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THE INVISIBLE FARM

TACKLING THE ABSENCE OF INTENSIVE PIG FARMING IMAGERY IN THE CAPITALOCENE

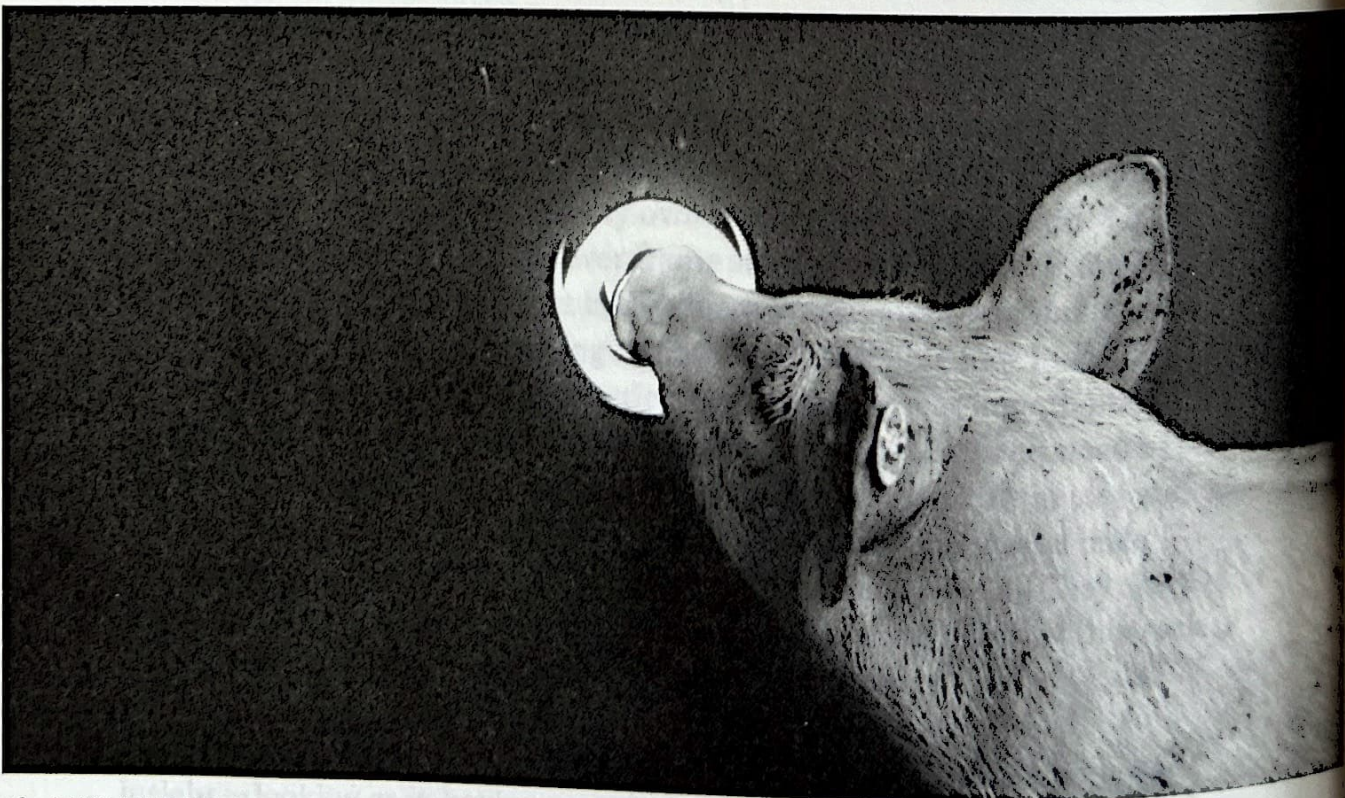
Agnieszka Wodzińska

Pig Chase (2009-2012) connects an interactive screen inside a pig farm with a tablet user. A colourful ball of light appears on the pig pen screen, prompting the animal to inspect it. The movement of the ball is controlled by the human. When the pig touches the screen with its snout, the game begins, and the two players move the sparkling light together (fig. 1). It ends when either participant loses touch with the ball. The project can be understood as “a first attempt to realize digitally mediated interspecies play in an intensive farm.”¹ It was conceptualized by philosopher Clemens Driessen and co-created with filmmaker Hein Lagerweij, and interaction designers Kars Alfrink, Irene van Peer, and Marinka Copier.² Driessen describes it as follows: “Our design is explicitly meant as a societal intervention. With this intervention, we do not claim to be morally neutral but intend to draw attention to current farming practices that we try to reveal in new ways as being problematic.”³ This paper considers *Pig Chase* an actor within the Capitalocene which recognizes capitalism as a way of organizing and interfering with nature in a way that puts profit and expansion above sustainability and the condition of the biosphere, which includes nonhuman animals.

¹ Clemens Driessen, “Animal Deliberation: The Co-Evolution Of Technology And Ethics On The Farm” (PhD Thesis, Wageningen University, 2014), 177.

² Dublin Science Gallery, “Playing With Pigs: Pig Chase”, *Science Gallery Dublin*, <https://dublin.sciencegallery.com/fieldtest/exhibits/playing-with-pigs.html>.

³ Driessen, “Animal Deliberation,” 171.



↑ fig. 1 HKU/WUR: Hein Lagerweij, Kars Alfrink, Irene van Peer, Marinka Copier, Clemens Driessen, photograph from on-site interactive screen testing, 2012

In the Capitalocene,⁴ the concept of cheap nature plays a significant role in allowing the exploitation of the biosphere, which can be traced back a few centuries. Environmental historian Jason W. Moore together with Raj Patel, scholar and just food production activist, identify Christopher Columbus' exploits as a turning point that changed the natural world into a prospective source of financial gain, marking the emergence of cheap nature when Columbus began to appropriate "uncapitalized nature as the pedestal of labour productivity."