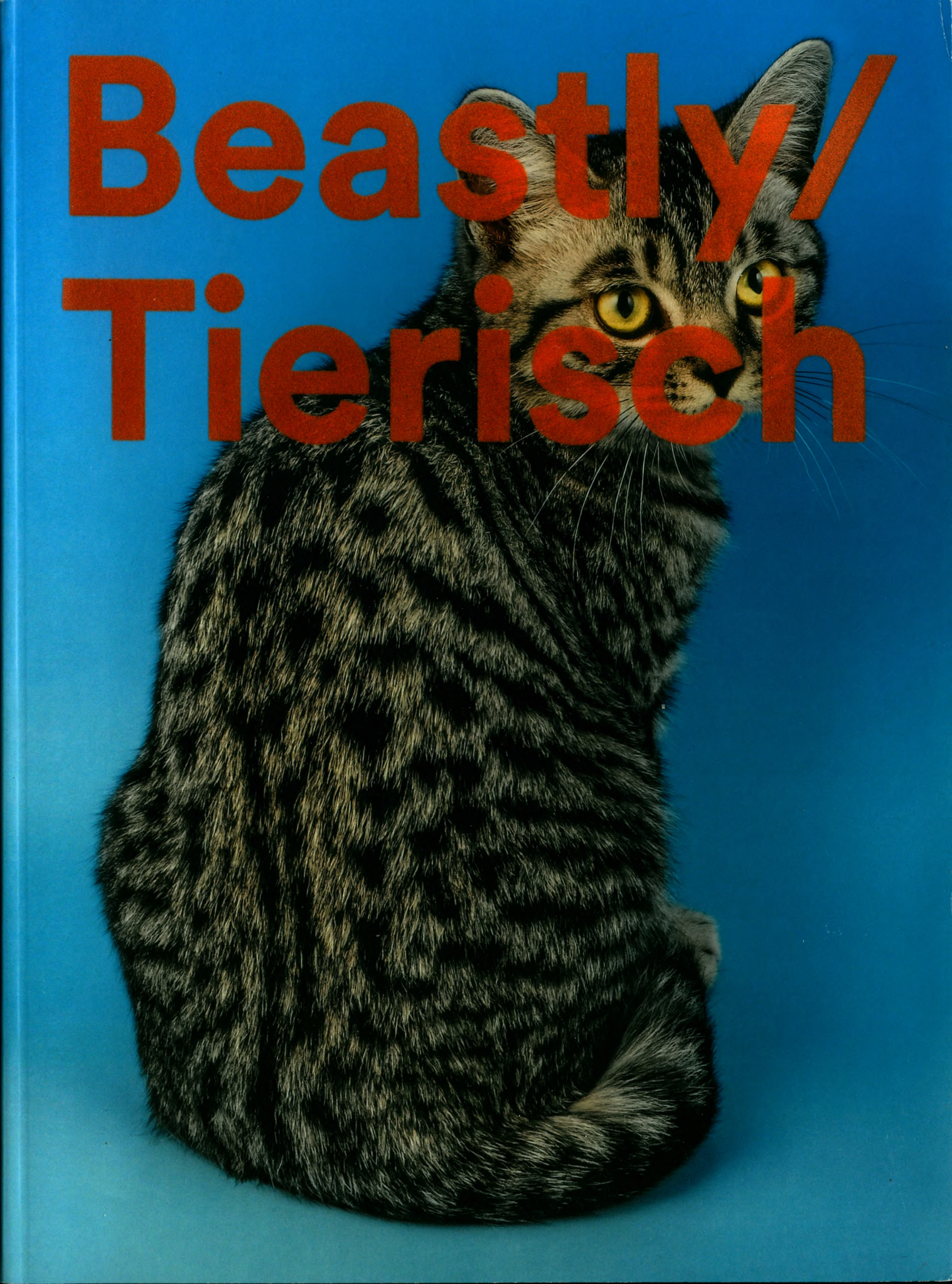
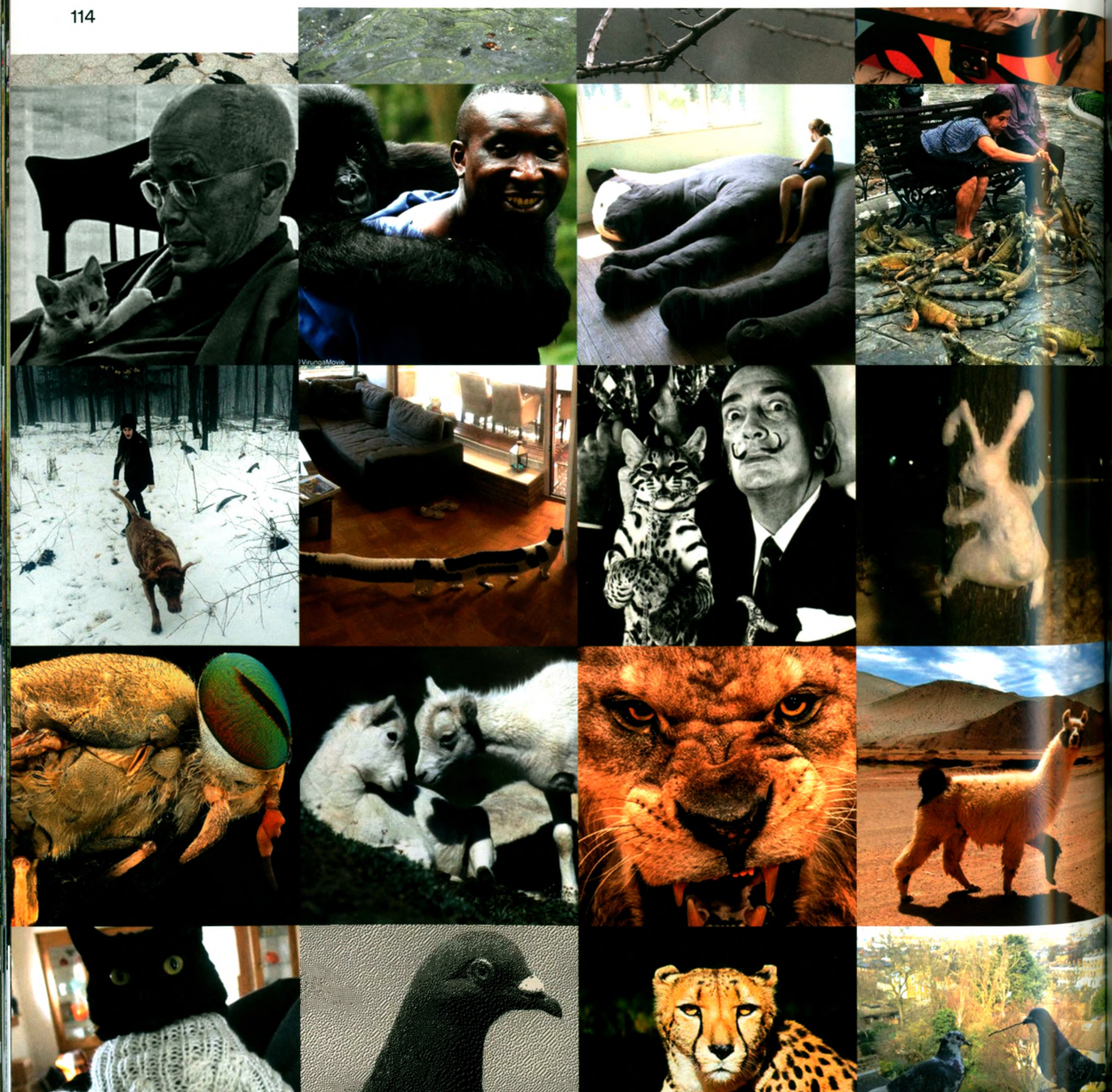
