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Feral Attraction: Art, Becoming and Erasure

Foreword

In the summer of 1999 we (Bryndís Snæbjörnsdóttir and Mark Wilson) undertook a nine-day hike in Hornstrandir, an uninhabited and remote coastal area in the far north of Iceland. It was July and at that time of year, in that region there is 24-hour daylight. Remarkably however, for virtually the entire hike, we were submersed in a shroud of dense mist. Consequently, despite the general light, for over a week we were unable to see much beyond a few paces, either back from where we had walked, or ahead in the direction we were going. At the time, paradoxically, this had been a heady experience close to epiphanic in its effect. Where the physical activity of walking in ‘wild’ landscape for that length of time is normally associated with retinal reward, with ‘views’ to draw the eye into a distancing and objectifying relationship with the terrain and away from the immediacy of bodily locus, in this case, because of the mist, our attention was entirely held in an enforced myopia. Unable to draw upon the reassuring and conceptual certainties of a commanding view and so (dis)placed beyond the controlling apparatus of representation we were cast instead into the stumbling blindness of uncertainty, of indeterminacy, instinct, intuition, of saving our skin - in short, into the awkwardnesses of close terrain negotiation, survival and most significant of all – into the ontology of ‘the moment’.

Though revelatory, it was so in ways we could not easily express. We discussed it as a form of cerebral locking-in, where the deprivation of seeing either forward or back left us in a state of temporal suspension. The terrain remained to be negotiated, (we were driven with increasing anxiety by the imperative of an arranged rendezvous with a boat many miles south of our starting point) but this necessitated navigational means, which were suddenly and lastingly bereft of the faculty of vision. Like most people, we have experienced conditions of uncertainty and fear many times but this was altogether more all consuming and immersive. Simultaneously and crucially it must be said, it was also exhilarating.

The point of this is as a reference from which to suggest that there are other ways (involving the relinquishment of control) of experiencing and understanding the world beyond what is deliverable to us by means of language, semiotics and whatever means we customarily deploy in order to control. The story touches on ideas relating to the familiar and unfamiliar in the landscape. It turns the attention to methods we might use when confronted with the unknown, in order to soothe and calm anxiety and to populate our perceptual world instead with representations stripped of threat. It is no exaggeration to see the fear that prompts us to protect ourselves as being a key driver behind the acquisition of knowledge. The need to bring everything into the realm of what is understood and ‘known’,

has led us to cut ourselves adrift from things which otherwise would tax us. But the reductionism implicit in this process has without doubt left us impoverished in other ways. Our insulation from environments beyond our urban or agrarian control has robbed us in turn of the know-how of how to be, not just 'in' the world, but 'with' the world. In the context of this chapter, what we propose is that the attraction of a feral condition lies in contradictory feelings provoked in us, in a disruption of order and an escape from what is known, named or contained. It turns things upside down and calls into question the otherwise indisputable. It speaks of the intentionality of 'things' and like the arrival of sudden, heavy snow in the city, reminds us that things remain beyond human control. The condition that the feral state stirs in us, between uncertainty and exhilaration, or more practically between a sense of inconvenience or the opportunity to see things anew, is its compelling attraction.

Introduction

Feral Attraction explores the disconnection between empiricism and cultural determinacy and consider the effects of cultural blindfolding in a context of environmental fatalism. The project focuses on the site of the Vestfjords, a remote area in the North West of Iceland, which became the theatre for the enactment of urban/rural ideological tensions and ultimately, a frenetic and awkward resolution involving the herding and eventual eradication of a community of feral animals. The Vestfjords is an environment, which during the twentieth century has been increasingly host to controversy surrounding the inexorable population drain from a rural to urban way of life involving two gradual processes. One was the migration of people from farming regions into coastal towns (including Reykjavík) and the abandonment of farms in large parts of the Vestfjords. The second was the persistent out-migration from the region as a whole, including its coastal towns, both small and large. The herding narrative that follows in some way mirrors the management of remote farming families and small communities, the continuing presence of which came to be considered from an administrative perspective, to be an unsustainable drain on the wider National project. Our art research project focuses on the significance of imagery in the story and on the particular resonance of visual information in the accumulation and instrumentalisation of knowledge as the events unfolded.

