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University of Turku

Faculty of Humanities
School of History, Culture and Arts Studies
Art History
Doctoral Programme in History, Culture and Arts Studies (Juno)

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ABSTRACT

In the early 21st century, front-facing smartphone cameras transformed visual culture, sparking a surge of interest in self-portraits. While widely studied, these images are rarely examined through the lens of human–animal relations. My dissertation began with a focus on self-portraits in art and social media, but I soon became more intrigued by the non-human animals that peek into the images from the margins and resist human intentions than by questions of human identity. This article-based dissertation analyses how human relations with non-human animals are depicted, negotiated, and questioned in self-portrayals. I ask how non-human and human embodied agencies as well as multispecies interactions and encounters are constituted in photographic self-representations of the early 2000s.

Theoretically, this dissertation engages with posthumanism, posthuman feminism and new materialism all of which challenge the position of humans as subjects and agents in contrast to nature as a passive resource and the object of human actions. The methodological inspiration is drawn from new materialist *ways of following* art which seek to encounter rather than to interpret visual culture. Through embodied and affective engagement with the material, I explore co-becomings and relationality, guided by a commitment to imagining less violent multispecies futures.

The research material of this dissertation comprises both photographic artistic self-portraits and selfies posted on social media. This selection opens up various perspectives on human–animal relations: "selfies" taken by Naruto the macaque monkey invite reflections on the status of the animal within social media and other forms of visual culture; photographs of the artist Elina Brotherus and Marcello the dog provide insights into multispecies families and non-human agency; seagulls appear in human Instagram selfies either as friends or flying vermin and make visible the ambivalence with which humans, particularly in the West, approach non-human animals, while the artist Iiu Susiraja poses with cuts of meat, bringing to the forefront questions about the objectification and dehumanization of human and non-human bodies.

In each of the four articles that make up this dissertation, I approach agency as relational and not exclusive to humans, examining how the selected photographs challenge anthropocentric power dynamics through agency, the gaze and the act of looking back. The analysis also highlights the noteworthy similarities between

human and non-human corporeal agencies. Drawing on posthuman ecofeminist Stacy Alaimo's concept of *trans-corporeality*, this dissertation challenges the clear-cut distinction between the Western human subject and the non-human world and emphasizes multispecies entanglements. The non-human animals in my research material, often described as "cute", behave in unruly ways that resist the compositional control imposed upon them by the human photographer, thereby challenging human exceptionalism and dominance. To conclude, I suggest that in addition to visualising ambivalence and illuminating speciesist hierarchies and asymmetrical human–animal power relations, visual culture has the possibility to foster less hierarchical ways of co-existing with non-human animals, encouraging more empathetic and ethical relations in our wounded world of ecological crises.

KEYWORDS: photography, self-portrait, human–animal relations, agency, posthumanism, new materialism, gaze, trans-corporeality, Elina Brotherus, Iiu Susiraja

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TIIVISTELMÄ

2000-luvun alussa älypuhelinten kameratoiminnot aiheuttivat visuaalisen kulttuurin mullistuksen, jonka myötä omakuvia kohtaan heräsi merkittävää kiinnostusta. Vaikka omakuvia on tutkittu laajasti, niitä on harvoin tarkasteltu ihmis-eläinsuhteen näkökulmasta. Väitöskirjani sai alkunsa kuvataiteen omakuvien ja sosiaalisen median selfieiden tarkastelusta, mutta kiinnostuin pian inhimillisten identiteettikysymysten sijaan marginaaleista kurkistelevista, niskoittelevista ja kameran itselleen kaappaavista ei-inhimillisistä eläimistä. Artikkeliväitöskirjana toteutettu tutkimus purkaa sitä, miten ihmisten suhdetta ei-inhimillisiin eläimiin esitetään, neuvotellaan ja kyseenalaistetaan omakuvissa. Kysyn, miten ei-inhimilliset ja inhimilliset kehollliset toimijuudet sekä lajien väliset kohtaamiset ja vuorovaikutus ilmenevät 2000-luvun alun omakuvissa.

Teoreettisesti tutkimus perustaa posthumanismiin, posthumanistiseen feminismiin ja uusmaterialismiin, jotka haastavat ihmisen aseman subjektina ja toimijana verrattuna luontoon passiivisena resurssina ja ihmisen toimien kohteena. Metodologinen inspiraatio juontuu uusmaterialistisista ”taiteen seuraamisen tavoista”, jotka pyrkivät kohtaamaan – ennemmin kuin tulkitsemaan – visuaalista kulttuuria. Lähestymällä aineistoa kehollisesti ja affektiivisesti tarkastelen yhteiskehkeytymisiä ja suhteisuutta pyrkien kuvittelemaan vähemmän väkivaltaisia monilajisia tulevaisuuksia.

Väitöskirjan aineisto koostuu sekä valokuvataiteen omakuvista että sosiaalisen median selfieistä, jotka avaavat erilaisia näkökulmia ihmis-eläinsuhteeseen: Narutomakakiapinan ottamat omakuvat inspiroivat pohdintoihin eläimen asemasta visuaalisessa kulttuurissa, taiteilija Elina Brotheruksen ja Marcello-koiran valokuvat tarjoavat näkökulmia monilajisiin perheisiin, lokit esiintyvät ihmisten Instagram-selfieissä joko roskalintuina tai ystävinä, korostaen länsimaisen ihmis-eläinsuhteen ambivalenssia, ja taiteilija Iiu Susiraja poseeraa lihanpalojen kanssa nostaen esiin kysymyksiä sekä ei-inhimillisten että inhimillisten ruumiiden objektifioimisesta ja epäinhimillistämisestä.

Kaikissa neljässä artikkelissani lähestyn toimijuutta suhteisena ilmiönä, joka ei rajoitu ainoastaan ihmisiin. Tarkastelen, kuinka aineistoni valokuvat haastavat ihmiskeskeisiä valtasuhteita toimijuuden, katseen ja takaisin katsomisen kautta. Analyysi tuo esiin inhimillisten ja ei-inhimillisten kehollisten toimijuuksien perustavanlaatuisia yhtäläisyyksiä. Viitaten posthumanistisen ekofeministi Stacy

Alaimon *poikki-ruumiillisuus* (*trans-corporeality)* -käsitteeseen väitöskirja purkaa länsimaisen subjektin erontekoa ei-inhimillisestä luonnosta ja korostaa monilajisia yhteenkietoutumisia. Aineistoni usein söpöiksi kuvatut ei-inhimilliset eläimet käyttäytyvät kurittomasti eivätkä alistu ihmisen määrittelemiin kuvallisiin asetelmiin, kyseenalaistaen näin ihmisen erityisaseman. Näin ollen väitän, että visuaalinen kulttuuri voi ambivalenssin, lajistisen hierarkioiden ja epäsymmetristen ihmis–eläin-valtasuhteiden valottamisen lisäksi avata vähemmän hierarkkisia yhteiselon mahdollisuuksia ei-inhimillisten eläinten kanssa sekä edistää empaattisempaa ja eettisempää olemista ekologisten kriisien haavoittamassa maailmassa.

ASIASANAT valokuva, omakuva, ihmis-eläinsuhteet, toimijuus, posthumanismi, uusmaterialismi, katse, poikki-ruumiillisuus, Elina Brotherus, Iiu Susiraja

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In Hämeenlinna, January 2026
Tiina Salmia

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List of Original Publications

The dissertation is based on the following original publications, which are referred to in the text by their Roman numerals:

I Salmia, Tiina. 2018. "Monkey in the Self-Portrait: The Non-Human Animal and the Question of Self-Representation." *WiderScreen* 21 (3). http://widerscreen.fi/numerot/2018-3/monkey-in-the-self-portrait-the-non-human-animal-and-the-question-of-self-representation/.

II Salmia, Tiina. 2021. "Marcello the Dog and More-Than-Human Family in Elina Brotherus's Self-Portraits from the Series *Carpe Fucking Diem*." *TRACE – Journal for Human–Animal Studies* 7 (1): 47–68. https://doi.org/10.23984/fjhas.99338.

III Salmia, Tiina. 2024. "Friends, Cuties and Trash Birds: Human–Animal Encounters in Instagram Selfies with Seagulls." *Tahiti* 14 (1): 117–136. https://doi.org/10.23995/tht.142635.

IV Salmia, Tiina. "Consumable Bodies: Eating, Sex, Gender and Species in Iiu Susiraja's Self-Portraits *Meat Model 1* and *2*." Undergoing peer review.

List of Illustrations

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Article II

Article III

Photographer 1. *She and seagulls,* 2019. Image: Screenshot from www.instagram.com, all rights reserved.

Photographer 2. *Wonder what the seagulls are thinking right now*, 2016. Image: Screenshot from www.instagram.com, all rights reserved.

1 Introduction

From early markings to contemporary digital selfies, across history, humans have used diverse media to represent themselves (Doy 2005; Walker Rettberg 2018). In the early 2000s, new smartphone camera functions, most notably the front-facing camera, triggered a revolution in visual culture, generating an unprecedented surge of interest in self-representation (Gómez-Cruz 2014, 31; Walker Rettberg 2018, 12). At the beginning of the 21st century, when cameras were suddenly everywhere and photo sharing became a seamless extension of photography, human–animal studies, posthumanism, critical animal studies and perspectives of care (see e.g., Wolfe 2010; Lummaa & Rojola 2014a; Puig de la Bellacasa 2017; Hyttinen & Lummaa 2020; Irni et al. 2023) simultaneously gained prominence. Although the surge in self-portraiture has been widely studied, its intersections with human–animal relations have remained strikingly underexplored. In this dissertation, I argue that multispecies encounters in self-representational images offer a productive framework for the analysis of self-portraits created by or featuring non-human animals.

My approach to photographic self-portraits is shaped by a lifelong sense of affinity with animals, a perspective that guides the questions this dissertation brings to the field. I would think that my love for animals is a characteristic way of being in the world, just as musicality might be for someone else. Despite this, conducting this research has often meant wrestling with my own human-centred prejudices. In fact, in my dissertation, I initially set out to explore self-portraits through the lens of human identity. More recently, I have learned to critically reflect on these anthropocentric preconceptions of my own – an aspect I will also elaborate on in the summary section of this dissertation.

Before this research, I wrote my Master's thesis (2013) on self-portraits by woman-identifying artists. I was fascinated by the crossing of boundaries that occurs when the photographer is both the subject and the object, the artist and the model. During and after the writing of the Master's thesis, the genre of self-portraits expanded significantly with the advent of so-called "selfies". In fact, in 2013, Oxford Dictionaries selected "selfie" as its Word of the Year, a decision that attracted considerable attention in mainstream media and underscored the term's cultural

significance and widespread usage at the time (Walker Rettberg 2018, 9). Alongside this "selfiefication" of visual culture, since the early 2000s, professional artists have increasingly drawn attention to the everyday role of photographic phenomena such as selfies and reflected on how casual snapshots often feel more authentic than carefully composed images (Heikka & Rastenberger 2014, 37).

At the outset of my dissertation, my primary interest was in hierarchical dichotomies and questions of power. I sought to understand why selfies are often dismissed as a frivolously feminine activity pursued by "superficial" girls, whereas self-portraits created by male visual artists are held in high esteem as a legitimate and profound mode of self-exploration. However, I soon became enchanted with the non-human animals that peek in from the margins, resist, and take photographs of themselves. Therefore, I was prompted to study, among other things, the self-portraits taken by Naruto the macaque monkey using wildlife photographer David Slater's camera. Seeing Naruto's self-portrait for the first time and being affected by the animal's gaze sparked wild inspiration and changed the entire direction of my dissertation.

With the image, the non-human animal reverses the hierarchical divisions between species, such as subject/object, human/nature, and active/passive. Naruto's face and eyes, looking directly at the viewer, emphasize the non-human animal's subjectivity, individuality, and distinctiveness. I experienced Naruto's gaze as a sign of animal agency, signalling how the monkey looks at the world from his own perspective. It allowed me to understand that "respect is respere – looking back, holding in regard, understanding that meeting the look of the other is a condition of having face oneself" (Haraway 2008, 88). The image also invited me to reflect on the significance of visual culture and its research in human–animal relations during the era of ecological crises. In this dissertation, across four case studies, I suggest that in addition to visualising ambivalences and asymmetrical human–animal power relations, visual culture can offer a profoundly moving experience for the viewer, allowing respectful identification with, and recognition of, the Other.

By examining issues of power and considering the gaze, this dissertation contributes to ongoing conversations in feminist visual culture studies where such concerns have been central (e.g., Mulvey 1975; Pollock 1988; Vänskä 2006; Kontturi 2006). The key questions of (eco)feminist research regarding the asymmetric distribution of power, dehumanization, and hierarchical dichotomies have been relevant in visual culture research broadly in recent decades (Plumwood 1986; Alaimo 2008b; Adams and Gruen 2014; Boetzkes 2018; Millner 2023; Irni et al. 2023).[1] Posthumanist and new materialist philosopher Rosi Braidotti argues that

[1] Feminist scholarship has critically interrogated the gendered mind-body dualism underpinning Western thought, revealing how this binary has historically aligned

ecofeminism informs posthuman feminism's critique of humanism's exclusionary practices, which marginalize "animalized" and "naturalized" Others (Braidotti 2022, 10–11, 80, 83). The definitions of human and animal are shaped by race, gender, sexuality, and ability (Irni et al. 2023, 8), while dehumanization, grounded in the human–animal and subject–object binaries, has justified atrocities by portraying certain groups as subhuman or less intelligent (Calarco 2021, 53–55).

Also fundamental to my research are the issues of ongoing environmental change and biodiversity loss that have made the relationship between humans and non-human nature and animals into an urgent research topic and sparked the *animal turn* that occurred at the turn of the 21st century. The reflections raised by human–animal studies regarding multispecies relations, the social and cultural significance of non-human animals, and non-human agency have become increasingly relevant (Despret 2013; Turner, Sellbach & Broglio 2018; Davis & Turpin 2015; Kaarlenkaski 2021; Koistinen & Karkulehto 2021). Soon after embarking on my doctoral dissertation, it became clear to me that these questions could not be overlooked. A major influence was the IPCC[2] Special Report, published in 2018, which emphasized the urgent need to limit global warming to 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels in order to significantly reduce the risks and impacts of climate change, calling for unprecedented, rapid, and far-reaching transitions in energy, land use, infrastructure, and consumption patterns (IPCC, n. d.).

The visual research material analysed in this dissertation covers the period from 2010 to 2020. The early 2000s were characterized by trends that have continued to accelerate in the 2020s: rapidly advancing climate change (manifesting, among other things, through severe wildfires, droughts, unpredictable weather patterns, and snowless winters), the crisis of democracy, the popularity of political extremism, and increasing forced migration (Johansson & Seppä 2021, 10). There is an urgent need for research that engages with the ethical renegotiation of human–nonhuman relationships. The massive exploitation of animals is both a central driver of the climate crisis and a defining feature of the Anthropocene (Aavik 2024, 281; Twine 2024).

The Anthropocene, a concept denoting humanity's impact on Earth's geological epoch, has sparked interdisciplinary dialogue, where the humanities enrich the

women with nature and objecthood, while positioning men as dominant, rational subjects (Lloyd 1979; Alaimo 2010; Braidotti 2013; 2019; 2022). This critique extends to the spatial and visual dimensions of agency, highlighting how women's roles have been confined to the private sphere and problematising the dynamics of the gaze, specifically, who holds the power to observe, who is observed, and from what positionality (Pollock 1988; Vänskä 2006).

