

***The Art of the Animal: Fourteen Women Artists Explore the Sexual Politics of Meat***  
Edited by Kathryn Eddy, L.A. Watson and Janell O'Rourke  
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Review by Annie Potts

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**T**he *Art of the Animal* is a visually stunning tribute to the influence of Carol J. Adams' work, bringing together the writing and art of fourteen feminist animal rights artists who were invited to contribute to an exhibition marking the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Adams' landmark text *The Sexual Politics of Meat*, at Los Angeles' National Museum for Animals and Society (NMAS). The book is co-edited by Kathryn Eddy, L.A. Watson and Janell O'Rourke, who collectively comprise ArtAnimalAffect, a coalition dedicated to bridging art and activism within the field of critical animal studies, and it commences with a foreword by Carolyn Merino Mullin, founder and executive director of NMAS, a non-profit organization specializing in the archiving and exhibition of artefacts from the global animal protection movement. Mullin draws attention to the important point that, despite the progress made by feminist endeavours, women artists remain poorly represented in American art galleries and museums (the National Museum of Women in the Arts estimating that only 5% of art currently on display in the USA is the work of women). Mullin remarks: "add in the subject matter of animal-protection and I can only imagine what that percentage might be" (p. x). Hence the significance of *The Art of the Animal*, a volume that wholeheartedly disrupts the androcentrism and anthropocentrism Mullin identifies as rampant in the global art world.

The book's introduction by co-editor J. Keri Cronin, professor of Visual Arts at Brock University, provides an overview of how visual culture has historically played an important role in raising awareness of, and challenging, speciesist beliefs and practices, from the efforts of 19<sup>th</sup> century American antivivisectionist France Power Cobbe (whose protest leaflets used images of dogs from the works of well-known artists), to the controversial material produced today by the world's foremost animal activist agency, People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA). Cronin explains: "All fourteen of the women represented in this project understand art to be a significant way to destabilize and disrupt patterns of representations that have normalized the linked oppressions of women and animals" (p. xiii).

The artists' own essays begin with volume co-editor Janell O'Rourke's "Small Fury",

which refers to one of her 2012 artworks depicting a “phantom hybrid animal”, which she says can “channel the spirit of extinct or unknown species” (p. 14). Created using charcoal and collage on paper, this being blurs the human-animal divide, suggesting both the comic and tragic. However it is O’Rourke’s works entitled *A Life Erased* (2014) and *The Heap* (2014) that more closely channel the ideas of Carol J. Adams. In both these works O’Rourke is concerned with what happens when we turn an animal into an object, when someone becomes a *something* (a concern common to many of the artists’ projects featured in this book). In *A Life Erased* the artist evokes a sense of claustrophobia, having arranged words for parts of animals’ bodies and types of meat (including, for example, ‘roast’, ‘boneless’, ‘flank’, ‘suckling’, ‘pork’, ‘hamhocks’) on rice paper the same size as the actual space allotted to a sow kept in a gestation crate (6.6ft x 24 in.). *The Heap* continues in this vein through an intense collage composed of terms for ‘meat cuts’ obtained from supermarket circulars. These terms are stacked below silhouettes representing those species of animals used in farming. Although smaller in size than *A Life Erased* this work effectively conveys the mass exploitation inherent in animal agriculture.

In “All Dressed Up with Nowhere To Go”, British artist Hester Jones shows how her art has been directly inspired by Adams’ concept of the ‘absent referent’, and also by the connections Adams makes between the animalization of women and the feminization and sexualization of animals in Western meat culture. Black and white photographs of a London meat market, taken in 1960 by Jones’ father for a school project (*Smithfield Meat Market* series) are juxtaposed with modern day colour photographs taken by the artist of women who work or live around this market today (*All Dressed Up with Nowhere to Go* series, 2012). The three contemporary photographs (Chicken Fillets, Bird and Hot Chick) each depict a woman ‘dressed up’ from neck to lower thighs (no faces are shown), posing suggestively. Here Jones explores the role that photography plays in exploiting both women and animals; and, just as she views the meat market as a masculinist space, she also reflects on her own experience being a woman photographing other women’s bodies arranged in sexualized ways.

