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Introduction to the Anthology: Flesh and Blood

We live in a multi-species society: numerous and diverse species co-exist in close proximity to each other, characterized by coercive domination. The culture in which we live in, however, pretends to be a single-species society, composed exclusively of Homo sapiens. The social facts are plain and unambiguous, but any attempt to define them in simple, definite terms may seem antagonistic and repulsive. For instance: in a world of animal consumers and consumed animals, nearly all of us carry in our digestive systems fragments of dead animals, secretions extracted from their bodies and embryos stolen from them, and we cover our own bodies with their stripped off skin or chopped off hair.

An embarrassed clearing of one's throat; surely these aren't the words we would choose to describe our multi-species society. Frankly, as a general rule, we would rather not describe it at all. Considering the extent and intensity of the industrial and consumer relationship between humans and other beings, there is no other subject about which our culture is more silent. "Animals" receive an official entry permit to our culture only on limited terms: when they are away from our personal influence, hurt by others, cute-beautiful-sublime, or clearly represent something we wish to say about ourselves. Thus, and as long as it is clear to all that "there are matters of greater importance", there is nothing antagonizing and repulsive in a variety of references to "animals", such as: a legislator's personal initiative and "a-political" act of legislation against animal experimentation for

cosmetics, an educational project campaigning against cat abuse in response to a horrifying act of the school's psycho kid, a tongue in cheek news item about an exotic zoo litter or about a rare bird breeding, or a bloody war of survival as a reality show on the nature channel. And alongside this variety, the chickens and cows that are in our body, practically composing it, are ostensibly non-existent. Their entry ticket to the cultural world is their objectification, or more accurately, their "productification". They are represented culturally as "food" or as "clothing", that is, their mental conception totally correlates with the "productification" they undergo in practice. They are not represented as living, sensitive and exploited entities.

It is easy to complain about the exclusion of agriculture's victims; it is more difficult to find alternative ways to relate to them. Part of the difficulty stems from general ignorance. We know how animal products are made about as well as we know how cellular phones are manufactured. Typical to the industrial world, only the very few who are involved in the actual production process know what's going on, and even that professional knowledge they have is fragmented and dispersed amongst them. It is impossible, therefore, to develop a serious discourse about human-animal relationships without first supplying a great amount of information that will enable us to understand what we are in fact talking about. We are lacking basic facts in the field of agricultural technology, and yet it is difficult to define these facts in a manner that

will properly express the relations between the species. In the industrial world, almost everything that has been written and said about live “farm animals” is deeply rooted in the agricultural, technological, scientific and economic discourse – a discourse which is all about objectification, generalization and avoidance of dealing with live, sensitive and exploited entities. In order to have a meaningful discussion in the West today about the minute details of a shocking case of cat abuse, for instance, all that is needed is a willingness not to shut our ears or harden our heart; we already possess the necessary terms and there is no need to translate them into everyday language. But what meaningful words can we say about climate control in poultry houses (and what the hell is “climate control”?) In this case we need to perform a tedious research into technical details. And these technical details will remain socially and morally meaningless as long as we leave them in their original format. The necessary act of conceptual translation, from a technical to a social language is a Sisyphean task.

The difficulty in understanding what we are talking about is apparent even in an attempt to define the extent of the phenomena – a common procedure in introductions to discussions on the industrial exploitation of animals. The number of agricultural victims in Israel, for instance, is hundreds of millions a year. Let us assume for a moment that we were speaking about several hundreds of thousands, or trillions; do the actual numbers contribute anything to the social and moral understanding? And yet, the

attempt to give a verbal and visual expression to the agricultural reality is a complicated task precisely because the numbers are so huge. Big numbers attract generalizations, and when one tries to bind together the condition and experience of millions of living creatures, the generalization may become one more means to erase from consciousness a substantial part of reality. Presenting a series of facts or pictures and declaring “this is the meat poultry industry” would be absurd, as if there were no substantial differences between the various industrial techniques, between one poultry house and another, between individual birds, or between one occurrence and the other, or as if the generalized description does provide us a basis for understanding the differences.

