

# Beautiful Little Dead Things



A guide to the exhibition component of the PhD:

Beautiful Little Dead Things: empathy, trauma, witnessing and the absent referent

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## Preamble to my practice & dissertation:

The thesis component of my PhD entitled; *beautiful little dead things: empathy, trauma, witnessing and the absent referent*, explores two pivotal themes, firstly the relationship between the figure and empathy within the context of sculpture. Secondly, it investigates trauma and witnessing in relation to the suffering animal; the 'absent referent'<sup>1</sup>. The project will draw these concerns together to consider the nexus between empathy, trauma and witnessing as they operate in my sculptural practice to consider the question – how does one empathically bear witness to animal suffering and death?

The creative component of this thesis is comprised of a number of sculptural objects created in latex and wax. These objects draw attention to the violence of fragmentation and the precarious nature of empathy. Whilst these objects bear traces of violence, mass-production and dis-assembling; they are torn, flayed, rent and 'butchered', each object is also tended to, cared for and completely unique. This tension between violence and care in my work is, I suggest, a consequence of the trauma and the ethical imperative to bear witness.

In situating this work in the recently emerged field of Human-Animal studies<sup>2</sup>, I take a certain position: humans are animals; animals are subjects not things, animals can suffer, and humans cause immense and preventable suffering to animals<sup>3</sup>. It is usual in human-animal studies to use the terms Human-animal to reference human beings, and more than human animal, other than human animal or non-human animal to denote the multitude of different animal species. However, for clarity in this short paper, I use

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<sup>1</sup> Carol J. Adams, *The Sexual Politics of Meat* (The Continuum Publishing Company; New York, 1990).

<sup>2</sup> Human-animal Studies is a relatively new and developing field in academia, bringing together perspectives on the relationships between the 'human' and the 'animal' from a variety of disciplines, including literary studies, visual arts, philosophy, psychology, anthropology and history to name a few. Critical Animal Studies is an aligned field, with a more radical activist and advocacy stance. Critical animal studies is committed to abolishing the suffering of animals (human and nonhuman).

<sup>3</sup> Margo DeMello, *Animals and Society: An Introduction to Human-Animal Studies* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012); Clifton P. [ed] Flynn, *Social Creatures: A Human and Animal Studies Reader* (New York: Lantern Books, 2008); Margo DeMello, *Teaching the Animal: Human-Animal Studies across the Disciplines* (New York: Lantern Books, 2010); Dawne McCance, *Critical Animal Studies: An Introduction* (New York: Suny Press, 2013).

the term 'human' to refer to human animals and 'animal' to refer to other than human animals, and in relation to this paper, I refer specifically to farmed animals.

### **Empathy and figurative sculpture:**

In the initial stage of the PhD I focused my research on an investigation of the inter-subjective empathic encounter, and how it might articulate a specific engagement with figurative sculpture. In an empathic encounter with another human being, one encounters the lived experience of an-Other, one witnesses the other as an-Other subject. I questioned whether an empathic encounter with figurative sculpture could engender such a 'lived experience', and whether it could generate the same experiences as witnessing another subject.

Whilst aesthetic empathy was developed in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century to discuss the way in which the spectator can project into and feel into an object<sup>4</sup>, it is the inter-subjective phenomenological empathy of Edith Stein that I focus upon in this thesis. Stein's thesis 'On The Problem of Empathy' was written under the supervision of Husserl, in 1917.<sup>5</sup> For Stein empathy is primarily an act by which the 'I' experiences an-other's consciousness, in doing so the 'I' understands itself to be one of many: it is the way we understand others to be subjects. Empathy, Stein argued, is not a process that creates a unity with an-other, or colonizes the experiences of another, as described by earlier empathy theorists, but rather it is the process by which I recognize that another is a fellow living subject, and not an inanimate object. Empathy is the mechanism by which one recognizes the alterity or foreignness of the other

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<sup>4</sup> Robert Vischer, Harry Francis Mallgrave, and Eleftherios Ikononou, *Empathy, form, and space : problems in German aesthetics, 1873-1893*, Texts & documents. (Santa Monica, CA [Chicago, Ill.]: Getty Center for the History of Art and the Humanities ; Distributed by the University of Chicago Press, 1994). and Theodor Lipps, "Empathy and Aesthetic Pleasure, 1905," in *Aesthetic Theories: studies in the philosophy of art*, ed. Karl Aschenbrenner (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1965).

