker mulene ut, ris, trenes, pleies, koses, pyntes, blir matet, beveger seg i sirkler. i bakgrunnen skimtes nydelige sandfargede fjell, prærien. jeg tror virkelig at de har det bra der, jeg fylles i alle fall av en viss ro når jeg ser dem inn i øynene. disse hestene har vært mishandlet, forlatt og neglisjert, og nå er de her, heget om av frivillige, beskyttet fra omgivelsene, den behandlingen folk kan finne på å utsette dem for. på wikipediaⁱⁱⁱ står det at en sann villhest er en hestefamilie som aldri har vært domestisert, den dag i dag finnes det kun én slik levende hestart, den mongolske villhesten, og selv denne er med vesentlig sannsynlighet ikke en ekte villhest, men mildt domestisert i en prehistorisk samfunn^{iv}. i 1945 fantes det bare 13 stk igjen, i fangenskap, men fra denne bestanden er det nå generert over 1500 hester, hvorav en del er reintrodusert i naturen, blant annet i tsjernobysonen, hvor det postapokalyptiske dyrelivet er rikt og myldrende, selvom det stadig trues av sitt weirde artsmangfold og etterhvert også ulovlig jakt antakelig utført av fattige personer som trenger mat. om en hest løper gjennom en drøm dreier det seg om frihet, styrke, makt, krig, hardt arbeid og skjønnhet.^v

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scroller ustanselig, nedover, innover. tilbake til en imaginær og mangefasettert natur bestående av fotografier, en virkelighetsflukt ved bruk av alternative eksisterende virkeligheter, mangfoldige innblikk i andre skapningers liv via andre personers øyne omgjort til objekter ved bruk av kameraet. for å slippe å tenke på en konkret vanskelig sosial situasjon jeg er midt i - at jeg har ghostet en av mine beste venner for å unngå en kanskje konfronterende samtale, samt tvangsmessige redsler for å være verdens verste person, en sykdom, farlig, ekkel, grusom. i lys av mine egne problemer ser verden mørkere ut, jeg bor i mine besteforeldres kjeller for å spare penger, jeg husker kun negative minner, biter meg bare fast i dommedagsprofetier, en classic post-teenage-emo-karikatur. i et agnostisk/ateistisk univers uten konkret mening er det mer enn dobbelt meningsløst å ha mistet sin egen meningsfullhetsfølelse. jeg klikker meg videre, utover, følger et utall nye kontoer, som på leting etter noe som kommer til å gi meg energien tilbake, et inntrykk som rister meg til kjernen, som spiser meg opp og spytter meg ut igjen i en ny form. jeg venter på at det jeg flykter fra skal gå over som kollaps eller som å våkne fra en dårlig drøm. at de sosiale situasjonene og de psykiske tendensene jeg fortrenger skal gå i oppløsning, at billedstrømmen er en myk klut jeg kan føre over bordflaten. på toget om morgenen hører jeg på techno og konsumerer dette kuraterte visuelle materialet. prøver å unngå å inngå i den folkeskapte verden mer enn nødvendig, jobber med å se tvers igjennom personer i rulletrappen, feste blikket i hunden på stasjonsgulvet uten å tenke for mye over den hippe fleecegenseren den har på seg, halsbåndet, betongen. hadde det vært enklere skulle jeg gjerne sluttet å snakke eller flyttet vekk, eventuelt bare gått i ett med omgivelsene, for eksempel smelte inn i skjermen og kun være en profil på instagram som poster bilder av dyr. under fight- og flight-respons reagerer visse skapninger med å stanse helt opp, eller late som at de er døde, enda noen andre bruker kamuflasje. kameleoner som blir grønne blant blader, blekkspruten som går i ett med en stein, sommerfuglen som ser mer ut som en blomst enn blomstene selv. «these responses are triggered by the sympathetic nervous system, but the idea of flight must be broadened to include escaping either in a physical or in a sensory way. as such, flight can be disappearing to another location or just disappearing in place».vi i still see myself in the mirror, and it reminds me that i have a body and that i look a certain way, i go about my life, function in conjunction with others, stay in touch with reality. i try to take photographs of the animals i see around me and to remember the ones i do not manage to capture - the cat in the shelf with the ceramic objects in the window, the deer behind the house in stockholm, the rats on the city square and the one by the trashcan in paris. the bird that flew into my workspace. as i sit in front of the computer and try to not work or focus on anything, i start drawing a bird. it is not a particular bird, simply an idea of one. an image does not come to mind, rather appears as the result of the drawn lines that have the intention of becoming a bird. when the paper is full, the bird stares at me, as if simply acknowledging my presence. i cannot discern the thoughts of the bird, i cannot imagine how it is feeling, i cannot understand its situation. the drawing in front of me is simply a bird that is, and to which i feel a real connection, a sense of familiarity, that we are in *this* together. i take a photo of the bird with my phone and upload it with the simple caption «confused bird in nature #relate». when i look at the image again later in the day as i get my first and only like from a generic scuba diving profile, i am put off by my anthropic nature, the far too performative text. i do not believe the bird is confused, i am simply at a loss for words - i am at the ridge of my capacity. the directional gaze of the bird is beyond my comprehension, but it does not wake me up, it does not change anything, nothing has happened at all. i am in the exact same position, situation, and the movement of particles and events that go on all around me remain both random and systematic.