⁵ The reign of cheap nature was then accelerated by technological advancements during the Industrial Revolution (1760–1840). The current scope of industrialized animal farming would not have been possible if it had not been for colonization and the emergence of capitalism. Both ideologies minimize accountability by creating elaborate excuses for the mistreatment of land, people and nonhuman animals in the name of endless expansion. In turn, the expansion of industrial animal farming shifted the role of animals in the Western collective imagination and fulfilled the need for cheap food without offering proper nutrition or an even distribution of food on a global scale.⁶ As a consequence, consuming animal products is the only option for communities who cannot afford or access other options even if they are interested in minimizing their ecological footprint. This paper does not aim to demonize those who support this industry as consumers or workers, but rather to focus on the harm and greed within the animal-fuelled branch of the capitalist cheap food regime.

Within the Capitalocene, sustained by the cheap nature ideology, exists an ever-present crisis of representation. Here, we can draw parallels between the fossil fuel industry and industrial animal farming. Engaging with the real-life consequences of both industries' actions is challenging due to the intangibility of some by-products — like the amounts of methane released by animal manure into the atmosphere — and the concealing of other, more tangible events — like the 2010 BP oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico or deforestation caused by the expansion of cattle ranches in South America, "often at the expense of local and indigenous communities who are expelled from their lands as a consequence."⁷ Recent history overflows with efforts to downplay and conceal the extent of harm these practices cause in order to continue the expansion and optimization of influence and profit. It is challenging to imagine what true responsibility would even look like, since the Capitalocene is synonymous with exploitation of natural resources for profit.

Multiple factors contribute to the crisis of representation of industrial farming practices. Within the Capitalocene, where nature is cheap and everything

⁴ Capitalocene is a term coined by Jason W. Moore, defined as "a historical era shaped by relations privileging the endless accumulation of capital" in contrast to the Anthropocene which "relies on well-work notions of resource- and technological-determinism." Jason W. Moore, *Capitalism in the Web of Life* (London: Verso, 2016), 173.

