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Breaking images. Aesthetic activism in anti-speciesist movements in Italy

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Abstract. This article discusses findings from qualitative social research on anti-speciesist aesthetic activism in Turin and Verona (Italy). Such activism seeks to provoke moral-affective ruptures by making animal suffering visible. The social movements under examination are involved in call-to-responsibility action by showing images and videos of the systematic killing of animals. Displaying these gory and violent images aims to challenge established and habitual ways of shaping morality and to prompt reflection on the causes of animal exploitation. This work describes the ‘funeral rituals’ of these social movements and how these are employed to communicate the social and structural causes of the systemic killing of animals. Being a vegan activist often means being a source of disturbance, annoyance and discomfort for others, but also of curiosity and wonder. The research was conducted by using multiple ethnographic and qualitative methods to provide an in-depth analysis of the processual and relational aspects of this form of aesthetic activism.

Keywords: emotions, aesthetics, animal suffering, social movements, veganism.

1. INTRODUCTION

The aim of this article is to discuss some results that emerged from qualitative research on the *aesthetic activism* of some anti-speciesist social movements. Such activism aims to provoke moral-affective ruptures through the visibility of animal suffering. The social movements studied (*Anonymous for the Voiceless*, *Go Vegan Verona*, *Animal Save*) are involved in *call-to-responsibility* action by making visible the violence that happens behind the walls of the food industry, and by asking people to reflect on their relationship with this reality. This research focuses on the aesthetic-affective role of images, exploring how they gain political significance by “breaking into” the perceptions of people who do not fully know about the problem. Therefore, this is not a study of images, but rather of what images pragmatically do, promoting disruption and reflexivity on these issues. Through this type of activism, the images can acquire an ethical “voice” that compels us to (re)evaluate of our own existential coordinates.

The research was carried out using multiple ethnographic and qualitative methods (participant observation, in-depth interviews, informal conversations, digital ethnography) to provide a thorough analysis of the processual

and relational aspects of this form of aesthetic activism. Leo Tolstoy is credited with saying “*If slaughterhouses had glass walls, we would all be vegetarians*”. Although different, the movements studied here share practices of visibilization, through which they are able to render the walls of slaughterhouses “virtually” transparent. *Anonymous for the Voiceless* and *Go Vegan Verona* organize their events mainly in public areas, such as streets or squares. Here, they show the violence perpetrated in the animal industry. This is done by means of TV screens physically held by the activists themselves. *Animal Save* is more typically involved with the ritual of “vigils”, where activists meet outside slaughterhouses and wait for the trucks to bring in the animals destined to be slaughtered. Scenes of the events are recorded in the form of images and videos, which are then shared via social media. All three social movements seem to have taken Tolstoy’s words almost to the letter, making them the heart of their activism.

The theoretical framework used to study the actions of these movements is based on pragmatist theories of emotions and aesthetics. The core idea of this approach is that the disruption of habits generates new styles of perception, attention and, in some cases, responsibility. Applying this theory to the performative activities of some anti-speciesist movements allows us to investigate new responsibilities that emerge through the unexpected, the non-ordinary, and the dismantling of what is taken for granted. Some aesthetic choreographies can cause profound affective disruption. These acts of expression aim to break consolidated and habitual ways of creating a sense of belonging. Extending these acts to forms of responsibility that involve the animal kingdom is certainly a step forward in rethinking the human-nonhuman relationship. This change in perspective is already a reality for many people.

That animals receive affection from humans is nothing new. However, the distinction between pets (dogs, cats, hamsters, etc.) and animals destined for food (pigs, cows, horses, chickens, fish, etc.) is the result of a historically rooted and shared social construct rather than an incontrovertible and immutable fact. In many regions of the world, dogs and cats are eaten; in others, cows are considered sacred. In some cases, even pigs and horses can form emotional bonds with humans and be treated as pets. Despite this, it is not uncommon for people to be shocked by the thought that someone might kill and eat a dog while they are themselves busy cooking some meat. The same people might go shopping for a cute cat sweater while also buying some ham for their children; or they might be horrified at the thought of drinking dog or mouse milk while having cow’s milk every morning

for breakfast. This exemplifies the *speciesism* that these movements criticize and oppose. Their aim is to dismantle any hierarchical discriminations that deny rights to some animals that are considered less important than others merely for cultural reasons.