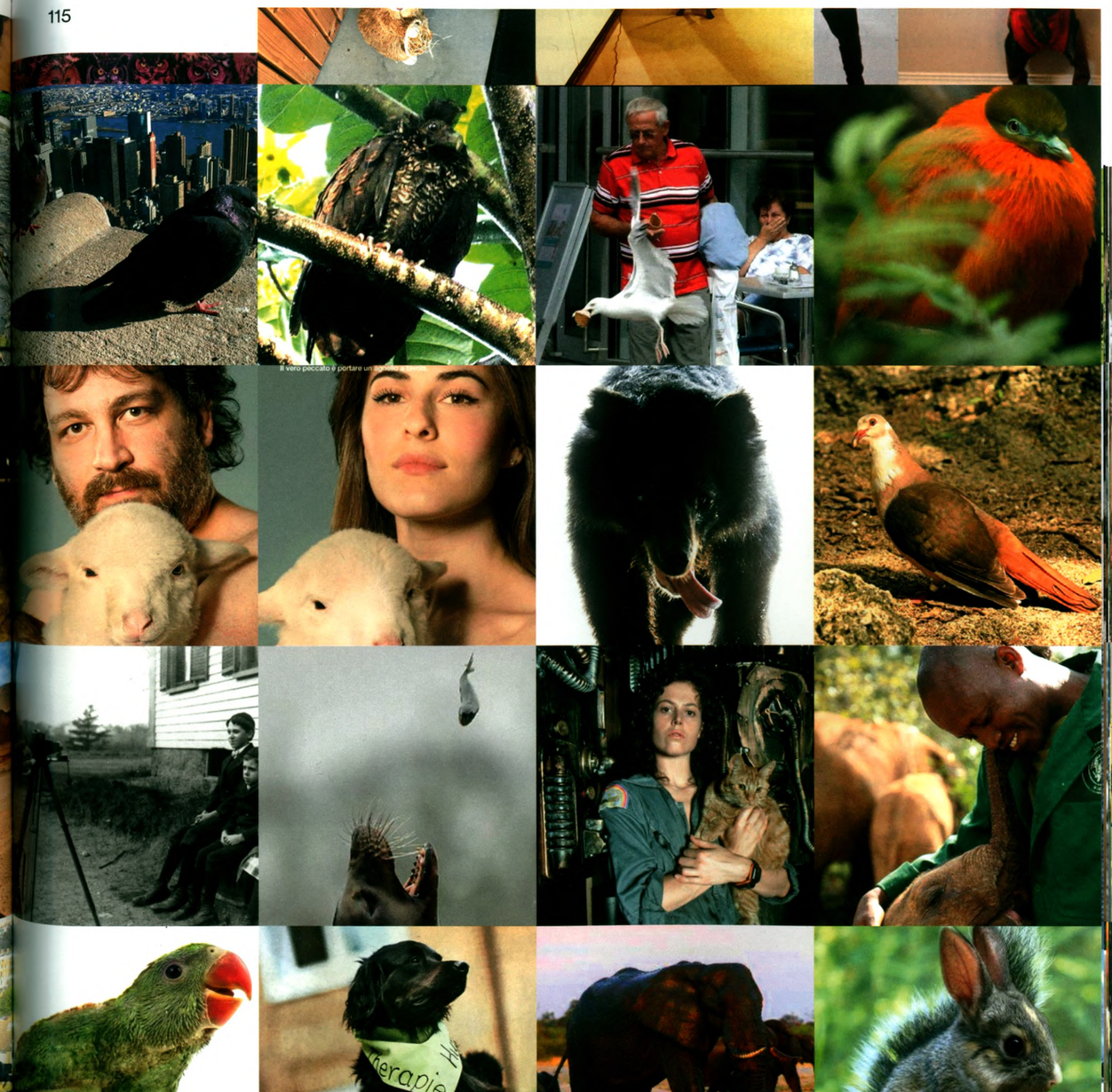
Beastly/ Tierisch