In “An Invitation”, San Franciscan Olaitan Valerie Callender-Scott credits Carol J. Adams’ books with opening up questions for her regarding her own life philosophy and trajectory. As an African-American woman significantly influenced by the civil rights and second-wave feminist movements, Callender-Scott states she “now turns to injustices of non-freedom against other species” (p. 38). The art in this essay is highly personalized, having been created out of strips of paper from Callender-Scott’s private journals over the past forty years, which the artist had recently decided to destroy. These largely indecipherable sections of sentences from her journals, cleverly referred to as ‘yarns’ or ‘threads’, are linked closely to the artist’s own life process: they represent new connections, the “weav[ing of] new understandings”, and are connected to the artist’s decision “to honour all life” (p. 40).

New Jersey-based Kathryn Eddy, another of the book’s co-editors, is the next featured artist. “Pig Blindness” also addresses issues of objectification and consumption. When she was introduced to Adams’ *Sexual Politics of Meat* around 2010, Eddy says her studio practice changed significantly in conjunction with the realization that various aspects of her life had until then remained compartmentalized: “working on race issues and white privilege, campaigning for stronger domestic-violence laws, advocating for animals, and primarily painting farmed animals in my studio – [were] all neatly separated in time and space” (p. 51). Understanding the links between various forms of human



**Kathryn Eddy**

*Meat Porn*, Sculpey Clay, Acrylic Paint. 2 in. x 4 in., 2011-12 (photo: Dave Nesi) © Eddy

oppression and the exploitation of other species led Eddy to bring her art practice and activism closer together. This is evident in *Meat Porn* (2011-12), a disturbing series of 'cuts' from a pig (clay and acrylic paint), including what looks like the recto-anal region, an ear, a tongue and nasal cavity (amongst other pieces), which still makes the artist feel "uncomfortable and angry" (p. 52). Having read that one North Carolina slaughterhouse killed and 'processed' 32,000 pigs per day, Eddy was prompted to design the on-going project named in the chapter's title, *Pig Blindness*, in which the artist employs collage, photography, sculpture, drawings and immersive sound to expose the 'absent referent' of the meat industry. Eddy also erects larger sculptures, like the interactive *Problematic Nature of Flatness* (2012). This involves an immersive sound experience (of farmed animal voices) inside a gallery which is near to an outside wooden installation containing paintings of a plastic pig and sheep. These installations call attention to the separation of consumers from the lives and suffering of those they consume.

"Undermining Popular Exploitation" focuses on the striking art of American Suzy González, which is influenced by Carol J. Adams' criticism of the objectification, fragmentation and consumption of both women and animals in advertising and popular



**Suzy Gonzales**

*Lola Devoured*, 40 in. x 60 in. (triptych), oil on canvas, 2013 © Devoured

culture. In *Tasty Chick* (2013, acrylic and collage on canvas, from the *Exposed* series), González places a collage of images of sexualized chickens, taken from Adams' well-known slideshow on the sexual politics of meat, and arranges these inside the shape of a provocative meat advertisement (also from Adam's slideshow) which depicts a sexualized (and feminized) chicken carcass, apparently freshly removed from the microwave, bearing tan lines in the shape of a bikini. *Lolita Devoured* (oil on canvas, 2013) is another powerful featured work of this artist: this triptych, in which Gonzales "separat[es] visual consumption, gustatory consumption, and the consumed individual" (p. 63) shows a human head (split between top and bottom) facing a cow's head, both drawn in the style of anatomy diagrams displaying the inner blood vessels, muscles and eyes. The anatomical cow's head is accessorized with a pair of red heart-shaped glasses, resembling those worn by the fictional character, Lolita, whose sexual exploitation is depicted in Stanley Kubrick's cinematic version of Nabokov's novel.

A vegan cookbook author by day, Nava Atlas is by night the creator of limited edition artbooks or "readable objects" (p. 74) focussing on social justice issues. She employs humour as a tool to prompt her audience to engage with what they not might

otherwise notice. Atlas's featured artbook is *Deconstructing Elsie* (18 in. x 24 in., 2014) which she describes as a "visual exploration of the madness of the dairy industry, from the heart-breaking abuse of cows to the polluting of Earth" (p. 74). In the mid-1900s the highly anthropomorphized cartoon character Elsie the Borden cow appeared in dairy industry ads as a sweet and submissive 'housewife' catering for her nuclear family, including 'the head of the house', her tyrannical husband, Elmer the bull. Atlas shrewdly exposes the patriarchal history of the dairy industry by inserting into each of these vintage cartoon dairy ads the resistant voice of a 21<sup>st</sup> century agentic (feminist) sun-glasses-wearing cow whom she calls Jezebel.