<sup>5</sup> Originally published under the title 'The Empathy Problem as it Developed Historically and Considered Phenomenologically.'

Stein considered movement as a crucial pre-condition for enabling the possibility of an inter-subjective empathy, ‘a movement’ she describes as ‘living’ not ‘mechanical’; this is initially troubling for an analysis of figurative sculpture. For Stein empathy can only occur with a living body, and stillness is problematic because it does not correspond to our understanding of what constitutes a lived body. However, Stein states that movement can be **perceived** rather than actual, and the body can be **interpreted** as living, whilst not actually living. In fact, Stein goes onto say that empathic objects can include anything that is “given to me as a living body”.<sup>6</sup> So while it seems that Stein initially precludes inanimate objects, in my dissertation I consider the way in which **perceiving** and **interpreting** might make room for figurative sculpture to create an inter-subjective empathic response, and in doing so render the object as subject.



### **Bearing Witness, trauma and absence:**

My work ‘Slink’ [multiple latex babyskins, sacs, screens] was influenced by the treatment of fetal calves in abattoirs, specifically in relation to the collection of fetal–

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.p.59.

Recent work in the neurosciences have established that static images lead to action stimulation in the brain. D. Freedberg and V. Gallese, "Motion, emotion and empathy in esthetic experience," *Trends in cognitive sciences* 11, no. 5 (2007). p220

bovine serum (blood) and the use of their skin as a luxury leather item (slink leather)<sup>7</sup>. As the suffering of animals began to emerge distinctly in my practice questions were raised: how was I to attend to animal suffering and death in my work? How could sculpture bear the horrors of what I witnessed and remembered? What does it even mean to *bear witness* to animal suffering and death? These questions were to form the ongoing direction of my work.

Stein's account of empathy allows the possibility of empathic encounters with animal others. Whilst empathy is strongest with other human forms, due to their correspondence with our physical 'type', we are flexible enough in what we consider a type to see the correspondence between the paw of the animal and the hand or foot of a human<sup>8</sup>, or consider an animal's face as corresponding to a human face.<sup>9</sup> The question of whether or not humans can feel empathy with animals is discussed in Filippi's 2010<sup>10</sup> study of empathic responses to images of animal and human suffering. Brain activation has revealed that humans respond empathically to images of human and animal suffering.

To witness is to observe or experience first hand, or have personal knowledge of an event. To bear witness is not only to remember and mourn, but also to convey, to evidence, account for. The question of how does one bear witness to the suffering of animals raises a number of other questions; how can one bear witness for a subject that cannot bear witness herself? What is the role of the secondary witness, the human witness of animal suffering? Is sculpture, or even visual art, an appropriate form to 'bear witness'? Giorgio Agamben's 'The Remnants of

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<sup>7</sup> Timothy Pachiarat, *Every Twelve Seconds: Industrialised Slaughter and the Politics of Sight* (Yale University Press, 2011) and David J. Mellor, "Guidelines for the humane slaughter of the fetuses of pregnant ruminants," *Surveillance* 30, no. 3 (2003).

<sup>8</sup> Edith Stein, *On The Problem of Empathy*, trans. Waltraut Stein (Washington, D.C.: ICS Publications, 1989). p59

<sup>9</sup> Rae Westbury H, Neumann DL (2008) Empathy-related responses to moving film stimuli depicting human and non-human animal targets in negative circumstances. *Biol Psychol* 78: 66–74. doi: [10.1016/j.biopsycho.2007.12.009](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.biopsycho.2007.12.009). reveals that empathy became closer as phylogenetic similarities became closer to humans ie. Mammals versus birds. "thus indicating that empathic response towards humans may generalize to other species"

<sup>10</sup> M Filippi, et al "The Brain Functional Networks Associated to Humans and Animal Suffering Differ among Omnivores, Vegetarians and Vegans," *PLoS ONE* 5(5): e10847(2010), <http://www.plosone.org/article/info%3Adoi%2F10.1371%2Fjournal.pone.0010847>.

Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive'<sup>11</sup> reflects on some of these ethical considerations and the role of bearing witness to the suffering of those who cannot bear witness themselves. Dominick LaCapra's 'Writing History, Writing Trauma'<sup>12</sup>, identifies the problems of developing an empathic over-identification with the victim. I suggest that Stein's empathy can guide the empathic witness away from the problems of over-identification with the primary witness, as it is an empathic encounter with the other that fundamentally acknowledges the separation of the self and the other.<sup>13</sup>

Why even bear witness? Surely, as Derrida states: ““No one can deny this event any more, no one can deny the unprecedented proportions of the subjection of the animal. ... Everybody knows what terrifying and intolerable pictures a realist painting would give to the industrial, mechanical, chemical, hormonal, and genetic violence to which man has been submitting animal life for the past two centuries”.<sup>14</sup> In answer Donna Haraway responded; “Everyone may know, but there is not nearly enough “indigestion”.”<sup>15</sup>



<sup>11</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive* (New York: Zone Books, 1999).

<sup>12</sup> Dominick LaCapra, *Writing history, writing trauma* (Baltimore, Md: John Hopkins University Press, 2001).

<sup>13</sup> This idea is supported by Dominick LaCapra's concept of Empathic Unsettling, which he uses to distinguish a colonizing empathy with an ethical empathy, *ibid* p78

<sup>14</sup> Jacques Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, ed. Marie-Louise Mallet, trans. David Wills (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008). p.25/6

<sup>15</sup> Donna J. Haraway, *When Species Meet* (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 2008). p78



One of the roles of witnessing is to provide testimony, and in animal advocacy this is most commonly represented in the revealing video footage taken in farms and slaughterhouses. However, there are other important reasons to bear witness besides advocacy. Kathie Jenni's recent paper, *'Bearing Witness to Animal Suffering'*<sup>16</sup>, questions: how can we ethically bear witness to the animals who are already 'brutalised and killed', and what are our obligations? What should we remember and what should we forget?

Jenni examines memorial duties for humans, that have; "an insightful tradition of moral thought about witnessing and memory"<sup>17</sup> that, she argues, can be usefully extended to animals. The act of bearing witness is an act of memory, remembrance and testimony. One who bears witness does a; "labor" in that it is often painful to bear witness to atrocities; and the act is sometimes, in its address to a community, not received as a gift but as "unwelcome ... a source of shame, guilt or remorse."<sup>18</sup>

For Jenni, like LaCapra, there is a risk in bearing witness, and that risk is the possible misperception or misuse of the 'testimony'. Some of the risks that Jenni outlines, in the misappropriation or misperception of content are specifically problems that effect visual artists, especially when artists are experimenting, or playing with form rather than language. However, the writer Steve Baker<sup>19</sup> suggests that these risks are worth taking. He states that while artists working with animals can produce compromising bodies and rhetorics, work; "that is, at least at times, characterized by (and welcoming of) contradictions, failures,

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<sup>16</sup> Kathie Jenni, "Bearing Witness to Animal Suffering" (paper presented at the World Congress of Philosophy, 2013). Kindly provided by the author prepublication.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid. p2

<sup>18</sup> Ibid. p4

<sup>19</sup> Steve Baker, *Artist / Animal* (Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press, 2013),.

———, *Picturing the Beast: Animals, Identity, and representation* (Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2001);

———, *The Postmodern Animal* (London: Reaktion Books Ltd, 2000).

uncertainties, and ambiguities”.<sup>20</sup> Artists should be trusted to work with representations of the animal, despite these compromises and potential theoretical difficulties;

“The look of the animal, the visual representation of the animal, still matters, still figures, and it’s the thing that art ... can handle most persuasively. It can *play* its own forms and conventions, extend them, render them tenuous and porous. To do this, the “figure” of the animal-body-in-art needs the ability to move back and forth ... seeping through, overspilling and generally making a bit of a mess of things. And to do that, it needs contemporary art’s openness”.<sup>21</sup>

To address the problem of absence, specifically the ‘absence’ of the animal in my work, I have drawn on Carol J Adam’s concept of the Absent Referent<sup>22</sup>. Adams articulates how the individual ‘animal’ is masked, or absented in the concept of meat. The subject, the animal is turned into the object – food:

