Invisible Animals

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Abstract
My research-creation on invisible animals explores what is invisible in the visual realm in order to explore immanence, power, and non-visual knowledge. Utilizing digital technologies, I create media artworks that I think about as being transformational objects, objects that can shift us into new ways of perceiving. The leap of perception through these media art experiences changes our understanding of the world, challenging notions of the utility of animals and the function of technology. My work offers an ethics of care as liberation from instrumental rationalism.

Keywords
Invisible animals, non-human animals, hallucinations, fabulations, ghosts, media art, video art, geolocation, immanence, artist-research.

Introduction
My art practice (or research-creation) plumbs what is invisible in the visual realm in order to explore immanence and non-visual knowledge. Utilizing digital technologies, I create transformational objects that shift us into new ways of perceiving. The art objects, or interfaces, confront the user with new experiences that crystallize new perceptions. This leap of perception through an art experience changes the viewer’s understanding of the world. To accomplish these ends, I engage research-creation methodologies in video, media art, animation, writing, installation, sculpture, and drawing.

I have been drawn towards expanded animation for its inherent ability to suggest the flight of the imagination, and to irritate the rupture between what is actual and what can be represented. [Figure 1] Technology offers platforms, interfaces, and experimental tools that can exceed a single channel video experience; moving images in expanded animation further complicate, destabilize, multiply, and perforate the boundaries of a single screen. My recent expanded animation explores the unseen-yet-apparent through site-specific media art in public venues. I create digital interfaces, installations, and situations in which the public can engage with new media that addresses their place in the world. This way of working allows me to create an art experience through emergent technologies that connect to our very localized, specific, sensory ways of being in the world. People, animals, technology, and the landscape combine in magical surprises.

Recently, nonhuman animals, or more accurately, invisible more-than-human animals have been emerging in my practice. What is the invisible animal in contemporary Canadian art? Having grown up partly in the remote wilderness of northern Manitoba, my childhood was filled with very real animal presences. At this contemporary moment, an unprecedented destruction of animal species and animal habitats is taking place globally under the twin engines of political indifference and unfolding ecological disaster.

This ecological disaster is largely the direct result of the endless consumption of the “capitalocene”. [1] In Donna Haraway’s instructive wordplay, capitalocene critiques the concept of anthropocene as a continuation of whitem supremacist, heteropatriarchal, European enlightenment values in its universalizing language. As Zoe Todd notes, the concept of anthropocene eclipses key differences in who is actively driving planetary ecological demise, and furthermore, who is engaged in its privileged discourse. [2]

What are the inspirations, currents, and political undertows in imaginary, invented, fabulated, hallucinatory, or
ghostly animal presences? Do these presences evoke an ethics of the virtual? How do invisible animals, as imminent forces, exert new perspectives into the discourse of animals in art?

What’s the use of an invisible animal? If we imagine ourselves as just rational cogs in a rational order, then we are merely the living entrails of a mechanistic imagination, locked within a meaningless machinic phylum. Digital culture can follow this mindset, interpolating users into a binary vision of leisure or work. [3] In this system what we understand as our self-definition through leisure or work is in fact a loss of lived, personal time, in an impersonal enactment of the system’s predefined actions of its general users. [4] Following only the logic of program rationality at the exclusion of the rest of our abilities, we become abstract, disembodied from what makes us each uniquely distinctive. [5] We become ever obedient nodes in an infinitely addressable universe. This type of so-called digital interactivity can only further our servitude in the self-reporting loop of consuming-as-surveilling in the attention economy. Fabulations and spectres promise extra-nodal liberation from this digital servitude. How does a ghost, séance, or hallucination promise emancipation from the rational world of modernist vision? Invisible animals and other hallucinatory beings offer a leap of the imagination out of the systematic impoverishment of the machinic/digital phylum.

In 24/7 Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep, Jonathan Crary gives a brief analysis of Andrei Tarkovsky’s 1972 film Solaris. Scientists inhabiting a spacecraft, locked into an illuminated 24/7 world suffer from chronic insomnia, and this constant light exposure leads to cognitive breakdown. Hallucinations and ghosts become their companions in a world whose sensory impoverishment leads to a blurring between dreaming and waking. It is precisely the hallucinations and ghosts that have made their impossible situation bearable. Once acknowledging these ghosts after repeated denials of perceiving them, the acknowledgment of one’s hallucinatory perceptions becomes a gateway itself towards liberation or freedom. [6]

In my work with invisible animals, I’m particularly struck by Derrida’s concept of hauntology. Hauntology deals with a central paradox in which a spectre exists but is also neither being or non-being. [7] As another type of assault on instrumental rationalism, that which haunts is paradoxically both a return from the past and yet, is also a spectre, a possible vision of the future, of what has not yet existed but yet still could return to haunt us. [8]

My invisible animal work began in 2011, when I was invited to a collaborative design charrette at University of Buffalo integrating my Brock University undergraduate visual arts students with theatre design students from the University of Buffalo. Thematically, the collaboration sessions dealt with our mutual terrain of Niagara Falls and our work was to research and explore this shared landscape then respond in design.

