



102 A totem pole blessing ceremony led by members of the Lummi Nation at the opening of 'Whale People: Protectors of the Sea', 2018

extractivist economy, *The Natural History Museum* advocates for a radical and transformative approach to museological representation at a time of ecological crisis.

The accession of animal specimens into the collections of national museums of natural history was from the outset bound up with the violence of colonialism, as the art practices discussed in this chapter reveal. Discriminatory attitudes towards the non-human species objectified in exhibition dioramas went hand in hand with the perpetuation of an ideology of racial supremacy that sought to justify imperialist domination, while the decision to display or hide from view collections of taxidermized animals has also followed changing political winds. Dismantling the edifice of the traditional natural history museum, artists have explored the potential of non-anthropocentric natural histories to reveal the dynamic and in recent times increasingly fraught relationship between humans and animals. Updating these institutions for a time of climate emergency, they have advocated abandoning the pretence of scientific disinterestedness to actively side with endangered species in their struggle against anthropogenic extinction and decolonizing the museum in the name of the excluded.

Chapter 2

Non-Human Persons

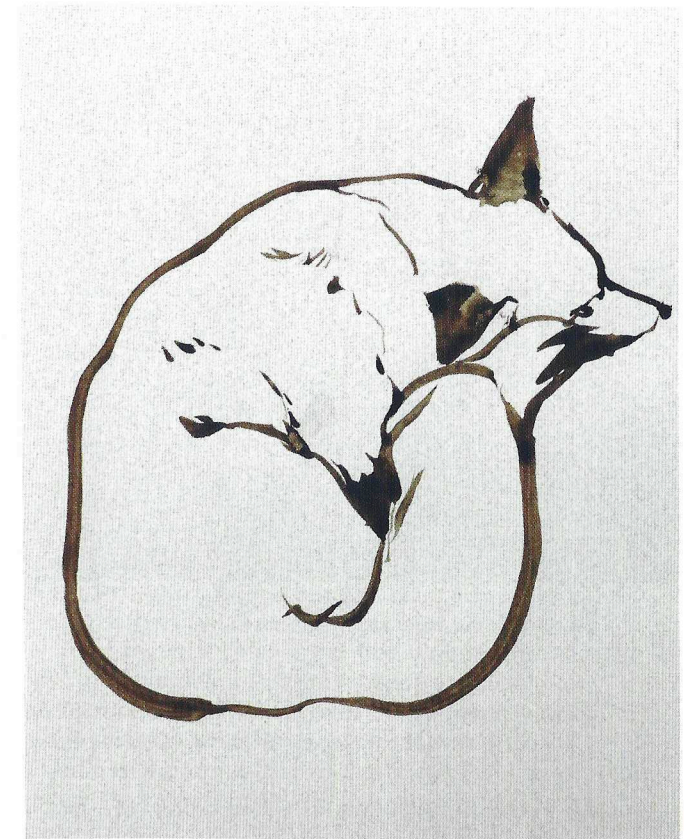
The antagonistic attitude towards non-humans in Western worldviews was contrasted by anthropologist Philippe Descola in *Beyond Nature and Culture* with the capaciousness of indigenous cosmologies that 'treat certain elements in the environment as persons endowed with cognitive, moral and social qualities analogous to those of humans'. Descola also referred to the Amazonian fieldwork of Eduardo Viveiros de Castro investigating the multi-perspectivism of the animist way of being in the world, which recognizes the similarity of all sentient beings, whether human or animal, in having a subjective sense of personhood, while acknowledging the multiplicity of different lifeforms. The seventeenth-century naturalists' tendency to relegate animals to an inferior category in the speciesist hierarchy, reserving for humans – and among them generally white European colonizers – the exceptional ability to express emotions, feel pain, make relationships and take decisions, prepared the ground for the intensive exploitation of non-humans in the modern capitalist era. In factory farms, as described in Alex Blanchette's book *Porkopolis*, animals have been subjected to a regime of total control designed to extract every last sliver of profit from industrialized animal bodies. The space for autonomous non-human life has shrunk further with the spread of surveillance technology, while accelerating environmental destruction and the destabilizing of Earth systems are dramatically affecting wild animals. Campaigns for the restoration of dignity to non-human persons have looked to the expansion of legal protections and animal rights, while also recognizing that to be effective these must be accompanied by wide-ranging measures such as the deindustrialization of agriculture and the restoration of

habitats, along with the revival of human–animal relations based on compassion, kinship and care.