A possible compromise would be to give up the presumption of presenting some sort of general picture, and instead, to focus on several random issues as a starting point for discussion, a stimulus for further investigation. This is the rationale behind the choice of factual reports in this catalogue. They do not cover those industries on which the chosen texts focus, and naturally they don't cover the variety of widespread agricultural relationships. Instead, they reflect an effort to touch upon local events, as seen through the eyes of one person in the field, and to highlight several minutes within some of the most prevalent agricultural phenomena – life on the farm, genetic manipulations and slaughter. The main focus is on the largest industry – the meat poultry industry (one testimony is taken from a sheep and cattle

slaughterhouse in Israel). Due to the extent of the animal industries, even such local references report of very large scale phenomena. Members of the Australian animal rights organization ALV, for example, made brief return visits to one complex of poultry houses and found systematic neglect of chickens whose lives depend on the whims of people and machinery. Even if someone wishes to believe that this case is merely anomalous, the ALV investigation still refers to millions of animals. In the agricultural-industrial reality, even a “local” or “anomalous” case is a huge phenomenon.

However, many problems in the agricultural world have never been described by outsiders in terms of local occurrences, but they have rather been described in sweeping generalizations by the industry itself. Destructive genetic manipulations of others, for instance, are not part of our socio-political-moral lexicon of thought, unless they are explicitly defined as science fiction. Nevertheless, destructive genetic manipulations are one of the bases of the relationships between humans and domesticated animals over thousands of years. Despite the tremendous harm caused to animals by artificial selection for the purpose of cultivating profitable traits at the expense of the fitness and health of the victims' offspring, social and moral thought on the issue is at its very beginning in our culture. Only about two decades ago, when birds in the meat industry collapsed under the weight of their distorted bodies to such a degree that the industry developed considerable interest in genetic problems, did organizations for the

protection of animals begin to pay attention to the problem of genetic manipulation. Accordingly, there are no personal testimonies available on such phenomena such as there are about slaughterhouses or animal farms. The only text in this catalogue quoted from standard agricultural literature deals, therefore, with genetic problems: a typical text of this genre, ranging from sweeping generalizations and indifference to descriptions of specific experiments, in an “objective” and “neutral” language (i.e. a-moral and a-social).

The excessive technicality and the inaccessibility to the agricultural-industrial world, as well as the sinking of this world beyond the horizons of cultural interest, are relatively new historical phenomena. For approximately 10,000 years of agriculture, the presence of agricultural human-animal relationship had a prominent place in culture, and in any case, wasn't more concealed than other inter-species relationships, such as killing animals for food, fighting dangerous animals or caring for pets. The anthropo-zoologist James Serpell, is one of the theoreticians who researched the historical changes in these fields. Serpell points out that the domestication of animals involved a formation of an anthropocentric ideology, which elevates man to the centre of the world and degrades all the rest of nature to a position of resources in his service. The anthropocentrism is close to the ideology which bestows humankind with uniqueness at the expense of all other species, and supports their abuse. This is called speciesism (like racism or sexism). One of the characteristics of speciesism

is the refusal to deal with social and moral thought regarding the principal relationships between humans and animals of other species, while persistently referring to these relationships from typical economic, technological and scientific attitudes in their various historical forms. Speciesism is ostensibly a main factor in our cultural sub-conscious, and it is so ancient, that it seems as if the sweeping conceptual and social distinction between human beings and the animals around them expresses a natural truth and not a historical creation of an agricultural society (even the linguistic expropriation of the human species from the "animals" category seems so natural to us, that any attempt to write something else becomes very cumbersome; which is why the artificial distinction is also applied in this article).

During recent centuries in the West, relying on a conscious, straightforward anthropocentric and speciesist ideology is gradually ceasing to be an essential background to the oppression of animals who live among us. The growing efficiency of agriculture has created a clear separation between us and them and has erased them from our minds to the extent that an enlightened man can feel free to critically contemplate "man's dominion over nature" and even "animal abuse" while chewing on a dead bird, without feeling the slightest discomfort or even noticing the absurdity. Complex historical processes enable the undisturbed survival of such a contradiction: the decrease in the ratio of farmers within the general population and particularly the increase

in urban population; the confinement of animals in closed facilities for their entire lives; the removal of their entire life cycle from human residential areas; the rationalization of agricultural activity and its transformation into an object of technological and administrative improvements under pressures of economic competition; the development of automatic equipment for the main animal "caretaking" tasks; and the reduction in individual contact with animals due to the growth in farm sizes and in the number of animals per farm, the lowering of the slaughter age, and an increased division of labor amongst all involved in the agricultural project.