Feral Attraction examines the particular incident in which, a flock of feral sheep, resident for several decades on the remote mountain peninsula of Tálkni in Iceland, was finally and with great difficulty rounded up in order to satisfy agricultural protocols and the legal subordination of farmed animals in Iceland. As recently as the 1920s, although not strictly considered good farming, it was not unusual in Iceland to keep sheep out and grazing through the winter months – a custom known in Icelandic as 'útigangur'. For a number of reasons including the increased capability for haymaking through mechanization and the need to address widespread land degradation and soil erosion, during the twentieth

century the practice fell increasingly out of favour. Anyone now who allows the sheep to overwinter in the mountains not only transgresses what is thought of as good practice, but indeed is in breach of the law itself. What began as a way of exercising more control over stock eventually came to affect perceptions of the animal itself and its relationship to its environment of over a thousand years. This was signified by a reduced estimation of its capacity to survive in its adoptive land and a concomitant increase therefore in the assumed responsibilities of its keepers.

As artists, our enquiry engages with environmental and relational discourse and so a scrutiny of the representation of others and other species is central to our work. In an earlier art project, *nanoq: flat out and bluesome* (2001-6)¹, concerned with the killing and capture of polar bears by British expeditions over the last two hundred years, we mapped a transition in the culturing of a 'wild' phenomenon. In *Feral Attraction* we follow in reverse, the passage of the Tálkni sheep, from farmed to feral beings, acknowledging their independent survival in a wild landscape. In respect of both transitions (polar bear or sheep) the association with man anticipates a fatality, veiled in a representational transformation. Amongst other intentions, our work critiques the still prevalent primacy of human interests and environmental exceptionalism together with the apparent impossibility of humankind to divorce itself from its solipsistic regard to self-survival, both practically and theoretically. Instead we lean towards a relational and ecological paradigm in which the species *Homo sapiens* is accepted as merely a player amongst a multitude of players.

Through Icelandic history the polar bear has been an occasional visitor to the island shores; folklore has generally recorded horrific accounts from these meetings². Far from seeking to underestimate the danger of polar bears under these circumstances, we want to take a step back to reflect and consider alternative and what we consider more measured and inquisitive approaches and behaviour towards the 'aberration' of unexpected arrivals and migrations in the landscape. In Svalbard, a territory in which the encounters between polar bear and man are frequent, legal constraints are in place, to avoid polar bear deaths whenever possible. The right of the indigenous animal to this landscape, which the Spitzbergen human community has come also partly to occupy, is paramount, instilling and reflecting a different sense of respect and environmental order. Whilst on an artists' residency in Longyearbyen, Svalbard in 2010, the local radio reported a group of tourists in crisis; a polar bear had shown up around their camp and was not responding to air rifles, flares and other customary measures used to

¹ *nanoq: flat out and bluesome* traced stuffed polar bear specimens in Great Britain from their current locations in museums and private collections, back in time to their Arctic encounter with man.

² In 2009 the authors were present at Skagafjörður in northern Iceland to witness a failed attempt to capture and relocate a polar bear discovered in the area. Despite a national will to manage the situation more adeptly than had been done in the past and Governmental involvement towards that end, the incident once more ended in the death of the polar bear.

scare bears away. But instead of tranquilizing the animal and airlifting it to a new location, as might normally be the case, the ombudsman/sysselman ordered that the tourists instead be relocated by helicopter.

In respect of these examples on Svalbard and Tálkni, the potency of the encounter between ‘man’ and ‘animal’ signals complexity in the perceived constitution of environmental order and protocols. Australian ecofeminist Val Plumwood (2000), in her reflections on her experience of being attacked and nearly killed by a crocodile in the East Alligator Lagoon in Kakadu, northern Australia, highlighted a significant ethical perspective by recording her determination that contrary to the normal response following such attacks, the animal in question should not be hunted down and killed, believing herself to be an intruder into its territory.

In taxonomic and other human systems designed to underpin the human position in relation to other beings, the differences between a crocodile, a polar bear and a sheep are clear. But what can be compared usefully is our approach and attitude here to any species testing the margins of what we consider to be ‘our’ territory. In our inability to adjust to the signals of environmental threat (a condition sustained by such anthropocentrism), it is and will remain impossible to distinguish or redraw our taxonomic biases of significance. Dust, plants, animals, minerals, biomass, particles, waves, oxygen, cold, densities are oceanic in their combined effects and mutuality. In this light, importance may not be measured in their apparent individuality, nor indeed in their ‘human significance’, but in their infinitely complex behavioural associations and interactions.

