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[See table of contents](#)

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CONVERSING WITH GHOSTS OF THE PREVIOUSLY TAMED

Martina Caruso

In this article I argue that representing animal-human relationality in contemporary video art shows how certain artists are addressing recent philosophical perspectives such as object-oriented ontology within a posthuman and post-anthropocentric paradigm. While the philosophies that treat the posthuman, from object-oriented ontology to speculative realism and vital materialism, imply a utopian refusal of hierarchy between human and non-human existence, artists may be hard-pressed to represent the described new order, which, at the moment, does not exist socially or politically.

Timothy Morton's idea in *The Ecological Thought* (2010), for example, is that, in accepting that all bodies are affected by and affect each other, human beings lose their central, dominant role in order to be part of a "mesh," where inside and outside no longer exist. In *Vibrant Matter*, 2010, political theorist Jane Bennett departs from late nineteenth-century philosophers like Henri Bergson and Hans Driesch to argue for vital materialism as a belief system that allows for new political goals "with more channels of communication between members."¹



Christoph Keller, *Storni morti*, 2018. Video (stills), colour, sound, 15 min. Courtesy of the artist.

The ‘members’ of vital materialism stretch across all forms of organic and inorganic existence. Other references include Giorgio Agamben’s *The Open: Man and Animal* (2004), Donna Haraway’s *When Species Meet* (2008) and Eduardo Kohn’s *How Forests Think: Toward an Anthropology Beyond the Human* (2013). One of the aims of this article is to understand the role of the technical apparatus used in video art and the way in which it narrates animal-human relationality.

Performance art has been one medium in which artists have explored this theme, such as Gino De Dominicis’ *Tentativo di Volo* (1969), Joseph Beuys’ *I Like America and America Likes Me* (1974), Oleg Kulik’s *Mad Dog* series from the 1990s and Marcus Coates with *Goshawk (self-portrait)* from 1999. More recently, Patricia Piccinini and the Italian duo I Santissimi have been creating hybrid human-animal creatures that border on the abject. And yet others, like Paola Pivi and Invernomuto, have been (ab)using wild animals in their work, but this does not concern the ideas of horizontality that I seek to explore here.

Here, I am examining the video art works of Christoph Keller, Corinne Silva and Basma Alsharif. Arguably, their work suggests an underlying posthuman perspective in which the animals, and the technical apparatus recording them, exist within an axiom of “vibrant materialism.” The human doing the recording is obfuscated in various ways, opening up spaces that non-human existences can penetrate and in which they can acquire agency. I question how the artists may be endeavouring to privilege “other kinds of conative bodies” over human efforts in their works.²

In “Conversing with Ghosts of the Previously Tamed” I imply that the “previously tamed” (i.e. animals and robots, or the technological apparatus used to film the animals) relate to humans in a different way, at the moment perhaps still in cryptic, ghostly form, as artists try to focus on how to translate and represent a new way of thinking about an anthropocentric world order that is no longer acceptable, but for which there is no tangible alternative.



Christoph Keller, *Storni morti*, 2018. Video (still), colour, sound, 15 min. Courtesy of the artist.

The Disembodied Camera and the “Mesh”

Christoph Keller focuses on starlings in his video *Storni Morti* (*Dead Starlings*) (2018). Scenes of an interview with a conservationist working for the LIPU (Italian protection of birds organisation) interrupt images of the birds swarming against the twilight. The video alludes to a mysterious spate of starlings dying and falling out of the sky in January 2018. The conservationist explains that we, as humans, cannot intervene in the birds’ existence on the basis of our human empathy, which causes a distorted view of their ecosystem.

After accidentally being trapped in the Verano, the main cemetery in Rome, Keller filmed the birds at dusk. His style is meditative, slow and the image is frequently blurred as he zooms in and out of the murmurations. The blurs seem to mirror the conservationist’s comments about our incapacity to understand the starlings. Our thinking, as viewers, starts to feel blurred. Keller creates a subtle atmosphere of uncertainty and unknowing in which the camera appears to mimic the murmuration, moving in and out of focus. The artist revealed to me that, in the process of editing, he reversed the order of the interview takes so that the flow of arguments becomes non linear or floating, although the statement remains consistent, further enhancing the viewer’s sense of disorientation.

