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In 1967, the Brazilian artist Nelson Leirner balked at the confining of a large dead pig to a gestation crate in the fourth Modern Art Salon of Brasília. He called out the curators, Frederico Moraes and Mário Pedrosa, in the press, questioning what possible criteria they had for admitting such a monstrosity. The work was titled *The Pig* (*O porco*, 1967) and had been submitted by none other than Leirner himself. For the art historian Claudia Calirman, the interest here involves a Duchampian reversal: Rather than defend a non-art object excluded from display in the interest of unsettling art-world conventions, Leirner resisted the successful inclusion of his readymade animal so as to question a definition of art that had become so expanded as to accommodate just about anything.¹ While this interpretation is compelling as an account of the Brazilian reception of the readymade, coming to terms with the exploitive conditions embodied by the pig in *The Pig* is a more urgent matter, given that these conditions have involved widespread human and nonhuman suffering, environmental violence, and deadly epidemics and pandemics.

Leaving aside the question of whether a sentient animal with personality and memory can ever truly be a readymade in the same way as a bicycle wheel or uri-

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1. Claudia Calirman, *Brazilian Art under Dictatorship: Antonio Manuel, Artur Barrio, and Cildo Meireles* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), p. 20. The debate over aesthetic standards between Leirner and the curators occurred against a wider sociopolitical backdrop of violence and censorship by the military dictatorship beginning in the 1960s. Calirman argues compellingly that the readymade and the whims of the military dictatorship shared common ground in their arbitrariness and lack of clearly defined rules—the first as deregulatory aesthetic freedom, the second as regulatory sociopolitical unfreedom. I would further argue that the pig in Leirner's work embodies both at once: the artist's freedom in transvaluing an animal into an art object, on the one hand, and the regimenting of the animal in a crate on the other. Moreover, as I will argue in this essay, industrial commodification is responsible for the normalization of violence that facilitates reducing nonhuman animal bodies to purportedly identical readymade units, a practice of intensive animal agriculture that should be seen as an integral part of repressive and undemocratic social, economic, and political power.



Nelson Leirner. *The Pig*. 1967.

nal, what is increasingly clear from our vantage point today is that the treatment of nonhuman animals as de facto industrial readymades has reached a critical phase—ethically, politically, and ecologically. Leirner’s work revealed the rich Brazilian legacy of *antropofagia* to be double-edged. Inaugurated by the modernist poet Oswald de Andrade’s “Cannibalist Manifesto” in 1928, the term refers to the cultural ingestion of European traditions, like the readymade, in such a way that they are incorporated into an anticolonial identity. *The Pig*, however, points to the possibility of anthropophagic *indigestion* in the harm caused by adopting European and US styles of instrumentalizing nonhuman animals.² If the Brazilian avant-gardes turned to the standardized language of the readymade in art, then Brazil’s

2. Having adopted European and US styles of meat production—with the accompanying environmental, social, and political ills—Brazil is now home to the world’s largest meat company, JBS. The company was founded by José Batista Sobrinho in 1953 in Anápolis as a modestly sized slaughterhouse. Shortly thereafter, the modernist construction of Brasília, with its burgeoning labor force, opened a new market for Sobrinho’s operation, allowing the company to expand considerably. His sons, Joesley and Wesley Batista, now co-own the parent company, J&F Investments. They have allegedly been involved in high-profile corruption in Brazil, having been accused of bribery in 2016 and of paying off food-sanitation inspectors in 2017. That same year, a conversation between Joesley and then-president Michel Temer was secretly recorded and leaked, exposing widespread corruption between Big Meat and government officials in Brazil. See <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2019/jul/02/swashbuckling-meat-tycoons-nearly-brought-down-a-government-brazil> (accessed 3/2/2021).

political and financial classes did the same with regard to the standardization of animal bodies in the meat industry, with disastrous consequences for the planet.

Brazilian animal agribusiness belongs to a broader ecopolitical history of domestication, therio-biopower (i.e., the “making live” of certain species and “letting die” of others; “therio-,” designating animality, points to the regimentation of nonhuman bodies for power, broadening Michel Foucault’s biopolitics beyond the human), and the always porous, unstable, and evolving understanding of the human-animal divide that suffuses our politics of sovereignty.³ From plundering pastoral nomads in Eurasia millennia ago to today’s multinational corporations controlling the nearly trillion-dollar animal-industrial complex, those deploying nonhuman animals as weapons for land and wealth accumulation have wielded considerable power over innumerable human and nonhuman lives. Histories of colonialism, neocolonialism, and anti-democratic authoritarianism have been, in part, carved out of nonhuman bodies. In this respect, it is little surprise that the current authoritarian president of Brazil, Jair Bolsonaro, touts his “bancadas de bíblia, bóia, e bala”—senate seats filled with Bibles, beef, and bullets. This alliterative trinity of zealotry, cattle, and violence unabashedly evokes a history of multi-species colonialist and neocolonialist brutality that continues to inflict harm on the environment and on democratic values in Brazil and beyond.

With this ecopolitical history in mind, I will stay in the Brazilian context and focus on a specific visual document, Wilson Coutinho’s short film *Cildo Meireles* of 1979.⁴ The film is remarkable for its prescient attention to nonhuman animals in the political aesthetics of Brazilian artist Cildo Meireles’s work. Coutinho mixes archival footage—scenes from protests against the military dictatorship, a chicken-disassembly line, a Coca-Cola production plant, nineteenth-century colonialist prints, and John Wayne in Howard Hawks’s film *El Dorado* (1966)—with documentation of Meireles’s installations from the 1960s and ’70s. In this way, the film is both an art-critical retrospective of Meireles’s work and an avant-garde artwork in its own right. In the reception of the film, the Wayne sequences—in which Coutinho *détourned* the film’s audio with an alternative voice track that made it seem as if the actor who most emphatically embodied the US frontier mentality was critiquing the doctrine of manifest destiny—have received the most attention thus far, with the suggestion that Coutinho does to the ideological circuitry of Hollywood what Meireles had done to Coca-Cola in his well-known *Insertions into Ideological Circuits: Coca-Cola Project* (*Inserções em circuitos ideológicos: Projeto Coca-Cola*, 1970). What is less often noted is the role nonhuman animals play in

3. For an analysis of the role of nonhuman animals in biopolitics, see Cary Wolfe, *Before the Law: Humans and Other Animals in a Biopolitical Frame* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012). On the question of nonhuman animals and their role in the history of Western political philosophy, see Jacques Derrida, *The Beast and the Sovereign. Volume 1*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).

4. Wilson Coutinho, dir., *Cildo Meireles* (Brazil, 1979). Coutinho (1947–2003) was a prominent art critic and curator at the Museum of Modern Art in Rio de Janeiro and an early champion of Meireles.

Coutinho's film and in Meireles's oeuvre. The Western capitalist expansion embodied by Wayne's North American character on horseback operated much like its European colonial precedents in the Caribbean, Central America, and South America. These genocidal campaigns of occupation were made possible by settler-colonial expropriative practices of ranching and "domesecration," a term coined by animal-studies sociologist David Nibert to defamiliarize the long history of domesticating nonhuman animals, which not so long ago was still deemed essential for human civilization and progress.⁵

In what follows, I focus on three particular passages from Coutinho's brief film: a painterly representation of a cow, footage from inside a poultry-processing plant, and an early-nineteenth-century print showing a lavish dinner in Rio. These three reference points allow me both to analyze the role of nonhuman animals in Coutinho's film and Meireles's work from the 1970s and '80s and to interrogate the undemocratic outcomes—some planned, some accidental—of animal industries in Brazil, from their emergence in European colonization to current national, international, and corporate forms of neocolonialism. I mean "undemocratic" beyond the traditional, anthropocentric stakes of democratic politics. Instead, I argue for a multispecies conception of democracy by which the well-being of the human *demos* is inextricably linked to the well-being of nonhuman animals and communities of all kinds. Such a multispecies politics is in accord with the many breakthroughs in cognitive ethology and behavioral ecology that compel us to reckon with rote tropes of "animality," as well as with the current interest in considering the lives of nonhuman animals in political philosophy and legal efforts to designate certain nonhuman species as persons, quasi-persons, or sentient beings.⁶ In short, the interests of human and nonhuman populations hinge on each other and implicate manifold social, political, economic, and environmental emergencies, such as land expropriation, the trampling of indigenous cultures, the harming of public health through the spread

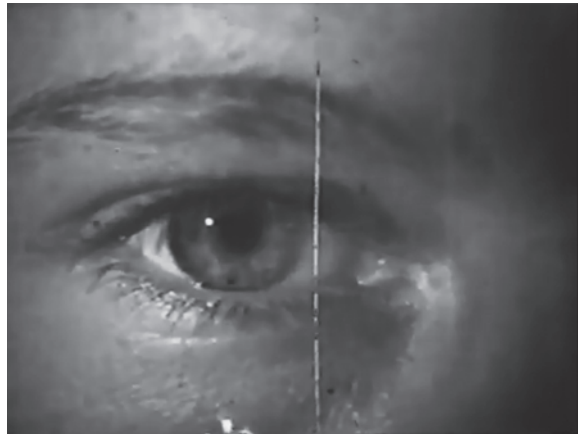
5. David Alan Nibert, *Animal Oppression and Human Violence: Domesecration, Capitalism, and Global Conflict* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013). I borrow "domesecration" from Nibert in order to foreground the deleterious consequences of animal domestication. This is not to affirm that all domesticated animals are necessarily domesecrated. Nonviolent, compassionate, and productive relationships between humans and nonhumans based on lifelong mutual dependency exist, as in the animal-sanctuary movement, and many more in the future can be envisioned.