Heather Davis



Future Animals

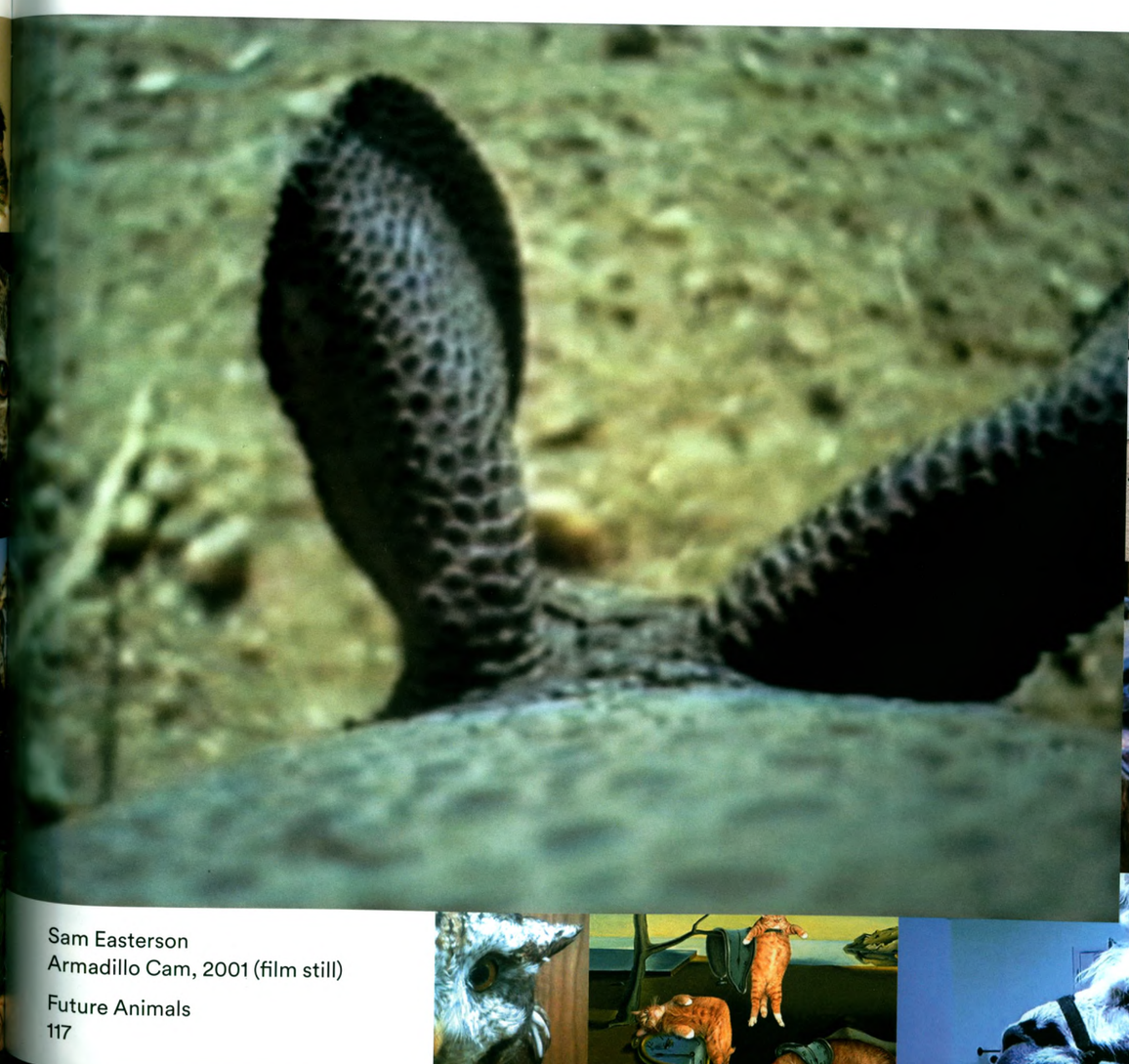


In 1998, American artist Sam Easterson was commissioned by the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis to create a new work. For it, he decided to strap a helmet-mounted camera onto a sheep to be able to view the world from the sheep's perspective. However, what he discovered was that the sheep weren't so keen on the idea. Easterson described being shocked "to realize [that] all the other animals in the flock could tell that this one sheep with the camera had been 'altered' in some way. She kept trying to enter, and they kept treating her as an outcast."[1] *A Sheep in Wolf's Clothing* was the first in what has grown into an amazing array of videos—from Easterson and others, such as National Geographic's Crittercams—that figure the animal's point of view. The point-of-view cameras do not afford unfettered access. Rather, the camera takes a position similar to that of a remora—a type of suckerfish that is known to attach itself to the bodies of sharks, other marine animals, and ocean liners—allowing us to accompany a creature into spaces we could not otherwise go. As feminist science studies scholar Donna Haraway writes, "The camera and the remora are more about accompanying than companioning, more about 'riding along with' rather than '*cum panis,*' that is, 'eating bread with.' Remoras and Crittercams are not messmates to either people or sharks; they are commensals, neither benefactors nor parasites but devices with their own ends who/which hitch a ride."[2] Our own assumptions about what an animal is and does are more often what is questioned or challenged through these videos, rather than understanding life as it presents itself to that animal.