American Patricia Denys's "Peep Show" is influenced both by the ideas of Carol J. Adams and by the powerful art of animal activist Sue Coe. Specifically, Denys plays with visibility and concealment, using the idea of the pornographic 'peep show' as a means of questioning the hidden aspects of factory farming (particularly of chickens) as well as the spatial restrictions that are imposed on animals in intensive farming operations. *Peep Show*, the installation, consists of two egg-shaped boxes bearing knobs made of tassels which viewers must turn to reveal what is inside the boxes: a series of 'seductive' photographs placed on satin. These photos convey the life course of a chicken born into the poultry industry (from egg to decapitated carcass, red blood vessels evident on the wings). The final part of the installation involves a Plexiglas cage of the same proportions as a regular battery cage that would normally contain eight hens. Denys avoids using images of actual chickens in this work; rather she has filled the Plexiglas cage with the remnants of KFC meals, including packaging, serviettes, discarded chicken bones and other components of the meal. The striking mess inside the cage draws attention to the lack of respect afforded to these unknown birds whose body parts are thoughtlessly devoured and discarded by consumers. "That is how her life ends and how she is consumed – faceless and, therefore, without identity or being-ness" (Denys, 2015, p. 87).

Interdisciplinary multimedia artist Renee Lauzon is known for her work involving sound, text and imagery. Her contribution to this book involves a poem accompanied by photographs, under which appear a separate running account of the atrocities occurring in the contemporary world towards nature, animals, women, children and First Nations peoples. The poem is raw and honest – speaking of rape and trauma recovery, and offering a moving tribute to a canine companion who helped the narrator in the aftermath of sexual violence (a photo is included of a dog named Kiki on a beach). A moving image called *Altar* (2014) reminds the viewer of the millions of human and nonhuman lives that are affected by brutalities such as rape, murder, slaughter, displacement and domestic violence. While focusing on the grimmest of subjects, Lauzon's essay nevertheless offers a sense of hope through connectedness with other species.

In "Burger King", Maria Lux discusses photographs from her 2014 *Monarchy* series. In her studio work this artist looks for connections between visual and verbal ideas. Through images of crowns and other royal paraphernalia (made with plastic jewels, miniature plastic cattle and plastic leather), Lux interrogates the intersections between meat, gender, sovereignty and dominion, national identity and capitalism, cleverly recalling King Henry VIII, the notorious 16<sup>th</sup> century patriarch who had some of his wives dismembered (or at least beheaded) when they did not bear sons (in art of the time, this monarch is depicted with meat, while his wives are painted alongside fruits and vegetables). The various works comprising the *Monarchy* series clearly trace the parallel trajectories of



**Lynn Mowson**

*slink* (detail), latex, tissue, wire, and string, 2013-14 (photo: Kerry Leonard) © Mowson

Britain and colonial USA with respect to gender and meat production and consumption: as Lux argues, “though the United States set out to reject the eminence of royal bloodlines, we, too, ended up conferring power through blood [...] the blood of meat” (p. 101). Thus, both Britain and the USA have shaped and continue to represent their national identities in relation to traditional masculinities, blood, and meat eating: modern America's origins are linked to the construction of streamlined slaughterhouses.

The eeriest and arguably most provocative artworks in this book appear in Melbourne-based Lynn Mowson's essay, “Beautiful Little Dead Things.” Mowson's art is chiefly concerned with bearing witness to the suffering and deaths of animals in the food industry through sculptural testimony. To this end, and influenced by Kathie Jenni's philosophy regarding the witnessing of animal suffering, Mowson works “emotively and intuitively, focusing on the materiality of the sculptures, and allowing the traumatic knowledge to seep into the work” (p. 113). *Beautiful little dead things* (2014) is a series comprising latex body-skins, sacs and screens, and a series of *fleshlumps*. Made from microcrystalline wax and pigment, these lumps appear uncannily organic, like big globs of raw pink fatty flesh, resembling uncooked parts of animals used for consumption. The flesh lumps are the remnants of a prior series called *creatures*, which included sculpted animal heads; Mowson transformed these ‘creatures’ by “violently” compressing and fragmenting them into clumps, some of which “retain the elements of the original portraits (a nostril here, eye socket there), [while] many were crushed to a point of nonrecognition” (p. 113). The very method of creating these flesh lumps mimics the atrocities committed against animals during meat processing. Another project discussed in Mowson's essay is *slink*, its name referring to the leather made from the skin of unborn calves and considered most luxurious by ‘discerning’ consumers. Inspired by her own identity as a mother, and her knowledge of the horrors for cows and their offspring enslaved by the global dairy industry, Mowson created *slink* by stretching latex skin over sculptured forms which, once dried, were flayed to produce tears and bulges. The artist then followed this “violent” process with a “ritual of care” (p. 115), during which she gently washed the sculptures and mended them. *Slink* resembles human-animal hybrid carcasses, drained of blood to a shade of yellow decay; strung up, the sculptures look like the grotesque bodies found hanging in slaughterhouses or meat lockers. Through these stunning works Mowson succeeds in highlighting the tension between presence and absence, human and animal, reality and fiction.