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the cat that we took care of for a while was mostly extremely irritating. biting our toes as we slept or tried to, walking on us, licking our faces, miaowing through the night for food or hugs or fights. i remember i wanted to kill it, kicked after it half asleep and thought about how easily i could have overpowered it, scared at my potential to think so violently. however this cat has obviously entered our hearts and we are sad it is no longer in our home. are we experiencing a sense of ownership? friendship? familiarity? of course i realise that we don't own the cat, someone else does, and we are not family. are we friends? what type of friendship would that be? is it mutual? what does the cat think about us? its owner? is it happy? and if it's happy, is this a kind of happiness that it would choose if it had a real choice? the cat lives in conjunction with us and our civilization. this is, i suppose, largely by coincidence and consequence, our mutually commensal natures. we have developed simultaneously on the same globe, our trajectories intertwine, our lives are connected, our potentials constricted or expanded by the contact with the other. where would the visiting cat be if it hadn't been for us? what kind of existence would it take on? and where would we be without the cat?

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upon looking at numerous videos of cute and funny dogs on instagram my love friend exclaims that they want to be a dog, simply run around, get cuddles, destroy pillows, drink the toilet water, catch items, smell the smells, jump at their owner and lick them in the face, play with other dogs, cats, goats, sheep, horses, ducks, pigs, capybara, a tiger etc., i too marvel at the thought of becoming something else, escaping, i guess, these clothes, leaving behind my constant low battery iphone, upcoming deadlines, my mastercard, the unread books on our nightstand, my mental condition, the smalltalk, all the products and objects of life as a person. i read in a book about different modes of empathy^{vii}, describing a crude mode of empathy - one that includes an imagining of how it is to be another for instance based on their description of an event as opposed to a critical empathy - that feels for the other, but does not believe it can imagine how it is to be like them. it is easy to let the mirror neurons run wild, to imagine, believe, feel, think that i know how it feels for the dog as it wags its tail, and to be extremely selective and person-like in my approach - my ideas of the experience of dogness is based in my own body and emotional spectrum, the history of people and their thoughts and philosophies, an anthropomorphic tendency. i cannot feel what the dog feels, think what it thinks and even less think it in the way a dog might think. but in certain moments it really is difficult to not feel that one knows what it's like to be a specific animal, that in this or this moment, we are like cats together, we are a mountain goat and a llama, a hungry snow leopard and a funny turtle, a truly inquisitive octopus and a beautiful, eery and dangerous physalia physalis. a sea sponge.

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the black death is believed to have travelled with fleas and lice - jumping from body to body, between species, suspended, a socially transmitted disease. rats have been blamed for centuries, typical for such a low-status city- and suburbia dweller. intelligent, abused and underestimated, simplified and utilised as a derogatory term, a bad trait. whenever i see a rat in the street, i feel in touch with nature, i try to greet it whilst it scurries away or at a distance shares some trash food with its group. a rat is a sacrifice we are all willing to make, the city rat makes it even easier. rats run through the maze, they are given stimulants and being observed, they wear modern makeup, they are subjected to vaccines and viruses. genetically modified predispositions for illness in order to work on treatments. needless to say i owe my life to a rat, i am in debt.

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as in any prolonged observation, patterns tend to become more visible over time. there lies a dormant responsibility in the consumption of these images - like the vulgarity of a specific repeating visual theme: animals posing for photographs with toy animals. for instance a little hedgehog wearing a tiny top hat lying on a fake fur duvet with a hedgehog plushie copy next to it.^{viii} i think the reason why these images feel especially weird to me is a kind of loneliness they might imply, a complete displacement from a natural environment. i mention this phenomenon and my reaction to it to a colleague who chimes in that it might be exactly the life a hedgehog could wish for - a cute hat, a silent synthetic friend, a warm cage, insects served with tweezers, the palm of a hand, to be an online celebrity. of course my colleague is right, i have no right to pour out some scalding judgement, i have no vantage point from which to make an objective statement beyond signs of concrete abuse, i must remember that my words cannot substitute the hedgehogs lack of wordly expression. i think about two images of breeze i saw a while back, a young orphaned horse, sleeping with the same huge teddy bear for over three years.^{ix} it makes me think about other animals i have seen and heard of - a rescue dog with a cuddly shark toy as a motivator and personal safety provider^x - finally daring to venture into the world with this toy in its mouth, doing things it did not manage to do before. that the emotional support that textile object could produce had the potential to unlock the dogs trauma. the vulgarity that i see has to do with my initial fallacy: that the cuddly toy is profoundly people-like, and as such not a thing that an animal would normally appreciate.

