Animals and Women as Meat

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Abstract: Society's current view of women and animals, both of whom have been regarded as sacred since ancient times, is as objects of consumption, containment and control in our patriarchal society. We have become disconnected as a society, from each other, and in turn, from Nature. Meat eating weaves together the oppression of women and of animals. Since this objectification has become so ingrained in our culture and denies accountability, it propagates the myth of how women and animals are marketed as being acceptable.

Women and animals share interconnectedness in how they are viewed, how they are marketed and, ultimately, how they are consumed. Meat eating weaves together the oppression of women and of animals. This objectification has become so ingrained in the American culture that it denies accountability. Women and animals are literally and metaphorically consumable. What does the subject of consumption mean and how is it masked? Is it only in relation to buyers and merchandise, to the visual consumption of images, to the consumption of another by eating or the consumption of a woman's sexuality, for example?

Our relationship with the animals we consume is more complicated than it may appear at first glance. Our society's love affair with meat is consummated by meat eating and it is the most frequent way in which we interact with animals. This one action causes immeasurable suffering. The average American eats 43 pigs, 3 lambs, 11 cows, 4 veal calves, 861 fish, and 2,555 chickens and turkeys in a lifetime.¹ Animals used for food, work, entertainment and fashion are hunted, trapped, poisoned, branded, castrated, impregnated by force, mothers separated from their young, tails and ears docked, debeaked, confined, objectified, transported, slaughtered, burned, cut, gassed, starved, asphyxiated, decapitated, decompressed, irradiated, electrocuted, frozen, crushed, paralyzed, limbs

amputated, organs excised, lobotomized, isolated socially, addicted, and exposed to disease against their wills.²

Our relationships with animals are full of contradictions. We choose who is a pet and who is not. We love some animals while we continue to wear the skins of others. We hunt, trap and vivisection animals at a rate of twenty-five million a year.³ If you are an animal raised for food, *everything* natural is denied you. Your entire life is about confinement. As philosopher Theodore Adorno, a German Jew forced into exile by the Nazis wrote, “Auschwitz begins wherever someone looks at a slaughterhouse and thinks: they’re only animals.”⁴ Factory farming denies a sense of “beingness” and a connection to Nature of over 100 million cows, pigs and sheep killed annually in cloistered slaughterhouses in the United States.⁵ Confinement systems are the very foundation of factory farming. Animals raised for human consumption have every basic desire and instinct denied; no sunlight, no companionship, no earth to stand on, no fresh air.

The majority of the food consumed in North America comes from female animals, from mothers who are impregnated forcefully while under physical restraints such as a “rape rack” and held in “iron maidens” for the birthing process.⁶ A gestation crate is a 2-foot by 7-foot prison used to confine breeding sows on factory farms. There are more than 6 million breeding sows in the United States and 80% of them are enclosed in these crates for their 4-month pregnancy.⁷ Temple Grandin, an expert in animal science, described the life of a factory farmed sow in the following terms: “It’s like being stuffed into the middle seat of a jam-packed jumbo jet for your whole adult life, and you’re not ever allowed out in the aisle.”⁸

The female pig is moved to a farrowing crate to give birth. Farrowing crates are metal prisons in which the mother sow is not allowed to move; she cannot stand, turn over, or lay down comfortably, and she is not allowed to turn over, walk or nurture her young. After 2-3 weeks, the piglets are taken from her and the process starts again with her being re-impregnated. After 2-3 years, her body is too broken down to continue and she is considered “spent.” It is then that she is hauled off for slaughter, her hooves having never touched grass.

The treatment and slaughter of animals raised for food were the subjects for artist Sue Coe’s 1995 book, *Dead Meat*. Coe viewed first hand slaughterhouses in the United States and documented that journey with her sketchbook and interviews of the workers and the managers of those facilities, those “killing floors.” Although Coe was allowed access because she and her sketchbook did not appear to be threatening, she was often intimidated. At one slaughterhouse in New York State, the head slaughterer pointed the bolt pistol at Coe and said, “This is to kill artists, women and animals.”⁹

Coe's sketchbook and notes became her book, *Dead Meat*.

The blurring of boundaries between the categories of "animal" and woman can also be found in many contemporary advertising campaigns, especially in campaigns where certain animals are dressed as up as if they were women. Animals such as birds, pigs and cows are often marketed using imagery usually associated with the objectification of a woman; a pig in a bikini or high-heeled shoes, for example. There have been many examples of advertisements in which animals are depicted with cleavage or with their hand (or, more accurately, their hoof, or wing) on their hips posing suggestively. In other examples, the animal is represented as smiling and presenting themselves for consumption. A recent Harper's Country Hams advertisement, for example, incorporated an illustration of a large, pink, heavily eye-lashed pig shown from the rear with head turned, mouth smiling, as part of their logo. This adds another connotation to the expression "Come and get it!" as these images are meant to incite desire on multiple levels.