In the first section of the essay, the theoretical framework through which the data were interpreted will be introduced. The second section will describe the methods, social movements studied, contexts observed, and analysis strategies. The third section will cover the research phase, where the focus will be on the types of aesthetic activism employed by these movements in the production of affective reactions. The fourth section will examine the movements’ “funeral rituals” and how they are used to communicate the social and structural causes of systemic animal killing through images of animal suffering. Being a vegan activist can often be a source of disturbance, annoyance and discomfort for others, but it can also be a source of curiosity and wonder. It has the potential to produce acts of moral rupture. Finally, the fifth section will illustrate the aesthetic strategies of these social movements and the distinctions between them.

2. AESTHETIC ACTIVISM IN ANTI-SPECIESIST MOVEMENTS

Animals have rarely been the subject of reflection by social scientists, although there are some notable exceptions in the classics (Cooley 2017; Mead 1934; Bateson 2000; Elias and Dunning 1986; Ingold 2016). However, in recent decades we have witnessed a growing interest in human-nonhuman relations, particularly within the Critical Animal Studies (Franklin 1999; Peggs 2012; Taylor and Twine 2015), social movement theory (Bertuzzi 2018), political sociology (Donaldson and Kymlicka 2011) and feminist approaches (Haraway 2003; Donovan and Adams 2007; de la Bellacasa 2017). Moreover, the animal question is a topic of growing interest for politics, both institutional and “bottom-up”. The consumption of animal products has a significant impact on global CO² emissions, biodiversity loss, water consumption and the use of primary resources. In addition, the ethical issue of animal exploitation is increasingly resonating with the public, leading to a growing sense of responsibility and awareness. Many organizations and social movements have long been active in establishing animal rights through a call to responsibility. It is not surprising that such causes have arisen in parallel with the increase in intensive livestock farming worldwide. The farther away animal exploitation is from people’s

awareness, the more efforts are required to make it visible and help people become conscious of it.

Many anti-speciesist movements use aesthetic strategies to promote their goals. The use of images and videos showing animal suffering aims to stimulate a reflective experience, both in public protests and on social media. The connection between aesthetics and political protest is not new and has been studied in various ways. Some authors have discussed “artivism” (Milohnić 2005), “the aesthetic dimension of protest” (Kershaw 1997), “direct theatre” (Schechner 1999), and “ethical spectacles” (Duncombe 2007). Furthermore, hybrid forms of activism have become more prevalent since the turn of the millennium, with the *Gezi* protests in Turkey, the *Indignados* movement in Spain, the Arab Spring movements, and the American No-Global movement of “Occupy Wall Street”. All these social movements have strategically used digital communication (Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and so on), as well as demonstrations in city squares to spread their presence. These are examples of “bodies in alliance” (Butler 2015) that employ aesthetic strategies to highlight social, ethical and political positions. Bakhtin’s (1984) term “carnavalesque” is used by Schechner to describe these protests. Carnival, according to Bakhtin, is defined by the creation of a space for freedom and creativity using masks, costumes and stages. It is a counter-culture zone. Anti-speciesist movements have become more performative over time, employing rituals, choreography, masks and shocking media artefacts (such as images depicting animal suffering).

Violent visual materials, particularly audio-visual materials, in conjunction with discourses and narratives (Fernández 2021), play an important role in inducing moral shock (Jasper 2008) and promoting vegan activism. Furthermore, in contrast to dominant media narratives about animals, these performances produce forms of “counterframing” (Wrenn 2012), showing that what constitutes an “animal” is socially constructed. The movements examined in this article all aim to portray all animals as sentient, sensitive and deserving of ethical consideration. Donaldson and Kymlicka (2011) describe the diverse responsibilities toward humans and non-humans, starting from the relationship between full citizens and non-citizens. Just as there are different types of citizen based on their varying rights, animals have different types of rights according to their roles within human societies (e.g. pets, labour, pet therapy, meat, animal derivatives and others). Some have privileges and rights based on their “civilized” behaviour (Hall 2018) and the role they play in meeting human needs. Some species are “worth more” as they have greater value for

human communities based on the affective relationships we have with them (e.g. dogs and cats). Others are generally used to produce meat, animal derivatives and hides (e.g. sheep, pigs, poultry). However, this boundary between animals that have worth and are worthless is arbitrary, socially constructed and historically variable.