Historical context

There is a history to ‘feral’ sheep being on Tálkni. The flock initially came from a farm called Lambeyri, whose owner, due to personal circumstances, is thought not to have been managing his sheep strictly in accordance with the law. In the early 1970s he stopped farming, leaving the farm to his family. They chose to keep the house and the land, but did not wish to keep farm animals. It is understood that by that time, the remaining sheep at the farm had already taken to the mountain. In accordance with Icelandic law, landowners of registered farmland have a duty to contribute to herding sheep generally in their district. In the Vestfjords this involves negotiating the many steep mountains characterizing this landscape. It is

a dangerous job, requiring detailed knowledge of the area as well as substantial agility and fitness.

The first officially recorded and acknowledged existence of the sheep in Tálkni was in 1984, when there was an outbreak in Iceland of the neurodegenerative disease scrapie ('riða' in Icelandic). At the time it was thought that between forty and sixty sheep were on the mountain. An argument concerning the presence, or otherwise, of the disease ensued between local farmers and the Chief Veterinary Officer. The farmers wanted proof that the disease was in their area before agreeing to cull their sheep. The veterinary officer was unable to provide such evidence, but pointed to the unregulated sheep on Tálkni as being amongst those that might have crossed the district borders in question and so were possible carriers of the disease. In the end, the Chief Veterinary Officer ordered these sheep to be culled. To fulfill the task, he called on a special division of the Icelandic Coastal Guard known as the 'Viking Squad' to shoot the sheep on the mountain from a helicopter. This was something at which this special squad was not expert. To make matters worse, the expedition hit bad weather, resulting in it having to be aborted, leaving some sheep dead but many more badly wounded. A few days later, when the weather had calmed down, the local rescue team then went over to the mountain and found, as reported by Lilja Magnúsdóttir when we interviewed her in Reykjavík on 25th of June 2010 "thirty sheep either dead or dying". In respect of these animals, the team had no choice but to finish what had been started. They also took photographs at the scene, which locals would reference in support of their opposition to further remote directives of the Chief Veterinary Officer back in Reykjavík. This visual evidence prompted two consequences; it helped constitute an identity for the remaining flock of sheep as 'Tálknafé' (Tálkni-sheep) and it galvanized the identity of the local farmers, affirming the division between themselves and the authorities based in the Capital.

Twenty-five years later, in October 2009, news came that the flock of feral sheep on Tálkni had once more been targeted, but on this occasion they had been herded from the mountain and slaughtered. As the story of their capture unfolded through the media, it revealed a fascinating tale of human dominion. A group of the best herders ('smalar') of the area, together with their sheepdogs, had risked their lives in climbing the mountain to retrieve the sheep. The adventure was undertaken by order from the chief legislative officer in the area. The consequence was that from a flock of twenty-five, fourteen sheep were captured alive, five perished as they fell from the cliffs in their attempts to avoid capture and six managed to escape. The fourteen captive sheep were loaded on board a boat that had brought the herders to the mountain and taken to the nearby town of Patreksfjord where they were immediately slaughtered. In addition to the ewes there were four rams and retrieved from the other side of the mountain, three yearling rams. The six remaining sheep, two rams, three ewes and one ewe lamb were retrieved a few

months later in January 2010, thus ending for the time being at least, the existence of sheep on Tálkni.

Art and Relationality

The story caused considerable controversy in Iceland at the time, and for some, provided a new focus for environmental concerns. In order to find out more, we visited the Tálkni area in the summer of 2010, together with Dr. Karl Benediktsson, Professor of Human Geography at the University of Iceland and Unndór Jónsson, an independent artist and researcher and recorded a series of interviews with people who'd been connected to the events. We gathered images, documentation and other material along the way. On location we interviewed; Ásgeir Jónsson, Ásgeir Sveinsson, Þröstur Reynisson, Sveinn Eyjólfur Tryggvason and Ragnar Jörundsson and on our return to Reykjavík, we interviewed Lilja Magnúsdóttir another local inhabitant temporarily residing in Reykjavík as well as previous Chief Veterinary Officer Dr. Sigurður Sigurðarson, and Dr. Ólafur Dýrmundsson, whose specialism is the Icelandic sheep, and who works for the Icelandic Farmers' Association.