‘The more species uploaded, the less species in the world’ is how Dutch artist Melanie Bonajo summarized the momentous transformation of the ‘physical animal kingdom into a virtual, imaginary, symbolic realm’. Her long-term research project into the online proliferation of images of animals investigated how the internet has altered the way animals are perceived, posing the question of what kind of analysis would emerge if uploaded images and videos of non-human animals were to be interpreted. Her publication *Non-Human Persons* (2015) catalogued these pictures first according to categories such as animals and air, animals and alcohol, and animals and stuffed animals, then ordered them in relation to books, cameras, cars, obesity, plastic bags, swimming pools and so on. At issue here was the trajectory of animals from non-sentient objects to hyper-subjective online entertainers, while Bonajo also drew attention to how the internet animal craze is contributing to the mistreatment of animals in the wild. The yellow background on which the images were arranged referenced the *National Geographic* magazine, standing for so-called objective scientific representation of the natural world, which in the artist’s opinion meant that ‘nature was captured without actually questioning the lens through which it is being observed, namely a western, heteronormative, capitalist, imperialist, white supremacist, patriarchal lens’. In the related video installation *Progress vs Sunsets: Reformulating the Nature Documentary* (2017), the main protagonists are children, who whimsically articulate the reconfigured relationship between human, technological and natural realms.

In reaction to the widespread ‘reductionist interpretation of nonhuman beings, which legitimizes extensive human exploitation of and lack of consideration for them’, British artist Fiona MacDonald started working collectively with human and non-human beings as Feral Practice to explore interspecies relationality and ethics. Their project *Foxing* (2017) dealt with the polarizing phenomenon of urban foxes, who as a result of the loss of their natural habitat have adapted to city life. It focused in particular on London, where they have resided since at least the 1930s. The exhibition display included a red fox pelt, installed in an outdoor cabinet alongside two scrolling signs emphasizing the divisive vocabulary attached to these animals by their human neighbours: majestic/marauding, sly/ thrilling, elegant/killer, beautiful/psycho. ‘Fox News’ was set up as a webpage collecting vulpine news items, such as speculation about the repeal of the ban on fox hunting with hounds. The gallery installation

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103 Fiona MacDonald : Feral Practice, Diego, 2016

included drawings and video of foxes under the care of the rescue charity ‘The Fox Project’, while a stained canvas on the gallery floor displayed the painterly traces left by the foxes visiting the artist’s garden at night. Visitors were invited to participate in an event at which they learned more about urban foxes and practised how to ‘walk like a fox, trot like a fox, talk and eat like a fox’, in order to imaginatively extend their understanding of the complex existences of these non-human city dwellers. Vulpine encounters in the more-than-human contact zones of the urban environment could also be said to point to the resilience and agency of the feral in the liminal spaces of a hyper-controlled world.

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Uncovering the entangled and enduring history of human–animal collaboration in the city was at stake in Vienna-based artist Anna Jermolaewa’s installation *Hermitage Cats* (2013). It consisted of forty photographs of feline employees



104 ABOVE Anna Jermolaewa, *Hermitage Cats*, 2013
 105 OPPOSITE Lin May Saeed, *Pangolin*, 2020

of the Hermitage in St Petersburg, a video and a textual collage. Cats were first brought to the Winter Palace in 1745 from the city of Kazan on the orders of Empress Elizabeth, who 'had a great fear of mice and rats', and they have lived and worked on the premises to the present day. The orderly grid of cat portraits is reminiscent of a roll of honour, alluding to the grim period during the siege of Leningrad in the Second World War when the city's entire population of cats was consumed by the starving inhabitants. After the siege was lifted, the authorities reputedly sent thousands of cats by train from Siberia to the city, which had been overrun by rats. The format of the photographs also referenced the practice of celebrating 'heroes of labour' on factory billboards, implicitly raising the question of the attitude to animals under socialism. While socialist ideology was anthropocentric in its prioritization of the interests of the working class, to the extent that animals could be considered workers, the communist revolution could potentially be extended to them. Writing about 'Communism with a Nonhuman Face', theorist Oxana Timofeeva drew on Soviet utopian poetry to argue that revolution 'goes beyond the human and human rights, towards animality', noting also that as long as 'inequality remains untouched at the interspecies level, equality of people, too, can never be realized'.