Although the artist is recording, his presence is not felt: neither in the cemetery, where the only noise is that of bird calls and distant traffic, nor in the interview save through the reactions of the LIPU interviewee. The idea of the camera having a mind of its own is one that Dziga Vertov captured as early as 1929 in *Man with a Movie Camera*. The film

enacts a video camera’s ability to travel and stalk human activity apparently unaided as though it had a desire to insinuate itself into voyeuristic situations. At times, the man behind the camera appears to be a slave to the needs of the machine.

A camera’s form of agency, which trumps that of the human, is an idea that theorists have entertained in various forms from Walter Benjamin’s celebrated essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” (1936) to Roland Barthes’ *Camera Lucida* in which the author expresses his complex emotions at the behest of a machine over which he feels he has no control. Jacques Derrida takes this idea the furthest perhaps in *Specters of Marx* (1993) when he uses the “visor effect”—a metaphor from *Hamlet*—to describe the uncanniness of spectrality whereby “we do not see who looks at us.”⁷³ Derrida develops this idea in *Echographies de la télévision* (1996), observing that while we may believe we are free agents watching spectacles of images on devices, on another level, “wherever there are these specters, we are being watched, we sense or think we are being watched.”⁷⁴ In *Specters of Marx* he observes that the “traditional scholar does not believe in ghosts,” but that “another scholar” (perhaps the postmodern or the posthuman scholar) “would finally be capable of thinking beyond the opposition between presence and non-presence, actuality and inactuality, life and non-life, of the possibility of the specter [...]” The spectrality of the camera, which seems to float in *Storni Morti*, appears to embody such a presence and non-presence.

Keller, as human, has absconded in order to make room for a heightened sense of interaction between the camera, the birds and the conservationist who appears as a mediator between humans and the world of the starlings. A poster behind her shows an owl’s head poised above hers and, perhaps the video’s theme influenced me, I interpreted her features—large eyes and expressive hand gestures—as quasi bird-like. As the viewer, I found myself wondering, “what is it like to be a starling” as I thought back to Thomas Nagle’s seminal paper “What is it like to be a bat?” in which he posits the impossibility of an objective human perspective. The camera, and its “visor-effect,” which destabilises the sense of who is recording and who is viewing, invites us to question the idea of an objective point of view and, perhaps, allows us to briefly give up a hubristic sense of human agency and participate in Morton’s “mesh” in which nothing is uniform, static or harmonious.

The Fox, the Turkey and the Drone: the Perspective of the Untamed

A similar presence of non-human agency emerges in Corinne Silva’s video work *Night Circuits* (2018). Silva filmed her London neighbourhood over a period of weeks, trying to track urban foxes at night. The two-channel looped video alternates late night scenes of barren streets: no moving cars or human beings. There is a sustained sense that something might happen, but nothing does. Like in Keller’s work, Silva’s presence is not felt: her footsteps are unheard. While Keller’s footage appears to participate in the birds’ movements, the steadiness of Silva’s image gives us a sense of ghostly fox-like stalking. There are only a few discreet sightings of foxes in the distance. The aesthetic of the “abandoned” streets absorbs the



Corinne Silva, *Night Circuits*, 2018.
Two-channel HD video (stills), colour, sound, 11 min.
Courtesy of the artist.



Basma Alsharif, *Home Movies Gaza*, 2013. Video (stills), colour, sound, 24 min. Courtesy of the artist.

viewer and previously unnoticed activity surfaces: leaves rustle on a branch, a solitary alarm system flashes above a manicured front garden, a fox yelps, clouds cover the moon above an unlit council block. The environment is alive, the camera is immersed and the artist, the human, has almost disappeared in an attempt, perhaps, to relinquish the subjective perspective.

In *Home Movies Gaza* (2013), Basma Alsharif's aesthetic is more surreal than Keller and Silva's, joining disconnected sequences of domestic and coastal scenes in Gaza. I am interested in her focus on a rafter of turkeys she filmed in the inner courtyard of a farm. The sound of airplanes or drones overwhelms the audio, which the turkeys interrupt with desultory clucks. In this case, Alsharif's presence is felt: her steps on the gravel can be heard, her filming is agitated and yet purposeful, at times erratic and apparently in imitation of what appears to me, as a human viewer, to be the erratic, searching movements of the birds. Alsharif has superimposed an electric blue shimmer on the bodies of some of the turkeys evoking the idea of infrared radiation highlighting the living bodies as targets. A millisecond timer on the screen along with the noise of the drones overhead, heighten the sense that the camera is standing in for a robot-like machine identifying potential targets.