The performative and choreographic activity of these social movements can be interpreted as a form of aesthetic activism. The term aesthetic is used in Dewey’s (1980) sense. Dewey defines “aesthetic” as a quality of experience that gives rhythm to and marks life. “*An experience*” is a delimitation of an event that is progressing toward completion, conclusion and meaning. Aesthetic is the refined development of the characteristics associated with each experience. Making and creating is artistic when the perceived result is of a nature such that its perceived qualities have dominate the production problem. The experience takes on an aesthetic quality to the extent that its emergence is governed by the relationship between these relationships. Moreover, for Dewey, emotions are aesthetic when they are associated with an object formed by an expressive act, diverting the spontaneous direction of emotions (through previous interests and channels) into new forms, and arousing, through the mediation of reflexivity, a new emotional response. Whoever performs an expressive act must incorporate in themselves the attitude of those who are the recipients of this act, arousing in themselves possible responses. Therefore, even the anti-speciesist activist, preparing, choreographing and performing their own activity, must incorporate the possible affective attitudes (compassion, shock, indignation, guilt, etc.) of those who will witness these images. Such emotional and aesthetic responses are, with varying degrees of intensity and frequency, disruptive.

The type of aesthetic activism employed by anti-speciesist movements is generally oriented towards breaking habits and the *habitus* of meaning with which we generally classify the lives of living beings and “naturalize” their value according to the use that the human species can make of them. The aim is to “break into” people’s affective sensitivity, causing a rupture and a break in their most rooted habits. It is from the pragmatist theories of emotions (Mead 2017; Dewey 1894; Candiotti and Dreon 2021) that we learn the role of disruption of emotional experience. Emotion is the adaptive tension between habit (affective, perceptive, ethical, aesthetic) and its rupture in the face of the surprising, the unexpected, and even the shocking. These are moments that provoke *emotional reflexivity* (Holmes 2010; Burkitt 2012): we reflect on what we feel, what we are attached to, and why. Everyone is guided by affective habits that

do not need to be interpreted until the chance for their breakup arises. In some cases, the rupture and its reflexivity are politicized and contested. This consists of provoking what Jasper (2008) calls “moral shock”, in the rupture of what is morally taken for granted. This process is channelled and skillfully handled by many forms of activism that emphasize and elicit the affective aspect of reflexivity.

From very different perspectives, rupture has been thought of as the main process of politics. Indeed, Rancière argues that politics begins when there is an «irruption» by a «part of those who have no part» (Rancière 1999: 11) that redefines the orders of effective power. The author distinguishes between “police” and “politics”. The first is the process of organizing powers, places and functions by disciplining bodies through ways of doing and being; politics, on the other hand, is that which disrupts the configuration of the police: it is the act that establishes a conflict and renders inequality visible. “Police” is a partition of the sensible, i.e. of what is given to us to perceive and what makes things visible. “Police” is a way of articulating between the ways of doing, the forms of visibility of these ways of doing, and the ways of thinking about their relationships. “Politics”, on the other hand, is the disruption and redefinition of the partition of the sensible governed by police: that which we can perceive through its visibility. Politics is thus not a habit, but rather its disruption and interruption. According to Rancière, the political community is a «community of interruptions» (Ivi: 137). The partition of the sensible is the system of evidence that makes visible who or what can have a part in the “common”, what is legitimate and recognized as important; politics is what overturns these legitimate aesthetic/political configurations. While the sensible is divided into boundaries (moral, legal, political, aesthetic, perceptual, and so on), politics is the act of rupture that overturns, transgresses and shatters these boundaries. Some things become visible, audible and perceptible as a result of the break-up. They appear in consciousness and claim a new position. Emotions emerge in concert with the manifestation of things and events. To incorporate the moving dynamics of events, the visible now calls for an affective (as well as epistemic and interactive) adaptation. What is important, legitimate and visible is so because it is embedded in a group’s set of habits and practices. Emotions, as interruptions of the “partition of the sensible”, have always played a role in political conflicts and cultural transformations.

Aesthetic expression, under certain conditions, produces affective ruptures that can be transformed into

long-term reflective and political transformations. Some anti-speciesist movements actively perform, choreograph and articulate these conditions. Aesthetic expression is a type of that performatively promotes affective ruptures through visions of animal suffering in order to elicit ethical reflexivity. Such aesthetic activism is the activity that produces new ways of feeling affectively connected to others, the environment, and other forms of life by drawing attention to a morally disruptive fact. Anti-speciesist movements use this type of activism in explicit ways. They make visible what is usually invisible, deliberately ignored or denied, such as animal exploitation and suffering in the food and clothing industry. The aim is to redefine activism as the activity that produces acts that break habits (Isin 2009) and consolidated the *habitus* of sensitivity. Feeling affection for something that is considered illegitimate, undeserving or unimportant can be a real act of citizenship (Isin 2008). It establishes moments of listening and responsibility towards what is not generally the object of affective involvement. These are acts that bring visibility to facts and events that require a person to transform their responsibilities. They shape and produce citizenship (*Ibidem*), insofar as they transform the responsibilities of individuals. Responsibility concerns everything that is an object of involvement.