New York artist Sunaura Taylor adds a vital critique of ableism to the intersectional politics introduced by Adams in *The Sexual Politics of Meat*. In her essay Taylor discusses how, as a woman living with a chronic debilitating condition, she has been drawn to the parallels between the cultural denigration and discrimination of bodies labelled ‘impaired’ or ‘abnormal’ and the simultaneous privileging of bodies labelled ‘capable’ and ‘normal’. She relays how she noticed that animals, regardless of whether they are or are not disabled, “are treated as inferior, devalued, and abused for many of the same basic reasons disabled people are – they are seen as incapable and different” (p. 128). Moreover, the more she looked the more the artist found “that the disabled body is everywhere in the meat industry” (p. 128). Taylor's 2008 lifelike mural *Chicken Truck* (10.5ft x 8ft, painted in oil) is disturbing in its detailed accuracy of chickens being transported, presumably to slaughter. In *Self-Portrait Marching with Chickens* (oil on wood, 12 x 12, 2008) Taylor depicts her own naked and afflicted body marching amongst numerous chicks bred to suffer deformities in order to produce more flesh for meat eaters. In *Self-*

*Portrait with Chicken* (pen and coloured pencil on paper, 2012) Taylor is drawn naked, sitting on the ground, while on her right leg perches a de-feathered chicken, symbolic of the state of battery hens in the egg industry; both are gazing slightly upwards and forwards as if waiting. The compelling *Lobster Girl* (oil paint on digital print on paper, 2011) and *Self-Portrait as Butcher Chart* (oil on Xerox, 2009) draw attention to the animalization of disability and the disability of animalization, as well as the casual misrepresentation of actual disabled people's experiences (p. 129).

Kentucky-based interdisciplinary artist L.A. Watson's essay begins with a description of the miserable lives and premature deaths of 45 million turkeys consumed during the American celebration of Thanksgiving. She goes on to introduce the photographic series *A Bird at My Table* (2008) which complicates both the human-animal divide and the subject/object binary integral to carnism. Each image in this series features Watson's back and arms posed to appear like the carcass of a turkey (or chicken) – browned skin glowing as if it is greased – contrasted with background black and white photographs depicting actual chickens or turkeys being debeaked, caged, killed, stuffed and consumed. *A Bird at My Table* draws attention to the objectification and fragmentation of women and poultry in consumer culture: both are depicted as parts (think 'breasts' and 'thighs'); but the viewer may have to look twice to realize that the browned body in each photo is not that of a cooked dead bird, but rather the carefully positioned body of the artist herself. This produces the desired effect of unfamiliarity and perhaps repulsion as the human-bird figure may even represent going beyond consumption of the other to cannibalism. The other artworks included in Watson's essay are equally clever and still more disturbing. In *Patent Pending* (2014, digital prints on Hahnemuhle paper) – described by the artist as an ongoing installation – the reproductive bodies of women and animals are portrayed in the service of science, technology and capitalism. In Watson's black and white drawings of apparatuses of restraint (similar to those used in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century) applied to the bodies of women and animals, individuality has been deliberately erased and replaced by numerical figures such as those assigned to the 'objects' of scientific experimentation. Poignant in this installation is the mechanical exploitation of cows in the dairy industry, although horses and dogs in various restraints also feature. When writing of this work, Watson explains that "women and nonhuman animals' bodies are either sexually and literally consumed, and are utilized as a kind of reproductive bio-machine in the larger context of what Michel Foucault calls 'bio-power'" (p. 140).

