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#2

**WILD WORDS —
REMEMBERING AND
IMAGINING HUMAN AND
ANIMAL RELATIONSHIPS**

JANIS RAFA - DAPHNE VITALI
**'WHEN THE COWS START TO AGE,
MAYBE THEN WE WILL HAVE
A PLACE IN THE FUTURE'.
JANIS RAFA IN CONVERSATION
WITH DAPHNE VITALI**



Michela de Mattei, True Believers See More Patterns, 2024
Ongoing video archive of thylacine sightings
Video still, 18' 42" (in progress)
Courtesy of the artist

The work of artist and filmmaker Janis Rafa explores the relationship between humans and animals. Through moving images, installations, and sculptures, the artist challenges the idea of human superiority in relation to all other animal species. In this discussion, Rafa dialogues with Daphne Vitali, curator

of her new solo exhibition at EMΣT, *We Betrayed the Horses*, whose works were commissioned and produced by the museum. They discuss the new works, the atmosphere of the exhibition, the themes her research addresses, her visual language and aesthetics, her film work, as well as notions of power, desire, animal language, the resistance animals can have, activism in art, and her own position on animal coexistence and meat eating.

Daphne Vitali: Beginning with the tri-channel video installation *The Space Between Your Tongue and Teeth* (featured in the group exhibition *Why Look at Animals? A Case for the Rights of Non-Human Lives*) and continuing with the works in your solo exhibition *We Betrayed the Horses*, you explore the fine line between such contradictory concepts as love and dominance, care and abandonment, seduction and consent, generosity and control, highlighting how they often go together in order to reflect about betrayal. How could these contradictory concepts be understood?

Janis Rafa: Our relationships with animals are based on a constant and highly inventive deception of instincts. We deceive them by satisfying some of their basic needs, such as food, safety, mating, and motherhood, and then manipulate them to serve as companions, food, or tools for movement, sport, combat, and so on. We have built entire industries on these animal instincts, as well spectacles such as horse racing, bullfighting, etc. In the context of this authoritarian condition in which animals are tricked and eventually imprisoned, we can often find elements of care, love, tenderness, and healing. If we take the example of companion animals, which includes the horse, as in sport riding, we will notice that there is a latent eroticism there. That is, a personal relationship of love, care, and devotion between owner-rider and horse that, however, is non-consensual. I had titled a previous exhibition at the Eye Filmmuseum in 2023 as *Feed me. Cheat me. Eat me.* Through this motto, I was referring to this sequence in which nonhuman bodies and strata are deceived with the ultimate goal of our own satisfaction and pleasure.



Janis Rafa, *The Absence of Your Body Has Shaped the Spectacles of Our Past*, 2025
Double-channel projection, 16:9, 5.1 surround, 12'35"
Courtesy of the artist

Produced by EMΣT | National Museum of Contemporary Art Athens. Photo by Paris Tavitian.

DV: One of the main themes that you deal with in your work is the coexistence of people and “what we call the animal”, as the philosopher Jacques Derrida emphasises. You often explore this coexistence through a relationship of violence and how it is reflected (often in the body of the animal). Furthermore, by approaching violence, you are also dealing with loss, mortality, and revenge. Violence is depicted in your work without the visualisation of pain; while you provide some documentation, you choose a narrative and aesthetic that are largely devoid of explicit representation of violence, leading viewers to associate it with human supremacy and power. This exploration of the coexistence of humans and animals has been the subject of study by several artists and philosophers, as seen in Joseph Beuys’ creation of an intermediate space where human and nonhuman animals can meet and reconcile in his work *How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare* (1965). In parallel, Derrida, in his book *The Animal That Therefore I Am* (2006), offers a philosophical exploration and critique of the degradation of animal life that results from the distinction between humans as thinking animals and other living species. Derrida explores the threshold between the animal and the human, coining the neologism *Limitrophy* that offers a possible methodology for examining the meta-human, which I understand is one of your current areas of research. Do you think there is room for a healthy coexistence between humans and nonhuman animals? Does your work explore this possibility?

JR: I wonder if there is room for meaningful reflection, education, and critical thinking by humans, as a larger whole, so that they can understand the ways and brutality through which they consider themselves to coexist with nonhuman animals. There, I detect a grey area, untapped and dormant in both our empathy and knowledge. That we can love our dog as if it were our child, yet fail to realise that the meat on our plate is a mother’s child born to be slaughtered, is a paradoxical and frustrating use of our critical thinking. We are not able to detect violence even when it exists in our personal space, in our home, in the food we feed our own child.

