

# **Proceedings of the European Society for Aesthetics**

Volume 10, 2018

Edited by Connell Vaughan and Iris Vidmar

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## **Proceedings of the European Society for Aesthetics**

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## Table of Contents

<b>Claire Anscomb</b> <i>The Epistemic Value of Photographs in the Age of New Theory</i> .....	1
<b>Marco Arienti</b> <i>Some Concerns with Experientialism about Depiction: the Case of Separation seeing-in</i> .....	19
<b>Marta Benenti and Giovanna Fazzuoli</b> <i>Experiencing the Making Paintings by Paolo Cotani, Marcia Hafif and Robert Ryman</i> .....	35
<b>Larissa Berger</b> <i>The Felt Syllogism of Taste – a Reading of Kant's Sensus Communis</i> .....	55
<b>Nicolò Pietro Cangini</b> <i>Prose and Life. A Comparison between Hegel's Aesthetics and Romantic's Poetics</i> .....	78
<b>Pol Capdevila</b> <i>Poetics of History in Contemporary Art</i> .....	93
<b>Stephen Chamberlain</b> <i>Literary Realism and the Significance of Life</i> .	122
<b>Melvin Chen</b> <i>To Chuck or Not to Chuck? Túngara Frogs &amp; Evolutionary Responses to the Puzzle of Natural Beauty</i> .....	153
<b>Zoë Cunliffe</b> <i>Epistemic Injustice and the Role of Narrative Fiction</i> ....	167

<b>Laura T. Di Summa-Knoop</b> <i>Defining Fashion: Novelty, Play, and Identity</i> .....	180
<b>Daniel Dohrn</b> <i>Art avant la Lèttre</i> .....	204
<b>Nemesio García-Carril Puy</b> <i>Against Hazlett’s Argument: Musical Works Qua Types are Modally Flexible Entities</i> .....	212
<b>Lisa Giombini</b> <i>Material Authenticity in Conservation Theory</i> .....	235
<b>Vitor Guerreiro</b> <i>The Unity of Our Aesthetic Life: A Crazy Suggestion...</i>	260
<b>Eran Guter and Inbal Guter</b> <i>A Critique of Langer’s View of Musical Temporality</i> .....	289
<b>Valentina Hribar Sorčan</b> <i>La Vie et la Mémoire</i> .....	308
<b>Eda Keskin</b> <i>Everyday Aesthetics and Empathy Development</i> .....	329
<b>Lev Kreft</b> <i>From Universalism to Singularity, from Singularity to Moralization</i> .....	343
<b>Gloria Luque Moya</b> <i>Experiencing the Extraordinary of the Ordinary</i> .	359
<b>Jerzy Luty</b> <i>Do Animals Make Art or the Evolutionary Continuity of Species</i> .....	381
<b>Giovanni Matteucci</b> <i>The (Aesthetic) Extended Mind: Aesthetics from Experience-of to Experience-with</i> .....	400
<b>Philip Mills</b> <i>The Politics of Poetic Language: An Analysis of Jean-Luc Godard’s Alphaville</i> .....	430
<b>Washington Morales</b> <i>Naturalization and Reification of the Human Global Subjective Experience in Some Forms of Scientific and Technological Art</i> .....	444

<b>Ancuta Mortu</b>	<i>Aesthetic Cognition and Art History</i> .....	459
<b>Dan O'Brien</b>	<i>Cubism and Kant</i> .....	482
<b>Una Popović</b>	<i>The Birthplace of Aesthetics: Baumgarten on Aesthetical Concepts and Art Experience</i> .....	507
<b>Matthew Rowe</b>	<i>Minimalism: Empirical and Contextual, Aesthetic and Artistic</i> .....	524
<b>Salvador Rubio Marco</b>	<i>Manipulating the Spectator's Moral Judgments: a Criticism of the Cognitivist Approach in Cinema</i> .....	544
<b>Marcello Ruta</b>	<i>Hermeneutics and the Performative Turn; The Unfruitfulness of a Complementary Characterisation</i> .....	557
<b>Sue Spaid</b>	<i>Are Art and Life Experiences "Mostly Perceptual" or "Largely Extra-perceptual"?</i> .....	598
<b>Daniela Šterbáková</b>	<i>John Cage's 4' 33": Unhappy Theory, Meaningful Gesture</i> .....	620
<b>Polona Tratnik</b>	<i>Challenging the Biopolitical through Animal-Human Hybridization</i> .....	643
<b>Andreas Vrahimis</b>	<i>Aesthetics, Scientism, and Ordinary Language: A Comparison between Wittgenstein and Heidegger</i> .....	659
<b>Weijia Wang</b>	<i>Kant's Two Approaches to the Connection between Beauty and Morality</i> .....	685
<b>Ken Wilder</b>	<i>Rosalind Krauss: From 'Sculpture in the Expanded Field' to the 'Spectacle' of Installation Art</i> .....	698
<b>Mark Windsor</b>	<i>Tales of Dread</i> .....	722
<b>Lorraine Yeung</b>	<i>Art and Life: The Value of Horror Experience</i> .....	737