6. For an example of what an interspecies democracy attentive to ethological knowledge might look like, see Eva Meijer, *When Animals Speak: Towards an Interspecies Democracy* (New York: New York University Press, 2019). For a political philosophy that makes room for nonhuman animals, see Will Kymlicka and Sue Donaldson, *Zoopolis: A Political Theory of Animal Rights* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011). For a critical analysis of the recent debates on the legal status of nonhuman animals, see Maneesha Deckha, *Animals as Legal Beings: Contesting Anthropocentric Legal Orders* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2021). For an overview of the legal status of certain nonhuman animals specific to Brazil, see Daniel Braga Lourenço and Carlos Frederico Ramos de Jesus, "The Legal Protection of Animals in Brazil: An Overview," in *Animals in Brazil: Economic, Legal and Ethical Perspectives*, ed. Carlos Naconecy (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), pp. 35–78.

of zoonotic illnesses and the development of unjust foodways, and the perpetuation of social and racial inequalities, as well as governmental and corporate corruption, ecocide, and global warming. As my analysis of Coutinho's and Meireles's work demonstrates, industrial animal agriculture plays a deleterious role in each of these emergencies and injustices.

Cow

Coutinho's film opens with Erik Satie's serene piano piece *Gymnopédie No. 1* (1888) and a *mise en abyme* of human and nonhuman vision. A human eye, in close-up and color, stares out unblinkingly at the viewer for about ten seconds. The screen then immediately shifts to a painterly representation of a cow, its rearing head in semi-profile as it too stares directly at the viewer, its left eye wide open in distress, saliva hanging from its mouth. Coutinho's opening sequence calls to mind Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dalí's avant-garde classic *Un chien andalou* (1929) and its notorious substitution of a sliced bovine eye for a human one. In this case, however, the animal is not a surrogate object in filmic dissimulation. But neither does it, strictly speaking, appear as itself, since this cow, which may or may not have existed as a living, breathing model, is made out of paint. Coutinho's camera pans slowly up the canvas, dwelling on the cow's immediate surroundings. A woman in a white dress is struck with fear at something unseen, as a child, also in distress, holds on to her body. To the left, a young boy thrusts a long spear into the cow's throat from behind. Framing these figures from above, a man crouches in sniper's position on an arched cliffside, having just fired his long rifle; white smoke fills the air around his



Wilson Coutinho. Cildo Meireles. 1979.



Pedro Américo. Battle of Avaí. 1877.

head. Over this painterly scene, the film's narrator, actress Hileana Menezes, laments "the violence of time and history."⁷

A student of academic Brazilian painting might recognize this scene as a detail from Pedro Américo's monumental history painting *Battle of Avaí* (*Batalha do Avaí*, 1877), which depicts the deadly war fought between Paraguay and the Triple Alliance (Argentina, the Empire of Brazil, and Uruguay) from 1864 to 1870. Coutinho never shows the full painting, revealing only one other detail: an indigenous warrior on the ground in danger of being trampled as he attempts to hold back the leg of a cavalry horse that looms over him. Ostensibly minor passages in Américo's painting, these two details single out the most consequential nonhuman animals used as biological agents in the history of colonial and post-colonial Latin America: horses and cattle.⁸ Pre-Columbian indigenous communities had never witnessed what must have been an imposing equestrian menace in the guise of mounted Spanish and Portuguese invaders. The appearance of gentle bovines may have been less threatening, but the deadly consequences of what some historians have described as an "invasion of cattle" were even more devastat-

7. "Cildo Meireles (1979), de Wilson Coutinho | FULL MOVIE," YouTube video, 10:36, posted by Filmes Verdes, March 31, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nG2USddDUR0>.

8. See Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, "Provocation: Nine Provocations for the Study of Domestication," in *Domestication Gone Wild: Politics and Practices of Multispecies Relations*, ed. Heather Anne Swanson, Marianne E. Lien, and Gro Ween (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018), pp. 242–43. The deployment of dogs in colonial campaigns should also be stressed. See Bénédicte Boisseron, *Afro-Dog Blackness and the Animal Question* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018).

ing to unsuspecting indigenous immune systems and the environment—and, if we include the current neocolonial impact of cattle, far more long-lasting.

What is striking about Coutinho's attention to these details in Américo's painting is that they augur some of Meireles's work to come, most notably *Mission/Missions: How to Build Cathedrals* (*Missão/Missões: Como construir catedrais*, 1987/2019) and *Oblivion* (*Olvido*, 1987/1989). The well-known *Mission/Missions* is a three-tiered installation: Behind a dark veil sits a pool of six hundred thousand coins cordoned off on the floor by a border of paving stones, two hundred cattle bones that are backlit and dangling from steel wires on the ceiling, and a ladder of eight hundred communion wafers connecting the two. Reviewing the literature on this work reveals an inattention to the metonymic specificity of the cow bones in favor of a metaphorical reading. For example, the curator Paulo Herkenhoff describes them as a “canopy of bones” evoking “baroque theatricality” and the Eucharistic sacrament, thereby interpreting the nonhuman remains as metaphors for “the conquering and devouring of humankind, as well as the physical connection between the body and God which occurs in the holy space of the church.”⁹ In this interpretation, which rightly evokes the theological thrust of colonialism, the animal is subsumed in allegory and its concrete role in Jesuit conquest is missed. In his study of *Mission/Missions*, the literature and media scholar Eduardo Jorge de Oliveira is more attentive to the material preconditions of the installation. De Oliveira reads *Mission/Missions* as alluding to a changing European economy built on previously unmapped and purportedly empty spaces in the “New World,” which was driven by a triadic colonial force of the numismatic (coins), the religious (wafers), and the sacrificial (bones). Arising from this conquering economy are what he describes as two “absent elements”: the building of cathedrals on one continent, which was made possible by a new economy based on expropriated land, and agriculture on the other.¹⁰

Yet there is only one passage in de Oliveira's admirable analysis of Meireles's installation that focuses on the material specificity of the bones.¹¹ He notes that they are not just any part of the bovine skeleton but the tibia in particular, which is “the most animal part of the ox” insofar as it evokes the “traction and friction [of hooves] against the ground,” the embodiment of agricultural toil.¹² This anthropocentric conception of animality as essentially grounded in laboring for humans is suspect, even if the historical lifeworlds and genetic makeup of certain nonhuman animals make it seem as if they are ineluctably

9. Paulo Herkenhoff, “A Labyrinthine Ghetto: The Work of Cildo Meireles,” in *Cildo Meireles* (London: Phaidon, 1999), p. 66.

10. Eduardo Jorge de Oliveira, “How to Build Cathedrals: Cildo Meireles: A Sensory Geography of Brazil,” *Journal of Latin American Cultural Studies* 28, no. 4 (2019), p. 6.

11. De Oliveira alludes to the role of zoonotic disease, though in a general way and without an explicit connection to domesticated animals. See *ibid.*, p. 24.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 17.



*Cildo Meireles. Mission/Missions: How to Build Cathedrals. 1987/2019.
Courtesy of the artist.*

“beasts of burden.”¹³ Nonetheless, de Oliveira’s attention to the tibia opens a path for analyzing the importance of the cattle bones in Meireles’s installations. One approach is to think through two distinct yet converging osseous temporalities: the *longue durée* of breeding and domesecration, on the one hand, and the contemporary lived time of the animal, on the other. The first implicates a long history of human techniques manipulating life and forming bodies—as well as the other way around, since humans and their domesticated agents have often entered into asymmetrical bargains of mutual influence. One of the most fateful episodes in this deep history of domesecration is the European invasions of the so-called New World, not only through the spread of zoonotic illness and death but also in the way domestic animal husbandry was imposed by settler colonialism and deemed essential to its “civilizing mission.” The second temporality implicates current forms of Brazilian agribusiness and the millions of bovine bodies and their managers who occupy and alter the environment, at a high cost. I work through these temporalities by analyzing Meireles’s use of cattle bones in his installations.

Columbus brought the first cattle to the West Indies in 1493, along with horses, sheep, goats, and pigs, after which the Caribbean became a launching point for colonial campaigns on the South American continent. Hernán Cortés was himself an elite rancher, and after his occupation of Tenochtitlan he established cattle ranches across Mesoamerica. Hernando de Soto employed horses, dogs, and pigs in his expeditions throughout the present-day southern United States. Behind nearly every colonial act of violent expropriation of land, one finds an army of European humans exploiting nonhuman animals in order to dominate non-European humans through both economic and cultural imperialism. Novel ecologies carved out by clearing and pasturing made the “New World” more hospitable to European primitive accumulation and settlement.¹⁴ Moreover, the economies that drove colonialist expansion were dependent on the interdependence of human and nonhuman labor. Meat provided a calorically dense diet for enslaved humans, while animal by-products, such as hides for leather and tallow rendered from animal fat, were used to fund settler-colonial projects and capitalist expansion. Without the natural lighting made possible by tallow candles, the mining and extraction of most mineral resources, notably gold and silver, would have been difficult, if not impossible. Sugar, perhaps the key colonial export, was also dependent on multispecies enforced labor, as the millstones used to crush sugarcane were powered by cattle. The sugar plantations themselves were often initially financed by the selling of cattle.¹⁵ Alongside these practices of land expropriation

13. I agree with the anthropologist Anna Tsing, who urges us to denaturalize the word “domestic” in the same way that “wild” and “nature” have been in certain contexts. Tsing, “Provocation: Nine Provocations for the Study of Domestication,” p. 247.

