

MARCO EVARISTTI: HELENA

In 2000 Marco Evaristti first exhibited 'Helena', an installation featuring functioning blenders each containing a live goldfish. The work caused unprecedented controversy and still raises a number of key questions about the use of animals in contemporary art. Interview by Eric Frank and H-Animals Readers



Marco Evaristti
'Helena', 2000, ©

In 2000 Marc Dion published 'Some notes towards a manifesto for artists working with or about the living world'. Point 4 of these notes reads as follows: 'Artists working with living organisms must know what they are doing. They must take responsibility for the plants' or animals' welfare. If an organism dies during an

exhibition, the viewer should assume the death to be the intention of the artist.'¹

The publishing of Dion's notes highlighted the necessity to establish a set of parameters within which to deal with the presence of leaving creatures in the

¹ *The Greenhouse Effect, Exhibition Catalogue, published by the Serpentine Gallery in 2000, London, p. 66*



Marco Evaristti
 'Helena' destroyed in 2006, photograph by Matthias Bildstein, ©

exhibiting space. It also coincided with the first staging of 'Helena' by Marco Evaristti; one of the most controversial works of art of the past twenty years involving live animals. 'Helena' consists of ten Moulinex Optiblend 2000 liquidisers positioned on an ordinary kitchen table; each liquidiser filled with water and housing a gold fish. The liquidisers are visibly connected to the mains as they are plugged in a multi-socket making the rules of the game implicitly set out from the start: anyone is allowed to press the 'on' button which will result in the liquidising a live fish.

It could be argued that the work questions our moral/ethical approach to animal life in general and that it does so in a quite violent way. Upon entering the gallery space, the viewer is invested with the power (or implicit authorization) to kill a living animal in front of other gallery visitors. From this angle, 'Helena' is an installation involving performative elements: a stage; an impromptu actor; and a casual audience from which actors can randomly arise.

The moral/ethical questions generated by this setting are many, and revolve around a complex paradigmatic set. Of course, the button was pushed, not just once... 'Helena' has since been staged a number of times in different countries generating each time the same level of curiosity and controversy. In May 2007, Evaristti was once again charged with cruelty to animals

in Austria just as it happened when he first exhibited the piece at Trapholt art gallery in Denmark. In 2006, Helena briefly appeared in a show titled 'Destroyed Utopia of Reconstruction'; here it was 'ironically' destroyed on the opening night by intruders— the fish were freed as the blenders were all smashed to the floor.

It has been suggested that the work engages with ethical issues in contemporary art, but animal activist cannot justify the testing of these boundaries when this happens at the expenses of animal life. Evaristti, who is himself not a stranger to controversy, sees the installation as a social experiment. His idea was to divide visitors to the museum into three groups: "The idiot, who pushes the button; the voyeur, who loves to watch; and the moralist, who will judge the action."²

We asked H-Animal Network readers to ask Mr Evaristti some questions for our interview. Our request sparked a thread of discussion on the website that once again highlighting the highly controversial nature of the work. Here we publish the interview to the artist followed by a selection of contributions featured in the original discussion thread.

² This article includes references to 'Marco Evaristti and the Open Work' essay by Anna Karina Hofbauer, 2007 in Marco Evaristti's website: <http://www.evaristti.com>

Where did the idea from Helena come from?

I have always been very fascinated by mythology; Helena is inspired by the Trojan War – the goldfish symbolizing the beautiful Helena and the mixer being the killer machine of war. Another source of inspiration is what happens all around me in society. How do we act and interact, how do we regard morality? I like to challenge audiences by revealing social mechanism that I find out of balance, or a taboo or a manifestation of double standards.

How many fish were liquidised through the show at Trapholt art gallery in Denmark back in 2000?

I believe only one fish was liquidised before the police came to cut the electricity off.

Is it ethical to use live animal in art?

I believe that sometimes it can be necessary to sacrifice one means for the sake of another. In this case, it was the lives of fishes that were at stake. To be honest people's harsh reactions surprised me as we, in my opinion, are surrounded by problems that are so much more serious that we encounter every evening watching the news. It worries me that we are passive in front of these news and that my art piece created such a stir instead. If people find that my use of live goldfish in my art piece is unethical, I would invite them to have a closer look at themselves and the world we live in.