In the next essay, Australian artist, academic, and animal rights activist Yvette Watt relays how Adams' *Sexual Politics of Meat* was instrumental in turning the focus of her art to farm animals. Watt's profoundly disquieting photographic series *Animal Factories* (2012-2013) required her to travel around Australia to obtain images of factory farm buildings. Although she collected hundreds of photos of these structures from the outside, Watt describes how overwhelming the experience was for her as she realized she had "only scratched the surface" of witnessing and capturing the extent of these operations in Australia (p. 153). Choosing not to include images of farmed animals themselves in this series, Watt wanted the viewer instead to imagine what existed *inside* them as she believes "imagination can lead to understanding and compassion" (p. 154). The effect is grim and compelling: each photo portraying the clinical lifelessness of the exterior of these massive sheds while inside thousands of incarcerated birds and pigs are being subjected to extreme deprivation and brutalities on a daily basis. In an earlier series called *Offerings*



**Angela Singer**

*Sore*, 620 x 400 x 600 mm. Taxidermic support and mixed media, 2002-3 © Singer

(2007), also featured in *The Art of the Animal*, Watt directly exposed the faces of the animals deemed most mundane and killable in Western culture: using her own blood she painted the portraits of a real-life pig, cow, sheep and hen (each with names) on white linen tea-towels. This process reinserted the individuality of these particular animals, while at the same time subverting the anthropocentrism of portraiture. The sepia colour of the paintings facilitated the viewers' connection to blood – that of the artist (as her own sacrifice) and of the billions of other less fortunate farmed animals whose blood taints the fridges, kitchen benches and plates in the majority of homes.

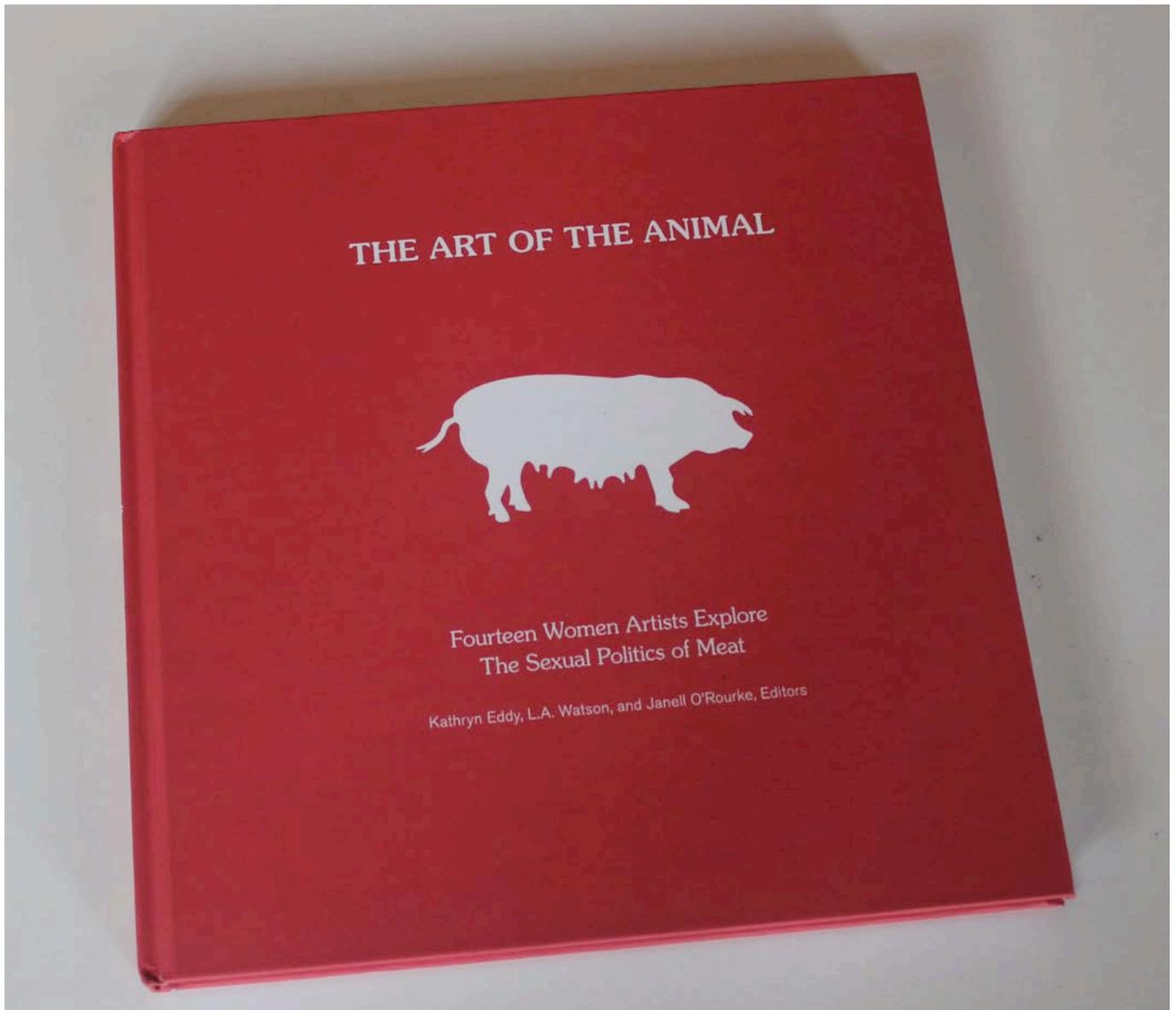
In "Making the Dead More Visible", UK-born New Zealand based artist Angela Singer discusses how involvement in animal activism during the 1990s inspired her to incorporate discarded parts of animals' bodies in her art, including sheep's skins and pigs' trotters, and she then began to work with vintage taxidermy animals. Singer's aim is "to