What seems surprising in Easterson's statement was not that the sheep could tell that this one had been altered, but that this reaction was not anticipated. Just as the makers of Google Glass were startled by the social death of their product, ending in scenes of ostracization,[3] these sheep, regardless of whether or not they were protesting the invasion of their privacy, could easily tell that one was "off." Easterson's surprise betrays a quite common assumption: that animals will submit to human intervention without modifying their own behavior. In other words, it is common to assume

Sam Easterson
Armadillo Cam, 2001 (film still)

Heather Davis
116



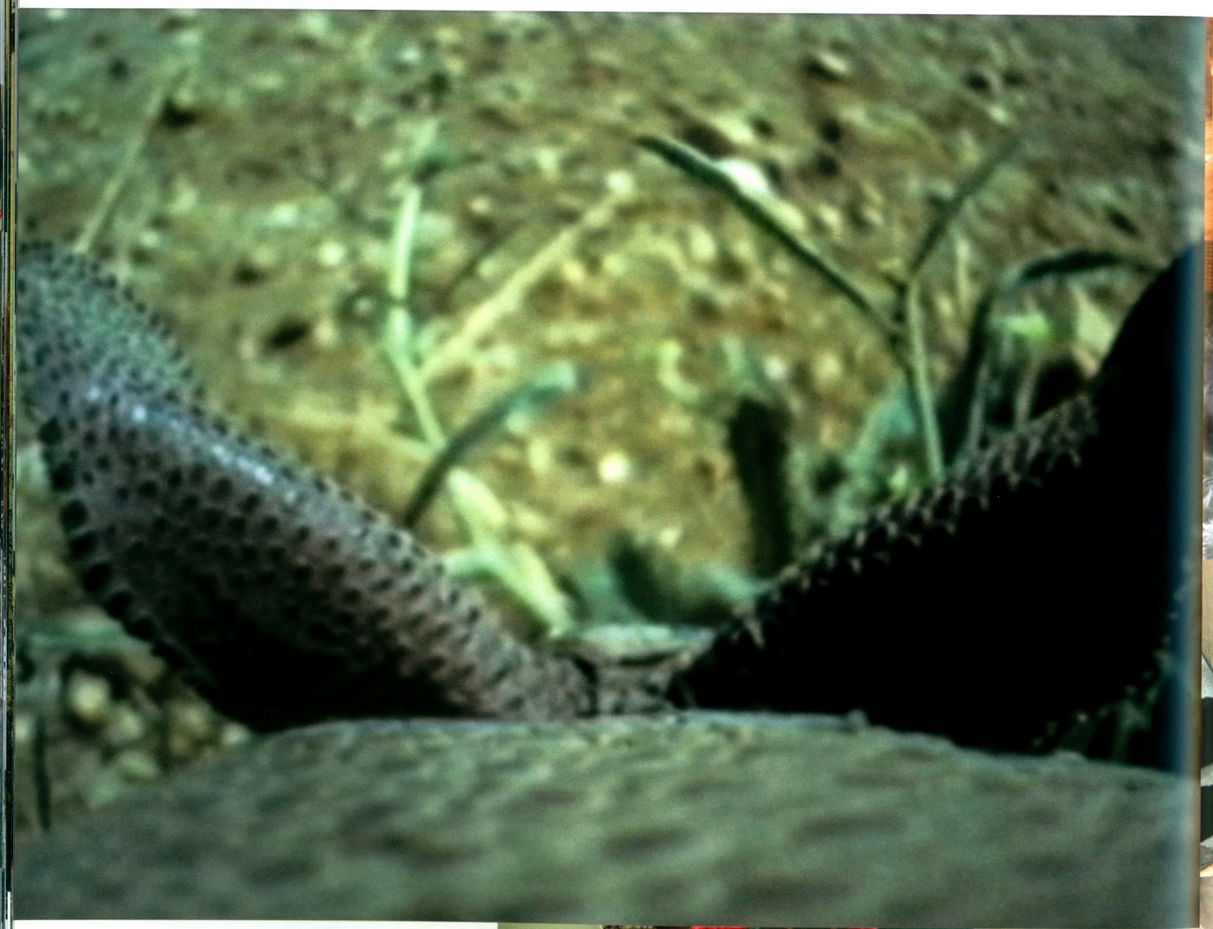
Sam Easterson
Armadillo Cam, 2001 (film still)

Future Animals
117

that animals do not have a vast knowledge of their own environments, perceptions, sensations, cultures, ways of being, appropriate behavior, and knowledge of the members of their community. We seem to think that this only applies to us, as humans. What this story shows are the ways in which animals are not the passive objects of a human gaze, but use humans and our technologies to their own ends.

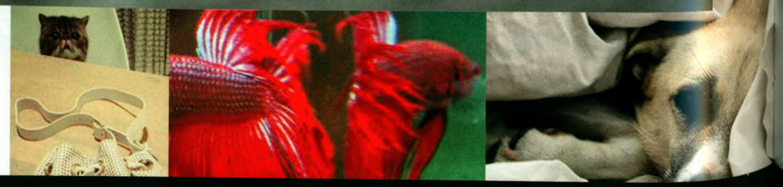
Philosopher Vinciane Despret claims that it is often through the refusal of the animal that we learn to register its agency. In other words, it is only because of the ostracization of the one sheep that we learn about how they respond to a sudden and unexplained difference in their fellow sheep. Despret writes, "This very resistance not only conveys [the animals'] perspective on the situation but credits them with full agency: they have opinions, will, desires, and interests."[4] And, as she makes clear, what we perceive as a lack of animal agency is often an agency of a different kind: "This resistance shows that when everything goes correctly, it is because of an active investment on the part of [animals]. As in the case of human work, animals' collaboration at work is visible when it is not obtained."[5] In *A Sheep in Wolf's Clothing,* the active agency of the sheep was registered precisely because they did not easily submit to this intrusion into their lives.