During the research phase, I came across the astonishing fact that 270,000 radioactive mice are buried at the Niagara Falls Storage Site near Lewiston, NY, as a result of atomic weapons research. The Niagara Falls Storage Site houses nuclear waste from the Manhattan Project and is sited 32 kilometers north east of Brock University where I teach. The irradiated remains of 270,000 mice are interred in lead and concrete, accompanied by scores of other irradiated animals including cats, dogs, and monkeys. Most Canadians are oblivious to the proximity of the Niagara Falls Storage Site because it is over an invisible political border, housed in the nearby United States. Like the Underground Railroad, which features greatly in our local history, these interred radioactive mice operate as a secret and hidden history of the area. I created the video installation by 3D animating a green glowing mouse running back and forth, and then installed this animation in a single channel video loop. Using a tiny Qumi projector, the video is rear projected onto rice paper at approximately mouse scale. The diminutive mouse haunts the gallery floorboards. [Figure 1, 2]

In 2015 I turned Invisible Histories into a mobile phone app. The app uses my original concept drawing as its icon, and multiple iterations of the 3D mouse animation, rendered so we look down upon the running mice from an overhead perspective. [Figure 3] The app is geo-locative so as the user gets closer to the epicenter of the Niagara Falls Storage Site, more and more glowing animated mice flood the mobile, running toward their grave. Like the Pied Piper gone wrong, the haunting mice lead us directly toward their toxic radioactive remains. Viewers immediately respond to the app’s afford to the general logic and utility of mobile apps: it takes us towards what we desperately wish to avoid. Generally, once introduced to the app, most people choose not to download and install it, instead relegating awareness of nearby nuclear waste to the fringes of their consciousness. Its inverted, repulsive logic plays against the utility promised by mobile functionality. Knowing about the app is the app’s largest function, and in this way the project is more of a conceptual artwork.

Figure 2. Donna Szoke Invisible Histories (installation) 2012
The work exists as a type of anti-monument or “nonument.” [9] It engages the mice as a missing spectacle in the Niagara Falls Region—a landscape of otherwise extravagant sites. New media becomes an avenue for marking, memorializing, and re-activating history. As activist art, it nods to critical animal studies, and questions the ways in which we engage, abuse, and memorialize nonhuman animals. It invites the viewer to visualize hidden historical outcomes, and hopefully by extension, to imagine other presents, and other futures.

Throughout creating this project I kept thinking about how the irradiated mice of nuclear weapons research occupy multiple invisibilities in a Marxist sense: the mice are the dispossessed material outcomes that are containers of their own alienated labour; as alienated workers, the mice continue to work, through their radioactive remains that outlast the bomb product they helped create; the mice are unwitting consumers of nuclear war, consuming their own alienated labour through their own alienated worker-body remains. How does the material waste of animal bodies haunt consumer objects? If we think of George Bataille’s reading of Marx, the mice are an unproductive expenditure. [10] The narratives of utility, guided by instrumental rationalism, produce these by-products or unproductive expenditures such as war, pollution, and these irradiated mice. In Sontag’s reading of Bataille, there are no purely unproductive expenditures. [11] These mice are productive-non-productive expenditures, as they petition our empathy. Therefore, the mobile app’s true utility is that it gives us the opportunity to respond to these mice with a community of mourning, a politics of care, that has real lived outcomes. This is an ethics of the virtual. If we critically engage with mobile app functionality, we can create opportunities to newly perceive and enact an aesthetics of care.

Many of the world’s spiritual traditions posit that what we see of the world rests on an unseen and meaningful order. Besides the invisible as the realm of the mystical, the invisible is also the realm of power in contemporary life. The degree to which one is able to make one’s self and actions visible or invisible is in direct correlation to one’s power. The most important global events are relatively invisible and difficult to capture into images. The current scale of animal atrocities is difficult to envision as a whole but can be intimated through individual instances.