2 The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) is the United Nations body for assessing the science relating to climate change.

natural sciences' perspectives on what it means to be human (see e.g., Åsberg 2024, 131–132; Rustick 2016, 3). In examining planetary-scale human impact, it is crucial to consider historically constructed power dynamics and the ways through which both natural and human resources are exploited. As a concept, the Anthropocene reinforces long-standing insights from the humanities and philosophy that humans and nature are deeply interconnected. Since the early 2000s, the ecological crises of this era have given rise to new research directions, including critical animal studies with activist dimensions, as well as work into the ethics and aesthetics of care that rethink human–animal relations (Hyttinen & Lummaa 2020, 24–25; Irni et al. 2023, 11; Nocella et al. 2014; Puig de la Bellacasa 2017, 1–6).

Consequently, I became engaged in the dynamic and expanding field of human–animal studies, which employs interdisciplinary approaches to challenge human exceptionalism and address ethical questions concerning human–environment interactions and multispecies relations. I studied the photographs taken by Naruto the macaque monkey, exploring in *Article I* ("Monkey in the Self-Portrait: The Non-Human Animal and the Question of Self-Representation") the implications of a non-human animal turning the camera on himself. This led me to investigate more instances of more-than-human relations in self-representations, and I observed that non-human animals appeared frequently in self-portraits as exhibited in galleries and shared on social media. In *Article II* ("Marcello the Dog and More-Than-Human Family in Elina Brotherus's Self-Portraits from the Series *Carpe Fucking Diem*"), I analysed Elina Brotherus's self-portraits with Marcello the dog from the *Carpe Fucking Diem* photo series through the lens of Donna Haraway's concept of companion species, considering the notion of a multispecies family. *Article III* ("Friends, Cuties and Trash Birds: Human–Animal Encounters in Instagram Selfies with Seagulls") focused on selfies taken with seagulls on Instagram, examining human coexistence with species often seen as transgressive of imagined boundaries, such as those between nature and urban spaces, or between humans and animals. Finally, in *Article IV* ("Consumable Bodies: Eating, Sex, Gender and Species in Iiu Susiraja's Self-Portraits *Meat Model 1* and *2*"), I examined Iiu Susiraja's *Meat Model* self-portraits, exploring how they engage with meat consumption as a gendered, embodied process intertwined with social practices. *Article IV* differs from the other articles in that no living animals are present in the photographs. However, I consider it essential to acknowledge that meat consumption is the most common way in which humans interact with non-human animals, making it a crucial topic to address in the context of this dissertation (cf. Adams 2015 [1990], 20). Susiraja approaches this topic by way of critical intervention. Through these case studies, I explore how diverse agents engage with multispecies relations in self-representational practices within visual culture.

Although there is always a human and a non-human, mechanical element in photography (Zylinska 2017, 2), the self-portrait genre, and research exploring it as well as selfies, have remained quite human-centred. While self-portraits and selfies have been extensively studied in recent research (including from the perspectives of digital visual culture, feminist visual studies, social media, and technologies of the self, see e.g., Burns 2015; Gómez-Cruz 2014; Senft & Baym 2015; Tavani 2024; Tiidenberg 2018; Walker Rettberg 2018), the topic has, thus far, not been addressed from the perspective of human–animal relations. Fascinated by encounters with non-human animals in recent photographic self-representations, I have focused on multispecies interactions in the four case studies discussed in *Articles I, II, III*, and *IV*.

These analyses focus on the gaze and agency of animals in photographic self-representations, exemplified by, for instance, the case of Naruto the macaque (famous for his 2011 selfie). In *Article I* his gaze compels me to perceive him as a subject and to recognize our shared similarity. I also explore more-than-human concepts of kinship and family in Elina Brotherus's photographic series *Carpe Fucking Diem* (2011–2015), examining in *Article II* the agency of Marcello the dog in the context of family negotiations. This involves interpreting his gestures, expressions, and gaze, and positioning him as a central figure in the analysis. In addition, in *Article III*, I investigate human–animal encounters in Instagram selfies featuring seagulls (from 2013–2019), reflecting on how these birds subvert the traditional hierarchical subject-object relation, where the humans observe the animals. In these images, the gulls appear to view the slow and clumsy humans as potential sources of food, thereby challenging the notion of human superiority over non-human nature through their own forms of agency. Using Iiu Susiraja's *Meat Model 1* and *2* (2020) as a case in *Article IV*, I further analyse how issues of gaze and power intertwine within human–animal relations, including the voyeuristic pleasure humans derive from watching animals. Throughout this research, it has become increasingly evident that while these early 2000s self-representations may initially appear anthropocentric, they ultimately reveal themselves to be deeply multispecies.

Beyond revealing the intertwined multispecies realities shared by humans and non-human animals, the photographs I study illustrate how humans express affection for animals, seek connection, and take pleasure in viewing images and videos of them. Simultaneously the humans position themselves at the top of a hierarchy of species and claiming the authority to determine animals' lives, deaths, and habitats. In my research material, non-human animals are frequently described as "cute" within the visual and textual framings of the research material itself, yet they often behave in unruly ways that resist the compositional control imposed by the human photographer, thereby challenging human exceptionalism and

dominance. I foreground this ambivalence in my dissertation title by characterizing the animals as both "cute" (a descriptor emerging from the material) and "unruly" (a term drawn from existing scholarship). This dual stance, celebrating animals through representation while simultaneously maintaining hierarchical control, captures the tension between allure and unease that animals evoke in humans, a dynamic that visual culture continually reflects and negotiates (Wells 2009; Servais 2018).

The following sections outline the key themes, concepts, methodologies, arguments, and findings of the articles included in this dissertation. In Chapter 1, alongside my research objectives, questions, and core theoretical concepts, I also introduce the four articles, situating the study within broader scholarly discussions on posthumanism and visual culture in both Finnish and international contexts. Chapter 2, *Theoretical Background: Trans-Corporeally Following Visual Culture*, reviews the conceptual framework of the dissertation, which draws on posthumanism, posthuman feminism, human–animal studies, critical animal studies, and new materialism. It argues that, although self-portraits and selfies have been widely studied, existing research often overlooks their multispecies dimensions. Chapter 3, *Research Design*, details the research materials and methods, emphasizing embodied and affective approaches to following art and visual culture as well as ethical considerations specific to internet-based visual culture and human–animal studies. Chapter 4, *Findings*, explores the interconnections between the articles and their relation to the theoretical framework. Lastly, Chapter 5, *Conclusions*, summarizes the research contributions, situates them within existing scholarship, and suggests directions for future research.

1.1 Objectives: Thinking with the more-than-human world

Non-human animals have been the subjects of research since the inception of scientific thought, but research focusing on human–animal relations began to gain popularity in social sciences and humanities from the 1990s onwards. This multidisciplinary field, which I was drawn to from early on in my PhD studies, also utilizes findings from natural sciences (e.g., Ginn 2018, 413; Schuurman & Räsänen 2020, 10; Kaarlenkaski 2021). The growth in significance of human–animal studies has been influenced by natural scientific research on animal behaviour which has challenged the traits traditionally considered unique to humans: in recent years, a wealth of new research has emerged regarding animal emotions, linguistic abilities, and morality which are not as removed from humans as previously thought (see e.g., Telkänranta 2016; Meijer 2019).

In his seminal book *What is Posthumanism?* Cary Wolfe (2010, xv) writes:

> Posthumanism names a historical moment in which the decentering of the human by its imbrication in technical, medical, informatic, and economic networks is increasingly impossible to ignore, a historical development that points toward the necessity of new theoretical paradigms…

In fact, so much work has been done in this area that posthumanist approaches can be seen as key research directions of our time. It has spread widely beyond academic circles into art and popular culture, driven by everyday news about abnormally warm winters, endangered species, extreme weather phenomena, and the exceeding of Earth's carrying capacity. Posthumanism challenges human exceptionalism, attributing environmental crises to humanity's tendency to elevate itself above other beings (Wolfe 2010; Lummaa & Rojola 2014a; Turner, Sellbach & Broglio 2018; Hyttinen & Lummaa 2020). It questions the presumed separation between humans and the natural world, emphasizing human vulnerability in relation to the environment. In response, one proposed solution to the fractured relationship between Western humans and non-human nature is the concept of *trans-corporeality*, which critiques the Western ideal of the autonomous subject (Alaimo 2016, 1, 5).

With trans-corporeality, posthuman ecofeminist Stacy Alaimo explores the porosity and vulnerability of the human body in its entanglement with the environment. She draws on theories of embodied agency which argue that the non-human resists full human control and frame anthropocentrism not as a given but as a fundamental problem (Alaimo 2016, 8). Alaimo's concept emphasizes the dynamic, interconnected nature of all matter, highlighting how bodies are both affected by and capable of affecting other beings and substances. The human body is inherently permeable, making it impossible to draw clear boundaries between the self and the non-human environment (Alaimo 2016, 78). It is continually shaped through its relations with non-human agents, materials, and forces. What makes Alaimo's work particularly significant for my research is its integration of ecofeminism, new materialism and posthumanism. Drawing on Karen Barad's notion of intra-activity (2003) and Donna Haraway's concept of situated knowledges (1991), Alaimo creates the concept of trans-corporeality in which agency emerges in the entanglements between human and more-than-human worlds (Alaimo 2008, 238, 248–49). While trans-corporeality is not the first term to address the complexity of multispecies interconnections, it is one that clarifies, exceptionally well, the research questions posed in this dissertation. The concept foregrounds the inseparable entanglements of human bodies with environmental processes and the

ethical responsibilities that arise from these interconnections (Alaimo 2008; Leppänen & Tiainen 2016).

In addition to emphasizing how the human body takes shape trans-corporeally, my dissertation highlights the agency of non-human animals. I regard human agency as equal to non-human agencies and consider it a central point in my articles, interrogating how the embodied agency of non-human animals often resists or diverges from human intentions associated with selfies or self-portraits. In the title of my dissertation, I sought to emphasise this premise through the formulation "non-human and human trans-corporeal agencies". Non-human agency has become another key concept within the humanities. In fact, my research is grounded in the understanding that human and animal lives are interdependent, that subjectivity extends beyond the human, and that the illusion of human superiority must be critically examined (Nance 2013, 7, 9). Agency, in this context, is conceived as relational – emerging through interactions and connections (Despret 2013, 38–41, 44; Kaarlenkaski 2021, 332; Schuurman & Räsänen 2020, 10). A central premise of this work is the idea that the study of non-human animal agency should prioritize the non-human lived experiences and autonomous subjectivity, rather than treating them merely as symbolic or cultural representations.

Posthumanism has been criticized for remaining abstract, estranged from reality and disengaged from activism, focusing too much on the realm of theory and philosophical analysis despite its political and ethical aims (Pedersen 2019, 8; Irni et al. 2023, 5). Critics of posthumanism also question whether this is truly the right moment to relinquish human dominance – especially now, after humans have disrupted all planetary systems. Moreover, they question whether posthumanism entails abandoning the legacy of humanism, the very foundation of concepts such as human rights, democracy, and even the animal rights movement (Haraway 2016, 3; Hyttinen & Lummaa 2020, 9). This concern arises, one might add, at a time when the value of humanistic research is already being contested as recent studies have shown that the rise of right-wing populism correlates with a marked distrust in expertise, undermines academic freedom, and politicizes culture (Jakonen, Renko & Harding 2025; Hernández-Huerta & Inclán 2025; Edis 2020). Although I acknowledge these challenges, I see significant potential in posthumanism, particularly in its capacity to question human exceptionalism and anthropocentrism.

Also of importance are the issues raised by critical animal studies, which take a critical stance towards sometimes purely academic approaches of posthumanism and human–animal studies, and which have gained, with each of my articles, an increasing significance in this dissertation. The aim of critical animal studies is to improve the status of non-human animals. It is openly political, focused on ethics, issues of power and a critical reassessment of the relations between the societal, the

natural, and the biological (see e.g., Taylor & Twine 2014; Aavik, Irni & Joki 2023; Ääri 2023; Karhu 2022). Critical animal studies argues that capitalist societies rely on the commodification of animal bodies and call for a critical reassessment of the categories of human and animal (Irni et al. 2023, 4, 9). Framing humans as one species among others reveals, for instance, how power structures and cultural norms determine which bodies are rendered edible in specific historical contexts. This distinction also surfaces in my articles: in the first three, non-human animals appear as bodies positioned outside of contemporary Western categories of edibility, while in the fourth they are addressed directly as meat.

In my view, fostering less hierarchical relations between species and understanding that nature and non-human animals are not merely resources for human use are political questions intertwined with the asymmetrical distributions of power. These are also key responses to the crises shaking the planet. In my dissertation, my aim is to critically examine interspecies power relations and analyse the transgressions of hierarchical boundaries between species. Motivated by the challenges faced by a wounded planet – challenges that call for multispecies collaboration – I argue that art and visual culture research can play a vital role in times of ecological crisis. Visual culture can shape perceptions, envision alternative futures, bring uncomfortable truths to light, spark dialogue, and provoke critical reflection. In this context, while grappling with the status of non-human animals in the anthropocentric world can be disheartening, I contend that apathy or escapism offer little in the way of meaningful response. Instead, what is needed is action and *thinking with the more-than-human world*. [3]

The term *more-than-human* refers to how animals and non-human nature can be understood as enriching human relations and knowledge rather than lacking what humans possess. As critical animal studies scholar Matthew R. Calarco (2021, 100–101) notes, the phrase was first introduced by David Abram in *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-than-Human World* (1996) to avoid the hierarchical implications of terms like "non-human", which suggest deficiency relative to humans. In the context of my dissertation, thinking with the more-than-human world involves engaging with trans-corporeal, multispecies agencies in early 2000s self-representations, challenging anthropocentrism, including within my own thinking, and questioning the human–animal distinction. It also entails striving to centre the agencies of non-human animals and critically examining issues of gaze and power as they emerge in my visual research material.

[3] On the complexities of movement within a more-than-human world, see also Springgay 2019.