The contrast between the vulnerable nonchalant turkeys and Alsharif's quasi-obsessive tracking of them appears to allude to the birds' powerlessness and incapacity to return the gaze of the all-seeing, spectral eye. Derrida uses the idea of the "visor effect" to explain why we live in a heteronomy (i.e. under the power of forces outside of ourselves) rather than an autonomy: "From the moment that I cannot

exchange or meet a glance, I am dealing with the other, who comes before me; an absolute autonomy is already no longer possible."⁵ The visor effect traps the viewer in an unequal viewing dynamic. In a separate scene of *Home Movies Gaza*, two lions are attacking and killing an elephant on the National Geographic channel playing in a domestic interior. The satellite reception is bad and the image and sound break up; it's frustrating to watch. Since 2007, the lack of technological infrastructure and frequent blackouts in Gaza is just one of the many ways the population is made to suffer from the Israeli blockade. While Alsharif does not dwell explicitly on the politics, the spectral presence of inequality, violence and tyranny suffuses the work through associations of sound and image in which plants, animals, humans and television sets attempt to carry on with daily life in a repressive system and under watchful, unseen, drones.

Although Alsharif is more humanly present in the video than Keller and Silva, she too seems to be shortening the distance between the animal perspective and that of the technological apparatus recording it, masquerading like a drone-camera hovering over the turkeys. This idea seems connected to Francis Alys' *The Nightwatch* (2004) in which the artist tracked a fox's movements during one night in the National Gallery in London on the building's various CCTVs. The animal tries in vain, and with seeming angst, to find its way out of this enormous trap. Alys and Alsharif's works ultimately comment on the oppressiveness of state control on human activity via animals that stand-in as symbols.

Silva and Keller obviate notions of targeting and entrapment, engaging with the animals' perspective in an immersive way. The human element is marginalized, favouring animal activities at dusk or in the night, at in-between moments, perhaps symbolically when "specters" or ghosts are more likely to surface: the divide between human and non-human (animal or technological) existence is reduced.

Are the artists trying to work their way through Derrida's theory of "heteronomy," yielding agency to the camera and the animals, in a non-human reality that challenges anthropocentrism? Bennett discusses non-human existence as "fields of energy," which she endows with a potential disruptive political effect. In contrast to Jacques Rancière, for whom Bennett observes, "nonhumans do not qualify as participants in a demos," Bennett argues for a re-imagining of the "being of the demos: not as a formed thing or fixed entity, but as an unruly activity or indeterminate wave of energy." This controversial idea appears to subtend the work of Silva and Keller in which a horizontality between camera and animal and the removal of the human narrative disrupts the agency of the artist as author, choreographer, inventor making room for a third space.

In one of his works (*Ceppo sradicato*, 2018) Keller purposefully references Gilles Clément's "Tiers Paysage" in which the French philosopher theorises a "third landscape," a "space that expresses neither power nor submission to power."⁷ In the "third landscape," the forsaken can let their spirits err freely: Alsharif, Keller and Silva's ghosts of the untamed are given a space in which to contrast human hubris and create greater fluidity, decolonizing the distinctions and hierarchies that exist between humans and non-humans within a Western capitalist system.



1.
Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press Books, 2010), 103.
2.
Jane Bennett, 102.
3.
Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*. Trans. Peggy Kamuf, Editions Galilée, 1993. (London: Routledge Classics, 2006), 6.
4.
Jacques Derrida and Bernard Stiegler, "Spectrographies" in *Echographies of Television: Filmed Interviews*, 1996, p. 122. from https://monoskop.org/File:Derrida_Jacques_Stiegler_Bernard_Echographies_of_Television_Filmed_Interviews.pdf
5.
Jacques Derrida, "Spectrographies" in *Echographies of Television*, 122.
6.
Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 106.
7.
Gilles Clément, "Manifeste du Tiers Paysage," 4. in http://www.gillesclement.com/fichiers/_tierspaypublications_92045_manifeste_du_tiers_paysage.pdf

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