Ásgeir Jónsson is a member of the local council, who had also for some years been responsible for organising the autumn roundups of sheep. His role was important, but complicated, in that for many years he had turned a blind eye to the sheep being on the mountain. Due to his official capacity, when the court order came, he was forced to take part in the clearance. He also had valuable information for this project in that due to a recent minor accident he was stationed back in the boat to receive the animals during the herding, which meant that he had physical contact with each sheep captured.

Ásgeir Sveinsson, a sheep farmer, who lives and farms with his brother and elderly father. At the time of interview he had a flock of 800 sheep. He has a reputation as an excellent 'fjármaður' (shepherd) and is the owner of exceptionally well-trained sheepdogs. Ásgeir's interview provided a detailed description of the sheep's unique behaviour and their unusual reaction to humans and dogs. He is very knowledgeable about sheep breeding and is the proud keeper of the only remaining known descendant of the sheep from Tálkni. This ewe was the progeny of a sheep that had escaped to Tálkni but which he had managed to herd back from the flock. His description of the characteristics of this animal was of further interest. He told us that in spring, when released, she heads to the top of the nearest local mountain and spends the summer there, apparently alone.

Þröstur Reynisson took part in the herding as an employee of the town council and the owner of a good dog, prepared to stand its ground. His role was to be at the foot of the mountain with his dog to stop the sheep escaping along the beach. He talked about the wariness of the flock, reasoning that from time to time the sheep had been shot at by locals, some for target practice and by others for meat.

Sveinn Eyjólfur Tryggvason was recruited by the governor of the local council and had been put in charge of the herding operation. He selected the men who went on this trip. In the interview he discussed the different characteristics of this flock and why the dogs did not work as they might in other sheep herding exercises. He did not consider it unusual that some sheep fell from the cliffs, as it is behaviourally characteristic of sheep when cornered on a mountain. He talked from the perspective of animal welfare and observed that the flock would have been much larger had it been kept in the right conditions. He mentioned that only one sheep of the nineteen caught, had been earmarked, as all farmed sheep are. This animal had been on Tálkni for four years, indicating that it had chosen to join the feral flock.

In our interview with Ragnar Jörundsson, the governor of the municipality of Vesturbyggð, to which the village of Patreksfjörður (Patreksfjord) belongs, he talked about the police involvement and how the local council established jurisdiction to clear the area of sheep. He discussed the division between the local people and city dwellers “who don’t know anything about sheep”. He also accused the media of reporting the incidents in a particularly frenzied way in order to stir up opposition, deeming their reportage to be misinformed. He talked about the responsibilities of the district council towards sheep that are unclaimed and therefore ‘in need’. These sheep by default belong to the council. He said the council takes advice from the Chief Veterinary Office and the Farmers Union and that both thought it best to clear the sheep of the area.

Lilja Magnúsdóttir was born and raised at the farm opposite Tálkni. She was part of the first serious attempt of gathering the Tálkni sheep, which took place in 1992. She is interested in the breeding of Icelandic sheep and described the physical appearance of the sheep both as livestock and as meat during and after the 1992 gathering. In our interview her description concerned the particular shape of the feet, observing them to have been higher and thicker than in normal sheep. She also described their body as being longer and more slender. As produce she described the location of fat as being in the muscles themselves and under the skin, whereas in the farmed Icelandic sheep the fat is around the abdomen. She proposed that such sheep would not have survived, as they would too easily have been caught up with and trapped in the heavy snow. Her theory concerns ‘natural selection’ as she calls it – saying that the sheep originating from

the Lambeyri stock – the ones that were ‘abandoned’ as it were when the farm closed – were more suited to the landscape and the weather and that this was the reason the majority of the flock looked as it did, despite newer additions.

Ólafur Dýrmundsson’s comments were from what he considers the perspective of animal welfare. He put forward various reasons why sheep are not able to take care of themselves. He pointed out that one out of every four sheep taken in 2009-10 were from other farms around the area. Despite that, he acknowledged that the majority was of a colour no longer prominent in Icelandic sheep. He says that this had caused difficulties for the coast guard elite squad when attempting to shoot them from the helicopter, because the colour blends with the landscape – making the animals difficult to see. He went on to say that this colour is the dominant outcome when mixing with white and that the presence of a flock of sheep in Tálkni would always encourage other sheep to join the group, it being such a difficult area to herd. In this respect he was sympathetic with farmers at not being able to go after them. While, he denied there being any such thing as ‘feral sheep’, he estimated that of 470,000 sheep in Iceland, approximately 500 are not accounted for.