When do you consider a piece of artwork that involves the death or cruelty to animals, not art?

I do not have an opinion on that. I am not for censorship.

Would you consider liquefying other animals?

No. And for the record – I have never liquefied a fish. I gave the possibility to do it and thereby saw how we fall into one of three categories: the sadist who presses the button, the voyeuristic who enjoys to watch the actions of other people, and the moralist that tell us all that we are mistaken. In that way the piece also has a sociological side to it.

The work caused uproar in Europe as well as in America. How in trouble were you by the end of the show?

At the end of the show, there was a trial where the ruling stated that the most humane way to kill a fish is to decapitate it very quickly. So as for the legal trouble they soon faded. As for the public trouble, it is still very

present in people's conscience, which I do not find troubling. It was a piece that invited the museum guests to intervene in the art piece, which was surprising and new and apparently had an impact on people.

Most recently, Helena was re-staged in Austria in 2006 for the exhibition 'Destroyed Worlds and the utopia of reconstruction'. Intruders on the opening night destroyed the work. Do you know who they were? How do you feel about it and would you consider re-staging Helena in the future?

I don't know who they were. I was very worried to hear of their reaction as I found it extreme.

You are Buddhist, how does Helena reflect Buddhist beliefs?

-No answer was given to the above question-

Why did you decided to use identical fish (as in one species) and why specifically gold fish?

I chose the goldfish for the same reason people choose them for their aquarium: for its beauty and for the minimum of demand of care...

What do you think of Damien Hirst' use of animals in his work?

Interesting. The pieces I have seen I have liked.

What are currently working on?

I just completed four years of work on the concept of territory that I began in 2004 when I painted a Greenlandic iceberg red. On March the 1st an exhibition of my work opens at Kunsthalle Krems in Austria including this piece and the two other projects: The Mont Rouge Project from 2007 where I transformed the summit of Mont Blanc to Mont Rouge and now finally in January this year The Arido Rosso Project in the Sahara. My next art project is about capital punishment, the death row and the lives or non-lives there.

Marco Evaristti, born 1963 in Santiago, Chile has lived in Denmark since the 1980s. After studying at the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts, Evaristti gained notoriety for a museum display entitled Helena in 2000 that featured ten functional blenders containing live goldfish. Evaristti's major work, in 2004, entitled Ice Cube Project, was to paint the exposed tip of a small iceberg red. On January 13, 2007, Evaristti hosted a dinner party for his most intimate friends. The main meal was agnolotti pasta that was topped with a meatball made with the artist's own fat, removed earlier in the year in a liposuction operation. On June 8, 2007, Evaristti draped the peak of Mont Blanc in France with red fabric, along with a 20 foot pole with a flag reading "Pink State". He was arrested and detained on June 6 for attempting to paint the peak red. His aim is to raise awareness of environmental degradation.

Special thanks to Malou Erritzøe for helping with the interview. Marco Evaristti was interviewed by Antennae in January 2008 ©

THE GOLDFISH THREAD

*In January, after securing an interview with **Marco Evaristti**, we asked **H-Animal**'s readers to send us questions to be put forward to the artist. Whilst achieving its original aim, our request also sparked one of the longest and most intense debates featured on the website so far. Here we have collated the most interesting exchanges – to read the thread in full, please visit <http://www.h-net.org/~animal/>*



Bryndís Snæbjörnsdóttir and Mark Wilson
Nanoq, Installation view at Spike Island Bristol, ©

Date Posted: Tue, 15 Jan 2008

My, my, Yes, I'd like to suggest a question." Is it ethical to use animals in art?" You might want to ask Mr Evaristti to consider the kind of animal, and whether the creature comes to harm in the process.

Cheers, Bill

William S. Lynn, PhD
Senior Ethics Advisor
Practical Ethics
Center for Animals and Public Policy
Tufts University

Date Posted: Thu, 24 Jan 2008

This is in response to Bill Lynn and his question for Marco Evaristti "Is it ethical to use animals in art?" I am an artist completing a practice based PhD that amongst other explores the removal of the animal from the 'frame' (the picture) in order to make it significance to humans apparent.