Animals are a part of the world of technological change; they not only resist technology, but actively play with it. The lyrebird, for example, has an amazing ability to imitate sounds and noises from its environment. It has been documented mimicking other birds, koalas, dingos, dogs, as well as car alarms, chainsaws, and camera shutters.[6] Humans seem to be fascinated with the ways in which animals transgress the bounds of what we deem as "natural." But it is perhaps more productive to understand the relations between animals, humans, and technology along the lines articulated by Haraway when she argues that "technologies are organs, full partners, in what Merleau-Ponty called 'infoldings of the flesh.' I like the word *infolding* better than *inter-*



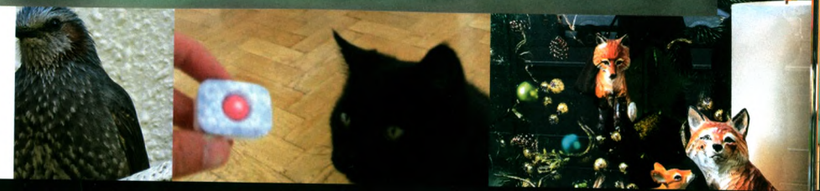
Sam Easterson
Armadillo Cam, 2001 (film still)

Heather Davis
118



Sam Easterson
Armadillo Cam, 2001 (film still)

Future Animals
119



face to suggest the dance of world-making encounters."[7] This "dance of world-making encounters" that happens through technologies can be remarkable. This act is not just about precision and mimicry, but about artistry and play.

As philosopher Elizabeth Grosz argues, we can understand art and technology not to be the sole domain of the human, but to arise from the excessiveness of sexual selection itself. That is, art emerges from the excess and prolific abundance of the propulsion of life. Animals use art in order to lure and seduce their mates. Grosz writes that the forms of sexual selection, such as the "haunting beauty of birdsong, the provocative performance of erotic display in primates, the attraction of insects to the perfume of plants are all in excess of mere survival . . . these forms of sexual selection, sexual attraction, affirm the excessiveness of the body and the natural order . . . They attest to the artistic impact of sexual attraction . . . a fundamentally dynamic, awkward, mal-adaptation that enables the production of the frivolous, the unnecessary, the pleasing, the sensory for their own sake."[8] In other words, the production of art is a part of the excessiveness of life: it is through these technological infoldings, sexual creation and co-species becomings that life produces itself in the incredible array and astonishingly strange beauty that we see around us, in animals, and in human animals.

While it is certainly a creative, playful, and sexually suggestive act for the lyrebird to mimic chainsaws, cars, and cameras, it also indicates something decidedly more troubling. The sounds emitted from this bird's mouth give a good picture of the present environment of lyrebirds: one that is defined by tourism, transportation, and deforestation. This is in no way unique to the particular rainforests of Australia, but is, as most of us know, a global phenomenon. From the geologic to the atmospheric to the biospheric, humans are causing a massive transformation of the earth. Intense resource extraction, oil dependency, and the rapid global circulation of goods are

Sam Easterson
Armadillo Cam, 2001 (film still)

Heather Davis
120

Sam Easterson
Armadillo Cam, 2001 (film still)

Future Animals
121

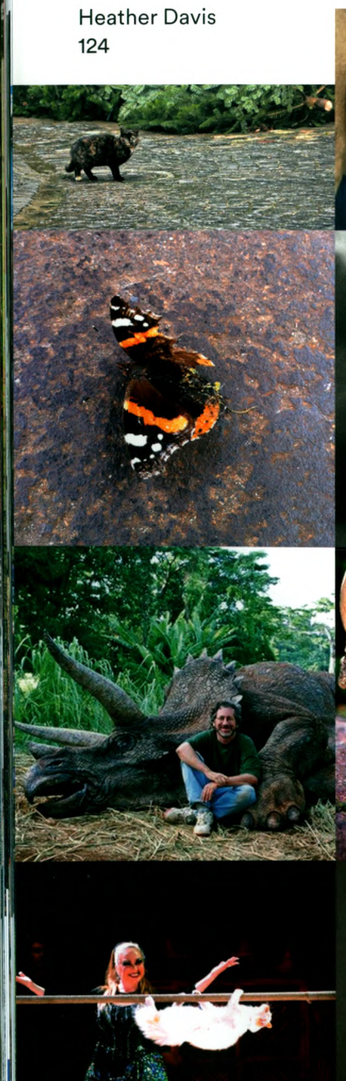
all propelled by the rapacious greed of the few who benefit from this system. This has led to what is being called the sixth mass extinction event.[9] As Thom van Dooren writes, "Far more than 'biodiversity'—at least in the narrow sense that the term is often used—is at stake in extinction: human and more-than-human ways of life, languages, ways of mourning and being with others, even livelihoods and diverse cultural and religious worlds are often drawn into the fray as species move toward, and then beyond, the edge of extinction."[10] In other words, what is being lost is not just particular kinds of animals, but whole ways of life, and the ways those lives interconnect with others, both human and other-than-human. As anthropologist Stefan Helmreich makes clear, what nonhuman worlds consist of are not just life forms, but forms of life. That is, cultural practices that have developed in entangled relations with other living things and their geologic and atmospheric surrounds.[11] The land and the animal are part of one system, one mutually unfolding and evolving relationship. So as we rapidly develop land, for suburbs or industrial agriculture, and raze forests,

remove mountaintops and re-coat the surface of the earth in oil and its associated by-products such as chemical fertilizers, pesticides, and plastics, we affect not only the immediately perceptible systems, the number of species able to survive. We also affect ways of knowing and adapting to the world that have been created over many generations. We affect the mutual co-evolution of intimately interconnected relationships that we (at least in the Western, enlightenment tradition) are only just beginning to grasp. The sheep's ability to detect the camera or the lyrebird's mimicry of that same device is not innate, but comes about through years and generations of cultural learning. It expresses an entire civilizational strategy, one that is intimately connected to human life. As Van Dooren writes, "it is clear that this thing we call a 'species' is an incredible achievement. . . . We often do not appreciate—and perhaps we cannot truly grasp—the immensity of this intergenerational work: the skill, commitment, cooperation, and hard work, alongside serendipity, that are required in each generation to carry the species through."[12]