# *Challenging the Biopolitical through Animal-Human Hybridization*

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ABSTRACT. With the series *K-9\_topology* Maja Smrekar is challenging anthropocentrism with linking biology and culture, in particular addressing interaction between human and animal species. The artist builds upon the recent scientific findings that not only the dog species has been domesticated, but domestication that took place during evolution is to be considered mutual. Not only the dog has been mastered by human, but also the dogs have had an active role in “using” the human species for a more comfortable survival. Both species coexist. Within the project *Hybrid Family* from the *K-9\_topology* series she nurtured a puppy. The artist refers to this process as to the process of becoming, of becoming-animal, becoming-woman and becoming m(Other). Deeply rooted in her own experience, when in the beginning of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Millennium “the liberal capitalism finally struck hard into the newborn Slovenian economy,” as she writes in her blog, and her parents lost their business, house, cars, forests, meadows, wine yards and her father committed suicide, she finds her way of resisting, which is in submitting herself to a “dog-human kinship relationship as a radical intimate action of ‘returning home’.” The process of becoming mother is analyzed in relation to the process of becoming animal and furthermore the process of becoming (m)Other is to particularly examined in reference to the mother and child unity, as regards the notion of *die Umwelt* and Hegelian, existentialist feminist and post-structuralist discussion of the identity and difference. The

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process of becoming (m)Other is finally examined as the biopolitical statement or intervention with the investment of artist's body with the purpose to re-gain the position of power, i.e. as an act of resistance to bio-power – the exercise of power on and through bodies.

## 1. Introduction

In 2017 Maja Smrekar won the main prize at the largest media art festival worldwide, Prix Ars Electronica, for her artistic *K-9\_topology* series of projects devoted to the relationships between dogs and humans, inviting to reinvent ourselves with our nonhuman others. With the series *K-9\_topology* Maja Smrekar is challenging anthropocentrism with linking biology and culture, in particular addressing interaction between human and animal species. The artist builds upon the recent scientific findings that not only the dog species has been domesticated, but domestication that took place during evolution is to be considered mutual. Not only the dog has been mastered by human, but also the dogs have had an active role in “using” the human species for a more comfortable survival. Both species coexist. In the project *Ecce Canis* Maja Smrekar built upon the sense of smell as an interface used to trigger the emotional connection between the species.

*Hybrid Family* is another project in the *K-9\_topology* series. In this performance she nurtured a puppy. By submitting herself to a two and a half months of physiological training she achieved milk production in her breasts. The artist refers to this process as to the process of becoming, of becoming-animal, becoming-woman and becoming m(Other). The project is

deeply rooted in her own experience, as she writes in her blog. In the beginning of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Millennium “the liberal capitalism finally struck hard into the newborn Slovenian economy”,<sup>2</sup> so her parents lost their business, house, cars, forests, meadows, wine yards and her father committed suicide. In this regard *Hybrid Family* is her way of resisting the neoliberal power over the bodies and lives of people.

The joining of her egg cell with the somatic dog cell within the project *ARTE-mis* presents the culmination of the *K-9\_topology* series’ investigations of the close and traverse relations between the species.

## 2. Becoming Mother

Maja Smrekar has bought a young puppy, which has been taken away from its primary dog-mother, and has got the artist for the new parent. The new parent has not only taken care of assuring a new home for the puppy as an ordinary dog keeper, but has also assured the nurture in the most possible literal sense, with breast-feeding it. Let us consider the significance of this act more carefully.