I am interested in the opinion of Bill Lynn as a senior ethic advisor and or anyone else who likes to contribute on how the context of art might have a different bearing on the use of animals to for example biology, natural history, zoological gardens, or farm adventure parks.

With a more specific reference to Marco Evaristti and his work in the Trapholt Museum of Art in Denmark where he gave the visitors the choice to switch on 10 water-filled kitchen blenders with a living goldfish swimming in each one. How does this ethically differ from for example recent campaign by chefs in the UK to make visitors aware of where the food they are eating is from killing animals on TV in front of millions of viewers? [<http://tinyurl.com/yppppcr>]

There is no doubt that animals have been used and abused in the name of art since the early development of caves drawings. There is also no doubt either that lens based media is responsible for what Akira Lippit calls the 'death' of the animal, as through our attempts to control it, we have lost the connection to the 'real' living being. In one of our art projects "Nanoq: Flat Out and Bluesome" we brought a number of stuffed polar bears on loan from public and private collections together in an art space. During the installation it became apparent that the more perfect or seamless the process of taxidermy was the more likely the audience was to respond to it as a truthful representation of a living polar bear. The more crude the taxidermy the more able the audience was to imagine a life that ones was.

For me and many other artists that work with socially engaged art practice, art is a serious tool of investigation and a powerful lever to instigate social change. It is therefore impossible to read the question "Is it ethical to use animals in art?" without thinking "Is it ethical to use animals in science?" "Is it ethical to use animals in cooking?"

Bryndís Snæbjörnsdóttir
Artist and Researcher
Faculty of Fine Art
Gothenburg Universtiy
www.snaebjornsdottirwilson.com

Date Posted: Mon, 28 Jan 2008

Bryndís and everyone,
Thanks for an intriguing question. You write, "It is therefore impossible to read the question 'Is it ethical to use animals in art?' without thinking 'Is it ethical to use animals in science?' 'Is it ethical to use animals in cooking?'" For that matter, is it ethical to use animals in Animal Studies? Every time we teach a course or write an article in Animal Studies, we are using animals. Well, my own answer in every case is, "Yes." I am concerned that if we become too fastidious about using animals, we will push them ever further from our daily lives, greatly impoverishing ourselves culturally and driving them ever more of them to extinction.

In the natural world, forms of life use one another constantly, and our use is a way of participating in the natural cycles. True, in most cases the use has become very asymmetrical, though not in all.

Rats and white tailed deer may take as much from us as we do from them, and their populations would probably be much smaller without human beings. In the case of, say, the AIDS virus, our relation is asymmetrical but in another way. It uses us, but we don't use it in the least. We may be relatively high on the proverbial "food chain," but it is certainly higher. We can never emancipate ourselves fully from the interdependence of living things, and I think we do best to integrate ourselves into it more fully instead of less so.

This does not mean that any use of animals is okay, in art or in any other area. Some uses, such as bear-baiting, are clearly repulsive, and many others are ambiguous. One question to ask, I think, is how our use may be made reciprocal. Personally, I have no problem, for example, with the Native Americans who sell buffalo burgers in order to help preserve populations of American bison. One may certainly argue over whether one or another use is justified, but I have no problem about using animals in general.

Boria Sax, PhD
Berkely College
Adjunct Faculty Member – Humanities and English

Date Posted: Mon, 28 Jan 2008

This post - and particularly the last few questions - got me thinking. I'm not sure I'm at any real conclusion here but here are some thoughts:

* Animal use in science is usually done behind closed doors (not that this makes it right) and is usually justified by the discourse of human superiority and human gain - is this the same for those using animals in art? Sticking with the goldfish example it seems to hold for the former (human superiority) but I can't see it for the latter (human gain)? I'm also unconvinced that allowing people to choose to blend fish leads to any kind of impetus for social change, and certainly not social change for the betterment of animals. It simply cannot do this as it is based upon the very notion that humans are able to abuse animals, in this case fish (i.e. human superiority). I also wonder if the artist entertained using animals whose sentience is less contested.

* I would imagine that the vast majority of those who object to the abuse of animals in art, are those who would answer 'no' to your final three questions.