1.2 Research questions: Enquiring interactions, researching co-existence and contesting hierarchical norms

To guide my analysis of the early 2000s self-portraits from the perspective of human–animal relations, I pose the following questions:

1) *How do non-human and human embodied agencies and interspecies interactions become visualized in self-representations of the early 2000s?*
2) *How is our relationship with non-human animals depicted, negotiated, and questioned within self-portraits?*
3) *How does the agency of non-human animals in self-portraits challenge anthropocentric norms of visual culture?*

Using the framework provided by these questions, I will turn my attention to human–animal interactions, coexistence, and the intertwinings of nature and culture in my chosen material through the agency of non-human animals

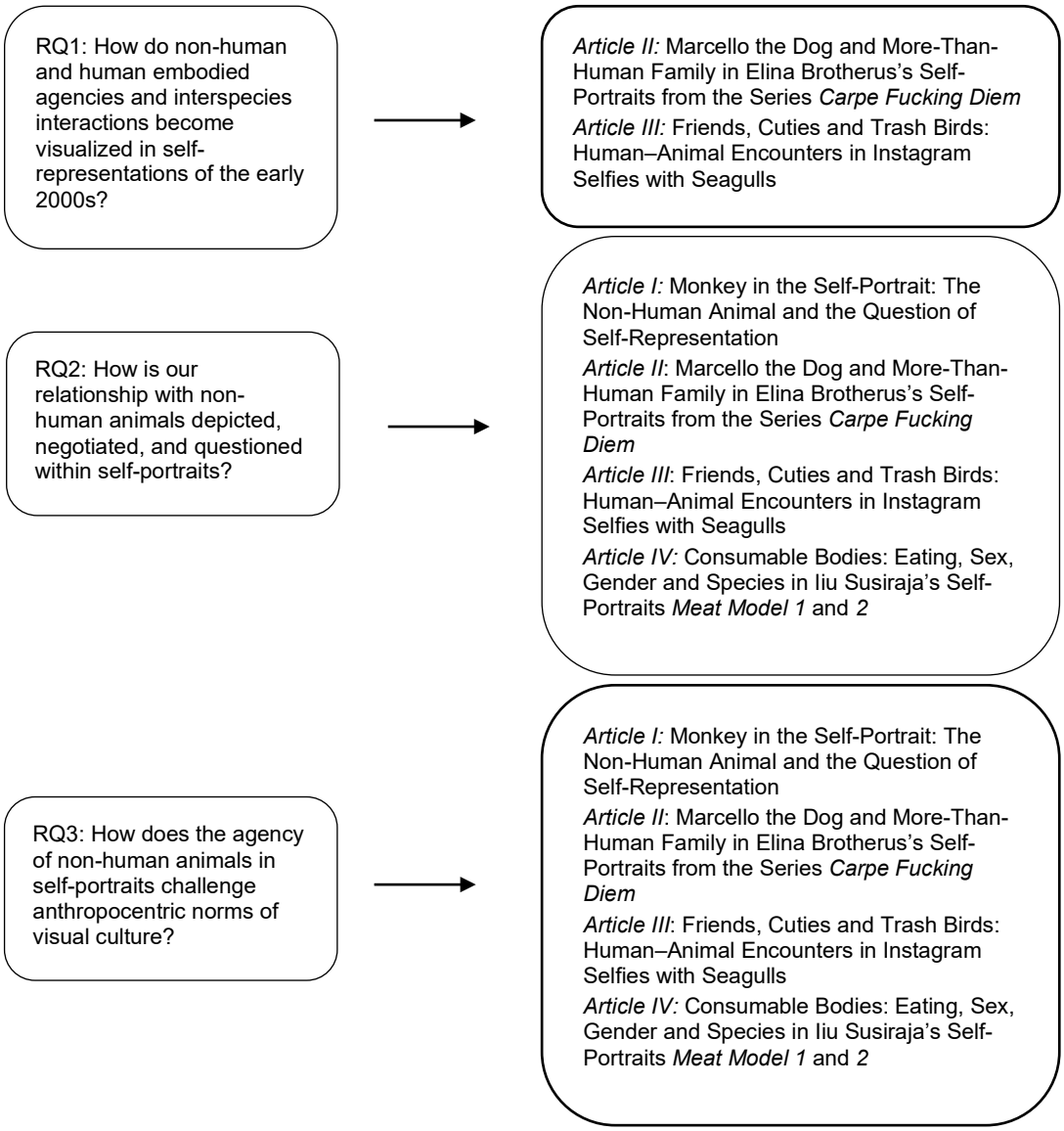

Figure 1. Research questions by article.

1.3 Key frameworks: Exploring trans-corporeal human–animal relations and agencies in self-representations

My dissertation explores trans-corporeal human–animal relations and agencies in photographic self-representations, drawing inspiration from posthuman and new materialist thought. These frameworks aim to transcend dualistic modes of thought and critique the dominant tradition in Western philosophy which constructs the human as a rational subject who engages with the world primarily through language and abstraction, thereby suppressing our animal origins and embodied connections to nature (Wolfe 2010, xiv–xv; Lummaa & Rojola 2014a, 22–23). In addition to this, the concepts related to interspecies equality as well as the co-operative and interdependent relations between humans, animals, plants, and the planet, typical of posthuman feminism, support the examination of the visual material I analyse (Braidotti 2022, 11). Similarly, in my research, I understand that caring for animals involves not only attending to individual beings but also ensuring the viability of broader ecologies and the entangled relationships between these non-human creatures and their environments (Turner, Sellbach & Broglio 2018, 7). This requires both knowledge of and sensitivity to the presence of non-human agencies all around and within us, their significance, and the need to account for them, particularly in environmental decision-making.

1.3.1 Trans-corporeal human–animal relations and care

As outlined above, Stacy Alaimo's notion of trans-corporeality posits that human corporeality is inherently entangled with the more-than-human world and is continuously shaped through its interactions with other bodies (see e.g., Leppänen & Tiainen 2016). Trans-corporeality challenges the Western conception of the autonomous subject exerting mastery over the world and instead emphasizes the body's permeability to and interconnection with external substances and materials. As Alaimo (2016, 3–5, 8–9) argues, drawing on examples such as environmental toxins and a changing climate, the vitality of nature resists human control and predictability. While human activity affects the environment, environmental forces also shape human existence. This framework has influenced my view that humans are not separate from nature and that non-human nature and animals do not exist merely to provide comfort or well-being to humans; rather, they possess intrinsic value in their own right and have the right to exist undisturbed by human interference.

Donna Haraway has likewise written about the entangled relationship between humans and the natural world, introducing the notion of *naturecultures* to highlight their inseparability. This concept underpins the idea that "nature" and "culture"

cannot be understood as opposing or universal categories (Haraway 2003, 8). Similarly, when referring to animals, I use the term *non-human animal* to underscore the continuity between species: we are all animals, human and non-human alike. Within the animal rights movement, this phrase became standard for distinguishing animals from humans while affirming their capacities for sentience, emotion, cognition, and even personhood: animal ethics advocate Peter Singer's foundational work popularised the term to stress moral consideration beyond humans (Singer 1975), and animal rights philosopher Tom Regan has employed it to argue for the inherent value and rights of animals (Regan 1983, 2004). More recently, Cary Wolfe critiques anthropocentrism and positions *non-human* as central to posthumanist theory (Wolfe 2010), while Haraway herself uses the term in her multispecies relational framework, challenging human exceptionalism (Haraway 2008). Nevertheless, the term has been criticized for its othering effect, as it defines animals in relation to humans, as something humans are not.

With a similar purpose, although not explicitly subscribing to the same terminology, Jacques Derrida has critically examined the term *animal* and the injustice it entails by subsuming a vast array of distinct beings under a single, overarching category. He observes that, in doing so, humans reserve for themselves the domain of language; the very faculty presumed absent in those relegated to the realm of "the Animal." From this exclusion arises a fundamental wrong: the animal is denied the capacity to respond. Humans speak with confidence, employing words such as "animal" and "I", even though the term "animal", in its singular form, encompasses *all living beings that are not human* – whether lizard, protozoan, lamb, dolphin, or silkworm (Derrida 2019 [2006], 53–55; Turner 2013). This stresses the need to remain critically aware of how the terms we employ shape our thinking and our relations with non-human animals (Ollila 2020). In the absence of a term that would describe the animals featuring in my material with perfect accuracy, I have chosen to adopt the previously mentioned terms "non-human animal" and "more-than-human" for the purposes of this study.

A perspective that frequently crops up in relation to non-human animals in Western visual culture is *anthropocentrism*. This term refers to the prioritization of human beings and the distinct status afforded to them in relation to other animals and non-human entities. In my research, my aim is to challenge anthropocentric views that are reinforced through violent practices, such as the meat industry which exploits animals for human consumption, as well as its subtler manifestations, such as the viewing of animals for entertainment purposes (e.g., zoos and funny cat videos) (Calarco 2021, 18–20; Lähdesmäki 2020, 16, 33). Anthropocentrism can be examined in relation to the concept of the *Anthropocene*, which describes the alarming impacts of human activity on the Earth's geology and ecology. Susan M. Rustick uses the example of Narcissus who gazes only at his own reflection in the

pond, oblivious to the life around him (Rustick 2016, 3). The concept of Anthropocene has also attracted criticism, particularly for holding all of humanity accountable, despite the roots of the environmental crises we currently face being found in the colonial pursuit of economic gain and resource extraction involving the exploitation of both human beings and nature over many centuries (Haapoja 2020, 10–11; Salmia & Niemelä 2022, 4).

For the purposes of this research, Donna Haraway's concept of the *Chthulucene* has proven particularly valuable. The term offers a more nuanced alternative to the often-criticized "Anthropocene", articulating the entanglement of human, more-than-human, and other intra-active mortal forces. It frames existence in terms that allow for partial survival, the mourning of inevitable losses, and "living and dying in response-ability" on our shared planet (Haraway 2016, 1–3). I regard Haraway's emphasis on multispecies survival and "staying with the trouble" as an empowering vision for the future. For instance, I suggest in *Article II* that while human-led multispecies families often reinforce hierarchical and asymmetrical relationships, living with animals also has the potential to disrupt and critically reflect on these hierarchies. Drawing on the concept of the Chthulucene, I argue that such everyday relationships can foster more responsible, compassionate, and co-operative ways of living with non-human others. By "staying with the trouble", humans are called to confront environmental crises not by seeking simple fixes but by engaging in ongoing, respectful coexistence and striving to create more liveable, less violent futures.

In fact, the term *unruly* in my dissertation title draws on its established use in feminist scholarship to signal resistance to dominant narratives and the opening of space for alternative political and theoretical understandings. Within this context, "unruly" denotes the disruption of norms, the contestation of binary hierarchies, and the articulation of counter-discourses (Diner 2004; Elkin 2023; Varghese 2025). The term carries deep political and social implications as does cuteness, which itself is not a trivial aesthetic but a powerful cultural and affective phenomenon that has gained prominence since the early 2000s. It evokes strong emotional responses, functions as a coping strategy within neoliberal capitalism, and operates as a performative mode of identity and affiliation (Dale et al. 2017). It is also worth noting that animals perceived as cute or charismatic are generally more likely to be prioritised for conservation (Lorimer 2007). At the same time, however, these species often experience greater disturbance from humans who intrude into their nesting areas in pursuit of photographs (Roy 2019). Consequently, even "cute" animals may appear unruly from a human perspective when they refuse to pose for pictures and instead seek to hide from view.

Moreover, an attempt to address the crises of the Anthropocene in an equitable and empathetic manner is embedded in posthuman feminism, which forms

significant theoretical source of inspiration for my dissertation. Posthuman feminism emphasises the importance of compassion and *care* for a damaged and suffering world, expanding the concept of care to include the non-human. Care is a fundamental aspect of contemporary feminist ethics, as it highlights connections and dependencies with other beings, removes the human from the centre of thought, and opens new ways of thinking together with the non-human world (Puig de la Bellacasa 2017, 1–6). I engage with the concept of care in each of the articles that constitute this dissertation. This is particularly the case for *Article IV* in which I explore it through the lens of mutuality in interspecies relations. María Puig de la Bellacasa frames care as a core principle to feminist ethics, highlighting interdependence and decentring the human to enable new ways of thinking with the non-human (Puig de la Bellacasa 2017, 2–28). Care has long been undervalued because it has been associated with the feminine and women's "unproductive" labour. Overlooking the importance of care, in relation to the environment for example, has contributed to ecological crises that jeopardise the future habitability of the planet (The Care Collective 2020, 3–9). In Susiraja's *Meat Model* photographs (*Article IV*), the gentle manner in which the subject is shown handling packs of raw meat stands in stark contrasts with the violent realities of industrial meat production and processing. In my other articles (*I–III*), I approach the concept of care through themes such as returning the gaze, respect, and the act of leaving the other in peace.

1.3.2 Agencies in self-representations

In order to shed light on the role of relations and relationality, the understanding of *agency* that I employ in my dissertation is based on the theoretical frameworks developed by the philosophical ethologist Vinciane Despret (2013), often cited in human–animal studies, and animal historian Susan Nance (2013). Both can be succinctly described as viewing the challenge to anthropocentric worldviews as essential to understanding human agency as one among many forms of agency. In her article "From Secret Agents to Interagency", Despret argues that non-human animals should not be viewed merely as victims but as beings capable of resistance. She introduces the concept of *interagency* to question the boundaries between bodies, species, and subjects. For her, agency is a form of interaction in which beings become *companion agents* through encounters, conflicts, and co-operation (Despret 2013, 29, 37, 44). For Nance, the emphasis is on the symbiosis between human and non-human lives, as discussed in her *Entertaining Elephants* (2013) in which she provides a theoretical foundation for animal agency in the context of the American circus and elephants navigating their lives under human control. She suggests that both humans and animals are complex agents that operate within their environments according to their own interests (Nance 2013, 7, 9–11).

In my dissertation, I analyse trans-corporeal human and non-human animal agencies, for example in *Article III* (in which I examine multispecies sharing of spaces considered "urban" or "natural"), describing how human bodies are vulnerable in relation to non-human forces and environments, for instance in relation to quick and unruly seagulls. In this article, but also in *Articles I, II* and *IV*, I find the concept of animal agency particularly intriguing within the human-centred genre of self-representation. While a human may strive to convey a specific quality through a photographic self-portrait or selfie, the animal's willingness to co-operate is uncertain. The non-human animal does not always adhere to the photographer's directives or share the same motivations. Although a human can conceptualize an image and attempt to guide the animal, the final outcome is influenced by the embodied, trans-corporeal agencies of both parties and their "co-constitutive natural cultural dance" as described by Donna Haraway (2008, 27).

The practice of self-representation is a useful means through which the problematics of agency can be illustrated: throughout history, humans have used various media, from runic carvings to diaries and today's digital self-portraits on social media, to represent themselves. In comparison, a *self-portrait* is an image of the artist created through drawing, painting, sculpting, or photography. In her book *Picturing the Self* (2005), Gen Doy explores the reasons why artists choose to portray themselves. Sometimes it is an act of conscious self-exploration, while at others it is simply a matter of convenience: it is easy to use yourself as a model (Doy 2005, 46). At the beginning of the 21st century self-portraiture began to take on new forms through the emergence of selfies and the rise of platforms like Instagram, with self-representation becoming more public and widely distributed than ever before (Walker Rettberg 2018, 3).

In fact, in the early 2000s, the photographic media became available to a mass audience and creatorship due to the exponential growth of smartphone camera functionalities and the popularity of social media. Technological advancements have made the camera an always-available tool, and the sharing of photographs has become a seamless extension of taking them (Gómez Cruz 2014, 31; Chalfen 2016, xviii). In the twentieth century, photographic self-portraits were frequently composed using mirrors, with the camera serving as a visual barrier between the subject and the viewer (Borzello 1998, 142). Photographers often positioned themselves partially obscured by their equipment, emphasizing the mediating presence of the camera. In contrast, the emergence of the smartphone has significantly transformed self-representation practices. The front-facing camera, combined with a live screen view, enables individuals to both see and capture themselves simultaneously (Warfield 2014). The smartphone functions as a mirror that can record one's image at any time, and digital photography removes previous limitations related to cost and material constraints, allowing for unlimited image

production (Walker Rettberg 2018, 13–14). This transformation reflects not only technological accessibility but also a broader cultural shift: visual culture has become pervasive, and selfies have redistributed the power of self-image making, enriching the discourse on self-representation with its variety (Lehner 2021).