This partial list summarizes a huge, still ongoing, historical trend. However, one of its dramatic outcomes can be clearly traced in industrial countries as early as the mid twentieth century: the major inter-species relationships have been pushed beyond cultural consciousness. For the great majority of human population, animal products only exist in the sphere of consumption. Recognition of their production process is limited to the boring, incomprehensible to strangers world of agricultural technology, and the life cycle of the products themselves is limited to the space between commercials and ads, impression from advertisement-laden packages and shopping, restaurant orders of fully prepared meals, mild adaptations of products for eating at home, eating and disposal of the packaging and remains to the garbage. The separation between the sphere of production and the sphere of consumption is incomplete, of course, and

when the connection becomes apparent for a moment, it is easy to overcome the discomfort by emotional detachment, shifting the blame to others and other mental-cultural mechanisms of the kind that Serpell describes.

True, when the coercive and violent source of animal products resurfaces in our consciousness, it is still fairly easy to recruit a generous portion of anthropocentrism and speciesism to justify the violence. As mentioned, they were never eradicated from the industrial culture, whose origins are rooted in thousands of years of open and direct agricultural domination over animals. The anthropologist Nick Fiddes even argues that as far as meat is concerned (as well as leather and fur), the animal origin of the product is never erased from our consciousness: we are necessarily aware that "meat" is the dismembered body of an animal slaughtered in order to become "meat". This knowledge, even without a detailed familiarity with the agricultural reality, is a major factor in the value attributed to meat in various cultures. The violence essential to meat is not a random and unfortunate cost of taste preferences or habit; on the contrary – people consume meat because this very act expresses most efficiently the power to dominate animals, as a symbolic act of subordinating nature in general or anything defined as opposed to "society" and "culture". The growing withdrawal from such coercive behaviour tends to impose the essential value of meat on other more naïve values, such as taste, nutritional value, physical need or cultural identity, but under the surface, the coercive element exists

as always. As early as 1939, the historian Norbert Elias described the evolution of this repugnance in Western culture over only a mere few hundred years, as part of an overall trend of dislike of all public expression of violent and "animal-like" behaviour. Needless to say, violence against animals was not reduced, it was merely "removed behind the scenes of social life". This removal was most efficient: in the refined culture of the early 21st century, the belligerent foundation of meat consumption has been suppressed so deeply in the sub-conscious, that its exposure outrages gluttons of foie gras and steak almost to the extent that it enrages those who prefer a crumbed schnitzel that can be heated in three minutes in a microwave.

Despite the objection which Fiddes' thesis tends to arouse, it explains rather convincingly the high status that meat products enjoy in many cultures. Nevertheless, one is left to wonder to what extent has our consumer society detached the sphere of consumption from that of production. In other words, to what extent has the essential link between animal products and their living source survived somewhere in our conscious, and to what extent do we conceive these products as "a manna, a gift from heaven", devoid of any production process, a "miracle" bestowed on us in the autonomous space of advertisement, packaging and shopping – the way goods are generally conceived in the consumer world, according to Jean Baudrillard. Today's animal products are more and more processed, mixed with plant ingredients into unrecognizable

homogenous “hybrid products”, and alongside an abundance of meat, leather, fur and milk “substitutes” – of the kind that often our senses cannot tell them from “the real thing”. Under such circumstances, and in a world where every product carries a variety of obviously fabricated images and stories as part of a standard marketing strategy, isn’t the exposure of the production process perceived as just another fantastic tale about the product?

This question brings us to the issue of the artistic representation of human-animal relationships. At the beginning of this essay, I mentioned the limitations that society imposes on any meaningful reference to specific animals, and the exclusion of other animals from every major cultural discourse, unless they have undergone objectification and productification. One course through which culture may accept “animals”, is as symbols of other contents. This route is unavoidable to any artistic reference to animals, due to the central role of symbolism in art in general. However, the artistic representation of animals is a specific case of their representation in other cultural fields, and their symbolic representation in art is a private case of their symbolic representation in culture in general, a point which merits further discussion.