* I do, however, find it interesting - if we follow this argument through - that the public vivisection of animals (lets call this 'use of animals in science' as it pertains to your email below) was abolished some time ago, whilst the public abuse of animals for food preparation (use of animals in cooking) is not at all banned and is, to the contrary, celebrated through the media etc. This leaves



Marco Evaristti

'Helena', viewer about to push the button, ©

me wondering where the abuse of animals in art fits between these two? [I do realise that not all animal use in art is necessarily abuse but I am sticking with this term when discussing the blending of goldfish].

* I do think that art is often a useful social-investigatory tool and that it can also be a tool for social change. I just don't think this applies in the case of the goldfish if the social change we are wishing to see is an improvement in the lives of animals.

Dr Nik Taylor,
Senior Lecturer, Sociology,
CQU Rockhampton,
Queensland,
Australia
www.criticalanimalstudies.org

Date Posted: Mon, 28 Jan 2008

Dear Bryndís:

As someone who has written at length about this very question, I would like to respond from the point of

view of someone who is not only an artist, but an art educator and a writer. Let me start with your last excellent statement first, as I think it is the most pressing and most valuable for this discussion. The connection between the uses of animals in art, science and cooking is not a trivial one. It links three of the most prevalent uses of animals: use as food, use as tools and use as metaphor or cultural mirror. The operative word in all three instances is "use." And herein lies the need for the question of ethics. Certainly, I know and support many artists engaged in a serious art practice, and believe strongly in art as a "powerful lever to instigate social change" and that is why, in answer to your question, does Evaristti's goldfish piece differ ethically from UK chefs' killing animals on TV? I would answer a resounding No. It does not differ either to the goldfish being blended in the name of art or to the chicken who the chef stunned, "cut an artery inside its throat, and let it bleed to death, all in accordance with British standards for humane slaughter" whether they were killed, in the Evaristti case, to engage the viewer in a moral choice, or in the case of the chefs' desire to show audiences ostensibly how chicken are killed for food (and not coincidentally, to show the audience how



Marco Evaristti
'Helena', non functional installation sample, 2004 ©

expensive that might be). In neither case was the animal used in an ethical way.

In my mind, that is the central point. Ethically it is up to us, as artists, and scientists and people who eat, to begin to see that "using" animals is itself one of, if not the primary, obstacle to those shifts in social, economic, political, environmental and cultural change we need to make.

Carol Gigliotti, PhD
Associate Professor
Emily Carr Institute,
ART + DESIGN + MEDIA
1399 Johnston Street
Vancouver, BC V6H 3R9
Canada
<http://www.carolgigliotti.net>

Date Posted: Mon, 28 Jan 2008

Boria wrote:

"I am concerned that if we become too fastidious about using animals, we will push them ever further from our

daily lives, greatly impoverishing ourselves culturally and driving them ever more of them to extinction"

If given a choice between exploiting nonhuman animals against not having any contact with nonhuman animals in my day-to-day life I'd choose the latter. I'm fine with an ethics of leaving nonhumans alone. It's the non-fastidious approach to animal use, I would suggest, that is implicated in their extinction, not vice versa. Then:

"In the natural world, forms of life use one another constantly, and our use is a way of participating in the natural cycles"

I don't remember seeing ads for slaughterhouse workers saying 'your chance to earn pittance and partake in interspecies natural cycles'. (come to think of it, I don't remember seeing ads for slaughterhouse workers per se). It's simplistic - to be polite - to use arbitrary constructions of 'nature' to guide human behaviour, is it not?

Cheers,
Richard

Date Posted: Mon, 28 Jan 2008

This question is a good example of "have you quit beating your wife?" USE is the culprit. Do we USE animals when we depict them? Do cave paintings USE animals? Possibly, but to what end? To ensure good hunting? To embody their characteristics? To merge with their spirits?

Ever watch a pre-teen obsessively draw horses, over and over and over, the same horse? They are USING the horse somehow (not that the horse knows it or even is a real horse) in some emotional internal way, becoming the horse? Mastering the horse? It's inchoate, dreamlike, but somehow "useful."

Mary Scriver
Writer

Date Posted: Tue, 29 Jan 2008

From a utilitarian standpoint, it might very well be ethical to blend a goldfish or slaughter a chicken: if neither suffered, and the public deaths of each were able to act as deterrents to the countless acts of painful or unwitnessed acts of animal destruction and slaughter. I can't say I necessarily endorse a utilitarian view, but it seems we sometimes need to ask "whose ethics?" or whether "the ethical" is a universal.