We are selective about the concept of violence towards others as long as it directly benefits our own enjoyment. So how can we talk about feminism and body liberation while leaving exploitation and rape in the context of animal husbandry out of the discussion? This is exactly where I am interested in focusing my work. It is where people come face to face with their decisions, achievements, and glorious past, leaving a strong imprint of actions on how they coexist with other animals and their own species, from the agricultural revolution to now. I avoid didacticism and straightforward narratives in my work, as I find more interest in an art where viewers have to reflect on their subconscious and ability to read and decode images and meanings, even if this initially leads them to a misunderstanding of the work.



Janis Rafa, *your genitals rubbing my back/your hands whipping my butt/your heels spurring my ribs/your glories killing my needs*, 2025
Words, glass, neon
Courtesy of the artist
Produced by EMZT | National Museum of Contemporary Art Athens. Photo by Paris Tavitian.

DV: What would be a misunderstanding of your work?

JR: When I refer to a misunderstanding, I mean a first-level reading that the viewer might make when looking at, for example, the neon sculpture whose words read:

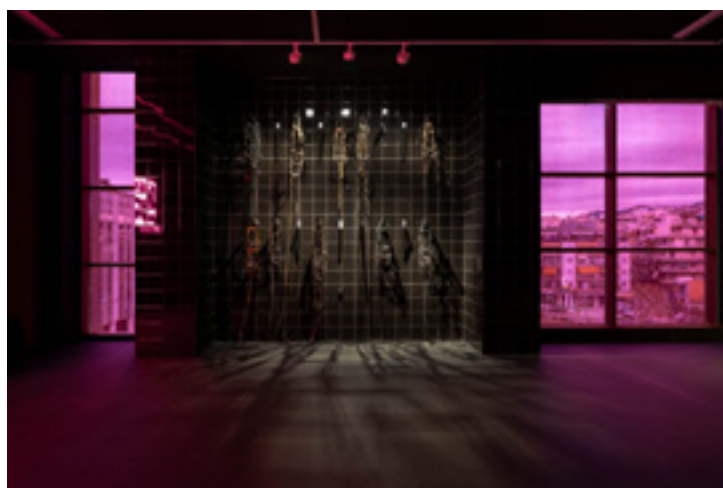
your genitals rubbing my back
your hands whipping my butt
your heels spurring my ribs
your glories killing my needs

These phrases, if we consider that they are said by one man to another, have an erotic, sexual, BDSM mood. But when the viewer recognises that this text refers to the potential words of a horse to its rider, then the notions of violence, domination, and hierarchical ranking of bodies take on a different meaning. In this case, the horse's right to choice and enjoyment is violated. Role-playing, here, is not a consensual game but a fulfilment of human fantasies and needs.

DV: You have mentioned that, as you spent a lot of time with animals where verbal language was not the main way to communicate, you learned to interact in other ways to understand animals' behaviours and needs through love and affection. Indeed, your work often deals with forms of non-reciprocal love and non-consensual relationships between humans and animals. In her book *Animal Languages: Revealing the Secret Conversations of the Living World*, Eva Meijer questions whether language indeed separates humans from other animals or whether animals speak their own languages to each other and to humans. She argues that animals do have language, which is much richer and broader than what most people think. Your approach has always been non-verbal, but in your more recent works, you seem to attribute a voice to animals, a language that we humans could understand, as in the work *your genitals rubbing my back...* Tell me about your work in relation to animal language.

JR: The lack of speech always fascinates me. There is an awkwardness when speech is absent. Without words, guidance, or human narrative, a resistance is formed in space, which allows for the decentring of the human dimension, of how we have learned to both produce meaning and feel safe with what we see. There, the viewer is alone, exposed. The packs of dogs confined to suffocating spaces, the stray dogs on the periphery of the city, the hundreds of chickens in the factories, the sport horses in training: they are all in a state of authoritative silence. This silence is disarming because it forces us to confront our own failure to read and with our own guilt towards the ‘silent’ animal. When there is no reason, call, or cry, there is no safe vantage point from which to offer justification, apology, and empathy.

The viewer is invited to discover other means of reading the work, and with them, there is always the risk of failure: it may be misinterpreted, misunderstood, or passed over. This is a conscious choice, both in the videos and in the neon sculptures, where the text appears.