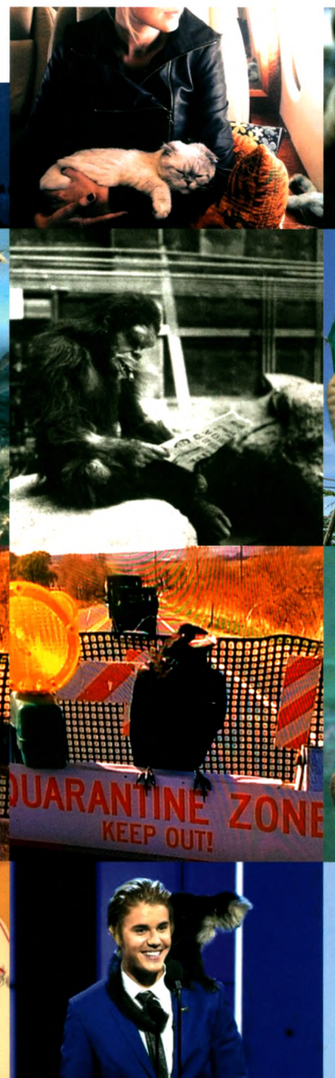
These anthropogenic changes are not only destructive. There is inadvertent creativity in the wake of our blind razing of the earth. White-footed mice, meadow voles, two species of bats, and two species of shrew have all been found to have significantly increased brain size in the past one hundred years due to anthropogenic pressures. As humans have rapidly transformed the landscape, these animals have had to learn new and novel ways of getting around and eating. This has resulted in much bigger brain sizes in these creatures.[13] We are not just causing extinctions, but also rapidly accelerating the processes of evolution. Humans create new forms of bacteria through an overuse of antibiotics and new microbial communities due to the overabundance of plastic.[14] These kinds of evolutionary changes have also occurred intentionally. The Center for PostNatural History in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, documents histories of creatures modified by means of selection, breeding, domestication, induced mutation, and genetic engineering.[15] And recent successes in synthetic life, cloning, genetically modified organisms (GMOs), transgenic organisms, and de-extinction

have all created new kinds of life forms.[16] Life proliferates despite the most brutal pressures that we exert to restrict and inhibit its permutations and evolutions. However, current rates of extinction far exceed novel forms of life. The scales are decidedly not tipping in our favor. And this applies not just to "wild" animals but to domestic ones as well: half of European livestock breeds went extinct in the last one hundred years, and 43 percent of those that are left are endangered.[17] It may not be to the sheep's advantage to continue its association with humans, equipped with cameras or otherwise.

So, the photographs in this show cannot help but feel melancholic, despite the adept handling of the photographers. They show the textures, details, and ways of living of many charismatic megafauna. The beautifully composed, classic images of the majesty of monkeys by Simen Johan offer a kind of haunting vision of a world rapidly disappearing [p. 108]. The intimate, enmeshed, and sometimes troubling relations