With breast-feeding the puppy and the artist get connected biologically, if biologically means through and with investing their own bodies. The artist “hunts nature”. She has not only become a sort of social parent to the puppy, assuring care and protection. Becoming the breast-feeding “parent” to the puppy puts this human dog keeper in a corporeal

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<sup>2</sup> <<http://majasmrekar.org/post-no-1-history-of-tears>> 31. 10. 2016

relationship with the dog.

“Naturally” milk is produced within *the exchange process* between the mother and the child and means a production realized by the mother, yet evoked by the child. Mother’s capacity to produce milk is enabled only with child’s evocation. The production of milk by the woman’s body is thus a process that originates from the tight *connection* between the mother and the child or *the unity* mother-child.

Breast-feeding is a process significant for the mother-child formation, in which the two are mingled together. Julia Kristeva ascertains that in this phase the child does not yet have narcissist attitude, which he or she gets only after the intervention of the third, who becomes the object of mother’s desire. The third breaks apart the diade. According to psychoanalytic analysis this moment signifies the beginning of the process of autonomization or the formation of the self. (Kristeva 1987) In our case we are not paying attention to the moment, in which the formation of the self begins, but to the moment, which is here originally performed, that is in which the mother-child formation gets to be established. The project thus establishes the situation before the moment of quitting the breast-feeding appears, in which the boy is protected against regret that he is no longer a breast-feeding baby or a girl, as ascertained by Simone de Beauvoir, since from then on he will embody his transcendence and his arrogant sovereignty in his sex. (de Beauvoir 2010) If this moment would signify the becoming of the first or the second sex, to paraphrase de Beauvoir, the project performs a “reverse” process of becoming, of becoming the breast-feeding mother for the artist and of becoming the human breast-fed baby for the dog.

Mother and child are in this formation of breast-feeding mingled to such a degree that they exist as an entity. The mother is not *the other* of the child's self, but she is as part of child's own subjectivity, of child's own self.

This moment of unity could also be examined with a reference to the notion of *the Umwelt*, introduced by Jakob von Uexküll in 1934. The early 20<sup>th</sup> century zoologist and one of the founders of ecology Jakob von Uexküll examines the notion of the environment that is bound to an animal. For Uexküll animals don't experience the same world and time. The bee, the tick and the fly that we observe don't move in the same world and don't share the same world with us, the observers. Each *Umwelt* is a closed unity within itself.

For Uexküll there exist also *die Umgebung*, a rather objective environment, but one that changes according to one's perspective, since actually there is no objective space per se, there is only a forest-for-a-woodcutter, a forest-for-a-botanic, a forest-for-a-wanderer, etc. Uexküll does not find much interest in the notion of *die Umgebung*, but offers a very interesting examination of the structure of *die Umwelt*, in which the world and the animal are intrinsically or existentially linked.

Uexküll takes into consideration the case of a tick. The fundamental aspects of the structure of *die Umwelt*, the environments that valid for all animals can be derived from the example of the tick. Out of the egg crawls a not yet fully developed little animal, yet even in this state it can already ambush cold-blooded animals such as lizards, for which it lies in wait. Once the female has copulated, it, the eyeless and deaf creature, finds its way to

the warm-blooded animal from which it pumps a stream of warm blood. Uexküll ascertains that the tick uses the sense of smell and has no sense of taste. It takes in any liquid, so long as it has the right temperature. For the tick it is existentially relevant to get the meal: after getting it, it will fall to the ground, lay its eggs and die. The tick gets into a “functional cycle as a subject and the mammal as its object.” (von Uexküll 2010, p. 50)

In *die Umwelt* there are carriers of characteristics or significance, in semiology these would be marks [*Merkmalträger*], which are also carriers of meaning [*Bedeutungsträger*]. These carriers are everything that interests an animal. An animal has receptive organs that are assigned to perceive the mark [*Merkorgan*] and to react to it [*Wirkorgan*].