14. For a compelling environmental history of cattle in Latin America, see Rosa E. Ficek, “Cattle, Capital, Colonization: Tracking Creatures of the Anthropocene In and Out of Human Projects,” *Current Anthropology* 60, no. S20 (2019), pp. S260–71.

and the exploitation of human and nonhuman bodies, the presence of microscopic zoonotic viruses unwittingly brought over by European explorers and missionaries devastated indigenous peoples and facilitated genocidal conquest. In sum, colonial enterprise was built on white, “humanist,” Christian supremacy and fueled by a nonhuman animal, viral, and extractivist economy.¹⁶

The cow tibias in *Mission/Missions* must, therefore, be interpreted as ghostly indices of a violent, extractive past. Looming over the sacramental and numismatic forces of settler-colonialist history, the glowing ceiling of nonhuman animal bones are not mere symbolic surrogates for devastation and death but concrete instances of it. These material remains may even be encoded with genetic markers of therio-biopower that point to the manipulation and domination of certain nonhuman lives as a means of manipulating and dominating certain human lives. In other words, the bodily remains of these cows were themselves formed and informed by this colonial history.

Oblivion, Meireles’s companion work to *Mission/Missions*, reinforces many of these observations. The installation also features cattle bones, though in this case as a necro-aesthetic mass on the ground fenced in by a circular wall made of 69,300 candles. As with *Mission/Missions*, the numismatic history of capitalism and exchange value is represented; here, it is in the form of a teepee covered in the paper currencies of North, Central, and South American countries (six thousand banknotes in all). This North American indigenous structure, which contains a mound of charcoal and emits the sound of a chainsaw, sits directly on top of a pile of cattle remains.¹⁷ The noise of industrial logging and the charcoal render the teepee inhospitable, while the thick mass of bones suggests that innumerable lives have been lost and that nothing can grow on these grounds. Every component of the installation evokes indigenous displacement and eradication, gathering together the temporal layers of colonial, postcolonial, and neocolonial history that had (and continue to have) a hand in this displacement and eradication. *Oblivion* identifies the nonhuman animal, viral, and elemental economy laid out above as the driving force of settler colonialism: mining, logging, deforestation, cattle, meat, hides, tallow/candles, and money—all playing a key role in the genocidal and expropriative practices alluded to by the work’s title. In both installations, however, Meireles presents a chain of signification that can never be reduced to the symbolic, referential, or indexical alone but insists on all three in mutual reinforcement.

In other words, the cow bones in *Mission/Missions* and *Oblivion* are both metaphoric and metonymic of domeseccration and its role in colonialist traumas across centuries of breeding, instrumentalization, and conquest. The cattle bones

15. Ibid., p. S261.

16. See Nibert, *Animal Oppression and Human Violence: Domeseccration, Capitalism, and Global Conflict*, pp. 43–69. See also Virginia DeJohn Anderson, *Creatures of Empire: How Domestic Animals Transformed Early America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

17. De Oliveira, “How to Build Cathedrals,” p. 21.



*Meireles. Oblivion. 1987/89.
Courtesy of the artist.*

are *figurative* of a history of human violence, in that they stand in for indigenous death and genocide; they are simultaneously *literal* in that they make up the extracted remains of nonhuman bodies that facilitated this colonial violence. In a sense, this second, literal reading is also partly figurative, since these cannot possibly be the actual bones of cattle used centuries ago by European invaders. The particular animal remains in Meireles's installations may be genetically linked to the livestock brought over by Columbus, but they are not themselves the remains of those animals. They can only stand in for them. This means that the purely literal reading of these cattle bones documents a more immediate lived time, specifically, that of cows in postcolonial and neocolonial agricultural exploitation. These bones are indices of nonhuman bodies that lived and perished only recently (relative to the making of *Mission/Missions* and *Oblivion*) within a matrix of postcolonial and neocolonial enterprise. The two installations therefore link two temporalities—one colonial, the other postcolonial/neocolonial—and in each instance function both metaphorically (of human violence) and metonymically (of extracted nonhuman bodies).

Reading *Mission/Missions* and *Oblivion* with such attention to the cattle bones reveals the history of domesecration to be a continuous shadow that looms over Brazilian history—and today, with the global environmental implications of cattle and deforestation, over the Earth's history as well. The big three Brazilian meat companies—JBS, Marfrig, and Minerva—were all made possible by decades of business dealings and mergers facilitated by a history of US military and economic intervention in Latin America in the 1960s and '70s, as well as by loans from the World Bank and other neoliberal trade mechanisms.¹⁸ The size of these companies has led to accelerating environmental devastation and widespread “cattle laundering,” in which cows illegally raised in protected areas of the Amazon enter the legal supply chain by untraceable means via indirect farming operations. These meat conglomerates are rhizomes of vertically integrated farms, slaughterhouses, and processing plants spread throughout Brazil, which facilitate the furtive traffic of bodies and prove difficult to monitor.¹⁹ Worse, cattle ranchers, often with the help of hired gangs and paramilitary mercenaries, have violently enforced their business interests. Chico Mendes, Sister Dorothy, José Cláudio Ribeiro da Silva, Maria do Espírito Santo, and Maxciel Pereira dos Santos are just a few of the environmental activists in Brazil murdered by ranchers or their proxies.²⁰ Here is

18. Nibert, *Animal Oppression and Human Violence*, pp. 196–202.

19. See Dom Phillips, “Meat Company Faces Heat over ‘Cattle Laundering’ in Amazon Supply Chain,” *Guardian*, February 20, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2020/feb/20/meat-company-faces-heat-over-cattle-laundering-in-amazon-supply-chain>.

20. The deadly assault on environmental activism in Latin America is ongoing and has only increased in the past decade. For example, the year 2015 was one of the most murderous for environmental activists, with Brazil seeing more killings than any other country (fifty out of 185 total). The majority have been killed by mining interests, but agribusiness and logging are not far behind. See the report “On Dangerous Ground” published by Global Witness (<https://www.globalwitness.org/en/campaigns/environmental-activists/dangerous-ground/>). For a more expansive consideration of this problem, see the Human Rights Watch 2019 report “Rainforest Mafias: How Violence and Impunity Fuel Deforestation in the Amazon” (https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/report_pdf/brazil0919_web.pdf).

the central tragedy of Meireles's installations in the present: The political and economic nexus of cattle and finance has privileged the bovine body over certain human bodies—namely, the poor and indigenous who are forced to work in slaughterhouses and plantations or are alienated from their territories through legal and illegal neocolonial practices of land expropriation. This industry also continues to prioritize the growth of certain domesticated bodies over the well-being of human communities and the more-than-human worlds dependent on the Amazon rainforest. This is because the pasturing and slaughtering of cattle entails the hoarding of life-supporting systems and resources—e.g., the immense amount of land, plant calories, and water necessary for maintaining bovine bodies—that could otherwise serve more urgent needs, including the need for “re-wilding” ecosystems that have fallen prey to industrial clearing. The above is a clear example of the wielding of therio-biopower: the “making live” and regimentation of a multitude of select nonhuman animals (however temporarily in relation to normal life expectancy) and the ecocidal “letting die” (sometimes outright killing) of certain human and nonhuman communities that find themselves in the way. Bolsonaro's government of bullets, beef, and Bibles reaches far into these violent paths carved out of the Amazon.

That Meireles's *Mission/Missions* and *Oblivion* were made in 1987 is also significant; a year later, scientific evidence for anthropogenic global warming was brought to public attention for the first time through the NASA climatologist James Hansen's testimony to the United States Congress. In this context, the tibia bones in *Mission/Missions* can be read as indices of greenhouse gases, specifically methane, which emanated from these once living bodies, and carbon dioxide (from animal agriculture and other heavy emitting industries), which went unsequestered as a result of the pasturing and deforestation necessary to make room for monocrop feeds. In *Oblivion*, the cow remains can be read as biostratigraphic species markers and fossils in the making, since, alongside the even more copious chicken remains from the poultry industry, it will be cattle bones that provide the future biotic signals in the geological strata of the Anthropocene.²¹ In both installations, the bones function as the return of the agriculturally repressed and point to agribusiness's responsibility not only for deforestation and global warming but also for species extinction, biodiversity loss, and unprecedented contact between humans and nonhumans—“spillover” that has led to epidemic and pandemic zoonotic outbreaks.²² Adding to this catastrophic mix are the recent corruption scandals in Brazil, which laid bare the political power that corporate meat holds in the country. Taken together, the overlapping consequences of domesecration

21. Staggeringly, livestock, mostly cows and pigs, currently make up sixty percent of the mammalian biomass on Earth, nearly double the biomass of humans. Non-domesticated mammals account for only four percent. For the future role of chicken bones in the geological record, see Carys E. Bennett et al., “The Broiler Chicken as a Signal of a Human Reconfigured Biosphere,” *Royal Society Open Science* 5, no. 12 (2018), <https://royalsocietypublishing.org/doi/10.1098/rsos.180325>.

22. See <https://insideclimatenews.org/news/23032020/coronavirus-zoonotic-diseases-climate-change-agriculture> (accessed 7/23/2020).

indexed by these cattle bones in Meireles's installations demonstrate that the stakes of democracy are tied to and hampered by neocolonial interests—and that the nonhuman animal, viral, and extractivist economy needs to be considered when confronting undemocratic politics.

Chicken

If Américo's *Battle of Avaí* recalls a moment in Brazil's imperial history, then the work immediately following it in Coutinho's film, by Meireles, harkens even further back, to the figure of Tiradentes, who, on April 21, 1792, was publicly executed for his anti-colonial revolutionary activities. On the anniversary of the execution in 1970, Meireles installed his *Tiradentes: Totem-Monument to the Political Prisoner* (*Tiradentes: Totem-monumento ao preso político*, 1970) as part of Frederico Morais's confrontational *Do corpo à terra* exhibition in the Municipal Park of Belo



Meireles, Tiradentes: Totem-Monument to the Political Prisoner. 1970.