The Liberation of Animals from their Cages is a sculptural series by German-Iraqi artist Lin May Saeed through which she problematizes the questions of animal rights, animal liberation and speciesism, citing suffragette and anti-vivisection activist Lizzy Lind af Hageby as her heroine. In this long-term project, a variety of animals – from elephants in chains to chickens in poultry farms and seals in zoos – are the subjects of works realized as large-scale paper cut outs, steel reliefs or life-size animal sculptures. In the sixteenth work in the series, *Moschophoros (gate)* (2015), which referenced in its title the ancient Greek statue of the calf-bearer, Saeed cut out silhouettes of factory-farmed cattle bursting free from their chains with the help of masked human allies equipped with wire cutters. In the artist's words, 'there is no justification for keeping animals in prison, not for animal experimentation, not for food, in either intensive or so-called species-appropriate farming – only freedom can be species appropriate'. The artist has also sculpted animals in styrofoam – a fragile non-biodegradable material made of petroleum, symbolic of the consumerist throwaway culture responsible for the current ecological crisis and extinctions – and placed them on wooden structures resembling cages or shipping crates. Among the most recent works in the series is *Pangolin* (2020), depicting the Asian and African mammal distinctive for its body covered in hard protective scales made of keratin. Pangolin meat is

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considered a delicacy in some Southeast Asian countries, while its scales are used in traditional Chinese medicine. Since they are one of the most heavily trafficked animals, pangolins are today an endangered species, however their status might change as a paradoxical result of alleged links to the spread of coronavirus halting the illegal consumption and trade.

The legal rights of non-humans were the subject of the courtroom performance *The Trial* (2014) devised by Laura Gustafsson and Terike Haapoja, based on the 2013 Perho wolf-poaching case that saw twelve Finnish hunters convicted of illegally hunting wolves. In their participatory re-enactment, actors playing the men were put on public trial and sentenced to imprisonment for eight years, with the judges also asked to consider whether compensation should be paid to the Perho wolf pack. While in medieval Europe live animals were taken to court for their criminal activities, more recent legislation is centred on the Animal Welfare Act, which although safeguarding their wellbeing, still categorizes them as legal property with little concern for the independent interests of animals. This artistic project interrogated the extent to which the existing anthropocentric law shapes our relationship to non-humans and how new ways of thinking about nature jurisprudence that are emerging from the convergence of indigenous customs and environmental crisis might transform the status of animals into legal persons. Reflecting on the typical attribution of rights to 'all persons' in national constitutions, the authors of *Zoopolis: A Political Theory of Animal Rights*, Sue Donaldson and Will Kymlicka, have commented that 'to achieve justice for animals, we need to move them from the property box to the personhood box'. Unabated public interest in this issue is evident from the fact that in 2020 Finland was taken to the European Court of Justice for continuing the cull of wolves despite their protected status. Meanwhile, in the Punjab, India, the high court has recognized the legal personhood of all animals, including avian and aquatic species.

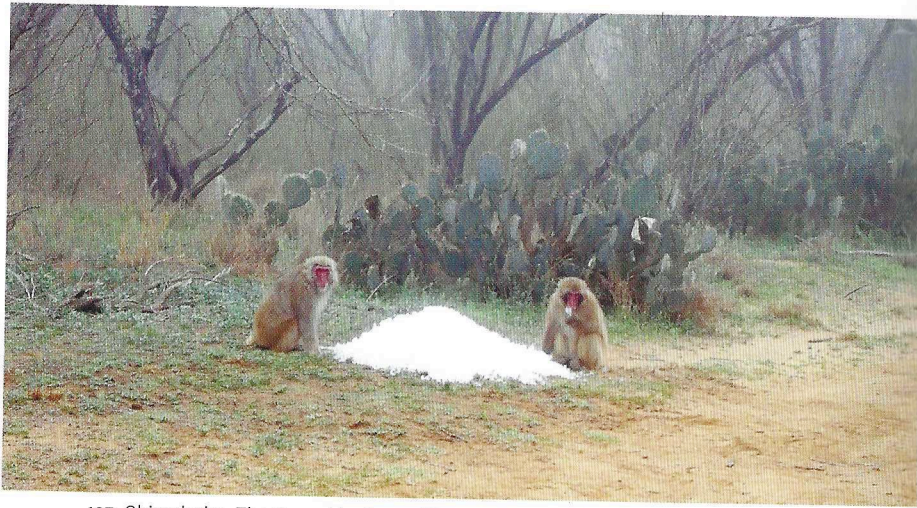
106 Brazilian artist Jonathas de Andrade's film *O Peixe (The Fish)* (2016) is made up of repetitive sequences in which Amazonian fishermen go through the process of catching a fish, which they then gently caress and hold firmly to their bare chest until it dies. Although shot in the style of an ethnographic documentary about Amazonian tribes, the tender-cruel ritual performed on the asphyxiating fish was invented by the artist. Exposing the voyeurism of Western anthropologists' fascination with indigenous practices of ritual slaughter, the film suggested a correlation between the ethnographer's power