“Behind every meal of meat is an absence: the death of the nonhuman animal whose place the meat takes. The absent referent is that which separates the meat eater from the other animal and that animal from the end product. Humans do not regard meat eating as contact with another animal because it has been renamed as contact with *food*. Who is suffering? No one.”<sup>23</sup>

Witnessing the suffering and death of the animal in food production, can mean that one no longer sees meat or dairy products in a ‘neutral’ or ‘natural’ way again, the animal is never absent again. Meat is no longer just food but “Corpses. Fragments of corpses”<sup>24</sup>, and in the dead bodies of once living fellow creatures; the animal becomes re-present. This tension between presence and absence features in my work, specifically drawn out in the sculptures; ‘flesh lumps’. The fragmentation I produced on the animal and human bodies was violent; a sculptural process evoked by the way in which the live animal (a subject) becomes brutally transformed into an object, a product for consumption.

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<sup>20</sup> Steve Baker, *Artist / Animal* ibid p235 Steve Baker considering the visual representation of the non-human animal as a “contested territory in contemporary visual culture”.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid. p228

<sup>22</sup> Carol J. Adams, *The Sexual Politics of Meat* (The Continuum Publishing Company; New York, 1990).

<sup>23</sup> Carol J Adams ‘The War on Compassion’ in J Donovan & Adams C.J [eds], *The Feminist Care Tradition in Animal Ethics: A Reader* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007). p23

<sup>24</sup> Costello in J.M. Coetzee, *The Lives of Animals* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1999). p69





The secondary trauma of witnessing horrific suffering provides a troubling veil for bearing witness. Taimie L Bryant's essay 'Trauma, Law, and Advocacy for Animals', examines the way trauma and post-traumatic stress disorder affects animal advocates, especially in the normalization of meat eating and the inability to effect change:

"Regular witnessing of violence directed against others, unsuccessful attempts to report or to address that violence, and having to contend with other's denial of the very reality of claims of violence can be devastating. Advocates for animals are vulnerable to traumatic stress because of their every-present awareness of the extent of violence against animals"<sup>25</sup>.

Patrice Jones coined the term 'Aftershock' to describe the affect of witnessing trauma, and whilst recovery from trauma involves integrating trauma into a world view, this is often impossible for many animal advocates, Jones states; "everyday life can be similarly nightmarish for those who have undone the socialization that leads us to see

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<sup>25</sup> Taimie L. Bryant, "Trauma, Law, and Advocacy for Animals," *Journal of Animal Law and Ethics* 1, no. 63 (2006). p136

cadavers as ‘meat’”.<sup>26</sup>

In accounts of bearing witness for other humans, clarity of communication, respect for the victims, and avoidance of re-traumatising victims are issues that are paramount. The confusion between the trauma of the witness and the suffering of the victim is particularly problematic. In bearing witness through trauma, these issues can be clouded and compromised. Stein’s empathic encounter can be usefully employed to define the different space between the primary witness and the secondary witness. My trauma as a secondary witness is not the primary witness’s trauma. However, I suggest that a witness must consider that acts of bearing witnessing can be mediated by, and inflected by trauma. In my work I see this occurring in the tension between violence and care inflicted on the sculptures.

During this PhD my sculptural practice has shifted from an investigation the empathic engagement with the human figure in sculpture, to the empathic engagement with the animal other. This is a move that sees empathy offer a role in witnessing and bearing witness, and sculpture offers a site to ‘play’ seriously with these ideas. To return to my question, how does one empathically bear witness for animal suffering and death? I haven’t reached conclusions, but rather raised more questions; this is the starting point for a complex and demanding journey. As Jenni states:

“Beyond the private imperatives of witnessing and remembering, *bearing witness* is surely an obligation for those who would assert the moral standing of the animal dead and the grave injustice of their fates ... Bearing witness effectively and respectfully **presents conundrums** and **choices** that simply witnessing and remembering animal suffering do not”.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> patrice jones, *Aftershock: Confronting Trauma in a Violent World, a Guide for Activists and Their Allies* (Lantern Books, 2007). p90

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.p28 My emphasis