Courtesy of the artist.



Coutinho. Cildo Meireles. 1970.

Horizonte, Minas Gerais. The outdoor installation comprised a wooden stake inserted into the ground with a white cloth framing its base, a clinical thermometer affixed to the top of the stake, gasoline, and ten live chickens. The birds were tethered to the wooden stake and unable to flee when Meireles set them on fire in a political-aesthetic act of corporeal punishment. This performative installation is often interpreted in a twofold way: The chickens are understood to be stand-ins for political martyrs—from Tiradentes to the dissenters being tortured and killed by the military dictatorship—and as an allusion to syncretic religious animal sacrifice in Brazil, a practice that, as Claudia Calirman notes, had been allegorized as embodying state violence.²³

In shifting attention from Américo’s *Battle of Avaí* to Meireles’s *Tiradentes*, Coutinho does not move straight to the installation itself, as might be expected. Instead, the viewer enters a poultry-processing plant and its disassembly line. Stunned but still living birds hang upside down with feet fastened to wires on a slowly revolving metal carousel. Slaughterhouse workers in sterile gear walk around a seemingly endless supply of suspended white chickens that keep coming

23. Meireles has analogized the chickens not only to political prisoners in Brazil but also to Buddhist monks burning themselves in protest of the Vietnam War. Herkenhoff, “A Labyrinthine Ghetto: The Work of Cildo Meireles,” pp. 62–65. Calirman, *Brazilian Art under Dictatorship: Antonio Manuel, Artur Barrio, and Cildo Meireles*, p. 123. Though superficial combustive affinities exist, this analogy is unworkable. Being burned alive against one’s will and self-immolation in a willful act of defiance are materially and symbolically distinct. With respect to animal sacrifice, Calirman notes that “references to Afro-Brazilian syncretic rituals of...animal sacrifices were often used in Brazil for the brutality of the regime,” citing Barrio’s *Trouxas Ensanguentadas* (Bloody bundles) (1970) and Antonio Manuel’s *O bode* (The Goat) (1973) alongside Meireles’s *Tiradentes*. *Ibid.*, p. 121. This analogy between religious animal sacrifice and state violence is also fraught, since it leads one to believe that violence toward non-human animal life in religious ceremonies can be related to state violence against human life. Clearly, the social, political, and ethical stakes are different.

down the carousel. Over this scene, the female narrator gives an account of Meireles's *Tiradentes* accompanied by Satie's *Gymnopédie No. 1* and nondiegetic sounds of sawing wood that sync with the images of throat-cutting. Close-up shots of the birds being killed one by one—a repetitive gesture of grabbing the head with one hand and slitting the throat with the other—are timed to match the sounds of the sawing wood. Only after this industrialized bloodletting does the film reveal images of Meireles's installation and its post-performance remains, though Coutinho continues to interpose imagery from the slaughterhouse: more throat-slitting, followed by another slowly revolving carousel of now dead chickens, defeathered and hung by the neck.

Over these images of rotating chicken bodies and Meireles's installation, the narrator says the words “the possibility of making visible the obscurity of violence.”²⁴ This suggests that both sequences, the poultry production plant and Meireles's *Tiradentes*, are analogical of dictatorial state violence—the former as vicarious gallows on film, the latter as corporeal torture in live performance. Both use the nonhuman body as an allusive cipher for human trauma. If we dig deeper, however, complications arise that alter the installation's meaning. In most discussions of *Tiradentes*, the birds are treated as readymade sacrificial surrogates with no context—a context that Coutinho provides viscerally in his film. It should be stressed that Coutinho provides this context in a threefold way: as avant-garde *film-making*, since these images of a chicken-disassembly line accompanied by the incongruous sounds of sawing wood likely elicit a visceral response in the viewer; as a historical *document*, since these scenes make visible the development of industrial animal production in Brazil; and, in his coupling of these images with the photographs and a discussion of Meireles's work, as *art criticism*. In this way, Coutinho allows for a multifaceted interpretation of *Tiradentes*, one that simultaneously revitalizes an affective rawness largely missing from photographic documentation, provides commentary, and offers a glimpse into the historical, cultural, and economic context of the nonhuman bodies used in Meireles's provocation against the military dictatorship.

Keeping this context in mind is important, since it fundamentally alters and enriches our understanding of the birds featured in *Tiradentes* beyond their being simply available as raw material for art. When we consider the history of animal production and domesecration, there is a crucial difference between a family of subsistence farmers sacrificing one of their chickens—be it for sustenance, in a ceremony, as a gift, or in some other symbolic act—and a large-scale industrial operation discarding one bird's body among thousands, millions, even billions of others. The first is a local site of non-substitution, in which an animal matters, however minimally and in the instrumentalized service of human culture and tradition; a subsistence farmer, in everyday conviviality with nonhuman animals, often comes to understand them proto-ethologically as having distinguishable per-

24. Coutinho, *Cildo Meireles*, 2:31–36.

sonality traits, a phenomenon that animal-behavior scientists have only recently come to verify in the case of chickens. The second is a global site of absolute substitution in which one chicken body is interchangeable with and reducible to any other. To borrow terms from Meireles (albeit in a different context, the 1984 text “Obscura Luz [Obscure Light]”), the difference is between what is *perishable* and what is *discardable*: “The perishable is a metaphysical condition which can be overcome by accepting the hypothesis that the universe is finite. ‘Discardability’ is a consumer-economic practice based on the illusion of infinity.”²⁵ In other words, the perishable has auratic value while the discardable falls under the law of general equivalence. The cow bones in *Mission/Missions* and *Oblivion* also attest to the power of general equivalence, since the interchangeable/discardable tibias cover the tracks of the singular/perishable beings from which they were culled.

Coutinho’s film shows that already by the late ’70s the chicken had entered into a production system rendering the avian body into standardized and commodified parts on an unprecedented scale.²⁶ Although it is difficult to establish the resulting changes in public perception short of sociological and material culture research, it is almost certain that perceptions of domesticated animals were altered as a result of this history of industrial animal production. This includes the *loss* of visibility, since one of the outcomes of industrial animal agriculture is to hide the multitude of non-human bodies being extracted, furthering Coutinho’s analogy of the “obscurity of violence” and the disassembly line, Meireles’s *Tiradentes*, and the military dictatorship’s torture and disappearance of people. Perhaps the most consequential change in the perception of domesticated animals for my present purposes has to do with the paradoxical loss of scarcity in inverse proportion to their becoming less visible as whole living beings. As was the case with many nations in the twentieth century, Brazil’s animal-industrial complex shifted meat consumption from an occasional luxury (outside the elite classes) to commercial abundance along the reach of its distribution chains. These economic developments almost certainly hold implications for the social and cultural perception of domesticated animals like chickens, for the increasing supply of individual “units” and the corresponding shrinkage of profit margins accelerated the scale of production. This economic devaluation has unavoidably led to changes in the social and cultural value, if not also the moral value, of these domesticated animals. Today, if chickens are thought of at all, it is most often as mundane, low-cost meat.²⁷

25. Cildo Meireles, “Obscura Luz (Obscure Light),” in *Cildo Meireles* (London: Phaidon, 1999), p. 128.

26. The animal-industrial complex expanded significantly in Brazil during the second half of the twentieth century, when the country went from a net food importer to one of the largest meat exporters in the world. Brazil produced one billion food animals in 1960; in 1970, three billion; by 2015 the total had neared six billion. Chickens represent the largest percent in sheer numbers. See Cynthia Schuck-Paim and Marly Winckler, “Food Animals in Brazil: Five Decades of Transformation,” in Naconecy, *Animals in Brazil*, pp. 10–11.

27. This dynamic of scarcity and value in relation to nonhuman animals can be clarified by a helpful hypothetical: If only a few chicken species remained on Earth, and not the estimated seventy-two billion currently being bred annually, they would likely be listed as endangered and encoded with value beyond the economic.

However obliquely, these socioeconomic developments left their mark on the art history of this period, for if living chickens became increasingly *invisible* along industrial systems of production, they became increasingly *visible* in works of art. Along with Meireles's *Tiradentes*, perhaps the most spectacular example was the Brazilian artist Marta Minujín's *Plastic Event (Suceso plástico, 1965)*, a happening in which five hundred live chickens were thrown out of a helicopter and onto its audience in Montevideo, Uruguay.²⁸ In fact, chickens appear in the work of an international roster of artists in the 1960s and '70s: Allan Kaprow's *Chicken* (1962), Carolee Schneemann's *Meat Joy* (1964), Rudolf Schwarzkogler's *Untitled (Mummy with Chicken)* (1965), Hans Haacke's *Chickens Hatching* (1969), Ana Mendieta's *Untitled (Chicken Piece, Shot #2)* (1972), Luis Ferenando Benedit's *Eggs Project (Proyecto huevos, 1976–77)*, and Jeffrey Vallance's *Blinky: The Friendly Hen* (1979). While these works are heterogenous and serve varied ideological purposes, what they hold in common is a newfound visibility of chicken bodies in art. This development should not simply be chalked up to the aesthetic deregulation and disinhibition, well underway at the time, of what can be used as a medium for art, but should also be seen as reflective of the socioeconomic backdrop of increasing availability, directly or indirectly, of animal bodies through industrial production.