3. SEARCHING FOR AESTHETIC DISRUPTION IN ANTI-SPECIESIST ACTIVISM

The following results come from qualitative research aimed at investigating the relationship between anti-speciesist activism and the use of visibility to promote affective and ethical reflection. I conducted this research by participating in the activities of three social movements, *Anonymous for the Voiceless* (AV), *Go Vegan Verona* (GVV) and *Animal Save* (AS) in Turin and Verona (Italy). The movements were chosen as special cases because they share practices, albeit different ones, in making animal suffering visible. AV and GVV are very similar movements that organize their events mainly in public areas, such as streets or squares, where they display the violence perpetrated in the animal industry using TV screens physically held by the activists themselves. *Animal Save* is more typically involved with the ritual of “vigils”, where activists gather at the entrances to slaughterhouses and wait for the trucks bringing in the animals destined to be slaughtered. I used various qualitative techniques: ethnography, auto-ethnography, digital ethnography, in-depth interviews (18) and conversations on the street.

I participated in AV and AS activities in Turin for four months and GVV activities in Verona for ten months, making a total of 14 months of participation and direct observation. Throughout the study, I included an auto-ethnography (Jones, Adams and Ellis 2016), which investigated my emotions and perceptions regarding the use of these images. Having been vegetarian for ten years and vegan for three years, it was not difficult for me to join these organizations, as I share their anti-speciesist values. However, participating in the activities of these movements was extremely painful for me due to my sensitivity to animal suffering. Seeing the slaughterhouses with my own eyes and smelling the blood during AS's actions deeply shook me. Even during the choreography of GVV and AV, the repetitive images of killings, violence, blood, and lifeless bodies disturbed me to the point that, for the final observations made in my research, I preferred to hold the screen myself so as not to see the images that appeared on it. I became increasingly aware of how the use of these images has a powerful impact on those who are sensitive to these issues. I conducted 18 interviews with members of these movements, including activists, organizers and videomakers. Conversations on the street with people observing AV and GVV choreography in Turin and Verona, however, were the most important oral sources. These primarily

consisted of discussions about anti-speciesism with people who stopped in front of the screens, as described in section 3. AV organized one event per month, whereas GVV was more consistent: as it was present every Saturday evening, for a total of four or five events per month. Considering that I had between five and seven conversations per event and attended two to four events per month, I had approximately 50 conversations with passers-by. In addition, I incorporated moments of digital ethnography, such as monitoring the social channels of these movements and analysing the use of visual materials and public reactions.

The combined use of these techniques was important to record the relational and dynamic dimension of affectivity in relation to the more reflective and intimate one. In collecting and analysing the data, I used an abductive approach (Tavory and Timmermans 2014), which is oriented towards the mutual and simultaneous constitution of data and theory. Therefore, I did not start with a specific theory in mind and then look for data to confirm it. Rather, I used the data that emerged to produce a micro-theory, which was then used to search for new data, leading to the development of a more comprehensive theory, and so on. This approach allowed me to organize the theorization process and anchor it as firmly as possible in the specific data.



Figure 1. Images shown in GVV and AV activities.

4. PUBLIC VISIBILITY

In every type of activism I have explored in this research, activists make extensive use of images and videos. The visual impact of these images can be disturbing and shocking, yet they are also capable of provoking emotional and moral reflection. Some of the images used by AV and GVV are shown in Figure 1.

AV is a grassroots animal rights organization that fights animal exploitation through street activism, organizing events called “Cubes of Truth”. A “cube” consists of a performance enacted by a group of volunteers disguised as the historical figure Guy Fawkes. The activists hold TV screens showing videos from intensive animal farms. The aim is to make the suffering that lies behind the walls of slaughterhouses visible to the public. The “Cube of Truth” is an outreach tactic employed to encourage people to talk to activists and learn about a vegan lifestyle and animal exploitation. The movement has a clear abolitionist stance on the exploitation of animals. GVV organizes performances that are very similar to those of AV. The GVV’s Verona group carried out its activities under the name of AV, but after a disagreement with the international leaders of AV, they decided to continue their activities under a different name. However, the two groups I observed continue to have similar ways of using images and conducting their “outreach” conversations. Rather than showing the actions of a single intentional oppressor, these movements reveal how most people, unconsciously or not, support animal violence through the purchase of products (meat, animal derivatives, cosmetics, clothing). Below are two photos (Fig. 2 and Fig. 3) showing these two groups’ use images.