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a while back i downloaded *neko atsume*^{xi}, a smart phone game in which one renovates and keeps one's backyard neat for the cats of the neighbourhood who come to visit. leaving different quality food out for them, redesigning the patio to make it even more attractive, and then take photos with the ingame camera when the exclusive or elusive cats come by. one gets small gifts from the cats when a trust has been built - an old coin or piece of string. i have developed an immaculate garden, bought all the objects that are available, all of the styles of backyard one can have (zen style, rustic style, modern style, western style, sugary style, café style), i have photos of most of the cats and i have saved up a lot of gold and silver fish (money). over a longer period of time, i showed them active care for these digital cats, i was back in the back yard daily, fed them sashimi and fancy tuna, changed toys and objects to each of the cats liking, i was a dynamic friend. their care a part of my everyday life, a routine, a habit. just like in the app *pocket pond 2*^{xii}, that transforms the screen into a pond seen from above, teeming with multicolored koi, visited by frogs, hummingburds, crabs and turtles, decorated with logs, stones, underwater plants and lillies. lately i've let all of the fish die multiple times in negligence, i've stopped caring for the neighbourhood cats. but these acts have much less consequence than in the real life outside the screen, the moment i start setting out food, the cats return, and in *pocket pond 2*, a bug allows one to wake all of the fishes back to life without having to pay any of the ingame currency koin (even after having left them dead for weeks, months or even years). as a sign of good faith, one fish in each pond is always revived, so the trick is simply to move the revived fish to another pond, and another comes back to life. although it feels meaningless each time i do it, as i know i'll just let them die again as a result of my lacking motivation. the games are quick to turn me into a capitalist - they're all about attaining more of some kind of currency, expand and own, more objects, more expensive decorations and toys, extremely rare fish breeds, better cat food or bait, reaching the next level and gaining points. when i download an animal sanctuary, i don't wish for this economical progression curve, i long for an emotional one. that new depths in the relation between the user and the creatures within the screen are possible. a connection that is built by faith and trust and dependability, a feeling that although the game is generic, the relationship is specific. it makes me think about *star trek voyager* and something about the *star trek* universe: set in a future where difference-based economy has been replaced as people's material needs have been met (at least within the united federation of planets). as there is no need for economical gain, the society has replaced monetary value with the value of knowledge, interpersonal relations, the sharing of information, expansion of communication networks. so in *star trek voyager* they look for the meaning of life or of existence itself through social interaction, through helping others and exploring the known and unknown universe. a not-economy based in social and cultural factors. maybe not even searching for the meaning of life, but acknowledging that they take part in creating it and getting to feel it through this pangalactic social networking and experience.

i think i might just have wanted to find a modern and better tamagochi amongst these different apps and games, at least the way i remember to have felt when having one: an animal that needs me, that demands continuous care, a repetition of daily tasks. with the tamagochi, the point is simply to keep it alive, and to stimulate its love for one as an owner. it gets older and tells me it loves me. but of course at some point every tamagochi must die, limited by their technological simplicity, the limited repetitions, the same needs. we let the tamagochi die because it does not have the potential to evolve further, or maybe the battery just dies, and we are too young to know how to change it, or too old to care enough.

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i used to live in an apartment that was frequently visited by a rat, it had chewed a hole in the wood fibre board under the sink and spent its nights rummaging through our trash. it made me uncomfortable although the situation didn't really have much of an effect on my life. the others in the collective had a trap set, and within days the rat was dead, and an image was sent to the whatsapp group chat - a tiny, beautiful rat body, fluffy and clean, head hidden under the trap. its small legs, i don't know, there was something about the way they looked, so hopeless or real or fragile or personal. what if we had done things differently, if i had spent my nights in the kitchen, waiting for the rat to return for its snack, and at its arrival greeted it with some sort of gift and over time gained its trust and affection, i could have given the rat a name and made a bed for it next to my own, include it in my life, as a pet, domesticated. then again, to trick it into loving me, to assimilate it and utilise its social nature to take ownership over it might merely be a different kind of violence.