Uexküll believes that in the manner he explains the interconnectedness of the subject with the object in *die Umwelt* biology has finally connected with Kant’s philosophy by emphasizing the decisive role of the subject, because there can be no time and no space without a living subject. (Ibid., p. 52)

In analogy with Uexküll we can postulate that in the case of the child and the mother, the child undertakes a similar role as the tick. The functional cycle of the breast-feeding makes the mother the object of the child in the sense that she is required for the child to survive, she is the child’s host, the nourisher, the food, the existential expansion of the parasite child. Together they form this significant environment, *die Umwelt*, which is a closed unity within itself. With not being part of it, we don’t share their world. And there is one very relevant ascertainment we have to formulate in this moment: there is no mother per se, there is no objective mother, the

mother is the mother-for-the-child. The fact that the artist voluntarily undertakes the “objectification” of herself for the puppy with becoming mother-for-the-puppy through breast-feeding, as well as through becoming a sort of the puppy’s social parent, opens a new dimension of the project. One may not forget that the dog keeper is legally responsible for assuring proper care for the animal. The role of the caretaker is somehow similar to the role of the parent, however the dog is considered as the dog keeper’s property, an object with an ability to suffer, whereat suffering may not be caused. Yet, punishment in the case of violation of rights in case of the child and the puppy speaks most about the hierarchical difference between human and animal, as consent in the society. The difference between the two species has been recognized within historical materialism, as ascertained by de Beauvoir, which assured a relevant recognition that “[h]umanity is not an animal species; it is a historical reality.” (de Beauvoir 2010, p. 87) Therefore, if Maja Smrekar is becoming mother-for-the-puppy this makes a significant dimension of this process of becoming, in which she is simultaneously becoming an animal-mother. With objectifying herself for the dog, she is resisting the politics over the animals, considering the domestic animals as proprietary objects of humans. The hierarchical differentiation of human and animal species is here subverted.

### **3. Becoming Animal, Becoming Other**

Saying that one is becoming an animal seems senseless since man *is* an animal, a speaking animal, if we agree with Jacques Derrida. (Derrida 2008)

For Martin Heidegger however there exists a difference between animal and human and stone; it lies in the relation of each of them to the world: “the stone is worldless [*weltlos*]; the animal is poor in the world [*weltarm*]; man is world-forming [*weltbildend*].” The origin of Heidegger’s consideration on the relation of the being and the world is to be found in Uexküll: what Uexküll defined as marks or carriers of meaning, Heidegger calls disinhibitors and what Uexküll defined as *die Umwelt*, Heidegger calls disinhibiting ring. Heidegger examines the relationship of the animal to its disinhibiting ring further in order to define what he called the “poverty in the world” significant for the animals. Heidegger differentiates between the animal existence in the world and the mode of the human world. Mode of existence, proper to an animal, is signified in its relation with the disinhibitor – it is in a state of *captivation*. As an example of captivation Heidegger presents a case of a bee described already by Uexküll. A bee, placed in front of a cup full of honey, begun to suck it, then its abdomen is cut away, yet the bee happily continues to suck while the honey visibly streams out of its open abdomen. The animal is captivated, stunned, but also taken away, blocked [*benommen*], as well as taken in, absorbed [*eingnommen*]. The animal is essentially captivated and wholly absorbed in its own disinhibitor. It cannot truly *act in relation to it*, it can only behave. (Agamben 2004, p. 52)

The animal is being-alongside-itself, the animal does not recognize the situation, the bee does not recognize the presence of too much honey neither the absence of its abdomen. It is *taken by* [*hingenommen*] the food. “This being taken is only possible where there is an instinctive ‘towards ...’

[*treibhaftes Hin-zu*]. Yet this being taken in such a drivenness also excludes the possibility of any recognition of any being-present-at-hand [*Vorhandensein*]. It is precisely being taken by its food that prevents the animal from taking up a position over and against [*sich gegenüberzustellen*] this food.” (Heidegger 1995, p. 263; Heidegger 1983, p. 383)

The baby is *taken by* the mother’s milk. When the animal comes in contact with its disinhibitor, it gets taken by [*hingenommen*] the food, it is captivated, because the “very possibility of apprehending something as something is *withheld* [*genommen*] from the animal, and it is withheld from it not merely here and now, but withheld in the sense that it is ‘not given at all’”. (Ibid. 1995, p. 253; *ibid.* 1983, p. 269) We can make an analogy with the captivation of the animal and the breast-feeding child. The breast-feeding baby gets into disinhibiting ring. The baby is driven toward the breast. It gets into instinctive drivenness “toward”. Being taken by the milk prevents the child to take up a position over the milk or apprehending something as something. In this case, however, the subject experiencing the “poverty in the world” is not the animal as in the case discussed by Heidegger, but the child, which is a pre-state of human being.