The depiction of non-human animals as whores is anthropornography.¹⁰ In American advertising animals are often reduced to body parts, and sometimes marketed with sexual innuendos referring to women's body parts. For example, The Chicago restaurant, "Uncommon Ground" has on its menu the "Double D Cup" breast of turkey.¹¹ Colonel Sanders asks of his consumers, "Are you a breast man or a leg man?"¹² Body parts are often visually fragmented in these ads echoing the ways in which animals lose each of their body parts during the slaughtering process. In advertising, fragmented body parts are sometimes sexualized and always take away from the individuality of the animal represented. As author and activist Carol J. Adams notes in *The Pornography of Meat*, "Pleasurable consumption of consumable beings is the dominant perspective of our culture. It is what subjects do to objects, what someone does with something."¹³ Adams's work questions the processes by which *someone* becomes *something*; to be seen as consumable is the result of systems of oppression. Dominance, subordination, degradation, power and submission are at work in this process.

Businesses like "Hooters Restaurants" blur the distinction between women *and* animals on a daily basis in their more than 450 locations worldwide.¹⁴ The restaurant sells chicken wings served by "Hooter's Girls," who were once required to wear t-shirts that said, "More than a mouthful."¹⁵ In 2005 the company ran billboards in Southern California which read, "Only a Rooster Gets a Better Piece of Chicken." In this context, references to other animals (owls with huge round eyes) and meat become the vernacular for sexual talk about women.¹⁶

There is, of course, a long history of this type of representation. For example, in June 1978 *Hustler* magazine generated controversy by publishing a cover photograph in which a naked woman was depicted as being “processed” by a meat grinder. In this image, the woman’s body was positioned upside down, and only her legs and lower torso remained intact as the rest of her body was represented as hamburger emerging from the metal grinder.¹⁷ A faceless body part cannot scream and body parts lack freedom; as Adams argues, the “sexual politics of meat” traps everyone: women, animals *and* men.¹⁸ This point is underscored by Melinda Vadas who notes that “Meat is like pornography. Before it was someone’s fun, it was someone’s life.”¹⁹

We are living in a time in which sexuality, sensuality and pornography are confused and confusing. The objectification of women and animals in everyday language contributes to their oppression. Our societies have devised clever ways of altering a living animal’s “beingness” through language. For example, we say “steak” or “hamburger” instead of using the word “cow.” In the slaughterhouse, animals are “processed,” “disassembled,” “packed” and “dressed.” In our daily vernacular women are often referred to as “chicks,” “birds,” “kittens,” and “bunnies.” These examples are underscored by systems of dominance. It is, in other words, no accident these beings are not free to determine their own identities.

The question of how identity is constructed through advertisements and other visual means has been taken up by a number of artists. For example, Barbara Kruger’s background in advertising influenced her art production, and in the late 1970s she started making print media collages with words and images. In these pieces Kruger addresses cultural representations of power, greed, identity, sexuality, consumerism, stereotypes and clichés. Kruger’s work combines image and text, her pieces use striking black, red and white imagery to proclaim things like: “I Shop, Therefore I Am,” “Power, Pleasure, Desire, Disgust,” and “Your Body is a Battleground.” For Kruger the visual aspect of identity formation is key; she says, “Our bodies, the flesh and blood of it all, have given way to representation: the figures that cavort on TV, movies and computer screens.”²⁰

Judy Chicago is, perhaps, best known for her provocative installation piece, *The Dinner Party*, which premiered in San Francisco in 1979. Chicago and a team of over 400 artists worked on this project from 1974-1979, and over one million people have seen the work worldwide. Chicago’s inspiration for this piece was directly related to her “realizations about women’s obscured history.”²¹ *The Dinner Party* is based on the primordial symbol for womanhood, the triangle. Within the installation 999 names of women from history and legend are listed. There are thirteen place settings on each side of the triangular table, a significant and symbolic number given that there were thirteen

males present in “The Last Supper,” and thirteen is the number of witches in a coven. At each place setting is a runner with the name of a woman embroidered in the style appropriate to the historical era to which she belonged. Each plate has painted and sculpted motifs based on female genitalia.