Kari Weil
College of Letters
Wesleyan University
Middletown, CT

Date Posted: January 28, 2008

I have a simple question that I can't seem to find an answer to on the web. Did anyone ever push the button on the blender? I can't help but wonder whether there is a difference between a work of art which asks people to ask themselves a very serious question about whether they should push a button on a blender and kill a goldfish, and a work of art (I recognize that some will dispute the term) through which people kill goldfish in a blender. So, a second question, does it matter to this discussion at all if a goldfish is actually killed by some person in an audience at a gallery?

Nigel Rothfels
Director, Edison Initiative
Adjunct Associate Professor, History
University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee
Milwaukee, WI

Date Posted: February 4, 2008

For Nigel and others,

About the goldfish in the blender: in the local Danish media it was clear that somebody pushed the button and a fish was blended (it happened twice as far as I remember). But it seems that the first button was pushed due to a journalist that asked a visitor at the exhibition to do it. Therefore, it is not simply a question about what the artist or the audience is intended to do but also whether the media can make a good story for the news. During the trial that followed the exhibition experts stated that the quickest and most humane way to kill a goldfish was to blend it – but of course that doesn't in any way answer the question whether it is ethical to kill it in the first place.

Denmark has just seen another example of animals in art: an artist and activist for cheap organic products killed a pig at a large art exhibit (and poured its blood on a naked woman artist) and claimed that the pig had been killed for the greater good - that is to convince people that organic products shouldn't be subjected to the same 25% tax as all other product in Denmark. The logic in the argument hasn't been made clear to me yet.

Best

Anne Katrine Gjerløff
post.doc. Ph.D.
dept.of history
SAXO Institute
University of Copenhagen

Date Posted: February 4, 2008

In answer to Nigel's question, according to the BBC News at least one person did push the button. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/3040891.stm> and in answer to your second question, yes it matters very much to me that a gold fish was killed "by some person in an audience at a gallery?" An animal's death is a death, and I argue against our causing that for any reason, whether to eat, wear, use in research or to make a point in art or elsewhere.

Carol Gigliotti

Date Posted: February 4, 2008

Whether or not someone has chosen the option, the fact that the option is not only there but encouraged seems to me the basis of ethical concern (Unless, of course, the blender really won't work even if activated or is somehow programmed to challenge and not enact the viewer's choice). Certainly some people will think caring about a goldfish's life and death silly. Millions float belly-up in aquariums world wide daily. But to deliberately choose its violent death seems to me an important distinction and one I'd prefer art spoke against rather than facilitated. I guess when you come

right down to it, I prefer art for animals' sakes rather than for art's sake. --Marion "Ronnie" Copeland.

Date Posted: February 5, 2008

Thanks to all who responded to my queries about the goldfish. I am still trying to figure out why we should question the artist in this case. I have no problem holding up the person who pushes the button to some moral scrutiny, especially perhaps someone who gets talk in to doing so by a journalist, but the artist did not push the button (as far as I know) and clearly posed an important and provocative series of questions to his audience. I think one could argue, in fact, that as a result of this work, Evaristti's viewers were forced to think more carefully about the decisions they make everyday about animals. Ronnie points to all the goldfish floating belly-up in aquariums, but what about all the others who are flushed down toilets alive? Doesn't the very starkness (or brutality) of this exhibit ask people to examine all the ways they have trivialized the lives of animals? Can't this work also be conceptualized as "art for animals' sakes"? I take Carol's point, that to the goldfish being blended (and to those who care about the goldfish being blended), my more utilitarian argument is utterly inadequate. I should also say, that I do not believe that a measure of good art is simply how much people talk about it, nor do I believe that demonstrations of brutality are desirable way to educate people about brutality. With all that said, though, I somehow still think it matters that Evaristti neither pushed a button nor, as far as I can see, encouraged (as I understand that term) anyone else to do so.

Nigel

Date Posted: February 6, 2008

Hi, Nigel! Well, to the extent that we think taking the life of a goldfish is trivial, the art based on this, or at least the prospect of it, must be trivial too. If, however, taking the life of a goldfish is important, the art becomes significant. The life of the goldfish, in other words, lends its significance to the work of art. What all of this comes down to, in my opinion, is blood sacrifice. This is practiced even today in Sanatoria and voodoo, but many people find the idea profoundly disturbing. The goldfish is a sacrificial offering on the altar of art.