It is against this socioeconomic backdrop that Meireles's *Tiradentes* enters into interpretive complications. Chickens can only truly stand in for political martyrdom if their deaths actually matter. In other words, a sacrifice of any kind—be it aesthetico-political or religious—is only nominal if the offering does not entail the loss of an irreplaceable entity (the same holds for the unconditional gift). It follows that, if the chickens *are* sacrificial and *do* matter, then they are potentially meaningful surrogates for political martyrdom in their perishability—which further means that Meireles's *Tiradentes* and the poultry plant from Coutinho's film entail the destruction of singular avian bodies and minds. If the chickens do *not* matter, however, then they cannot be sacrificed, only discarded like any other replaceable object—which further means that Meireles's work is only superficially or nominally sacrificial and that the animal-disassembly line in Coutinho's film holds little ethical or emotive interest, severing any real analogy with state violence.

Clearly, there is something affectively potent about a nonhuman animal's having its throat slit or suffering and perishing in flames, which is why *Tiradentes* is such a visceral politico-aesthetic analogy for state violence. Burning stuffed animal effigies would not have had the same effect. I further argue that, in the case of such nonhuman animal surrogates, analogy is fueled by homology. To burn and

28. The German-born Uruguayan artist, curator, and critic Luis Camnitzer relates that Uruguayans were shocked at Minujín's treatment of these chickens, which occurred near a poor neighborhood that could have used them as resources. This demonstrates that the increasing commercial abundance of chicken bodies did not reach all times, places, and demographics at once. See Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (New York: Verso Books, 2012), p. 315n3.

perish *like* humans who experience violence, these birds also have to *be*, in part, homologous to human minds and bodies in the evolutionary sense of kinship, which dictates that bird mindedness and embodiment are filiated with our own minds and bodies to certain degrees.²⁹ Being unable to escape one's body in pain and losing consciousness are embodied conditions shared by human and innumerable nonhuman animals. Such homological affinities include many personality traits pointing toward nonhuman individuation, memory, and self-awareness—what Jacques Derrida described as the “ipseity of being *able to be* or *able to do* ‘I,’ even before any autoreferential utterance in a language”³⁰—forms of singularization that preclude the tautology of standardized production. In other words, chickens only have the appearance of being an undifferentiated, homogenous mass in an industrial setting. In reality, they are a multitude of singularities with meaningful variations for us and among themselves. This reading of *Tiradentes* may be uncomfortable, since so-called food animals are rarely a point of concern in humanistic disciplines like art history, yet it is an interpretation that befits the current ethological evidence on avian life.³¹ This interpretation has further merit in the broader political context, since, as we have seen with respect to cattle, state violence and anti-democratic powers in politics and society are, in part, driven by agribusiness. *Tiradentes*, therefore, can be read as both metaphoric and metonymic of state violence and the sociopolitical disparities engendered and maintained by intensive animal production, of which the poultry plant in Coutinho's film is but one example. Just as *Mission/Missions* and *Oblivion* serve as metaphoric and metonymic examples of domesecration, *Tiradentes* offers both metaphoric and metonymic readings of state violence and repression.

These observations do not leave Meireles's work unscathed. The power of *Tiradentes* resides, in large part, in its morally transgressive or ethically questionable act of sacrificing singular beings, which necessarily involved inflicting irreversible damage and death. The work's logic is one of fighting fire with fire. Consequentially, there is a kernel of cynicism or bad faith in *Tiradentes*, insofar as its provocation against military violence mimics another form of violence. In hindsight, Meireles acknowledges that his installation was a violent gesture—albeit to

29. What I am arguing for is a multispecies attention to overlapping differences and sameness, which vary from species to species. Furthermore, I hope to undercut any form of human supremacy founded on the ontological differences between human and nonhuman animals.

30. Jacques Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, trans. David Wills (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), p. 92. Nonhuman individuation and personality traits have become viable topics of study in the animal-behavior sciences. See Claudio Carere and Dario Maestripieri, *Animal Personalities: Behavior, Physiology, and Evolution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013).

31. Western science is only beginning to discover the richness of the cognitive, emotional, and social lives of chickens. For my purposes, calling attention to avian forms of individuation, such as singular memory, facial recognition of humans and fellow species members, and evidence of distinct personality traits, points to a non-standardized conception of these birds, which complicates their treatment as undifferentiated entities. For a cogent review of the ethological literature, see Lori Marino, “Thinking Chickens: A Review of Cognition, Emotion, and Behavior in the Domestic Chicken,” *Animal Cognition* 20, no. 2 (2017), pp. 127–47.

his mind necessary at the time—but one he would never repeat: “I can still hear those poor hens in my emotional memory.”³² A similarly fraught analogical dynamic could be found in Artur Barrio’s use of raw cow flesh in his *Situação.T/T1.*, (Situation.T/T1., 1970), which came to be known as *Trouxas ensanguentadas* or “bloody bundles.” Also included in Morais’s *Do corpo à terra* exhibition, these fourteen clothbound bundles of bovine flesh were anonymously placed by the artist in riverbeds and sewers around the city. Their similarity to human flesh was strong enough to make the public and authorities believe they might be crime scenes (the cattle bones were even sent to a laboratory for analysis), though in truth, they were acquired at nearby slaughterhouses.³³ Like Meireles’s *Tiradentes*, the metaphoric resonance of Barrio’s offal-soaked bundles is founded on a violent metonymic complicity with animal industrial production. Pointing out this complicity is less a moralizing judgment against the artists themselves than the making explicit of a structural complication of socioeconomic violence, which affords a wider view of human and nonhuman bodies in their artistic, ethical, and political entanglements in Brazil and beyond.

Neocolonial Diets

It is significant that the exhibition *Do corpo à terra* was held in the state of Minas Gerais, as a key economic sector is agricultural, notably cattle ranching, and the region has historically been the main supplier of beef and dairy products to Rio de Janeiro. In this section of my essay, I call attention to agricultural history—deeply entwined as it is with colonial, postcolonial, and neocolonial dynamics, for nearly every kind of domesticated animal now ubiquitous in Brazil was originally imported there—in relation to the final detail in Coutinho’s film connected to nonhuman animals. Looking at an early-nineteenth-century colonial print depicting a lavish dinner table, I ask the following: How might the historical strata of hybrid and syncretic dietary regimes be interpreted as symptomatic or reflective of geopolitical realities that result in or maintain inequality, racism, and, ultimately, state and corporate forms of governmentality and control? Answering this question necessitates understanding domesecrated bodies not only as ostensibly ready-made units of profit but also as symbols of power and social inequality. In addition, so-called food animals should be seen as casualties and living proof of agribusiness’s environmental warfare, often waged in collaboration with the state, ruling political and corporate classes, and international financial institutions.

In this regard, Calirman notes a telling episode having to do with the right-wing military reception of Meireles’s *Tiradentes*. On the day after the performance, leaders of the Brazilian military government, including President Emílio

32. Cildo Meireles and Gerardo Mosquera, “Gerardo Mosquera in Conversation with Cildo Meireles,” in *Cildo Meireles* (Phaidon), p. 15.

33. Calirman, *Brazilian Art under Dictatorship*, pp. 90–91.

Garrastazú Médiçi, denounced the work over lunch.³⁴ By this point in Brazilian history, the figure of Tiradentes had proved ideologically malleable. As an anti-colonialist, he could be likened to dissenters of the dictatorship, while as a nationalist hero, he could simultaneously be co-opted by the military police as its patron (the military even sponsored *Do corpo à terra*, since it fell on April 21, the national holiday celebrating Tiradentes). Calirman picks up on the ironic detail of these military leaders' condemning Meireles's work while lunching on coq au vin,³⁵ a traditionally French culinary import symbolizing prestige and a "civilizing" diet dating back to European colonization. By the '70s, this dish had acquired a neo-colonial layer in the sense that the bodies served to the generals, like those immolated in Meireles's installation, arrived at the table via an increasingly multinational neoliberal model of industrial meat production that saw Brazil, as well as most of Central and South America, partner with US and other foreign interests.³⁶ In noting this episode, Calirman means to insinuate a facile irony comprising two sets of birds—one for art, the other for elite military men, with the latter unaware of their hypocrisy in denouncing the former. This irony falters, however, since the military's denunciation was almost certainly leveled more at the symbolism of political martyrdom than out of any sympathy for the chickens themselves. The deeper irony lies in the fact that both military meal and transgressive art installation involved bodies likely sourced from the same industrial foodways.

With reference to industrial foodways in the context of Meireles's work, the more obvious choice is Coca-Cola, and, indeed, toward the end of his film, Coutinho brings the viewer inside one of the company's production plants. An immediate visual parallel is established between the assembly line of sterilized glass bottles whizzing by, waiting to be filled, and the disassembly line of chickens from the beginning of the film. Both bottles and birds are suspended and standardized on their way to market channels. Alongside these images from the Coca-Cola plant Coutinho interposes scenes of John Wayne in *El Dorado*, his voice track having been overdubbed by a male narrator (Jorges Ramos) in an audio *détournement* that is both comic and critical. "Wayne" tells the viewer he is "here in the West, in the middle of this savage capitalism, to hold a conference about Cildo Meireles,"³⁷ and proceeds to give an admiring lecture on some of Meireles's insertion projects that

34. Ibid., p. 123.

35. Meireles's recollection is slightly different. He remembers reading a newspaper article at the time that covered the exhibition and the junta's denouncing of his work and claimed that the dish served was Brazilian chicken in blood sauce, in which case the culinary pedigree is Portuguese. See his interview on Follow Arterial: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EHZQaoHeRMI>.