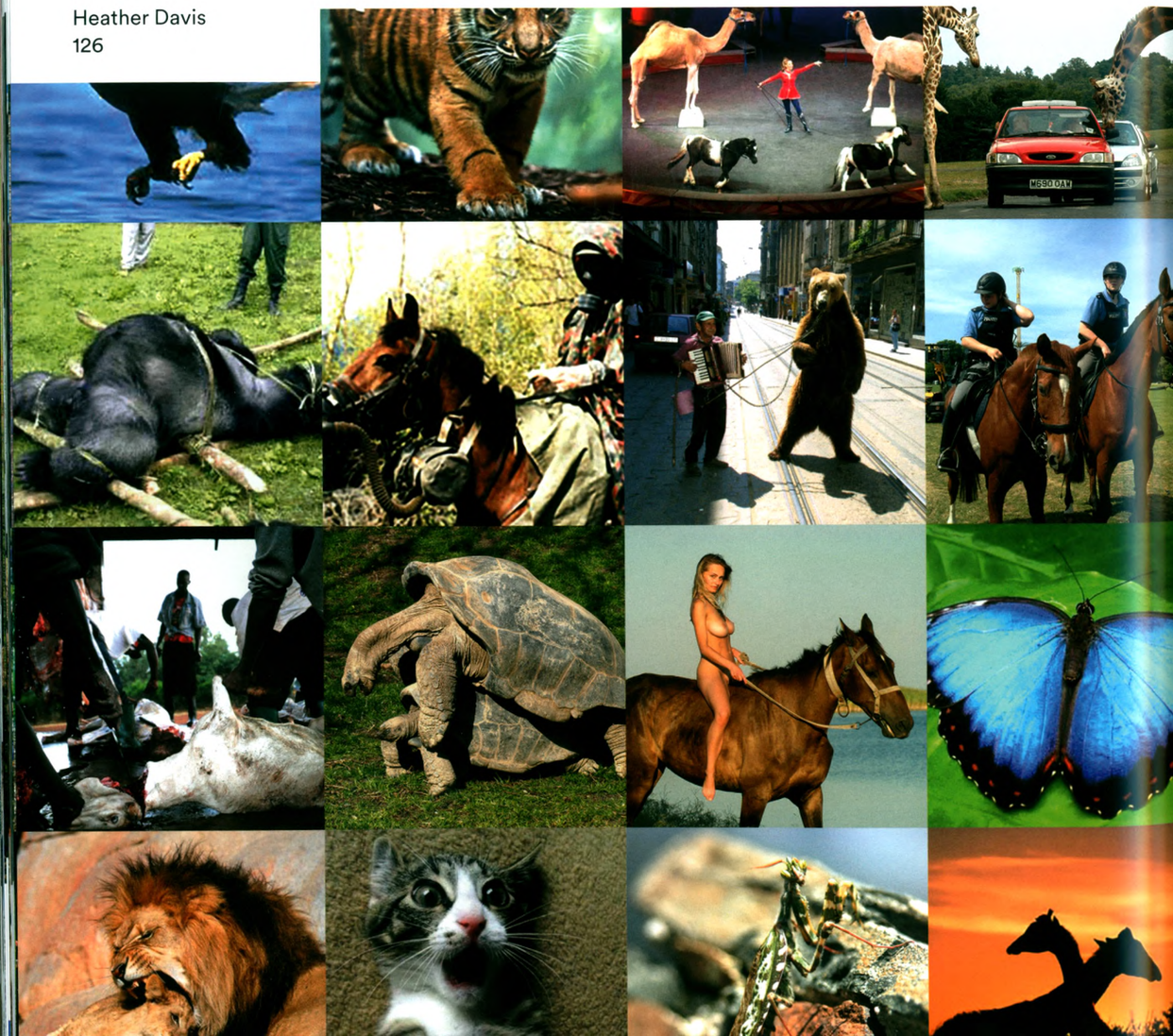


of farm and companion animals, depicted by Xiaoxiao Xu [p. 149], Pieter Hugo [p. 105], and Alessandra Sanguinetti [p. 138] show the ways in which human lives are bound to those of other animals, for entertainment, food, companionship, and protection. We are dependent upon animals to sustain us. Although the evocation of the relation of photography to death may have become a platitude, there is something discomfiting in photographing all of these animals, at this particular moment in history. For even as the images elicit and evoke the myriad ways in which animals figure in our imaginations, and the ways we try to stretch our imaginings into the movements, sensations, and cultural knowledges of these animals, it is hard not to see these still moments as capturing something about to be, or already, lost.

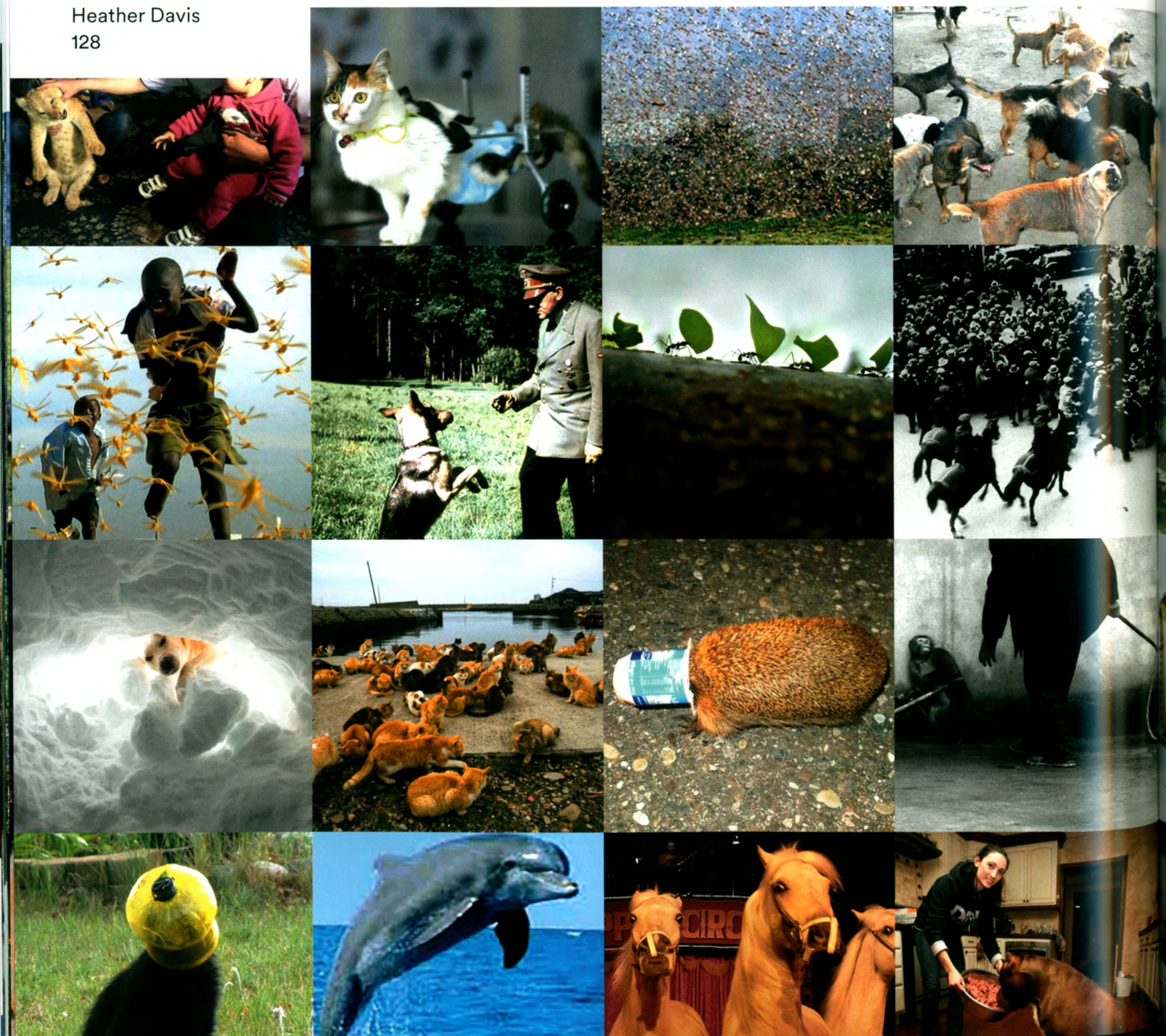
In Roland Barthes's famous discussion of the *punctum*—the wound of photography that grabs the attention of the viewer, that makes it so we cannot look away—he speaks of a simple family photograph of his mother as a child after her death. He writes,