Janis Rafa, *Saddle-vulvas and Boots*, 2025

Saddles and boots, used and new, dating from 1880 to now

Leather, synthetic leather, synthetic latex, polyester, fabric, stainless steel, metal

Courtesy of the artist

Produced by EMΣT | National Museum of Contemporary Art Athens. Photo by Paris Tavitian.

DV: Your works consciously create allusions to role-playing and the power we wield over bodies in general, whether it is the body of an animal or another human body. How do you understand this relationship between power and the body that you negotiate so vigorously and systematically in your work?

JR: One way to approach the relationship between power and bodies is that of sadism. Sadistic practices usually involve sexual relations, eroticism, and physical pleasure between two or more people. These BDSM practices [bondage, discipline, sadism, masochism] include elements of domination, submission, control, discipline, and intimidation through pain. Here, physical violence is exchanged for sexual pleasure between the participants. But in this relationship, there is theoretically a consensus between the subjugating and the subjugated body.

Conversely, the relationship between humans and animals, and more specifically between rider and horse, is based on a sadistic need for harnessing, pleasure,

domination, eroticism, and the fulfilment of roles (that of the trainer, rider, cowboy, etc.) that is not consensual. The role of the animal in this equation has been taken for granted. It satisfies the needs, desires, and fantasies of others without ever having thought about the horse's needs, fantasies, and desires. The way we have learned to coexist with animals is rooted in sadistic venting practices; we have failed to recognise that what we label as love and affection (for the horse) is ultimately an exercise of power to be loved by a species with a totally different body, desires, and passions.

DV: The exhibition *We Betrayed the Horses*, through a multimedia narrative, focuses on the desire for the horse's body and the need for control, domination, and submission. Although many of your previous works focus on the image of the animal's body, this exhibition addresses its absence: horses are absent, and their presences are only suggested through human inventions, mechanisms, and special equipment, which derive their shape and form from the animals' physiology and are fashioned to control, tame, and express worship and care for them.

Furthermore, the materials of your works either come from the care of animals (tiles, plastic flooring, watering troughs, horse hoof grease) or are devised to control the animals' bodies (mouthpieces, headgear, whips, saddles). By exhibiting materials with opposing functions, we negotiate misinterpreted forms of love and the relationship between care and power.

JR: I see these used materials and utilitarian objects as a form of archaeology, as examples of collective and individual responsibility towards nonhuman or posthuman life. One could say that they are irrefutable evidence of the instrumentalisation of bodies, bearing the imprint of human ingenuity, sadism, and domination.

In every saddle on display, I see not only the bodies of the riders who rode on them but the bodies of the horses who carried them on their backs.



Janis Rafa, *Saddle-vulvas and Boots*, 2025

Saddles and boots, used and new, dating from 1880 to now

Leather, synthetic leather, synthetic latex, polyester, fabric, stainless steel, metal

Courtesy of the artist

Produced by EMZT | National Museum of Contemporary Art Athens. Photo by Paris Tavitian.

DV: The exhibition evokes sensuality and can be interpreted in a variety of ways regarding erotic desire, sadomasochism, the subconscious, or humanity's dark side. Your work, in general, has a dark side. It often addresses violence, death, and loneliness. The new two-channel video installation *The Absence of Your Body Has Shaped the Spectacles of Our Past* (2025), that you present in your solo show at EMΣT, resembles a horror movie. This, as well as many of your other moving image works, can be seen as a requiem for the troubled connection with animals and the natural environment, which has been shaped by a long history of human domination. Although, in recent years, we have witnessed a change in thinking about our relationship with animals and the natural environment, the damage that has been done is irreversible. Do you see your work as a funereal ode to the subjugation of nonhumans?

JR: My works of the past 15 years, especially my films and videos, could be considered a tribute, a reminiscence, or a memorial to nonhuman existence and our failure to coexist with other species. They are reflections, or experiments, as I like to call them, through a non-logocentric, non-linear narrative on the use of image and film. This starts from the first films that I presented at the Rijksakademie in Amsterdam in 2013 and goes all the way to my feature-length *Kala Azar* (2020) and the exhibition we are currently working on together at EMΣT.

DV: You have recently written the foreword for a book in Greek by Iraklis Karabatos, titled *The Visualisation of Pain: The Suffering of Animals as a Dimension of the Visible* (2022, Kyanavgi Publications, a Greek publishing house focusing on animal rights), where you unfold a personal narrative and recount in detail your visit to a stable to photograph the moment of the slaughter of an animal by three men. You state, "I knew [...] that I had to see it to be able to understand it and later talk about it. [...] I wonder if the object of my observation was the animals or the men, or ultimately myself in the face of these acts" (p. 10).