Judy Chicago purposely chose the dinner plate to use as her visual analogy to women. She said, “It seemed as though the female counterpart of this religious meal would have to be a dinner party, a title that seemed entirely appropriate to the way in which women’s achievement—along with the endless meals they had prepared throughout history—had been consumed.”²² She further remarked, “At some point I decided that I would like the plate images to physically rise up as a symbol of women’s struggle for freedom from containment.”²³

Carol J. Adams has also observed the symbolic importance of the plate in women’s history, and has underscored the connections here with respect to consumption and containment. Adams’ notion of the “absent referent” refers to the thought process that separates the meat eater from the end product or the space that exists between the animal’s life and your dinner plate: “I realized that the absent referent was what enabled the interweaving of the oppression of women *and* animals.”²⁴

These representations and referents have real consequences for living animals. For example, if a factory-farmed hen survives her two-year existence in a battery cage, it will be a life lived against her will and against every natural grain in her being. Her body is not her own. Her natural desires to dust bathe, roost above predators and nurture her young are denied. Instead, her two years in a factory farm before her slaughter are a living hell. Battery cages confine more than 325 million egg-laying hens in the United States.²⁵ The laying hen lives with 4-8 other debeaked hens in a single wire battery cage measuring 18” x 18” x 14”. These cages are stacked in dimly lit buildings holding up to 125,000 hens. An individual hen cannot stretch, spread her wings, or nest; she stands on wire, stretches her neck through wire to eat swill from a tray, lays her eggs on wire with no place to prepare or nest, defecates through wire and often dies on wire. A hen who *does* survive two years in this environment does so only to be sent to slaughter without a thought for what she once was, or rather, never had a chance to be. She has been butchered to the point of disappearance. And, yet, at the same time she remains a pastoral symbol in the kitchen—we find her likeness on hand towels, and painted on coffee cups. The hen is often found as a nurturing, apron-wearing mother figure in children’s books. The representation and the reality are incongruent; the genocide of over 35 million chickens a day ends the lives of these gentle, earthy souls.²⁶ This female animal epitomizes our society’s self-serving affair with meat. The female chicken raised for food is possibly the most graphic representation of the *female* struggle against containment, objectification and finally,

consumption. As the above examples demonstrate, women and animals are frequently linked in the cultural metaphors for the processing, marketing and eating of meat.

Notes

¹ Carol J. Adams, *The Sexual Politics of Meat: A Feminist Vegetarian Critical Theory* (New York: The Continuum Publishing Co., 2010), 97.

² Carol J. Adams and Josephine Donovan, eds., *Beyond Animal Rights: A Feminist Caring Ethic for the Treatment of Animals* (New York: The Continuum Publishing Co., 1996), 81-82.

³ Peter Singer, *Animal Liberation* (New York: Harper Collins, 2009), 220.

⁴ Translation of "Auschwitz beginnt da, wo jemand auf Schlachthof steht und denkt: Es sind ja nur Tiere." Quoted in Christa Blanke, *Da krühte der Hahn: Kirche für Tier? Eine Streitschrift* (Eschbach, Germany: Verlag am Eschbach, 1995), 48. Quoted in Patterson, *Eternal Treblinka*, 53.

⁵ Singer 95.

⁶ Adams, *Sexual Politics* 82.

⁷ Farm Sanctuary, "Factory Pork Production," <http://www.farmsanctuary.org/issues/factoryfarming/pork/>.

⁸ Temple Grandin and Catherine Johnson, *Animals Make Us Human: Creating the Best Life for Animals* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2009), 176.

⁹ Sue Coe, *Dead Meat* (New York: Four Walls Eight Windows, 1996) 62.

¹⁰ Adams, *Pornography* 109.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 80.

¹² *Ibid.*, 133.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 13.

¹⁴ Hooters of America, "About Hooters," <http://www.hooters.com/About.aspx>

¹⁵ Adams, *Pornography* 101.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 28.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 24.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* 17.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 9.

²⁰ Barbara Kruger, *Remote Control: Power, Cultures, and the World of Appearances* (1993; Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998), 5.

²¹ Judy Chicago, *Beyond the Flower: The Autobiography of a Feminist Artist* (New York: Viking Penguin Books-Penguin Books USA Inc., 1996) 182.

²² Edward Lucie-Smith, *Judy Chicago: An American Vision* (New York: Watson-Guption Publications-BPI Communications, Inc., 2000) 62.

²³ Lucie-Smith 72.

²⁴ Adams, *Sexual Politics* 13.

²⁵ Farm Sanctuary, "Factory Egg Production," <http://www.farmsanctuary.org/issues/factoryfarming/eggs/>

²⁶ Karen Davis, *Prisoned Chickens Poisoned Eggs* (Summertown, TN: Book Publishing Company, 1996), 132.

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