Boria

p.s.

And just for the record, I don't think there is any remotely objective answer to the question of how important the life of a goldfish is.

Date Posted: February 7, 2008

The simple answer for why we should question the artists is that they are creating an attractive nuisance, like an unfenced swimming pool.

Rick Bogle

Date Posted: February 7, 2008

Well, then, unfenced swimming pools are illegal most places because human children drown in them, as well as the occasional pet. Where was all this discussion when pet stores were charging children 50 cents to feed a white mouse to a boa constrictor? (No charge for the other kids to watch.)

Mary Scriver

Date Posted: February 8, 2008

Hello Everyone,

This entire thread has been fascinating for me, and raised quite a few interesting ideas about the nature of art, the value of animals, and how one might ethically think about the two. I want to gently make several brief observations on themes in the conversation. I mean these comments to be suggestive not conclusive.

1. Mr. Evaristti is culpable for the blender-based harms to animals. So too were the button pushers in the audience. The legal concepts of negligence and being an accomplice are ideas that can help us clarify this culpability.

2. I think we resolved the questions of animals and intrinsic value long ago. Yes, to the degree that a goldfish can be sentient or sapient (aware or self-aware), he/she has intrinsic value. Sentience or sapience is not the gold standard for intrinsic value (forgive the pun). They are however two properties intrinsic to some creatures (including ourselves), and indispensable in moral reasoning about such creatures. We routinely think and talk about the intrinsic value of human beings in moral, political and social discourse. There is no reason we should not do so with animals.

3. Ethical and aesthetic questions (like all questions in the humanities and science) are neither objective nor subjective. They are interpretive. This is the key insight in the turn away from empiricist and positivist paradigms of scholarship. While this has many implications, one pertaining to ethics is that there may be a range of morally responsible answers to an issue like using animals in art. It also means we do have contingent criteria to distinguish better and worse



Marco Evaristti
'Helena' destroyed in 2006, photograph by Matthias Bildstein, ©

answers. We should not mistake intellectual pluralism for moral relativism.

4. Comparisons of animals harmed in art to other harms for animals (e.g. factory farming or fishing) should be made with caution. Asking how a man in Europe liquidizing goldfish is different from an indigenous person catching salmon in a stream can be an important and ethically clarifying question to ask. But such questions are misplaced when they are rhetorical devices for moral relativism.

5. Ethics is indispensable to art. I do not mean to imply that art must meet some standard of a hectoring moralism. Rather art is produced with morally relevant presuppositions and intentions, and it can have consequences for the well being of human and non-human others. It is thus both reasonable and requisite to submit art to moral scrutiny. This is especially true when harm is done to others in the fashioning of art. By way of analogy, we would not accept the claim that science is value-neutral and thus human subjects research cannot be subject to ethical oversight. So too with art.

6. This thread also informs two prior threads about defining human-animal studies (HAS), and the role of

activism in the academy. To state my presuppositions, I believe there are reasonable differences over what defines HAS. I also believe advocates and academics have differing roles and functions in society.

Yet I do not read the posts of activists on H-Animal as wanting to erase such distinctions. Rather they are calling to account representations of scholarship that endorse an acritical, value-neutral, and/or ethics-free vision of HAS. I think we need to listen to their caution. An acritical HAS is both intellectually untenable and morally irresponsible. Sometimes we must speak with a moral voice, or legitimate through silence the harm done others. To bracket ethical questions at times is entirely appropriate. To avoid them altogether is a serious error. I want HAS to make a welcoming space for individual scholars who bracket ethics in their research. I mean them no disrespect. Yet I do not want an acritical HAS. Ethics needs a reserved seat at the table. I think this conversation over animals, art, and ethics provides insight into why this should be so.