Today, the selfie is the most popular form of self-representation within the digital media landscape. It can be considered a subgenre of self-portrait photography and is now a well-established form of self-expression. A selfie is usually taken at an arm's length or in front of a mirror using a digital camera or smartphone and posted on social media (Pargana Mota 2016, 36). The explosive rise of selfies is often seen as a sign of societal individualization, growing narcissism within society, or as a shift in the visual paradigm (Gómez Cruz 2014, 31). However, selfies can also be defined as self-representations, as expressive acts, as cultural practices and gestures, and as tools for self-understanding (Tiidenberg 2018, 7). Also of importance is the issue of marginalized groups: selfies are often associated with groups who have historically had limited access to visibility – such as young girls, queer and trans individuals, people with disabilities, and those whose appearance or identity does not conform to dominant societal norms (Tiidenberg 2018, 15). Non-human animals frequently appear in human selfies and on social media posts. Jessica Maddox, for example, argues that Instagram users who run accounts for their pets use animals in their photographs to express something about themselves, and that these non-human animals are considered a part of the extended self (Maddox 2020, 3334). The visual culture of the internet also includes a vast volume of images in which animals play with camera apparatus and act in other amusing, and often human-like, ways (Munster 2016).

Across time, animals have been significant objects of representation in visual culture, beginning with early human paintings on cave walls, where they were depicted as threats, competitors, or as sources of sustenance. Notable examples include the realistic animal representations found in the Lascaux caves, dating back to 25,000 BC. Animals have served as symbols in myths and beliefs, while also playing roles in human daily life as food, companions, and pets. While pets are sometimes portrayed as individuals, wild animals are often depicted as representatives of their species, frequently symbolising human activities and interactions. Furthermore, the evolution of animal photography has paralleled the practice of hunting, as noted by the artist and researcher Bryndís Snæbjörnsdóttir, who, as an artist, works as part of the artist duo Snæbjörnsdóttir/Wilson. Early nature photography emerged alongside advancements in taxidermy, both serving to document natural specimens (Snæbjörnsdóttir 2009, 80–82). Before Snæbjörnsdóttir, Donna Haraway examined the entanglements of photography, hunting, and taxidermy in her early article "Teddy Bear Patriarchy: Taxidermy in the Garden of Eden, New York City, 1908–1936" (Haraway 1984). However, alternative

perspectives on non-human animals have been presented, including through self-portraits. Visual artist Mary Britton Clouse, for instance, seeks to challenge the low value assigned to chickens by blending human and chicken faces into human–animal hybrid portraits (Potts 2009).

This discussion of multispecies encounters in self-representational images forms a central theme of my dissertation. A second key focus addresses questions raised by posthumanist theories, particularly the critique of conventional binary thinking and the promotion of a more egalitarian view of human–animal relations, which I argue offer a productive framework for the analysis of self-portraits created by or featuring non-human animals. In the early 2000s, alongside human–animal studies, posthumanism, critical animal studies and perspectives of care (see e.g., Puig de la Bellacasa 2017) have emerged. These research directions address not only cultural and art studies questions related to human and non-human relations, but also tensions between art, ethics and politics (Hyttinen & Lummaa 2020, 24–25). In an anthology of essays that illuminate key questions for contemporary art and art research concerning anthropocentric thinking and climate change, Hanna Johansson and Anita Seppä argue that art and art studies can no longer remain detached from the ecological crises facing the planet (Johansson & Seppä 2021, 11). Johansson questions why an ecological turn has not occurred in art history in the same way it has in philosophy and history and suggests that art history needs to be updated towards a new form of future humanism capable of responding to the eco-social and climatic challenges of the Anthropocene (Johansson & Seppä 2021, 17, 10).

My research examines the phenomenon of self-representation from a multispecies perspective, questioning human exceptionalism. While the presence of non-human animals in social media has been analysed (Maddox 2020; Kaarlenkaski 2022), the scope of this work has so far not extended to self-portraits and selfies (Senft & Baym 2015; Burns 2015). While the self-portraits of Elina Brotherus and Iiu Susiraja have been studied extensively (Nyberg 2003; Mora 2016; Lalja 2017; Haapala 2019; Snider 2019; Hynnä-Granberg & Paasonen 2023), this has not been done in relation to non-human animals. My dissertation makes an important contribution to addressing these gaps in current research.

As a visual culture researcher, I am particularly interested in primarily photographic self-representations across a range of contexts, visual technologies, and platforms. Rather than drawing rigid distinctions between visual art and other forms of visual culture, my focus lies in asking: what can images *do*? What kinds of world-shifting experiences might they provoke? I am, in fact, a living example of this: the images that form my research material have inspired me to dedicate ten years of my life to this dissertation. These images have led me on a thematic journey from the jungles of the Sulawesi, where Naruto the macaque monkey took his well-known selfie (*Article I*), to multispecies families, as portrayed in Elina Brotherus's

photographs with Marcello the dog (*Article II*), and from the seaside and various urban settings, where seagulls make a surprise appearance in selfies (*Article III*) to supermarket meat aisles, the ultimate destination of production animals, that provoked Iiu Susiraja's *Meat Model* photographs (*Article IV*). The ability of the "self" to dictate the final outcome of the photographic self-portrait is always limited, as the active and unpredictable non-human world ultimately determines the rest: the weather, the climate and the agencies of non-human beings are not subject to the human photographer's control.

1.4 Research material and the articles

My research material draws from both Instagram and the field of visual arts, comprising also images by established artists such as Elina Brotherus and Iiu Susiraja, alongside Instagram selfies featuring seagulls. I also analyse the self-portraits taken by Naruto the macaque monkey and the debates these photographs have sparked. By selecting internationally recognized cases and writing my dissertation in English, I aim to contribute to global scholarly discussions on human–animal relations and practices of self-representation.

In the articles that make up my dissertation, I have chosen to explore photographs that do not explicitly represent posthumanist, feminist, or animal rights perspectives. However, these self-portraits lay bare the ambivalence inherent in Western attitudes towards non-human animals: some animals are loved, some are considered pests, some are eaten, some are exploited for economic purposes and some are seen as metonyms for nature, while others are used for entertainment or employed as symbols of human activity. At the same time, they make visible a human longing for connection with animals and open up questions related to ethical and political concerns without stating them overtly.

I have selected these particular photographs for my research, because they offer compelling and varied examples of human–animal relations as depicted within the genre of self-representation in the early 2000s. In addition to this, my choice of visual material for my doctoral dissertation has been primarily guided by affective encounters. Affect is often difficult to articulate in words, yet it exerts a deep and powerful influence both bodily and emotionally (Nyman & Schuurman 2016, 2). Accordingly, a suitable methodological inspiration for my dissertation has been the new materialist practice of *following* art and visual culture, which involves an openness to the processes of being moved, moving alongside, learning-with and attending to relationality (Kontturi 2018, 12–15). The images I analyse have profoundly unsettled and moved me, prompting me to follow them and to engage in a form of writing that engages in dialogue with a more-than-human world.

I first encountered Elina Brotherus's profoundly impactful *Carpe Fucking Diem* photo series in 2016 at Galleria Heino in Helsinki, while the self-portrait by Naruto that changed the direction of my dissertation I have only ever seen on a smartphone and laptop screen. I browsed the seagull selfies primarily on my mobile phone screen, glasses on my forehead, squinting with my aging eyes at the display. Iiu Susiraja's *Meat Model* photographs I first encountered in an online article in *The New Yorker* (Fateman 2022), and it was not until more than a year later that I saw them printed in their full size at WAM Turku City Art Museum.

At the beginning of my dissertation research, I came across a widely publicised case that brought together issues of self-representation, non-human agency and the visual representation of animals. *Article I* "Monkey in the Self-Portrait: The Non-Human Animal and the Question of Self-Representation" examines self-portraits taken by an Indonesian crested black macaque monkey named Naruto using wildlife photographer David Slater's camera in 2011, the discussion raised by them, and the lawsuit to determine copyright ownership. The article analyses the power dynamics inherent in visual representations and self-portraits, drawing on feminist visual culture studies and human–animal studies, particularly through the lenses of new materialism and posthumanism. The article also addresses the question of the animal as an artist and the gendered stereotypes evident in a series of viral memes based on Naruto's self-portrait. I ask what it means when a non-human animal turns the camera towards himself and takes a photograph. I argue that awareness of the fact that the photograph was taken by a monkey forces a critical reflection on the power relations, agency, and embodied consciousness associated with photography and self-presentation. In my interpretation, in line with the portrait genre in general, the face and eyes are central to Naruto's self-portrait and emphasize the subjectivity of the Other. This aspect of visual culture has the ability to suggest less hierarchical ways of existing alongside non-human animals. I argue that art made by non-human animals threatens the uniqueness of human culture and the boundaries drawn between humans and non-human animals.

In *Article I*, my material consists of the viral "monkey selfie" taken by Naruto, as well as other photographs from this unique photo session, the discussion surrounding the images, the lawsuit, and the memes based on Naruto's self-portrait. In the best-known image, Naruto appears to be smiling at no more than an arm's length from the camera, in a perfectly framed and sharply focused photograph that resembles a joyful selfie. Gathering this material involved a deep dive into online articles detailing the progress of the legal case, the discussions on various media websites, and the world of internet memes. The images imply the possibility of non-human animals as artists or copyright owners, challenging the human-centred notions of creativity. The internet memes featuring monkeys and selfies also communicate cultural, gendered perceptions of selfies and their subjects.

In *Article II*, I explore interspecies relations by analysing self-portraits by visual artist Elina Brotherus. *Article II* "Marcello the Dog and More-Than-Human Family in Elina Brotherus's Self-Portraits from the Series *Carpe Fucking Diem*" explores the potential of visual culture to open new perspectives on interspecies relations by analysing the self-portraits in Elina Brotherus's photographic series *Carpe Fucking Diem* (2011–2015) in which Brotherus appears alongside her family dog, a dachshund named Marcello. The article investigates more-than-human notions of kinship and family in *Carpe Fucking Diem*, drawing on Donna Haraway's concept of companion species, alongside discussions on new materialism and posthumanism. Through affective and embodied readings of three self-portraits and one video work from the series, I examine how Brotherus's self-portraits challenge human-centred, and heteronormative notions of family. Ultimately, the self-portraits with Marcello from the photographic series *Carpe Fucking Diem* invite viewers to reconsider the dynamics of companionship and the embodied consciousness of animals within visual culture. Cultural ambivalence towards animals is evident, as some are welcomed into human homes, others are viewed as food, and some are considered pests. The interplay of affection and control in human–animal relations reveals underlying tensions that challenge traditional notions of family and kinship, advocating for a more inclusive understanding of coexistence. Living with animals can help call into question the naturalised hierarchies that continue to characterise human–animal relations (Kupsala 2019, 58). The article calls for new and more ethical perspectives eschewing the current strict separation between nature and culture. In the era of planetary crises, I argue that visual art and culture can provide opportunities to better understand the experiences of non-human animals and emphasize the interconnectedness of our fates: we either survive together or not at all.

Elina Brotherus (b. 1972) is a Finnish contemporary artist known for her work in photography and video. Photography scholar Gilles Mora characterises her practice as comprising "highly autobiographical self-portraits and landscapes, in a successful reconfiguration of what she admires most in the painterly tradition" (Mora 2016). A distinctive feature of Brotherus's work is her dual role as both artist and model, through which she fluidly navigates and blurs the conventional boundaries between subject and object in visual culture (Mora 2016).

In *Article II*, my material consists of three self-portrait photographs from Elina Brotherus' *Carpe Fucking Diem* series, *My Dog Is Cuter Than Your Ugly Baby* (2013), *Marcello's Theme* (2014), *Silver River* (2014) and *Marcello's Theme* video work (2015), in which the relationship between a human and a dog is explored. In one of the photographs from this series, the one that made a profound impression on me upon first viewing, *My Dog Is Cuter Than Your Ugly Baby* (2013), the artist subverts traditional family norms by presenting a provocative, multispecies portrait

with her dog Marcello. Posing in front of a dark wooden wall, Brotherus wears a stained hoodie and gives the viewer the finger, while Marcello gazes off-frame with an attentive air. Rejecting the polished aesthetics commonly associated with family photography, the image humorously critiques the ubiquity of baby photographs on social media and suggests that cross-species bonds can rival – or even surpass – conventional human kinship. I am interested in how these photographs question normative perspectives on family as human-centred and heteronormative. I also highlight Brotherus's description of her photo series as a commentary on the nuclear family and an exploration of her failure to create a family with children (Elina Brotherus website, n.d.). I view this "failure" as an opportunity to resist the norm. As queer scholar Jack Halberstam has noted,

> "[h]eteronormative common sense leads to the equation of success with advancement, capital accumulation, family, ethical conduct, and hope. Other subordinate, queer, or counter-hegemonic modes of common sense lead to the association of failure with nonconformity, anticapitalist practices, nonreproductive lifestyles, negativity, and critique" (Halberstam 2011, 89).

I find it impossible to write a dissertation on early 21st century self-portraiture without addressing the phenomenon of social media selfies. In *Article III*, I examine trans-corporeal encounters between humans and seagulls within spaces perceived as either urban or natural. *Article III* "Friends, Cuties and Trash Birds: Human–Animal Encounters in Instagram Selfies with Seagulls" examines how human-seagull interactions are observed, visualized, and negotiated in Instagram photographs marked with the hashtag #seagullselfie. While my main dataset consisted of Instagram posts published before 2020 featuring #seagullselfie, I selected a limited number of photographs representing different types of human–animal interaction for a more detailed analysis, as they reveal human ambivalence towards non-human animals. The article investigates how human–animal relations, urban and natural environments, as well as the visual culture on social media and associated with material bodies, intersect or intertwine in Instagram images with the hashtag #seagullselfie. It furthermore explores how animal agency challenges human dominance in situations where selfies are taken, as well as the hierarchical dichotomies between species (subject/object, human/nature, active/passive). The quickness, intelligence, and disobedience exhibited by seagulls challenge the control humans seek to exert over the urban realm. These photographs visualise how humans attempt to coexist with non-human beings, as well as the interagencies involved in photographing them. In the seagull selfies of my material, there is no nature that obediently remains as an aesthetic backdrop for human photographs. When a seagull snatches food from a human, the human loses control of the

situation and must confront the vulnerability of the body. To understand this vulnerability means recognizing that humans are not separate from non-human nature.

In *Article III*, my full dataset consists of 814 Instagram photographs (from 2013–2019) with the hashtag #seagullselfie. I selected six photographs, which represent various interactions between humans and animals, for a more detailed analysis. The study adheres to a careful research-ethical approach by analysing only publicly available Instagram images while nonetheless seeking informed consent, negotiating copyright alongside privacy concerns, and ensuring anonymity when permission was not possible to obtain. A more detailed account of the research ethics is provided later in this summary section.

The photographs with the hashtag #seagullselfie testify to the ambivalence of Western human–animal relations. In these images, birds and non-human nature are depicted as symbols of human relaxation, seagulls are shown as thieves and a nuisance for stealing food from human hands, they are called "trash birds", equated with trash bins, and conversely, they are also depicted as friends. In many of the photographs, seagulls appear to observe humans – often without being noticed. This challenges the conventional subject/object hierarchy, where humans are positioned as active observers and non-human animals as passive objects. The seagulls' swift, intentional behaviour – particularly when targeting the food of the comparatively slow, unaware humans around them – disrupts the notion of human superiority or separation from nature.