The choreography of AV and GVV, as seen in these images, is very similar. The AV performance features a group of masked volunteers who form a “cube” in the street, attracting passers-by with gory, violent images. The masks have the function of hiding the identity and face of the activist while, in turn, allowing the passers-by to watch and reflect without feeling observed or judged. Other volunteers stand by and wait for people to stop in front of the screens. The activists then wait for about 30 seconds before approaching them. They explain that the scenes they are watching result from structured and systemic oppression, fuelled by daily consumption choices made by everyone. In order to combat this, the activists propose a vegan lifestyle. The rationale behind this is to approach people who show interest, as they are more likely to engage in a meaningful conversation. The kind of conversations they have are aimed at helping people understand how every consumer (of meat and animal derivatives) is directly involved in perpetuating the acts shown on the screens, and that the only way to avoid being responsible for this suffering is to adopt a vegan lifestyle. This method of engaging with people in this manner is referred to as “outreach”.

This choreography is a form of aesthetic activism. «It’s an effective form of activism» says Sara, one of the organizers of AV, «because the images reach people’s heart». It is a “call to responsibility” through the irruption and visibility of what is unknown. «It is a type of activism that puts you in front of reality, in a way that is not nice but incontestable» (Michele, AV activist). The recipients of this type of activism, as the participants believe, are people who may be sensitive to the issue but do not yet know it, or who might not have taken deci-



Figure 2. AV’s Cube of Truth in Turin on 5 November 2022.



Figure 3. A GVV Event in Verona on 30 July 2023.

sive steps towards a vegan lifestyle. The aim is not so much to convince those who will never be convinced (like those radically opposed to animal rights activism) but rather those who are willing to stop, show their sensitivity and talk to activists. The affective responses from people who stop are extremely varied. Some people are in a visible state of shock. Sometimes they even show tears. Others do not believe the images they see, suspecting that the videos have been manipulated, or claim that the practices they see take place elsewhere, not in Italy. Although these people show sensitivity to what they see, they do not feel directly involved in the reproduction of the suffering. Others will walk past and shout provocative remarks such as «seeing these images made me really want to go to McDonald's!», mocking and denigrating the activists. Once, while I was holding the screen, a group of young people tossed a piece of chicken at us, which remained there on the ground all evening.

I participated directly in this form of activism, both by wearing the mask while holding the TV screens and by doing “outreach”, talking and conversing with passers-by. What you see on the faces of passers-by from behind the mask is a wide range of emotions, such as anger, disgust, helplessness and disbelief. Some people stop for up to 40 minutes with teary eyes fixated upon the images. In addition, I observed certain patterns in the conversations that I had with passers-by. Some, usually the youngest, were already aware of what happens in meat production and were inclined to adopt a vegan lifestyle, but they were afraid that their choice would not be understood by their family and friends. They usually asked more questions about the way in which the activist experienced the transition to a vegan diet, as they were worried about the danger of excluding certain foods. Others oscillated between a strong emotionality and sensitivity to what they were watching and a more defensive attitude, expressed by comments like «it is natural, it has always been like this». Others considered it natural and right but say «I would never do it myself». We can observe a deep clash between the sensitivity towards animal suffering and the interpretative strategies that derive from the culture in which people deeply live. The impact of culture, in this sense, is much more rooted than we might think. Some people conversed with the activists for a long time in order to understand their way of life at a deeper level. They appeared to be curious and amazed by the experience. This form of activism is perfectly in line with the goals of the movement. It is a form of action that involves people directly and leaves no escape, preventing them from ignoring the connection between what they eat and the mechanisms of violence and exploitation that allow its production.

AS carries out very different activities but is always focused on the collection and use of images. AS is a movement that is part of the worldwide movement The Save Movement (along with Climate Save Movement and Health Save Movement). Their activism is aimed at organizing vigils outside slaughterhouses, where activists wait for the trucks bringing in the animals destined for slaughter. Their actions include stopping the vehicles and giving some relief to the animals by means of providing water and physical comfort. In addition, activists try to establish a dialogue with the drivers and slaughterhouse workers to understand their motivations and at the same time convince them not to become accomplices in the animal elimination system. Furthermore, one of the objectives is to witness the procedures of the elimination system, sharing videos and photos of the “vigils” on social media. The “vigils” aim to provide comfort to the animals entering slaughterhouses and bear testimony to the existence of these places while recording their experience through pictures and videos for media coverage. This aims to make the structural nature of animal oppression and exploitation more visible.