The representation of animals in any culture is always achieved with a dominant mediation by human beings. This is a banal fact, based on biology: only human beings use a language in a manner which enables cultural discourse, and only they create proper visual images.

Recognition of this banal fact might lead the discussion in a futile direction. If animals cannot represent themselves in the discourse, but are only represented by others, obviously their meaning in the discourse is socially constructed, and therefore we cannot discuss them meaningfully, but rather their mere representation. We can therefore discuss no one but human beings, even when the subject is ostensibly animal representation. This idea, which is subtly presented in Erica Fudge’s claim that one cannot write “a history of animals”, might appeal to the intellectual mind due to its philosophical coherence. The philosophical discussion will focus, therefore, on the question: is it at all possible to hold an authentic discourse on these or other subjects based solely on their direct representation, without relying on mere social construction? And if such a discourse is impossible, what is so special about the fact that animals do not represent themselves? When we discuss the life of farmers in the Roman Empire, for instance, do we really insist on studying nothing but farmers’ writings? And what if we can’t find ample sources of this kind, will we argue that the discussion about farmers’ life is futile?

Such polemics, however important in terms of their contribution to the philosophical basis of animal representation, miss the principal issue: the representation of the Other gives power to the one representing over the one represented, and the representation of animals is always done by those who exploit them and their accomplices. The greatest difficulty in the fact that animals

cannot represent themselves in the cultural world isn’t their inability to do so – as a biological fact – but the social power relations based on this biological fact. The inability of animals to talk about themselves or to photograph, paint, etc., is a weakness that tempts exploiters. We have the power to say whatever we like about them without their objection, to enforce upon them diverse and adverse meanings without their protesting, to avoid recounting the important stories without their complaining about injustice, and even to argue that all the talk about animals as morally meaningful creatures is nothing but social construction, separated from the real world. How easy it is to spread such convenient claims into the cultural sphere of media, science, law and art – and how easy it is also to avoid expressing inconvenient claims. No carp will revolt, no rooster will avenge! The very idea of revolt or revenge is ridiculous; we can therefore continue eating and wearing them without concern. If we aspire to overcome the inherent distortion, representation of animals and human-animal relationships must be done through an effort to recognize the temptation to use animals, to invent and to erase them. This attempt holds no promise to overcome distortion, because we cannot totally escape the temptation to use, invent and erase. However, it is possible to “mitigate damages”, if we acknowledge the fact that we have used, invented and erased much more than we had intended to – remembering that there is no voice to protest the injustice, there is no chance that we will be punished, and in fact, we have a lot to gain.

One can be similarly critical about any representation of the Other within imbalanced, institutionalized power relations. If the imbalance in power is stable, the dominators can also use, invent and erase a talking, writing and drawing public. And yet, the representation of animals of other species has a different meaning – different not as a necessary result of biological differences, but rather due to specific historical inter-species relations. The use of animals in the visual arts is a typical example. When we face a film, a sculpture or a picture with a prominent image of an animal, the question arises: did the artist torture or kill animals in order to create this image? This question has nothing to do with the biological identity of the beings involved. It is just as possible to shoot an emaciated homeless, stuff his dead body and use it to create a remarkable Pietà, but no artist would do so – whether because no one thinks that his or her artistic expression is more important than human life, or whether for fear of being caught, tried and punished for murder. Moreover, as far as shooting and stuffing a homeless man is concerned, it matters not if the subject of the art work is taken from a distant mythology, as in the case of Pietà, or whether it is a particularly effective protest against the economic policy of the government, that causes people to become homeless. In such cases it is evidently clear that symbolic and aesthetic field of meaning in art is secondary to the moral and legal field of meaning. On the other hand, when looking at a stuffed hen, nothing is clear. We do not even know whether not only the stuffed animal, but also a photograph or a painting of

a shiny-eyed hen were not the result of a killing intended to create a convenient and easy to handle immobile model. In this case, the artist is almost certainly immune from legal action. The hen is not a "protected animal". As long as she was killed "humanely", no offense was committed. And if prior to the killing the artist allowed her to live a better and longer life compared to her kin in a commercial poultry house, then even the moral debate might turn to the artist's favour. Moreover, there is a game of power here between the symbolic-aesthetic field and the moral-legal one. Whatever the public reaction to the killing of the hen, in this case the art will enjoy an autonomy that would not have been possible in terms of cultural norms, in the case of hurting a human as part of an artistic process. In the name of artistic freedom, the museum or gallery is sanctified and protected from hot-blooded laymen. Provided the victim is not a human being.