In *Article IV*, I return to the analysis of photographic self-portraiture by focusing on one of the most common ways humans interact with non-human animals: by consuming them. The central claim in *Article IV* "Consumable Bodies: Eating, Sex, Gender and Species in Iiu Susiraja's Self-Portraits *Meat Model 1* and *2*" is that Iiu Susiraja's *Meat Model 1* and *Meat Model 2* (2020) highlight and challenge Western cultural hierarchies that position women and non-human animals as passive objects, contrasting them with active male subjects. This article, inspired by posthuman feminism and new materialism, analyses eating as a gendered bodily process intertwined with social practices, offering crucial insights into human–animal relations. Utilizing Stacy Alaimo's concept of trans-corporeality, the article argues that Susiraja's works illustrate the interconnection between human bodies and the material world, in this case the food-consuming body and the parts of outside world incorporated to the human body, prompting a reconsideration of anthropocentrism and multispecies relations. The article explores how taste, eating habits, gender, and body weight intertwine, and how the human body merges with the more-than-human world through eating. Furthermore, the article discusses the implications of viewing these photographs through the lens of critical animal studies, which interrogates the human species as one among many and suggests that an understanding of power

structures and cultural traditions can illuminate why certain meats are seen as edible, others as sexualised, and some as provocative. Susiraja's self-portraits juxtapose her living flesh with dead animal meat, creating a visual dialogue that questions the power dynamics inherent in eating. By equating human and animal flesh, Susiraja critiques societal norms dictating which bodies are deemed consumable or desirable. Objectification, or seeing another living being as just a piece of meat, goes hand in hand with dehumanisation. By emphasising the similarities between human and animal bodies, the works challenge viewers to confront their complicity in systems of exploitation and imagine more compassionate visions that transcend traditional hierarchies.

Susiraja's practice is characterised by the inventive use of everyday objects, food, and domestic items. Her works, marked by their laconic and absurd tone, often feature her interacting with mundane objects – sausages, fish, bananas – in unexpected yet deliberate ways, accompanied by a neutral, unsmiling gaze. This approach renders these objects active participants, blurring the boundary between self and the world (Haapala 2019; Hynnä-Granberg & Paasonen 2023). While her work has variously been interpreted through the lenses of body politics, ugliness, and gender normativity (Lalja 2017; Snider 2018; Skregelid 2021), its implications for human–non-human relations remain underexplored.

In *Article IV*, my material consists of Iiu Susiraja's *Meat Model 1* and *Meat Model 2* (2020), which show the artist posing in her underwear with her mouth seductively open, holding cling film-wrapped packs of fresh meat. Susiraja's self-portrait photographs point out the gendered politics of eating meat, mock Western culture's hierarchical dichotomies (such as women and non-human animals as passive objects in contrast to active male subjects), and parody consumer culture. The composition and colour palette highlight the visual similarity between human and non-human flesh, drawing attention to the asymmetrical power dynamics of consumption and offering a critical reflection on multispecies entanglements.

Elina Brotherus and Iiu Susiraja, whose works are the subjects of analysis in *Articles II* and *IV*, are internationally recognised Finnish photographic artists whose practices are grounded in self-portraiture. Their work continues the feminist tradition of using the female body as a central medium in photographic art (Doy 2005, 52–53; Hynnä-Granberg & Paasonen 2023, 206). Notably, their self-portraits engage meaningfully with the theme of non-human agency. Together with the seagull selfies on Instagram and the well-known self-portraits taken by Naruto the macaque, these works provide a multifaceted view of human–animal relations as depicted in early 21st century self-portraiture. Notably, the cases also illuminate speciesist hierarchies that determine the perceived value of different animal species in relation to humans, with characteristics such as physical appearance and cuteness playing a significant role (Arluke & Sanders 2022 [1996], 225–226; Dale

et al. 2017). Based on the research material examined, it is particularly noteworthy that certain species – such as dogs – are afforded emotional value and cultural visibility, while others – such as cows or pigs – remain nameless, faceless components of the human diet.

1.4.1 The Finnish context

Internationally, for instance Ron Broglio and Steve Baker have analysed how art and visual culture invite human observers to reflect upon and negotiate the perspective of the Other, as well as to perceive non-human animals as beings with whom we share the world, rather than merely as metaphors or symbols for human actions (Broglio 2011; Baker 2013). My research complements theirs by focusing on non-human agencies and multispecies entanglements in recent self-representational visual culture, with a focus on the Finnish context, where my work is rooted, but which overlaps with the international and Anglophone research field.

In Finland, human–animal studies and posthumanism have been explored in arts studies by literary scholars such as Karoliina Lummaa (2014; 2020), Lea Rojola (2014), and Elsi Hyttinen (2020); by Tuija Kokkonen (2017) through her artistic dissertation in the field of performance art; and by contemporary art researchers Hanna Johansson and Anita Seppä (2021) in relation to visual arts and ecological crises. These scholars have been pioneers in advancing posthumanism, ecocriticism, the environmental humanities, forest and wilderness studies, and research on human–animal relations in Finland. Lummaa and Rojola's seminal anthology on posthumanism, *Posthumanismi* (2014) examines the relations between humans, animals, and machines, as well as the material and processual nature of humanity, through the lenses of literary studies, performance art, and visual culture. Johansson and Seppä's anthology *Taiteen kanssa maailman äärellä: Kirjoituksia ihmiskeskeisestä ajattelusta ja ilmastonmuutoksesta* (Exploring the World with Art: Writings on Anthropocentric Thinking and Climate Change) (2021) sheds light on key questions in contemporary art and art research, including ecological crises and perspectives on new possible futures. More recently, emerging scholars such as Sanna Karimäki-Nuutinen and Suvi Vepsä have focused their research on themes like multispecies art and non-human agency in artistic practices (Vepsä 2022; Karimäki-Nuutinen 2025).

While human–animal studies have become more widespread internationally since the late 1980s and 1990s, the first national association in Finland was established in 2004; this organisation evolved into the Finnish Society for Human–Animal Studies in 2009. The field's own journal, *Trace – Journal for Human–Animal Studies*, was launched in 2015, followed by the Network for Critical Animal

Studies in 2017 and the Turku Human–Animal Studies Network[4] in 2018 (Tuomivaara 2025).

In the Finnish context, human–animal relations have also been studied in relation to fashion and consumption, including by Annamari Vänskä (2014; 2018), a scholar specialising in art and visual culture studies as well as fashion research. Vänskä's work has explored dogs as fashionable co-consumers and symbolic children within contemporary consumer culture, revealing how capitalism redefines human–animal relationships. Vänskä suggests that garments play a role in the cultural construction of both humans and pets, particularly dogs. She further argues that, since the 19th century, dogs have been transformed into "pets" through processes tied to education, fashion, and consumerism.

A significant source of inspiration for my dissertation has also been the works and writings of the artist duo Gustafsson+Haapoja (2016; 2020). Although posthumanist research remains relatively limited within Finnish art history, aside from the exceptions such as those mentioned above, a number of artists have actively engaged with these themes. These include Gustafsson+Haapoja, Tuija Kokkonen, and Outimaija Hakala, among others. Finnish artists are also frequently referenced in international anthologies on posthumanism (see e.g., Davis & Turpin 2015). Human–animal and critical animal studies, as well as posthumanist art, are well-established fields in Finland, and scholars in Sámi Studies have likewise contributed significantly to discussions on relationality with nature and analysed, for instance, Sámi art (see e.g., Valkonen et al. 2023; Valkonen et al. 2025).

In addition to these thought-provoking artists and researchers, I also seek to outline more ethical multispecies relations, in my own research, which requires an understanding of how environmental crises are rooted in the human tendency to assert our own species' superiority over other forms of life. It is increasingly evident that there is an urgent need to ethically renegotiate human–animal relations without centring profit making and while recognising multispecies interdependencies (The Care Collective 2020). My research builds upon the work of previous visual culture scholars in this field, and I hope that my dissertation can contribute to the ongoing dialogue that helps move this development forward.

4 In which I currently serve as vice director.

2 Theoretical Background: Trans-Corporeally Following Visual Culture

In this chapter, I explore earlier research findings from the fields of posthumanism, posthuman feminism, human–animal studies, critical animal studies, and new materialism more closely, following the outline given above. I will also introduce the theoretical framework underpinning my research in greater depth. In this dissertation, I argue that self-portraits in social media and photographic art constitute a field in which negotiations of human–animal relations are actively taking place, challenging anthropocentric interpretations of self-representations. Furthermore, I contend that multispecies dimensions of self-representation remain insufficiently recognised and underexplored.

2.1 Visual culture studies

I have written my interdisciplinary doctoral dissertation under the disciplinary umbrella of art history, though not with an exclusive focus on art per se. Following the scholarly trajectories outlined by visual culture researchers such as W. J. T. Mitchell (1994; 2005), Nicholas Mirzoeff (see e.g., Mirzoeff 2023) and Annamari Vänskä (2006), I define my methodological approach as one rooted in visual culture studies. I understand visual culture as an overarching concept encompassing all visual and culturally meaningful phenomena that rely on the sense of sight, including still and moving images.

Visual culture emerged as a distinct field, because scholars found traditional art-historical methods too limited for understanding how meaning is produced within visual relations. While it draws on art history, it adopts a broader, interdisciplinary approach that challenges disciplinary hierarchies and examines images across cultural and academic contexts (Jones 2010, 2–3). Vänskä describes the turn toward visual culture studies as a paradigmatic shift within art history, a transformation that began in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Mitchell, in turn, has characterised the "pictorial turn" as a shift in worldview, where the world becomes a picture and the human body a surface upon which values and attitudes are made visible (Mitchell

1994; Vänskä 2006, 13–14). This development has only accelerated in the era of social media, which began in the early 2000s.[5]

With my selection of research material, I have sought to transcend these distinctions and to bring popular culture and art together within the same study in a broad and open-ended fashion. I focus on the cultural meanings, values, and valuations embedded in visual materials, with particular attention paid to questions of power and the gaze. Grounded in this perspective, my research focuses on the fields of visual culture – specifically, on a selection of photographs and one video artwork – that fall under the subcategories of social media, wildlife photography and photographic art. Accordingly, in this dissertation, both art and social media photographs are treated under the shared framework of visual culture.

2.2 Posthumanism and posthuman feminism: Ethics for a shared planet

A major paradigmatic shift shaping the theoretical foundation of my dissertation has been the rise of posthumanism within art studies. Over the course of this research, posthumanist thought has not only emerged but established itself as a central framework, challenging anthropocentric assumptions and reconfiguring how art is understood in relation to ecology, technology, and multispecies entanglements. The discourse has shifted from "What is posthumanism?" to "What can be done with it?" Contemporary debates now centre on critical questions such as the dynamics between human and non-human agencies and the decentring of the human subject (Wolfe 2010, xv; Hyttinen & Lummaa 2020, 10–11). Building on this theoretical framework, I emphasise the need to understand human agency as one type of agency among many, rather than as the dominant one, thereby facilitating a move beyond anthropocentric modes of thought.

Humanism has contributed to the development of liberal democracies by emphasising the separation of church and state and promoting the advancement of fundamental freedoms in line with the rule of law. Since the Enlightenment, humanism has promoted the values of science, technological progress, equality, and tolerance. However, in the face of contemporary global challenges such as the climate crisis, the depletion of natural resources, and environmental degradation,

[5] It is also noteworthy how the divide between "popular" culture and "art" is closely bound up with classed and gendered hierarchies that position the feminine and the popular as culturally inferior (Pollock 2003 [1988]; Parker & Pollock 1981). Such distinctions also reinforce the idea that popular culture is suited only to those presumed to lack an understanding of "real" culture – the so-called masses (Storey 2015). However, this point of view is not the focus of my articles (*I–V*) and is a separate research topic in its own right.

humanism is no longer sufficient. The central notion of humanism, which places the human being at the centre of the ethical and ontological framework, is increasingly being questioned. Posthumanism has emerged in response, challenging human exceptionalism and questioning the distinction between humans and other living beings. This shift has extended beyond academic circles into broader societal discourse (Lummaa & Rojola 2014b, 7–8, 13; Braidotti 2022, 18, 42; Hyttinen & Lummaa 2020, 10).

The growing significance of posthuman research is influenced by growing evidence that many abilities traditionally considered human are also found in non-human animals, such as language, tool-use and sentience (Lummaa & Rojola 2014a, 20; Ginn 2018, 413). Posthumanism challenges the dualism between humans and animals, aiming to deconstruct the culturally constructed nature of these concepts (Johansson & Seppä 2021, 15). A central issue in this discourse is the distinction between humans and animals, which is a key concern for both animal philosophy and human–animal studies (Lummaa & Rojola 2014a, 19). My dissertation calls into question this presumed fundamental distinction between humans and animals – particularly the notion that the boundary is defined by the human capacity to create art or the animal's inability to speak a human language.

Beyond non-human animals, advances in science and technology compel us to ask how much we ultimately differ from other living and non-living entities (Lummaa & Rojola 2014a, 13). Donna Haraway famously writes about the cyborg as a hybrid of machine and organism, lived experience and fiction, which can guide a way out of stereotypical dualisms (Haraway 1991, 149, 177, 181). Digital humanist theorist Katherine Hayles, in turn, introduces the concept of "human-technical cognitive assemblages" and their transformative power over life on the planet. Hayles argues that one of the most urgent contemporary issues is the need to rethink cognition in light of technological autonomy and environmental crises. She critiques anthropocentric beliefs that humans dominate due to superior cognitive abilities and calls for a reconceptualization of cognition as distributed across humans, technical systems, and other life forms. Her framework proposes a planetary cognitive ecology that includes human and non-human actors and should become a central focus for ethical inquiry (Hayles 2017). Similarly, media theorist Joanna Zylinska advances a posthumanist media theory that understands photography as a dynamic process of mediation involving humans, machines, and environments. This perspective links photography to the Anthropocene, emphasizing how visual responses to planetary crises reveal photography's entanglement with ecological and technological systems (Zylinska 2017). Although these technological perspectives offer fascinating challenges to anthropocentrism, they are not the focus of this thesis and are a topic for another research project.

Instead, I concentrate on the ways in which posthuman feminism seeks to abandon the unfulfilled promises of Eurocentric humanism and to develop more inclusive practices. Various critiques, including socialist, Black, anti-colonial, Indigenous, queer, and trans perspectives, have been central to the challenging of humanism from an equality standpoint, revealing the marginalization, exclusion, and oppression underlying its noble ideals. Especially, the humanist conception of the human being, rooted in Leonardo da Vinci's *Vitruvian Man*, has been criticised for its emphasis on masculinity, rationality, health, and whiteness (Braidotti 2022, 18, 40–41, 67). A key question that arises is: who is considered human, and at whose expense? (Åsberg & Braidotti 2018, 14).

Rosi Braidotti defines the central ethos of posthuman feminism as a commitment to caring about the state of the planet, intervening in it, and placing trust in the future. Ethical approaches are crucial within this field of research. These include concern for the world, co-operation with marginalised groups, embodied ethics of care, climate justice over models of unsustainable economic growth, and compassion toward non-human beings (Braidotti 2022, 9, 98–99). At the core of posthuman feminism lies the questioning of anthropocentrism and human exceptionalism, as well as an expansion of the analysis of sexualised and racialised hierarchies to encompass the naturalised differences between non-human beings. The focus is on interspecies equality and the collaborative and dependent relationships between humans, animals, plants, and the planet (Braidotti 2022, 11).

In my research, I have sought to approach the animal individuals depicted in my visual research material as agents in their own right. This contrasts with the more common approach in art studies, where animals have often been interpreted as representatives of their species or as symbols of human actions and relationships. Furthermore, I have made a conscious effort to use more equitable language, such as employing the pronoun "he/she" for both human and non-human animals. Moreover, I have critically examined my own biases and have deliberately engaged with unsettling topics such as meat production. It is not possible to write about human–animal relations without addressing the violence and exploitation directed toward non-human animals, as well as the inherent asymmetries in these power dynamics.