36. The first president of the military dictatorship, Castello Branco, came from a ranching family and expanded cattle pasturing into the Amazon rain forest with the financial backing of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, not to mention the assistance of the US government in the 1964 coup that deposed the previous president of Brazil, João Goulart. It is during the time of the military dictatorship in Brazil that chicken production exploded, turning chicken from a luxury item to a major national export.

37. Coutinho, *Cildo Meireles*, 4:42.



Coutinho. Cildo Meireles. 1970.

involved the manipulation and recirculation of consumer objects, goods, and currency: glass bottles in *Insertions into Ideological Circuits: Coca-Cola Project* (1970), counterfeit tokens for transportation, telephones, and dispensing machines in *Insertions into Anthropological Circuits* (*Inserções em circuitos antropológicos*, 1971), and forged Brazilian cruzeiro bills with no value in *Zero Cruzeiro* (1974–78). Upon concluding his “conference,” the Hollywood star rides off on his horse, whereupon the female narrator returns to close out the film. In doing so, she claims that the role of the artist is to unmask illusions and to guard against “fixed images, against temptation from the past, of the order of the past.”³⁸ Accompanying this statement, Coutinho shows examples of such “fixed” ideological images in the form of prints by Jean-Baptiste Debret, the founder of the first Brazilian Academy of Art and foremost visual documenter of early-nineteenth-century Brazil during its transition from colony to empire. Coutinho chose four watercolor plates from Debret’s three-volume *Voyage pittoresque et historique en Brésil* (1834–39): *Cabocle*, (*Indien civilisé*), showing two indigenous hunters lying on their back and shooting at birds, possibly great egrets, with bow and arrow drawn taut by their feet; *Transport d’un enfant blanc, pour être baptisé à l’église*, depicting a cortège of four Afro-descendant servants carrying a white infant to baptism; *Les délassements d’une après dîner*, comprising four men relaxing after a meal; and *Le dîner*, revealing what such a meal looked like. I turn to this last image, since, alongside *Cabocle* (*Indien civilisé*), it also relates to the role of animals in Brazilian history and society, if, in its subtle politics of food, more surreptitiously than Américo’s *Battle of Avaí* or Meireles’s *Mission/Missions*, *Oblivion*, and *Tiradentes*.

Le dîner portrays a white couple seated across from each other and enjoying their domestic setting. Their dress, the food and drink on the table, and the Black servants standing quietly behind them attest to their wealth. A female servant fans the couple as they eat, while two male servants stand at the other end

38. Ibid., 8:20–34.

of the dining room with arms crossed—one just behind the master of the house, who is lifting food to his mouth, the other leaning against a doorframe, their attentiveness laden with ambivalence.³⁹ The most egregiously racist passage in this print involves two young Black children in the foreground. The older child, who appears to be a girl, stands just below the tabletop's edge and is naked aside from a decorative collar around her neck and a bracelet on her left arm. The younger child, likely a boy, sits completely naked on the bare hardwood floor. The mistress of the house is handing what appears to be a piece of meat off the end of a fork to the older child, who takes it with both hands. The younger child is already eating the morsel given to him. Each print in *Voyage pittoresque* has a corresponding text by Debret, in this case *Le dîner*, which describes the hybrid eating habits in Rio. After accounting for the variable eating times and cautioning the reader not to disturb store owners during their meals, Debret turns his attention to the wealthy couple at the table and the meal itself. The master is

39. See Marcus Wood, "Slavery and the Romantic Sketch: Jean-Baptiste Debret's Visual Poetics of Trauma," *Journal of Historical Geography* 43 (2014), pp. 39–48.



Jean-Baptiste Debret. *Le dîner*,
from *Voyage pittoresque et historique en Brésil*. 1834–39.

described as eating in silence, tending to professional affairs. By contrast, the mistress is animated and plays with her “petit négillons.” This racial slur used to describe the young Black children is reinforced by explicit codings of animalization and primitivizing aspersions: Like little “dogs,” they are “spoiled” and “wretched” and are said to often be found fighting over leftovers with other “domestic animals” in the alley. Once of age, they will come under the strict supervision of the servants in order to be “domesticated.”⁴⁰

Any analysis of this print should prioritize and denounce the racialized animalization of the young children by the wealthy family. It is a form of control through pseudo-ontological debasement, calling attention to a colonialist history of anti-Blackness and bestialization that also implicates the lives of the Afro-descendant servants.⁴¹ This analysis, however, should also critique a more subtle and entrenched form of animalization present at this meal—namely, the animalization of sentient *nonhuman* beings. In truth, there have always been two distinct forms of animalization deployed as discursive and material power over other bodies in human history, especially Western colonialist history: that of human *and* nonhuman beings. The animalization of human beings is a form of debasement founded on superficial or nonexistent differences between humans, which includes infrahumanization, whereby certain humans are understood to be less than fully human by virtue of their purportedly greater share of human animality. The animalization of nonhuman beings is a form of debasement founded on superficial or real differences between humans and other species (or between two separate nonhuman species, one of which is deemed more or less animal by virtue of its proximity to human culture). Moreover, these two forms of animalization often work together to fuel supremacist ideologies. The first form of animalization I point to will not sound radical, since it is commonly found in histories of primitivism, racism, sexism, and classicism. By contract, the second form of animalization may seem *prima facie* absurd. After all, how can animals be animalized “as if” they were animals when they are, in fact, animals? However compelling such commonsense reasoning may be, this line of thinking betrays an implicit overestimation of human language’s ability to fully account for the complex entities that inhabit the world alongside us. This is especially true when it comes to an umbrella term like “animal,” which is so inexact and exhausted in its overreaching attempt to designate the manifold of other minds on Earth.⁴² Moreover, to imply

40. Jean-Baptiste Debret, *Voyage pittoresque et historique au Brésil, ou Séjour d'un artiste français au Brésil, depuis 1816 jusqu'en 1831 inclusivement, tome 2* (Paris: Firmin-Didot 1834), pp. 39–41. All translations mine.

41. The relationship between anti-Blackness and animalization is delicate and fraught, especially when tending toward reductive analogies. Recent animal-studies scholars have begun interrogating the interlocking forms of oppression based in race and species without employing naive or opportunistic comparisons. See the work of Neel Ahuja, Bénédicte Boisseron, Maneesha Deckha, Lori Gruen, Zakiyyah Iman Jackson, Claire Jean Kim, and Alexander G. Weheliye.

42. This is why Derrida coined the term *animot*, a French neologism combining “animal” and “word,” in order to effectively put the homophonous plural *animaux* (animals) under erasure. See Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, pp. 47–48.

that it is only natural that *animals be animalized because they are, in fact, animals* is patently circular; it is a performative presumption that is only coherent in the closed system of a sentence. There is, furthermore, a semiotic affiliation between “animal” and “animalization” that holds real-life consequences, for it is difficult to imagine a conception of the animal or of animality that is not already contaminated with associations and histories of animalization—in other words, of deeming nonhuman life to be fit for debasement, for falling naturally under regimes of control and killability, and to otherwise be coded as lesser than certain humans. I insist on reconceiving the superficial and real differences between humans and nonhuman animals as *difference without debasement*, which will not only serve to ameliorate discrimination toward nonhuman beings through practices of animalization (including in food systems) but will also severely complicate human animalization by undercutting the naturalizing placeholder of “animal” or “animality,” that purportedly intrinsic quality of certain cultured, raced, sexed, or classed human beings that has justified their debasement either subtly or explicitly.

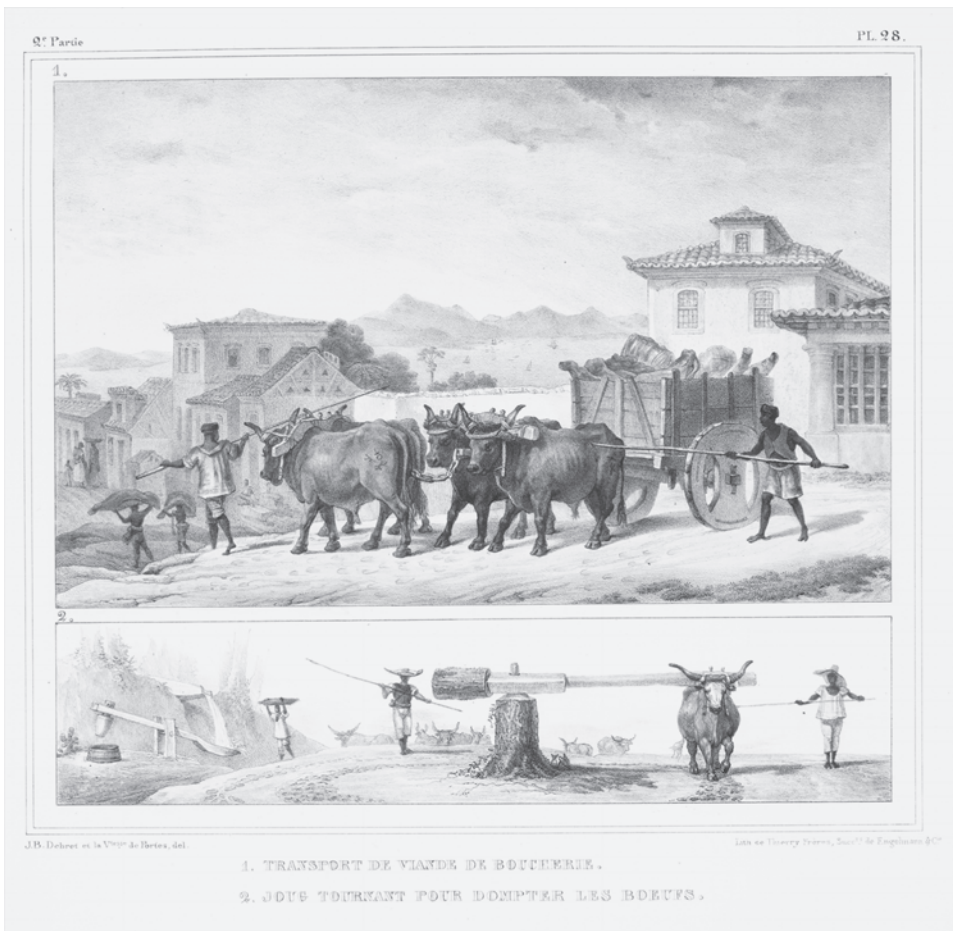
Remaining vigilant with respect to these two forms of animalization, of human and nonhuman beings, also provides a method for historical analysis, as they can often be found together in mutually reinforcing modes of bodily control that have been used to rationalize the instrumentalization, subjection, violence, and death of certain humans and nearly all nonhuman animals.⁴³ For this reason, the “animal” needs to be defamiliarized from its commonsense reduction inside “*animalization*.” This is for two interlocking reasons: First, nonhuman animal bodies and minds have always had a way of escaping the semiotic (not to mention physical) confines imposed on them—in other words, there is a plasticity of being and becoming inherent to animal life that overflows the strict categories and behavioral determinisms that have been placed on the manifold of nonhuman minds and lifeworlds.⁴⁴ Second, the cultural and even scientific concept of animality is malleable and cannot be thought of as a universal concept. It has come under serious reevaluation in Western ethological knowledge and, moreover, was never reducible to the onto-semantic subject of “animalization” in many non-Western cultures, where any equivalent abjection of nonhuman beings is foreign and the totalizing word “animal” may be nonexistent. This is further attested by the fact that practices of domesecration have not been used at all times and by all human societies, even if that appearance holds today in the wake of a globalized