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the routines of daily life shift and melt, i get up late in the afternoon after having spent a better part of the night scrolling through hundreds of photos laying in bed, falling asleep looking into the eyes of a huge picture of a longhaired dachshound in the dim light of the dawning day. i have the kitchen to myself, and feeling that time is extremely irrelevant i spend an hour and a half making stupid pasta. i put a coffee pot on the stove after eating and wait for the coffee to materialise in the chamber. unlike me, most of the objects in the kitchen have concrete purposes. looking at the dishes for instance, they all make sense: the fork is easy to hold, robust, weirdly specific and precise, a good fork is perfect, and the relationship between the fork and the pasta is exemplary - the swirl and tangling of the pasta, the sauce sticking to the strings, the bowl as a containing vessel. not to mention the spaghetti strainer, the pot, the electric stove, the pan, the oil, spatula. mayonnaise. the coffee starts making its noise, i fill a small gold glazed ceramic cup and look out of the window as i drink from it. two hares jump by - it's the first time i've seen real ones this close. their bodies look extremely alien, and not at all like i've put them together in my head, it makes me feel very different, a difference that i suspect i can only feel with other living beings. at least i don't feel a difference towards the clothes i am wearing, and the cup in my hand seems like an extension rather than an opposition. i have much more in common with a hare or a lizard than a stone or a coin. however it does seem easier to assign an animal a purpose, i remember the charts of eco systems we looked at in high school, this animal eats that, the blueberries are fuled by the feces of the moose, the bird of prey control the mice population, the funghi recycle the dying matter. people are always placed askew on top of this weird pyramid, shifting and melting and destabilizing the systems, and sometimes working to restabilize them. does an eagle feel the same purposefulness as is ascribed to it? how different does an alligator feel to a pangolin or a tree? common magpies can relay information about problematic people across generations. i get dizzy from reading about the primordial soup^{xiii}, trying to identify the point of departure, organic matter, the difference between the rock and the plant, freefloating molecules and their tendencies and behaviours in different environments. at what point does an experience of purpose or meaninglessness occur? a video in my feed shows a hand holding a rock, with one single tap of a hammer it pops open and a fossilised skeleton of a prehistoric creature appears. marble consists of the shells and bones of tiny sea organisms piling up on the ocean floor and compressed in the passing of time, like the spaghetti strainer its meaning is given by its use - for instance aesthetical consumption, the creation of beauty, a form of weird magic. maybe it is possible to let my shoulders down at some point, with for instance an ore of metallic material as inspiration, or maybe the chili plants i grew. a certain potential that can be found, a meaning that is created. to exist and experience and grow, metamorph, melt, spice up someone's life. looking at the dishes i understand that things can make sense. looking at the hares out of the window i understand that language is soft. remembering the story about the penguin who returns every year to the person who saved it^{xiv} i confirm that real individual connections are natural across species. there is an ongoing open-ended conversation that very obviously transcends communication as we often describe it, and it challenges our perceptions on hierarchies of knowledge and understanding and categorisation.

thinking about shaping a piece of wax in my hand, maybe to make a small representation of a horse, i know that things can change.

notes:^{xv}

- ⁱ https://www.instagram.com/animal_follower1/
- ⁱⁱ <https://www.instagram.com/p/BSzhr7zl-XJ/>
- ⁱⁱⁱ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Horse>
- ^{iv} https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Przewalski%27s_horse
- ^v <https://www.whats-your-sign.com/horse-symbol-meanings.html>
- ^{vi} https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fight-or-flight_response
- ^{vii} *Thinking Animals, Why Animal Studies now.* - Kari Weil, Columbia University Press, 2012 - p. 19-20 (chapter: *A report on the animal turn*) - Kari Weil describes Jill Bennet referring to Bertolt Brecht on empathy - abstracted thoughts from this chapter are also present in further text, in conjunction with own thoughts.
- ^{viii} <https://www.instagram.com/p/Bk3rupbHLKA/>
- ^{ix} <https://www.instagram.com/mareandfoalsanctuary/> & https://www.instagram.com/p/Bdsz4jZHXfG/?fbclid=IwAR0UVbKsqIFWzCfpL_a6qZvORPDPKrcnfwVqH2FKtcmwdjA-PeU7qq_USvg
- ^x <https://twitter.com/dodo/status/994291917608357888?lang=en>
- ^{xi} https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Neko_Atsume
- ^{xii} http://pocketpond.wikia.com/wiki/Pocket_Pond_Wiki
- ^{xiii} <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abiogenesis> & https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Primordial_soup
- ^{xiv} <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5pv8V4SXfzY>
- ^{xv}

some general backdrops, read previously (and/or partly), influencing or oscillating with own thought material, works, etc.:

**History of Animals, An Essay on Immanence and Negativity* - Oxana Timofeeva, 2012, Jan van Eyck Academie

**Why Look at Animals?* a selection of essays, John Berger, 2009, Penguin Books

*Countless hours of looking at animals on the internet, reading click-news and wikipedia pages and other stuff that comes up, conversations with friends, colleagues and family.