2.3 The animal turn and new materialism

Ongoing ecological crises have made the human relationship with non-human nature and animals an increasingly urgent topic of study. This has, in part, sparked the *animal turn* in the early 2000s, which I began discussing in the previous chapter. During this period, scholars started to examine the role of animals in culture, society, and history, increasingly recognising their significant influence on the formation of societal phenomena. The animal turn can be seen as connected to the rise of

posthuman and new materialist theories in the humanities and social sciences over the past few decades. These frameworks question anthropocentrism and emphasize the construction of agency in relations between human and non-human entities, while also critically challenging the presumed human entitlement to the bodies of all other Earthly beings (Pedersen 2014, 14; Kaarlenkaski 2021, 329). Changing scientific and social conceptions of animals have also contributed to the growing discourse on animal treatment and the politicisation of these issues (Tuomivaara 2016, 116).

Initially, in questioning the dualisms related to the way we think about bodies, differences, and diversities, I found new materialist theories particularly useful, including those by Katve-Kaisa Kontturi (2018), Rosi Braidotti (2013; 2019; 2022), and Jane Bennett (2010). A central influence that informed my approach is Jane Bennett's argument for recognising the vitality of matter. She contends that failing to do so sustains a view of the material world that is merely instrumental, reinforcing human hubris and perpetuates what she calls our "earth-destroying fantasies of conquest and consumption" (Bennett 2010 [2004], ix). New materialist theory emphasises that nature operates in, through, and around human bodies and practices, asserting that matter possesses both agency and meaning – an especially pertinent claim in the context of the Anthropocene.

This entanglement of flesh and environment offers an alternative to dominant Western conceptions of the human as separate from the world (Alaimo 2016, 1). In doing so, it displaces humanity from a privileged position and foregrounds multispecies interdependence, connectivity, and the extension of care beyond the human (Braidotti 2022, 80, 83). My analysis draws on new materialist and posthumanist frameworks to examine co-formations and relationality, while challenging hierarchical and dualistic conceptions of human–non-human relations. These perspectives question human exceptionalism and critique the view of nature as a passive resource to be exploited through human action. In addition, I attend to the researcher's embodied and subjective engagement with the artworks, acknowledging knowledge production as an affective, situated, and material process (Barrett 2013, 63; Bolt 2013, 1–3; Kontturi 2018, 19). Earlier theorists, such as Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (2004 [1980]; Deleuze 1988 [1970]; Guattari 2000 [1989]), have influenced these recent new materialist discussions, critiques of representation studies and the theorization of affect, expanding attention beyond the external material world to include the material reality of the human body. Furthermore, theorists of affect and emotion, such as Sara Ahmed (2004), have explored how affective relations shape bodies and groupings, centering the role of feeling in processes of exclusion and othering.

Also of importance is the issue of the new materialist view on subjectivity, which is relational: a mutual capacity to affect and be affected (Braidotti 2013, 26; 2022,

205–206; see also Parikka 2010; Dolphijn & van der Tuin 2012). Researchers approaching art and visual culture from posthumanist and new materialist perspectives challenge the notion of the primacy of the human mind and language in relation to the world (Braidotti 2013, 67–73). Post-representational approaches emphasise the reciprocal, material and active relations between humans, images and the more-than-human (Deleuze & Guattari 2004 [1980]; Braidotti 2013, 3; Hongisto & Kurikka 2013, 9–12; Hyttinen & Lummaa 2020, 21). Through these theories, I approach the more-than-human world with the aim of moving beyond a human-centred perspective, repeatedly confronting my own anthropocentric assumptions – from perceiving seagulls as transgressive to viewing pieces of meat primarily as food, despite their being body parts of dead animals.

2.4 Hierarchical dichotomies and questions of power

Non-human agency has been studied from a variety of perspectives such as non-human animals possessing many abilities traditionally attributed only to humans (Bekoff & Pierce 2009), non-human animals engaging in resistance to actions directed at them (Hribal 2010), and non-human animals as conscious, intentional agents (Suen 2015). From *Article II* onwards, however, my work has been focused on relationality, entanglement, and co-agency. In *Article III* I discuss the inseparability of humans and non-human nature: although Instagram photographers use the images they post as a means to depict their connection with nature, nature is, in fact, already as close as their own skin, if not closer (Plumwood 2003 [1993]; Alaimo 2016, 2). Vital to my research on non-human agency are insightful analyses by scholars such as the above mentioned Vinciane Despret (2013), Susan Nance (2013), and Donna Haraway (2003; 2008) that view agency in terms of encounters, interactions, and entanglements.

Given that humans are inseparably part of their environment (and the environment, in the sense of microbes, bacteria, and viruses, is inseparably part of the human make up), I join the line of thinkers who suggest to abandon the imagined notion of human as separate from nature (see e.g., Haraway 2003; 2008; Alaimo 2010; 2016; Braidotti 2013; 2022). Stacy Alaimo's concept of trans-corporeality, introduced in the previous chapter, is particularly clear on the relationality of agency: human corporeality is always intertwined with the more-than-human world, and its interaction with other bodies continuously shapes it (Alaimo 2008a). The human body is entangled with the surrounding world and is vulnerable in relation to it. It is impossible to define where the body ends and non-human nature begins, and the concept of the *holobiont* concretises the idea that the human, rather than being an individual, is a multi-species ecosystem and habitat for the body's microbes

(Margulis 1998). The concept of the holobiont makes tangible the inseparability of the human and nature by challenging the boundaries between them: where does nature begin and the human end, when a significant proportion of the body is composed of microbes and other micro-organisms?

Although Donna Haraway does not identify as a posthumanist scholar (Haraway 2008, 16–17), her theorizing has been central not only to my own work but also to that of many contemporary researchers engaging with posthumanist questions (e.g., Barad 2007; Wolfe 2010; Braidotti 2013; Tsing 2015). However, her writings on non-human animals have been strongly criticized by critical animal studies scholars, as she has not questioned practices such as dog breeding, scientific animal experimentation, hunting, and the consumption of animals. From this perspective, some ecofeminists and critical animal scholars have considered her work of little use for a critical analysis of human–animal relations (see e.g., Weisberg 2009; Gaard 2017). Nevertheless, critical animal studies scholar Kuura Irni, one of the editors of the book *Feminist Animal and Multispecies Studies*, emphasizes that concepts such as Haraway's naturecultures remain highly productive (Irni 2023, 211). Similarly, I have found Stacy Alaimo's theorizing to be less ethically problematic, even as I acknowledge Haraway's groundbreaking contributions and employ some of her concepts. Alaimo foregrounds trans-corporeality, ecological entanglement, and ethical responsibility toward nonhuman life (Alaimo 2010; 2016); indeed, her writing often highlights vulnerability and interconnectedness, resonating strongly with the ethical concerns within human–animal studies that I find relevant to my research as well.

Having recognised the hierarchical dichotomies that exist in dualistic thinking about nature and culture, it is possible to move on to consider the gaze and the act of looking, which are deeply embedded in complex power relations. The following questions arise: who has the right to look, and who becomes the object of that gaze? These dynamics of looking and power are particularly significant in human-non-human relations. Randy Malamud, a literature and cultural studies researcher specializing in ecocriticism, reflects on the human practice of observing non-human animals, highlighting the voyeuristic pleasure offered by nature documentaries and zoos in a world where animals might prefer to remain unseen by humans (Malamud 2012, 3, 19, 22, 54). Malamud argues that the visual representation of animals plays a significant role in shaping public perceptions and ethical relations, often mirroring anthropocentric desires and underlying power structures. He points to zoos as illustrative sites where humans learn to conceptualize their relations with other species – institutions that exist primarily to render animals conveniently accessible and visible to human audiences. Malamud calls for a more reflective and ethically grounded approach to how non-human animals are framed and perceived within visual culture, highlighting the asymmetrical power dynamics between humans

(those who frame) and animals (those who are framed) (Malamud 2012, 52–53). Likewise, in *Article IV,* I examine, using the tools provided by feminist research and Iiu Susiraja's *Meat Model* self-portraits as a case study, issues of power and the gaze, which are intertwined with asymmetrical power relations and reflect on why humans perceive it as their right to gaze at animals and position them as objects.

Questions of gaze and power are closely intertwined here with the problematics of cuteness, which frequently emerges in relation to the images in my research material. Kate Marx (2019) examines the rhetoric of affective cuteness used by hikers when describing encounters with non-human animals in nature. According to Marx, the affective experience of cuteness stems from a perceived power imbalance between humans and animals and is bound up with the pleasure derived from the human subject's dominant position. This discourse, she argues, is shaped by cultural representations including Disney films, advertisements, and toys. Because most hikers have only interacted with domesticated animals, particularly pets, they tend to project those experiences onto wild animals (Marx 2019, 94–95). Given that many urban Westerners have a distant relationship with non-human nature, they often assume – based on their interactions with pets – that animals desire human friendship, affection, or even physical contact. However, wild animals typically seek to avoid humans altogether and are more likely to experience stress from human attention, particularly when subjected to prolonged observation or physical touch.

Having outlined the theoretical foundations of this dissertation, from visual culture studies to posthumanism, posthuman feminism and new materialism, and examined the hierarchical power relations between humans and other animals, the next step is to turn to the methodological and ethical considerations that have guided the research.

3 Research Design: Methods and Ethics

In this chapter, I discuss the methods and ethics of my dissertation. The concept of self-representation and the choice of the early 2000s as the time period under investigation have influenced the selection of my material. However, the definition of self-representation has, in light of my research material, turned out to be broader than I initially anticipated. For example, the images marked with the hashtag #seagullselfie on Instagram, which I analyse in *Article III*, are not self-representations in the traditional sense, as the photographer is not always visible in them. Nevertheless, I included these images in my material because they suggest a human presence. To put it simply, selfies can be seen not only as images taken of oneself but also as gestures, as tools for self-understanding, and as manifestations of a desire to express something about oneself (Tiidenberg 2018).

With the choice of research topic and time frame finalised, my preliminary research plans have evolved and changed as I have become inspired by the visual material, which later appeared as the central focus of my next article. Using inspiration and enthusiasm to guide the selection of your research material and as a mode of doing research, is, in my opinion, inherently in dialogue with the act of following art and visual culture: allowing images to move you enables you to follow them. Watching from the riverbank is different from flowing with the current: following always leads one to a new place (Deleuze & Guattari 1987, 374; Kontturi 2018).

Lynn Turner, Undine Sellbach, and Ron Broglio also recognise, in the introduction to *The Edinburgh Companion to Animal Studies* (2018), the urgent need to develop ways of following, representing, and narrating the lives of non-human animals. This need is especially pressing at a time when their habitats are rapidly disappearing and an increasing number of species face the threat of extinction (Turner, Sellbach & Broglio 2018, 2). After encountering the self-portrait of Naruto, the macaque monkey, I was inspired to follow non-human animals as they appear in photographs: as part of multispecies families, in spaces considered urban or natural, and on human plates.

My four articles all illuminate various dimensions of early 2000s self-representation in the context of human–animal encounters. In my analyses, I have sought to keep the photographs at the centre while also acknowledging the more-than-human dimensions and relationality of artistic practice (Kontturi 2018, 18). Furthermore, a central aim of my research is to highlight the voices and agency of nonhuman animals.

3.1 Research methods: Affective and embodied followings of visual culture

This research is theoretically grounded in posthumanist, posthuman feminist, and new materialist theories which challenge anthropocentric perspectives that position non-human nature as passive material for human exploitation. Instead, these frameworks emphasise processes of co-becoming between humans and nonhuman entities. For the purposes of this work, theory and methodology are therefore inextricably linked.

My research has been guided by powerful affective encounters with a selection of photographs found on social media and in art exhibitions. Likewise, cultural theorist Melissa Gregg (2006) advocates for a positive orientation towards the work of others, a stance she refers to as intellectual hospitality. Feminist research has often begun from a critical position – for instance, in analysing the representation of women in visual culture – and I also seek to critically address the asymmetrical power relations between humans and non-human animals in my dissertation. At the same time, I wish to allow for the possibility of being inspired by the work of other scholars and by visual culture (Gregg 2006, 6, 14–16). One such moment occurred when I encountered Elina Brotherus's photograph *My Dog is Cuter than Your Ugly Baby* in a Helsinki gallery, an experience I described in *Article II* as "like a punch in my gut." I had just had my first child, and begun my doctoral studies, and I found myself struggling with my awareness of the ecological crises caused by human activity on our planet. The intense impact the artwork had on me sparked new ideas about more-than-human families and the possibilities for a more equal multispecies existence that we humans could practice with our companion species. In *Article II*, I described this as "an affective, bodily encounter with the works".

In a similar vein, I approach affective writing as a means of engagement: the concept of affect enables a movement beyond the binary of researcher and subject, allowing for a more entangled and responsive relationship. It was also important for me to position myself in relation to the topic, rather than emphasize distance or detachment from material that had profoundly moved me. As Sara Ahmed (2004, 1, 10) argues, bodies are shaped through encounters with others; the formation of the "I" and the "we" occurs through affective contact. Donna Haraway's notion of

situated knowledges further supports this view, emphasising embodied, critically engaged feminist knowledge practices and questioning "the god-trick of seeing everything from nowhere" (Haraway 1991, 188–189).

Another relevant issue concerning the tension between critical distance and affective engagement in research is raised in Bruno Latour's influential article "Why Has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern" (2004). Latour reflects on how feminist scholarship, among others, has historically challenged the presumed objectivity and unquestionable authority of scientific knowledge. However, he notes with concern that similar arguments are being co-opted by climate change deniers and right-wing populists to discredit the legitimacy of science itself (Latour 2004b, 227). Feminist posthumanist scholar Cecilia Åsberg has reflected on the same topic from the perspectives of intellectual generosity, posthumanism, and cyborg knowing:

> You see, I think we are in deep trouble as feminist scholars if we teach a proud pessimism (oppression always stays the same) or support a scepticism of objectivity. Too many times, "situated knowledges" (Haraway, 1991) are misconstrued as a simple debunking of scientific objectivity or locally valid truth claims, when it is in fact an up-grade into "feminist objectivity" that embrace both feminist critique and science... Change is the material and semiotic starting point of cyborg knowing. There is always the possibility for change, for making a difference. In fact, change is built into the very chemistry of what makes the patterns, us and the world. Nothing ever stays the same. We simply do not know how the story ends. Yet, how we tell it will have an impact – and for that we need to be accountable, limited in our claims, and story exposures in ways that emphasize the change we do want to see (Åsberg 2024, 133).

What Åsberg's phrasing suggests is that posthuman feminism urges a transformation of the critical humanities in response to the complexities of the posthuman condition. For this shift to occur traditional analytical frameworks must be rethought and expanded to allow engagement with interconnected human and non-human realities. Central to this transformation is feminist expertise in navigating asymmetrical power relations, particularly through practices rooted in care, curiosity, and relationality (Åsberg & Braidotti 2018, 12). The Care Collective, in *The Care Manifesto* (2020, 6), calls for a shift away from the carelessness that has fuelled the climate crisis toward an egalitarian model of care that scales up from the interpersonal to the planetary.

Similarly, the *affective turn* has recently emphasized emotion, commitment, and the corporeality of being in feminist writing (Liljeström & Paasonen 2010, 1; Braidotti 2022, 216–217). Affective and embodied practices have a central role in

the methodology of my dissertation, which is based on new materialist practice of following (see e.g., Kontturi 2006, 2018; Bennett 2010; Coleman 2019). The methodological approach, which Katve-Kaisa Kontturi has employed in the study of contemporary art, engages with art through transformative and embodied processes rather than through traditional modes of interpretation. Central to this practice is the idea of following art – learning-with, writing-with, and being moved by – while remaining attuned to its processual and material dimensions (Kontturi 2006, 2018). Rather than seeking to master or explain the artwork, in following, the researcher attends to the relational dynamics of matter and upholds ethical engagement with artistic processes (Kontturi 2018, 12, 18–19).