Jón Þórðarson was one of the owners of the surrounding land closest to Tálkni. He was against the herding of the sheep, wanting instead to keep them on the mountain. At the time of our visit he was living in the nearby town of Bíldudalur and from there he runs a tourist and fishing business together with guesthouse and art gallery/residency. His idea was that they could have become a tourist attraction. He tried to stop the sheep being herded by declaring them to be on his land; however by law, in order for this to be acknowledged, he would have had to build shelters for them on the site and so his claim was dismissed.

Fig.2 (sheep on Tálkni)

From the beginning of our research in Iceland, the role of the image was of great importance. Images were crucial in cementing the identity of the sheep as a ‘special flock’ by their unique appearance on the one hand and on the other, by means of the television footage documenting their attempts to escape capture on this inhospitable mountain. This footage, stood in contrast and conflicted with an image of domesticated, living produce destined for the slaughter and consumption normally associated with ‘réttir’, the autumnal roundup. In the imaginations of many who protested from near and far, these sheep instead were independent beings of note, deserving of their right to live out their lives. The imaged embodiment of the animal in an effectively non-human landscape seems to challenge the scope of human representation by means of a paradigm shift. In its apparent self-determination, the animal in question can be seen to have grown into

‘its larger self’ through its adoption of this landscape as a permanent home beyond human accessibility and control. The (albeit perhaps reluctant) acceptance of this by locals in the surrounding area for so long, eventually in itself became a bone of contention prompting the central government office to make demands for the flock to be recovered.

In further comparison between the polar bear and the Tálkni sheep in the context of the Icelandic landscape, it has always been deemed necessary to kill the polar bears arriving in the country, because the Icelandic wilderness is considered not to be their natural environment. As a non-native species and a carnivore, the polar bear is considered a danger to other Icelandic beings and impossible to contain humanely and securely. The Tálkni sheep on the other hand did not threaten anyone or anything. The land they occupied was not managed, occupied or indeed coveted by anyone else. In fact, the family who owned Tálkni was quite comfortable with the flock of sheep remaining there. This however raised the legal necessity to erect houses for their shelter and upkeep – itself, an impossible task, considering the nature of the land and its limited accessibility. Paradoxically, this would in turn have undermined the independence of the flock and therefore defeated the purpose of any armistice.

There are different ways of interpreting what happened on the mountain the day the flock was herded, leaving five sheep dead and six still at liberty. There are many questions to be asked regarding animal consciousness – whether for instance that in the context of new circumstances, jumping from a cliff is indicative of the exercising of choice. There are the complicated distinctions to be made between what is seen as a ‘noble’ and an ‘ignoble’ killing – the affront to the many Icelanders who protested was triggered by what was seen to be a bungled and, as a consequence, inhumane, exercise of shepherding. Was this perhaps an unconscious conflation of the idealized concepts of tidiness and seamless erasure? When humans slaughter animals, their imposed departure is one of transformation, not normally regarded as one of eradication. In order to preserve a sense of vital continuity, within Western culture, particularly Anglo-American, it has been a characteristic that insofar as we are eaters of animal flesh we focus on meat as opposed to the extinguishing of life that such consumption necessitates. This death is a byproduct of our desire to eat, but its visibility has been discreetly minimized in deference to this more culturally palatable focus of attention. Everywhere in the story, and not least in our interviews, there are contradictory perspectives and conflicting ideals. There is the unquestioning belief by some in the need for adherence to existing legislation. There are environmental perspectives; those based on animal rights; and there are matters of professional and moral pride and the desire of farmers, to be seen to be ‘taking care’ of the animals in their charge.

Exposition and process

From an early stage in the examination of this story and in the research material we accumulated, we stumbled again and again on the claim that something odd had happened to the sheep during their time on Tálkni. In the media, in popular accounts, and in the interviews we conducted with those on the ground, there is repeated mention of an adaptation in the sheep's physiology. A natural, adaptive, even evolutionary process had occurred, due apparently to their constant negotiation of this demanding mountainous terrain. This adaptive response to the topographic constitution of the landscape that ensured their relative isolation and insulation from humans for so long, seems to have been most conspicuous in a lengthening of their legs. But in the absence of concrete evidence, how is this ever to be tested?