Alfred waits is a site-specific video commissioned by HERE 2012, a public media art project. [Figure 4] HERE 2012 located work by 40 artists via QR codes installed at 40 historic sites in the Niagara Region of Canada. I chose the historic battlefield of 1812 where General Brock died as I was appalled by pro-military accolades on the local, provincial, and national level as we neared the 200th anniversary of the War of 1812. During my research, I learned that General Brock rode his horse Alfred into battle, and while Brock was killed, Alfred fled the scene alive. Another soldier then mounted Alfred, rode him back into battle, and Alfred was killed. I was fascinated by the cruel irony of Alfred’s plight, and imagined his disorientation at having to navigate a battle while being ridden by a stranger. I imagined a small moment in which we just witness an imaginary Alfred, and Alfred is simply given the equal footing of watching the viewer back. I went to “The Last Chance Horse and Pony Rescue” in Fort Erie, ON and videoed their first rescue, and still pack-dominant horse, Floyd. I then rotoscoped each frame to animate the footage and placed the animation overtop of an image of the historic battlefield. These frames are individually hand drawn, in simple line drawing, recreating Alfred as both historical fact and as an artist’s rendering. This work is sited using QR codes, so that one can simply go to the historic Queenston battle spot, encounter the QR marker, and
launch the video on a mobile device while one stands on the spot where Alfred would have died. In this work I use digital technologies as magical and irrational mediums, to conduct an imaginary glimpse of Alfred, who glimpses us, bending time and space. Viewers often remark on the uncanny nature of this work, as the simplicity of the line drawing seems at odds with the accuracy of gestures, such as the tiny ear flicks. I continue to explore rotoscoping for the uncanny valley it resides in, a strange conjoining of live action, animated images, and inanimate images.

The atrocities enacted upon animals in the course of warfare are often elided in war histories. I think of Franz Marc and his visionary paintings of horses created on the eve of, and during, World War I. Initially his horse paintings suggest bucolic spaces and idealized forms, such as in The Large Blue Horses from 1911. Conversely, Marc's painting Tierschicksale (Animal Destinies or Fate of the Animals) was completed in 1913 when war was impending in European. On the rear of the canvas, Marc wrote "Und Alles Sein ist flammend Leid" ("And all being is flaming agony"). While serving in World War I, Marc wrote to his wife that he could hardly believe he had created the painting and its premonition of the destruction to come. [14] Fighting Forms from 1914 is perhaps my favourite of these visionary works as the animals have been abstracted into the pure forces.

Horses have always loomed large in my imagination. As a Mongolian-Hungarian Canadian, I'm the first generation to not know horse-handling techniques that have been handed down for centuries. These horse-handling skills allowed my family to immigrate from Hungary to the US, and then to Canada. In a sense, it was the horses that allowed my grandmother, a Hungarian Jew, to live in Canada, spared from World War II in Europe and the Shoah that claimed her entire extended family, save for one cousin hidden in Odessa. It is an amazing experience for me to bicycle in rural Hungary on the same ancient pathways that would have borne my ancestors on horseback.

I use digital technologies to create moving images of things that cannot be simply captured by a camera; I use projection-based and screen-based technologies, not to show an image of what was once before the camera, but to create a space for co-presence. [17] Hannah Arendt proposes a concept of natality: New beginning is inherent in birth therefore the newcomer can begin anew, that is, they embody an inherent capacity for new action. Arendt places natality as potential in all human activities. She centres these actions of the radically new as the political par excellence, and therefore casts natality as the central category of politics, not metaphysical thought. [19] This idea echoes the notion that in projection we might be dealing not with vanishing, but with the moment of becoming. In this shared space we can newly consider our shared embodiment and empathy through projection as a medium of co-presence. Co-presence allows us a way to inhabit a shared space of the aesthetics of care.

Media art can create pathways for making non-linear associative leaps beyond physical reality. Like cinema, media art can be poetry’s agent. Rather than only mediation, media art offers the possibility of an experience or encounter. The nature of experience cannot be fully articulated, it is lived, embodied, and it sings out in our silence. The unseen, the silent unsaid, gives rise to the very impulse to make art, to articulate, to push up against the limits of representational systems.