In political philosophy, Jane Bennett has written about following in relation to the vitality of matter, which foregrounds non-human forces and corporeal material agency (Bennett 2010, xiii). Rebecca Coleman extends this logic by developing following as a sociological method that traces the movements and affects of materials, highlighting their active role in research. Her example of glitter demonstrates how following foregrounds material properties and their political and affective implications, offering a way to engage with the vitality and unpredictability of things (Coleman, Page & Palmer 2019).[6]

In his seminal work *The Animal That Therefore I Am* (2006; Finnish trans. 2019), Jacques Derrida also reflects on the notion of following non-human animals. In French, "I am" and "I follow" are written identically as *je suis*, and Derrida explores how following, pursuing or being behind an animal leads to a transgression of the boundaries between human and animal. "Who am I when I find myself before the gaze of an animal?" he asks. And indeed, who better to pose this question to than the Other? In Derrida's case, this Other is his small cat, observing him naked in the bathroom one morning. Proximity to the animal prompts Derrida to contemplate his own being in relation to following: the animal may submit to being looked at, but it can also return the gaze. Art historian Leena-Maija Rossi, referring to Derrida, and to his cat, suggests that we can only know by looking and by looking back, and suggests that following the animal and being behind it is a form of *becoming with* (Rossi 2021, 132–135). Following, then, becomes a form of co-being and of sharing the world. The human is constituted in relation to the Other, and both are united by mortality – a fundamental way of thinking together with non-human animals (Derrida 2019 [2006], 15–48). Mortality and finitude bind our destinies, and as recent scholarship suggests (Haraway 2016, 4), survival on this wounded planet will occur either together, or not at all. In my research, I draw on these ideas to articulate a mode of thinking with the more-than-human world, one that embraces affect,

6 Bennett, Coleman, and Kontturi all draw on Deleuze and Guattari in their writings.

relationality, and the agency of matter as central components of knowledge production.

In this dissertation, being moved by photographs plays a key role in the research process, with the material guiding the evolution of research topics and articles. In particular, the researcher's role is to follow the research material relationally, remaining open to its transformative power and focusing on ethical practices, eschewing dominance over the material. Following is a dynamic process, always leading to new places, emphasizing a mode of research that is responsive, affective, and open to the possibilities of non-human agencies.

This methodology, which emphasizes relationality, ethics, and corporeality, is well-suited for the study of my material. I have used it to analyse how interspecies relations are depicted, negotiated, and questioned in early 2000s self-representations, in which the trans-corporeal interactions between humans and non-human animals take centre stage. The materiality of the self-portraits in my material, along with the entanglements and choreographies of human and non-human bodies, encourage thinking with the more-than-human world through vulnerability, presence, wonder, being touched, and being disrupted (Haapoja 2020, 16; Hakala 2022, 50).

In *Article I*, I examine, through an affective and embodied reading of Naruto's self-portrait, what occurs when an animal directs a camera at himself and takes a photograph. I discuss the corporeality of the non-human animal as an "unruly force" and, inspired by posthuman feminist theory, explore the agency of animals, analysing the hierarchies and power structures between humans and non-human animals.

In *Article II*, in affective and embodied readings of three self-portrait photographs and one video work from the *Carpe Fucking Diem* series, I examine how Elina Brotherus's self-portraits call into question anthropocentric and heteronormative notions of the nuclear family. I argue that the powerful, affective encounters with self-portraits from the *Carpe Fucking Diem* series highlight the physical and concrete nature of interspecies relations, prompting human viewers to reflect on their own human–animal relations and the hierarchies that are both constructed and deconstructed through them.

In these first two articles, I approach the photographs in my material through a method I describe as *affective and embodied reading*. This method seeks an open, bodily process that encompasses the researcher's emotional response to the photographs. The powerful encounters I enjoyed with the images expanded my thinking and inspired a deeper engagement with human–animal studies and posthuman philosophy.

In *Article III*, I analyse Instagram selfies with the hashtag #seagullselfie, drawing inspiration from ways of following art, as described above, which suggests photography as a process influenced by non-human forces, where the human

photographer does not assert mastery. I aimed to challenge the fixed perspective of human social media users by considering the viewpoint of the seagulls, following where their perspectives lead and what they offer (Kontturi 2018, 11–13, 94).

In *Article IV*, I also draw on ways of following art, focusing on *encountering* rather than *interpreting* art and recognising the transformative power of matter. This approach means remaining open to the possibilities inherent in the processual nature of art, suggesting new ways of being and living. My analysis of Iiu Susiraja's *Meat Model* photographs examines co-formations and relationality, challenging hierarchical and dualistic practices in human–non-human relationships. In the final two articles of my thesis, the method evolved into a clearer and more applicable framework than in the first two, utilising art historical and new materialist literature and delving deeper into thinking with the more-than-human world (Kontturi 2018, 10–12, 18–19; Bennett 2010).

3.2 Research ethics: Knowledge, interest, time and respect

One of my favourite quotations in this dissertation and cited in one of my articles (*Article III*) advocates for the intrinsic value of non-human nature and challenges the notion that non-human nature exists solely to provide humans with relaxation and pleasurable experiences (or cute and obedient animals to photograph): "As much as we would like all our interactions with nature to be clean, safe and cuddly, 'nature … is as likely to shit on us as to embrace us'" (Nagy & Johnson 2013, 19). In this dissertation, I ground my writing in a respect for the right of non-human animals to exist, to live in peace, and to trouble or upset humans, even. Therefore, in my research, it is important to recognise the differences between the ethics of Internet research, the ethics of art studies and the ethics of human–animal studies.

I engaged with the ethics of Internet research while writing *Article III* in particular. I chose to limit my analysis to photographs publicly posted on Instagram with the hashtag "seagullselfie". However, it is important to note that many social media users may not be fully aware of the platform's terms and conditions, people's expectations of privacy may vary, and search engines can render content more visible than users expect. Therefore, despite the research material being publicly available and not particularly sensitive, I sought informed consent from the social media users whose photographs I intended to use, as I considered this essential from an ethical standpoint. Since copyright concerns overlapped with questions of anonymity and privacy, I contacted all the photographers to request permission to use their images and to inquire whether and how they would like to be credited for their contribution. If I did not receive a response, I blurred their username and ensured their face was not visible. This decision was made after careful consideration, as the photographs

are publicly accessible, the humans in the images are not recognisable, and the topic is not considered sensitive (i.e., unlikely to cause harm based on religion, ethnicity, sexual orientation, or political beliefs). I also considered the reputational risks posed by the research, aiming to minimise harm by omitting examples of humans bullying seagulls and simply describing those images (Ess & the AoIR ethics working committee 2002; Townsend & Wallace 2016; Kohonen, Kuula-Luumi & Spoof 2019).

For the articles exploring the works of visual artists, I also found it important to seek informed consent for the use of photographic works of art. Elina Brotherus kindly granted permission for the use of three images and one video work from the *Carpe Fucking Diem* series. Wildlife photographer David Slater was also very kind and allowed me to use his "monkey selfie" image. In *Article IV,* I analyse and describe the *Meat Model* photographs without including them in the article.

When it comes to images involving non-human animals, informed consent is a more complex issue. Due to the lack of a common language and other challenges typical for multispecies existence, I was unable to ask for permission to publish images taken by or featuring Naruto, Marcello, the seagulls in the Instagram selfies, or the dead animals featured in Susiraja's self-portraits. I have justified the publication of these images by asserting that the benefits offered by my empathetic approach outweigh any potential harm caused by their publication.

The ethics of *empathetic listening* (Nunes 2025), *weak agency* (Kokkonen 2017), and respect (Haraway 2003) demand a slow, thoughtful approach and a commitment to questioning human exceptionalism. Donna Haraway (2003, 7, 61) argues that it is essential to foster more worldly and respectful relations, create liveable worlds with companion species and explore less violent forms of love. Similarly, thinking with the more-than-human world requires a shift in one's anthropocentric perspective. For example, while writing *Article III*, I realized that my hypothesis about selfies with seagulls as revealing conflicts stemmed from my own human-centred thinking. Yet, I concluded that through knowledge, engagement, time, and a respectful approach, new interspecies languages and friendships may emerge.

4 Findings

To address my research questions,

1) *How do non-human and human embodied agencies and interspecies interactions become visualized in self-representations of the early 2000s?*

2) *How is our relationship with non-human animals depicted, negotiated, and questioned within self-portraits?*

3) *How does the agency of non-human animals in self-portraits challenge anthropocentric norms of visual culture?* I have carried out four case studies of non-human and human trans-corporeal agencies in photographic self-portraits ranging from 2010 to 2020. All in all, they explore the various ways in which human–animal relations come to exist in self-representations.

These examples represent different aspects of how non-human animals are categorized in relation to humans in visual culture: they depict, negotiate, and question our relationships with wild animals (in *Article I*, where Naruto the macaque monkey grabs the camera and takes a selfie), pets (in *Article II*, where the concept of a multi-species family is analysed in relation to Marcello the dog and Elina Brotherus, paying attention to the hierarchies between animal species), liminal animals (in *Article III*, where seagulls move seamlessly from areas considered natural to urban environments, and human's attitudes towards them change depending on the location), and production animals (in *Article IV*, where Iiu Susiraja poses for the camera while tenderly holding cow and pig body parts).[7]

Across all the articles, recurring themes emerge in relation to the critical examination of asymmetric power relations between humans and non-human animals: the analysis of boundaries, transgressions, and violations, the questioning of anthropocentric dichotomies, and the exploration of less hierarchical and less violent forms of multispecies existence. The significance of non-human animal agency is studied from one article to the next, with the gaze of the animal and the act of looking back emphasized as markers of agency. A common thread that runs

[7] Note that I intentionally avoid using meat-related terms (such as pork cuts or bacon) for these pieces of flesh in order to question the normative use of animal bodies into "meat."

through the articles, is that, in their respective approaches they challenge the use of non-human animals and the natural environment for human consumption. The distinction between the Western subject and the non-human world is questioned, highlighting our vulnerability in the face of planetary-scale crises. In each article, I explore the potential of art, visual culture, and art history research to respond to the challenges of a wounded planet, inspiring collective action, hope and care. Disruptive encounters with the photographs that constitute my research material have led me to better understand the human connection with the world as part of a larger whole, rather than viewing humans and culture as separate from nature and non-human animals.

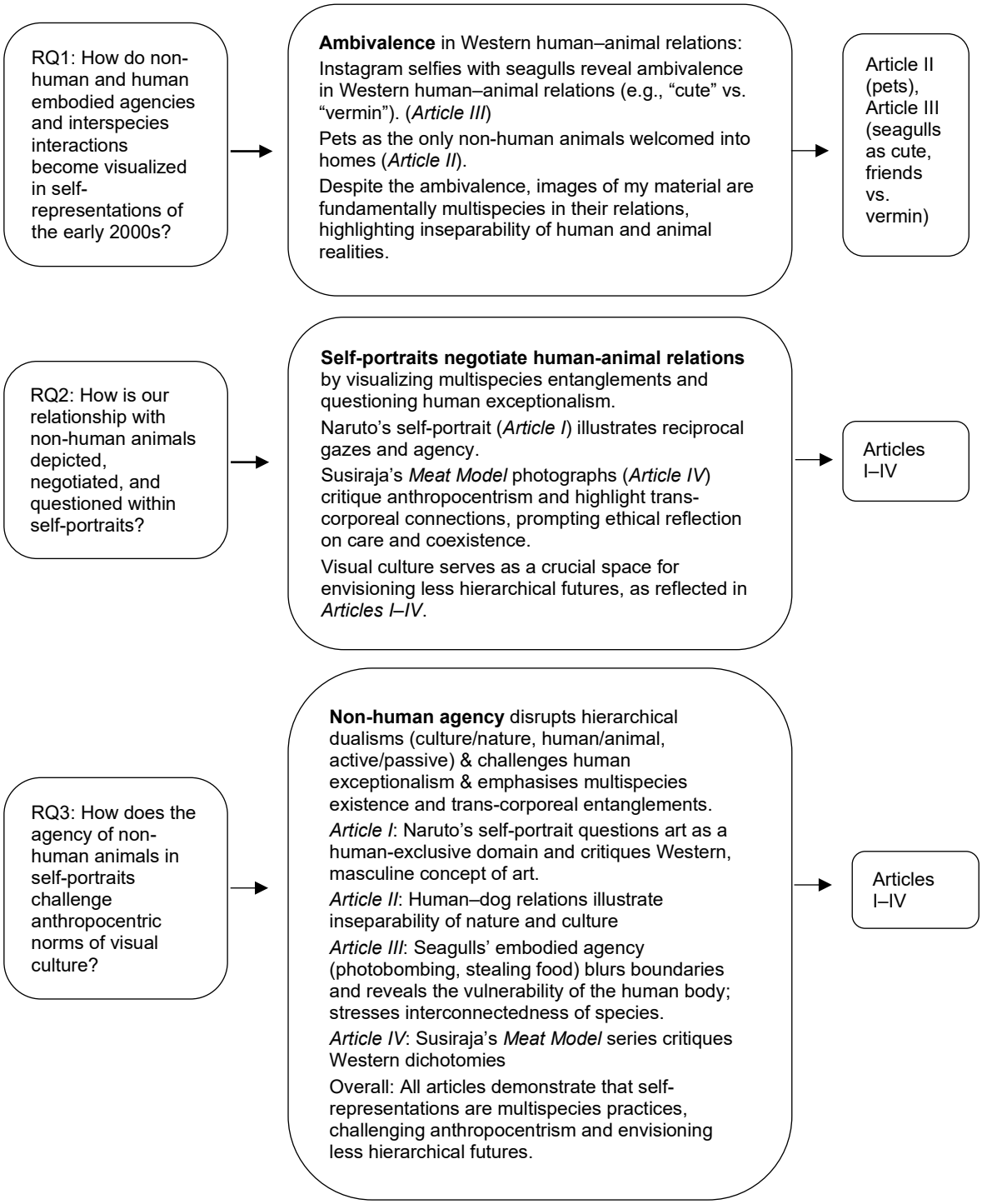

Figure 2. Research questions and how they are addressed in *Articles I–IV*.

4.1 Ambivalent human–animal relations in self-representations

Research question 1 *asks: How do non-human and human embodied agencies and interspecies interactions become visualized in self-representations of the early 2000s?* This is addressed in *Article III* in particular, where the photographs in the Instagram-sourced dataset demonstrate the ambivalence that characterises Western human–animal relations. For example, seagulls featured in the Instagram selfies are described in the captions as both "friends" and "cute", but also as flying vermin. It was fascinating to observe this dichotomy in the attitudes exhibited towards the birds across a large dataset sourced from Instagram. Human–animal studies and posthumanism openly recognise the central role that ambivalence plays in human–animal relations. For instance, Tora Holmberg argues that non-human animals are classified as pets or pests based on the specific nature of their relationships with humans (Holmberg 2017, 57; see also Philo & Wilbert 2000, 10; Kaarlenkaski 2022, 68). Furthermore, the answer to the question of ambivalence is explored in *Article II* when discussing animals kept as pets: they are the only non-human animals welcomed into human homes, and even beds, without being regarded as intruders or pests requiring removal or extermination (Fudge 2008, 3, 17–18). The article also shows how the pet dog is culturally treated in ways that parallel the handling of a human child, through infantilization, moral education, and the imposition of middle-class norms, while also suggesting that multispecies kinship can rival or even surpass the value of a nuclear family.

