

DO BREEDERS DREAM OF ELECTRIC SHEEP?

*I saw that there is no Nature,
That Nature doesn't exist,
That there are hills, valleys, plains,
That there are trees, flowers, weeds,
That there are rivers and stones,
But there is not a whole these belong to,
That a real and true wholeness
Is a sickness of our ideas.*

Fernando Pessoa (1925). *The Keeper of Sheep*. Sheep Meadow Press, Bilingual Ed 1997.



Les Bergers du futur (2018) Lionel Roux, screenshot of the movie.

The variety of tools human use to gain power over their environment is huge and constantly evolving. Human beings have indeed empowered themselves due to their creation of tools and equipment, always with the aim of controlling their natural environment - commonly called *nature*. Nature, as explained by Philippe Descola in his essay "Beyond Nature and Culture"¹, is a concept that defines a separate and external reality from the exclusively human society.

In the case of farm breeding, human domination over nature is highly visible through the processes of animal domestication. I discovered the wide range of high tech devices for "smart livestock farming", especially during my visit to the Floating Farm of Rotterdam in the Netherlands where the cowshed was equipped with multiple robots dedicated to different tasks. Among them, was an automatic belt feeder distributing food, a slurry robot clearing manure, and an automatized milk robot for the cows.

This colonisation of robots in farm breeding is not without consequence: breeders develop their expertise in robot machinery as opposed to how to actually take care of cattle. It is clear that higher the technology the farm is equipped with, the bigger the gap will be between the breeders and their cattle. This occurs as tasks that require a physical presence of the farmer near his herd are replaced by robots or agribots in order to help the farm gain more efficiency and profit.

¹. Philippe Descola, *Beyond Nature and Culture* (2013) University of Chicago Press, 2013.

Simulated by postwar agricultural policies a Dutch landscape of small dairy farms gave way to an efficient, booming production machine relying on rationalization and mechanization. High labor costs and new regulatory pressure for cleaner and sustainable production pushes farms to keep increasing their size and rely even more on automation technologies in order to remain competitive.

I realised that the victory of industry was not limited to the realm of livestock, but also moved into the realm of the employee who became its subject as a mere meat supplier.

In the countryside, dairy and horticultural farmers oversee ever-growing automated operations through dashboards on desktop computers and smartphone apps. Cows and workers become data, and their bodies are managed as abstract components of a larger system, accessed from anywhere by logging on the cloud.²

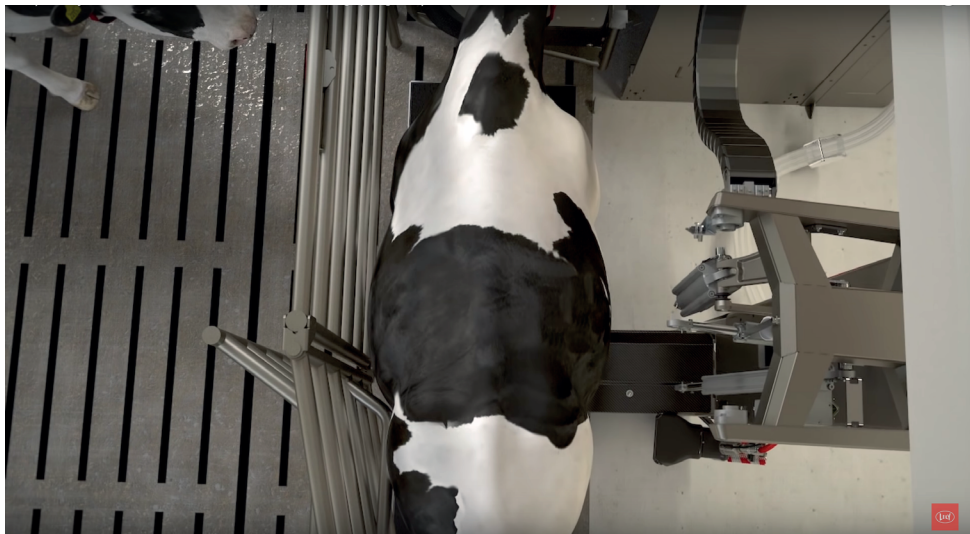


Valentine Hhevåh Langeard (2020) collage based on photo of Rotterdam Floating Farm.

2. *Automated Landscape: Dairy Farms&greenhouses*, Research department of the Het Nieuwe Instituut, Rotterdam. <https://automated-landscapes.hetnieuweinstituut.nl/en/dairy-farms-greenhouses>



Valentine Hheväh Langeard (2020) collage based on photo of the floating farm cooler.



Lely (2018) Lely Astronaut A5 - The art of milking, youtube video.

I also got to know two urban shepherds and discovered their sheepfold in the outskirts of Paris: Julie Lou Dubreuilh from Association Clinamen and Gilles Amar from La Bergerie des Malassis. They are activists against industrial animal production. They breed their herds with a lot of care and respect, in an alternative small scale breeding style close to people.