43. For a brilliant analysis of animalization in the context of anti-Blackness, see Zakiyyah Iman Jackson, *Becoming Human: Matter and Meaning in an Antiblack World* (New York: New York University Press, 2020). Jackson examines the convergences and differences between these two animalizations and offers an important methodological path forward: “[C]ritical black studies must challenge animalization on at least two fronts: animalizing discourse that is directed primarily at people of African descent, and animalizing discourse that reproduces the abject abstraction of ‘the animal’ more generally because such an abstraction is not an empirical reality but a metaphysical technology of bio/necropolitics applied to life arbitrarily” (ibid., p. 15).

44. For a fascinating analysis of nonhuman animal plasticity and supernormality, the latter being a term coined by the modern ethologist Nikolaas Tinbergen, see Brian Massumi, *What Animals Teach Us about Politics* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014).

appetite for domesticating technologies and economies—Brazil being a salient case in point.

Although not pictured in Coutinho's film, another print by Debret illustrates how these two forms of animalization reinforce each other. *Transport de viande de la boucherie* shows four oxen harnessed to a wagon containing cattle carcasses. The four “beasts of burden” are accompanied by four Black slaughterhouse workers—two carrying slabs of beef over their heads and two prodding the cattle with long poles to keep things moving. The image communicates a scene of species debasement that implicates both human and nonhuman. The necro-economy of bovine body parts, which in this case subordinates nonhuman animals to carry the remains of their own kind, is facilitated by the exploitation of poor and racialized



Jean-Baptiste Debret. Transport de viande de la boucherie, from Voyage pittoresque et historique en Brésil. 1834–39.

human laborers forced to take on the harrowing and dangerous slaughterhouse work and transport depicted in this print. Along this dusty road to Rio, the colonial history of cattle invasions and genocide meets the post- and neocolonial history of the cattle economy, which maintains the subordination of the environment and those deemed ontologically inferior and expendable.

Debret's lack of self-awareness reaches breathtaking heights in the text that accompanies *Transport de viande de la boucherie*. He begins by basking in the civilizing mission of freshly slaughtered cattle, destined for shops in Rio, in a climate he claims is not conducive to the raising of beef. Yet Debret spends most of this text lamenting the "deeply ingrained Brazilian barbarity" evident in the way "negroes" go about butchering animals without considering that such practices were imposed by settler-colonialism as part of its "civilizing mission" (nor does Debret consider that the owners of land, domesecrated animals, and slaughterhouses are all white- and Euro-descendant, which continues to be predominantly the case today). He describes the slaughterhouse as filled with half-dead bodies falling on top of each other while having their heads cut off. Even more "repugnant" are the Black workers themselves, the "disgusting sacrificers" who go straight to a bar for an "eau de vie" or sangria "still covered in blood from their grisly work."⁴⁵ In this way, Debret presumes—one could even say fantasizes—a Black psyche that is essentially cruel and barbaric, even though these workers have been compelled to work in conditions that necessitate cruelty. This is another concrete example of reinforcing animalizations, whereby human animalization, or infrahumanization, is purportedly confirmed by disregarding or disavowing the animalization of the nonhuman. That cows need to be slaughtered is, for Debret, never open to debate, making the killings a neutral gesture that need not complicate his assessment of these "disgusting sacrificers." But for the precarious humans involved in the slaughterhouse's inherently violent activities, killing is hardly neutral—culturally, psychically, or physiologically.⁴⁶ Debret's lack of self-awareness allows him to pathologize the animalized humans as barbaric by disavowing the traumas induced by the repeated infliction of pain and death on sentient nonhuman beings (he never pauses to think that such work might necessitate a numbing drop

45. Debret, *Voyage pittoresque et historique au Brésil*, p. 90.

46. The dogma that slaughtering animals is natural and neutral has become acutely strained during the COVID-19 pandemic: insoluble farmers lamenting the culling of pigs that had no viable economic paths of travel in the food system; precarious workers contracting COVID-19 in hotspot slaughterhouses; former president Trump invoking the Defense Production Act to keep animal industries up and running under the pseudo-justification that they are essential to national security. In all three examples, that it is important to produce animal bodies for consumption is a foregone conclusion, even in the face of evidence of trans-species emotional distress, the exploitation and death of precarious workers, and histories of pandemics and epidemics whose origins are traceable back to intensive animal agriculture and that represent very real threats to national security. That the killing of nonhuman animals is far from psycho-socially neutral is also attested by statistics indicating increased rates of violence in areas close to slaughterhouses. See Amy J. Fitzgerald, Linda Kalof, and Thomas Dietz, "Slaughterhouses and Increased Crime Rates: An Empirical Analysis of the Spillover from 'the Jungle' into the Surrounding Community," *Organization and Environment* 22, no. 2 (2009), pp. 1–27.

of alcohol). It may even be that his disavowal is maintained only by the displaced debasement of the Black slaughterhouse worker in order not to fully confront the act of slaughtering itself, which remains unseen in the print. This racialized pathologizing, projected as an innate feature of an “uncivilized” psyche, is therefore made possible by making the rendering of the nonhuman body invisible (or only partly visible in commodifiable pieces after the fact). In turn, the violence of the slaughterhouse—and its circumstantially induced pathological disorders—are displaced onto the Afro-descendant worker as essential traits in Debret’s self-fulfilling prophecy of the Other.⁴⁷

Absent from the print *Transport de viande de la boucherie* are its profiteers and consumers, which is why placing *Le dîner* alongside it proves subversive. If we revisit the wealthy couple in Rio, it is clear that the racialized human laborers making the elaborate dishes possible have not been invited to the table. In the case of the non-humans involved, they are only partially visible—or only visible as “absent referents,” a term coined by the ecofeminist Carol A. Adams for how visual culture dissimulates the embodied origins of extracted animal products, often through gastronomic traditions.⁴⁸ Debret catalogues the copious dishes on offer: a “caldo de sustancia,” or bouillon soup made with an “enormous piece of beef” into which lard, sausages, tomatoes, cabbage, and radishes have been added; various “piles” of boiled meats and vegetables; fowl served with rice; and manioc seasoned with a “consommé of meat, tomato juice, or shrimp coulisse.” Rounding out the meal are a salad, oranges, a dessert, cheese from Minas Gerais, and coffee. While Debret focuses largely on this opulent dinner, he also gives contrasting accounts of lower-class diets—from the slightly less lavish merchant’s to the worker’s to the indigent or servant’s and, finally, most “revoltingly,” the medicant’s.⁴⁹ These racially demarcated and class-based diets become not only humbler as one moves toward the beggar but also less meat-filled, reinforcing the symbolic power of animal products as “civilizing.” Even the mistress’s extending of food on silverware is grounded in a symbolic difference: White hands remain unsullied while young fingers hold the food directly—a class-race dynamic of eating with one’s hands still present in contemporary Brazilian society.⁵⁰

Le dîner is a prophetic scene in miniature for the subsequent development of post- and neocolonial cultural and economic development in Brazil, particularly its food politics. As with the young children and servants who are largely dependent on their wealthy patrons, the struggle for food sovereignty and land rights is a continuing one for poor, indigenous, and Afro-descendant populations. Meireles’s

47. Debret also fails to account for how his presumably white and more “civilized” butchering contrasts with the scenes he describes.