The cultural status of animal exploitation for aesthetic and symbolic purposes is therefore controversial, and it is not uncommon for such acts to be acceptable. The symbolic exploitation of animals, on the other hand, is hardly controversial. We are trained from infancy to use animals as symbols for contents that interest us: as toys, in books and movies, in dreams, in fables, in advertisements and in daily talk. We perceive animal images and real animals as symbolic representations of people, of their inter-relationships, of ideas, of traits, and so forth. It is doubtful whether we can avoid doing so, and as Steve Baker explains, animal representations are

always open to wild interpretations, sometimes the complete opposite of the creator's original intention. At first glance, and even at the second, it's not easy to grasp the problem in an expression such as "cash cow" or in the riddle analyzed by Randy Malamud, "why did the chicken cross the road? To get to the other side." The difficulty in identifying the problem is not surprising. The focus of our interest is the symbolic abuse of animals, a stereotypical use of their images, political incorrectness. Political correctness is a particularly subtle kind of social justice, a sensitivity that becomes possible thanks to self-representation of the highest level by the abused group. Hence, while sensitivity towards the stereotypification of talking, organized human beings is no trivial matter, then sensitivity towards the stereotypification of animals is non-existent. Not only towards cows and hens, but also towards the most beloved cats and dogs. Iconographical lexicons, that describe in detail the symbolic meanings enforced on animals in art, do not arouse discomfort in anyone; on the contrary, any "animal lover" spectator and art critic, will most probably be happy to decipher the iconography of animal images.

The difficulty, however, is definitely not limited to the refinement of our wording regarding animals. The humanities and social sciences accept the concept summarized by the anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss in his phrase "animals are good to think with". They are "good to think with" because they act intentionally just as humans do, they have interrelations like humans have,

and different species have distinct external characteristics as do different human groups. And finally, animals don't protest when being used as a symbol for any content – in this case, unlike human beings. Levi-Strauss' phrase is a paraphrase on the expression "animals are good to eat". Undoubtedly, the symbolic (or aesthetic) use of animals is essentially different from their actual use, and yet, the concept of use is the basis of both relationship categories. A symbolic use might be a training and preparation for actual use, a part of the ideological system that surrounds the actual use and nurtures it. We become annoyed when some foreigner uses our national or ethnic identity as a symbol for something. It's not a matter of simple impoliteness; the sensitivity to "symbolic exploitation" is based on the justified fear of the practical implications that such abuse might cause. Indeed, art may be granted a degree of cultural immunity that allows artists to exhibit in public a play on the meaning of national, ethnic or gender identities, when such a play would not be acceptable in other public domains. But in many cases, the moral and legal field of meaning will override art's immunity – whereas animal images will not even be subject to similar criticism. The ease with which animals are used as symbols in art expresses, therefore, their actual social status, and in some ways it also reinforces it. Several artists are endowed with sensitivity to the drawbacks of symbolic and aesthetic use of animals in art, and they attempt to create an authentic, inoffensive, critical and awareness-raising representation. But such a stand is so

unusual, that it stigmatizes them as propaganda artists even when they treat the subject subtly. This raises the question that may be relevant to propaganda art in general: if the aim is indeed social change, why not act directly through the more influential social channels, without having to meet high artistic standards? The question is seemingly more relevant to the critical art work dealing with human-animal relationships than to propaganda art in most other fields. This brings us back to the issue of ignorance mentioned above. When creating propaganda art which deals with human-animal relationship, it's impossible to address the main issues without supplying information about unknown phenomena. It is relatively easy to deal with esoteric issues such as confinement conditions in zoos, or familiar consumer issues, such as hesitation over vegetarianism. But as far as the main phenomenon in human-animal relationships today – industrial agriculture – the public knows too little. The art work is therefore prone to be excessively didactic, because without proper explanations it will simply not be understood. It is difficult to create a high quality cultural product in a field that has been expropriated from culture. The discussion regarding the status of animals in culture in general and in art in particular, maintains a dialogue with more familiar precedents of critical theory – precedents that focus on familiar types of human-to-human relationships. Critical theorizing through moral and social interest in animals apart from human beings – or in short, critical animal theory,