I work with time-based media because our primary relationship to perception is not to measured time, but to lived, irreversible time. As Laura Marks notes, lived irreversible time is truly a re-enchantment of the world, as we live in a present where we can bring about actions that create previously unforeseen outcomes. [21]

Figure 5. Donna Szoke Midst (Video installation) 2019

The video installation Midst creates a mysterious image, meant to invite the viewer to experience non-human animal presences—or rather, their urban absences. [Figure 5] The image suggests that large shadowy bison pass through fog, visible momentarily. Bison that once would have been populous across much of Canada seem to have temporarily reappeared. To create Midst, I constructed a 2.5-meter fog wall comprised of eighty computer fans, aeronautic honeycomb, custom electronics, a fog machine, a projector, and a 4K animation loop. Again, uncanny rotoscoping conveys both accuracy and abstraction in the ghostly animal bodies. The fog manifests the bison’s ethereal presence at life size. Ethereal, abstract, and somehow real, the fog bison enact a magical moment of their manifestation. Most viewers respond to this work with words like “magic” and “wonder.”

As site-specific media art, new technologies are employed to destabilize the familiarity of public space. How does the presence of the non-human animal transform public space in the experience of the viewer? Midst questions our relationship to natural spaces, inviting our imaginations to repopulate those spaces. It prompts the viewer to engage in questions of embodied perception and the fluidity of lived experience.

Issues of encroachment of cities into rural spaces raise questions of animal rights. Do animals own the wild spaces
that they depend upon for life and sustenance? Within systems of property rights through capitalism, animals have no land rights. How does the reality of the disposability of animals fit within the mainstream Canadian psyche, one in which mythical ideas of nature predominate? How do we rethink what it is to be an animal beyond being another disposable body for the interests of advanced capitalism? How does a celebration of an animal shift the values of a global, technological world? Media art allows a unique phenomenological experience to address encroachment of urban dwellings into wild spaces, disappearance of large animal populations, and animal land rights. In an international context this work speaks to the urgency to recognize animal rights in our current eco-crisis of habitat and species loss.

Shot / Counter Shot: Self-portrait as a Mother was commissioned by the Grimsby Art Gallery for the project Ripple Effect in which the gallery invited 5 artists to create new work in response to a piece in their collection. [Figure 6] This print was made in response to Lupe Rodriguez’s wonderful painting, The Arrival of Liam (1985). [22] I was struck by Lupe’s sense of colour in the painting and her choice to use the image of a bull to represent herself as a mother. She made the work after the birth of her second child, and I pondered her painting 3 ½ years after the birth of my second child. After spending some time with the painting, I continued to ponder the work. What does it mean to select a bull, obviously male, to represent a mother? I loved the idea of the force of motherhood as being something beyond gender. When I think of Lupe’s image, I feel it does work as a representation of motherhood as I too feel like I am massive, barely tamed, a more-than-human-animal able to erupt into sheer force at any second. Suddenly it seemed obvious that my image needed to be an almost filmic response to Lupe’s image. In narrative film we see the shot / counter shot strategy where the camera peers over the shoulder of a character toward a second character. In the next shot the camera looks back at the first character in an almost perfect 180-degree axis. This suture is magical: we transcend time and space, pinning two characters into a fictional exchange. My bison is looking back at her bull.

At the outset of this project, I searched online for bison subjects to rotoscope and found image after image of dull eyed farmed bison. At last an image popped up of a bison intensely alive. It was a portrait of a bison reintroduced to wild herd in Jasper National Park. I like to imagine the print in Europe where the image of a newly re-wilded bison can rest on the soil of the extinct European bison, hopefully inspiring its invisible and long-lost kin.

I have lived with both real and imaginary animals my entire life. In my approach to the invisible, ghost, or fabulated animal, I try to create a space that doesn’t demand optics. Invisible animals retain the ability to not be completely knowable, to not be fully divulged. Freed from constant material identification, they are free to inhabit the immaterial values historically assigned only to humans. They are able to haunt, to appear and reappear at will, to manifest as a hallucination or ghost, and to have a privileged interiority. Invisibility is not a dismissive relegation, as if a subject or object can only exist or not exist in a binary state. Rather, the continuum between visible and invisible speaks not just to the thing-ness of the world but to human perception itself. Invisibility is not a failure of perception, but rather, it is a freeing of the imagination, a liberation of consciousness. The ability to be beyond perception is the very nature of animals, to exist beyond our understanding.

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**Author Biography**

Donna Szoke creates expanded animation, video art, drawing, and printmaking. She investigates immanence, embodied perception, and the fluidity of lived experience. Her work has exhibited in Canada, USA, France, Germany, Turkey, Hungary, Croatia, Cuba, and UAE. She has received awards including SSHRC, Canada Council for the Arts, BC and Ontario Arts Council. She is Chair & Associate Professor, Visual Arts, Brock University where she received the Faculty of Humanities Award for Excellence in Research and Creative Activity in 2017.

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