48. See her classic ecofeminist text *The Sexual Politics of Meat*, first published in 1990.

49. Debret, *Voyage pittoresque et historique au Brésil*, pp. 39–40.

50. Susan Paulson, “Sensations of Food: Growing for the Nation and Eating with the Hand in Bahia, Brazil,” in *Geographies of Race and Food: Fields, Bodies, Markets*, ed. Rachel B. Slocum and Arun Saldanha (London: Routledge, 2016), pp. 103–06.

biography is connected to these struggles: His father, Cildo Furtado Meireles [*sic*], was president of the FUNAI (Fundação Nacional do Índio) and fought on behalf of the indigenous Krahô people, whose first contact with Europeans came in the early nineteenth century with the encroachment of cattle operations that displaced them, and who were subsequently decimated by cattle ranchers in the 1940s.⁵¹ Meireles made use of his father's audio recordings documenting indigenous music and rituals, along with interviews and narrative accounts of their massacre, in his 1975 sound sculpture *Sal Sem Carne* (Salt without meat), which Coutinho uses as an aural dimension in his film. The invisibility of food laborers to society and their alienation from democratic processes are also widespread problems. These inequalities have been engendered and maintained, in part, by agricultural practices and unequal power dynamics—the cattle ranchers devastating the Krahô being a symptomatic example. The food-studies scholar Susan Paulson notes more broadly how such inequalities have been established by the legacy of settler-colonialism, whereby “the development of racial ideologies and mechanisms has been driven by the appropriation and exploitation by White/European-identified people of land and other natural resources formerly controlled by non-European people.”⁵² In other words, postcolonial ideals have been unable to free themselves from colonialist history, morphing into neocolonial ideals that uncritically or cynically replicate the inequalities of so-called developed states—and are often coerced into doing so by these developed states through hard and soft power. The Brazilian meat industry attests to this conundrum: Founded on the colonial importation of domesecration and the cattle invasions, today it represents a point of economic pride and privilege for the country; yet by virtue of its postcolonial success and expansion, the industry has neocolonized the society it benefits in highly unequal ways, exploiting precarious populations and cannibalizing fragile ecosystems in the process.

Zoonotic Undemocracy

On August 19, 2019, fires in the Amazon caught the attention of the world when São Paulo was plunged into darkness by smoke clouds. The forest-clearing role of cattle and other legal and illegal industries in Brazil became a matter of global discussion, even leading to modest calls for eating less beef. At the start of 2020, with similarly apocalyptic fires consuming Australia, a different sort of crisis emerged in the form of the COVID-19 pandemic, which almost certainly began in the body of a bat—be it in a lab that sourced a novel coronavirus from a wild host

51. The cattle ranchers flew over the reservation and dropped infected clothing; see de Oliveira, “How to Build Cathedrals,” pp. 13, 25. Meireles's uncle, Chico Meireles, and his nephew, Apoena Meireles, were also involved with land activism and indigenous-rights movements. See Calirman, *Brazilian Art under Dictatorship*, p. 116.

52. Paulson, “Sensations of Food,” p. 99.

for research purposes or, more plausibly, at an animal market.⁵³ The Amazon fires can be connected to the normative practice of breeding and consuming bovine bodies on a global scale, which implicates widespread deforestation and the emission of greenhouse gases that alter the thermal composition of our planetary biome. The current pandemic can be connected to the coming into contact with and consumption of a nonhuman body tied to local tastes, which implicates a novel coronavirus that compromises the respiratory and immune systems of our bodily biomes.⁵⁴ For all their differences, these events are part of the same problem: Both imperil us and both are fueled and spread by a networked and globalized economy; both are exacerbated by disparate undemocratic and authoritarian politics; and both are zoonotic, in the exact and loose definition of this word, in that they originated in the drive to dominate the environment via the practice of confining and consuming nonhuman animals.

Considering these events together undercuts any racist argumentation concerning culturally niche eating practices associated with “foreign” so-called wet markets and animal trafficking. This is because global hegemonic Western forms of nonhuman animal confinement and killing represent legalized forms of trafficking bodies that have been equally, if not more, disastrous than non-Western local practices of animal consumption. For every epidemic or pandemic traced back to an “exotic” nonhuman body—like SARS in 2002 or MERS in 2012—many more can be traced back to a mundane Western “food animal”: for instance, the 1918 influenza pandemic, the bird-flu epidemics of 1997 and 2004, the 2009 swine-flu pandemic, and likely the next pandemic around the corner.⁵⁵ The more honest approach is to affirm that colonialist therio-biopower and ecological warfare, which have been central themes of this essay, are far from over. Today, living under the threat of domesecration’s consequences and viral pathogens has become a universal, planetary condition. This threat is no longer limited to European colonial-settler operations that conquer non-Europeans with the unwitting help of zoonotic diseases from which the imperials are happily immune; it is a planet-encompassing autoimmunological complex comprising billions of immiserated animal bodies, greenhouse gases, and novel viruses that stifles and strikes out at both the weak and the strong, the so-called developed and developing, with no regard for national borders or GDP. In this sense, the world has neocolonized itself—though, as ever, with disjunctive effects and severity depending on geogra-

53. If previous experiences with tracking down the source of viral epidemics and pandemics are any indication, it may take a decade or more to securely establish the source of COVID-19. It is also possible that the source will never be fully established with complete certainty, yet most researchers believe “natural” transmission to be more likely than laboratory origins. See Amy Maxmen and Smriti Mallapaty, “The COVID Lab-Leak Hypothesis: What Scientists Do and Don’t Know,” *Nature* 594, no. 7853 (2021), pp. 313–15.

54. Should the lab theory prove to be correct, it would nonetheless also implicate local contact with and consumption of bats and other animals at markets, since the need to study novel coronaviruses arises from the risks posed by endemic outbreaks connected to wild and domestic animals in the region.

55. For a primer on this disease history, see <https://www.surgeactivism.org/covid19>.

phy, race, class, and political formations. If, as one critical animal-studies scholar has argued, we have waged war on the other species of this Earth, we are losing by virtue of winning it so brutally and efficiently.⁵⁶

One way out of this generalized neocolonial condition is to reenvision democratic politics as posthumanist and multinatural. For the sake of the human peoples of this Earth, the *demos* can no longer be limited to human peoples alone. The public sphere would remain grounded in human reason and emotion, it is hoped, with unconditional attention to difference, diversity, equality, and justice. All these democratic ideals, however, are clearly dependent on the cooperation of a climate that either allows them to thrive or creates states of emergency leading to their breaking down. Methane, carbon dioxide, global warming, forced human migrations, antibiotic resistance, superbugs, viruses, droughts, fires, food insecurity, famine, diet-induced illnesses, land expropriation, the persecution of activists as ecoterrorists, pollution, species extinction, loss of biodiversity—all these play a role in democratic politics, directly and indirectly, and in each case the animal-industrial complex (along with fossil fuels) is a major driver of our worst-case scenarios.

Reconceptualizing the *demos* beyond “man” requires a disciplinary mix of ecofeminist, decolonial, and posthumanist positions and critiques leading to various forms of solidarity with nonhuman animals. Going beyond academic enclosures, this will also require coalition-building among policy makers, artists, food-empowerment initiatives, indigenous and racial-justice activists, animal ethicists, and environmentalists. Unavoidably, the question of personal responsibility will enter the picture, as will debates about the merits of individual versus collective action. Meireles, in an interview reflecting on the relative success of his *Insertions into Ideological Circuits: Coca-Cola Project*, claims that “it is practically impossible to achieve anything on an individual scale through this work. The contribution of each individual insertion is minor in comparison with the potential scale of the work.”⁵⁷ By this he means that a single intervention in the capitalist circuit, i.e., one artist’s *détournement* of one Coca-Cola bottle along its distribution chain, has little effect in and of itself on the system (though the “potential” is there waiting to be scaled up to a collective level). He does not say, however, that the individual act is meaningless. Nor does he suggest that personal responsibility is a reactionary ploy to displace blame or guilt. Without overvaluing the individual, Meireles reveals that choosing between daily burdens and large-scale structural change is a false choice. There is every reason to strive for both in tandem. If, however, Meireles’s work involved a textual undermining of corporate power by *entering* its production line, the stakes of global warming, ecocide, and pandemics demand a radical scaling back of the extraction of bodies, which means different approaches

56. Dinesh Joseph Wadiwel, *The War against Animals* (Leiden: Brill Rodopi, 2015).

57. Meireles and Mosquera, “Gerardo Mosquera in Conversation with Cildo Meireles,” p. 12.

are necessary with respect to the animal-industrial complex. First, a negative approach based on embargo: personal commitments to halting exploitive practices by *not* entering into the production line and refusing to consume animal bodies and their extracted by-products (whenever possible), while pressuring political entities and educational and cultural institutions to fully divest from these industries. Second, a positive approach based on alternative modes of production and the promotion of design, architecture, installation, food-art and empowerment projects that realize a less violent relation to nonhuman animals and the environment. It is a potential mobilization that fits within Ariella Aïsha Azoulay's recent imaginative proposal that academic and cultural workers strike in order to combat imperialist oppression on multiple fronts.⁵⁸ In the section "Imagine Going on Strike: The Governed" she asks us to imagine "neuroscientists or other scientists saying no to the anticipated glory at the completion of their research, because they question the right to keep apes or dolphins in captivity and treat them as legitimate objects of scientific knowledge."⁵⁹ For similar reasons, one might imagine the boards of directors of a major meat company redirecting their operations away from animal exploitation, or museum directors and university presidents cutting financial ties with intensive animal agriculture on their board of directors and in their restaurants, or a mass social movement forcing these changes through a general boycott of the animal-industrial complex. What does it say about our perilous historical moment that these imaginings are utopian at the social level but absolutely necessary at the environmental level? It means that in order to decelerate climate devastation and push back against undemocratic global inequalities, the cultivation of solidarity with nonhuman animals needs to become a historical force on the world stage as never before.

58. Ariella Aïsha Azoulay, *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism* (New York: Verso, 2019).

59. *Ibid.*, p. 447.