In art, there is often more significance in one identifiable and well-articulated detail than can be relayed in a wealth of information, particularly where such a detail exposes a flaw, a fluctuation, or break in the rhythm of cultural (and human-specific) affairs. Relationality is key to our artworks and projects. It is reflected in the research process by which we seek to gather information and evidence through contact with individuals and organisations concerned. These meetings are often recorded or documented through photography, video or audio and are often pivotal in influencing the structure and the development of an artwork. The biggest significance of this story is in the exposure of the insecurities of 'expert' culture. Those who felt they should have power felt their power usurped. In managing the evidence (the disposal of the flock and subsequently of the carcasses and bones), the community of experts involved, reduced the physical signs by which the history of this event (this nomadic becoming) could be remembered or told. In the absence of relics and data, all fact and fiction is conflated, all borders between them are blurred and therefore subject, potentially, to wholesale dismissal as myth. But by ascribing greater significance to materiality and ensuring its strategic absence, the perpetrators of this act perhaps underestimated the ripple effect of that removal – into every void, the imagination will pour its will or its questions. Without the hard evidence to provide a satisfactory backstop to such suspicion, the impertinence of the questions is always likely to exceed what facts alone might have tempered or quelled.

Fig.3 (*Relic*)

In this work, the value of the leg and its transformation pertains to its role in the extruded and extruding process of liberation – the sheep remained out and over time became better capable of being so by a process of adaptive response to the environment. The symbolic driver – in representational terms is in a retrieved relic – even (by necessity) a faked relic, designed and made in order to give value to something observed but allowed neither to survive nor be measured and corroborated by instruments of science. For this artwork, the bone is extended in correspondence with the lengthening of the legs as was reported by some observers of the sheep. The gap of significance, is bridged by a hoop of silver, a material we accept culturally as being ‘of value’. The human representation and symbolic conferral of importance may even be seen as a compromise here, in deference to the semiotics of a culture that often fails to recognize intrinsic value. Here, silver gives presence to the missing, valuable, phenomenological and symbolic apparent ‘effect’. It signifies the change that is intrinsic to a) a period of time, b) a specific location c) the transitional condition of ‘becoming’ and in addition, both d) a theft and e) a possible conspiracy where all evidence of the flock and its bodily remains was eradicated deliberately, before biologists (for example) had the chance to examine them. Broadly it is the embodiment of difference – in opinions and of the contested claim that the sheep adapted as a consequence of having become feral. As there was no opportunity for scientific study to be conducted on the flock before or after slaughter, we mark a space in which this extension hovers between being a memorial and a relational corollary of being feral in a mountainous landscape. With this intervention, we keep alive the story of a community of domestic animals, which despite climatic inclemency and the seeming impenetrability of this landscape, survived without human care for three decades and indeed showed every sign that they might have continued to live there in perpetuity.

After-lives

The flawed nature of this enterprise, that is the inefficient and messy nature of the herding of the Tálkni sheep, had a retrospective after-effect, calling into question the validity of the enterprise itself. The very representational tropes which ennoble human agrarian enterprise, for example the promotion of efficiency in the management of land and animals of the kind implicit in historical paintings, (Thomas Gainsborough’s *Mr & Mrs Andrews*, Paul Potter’s *Bull*, and innumerable 17th Century livestock paintings), throw the dubious nature of the reclamation of the herd into sharp relief. Whilst involving a starkly different kind of relationship to our ‘landscape others’ there are parallels also to be drawn (and they have been described above in this text) between the controversy and contradictions embodied in this episode and those prompted by what has become an intermittent but recurrent phenomenon in northern Iceland – the arrival of ‘stray’ polar bears. Tidiness and order is threatened by the presence of the feral animal on the one hand and the appearance of the exhausted and dangerous alien

wild animal on the other. Rather than engaging with complexity and being open to the opportunities it may offer, the default position of local and national governmental authorities seems to be to excise the agent that would test its borders, thereby allowing the maintenance of the status quo. The resultant human fault-line seems to run between two ideologies – a national, establishment view on one hand, in which the integrity of Icelandic farming (and perhaps culture) is an imperative. On the other, there is a growing lobby of those whose interests can perhaps be said to be less locally rooted and who are able at this point to exercise little direct power, but whose collective voice increasingly coheres around environmental ideas extending far beyond nationhood.