turn absence into visible presence" (p. 162) by exposing the real-life animals who existed before they were turned into trophies, and by emphasizing the suffering each animal endured as he or she was killed by bullet, trap, poison or other means. The stunning *Sore* (2002-2003) succeeds brilliantly in turning the absence of a deer killed by a hunter into a palpable painful presence. Here Singer incorporates into the appearance of this work some of the history of the deer's death as this was narrated to the artist by the hunter himself. The deer's head is covered in deep red blood-like substance, the absence of the antlers representing their violent sawing off as part of his kill. Blood-like protruding wax eyes compel the viewer to face this deer and acknowledge the terror and pain of an animal pursued to death. Singer also transforms intact trophies to expose how animals died; pulling back the skin and stuffing she locates the exact areas on the body – the bullet entry holes or stab wounds – that the original taxidermist carefully concealed. To highlight these areas of violence she uses beads, crystals, buttons, zippers, wax and polyester clay; in this way she adorns and decorates the dead. The effect of these animal sculptures is confronting: appearing vibrant and even 'pretty' on first glance they become, on closer inspection, macabre testaments to the cruelty and suffering imposed by humans. For example, in *Catch/Caught* (2006) attention is drawn to the suffering of a rabbit through the use of bright red beads positioned where the abdomen has been opened; dangling red buttons suggest dripping entrails. The rabbit's body is splayed and her ears are replaced with blood-red beads.

It is obvious that the feminist vegan theory espoused by Carol J. Adams has been highly influential for each artist who contributes to this volume: all refer to Adams' concept of the absent referent (the process through which someone becomes something) and discuss their commitment to exposing, challenging and disrupting the ways in which women and animals are objectified, dismembered or fragmented, and consumed in Western culture. Many essays demonstrate how the intersectional politics of ecofeminism have influenced creative ideas and processes. Covering a diverse range of artistic approaches – from detaxidermy to artbooks, sculptures, photography and multimedia works – many of the projects in this book could not be described as beautiful in any conventional way: they are far more substantive, radical and inspirational than this. In so strongly confronting and challenging the realities of humankind's exploitative practices and everyday violence against other species (particularly with respect to farming and consumption), these works – and the artists' stories that accompany them – will undoubtedly rekindle the passion of animal activists everywhere, and compel those who are complacent about and complicit in carnist culture to look at the realities of meat production and consumption (perhaps for the first time). The volume closes with Adams' own response to this project, in which she expresses how much she has been inspired in turn by the works of the fourteen artists. Fittingly she writes: "We do not write 'Finish' as this book ends, but unfinished. We invite you into the process of *unfinishing* it in your own way. In the lull, don't look away" (p. 172).

## Reference

Adams, Carol J. (1990, 2000). *The Sexual Politics of Meat: A Feminist-Vegetarian Critical Theory*. New York: Continuum.



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