106 Jonathas de Andrade, *O Peixe (The Fish)*, 2016

over the observed and that exercised by the fisherman over his catch. The fictional ritual in *The Fish*, nevertheless resulting in the death of its non-human participants, mimics animist practices recorded by anthropologists in which indigenous hunters soothe or cajole their prey to reconcile it to the loss of life. This brings to the surface the tension between defenders of animal rights and advocates for indigenous customs, since while both groups reject myths about the inferiority and non-sentience of animals, they disagree on the rightness of killing them. As Claire Jean Kim has pointed out in *Dangerous Crossings: Race, Species, and Nature in a Multicultural Age*, the urgency of resolving such differences comes from the fact that 'meantime, the forces of neoliberal capitalism face few obstacles as they transform racialized others, nonhuman animals, and the earth into "resources" in the game of perpetual capital accumulation'.

The impact of climate change on all terrestrials has cast debates over the treatment of non-humans in a world transformed by colonialism and capitalism in a new light. Moved by the story of a group of macaque monkeys who in 1972 were resettled from the cold yet changing climate of the mountains in the vicinity of Kyoto to a reserve in Texas, Japanese artist Shimabuku decided to pay them a visit in their new setting in the southern United States. After spending



107 Shimabuku, *The Snow Monkeys of Texas: Do snow monkeys remember snow mountains?*, 2016

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several days with them in their adopted environment populated by cactuses and cougars, the artist wondered whether they still remembered their old habitat. His video *The Snow Monkeys of Texas: Do snow monkeys remember snow mountains?* (2016) recorded the reaction of the monkeys to a heap of snow and ice brought to them under the Texan sun. It shows the American-born primates cautiously approach, touch and taste a substance that they have never experienced before, but which used to define their ancestral home. While the monkeys were saved from the deteriorating environment in Japan, this ephemeral encounter is a reminder that, as for the human animals with whom they share the gift of sentience, there is no escape from the planetary crisis of climate change, while the memory of thick winter snow fades for our species too.

The artistic practices discussed here have proposed a critical rethinking of relations with other-than-human species. The intensification of the exploitation and mistreatment of animals that is manifest in farming practices, habitat loss, illegal hunting and the trade in wild animals is accompanied by the spread of uncaring and exploitative attitudes, reflected in animal memes that negate the dignity of non-humans by denying them the privacy of their species-specific existence. At the same time, heightened awareness of climate change is instigating a reorientation visible in movements for non-human rights and personhood and calls for the critical embrace of untamed, wild and feral forms of interspecies coexistence.

Chapter 3 Countering Extinction

The rate at which species go extinct can be seen as a barometer of the health and stability of Earth systems. While during stable periods the level of background extinctions is slow and negligible, in the history of the planet there have been five previous mass extinction events when, as environmental writer Elizabeth Kolbert put it in *The Sixth Extinction*, 'there's a crash and disappearance rates spike', eliminating a significant proportion of existing biota. With mammals, birds, fish, amphibians and insects now dying out at up to a thousand times the background rate, resulting in the loss of two thirds of wildlife since the 1970s, the world is witnessing in real time a catastrophic sixth mass extinction, this time as a consequence of the toxic impact of humans on the liveability of the Earth. The destruction of planetary biodiversity should not be taken as a 'general human capacity' but rather, as Ashley Dawson, author of *Extinction: A Radical History*, has commented, as a 'product of the global attack on the commons, a capitalist frenzy on the planet that tilts towards increasingly intense environmental catastrophe'. Counter-extinction endeavours have either followed the eco-modernist path of combining genetic material from preserved specimens with that of their living relatives to reverse species loss or have centred on the rewilding of diminished habitats by reintroducing missing species and restarting natural processes. Artists have engaged with extinction as a planetary phenomenon that threatens to turn the blue planet into a lifeless Martian red and also as a downward spiral experienced by individuals and communities in specific geolocations, while also exploring potential recovery scenarios.

A Labrador duck, Pyrenean ibex, Tasmanian tiger, Irish elk, aurochs, Steller's sea cow, pied raven, Japanese Honshu