"I might say, like the Proustian Narrator at his grandmother's death: 'I did not insist only upon suffering, but upon respecting the originality of my suffering'; for this originality was the reflection of what was absolutely irreducible in her, and thereby lost forever."[18] How would it even be conceivable to hold the irreducible loss of all the creatures depicted here, their individual lives, and their enmeshed, collective relations? How do we even begin to conceive of a response adequate to this kind of loss? For each animal is a way of knowing the world, and this knowledge births new kinds of worlds. We are reducing the world itself through the loss of each kind of animal. For "extinction is the loss not of a single fixed 'kind,' but of a potentially limitless set of emergent and branching flight ways from the present into the diversity of the future. Each species is ultimately a *flight way beyond itself*."[19] And although extinction is certainly part of the pathway of any species, mass extinction correlated to the actions of humans is not a neutral event. The loss of these animals implicates us in the most haunting and telling fashion.



If we are to accompany these animals, through our technological worldings, then we are accompanying them to the brink. The deaths of numerous species are not just to be mourned for their own loss, but speak in a foreboding tone about the future for homo sapiens. As these photographs make clear, animals are integral to human forms of life. Even if we would like to entertain the fantasy that these animals are not staring back at us with all the range of knowledge, artistry, and cultural expression that the world has ever created, and that we, on the other side, are somehow fundamentally different because we have managed to "capture" them in these single instances, one thing is for sure: we cannot live without them. For they compose us.

Heather Davis is a researcher, writer and a postdoctoral fellow at the Institute for the Arts and Humanities at Pennsylvania State University. She is the editor of *Art in the Anthropocene: Encounters Among Aesthetics, Politics, Environment and Epistemology* (London: Open Humanities Press, 2015) and *Desire/Change: Contemporary Canadian Feminist Art* (MAWA/McGill-Queen's UP, forthcoming 2017).



1 Sam Easterson, http://greenmuseum.org/content/artist_index/artist_id-106.html (all URLs cited in this essay were accessed in February 2015).
2 Donna Haraway, *When Species Meet* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), pp. 253–54.
3 On news items related to the banning of Google Glass from coffee shops, see Elizabeth Weise, "San Francisco bar bans 'Glassholes'," *USA Today*, March 5, 2014, http://www.usatoday.com/story/tech/2014/03/05/san-francisco-bar-bans-google-glass-glassholes/6080801/.
4 Vinciane Despret, "From Secret Agents to Interagency," *History and Theory* 52 (December 2013), pp. 29–44, esp. p. 41.
5 Ibid., p. 42.
6 See "Lyre Bird Impression of a Camera, Car Alarm and Chainsaw," YouTube video, 2:14, narrated by David Attenborough from the BBC, posted by Paul Holden, October 16, 2012, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VRpo7NDCaJ8.
7 Haraway, *When Species Meet*, p. 249, italics in original.
8 Elizabeth Grosz, *Chaos, Territory, Art: Deleuze and the Framing of the Earth* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), p. 7.
9 See Terry Glavin, *The Sixth Extinction* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2006) and Elizabeth Kolbert, *The Sixth Extinction: An Unnatural History* (New York: Henry Holt & Company, 2014).
10 Thom van Dooren, *Flight Ways: Life and Loss at the Edge of Extinction* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), pp. 7–8.
11 Stefan Helmreich, *Alien Ocean: Anthropological Voyages in Microbial Seas* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), pp. 6–9.
12 Van Dooren, *Flight Ways*, p. 27.
13 Carl Zimmer, "As Humans Change Landscape, Brains of Some Animals Change, Too," *The New York Times*, August 22, 2013, http://www.nytimes.com/2013/08/22/science/as-humans-change-landscape-brains-of-some-animals-change-too.html?_r=1&.
14 On the rate of evolution of bacteria in response to antibiotics, see "Resisting our drugs," *Understanding Evolution*, http://evolution.berkeley.edu/evolibrary/article/bergstrom_03. On new forms of microbial communities that exist on plastic substrates, see Gwyneth Dickey Zaikab, "Marine microbes digest plastic," *Nature: International Weekly Journal of Science*, March 28, 2011, http://www.nature.com/news/2011/110328/full/news.2011.191.html.
15 The Center for PostNatural History is a museum in Pittsburgh, PA. As they say on their website, http://www.postnatural.org: "The Center for PostNatural History is dedicated to the advancement of knowledge relating to the complex interplay between culture, nature and biotechnology. The PostNatural refers to living organisms that have been altered through processes such as selective breeding or genetic engineering."
16 On the invention of synthetic life, see Craig Venter, "Watch me unveil 'synthetic life'," *TED in the Field*, 18:17, filmed May 2010, http://www.ted.com/talks/craig_venter_unveils_synthetic_life?language=en. For information regarding the various aspects of cloning, including its long-term viability, see the fact sheet on "Cloning," National Human Genome Research Institute, http://www.genome.gov/25020028 and "Success Rates of Cloned Animals," www.ansci.wisc.edu/jjp1/ansci_repro/misc/project_websites_fa06/wed06/Cloning/SuccessRates.htm. On the history, development, and controversies surrounding transgenic and GMOs, see Theresa Phillips, "Genetically Modified Organisms (GMOs): Transgenic Crops and Recombinant DNA Technology," *Nature Education* 1, no. 1 (2008), p. 213, http://www.nature.com/scitable/topicpage/genetically-modified-organisms-gmos-transgenic-crops-and-732.
17 Terry Glavin, *The Sixth Extinction* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2006), p. 2.
18 Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), p. 75.
19 Van Dooren, *Flight Ways*, p. 38.