AS events elicit direct antagonist reactions from slaughterhouse owners and workers. This is understandable, because slaughterhouse and livestock workers, whose economic livelihoods depend on meat, feel directly attacked. However, in some cases there is a particular emotional connection between AS activists and some slaughterhouse workers who are sensitive to animal suf-



Figure 4. An Animal Save vigil in Turin on 11 July 2022.

fering. These are usually exploited workers, often immigrants with precarious social situations. «I can't afford to quit this job, but I don't want to do what I do to these animals anymore» a tearful worker told Susanna (AS activist). As in other contexts, it is immigrants and those who have no alternative who are most exploited and who perform the most terrifying jobs, which are detrimental to their mental health. On the other hand, owners (of slaughterhouses, dairy companies, or cheese producers) are quite aggressive toward the activists. Thomas says:

I approached this animal and tried to pet it to give it comfort. This gentleman approached me and said: just try to touch it and I will break your face. At that point, I walked away, and he kept telling me that he would wait for me outside. In the end, fortunately nothing happened, despite me staying where I was. (Thomas, AS activist)

Another reason why AS organizes vigils is to record the scenes in which activists are involved. Through the physical presence of activists, many other people can be present digitally, either through live streams or by viewing recorded social media content. The images manage to reach a wide audience, who may either support or oppose AS's actions. Through these images and their online reproduction, it is possible to understand the vast structure that underlying animal exploitation and how the world reacts concretely to the cause of animal rights.

However, there are some substantial differences between the actions of AV, GVV and AS. These social movements promote a sense of responsibility towards animals within very different political frameworks. AV is primarily focused on engaging people on an ethical level, paying less attention to issues like food, climate issue or other social matters that may intersect with speciesism. AV does not address other forms of oppression and concentrates solely on promoting a vegan lifestyle. AS, on the other hand, politicizes its activities as part of a wider struggle against oppression. On their website, we read: «Animal Save Italia is a horizontal and intersectional movement, active against xenophobia, racism, fascism, sexism, homobitranphobia, ableism and any other form of oppression and discrimination» (AS website). GVV also frames its activism, similar to AV's, as deeply political, connecting anti-speciesism with feminism, anti-racism and opposition to current systems of domination. AS and GVV promote their actions as intimately political, while AV «depoliticizes» its actions by focusing solely on the moral dimension. However, individual AV activists tend to politicize the animal issue much more than AV as an organization does: «It is political because it is based on an injustice, and therefore it is necessarily political. Usually, when it is not considered political, it is

because it is not understood and it is considered a fad» (Michele, AV activist). Usually, as Michele said, a vegan lifestyle is not treated as political, yet it is so for many who have adopted it as a personal and individual ethical choice.

5. RITUALITY AND PERFORMATIVITY OF EMOTIONS

These forms of activism, as discussed in the previous section, aim to create affective disruptions and the circulation of materials that can trigger certain types of emotion. However, the emotional involvement that is obtained is far from improvised. These choreographic and performative activisms are real social rituals (Collins 2004; Durkheim 2001; Garfinkel 1967) that have the effect of generating emotions that seek to manifest themselves as appropriate (Hochschild 1983) and widespread. During the AV «Cubes of Truth» and GVV events I participated in, the organizers suggested making «funeral faces» when watching the videos from outside the performance. This was meant to draw the attention of passers-by to the gravity of the images that appear on the screens. It is, in a rather classic way, a way to institutionalize new feeling rules (Hochschild 1983) through the linking of the emotions shown with the images of animal suffering. This produces some desired results: 1) it immediately captures the attention of passers-by by looking stern and solemn, making explicit and visible a ritual that has the effect of drawing their attention; 2) it shows and promotes what emotions it is *appropriate* to feel in front of those images; and 3) it makes it easier for passers-by around them to share their emotions.