The captivated subject, the breast-feeding child, does not, according to the presented Heidegger’s theory, fulfill the criteria for the human being. The difference between man and animal lies in human’s capability to act in relation to it or to act against the world according to Heidegger. It would not be correct to say that this child is becoming human through the process of breast-feeding or this performance. Recalling Derrida saying that man is a speaking animal, let us make a reflection upon the *communication aspect*.

Uexküll refers to the decisive role of the subject enlightened by Kant when conceptualizing the notion of *die Umwelt* to show how space and time depend on the subject, the animal in that case. With Kant we get the notion of existence of things *for* the subject. So how does the baby exist for itself? The environment, time and space are formed according to the subject, they exist *for* the subject. But as being in the state of captivation the child is not capable of apprehending something as something. Accordingly, it is not capable of apprehending itself. The same holds for the animal. There is a certain difference between the baby and the grown up. If man is a speaking animal and other animals are not speaking, the baby is a non-speaking animal, the animal as all other non-speaking animals. The mother, on the contrary, is a speaking animal.

One might say, the mother is capable of reaching the state of being-for-herself. She is thus a conscious being, whereat consciousness would make the difference between human and animal. Jean-Luc Nancy disagrees that consciousness is the criterion and claims there is no difference between man and animal. There is no consciousness, but there is *exchange*.<sup>3</sup>

Let us consider the breast-feeding performance as a *communication event*. Jean-Luc Nancy recalls Edmund Husserl's reflection upon the silent voice of the self, talking to itself, listening to itself. The self communicates with the self. One aims to be present to oneself. Yet, to see oneself can only happen if there is a difference between the presence one and the presence

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<sup>3</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy in a Ph.D. seminar for the Humanities program, Alma Mater Europaea – Institutum Studiorum Humanitatis, 30<sup>th</sup> August 2016.

two. There is an “Augenblick”, a moment, it takes a while. The self starts to go to the self, however the self will never find itself. There is a *différance* at work. With the term Jacques Derrida refers to the double meaning implied in the root of it: French verb *differe* means *to be different of* or *to delay something*. The delay of the *différance* is an infinite delay. To be becomes suspended. It is a continuous, never ending process of *becoming*.

If the baby does not have a capability to apprehend itself as itself, to be present to itself, it does not even start to go to the self. Mother on the contrary, has the ability to aim to be present to herself as the mother. Yet, this to be, the identity, is suspended. The mother gets in a continuous process of becoming mother.

Considering the existence of an identity, Hegel introduced the notion of an *other*. The relationship between the two, the mother and the baby, is essential for the establishment of their identities. It is the baby that makes the mother the mother. According to Hegel, something is existence, whereat the relationship to others determinates this existence: “[s]omething is a determinate existence, this something is in relationship to *others*, and also to a perceiver among these others.” (Hegel 2010, p. 64)

Identity is being established not essentially, but through a differentiation process in relation to that what something is not, i.e. through negative relational defining. Something is defined through relations and differentiations, negations (and confirmations).

Furthermore, for Hegel, something is also *becoming*. The two moments are not that of abstract being and nothing, but an existence, something, and another existence, which is the negative of something. “The

other moment is equally an existent, but determined as the negative of something – an *other*. As becoming, something is a transition, the moments of which are themselves something, and for that reason it is an *alteration* – a becoming that has already become *concrete*.” (Ibid., p. 90)

With breast-feeding the puppy, the artist positions herself in a kinship relationship with the dog. She gets in a process of differentiation and of becoming the negative of herself as the speaking animal, that is the non-speaking animal. And the same time the puppy gets in a process of becoming human. Humanity enters its differentiating identity, an identity of a non-speaking animal, which an animal that is not speaking, having the speaking animal as its other. This equalization of the two processes of becoming is significant for the artist. Agamben’s finding that “[t]he total humanization of the animal coincides with a total animalization of man” (Agamben 2006, p. 77) is a relevant reference in the *K-9\_topology*.<sup>4</sup>