In another art project from 2010 entitled, *Uncertainty in the City*, we explored the idea of contested ‘human’ environments with specific relation to the presence of other species. The project hinged on an (albeit unwritten) assumption of neutral interspecific claim to territory and we conducted interviews with hundreds of participants in relation to their encounters with animals within and around the margins of their home. Along with an invitation to retell their stories we invited them to consider ideas of ownership, colonization and encroachment in this context. Given the space to objectify the experiences there was surprising openness towards questioning the rationality of their responses and to confront the emotional inconsistencies within such experience. The garden – a piece of land we suggested was a surrogate, albeit altered tract of ‘nature’ – is a kind of cultural epidermis by which tolerances and affections for others moving through, were tested and analyzed. In this project and more widely we use aberrant exemplars to challenge accepted behavioural and cultural tropes. In the *Uncertainty* project, non-human encroachment on human systems was often, although not always, viewed as a negative occurrence. Typical cases were the presence of ants for instance around the door to a house – the margins of tolerance were drawn in relation to the proximity to threshold or perceived infringement either towards or across that line. Urban foxes and seagulls are amongst the most consistently contested species and their presence is alternately construed as pleasant, desirable or offensive, according to the experience and/or conditioning of the humans concerned. In the case of the Tálkni sheep, however, the migration away from the human, in giving further dimensionality to the phenomenon of human/nonhuman entanglements, reminds us that our presence is neither necessarily crucial nor desirable for most species, even ones we’ve domesticated and trained to be reliant upon us.

The feral flock was a thorn in the side of the agricultural community – not necessarily those in the local area in question, but more starkly and tellingly, from a remote, central-administrative perspective. But in the resistance of something, particularly an entity that is normally attributed with little self-determination, as artists we see something much more interesting, in that it breaks the mould of our expectations – it draws our attention. The expression and enactment of

capabilities beyond what we are given to believe is expected, forces us to re-examine our perception of that thing, and our initial reasoning for arriving at such a perspective. Did we believe we had modified the behaviour and capacities of the domestic sheep to the extent that it had indeed become an unreconstructed model of our projected will upon it? Just as we might enjoy the frisson of being lost when we believe that it is a temporary condition, so too do we find fascinating the idea that our constructed world-view is in some way destabilized by the will of another. In the same way therefore, when such aberrant behaviour is suppressed, there is a sense that an injustice is done. Something, which appeared to us to offer a new perspective – rather than being acknowledged and valued, preserved and observed – is eliminated purely in order that the status quo is restored and the behaviour-model is reaffirmed. Such action is based on an anthro-utilitarian approach that sees adaption or evolution within systems we have engineered around other adopted organisms as running counter to our interests and therefore undesirable. Simultaneously of course the phenomenon exposes the mythic projections we deploy in order to uphold our utilitarian requirements: if an organism is useful for this and that, then anything – any capacity, behaviour or inclination that does not support that function-set – may, if noticed, be deemed undesirable and may be subject to extirpation. This thinking is the basis of intensive breeding programmes and the kind of genetic modification that gives us for instance, hairless cats and seedless grapes. It is this single-mindedness that in modernity has caused us increasingly to consider things, places and beings in isolation. This has been to the detriment of possible developments towards a more coherent and complex world-view, which might privilege, instead, an understanding and appreciation of ecologies and the acknowledgement of material interconnectivity.

There is a tension between what we hold culturally as being right and proper and what we observe as a bid by another agent to disrupt that order. At the heart of this case is something that may be dismissed by many to be trivial and inconsequential; for us, in ways resonant with those ideas proposed by Jane Bennett (2010) in her book *Vibrant Matter*, it serves as a vital pointer to expose how human systems suppress the inclinations and capabilities of ‘things’, seeing instead only what we have designated for them. We have a tendency to blind ourselves to the wills of those outside our systems whose actions do not correspond with, or seem at odds with, our own – who are simply not compliant in the human enterprise at hand. When the animal agent is one with which we technically coexist, (a domestic animal) the oversight seems particularly acute. A lack of porosity is evident – a resistance to ideas or indicators of change – a reactionary dismissal of knowledge concerning environment and the adaptability of denizens – the shaping of existence by environment – the capacity of discrete environments to model not only new biological permutations but to spawn new behavioural possibilities as a consequence of introductions or migration – a failure on our part still to acknowledge that a condition of ‘becoming’ is actually the norm – in nature, stability and material independence are illusory.

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