In this activist ritual, volunteers symbolically embody images of animal pain through the images on the screen that they are holding, producing affective atmospheres (Anderson 2009) that promote some emotions rather than others. The atmosphere is therefore heavy and funereal, but it «allows us to speak directly to the emotional sphere of people» (Michele, AV activist) and elicit amazement, wonder and disturbance. Subsequently, during the conversations between activists and passers-by, we enter the phase in which we «guide» the affective reactions of people with the aim of helping them arrive at a vegan lifestyle. «[it's aimed at] making you feel responsible, but not guilty», says Sandra (activist). The objective is not to cause people to feel guilt and frustration, which are often the spontaneous emotions of the most sensitive passers-by, but rather to generate emotions that activate a path of awareness and reflection on what they have seen and heard. To instigate guilt would be to raise a wall between the «We» and the

“You”, between the good and the bad, and to ignore the cultural and most pervasive roots of speciesism. Animal exploitation is a structural oppression; therefore, it is based on the often implicit and unconscious involvement and participation of consumers. The objective is to elicit *emotional reflexivity* (Holmes 2010; Burkitt 2012), to reinterpret one’s moral habits and to make transformations. Sometimes, even though people are sensitive, they find blocks and obstacles of a relational nature. One of the emotions most present in passers-by inclined to adopt a vegan diet is the fear of being excluded or not accepted by loved ones. People are afraid that being vegan would mean being out of place in their family and circle of friends, so they feel discomfort and frustration. Activists will then share with the passers-by their own experiences, their difficulties, but also the enthusiasm that this kind of life can bring. However, the danger of exclusion is always present, not only in eating habits but also in one’s moral and relational life.

AS’s activities are directed toward encapsulating emotions and turning them into digital artefacts such as photos, videos and informative posts on social media. In addition to establishing an open and reflective dialogue with slaughterhouse workers, the ritual of the vigils aims to collect images of animal confinement and disseminate them. However, the ritualistic and funereal dimension is also present in the actions of AS. The “vigils” that AS organizes outside of slaughterhouses and places dedicated to animal exploitation are acts of presence and testimony to the life of the animal before it disappears forever behind the walls of the slaughterhouse. «Every time you are in front of it, you feel death [...] when you decide to eat an animal, you decide on its death,» says Tommaso (AS activist). Indeed, during the participant observation phase, vigils were the most painful part of this research. I think it would be so even for those who are more “detached” from their object of investigation. As we breathe in the smell of animal flesh, looking at the miserable and haggard snouts of calves, full of scars and abscesses, we cannot help but reflect on the existential pain of these animals, guilty of belonging to an unfortunate species. Their body crosses the threshold of the slaughterhouse that is the barrier between life and death, a wall that makes them goods to sell, buy and taste. Many pieces of them will end up on the plates of people who will never know their story of torment and agony.

6. AESTHETIC CONTRASTS

This activism’s performativity is rich in aesthetic contrasts. The shock is caused by activists precise-

ly because these images of animal suffering suddenly appear in unexpected contexts. AS activism entails image circulation in the media, with images of animal suffering appearing on the homepages of social network accounts of sympathizers and supporters of animal rights, as well as of those who are unaware and have never reflected on the problem. Such images can arouse curiosity and a desire to learn more, but they can also elicit reactions of rage and indignation towards these movements. The violent nature of the images and the contrast they create in everyday life highlight the moral boundaries of speciesism. Even GVV and AV activities on street corners and in squares emerge as “disturbing” contrasts in city aesthetics. GVV, in particular, has developed a keen awareness of this. Every Saturday evening, GVV activists stand in front of the *Arena di Verona*, “forcing” passers-by and tourists to notice their images. The decision to position the event in front of the *Arena di Verona*, one of the city’s symbols along with Juliet’s iconic balcony, was motivated by a desire to stop passers-by in the middle of their tourist walks by means of glory images. These images stand out even more against the background, combining artistic beauty with shocking brutality. On one side, one of Europe’s most popular monuments; on the other, some of the most hidden scenes of human economic activity. From the conversations I had with passers-by on the street, it became clear that it was the contrast that brought out the “dissonance” of the images being shown.

To my and the activists’ surprise, many passers-by stopped in front of the event without noticing it and took pictures of the *Arena* or took selfies with the *Arena* in the background, as shown in the photo below (Fig. 5).