7. Finally, is it ethical to use animals in art? This is a complex question, and I do not pretend to have the answer. As a practical ethicist, my answers would be rooted in concrete situations. Amongst other things, I would look at the point of view, intentions, and actions

of the artist, as well as the consequences of the art itself. To my mind, Mr. Evaristti's work can be an easy mark, given the harm it does to animals and nature, and the meritless justifications of his theorizations. Other art, however, incorporates animals in fascinating, nuanced, and well-theorized ways. Simply view the work of Rob Hite, Catherine McIntyre, and others on the Practical Ethics Gallery, and you can see what I mean (www.practicaethics.net). Like many of you, I am unwilling to offer a blanket condemnation. Even so, we can and should make discriminating judgments about using animals and nature in art.

Bill

Date Posted: February 8, 2008

The issue was mentioned whether, in effect, morality is binding on art(ists). I don't see how it can't be. If artists are allowed to suspend ethics for the sake of aesthetics, then in short order we should not be surprised to find many/most transgressors excusing their misdeeds as instances of performance art. Practically (and indeed conceptually) morality is an all-or-none proposition. If anybody is outside its purview, then everybody has to be--otherwise, nobody would rationally submit to its norms; and, while a wholesale retreat from ethics (a.k.a. amorality) is not unthinkable or irrational, I'd wager most of us (with the rare exception of truly radical anarchists) would not want to live in any society under its sway.

Ralph Acampora,
Philosophy Dept.
Hofstra University,
Hempstead, NY, U.S.A.

Date Posted: February 9, 2008

Consider, too, that if we substitute "pornography" for blending goldfish, the morality/ethical gage goes up a few degrees in the minds of many humans.

MWCopeland

Date Posted: February 9, 2008

First of all, I think Bill Lynn has given us a beautiful summation of the issues involved. I would just like to add that the reason why I find Evaristti objectionable is not because it "uses" animals but, rather, because it does not. While not many people subscribe openly to the idea of "art for art's sake" today, the special ambience of art consists in being placed apart from at least the more everyday sorts of utility. By virtue of being placed in a gallery, the urinal loses its utility and becomes a work of art. Artists today may rationalize

their work with claims to inspire social change, but we pretty well have to take these of faith. They can almost never tell us, except in the vaguest terms, what the social change is, or how their role can be verified.

The killing of the goldfish would not be objectionable if it were eaten, whether by people or animals, or otherwise put to use. Then the goldfish have a part in natural cycles, and the dignity that comes from that participation. What is objectionable here is that the killing of the goldfish appears entirely gratuitous, apart from highly abstract and speculative ideas about some higher cultural purpose. The artist may not be making a claim to be above all morality, but there seems to be an implicit claim that he/she follows only some exalted morality that is above everyday concerns.

It is in this arbitrary nature that the killing of the goldfish reminds me so of blood sacrifice. The word "Holocaust" literally means "burning of the whole," a sacrifice in which nothing is used of the victim. The offering is, in other words, deliberately deprived of all utility so that it can serve a presumably higher purpose. The life force of the goldfish, it seems to me, is intended to exalt the work of art.

Boria Sax

Date Posted: February 12, 2008

Boria Sax wrote, in part: "The killing of the goldfish would not be objectionable if it were eaten, whether by people or animals, or otherwise put to use." Animal rightists find statements like this as objectionable as statements that seek to justify violations of human animals' rights, for the same reasons.

Rick Bogle
Primate Freedom Project

Date Posted: February 16, 2008

As a lawyer, I will stand back from that use [Rick Bogle's, ed.] of the term "rights." But as an American Indian who grew up a little differently than you, apparently, I have to wonder at privileging goldfish life over carrot life and how I could have missed it when some living thing learned to live without consuming other living things?

I'll shut up now as I'm sure savage ideas don't fit here. In my language, "vegetarian" would translate to "poor hunter" but taking an animal without asking permission first and giving thanks afterward would lead to dire consequences. Some people know that. Not as many know of similar beliefs about Grandmother Corn.