develops existing conceptual foundations, upon which it is inevitably based. However, relying on existing ideas is more than an obvious need to “stand on the shoulders of giants”. Critical animal theory seeks to be founded on a base of wider consensus as a means to present innovations in a convincing manner. When the goal is a radical change in thoughts and actions, including a shift in most banal daily habits and the eradication of some of the biggest industries, it is best to rely on as wide a consensus as possible. That is how most critical animal theorizing is done: by taking a familiar and consensual field of culture, and showing how it collapses due to internal contradictions – unless it is redefined with a much more serious regard to animals beyond our own species.

This approach has been demonstrated most clearly in moral philosophy (ethics) when philosophers like Peter Singer and Tom Regan analyzed the inner logic of existing theories in the context of animal issues. Singer, who specializes in the utilitarian approach to ethics, shows that the basis of the idea of moral equality between human beings is lost if we limit it to our own species. Singer examined the attributes that are most commonly considered as morally significant, as opposed to attributes that nowadays are not deemed as meriting particular moral treatment, and he found that the capacity to feel (suffering and pleasure, for instance) lies in the heart of our moral intuitions. In the absence of an agreed upon attribute which gives moral priority to one being's feelings over another's, we must also

forgo the pertinence to one species or another as a moral criterion. The suffering of one is morally equal to the suffering of another, including a creature of another species – and if we do not accept this, forgoing the principle of equality among human beings as well would be perfectly consistent. Similarly, Regan shows how in the Kantian tradition of moral philosophy, the very foundation of the idea of basic moral rights is undermined when limiting this to the human species.

Both philosophers searched, therefore, for a way of changing our attitude to human-animal relationships by refining common views and improving their internal consistency. Thinkers in other disciplines, and probably most of the proponents of critical animal theory in a variety of intellectual and creative fields, also tend to seek a change in terms of consistency, to innovate while still relying, at least for the sake of appearance, on wide reliance on what is known and agreed. However the obvious rhetoric advantage of this attitude also pays a toll. Not only are inter-species relationships in industrial agriculture rather unfamiliar to us, but also the aspired changes are also well beyond our social consensus. To be a creature whose whole living body, whose behaviour and motives for behaviour are understood in terms of the attributes of the product to be derived from its dead body – is a situation that as far as we know does not remind any danger or fear which ever bothered human beings. We have no emotional baggage concerning such situations,

we aren't equipped with relevant values, we have no “collective subconscious” regarding similar phenomena. When trying to express the most incomprehensible contents regarding inter-species relations, one has no choice but to innovate. The attempt to adhere to the familiar and consensual may be useful rhetorically, but it blocks the ability to absorb ideas that one has never thought of. Critical animal theory is in a catch-22 situation.

This is a pessimistic picture, perhaps too pessimistic. The industrialization of agricultural exploitation of animals, in addition to other domains of industrialization and social alienation, has triggered a powerful public countermovement against the animal industries, which leaves its mark on the industries. A growing number of people in the West choose veganism and avoid contributing directly to financing the industries. The industrial-agricultural systems are restrained here and there, both in response to limiting legislation and as part of reforms that are enforced on huge corporations following pressures from consumers. When Tom Regan describes the course that led him to vegetarianism, veganism and animal rights activism, one can identify with his personal experience, though the solitude reflected in his description quickly becomes a sign of a bygone era. In all Western countries, choices such as the ones made by Regan are still personal, beyond strong traditions and big establishments, but solitude is rapidly lost. A person who chooses veganism, is easily embraced by a lively social

movement, and whoever is interested in further action, need not reinvent the wheel. The eradication of animal industries is not readily foreseeable, but it is possible that in the not too distant future, some of the problems described here will have become passing phenomena. The very fact that a space dedicated to social criticism opens its gates to contents that in the last decades could not have been publicly presented other than as “technology”, is a promising sign for change.