I argue that the photographs I have studied clearly testify to the ambivalence of Western human–animal relations. But importantly, it is also the case that posthumanist theories facilitate the interrogation of these naturalized, simplified, and anthropocentric conceptions of non-human animals. As a response to this anthropocentrism and human exceptionalism, the concept of weak human agency allows for the conscious effort to reduce one's own agency, thereby meeting non-human animals as agents to be respected (Kokkonen 2017, 157, 168). Although the self-representations that motivated my research were not explicitly grounded in animal rights, posthumanism, or critical animal studies discourses, they nonetheless reveal a strong interest in the realities of non-human animals and a desire for contact with them. I argue that despite the ambivalence, the images I have chosen are fundamentally multispecies in their relations. In this way, they prompt the viewer to recognize the inseparability of human and animal realities and the urgent need to find less violent ways of coexisting on this planet.

4.2 On the possibility of a less hierarchical multispecies future

My argument is that the photographs I have encountered and analysed in my articles, that is, Naruto's self-portraits, the love-filled joint portraits featuring Elina Brotherus and Marcello, the selfies with seagulls incorporating an attempt to understand an animal often considered transgressive, and the parallels drawn by Iiu Susiraja between dead animal meat and living human flesh, do convey visions of a less hierarchical multispecies future. Throughout my dissertation, I have reflected on the significance of visual culture in the context of the ecological crises that became increasingly pronounced during the early 2000s. This has been in response to my *Research question 2* that asks: *How is our relationship with non-human animals depicted, negotiated, and questioned within self-portraits?*

Roni Grén, an art historian specialised in animals in modern art discourses, suggests that the modern era can be described as an age of human exceptionalism. For much of history, humans were regarded as possessing unique spiritual or cognitive capacities, such as the ability to create art, that set them apart from other species (Grén 2017, 6). In *Article I*, I examine the themes of the reciprocal gaze and respect in relation to Naruto's self-portrait. In the image, which had a profound impact on me, Naruto is in fact looking at his own reflection in the camera lens. Yet, in viewing the photograph, I have the strong impression that he is looking directly into my eyes. This meeting of gazes prompts me to question human exceptionalism – the human is not the only being who creates images or possesses language skills.

In addition, I claim that the less hierarchical multispecies future is addressed, when, in *Article IV*, I draw on posthuman feminism and ways of following art, engaging with Iiu Susiraja's *Meat Model 1* and *2* self-portraits, where the artist poses in her underwear while holding pieces of meat. I explore how the human body intertwines with the more-than-human world through the practice of meat-eating implied in the images. Specifically, posthuman feminism critiques the discriminatory practices embedded in humanism, questioning anthropocentrism and the exclusion of animalised Others from the sphere of subjectivity. As a community that cares about the world in the widest sense, posthuman feminism aims to build inclusive futures based on solidarity, care, and compassion, emphasising that while we are not the same, we are in this together (Braidotti 2022, 8–9, 10–11). Similarly, the practice of following art seeks to acknowledge the transformative force of matter, and to suggest new ways of being and living by being moved by art (Kontturi 2018, 10–12, 18–19). In my research, I develop this method further by deepening the theorisation of the non-human within it and by describing my approach to multispecies relations in visual culture as thinking with the more-than-human world.

Indeed, Susiraja's photographs, which intertwine human and (dead and sometimes highly processed) animal bodies, highlight the trans-corporeal connection

between humans and the material world, prompting viewers to confront issues of anthropocentrism and multispecies entanglements. By highlighting interspecies similarity, *Meat Model 1* and *2* raise ethical questions surrounding food production and consumption, prompting a re-evaluation of human-non-human relations through care. The portrayal of production animals receiving affection only after death, in the form of meat cradled in Susiraja's arms, evokes deep sadness in me. In my interpretation, these photographs challenge food production practices and urge us to search for less violent alternatives. In my view, the strong, affective encounters with the images in my material, capable of expanding my own anthropocentric thinking, demonstrate the central role of visual culture in illustrating visions for more sustainable animal relations and for change.

4.3 Trans-corporeal multispecies existence in the world

Through the analysis of the photographic self-representations in my articles, it becomes evident that the active agency of non-human animals disrupts established hierarchical dualisms (such as culture/nature, human/animal, active/passive), challenges the human exceptionalism (e.g., human as the photographer and animal as the subject of the photograph or human as the only species making images), and emphasizes the multispecies existence and trans-corporeal entanglements in co-existing in the world. As *Research question 3* puts it: *How does the agency of non-human animals in self-portraits challenge anthropocentric norms of visual culture?*

The response to this question is suggested in each of the articles that make up this dissertation. In *Article I*, I analyse the self-portrait of Naruto the macaque monkey, and discuss how art created by non-human animals questions the ideas of human uniqueness and the concept of art, which is often seen as both masculine and Western, and which is considered to have sought to exclude and hierarchise its Others, such as handicrafts, women's art, and non-Western art. I argue that Naruto's gaze in the photograph, as well as its agency as a non-human animal photographer, surpasses the dualism between humans and non-human animals and emphasizes the Other's role as a subject and an individual.

In *Article II*, I draw on Donna Haraway (2003) to argue that it is impossible to clearly define what is natural and what is cultural in the human–dog relationship. Humans and dogs have evolved together over the course of their shared history, mutually influencing one another. Bruno Latour (2004a) contends that the division between nature and society is the primary issue for Western thought. His *political ecology* proposes extending the concept of democracy to non-humans, suggesting that the separation between nature and society, subjects and objects, and facts and social representations should be abandoned (Latour 2004a, 50–51; see also Lummaa

2014, 98). These harmful divisions, constructed throughout history between nature and culture, can also be questioned with the help of Haraway's concept of naturecultures (Haraway 2008, 62). The *Carpe Fucking Diem* photographic series, for example, foregrounds, through the use of colour, an entanglement between human, dog, and environment.

In *Article III*, I argue that the embodied agency of seagulls in the Instagram photographs bearing the hashtag "seagullselfie" challenge our hierarchical, anthropocentric worldview. Through practices such as stalking humans, taking their food and photobombing, seagulls disrupt human control and reveal the vulnerability of the human body. This trans-corporeal interaction blurs a number of boundaries, emphasizing the trans-corporeal interconnectedness of human and non-human bodies. It shifts the focus from the individual to multiple, intertwined, and sensate subjects, illustrating that humans are not separate from nature (Alaimo 2016, 78). The human body, understood as a complex naturecultural entity, is interconnected with other species, including the microbial ecosystems within it (Margulis 1998).

In *Article IV*, I argue that Iiu Susiraja's *Meat Model 1* and *2* self-portrait photographs point out Western culture's hierarchical dichotomies (such as women and non-human animals as passive objects compared to active male subjects) by inviting us to ask: which is the product, Susiraja's body or the plastic-wrapped meat? Both are depicted as objects, of both hunger and sexual desire. In the article, I seek to dismantle the hierarchical boundary between the human–animal and the non-human animal by demonstrating that the distinction over whose flesh is considered edible is itself a culturally constructed boundary.

In conclusion, the photographs examined in this dissertation reveal how early 2000s self-portraiture is shaped by trans-corporeal interspecies relations, where human and non-human realities are deeply intertwined. By foregrounding this entanglement, the dissertation provides a fresh interpretation of the active role non-human animals play in early 21st century self-portrait photography.

5 Conclusions

One rainy March evening, while walking with Lotta the dog at a local lake, I heard it for the first time after a long winter: loud and joyful seagull calls. A small flock of seagulls flew above us, but no matter how hard I stared at the dark, foggy sky, I could not see them. Inspired by this encounter, on one of the first warm days of April, when most of the snow had melted away, I packed my lunch in a box and got on my bike, intending to encounter seagulls. In the spirit of this research, I wanted to consider outdoor as well as research ethics. Coincidentally, the principles that govern both are quite similar, i.e., minimising harm by remaining on the path, considering the well-being of birds, and respecting their privacy (BirdLife Finland guidelines, n.d.).

Seagulls have become significant animals for me since writing *Article III*. They have begun to symbolise the limits of human control over the spaces shaped by urbanisation and the instability of the imagined boundaries between nature and culture. For me, seagulls exemplify how one's perceptions and attitudes toward a particular species can shift through a deeper knowledge and understanding. They also embody the title I gave my dissertation by simultaneously being viewed as cute friends, beautiful birds of freedom, and unruly, cheeky creatures who do not respect human wishes or personal space. I argue that the photographs of my research material reveal the deep ambivalence that characterises Western human–animal relations. Non-human animals are simultaneously cherished and controlled, celebrated and exploited; some are loved as companions, others vilified as pests, consumed as food, or commodified for entertainment. This ambivalence manifests in contradictory representations, such as seagulls depicted as both friends and "trash birds", or pets welcomed into homes while other species are excluded.

Recently, inspired by this research, I have begun to question my own stereotypical emotional responses toward non-human animals commonly regarded as pests, such as mosquitoes, wasps, and rodents. Co-existing with nonhuman animals is rarely free of conflict, however, it is essential that humans learn to tolerate minor disturbances caused by other species. It is also important to acknowledge that empathy alone is not sufficient, knowledge and understanding are equally necessary. I argue that, in order to gain greater knowledge, it is crucial to study non-human animals from the perspective of not just the natural sciences but also visual culture

research, and to engage with the paradox that while animals are increasingly depicted in the images humans take and make, and objects of massive human interest, the destruction of their habitats continues at an accelerating pace. In fact, over three-quarters of the Earth's surface has been altered by human activity, and only 4% of the total biomass of mammals living on the planet consists of wild animals. In contrast, 60% is made up of livestock and domesticated animals, and 36% consists of humans (Tønnessen & Armstrong Oma 2016, ix; Aaltola 2022, 183).

Tuija Kokkonen's concept of weak human agency, which describes the reorientation of our attention toward Others and the decentring of our own ego or agenda, resonates with my own practice. For me, it also implies the intention to move slowly and carefully through the environment – whether urban or natural – and to engage in a hasteless, reflective observation of visual culture and the world in general. This concept aligns with the broader theoretical and methodological frameworks I adopt in this dissertation, which emphasise relationality among species rather than viewing beings that constitute the world as isolated entities. Stacy Alaimo's concept of trans-corporeality foregrounds the permeability and interconnectedness of human–non-human relations, revealing that human and non-human environments are intertwined in material and affective exchanges. These approaches advocate for more ethical, respectful, and sustainable forms of human–animal interaction. This aligns with what Donna Haraway calls for in *Staying with the Trouble*: the need to take and share responsibility, and to engage in multispecies survival and co-existence (Haraway 2016, 1–8, 29).

Throughout this dissertation, I refer to my approach as thinking with the more-than-human world, by which I mean that the photographs in my research open a multispecies perspective characterized by complex trans-corporeal entanglements and agencies between humans and non-humans. The concept emphasises the experience of being moved, and the multispecies nature of scholarly writing, while keeping ethical considerations at the forefront. It is important to recognise that these images are not solely about humans or human-created art. Although animals appearing in self-portraits illustrate the ambivalence that characterises Western human–animal relations and the hierarchical binaries in our thinking, where animals are regarded as less valuable than humans, the presence of a genuine interest in the Other within these photographs may offer openings for more nonviolent and empathetic relationships in the future. I hope that this dissertation contributes to ongoing conversations that advance such developments.

Across the four articles, I trace diverse human–animal encounters through visual culture, revealing both hierarchical power relations and gestures of care. In *Article I*, Naruto the macaque leads me from the jungles of Sulawesi to courtrooms debating animal rights, gendered online selfie memes, and questions of animals as artists, dehumanisation, and simianisation – ultimately reaching a view that respects animal

agency. *Article II* follows Marcello, a dachshund moving from the embrace of a multispecies family to challenging human exceptionalism with his own agency, exposing the asymmetrical dynamics of pet–human relations and turning towards Haraway's "hot compost pile" of mortal, multispecies coexistence. In *Article III*, seagulls captured in Instagram selfies traverse coastal landscapes and restaurant terraces, drawn to rubbish and carelessly held ice creams, concretising the ambivalence of Western human–animal relations and anthropocentric notions of nature. *Article IV* turns to the artist Iiu Susiraja, whose hands tenderly hold the body parts of a dead pig and cow, materialising Alaimo's concept of trans-corporeality by highlighting the fluid boundaries between human and non-human bodies associated with eating.

Alongside inequality and anthropocentrism, these self-portraits also convey tenderness, care, and a striving for multispecies connection. David Slater travelling to the island of Sulawesi in Indonesia with the intention of getting close to Naruto's conspecifics, the black macaques, Elina Brotherus posing with Marcello in her arms, Instagram users seeking proximity to seagulls, and Susiraja cradling butchered animal parts as if they were beloved pets, these all exemplify complex affective entanglements. Throughout, I follow the gaze of the non-human animal, valuing its perspective and unpacking, through this lens, the issues of gaze and power: who is allowed to look, and at whom, when, and where? Would it be more ethical to leave the Other in peace?

I argue that posthumanist theories, as well as those from human–animal studies and critical animal studies, can provide answers to these questions and demonstrate that the ethical renegotiations between the human and the non-human require a critical perspective on the exploitation of the non-human, as currently embedded in Western and capitalist systems. Analysing and deconstructing the entanglements connecting environmental crises and inequalities helps reimagine the ethical relationship between humans, the environment, and the non-human, while dismantling harmful dualisms constructed between nature and culture. I believe the significance of my research lies in speaking about the phenomena and beings of the multi-species world, narrating new possible futures and articulating visions for change. All the images of the non-human animals that I have followed in this dissertation have helped me to develop an understanding of non-human animals as active agents rather than as mere objects of care or symbols for human action. They have also guided my interest in future research, broadening my focus toward the environments and ecosystems essential for these animals. Looking ahead, my research will explore extending care beyond individual beings to encompass the complex entanglements between species and their living environments.

This study is unique in bringing together studies of photographic self-portraits across visual culture, critical studies of non-human animals, and contemporary

posthuman feminist theory. It does this by advancing theorisation of the non-human in relation to the method of following and introduces the practice of thinking with the more-than-human world. Furthermore, my research offers a new perspective on self-portraits, an extensively studied genre, through non-human animals that either peek from the margins of photographs or seize the central role within them. It does not distinguish between images classified as artistic or popular thereby challenging this and other hierarchical dichotomies typical of Western thought. Moreover, the research argues that, although they might not self-evidently engage in a critical examination of human-animal relations, the images in the corpus are fundamentally multispecies in their relations, highlighting inseparability of human and animal realities.

The powerful affective encounters I enjoyed with the images throughout my research suggest that visual culture can indeed play a significant role in building more ethically sustainable human–animal relations. Prompted by these images, my thinking has gradually shifted towards thinking with the more-than-human world: first, I became interested in non-human animals in photographs; then I began noticing non-human actors all around me, seeing the world more from their perspective: how animals have been pushed to the margins, objectified and used as resources and how forests and other natural habitats have been reduced in size. This realisation was followed by feelings of sorrow and concern, and, ultimately, led me to question my own anthropocentric thinking, change my course of action, and imagine and work towards different and less hierarchical futures both within research and beyond it too. By asking the reader to follow me along this process, I hope that this study can provoke similar processes in others.

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