JR: Kyanavgi Publications is an eclectic treasure trove of essays and literary works with animals as the central theme. It is a touching life's work by the publisher Costas Alexiou, who slowly and methodically managed to form a significant Greek bibliography around the theme of animal rights. A good example is the Greek translation of John Berger's essay "Why Look at Animals?" (1980), from which Katerina Gregos' EMΣT group exhibition borrows its title. One of my favourite literary texts, however, is "My Last Hunt" by the Greek poet Napoleon Lapathiotis in the book *Hunters' Diaries*, published by Kyanavgi in 2018.

The hunter, the herd of hunting dogs, the wild prey, the heartbreak of the body that has now been wounded, and the dead bodies as booty as in the 17th century Flemish still life paintings are constant obsessions in my work. They offer a unique vocabulary distinctly captured in each work. The male predator, i.e., the male element, as a guide in the chain of domination always makes me think of Derrida's words in *The Animal That Therefore I Am*: humans assume that they have the ability to follow but never be followed, without leaving traces behind and without fear to becoming prey. Hunting, as an archetypal depiction of the human-nature, human-prey relationship, conceals inherited violence not only from generation to generation, from culture to culture, from place to place, but also from humans to their animals of prey. For example, in foxhunting in Great

Britain, horses and dogs that have been bred and trained to hunt foxes that have also been bred specifically for this purpose are still used to this day. All these animals are locked into a perverse breeding of violence, whose only aim is to satisfy a hobby, a tradition that aims to assert that the human is still a predator. A white male predator on his horse.



Janis Rafa, *Cause of Death #1*, 2025
Words, glass, neon
Courtesy of the artist
Produced by EMΣT | National Museum of Contemporary Art Athens.
Photo by Paris Tavitian.

DV: Human dominance towards animals, whether for consumption or for entertainment (e.g., horse racing, riding, or foxhunting, as you mentioned) or for their use for other purposes, are well-engrained *habits* and cultural *norms*: something that is considered important and part of culture, customs, and traditions. Dominance over animals is taken for granted by most people. This is how I feel society relates to meat consumption: it's cultural. What are your thoughts on this? Do you think art can play a role in this? Can it have a more activist action function?

JR: There is an art that has a direct activist imprint and goal, even if it is on a small scale, such as the work of the Italian artist and activist Tiziana Pers. A wide range of her work is currently on display at the show at EMΣT. In Pers' work, one can see a personal and sincere attempt to use art to invent ways to save animals from experimentation laboratories and meat industries or to awaken the viewer to the issue of meat consumption. This kind of work resonates with me because I recognise the internal struggle and effort the artist puts into not only creating and representing their beliefs but also acting on the problem. There is a delicate balance between the personal and the artistic, which I admire and also aim to achieve.

In a more theoretical and conceptual framework, I believe that art can momentarily reflect but not change consciousnesses.

DV: What about the resistance of the animals themselves? Can animals resist? Some time ago, you shared with me the essay by Sophia Efstathiou, entitled *Taurus: On Animal Resistance*, which also addresses animal resistance, arguing that witnessing animal resistance is important because it allows us to encounter animals as morally significant others. Tell me your experience with animal resistance or how you imagine it might be.

JR: Animal resistance is the most modern and interesting subject I can think of at the moment. Recognising animal resistance, whether collectively or individually, acknowledges animals as political beings. The body that resists but is out of sight (e.g., meat and dairy industries, slaughterhouses, etc.) or in sight but we do not acknowledge its torture and effort (e.g., horse racing, carriages, circus, zoo, etc.) is a tragic body. A mouth that speaks, asks, bites, rebels, and screams but is not heard is a mouth that is doomed. I can't think of anything more tragic than that. This condition is a perverse human contrivance that sustains itself in every way possible so that change and evolution towards a better future for animals are excruciatingly slow.

One of the things that inspires me to find new reasons for research in my work is not just the animal that resists but the animal that finally takes revenge.



Janis Rafa, *Kala Azar*, 2020
Feature film, 91'
Film still
Courtesy of the artist

DV: Your first feature film, *Kala Azar* (2020), portrays a couple living on the outskirts of a city, collecting and cremating dead pets and returning the ashes to their owners. This film, like many of your other works, has clear references to your own childhood, as you grew up in a family surrounded by animals. The film addresses life and death, abandonment and loss – recurrent themes in your work. You pay attention to things that most people ignore or consider unimportant or even appalling, as if the world around them, the world of other beings, is of no interest.