The girl, who was standing directly in front of images of animal suffering, did not notice them. She paid

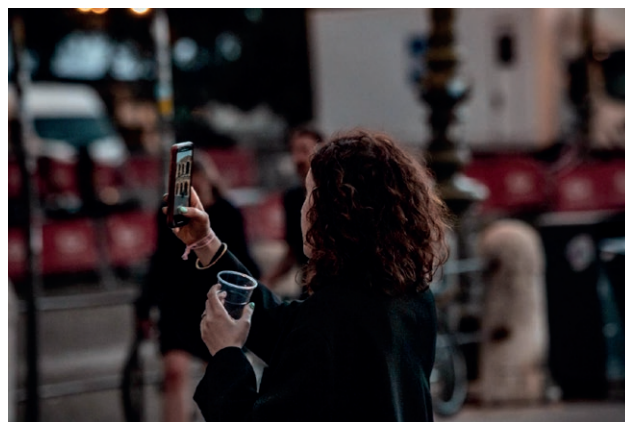


Figure 5. A passer-by photographs the Verona Arena during a GVV event.

the choreography little attention and captured a view of the *Arena di Verona*, as seen on her screen. I have asked myself and the other activists several times whether these cases are influenced by distraction (i.e. people not noticing the choreography) or something else. Indeed, when such episodes occurred, I focused on the gazes of passers-by in order to capture the moment when people noticed the images, which did not always occur, as they stopped in front of the event for several minutes taking photographs.

The activists who have been organizing these events for many years believe that these images have an effect on those who are “already” potentially sensitive «but are unaware of it» Cristina (GVV). These are the people who stop to talk to the activists because they are conflicted or curious. They are typically people who have reflected on animal suffering in the past but have lacked information and a group with which to discuss and further explore these issues. «Those who have never considered the issue hardly stop or are hardly moved by these images» (Roberta, GVV activist). These images produce effects as a result of a number of factors, including aesthetic contrast, potential sensitivity and curiosity, amazement and an interest in delving deeper into these issues with someone who is familiar with them.

The aesthetic activism of these activities is such that the encounter with these images becomes, in the words of Dewey (1980), “an experience” that leads to a conclusion and meaning. Through affective and moral contrasts that are reinterpreted with reflexivity, these images provide rhythm to the experiential flow. Furthermore, these images are political in the sense that they “break into” an aesthetic-moral order and alter the configuration of sensitivity, as defined by Rancière (1999).

The irruption of animal suffering makes more visible, marked and contrasting the moral boundaries that structure speciesism and the domination of humanity over other forms of life that inhabit the planet. The activists who talk to them, on the other hand, co-manage the “rhythm” of the experience of passers-by, their affection and reflections. The rhythm is relational in this sense, as their emotions are combined with the affective dialogue that passers-by have with activists. Dialogues are contrast-based developments. «When people say you should manage farms in a more ‘humane’ way, I say, okay, would it then be acceptable to breed and slaughter cats and dogs in these more “humane” farms as you say? People’s expressions change, displaying a mix of disgust and amazement» (Emilio, GV). The contrast between beloved animals (dogs and cats) and violent conditions draws people’s attention to the tacit, invisible and overlooked bounda-

ries of speciesism within the dialogue. This contrast is an aesthetic activity performed with a variety of tools. The choreography grabs the audience’s attention, the images surprise them, and the dialogue with the activists forces them to face these matters, highlighting the contrasts and blind spots in morality.

7. CONCLUSIONS: A MORE-THAN-HUMAN AESTHETIC POLITICS

The kind of aesthetic activism I have described is certainly based upon political actions that intentionally engage people’s emotionality. Although these movements employ various strategies and arguments, their actions are based on an attempt to penetrate people’s sensitivity through dialogue. Images and audio-visual materials are especially important. The intentional use of such images aims to show what is not directly visible due to its confinement within the walls of slaughterhouses. Furthermore, these images, along with subsequent face-to-face dialogue (as in the case of GVV and AV) or via social media (as in the case of AS), facilitate the development of a moral and political dialogue on animal exploitation.

Images do things as a result of this type of activism. They generate contrasts, internal conflicts and contemplative emotions. People react to the images with a variety of emotions, including surprise, disbelief, indignation and anger. For this reason, anger is sometimes directed at activists who “should not” show these images, as they are considered “disturbing”. This type of aesthetic activism is expertly organized and governed with visual materials prepared specifically to cause disruption in the spectators. To plan these activities, activists must anticipate and incorporate potential reactions and address them in advance. Through the activists’ choreography, the images “speak” on behalf of the “voiceless”, i.e. the animals. Indeed, the issue of the animals’ voices is incorporated into the name AV (*Anonymous for the Voiceless*). Images, in some contexts, “speak” their own language, which is immediately affective and aesthetic, obstructing, interrupting and disrupting people’s daily lives. Only in the face of these interruptions, as supported by the pragmatist theory of emotions, can a reflective dialogue be established.

ETHICS STATEMENTS

Names of participants were changed throughout this article for privacy reasons. The information and consent forms provided to participants were drawn up in accord-

ance with the EU regulation 2016/679 relating to the protection of physical persons.

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