In short we will focus upon the political implications of this equalization. But first we need to enlighten the striving of the artist for de-hierarchization, since the two species do not enjoy political equality. The original positioning of the artist lies in making herself a disinhibitor for the puppy. In this disinhibiting ring she does not take over the “higher” state of being as regards the relation to the world, but a “lower” one, as far as one can gather a hierarchical positioning of the human, animal and the stone in Heidegger. She enters a transubstantiation process of becoming a “defined”

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<sup>4</sup> <[http://majasmrekar.org/k-9\\_topology](http://majasmrekar.org/k-9_topology)> 1. 11. 2016

being, an animal, as Heidegger comprehended the animal. At the same time the animal gets “privileged” with the transition to human.

The becoming a non-speaking animal is however at work also in the mother-child formation through breastfeeding if we infer from Heidegger that the baby is as well a “defined” being as other animals. It is the state and the relation to the disinhibitor that defines the being as “defined” or “non-defined”. The “defined” being is not in a state in which the subject would be able to apprehend something as something, itself as itself, or would aim to reach the comprehension of itself. In this state the subject lets itself to the instinctive drivenness “toward”, *it is the state of captivation*. With putting herself in this state Maja Smrekar can discard the “privilege” of human to be a “non-defined” being. Because, as this project demonstrates, the mother is not a mere host that harbors the parasite, the breast-feeder, but the giver of the suck also gets captivated by the breast-feeder in this functional cycle. The giver of the suck is dependent on sucking, as is the whole process of breast-feeding dependent on a breast-feeder. The existence of this breast-feeding *Umwelt* is established on breast-feeding, since without sucking there is no milk. Therefore, it is relevant to conceive the *Umwelt* of the breast-feeding mother and the child, as well as of the *Umwelt* of the artist and the puppy as an *exchange circuit*.

For Maja Smrekar this physiological captivation is of extreme importance. It becomes her means of resistance: “Becoming (- animal) is a molecular process: in my case the molecular process of my pituitary glands being so much triggered by systematic breastpumping, they would get connected with hormone prolactin to accumulate milk in my body. As a side

effect of that triggering, hormone oxytocine increases, which evokes empathy.”<sup>5</sup>

#### 4. Biopolitical Resistance: Becoming Bare Life

“I hunt nature and culture hunts me,”<sup>6</sup> says the artist with the title of another *K-9\_topology* performance. Aiming at becoming “nature” is aiming at escaping culture, as the nothing of culture, whereat culture is the management of life, the biopolitical. Maja Smrekar aims at becoming “zoē”, bare life, the domain once reserved only for the animals. Yet, what can we today say of the distinction between zoē and bios? In Giorgio Agamben’s observation anthropological machine produced the *humanitas* by de-ciding every time between man and animal. There is a “total management” of biological life at work today, that is, of the very animality of man. Humanity “has taken upon itself the mandate of the total management of its own animality”. (Agamben 2006, p. 77)

Maja Smrekar responds to the situation, when bio-power is being exercised on and through the bodies, as ascertained by Michel Foucault. “As an artist I feel I need to use my own body (and bodies of my dogs) to re-gain the position of power. To re-gain my body. Our bodies.”<sup>7</sup> The project of becoming (m)Other is to be comprehended as a biopolitical statement or

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<sup>5</sup> <<http://majasmrekar.org/post-no-2-involution-of-m-mother>> 19. 10. 2016

<sup>6</sup> The title of another Maja Smrekar’s performance with wolves.

<sup>7</sup> <<http://majasmrekar.org/post-no-2-involution-of-m-mother>> 19. 10. 2016

intervention with the investment of artist's body with the purpose to re-gain the position of power and her own animality, i.e. as an act of resistance to bio-power.

Her artistic gesture is additionally to be read as a response to neoliberal capitalism: "The global economy threatens to homogenize people by means of the lowest common denominator – the ability to consume". The artist feels the urge to resist with using her own economy of emotions: "Therefore I am submitting myself to the dog-human kinship relationship as a radical intimate action of 'returning home'."<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> <<http://majasmrekar.org/blog>> 19. 10. 2016

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