Paris had a thriving farming culture up to the 1960's. Sheep had always been part of the city, but industrialised farming methods, and better food conservation broke the link between city-dwellers and animals. Contemporary urban shepherds want to revive that union, to show that tending herds in the city is both possible and desirable.

Gilles Amar, who prefers to be called a « suburban goat-herd », defends open public spaces in his neighborhood, and fights for the survival of *nature* and the presence of green areas inside the city. Indeed, he fights against excessive urban growth that threatens the existence of vital land used both for feeding his herd as well as social life amongst neighbors.

The Sheepfold is a positive symbol that is part of the little-known and despised heritage of the Malassis (neighborhood)... the inhabitants can no longer live in endless construction work, with big trees torn down by bulldozers, and see everywhere the earth being covered in concrete.

We do not only defend La Bergerie, we defend the public green spaces of the district, as places of sociability and daily experience of the relationship with other human beings; in the lingo we would call this biodiversity.

-- Gilles Amar

People must know it's an animal with a personality, not only meat. If they're not here, we're not here. Our survival depends on their survival.

-- The urban shepherdess Julie Lou Dubreuilh.



Valentine Hheváh Langeard (2020). Collage based on photos of Association Clinamen's herd.

In talking with them, I realised they were still stuck in regards to the moral issue of slaughtering: as shepherds they raise their animals in very good conditions, but in the end, they can't escape a violent industrial slaughter. In France it is illegal for breeders to slaughter their animals themselves. As a result, alternative methods are being evaluated to find safe ways of slaughtering directly at the farm. This problem directly affects Association Clinamen as they sell animals for meat, and indirectly La bergerie des Malassis as they only sometimes sell their animals. But both Julie and Gilles told me that being a breeder presents them with a dilemma: raising animals with love to finally sell them or slaughter them.

This dilemma led me to look at anti-speciest ideologies and their will to abolish breeding.



Valentine Hhevåh Langeard (2020). Collage based on photos of Paris subway and the herd of Association Clinamen.



Valentine Hheväh Langeard (2020). *Less Hate, More Wool*. Collage based on photos of Association Clinamen's herd.

Human relationships to nature and animals are manifested in the following three ways:

- the distant and indifferent relationship through omnipresent technologies
- the traditional relationship where humans take matters into their own hands
- and finally, a radical relationship through separation which banishes all types of animal domestication

The latter relation to nature is preached by anti speciesism activists as a result of the conflict between the first two. It reveals the inconsistencies of humans' relationships with animals: we favor some animal species over others, while they are equal living beings. Equal is defined here by the scientifically proven fact that they have the same degree of suffering as humans. Some species we exploit and kill while others we raise and love.

The anti speciesism ideology questions human coherence and morals, and is based on human equality with other species. Therefore, anti-speciesists fight for the end of animal domestication, putting a stop to human control over animals.

Without being as radical as breeding abolitionists which would imply a human society without the presence of livestock, I believe that a new awareness of these human incoherencies can lead to a more sustainable coexistence between humans and animals.

This sustainable coexistence can occur through gradual changes. First, local farm breeding can be revolutionised to mitigate the need of industrial animal husbandry. Tending herds can once again become integrated to city life which will consequently preserve natural greenspaces from overbuilding, thus maintaining a symbiotic balance between human and nature.

This evolution towards local, small-scale farming, would minimise breeding activity and decrease the amount of livestock.

Subsequently, we can also envision a world where breeding would remain only in territories where it is vital - tending herds remains necessary for certain populations who rely on their animals as their only source of wealth and resources.

This scenario is depicted by the research collective, the Soft Protest Digest:

*This scenario would only be remotely conceivable in the Western world. The fact being that millions of people do, today and will still in a near future, only be able to survive thanks to livestock. Countries of northern Africa for instance do make use of livestock on grounds where the growing of crops is close to impossible.*³

The fate of breeding depends on societal needs and other factors such as economics, population and activism.



Valentine Hneváh Langeard (2020) photo and collage based on picture of La bergerie des Malassis, Bagnolet, and *The Sea Maid* (1897) painting of Arthur Hacker.

3. 3rd scenario, 3 scenarios: the possible futures of the cow (2019) the Soft Protest Digest. http://www.thesoftprotestdigest.org/index.php?title=3_scenarios:_the_possible_futures_of_the_cow

I believe that the most beneficial path to minimise animal exploitation is to create a balance to coexist with them within cities as well as on a large scale in rural settings as opposed to viewing them as mere objects and tools of production. This harmonious coexistence implies that we start to view animals at the rank of individuals and as stakeholders in society. Therefore, it is essential that we take full responsibility for the death of animals and assume its moral weight.

In a time in which we digitally track animals through electronic implants, the electric sheep is not a dream anymore, so we must ask ourselves, what remains of our energetic and spiritual connection to these living beings?

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