Steve Russell



Marco Evaristti
Helena destroyed in 2006, photograph by Matthias Bildstein, ©

Date Posted: February 23, 2008

Dear colleagues,

As someone who considers himself an animal rights advocate, what I find problematic (let's put the word 'objectionable' aside for a moment) about Boria Sax's argument is that it seems to imply that morality is democratic, inasmuch as it conflates a majority view (the killing of goldfish for human food is morally acceptable) with a universal statement ('it would not be objectionable'). But it seems to me that we're at cross purposes here. If I understand/interpret correctly, Sax argues that it is hypocritical for those who believe in the morality of 'pragmatic' 'use' (in this case, killing) of a goldfish or other animals, to object to the same actions carried out in the name of art. Rick Bogle replies that this argument has no purchase on those who believe that the killing of goldfish is always wrong, and who practice that belief in their day-to-day existence. These two positions, then, are not conflictual. In regard to Steve Russell's point, it seems to me that two separate issues are being addressed. One is whether we should apply different standards to different cultural groups as regards the morality of using and killing animals. This is a problematic issue which inquires as to whether we

believe in situational or absolute morality; it also demands inquiry as to the specific circumstances of any such group vis-a-vis sustenance, survival, and the animal and human worlds. The fact that something is a cultural practice of a minority or oppressed group (or indeed, the fact that something is traditional per se) does not in itself make it either a necessity, or necessarily moral; but it needs to be understood in a context in which the entire cultural practices of such a group are under threat. This argument has also played out in debates over such practices as kosher and halal slaughter.

However, the argument that, in eating carrots while decrying the eating of goldfish, we privilege goldfish over carrots, seems to me highly problematic. We have ample evidence of the sentience and ability to feel pain of (many) animals, including fish, while we have no evidence of this in plants. It may be argued that scientific rationality of the kind which attributes sentience, the ability to feel pain, etc should not be privileged above other discourses, and argued also that this discourse has caused more harm than good in terms of human actions toward animals. However, even putting this scientific-rational discourse aside, on a very basic level of everyday observation, (most) animals have the ability to evade pain and death and will generally do so if it is possible, whereas plants have no such abilities,

which would seem to indicate a qualitative difference between violence toward plants and toward animals.

Furthermore, for at least some plants, being eaten has clear survival benefits in that it is thus that propagation occurs, whereas this is never the case for animals.

Finally, as Steve Russell notes, living things (though photosynthesising plants do not fall into this category) generally do need to consume other living things; but this is by no means an argument that it is morally acceptable to do so under any circumstances of human choosing, or that there is no moral difference between what living things we consume (after all, the same argument would morally justify cannibalism). For example, there are few (though not none) who would argue that it was morally wrong for a hunter-gatherer people, before the rise of agriculture or in its absence, to kill and consume animals; but this is not to say that in our present-day society it is acceptable to kill and consume animals (in any circumstances) in a situation in which the possibilities of our relationship to sources of sustenance, and our relationship to the animals we consume and to their carcasses, are so vastly different.

Rowan Savage

Doctoral Candidate

Department of Sociology and Social Policy

University of Sydney

Sydney

Australia

Date Posted: February 23, 2008

Howdy folks,

I agree with Steve Russell's point. And I have never heard an ethicist or anyone else convincingly explain to me how animals and plants are different--from a philosophical point of view. And I would be very open to having this settled once and for all. Some say that a vegetarian or vegan lifestyle is more ethical than an omnivorous one because one should not use animals. And some say that the argument "animals should not be destroyed/used because they feel pain/can suffer" is not sufficient to prevent animal use since an animal could be made to feel no pain through genetic manipulation or use of analgesics, for instance. Thus, some say, animals should not be destroyed/used simply because they have a right to exist (pain & sentience, or no).

So how can we use any life at all? Plants also grow and change, they inhabited the planet before humans did, and maybe have a "right" to exist, even if they feel no pain and cannot suffer (as far as we know). Is it possible for humans to exist without being necessarily unethical?

Which brings me back to my earlier questions, which were met with a suspicious silence from the subscribers to this list:

Is it ethical for me to take my dog to the veterinarian knowing her tools, drugs, and training were developed through animal use and experimentation?

*Is it ethical for me to feed my dog the processed flesh of other animals, i.e.: dog chow?

*Is my dog really a "companion animal," or in actuality a prisoner in my house subject to me legally and physically in every way?

*Is pet/companion animal keeping a form of "animal use"?

*Why is pet/companion animal keeping exempted from most debates around the ethics of animal use?

Dr. Susan Nance

Department of History

University of Guelph

Guelph, ON N1G 2W1

Canada

www.susannance.com

The 'Goldfish Thread' was printed by permission of H-Animal Moderator Brett Mizelle. 2008