

Conference Report

The 8th International Animal Futures Conference and 8th Biennial Conference of the European Association for Critical Animal Studies (EACAS)

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The joint 8th International Animal Futures conference and the 8th Biennial Conference of the European Association for Critical Animal Studies (EACAS) was held in Tallinn, Estonia, and online, from June 16 to 18, 2023. The event was organised by the animal advocacy organisation Loomus, the Estonian Vegan Society, and EACAS, and featured many international speakers and papers reflecting on the conference's topic: 'Animal Advocacy against the Grain? Traditions and Transformations in and around the Movement.' The title, formulated as a question and an invitation for discussion, inspired activists and scholars from various fields, from historians to sociologists.

The Animal Futures conference, which has become global thanks to its online sessions, is distinguished by its ambition to involve both scholars and activists. Throughout the years, the scholars who have presented at the conference have predominantly been from the fields of social sciences and humanities. However, as the conference has demonstrated, the line between a scholar and activist is blurred, as many researchers are also active in different animal advocacy organisations. The 35 presentations held at the 2023 edition were divided into ten panels, which addressed various animal rights issues. The organisers aimed to give the conference a horizontal structure by not inviting keynote speakers, nor distinguishing between presenters by time allocated for their presentations. The subtitle of the conference referred to the traditions around and within the animal rights movement, but the definition of traditions was deliberately

left open. The speakers related mainly in three ways: intersectional approaches, critique of speciesism, and strategies for disseminating animal rights messages.

In the framework of critical animal studies, as well as in the context of the animal rights movement, intersectionality means recognising that animal welfare issues are interconnected with other social issues such as racism, sexism, and classism, but also non-human animals in social hierarchies. For example, the Gender Studies panel focused on veganism, men and masculinity with presentations from Cameron Dunnett and Richard Twine, while in the Privileges and Critical Perspectives panel, 'veganisms' were introduced as possible indigenous decolonial practices by both Martina Davidson, focusing on Latin America, and Denisa Krásná, focusing on North America.

Also in the Privileges and Critical Perspectives panel, Emily Major discussed the conflicts that arise between introduced and native species and the role of humans in causing and resolving these complex situations. Heldi Marleen Lang based her presentation on Peter Singer's work to explain the ethical blindness of researchers towards animal testing, and introduced the panel on animal testing, which included presentations on humane-washing in animal experimentation and the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic on animal advocacy. 'Humane-washing' is the practice where companies or organisations attempt to improve their reputation regarding animal welfare by portraying themselves as humane or sustainable, but in reality, they do not significantly change their standard practices. The conference also opened up a space to discuss animal-futures-related alternatives and utopias in the session under the same name. Here, topics on robotisation as the ultimate step in distancing from animal suffering (presented by Maša Blaznik and Tomaž Grušovnik), veganism and vegetarianism in behavioural science literature (Gelareh Salehi), cultured meat farms (Simcha Nyssen) and the utopian discourses on plant-based alternative brands (Júlia Castellano) were discussed.

While Karl Hein, Daniel Breeze, Ronnie Lee, and Mark Dunick started the conference with historical lessons from Estonia, Great Britain, and New Zealand, and Alexandra Isfahani-Hammond, Cansu Özge Özmen, and Christopher Jain Miller discussed the notion of compassion and possibilities for veganism in different religions, the second day mostly focused on ways of shaping society through political lobbying and media. Farištamo Eller, Olatz Aranceta Reboledo, and María Ruiz Carreras all addressed very concrete paradoxes of lobbying against compassion that

are the result of manipulation of public opinion by the specific interest groups – be it the cruel slaughter of lampreys in Estonia, harm in the animal-based entertainment industry in Spain, or the European dairy industry. As one possible solution to enable the political agency of animals, Paulina Siemienieć proposed an alternative option focusing on care relations rather than citizenship.

The Aesthetic Strategies session was opened by Vesna Liponik discussing tropological violence and the ways out, including aesthetics. Katja Guenther used pumas in Los Angeles as a case study for charismatic megafauna, and Claire Parkinson, too, advocated for charisma instead of gore in influencing people to think differently about animals – a ‘soft approach’ through audiovisual fiction. This ignited an open discussion on the tension between fiction and documentation: which one works better in getting the message across? Cultivating audiences through audiovisual means was also the main topic of the Animals on Screen session, which juxtaposed Laura Saarenmaa’s discourse analysis on meat advertising in Finland in the 1980s, Brett Mills’s examination of the presentation of animals in the BBC’s early output, and Bianca Friedman’s investigation on the representation of nonhuman animal stars’ agency.

Despite the age of social media, TV, film, art, and literature were in the limelight at the 2023 conference. Throughout the event, emphasis was also put on the education system as an important place in which to create social change. The role of education and various educational institutions in shaping the relationship between humans and animals has been conceptualised by critical animal pedagogy, which strives for the liberation of animals through education. As an example, Jonna Håkansson and Malin Gustafsson pointed to a training project based on critical animal pedagogy in Swedish schools, where students were encouraged to ask critical questions about the exploitation of animals in everyday life.

Cultural Practices, the final session of the conference, was a mix of different themes, featuring Tim Reysoo’s discussion on human privilege, based on his critical reading of Gloria Wekker’s book *White Innocence: Paradoxes of Colonialism and Race*; Vivek Mukherjee’s critique on the human right to culture versus animals’ right to live, based on a shocking case of re-legalising the Jallikattu bull racing in the state of Tamil Nadu in India; Paul Chen’s hopeful revisitation of modern Chinese veganism through a hundred-year-old local plant-based cookbook, claiming that veganism in China is not (merely) a result of Western influence; Daina Pupkevičiūtė’s reminder that collateral damage in war is not just about

people, but may result in the extinction of whole species; and S.A. Bachman's and Neda Moridpour's inspiring examples of artistic interventions that have made an impact. This seemingly eclectic combination served as a reminder that animal rights can never be taken for granted. When moving towards a more animal-friendly world, it is important to work with animal rights in mind, as well as to have an open mind and an attentive eye towards other social and environmental topics and ways of creating a better future. As the name of the Animal Futures conference suggests, the conference focuses on the future of animals, but provides an opportunity to learn from the past and the present to create a better future for ourselves and those around us in a rapidly changing more-than-human society.

The post-conference networking tour included an interspecies urban walk in Lasnamäe, a residential district in Tallinn, led by Hildegard Reimann, who defended her master's thesis in ethnology on the possibility of perceiving the perspective of other species through multispecies urban walks at the University of Tartu in January 2024. In the winter of 2024, we are also looking forward to the 9th International Animal Futures conference, which has been announced as taking place in Tallinn and online from 17 to 18 May, 2024, under the title: '(Re)visioning Animal Advocacy: Strategies, Dilemmas and Directions.' Learn more at <https://loomus.ee/konverents/>.