JR: *Kala Azar* focuses on stray animals moving on the periphery of cities: dead, abandoned, out-of-sight nonhuman bodies (e.g., roadkill, hunting). By talking about animals in an urban landscape on the periphery of Athens, the film attempts to investigate how we perceive the history of a place through these bodies. By using animals – dead or alive, unseen or overlooked, stray or tethered – as the primary axis for mapping a landscape, I aim to create a reality that is both familiar and uncanny.

It is this reality that I recognise as the coexistence between animals and humans in an urban context through my own childhood and adult experiences and research. Dirt, hygiene, mortality, the farewell of the dead nonhuman body, grief, and loss are the materials through which I can speak of this coexistence.

DV: I feel that your film work has been influenced by the so-called Greek weird wave, the artistic movement of contemporary Greek cinema that dealt with social issues in a weird way. In the new feature film you are currently working on, women stop having children and give birth to animals. The script can initiate a conversation about a pressing and significant change that needs to occur in society. Tell us about it.

JR: I don't think the Greek weird wave has influenced my film work. I follow it, but my influences are Argentinean and English contemporary cinema, which were key reference points in *Kala Azar*. However, my attempt in each film to explore the coexistence of humans and animals is an attempt to push the boundaries of what is considered familial, familiar, parental, traditional, and acceptable in an institutional context of role fulfilment. The new film, entitled *The Future Is an Elder Cow*, deals with the value of life from its beginning. What would happen if humans gave birth to mammals, such as goats, cows, or pigs? Would they eat them? Would they raise them as their children? Would they allow their children to grow old?

What is it that makes us unable to see that the calf is the child of another mother who was forcibly taken from her immediately after birth? What makes us worthy to eat someone else's baby while we are making sure our children grow up and succeed in the future? What makes us believe that this perversion, which we have forced our bodies and mouths to serve, will not come upon us at some point? In the film, for inexplicable reasons, nature takes revenge on humanity, making people unable to bring children into the world but forcing them to gestate animals before they become extinct.

Despite its fictional element, the film will convey a strong sense of realism and focus mainly on human relationships and passions, mysticism and traditions, in a society where locals cannot accept change and admit to each other that the future cannot remain the same.

When the cows start to age, maybe then we will have a place in the future.

DV: What have animals taught you over the years that you have been around them through your work?

JR: That no matter what we do for them, for the animals, it won't be enough, considering the destruction we bring about by our presence. As I often say, in every project, I fail. Because in every project that I ask them to star in during filming, I encroach on their freedom, their space, and their privacy.

Translation: Humphrey Brunch



Janis Rafa, *The Space Between Your Tongue and Teeth*, 2023
Three-channel video projection, three-channel stereo, 4K, 1.37:1, 9'. Film still.
Courtesy of the artist

- The header is a still from an ongoing video archive of thylacine sightings compiled by Michela de Mattei. The archive features all currently available footage sourced from online communities and regarded as evidence of its existence. The archive will expand as new evidence emerges.

ABOUT THE INTERLOCUTORS

Janis Rafa was born in Greece, and she lives and works between Amsterdam and Athens. Rafa studied Fine Arts at the University of Leeds (BA and MA) and has a PhD in Visual Arts & Philosophy at the same University (2009-2012). In 2013 and 2014, she was a resident at the Rijksakademie in Amsterdam, and she has also participated in other artists' residencies, including ARTWORKS of the Stavros Niarchos Foundation (2020) and Onassis AiR Program (2023/24). She participated in the 59th Venice Biennial. Recent solo shows include: *Janis Rafa – Landscape Depressions*, VOX Centre de l'image contemporaine (2025); *Copri Caduti*, Artdate Bergamo (2024); *Janis Rafa – Feed me. Cheat me. Eat me*, Eye Filmmuseum, Amsterdam (2023). Janis Rafa's artistic research employs different media, from feature films to shorter videos, and from sculptures to drawings and text-based works. Her work focuses on the relationship between human and nonhuman animals, to raise issues about seemingly contradictory schemes such as love and domination, seduction and consent, but also mortality and loss. Her multilayered practice emphasises animalistic instincts, untamed behaviours, inherent violence, alongside human fears, desires, and failure. Her films and installations often focus on the silent presence of animals, allowing them to become the leading force within her poetic and timeless compositions. Her subjects are often positioned on urban fringes and decaying landscapes, blending the fictional with the mundane.