⁵ Jason W. Moore, *Capitalism*, 17.

⁶ "The raising of animals for food by the methods used in the industrial nations does not contribute to the solution of the hunger problem. On the contrary, it aggravates it enormously." Peter Singer, *Animal Liberation* (New York: Avon Books, 1975), 180.

⁷ Action for Solidarity Environment Equality and Diversity, "Livestock & Anthropogenic Green House Gases in the Era of the Capitalocene," *ASEED*, 2017, <https://aseed.net/nl-livestock-anthropogenic-green-house-gases-in-the-era-of-the-capitalocene/>.

within it undergoes commodification, animals start to exist only in skewed representational forms. If they are not our domestic pets, they seem to disappear behind cartoonish images of themselves, often advertising products made from their own flesh, enthusiastically so. Art critic and cultural historian John Berger identifies this phenomenon as the disappearance of the animal.⁸ The more distance between the living, breathing animal and the packaged meat product on the shelf, the better in the eyes of industrialized animal agriculture. To make the connection means to question the rules which uphold the cheap food regime.

The concept video

As cheap nature prevails and the crisis of representation hinders our active political engagement with the escalating climate crisis, *Pig Chase* may be an interruption to this destructive chain. The choice to engage with the topic of intensive animal farming through the medium of a video game allows communication in a familiar way that is approachable to anyone who uses technological devices, such as smartphones or tablets. Since the finished product does not seem to be available online, it is understood that the game remains a prototype. However, the documented collaboration with the pig farms in the Netherlands and the public debate surrounding the *Pig Chase* concept video provide enough output and feedback for a fruitful inspection of the project. The chosen medium has the potential to produce a wide range of responses, as seen in Clemens Driessen's Ph.D. thesis, which includes feedback from Internet users to the *Pig Chase* concept video. Reactions range from outrage at the sick irony of playing with pigs whose fate is slaughter, confusion about the makers' intentions, self-defensiveness about eating meat, to support of the perceived attempt to critique farming practices. Driessen states that,

[This type of response], in different ways probing the experience of watching the video, reveal complex ways in which people may relate to the eating of animals and how they cultivate themselves as (here anonymous, web based) public personae to deal with the ambiguities involved in human-animal relations.⁹

The equivocal concept video offers an opportunity to reflect on one's eating habits anonymously in an online space, which might be more productive than reacting to animal rights campaigns that often aim to spark guilt and shame in viewers. While the trailer video format may be productive, the video game concept, on the other hand, uses the same tools as those of the intensive farming industry. If *Pig Chase* aims to improve pig welfare, why choose to do it by further technologizing the intensive farm, a space that is already often 'optimized' by the technological developments offered by the Capitalocene?¹⁰ This reveals a tension that stems from the ambiguous nature of the project; if it aimed to remain a prototype and spark a public discussion, then the proposal need not be practical or

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John Berger, *About Looking* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980).

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Driessen, "Animal Deliberation," 172.

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A parallel exists here between *Pig Chase* and geoengineering, which T.J. Demos identifies as the Anthropocene's overly-technologized solution to changes caused in the geosphere by human activity. See: T.J. Demos, *Against the Anthropocene* (Berlin: Sternberg press, 2017), 26.

feasible. However, if developed into an option that farming facilities may choose to abide by the 2001 EU ruling to diversify entertainment provided to pigs in slaughterhouses it would bring up a question of responsible money allocation.¹¹ Funding the installation of interactive screens instead of expanding the size of pig pens, investing in higher-quality feed, or maintaining a large outside area, is questionable, if not reckless. Such a decision would also be ignorant to the observation made by international relations scholar and climate justice activist Vishwas Satgar that “either corporations or powerful states control modern technology and that technology is not neutral in these relations of production — it serves particular interests.”¹² Most often, the interests are of those in power. In the end, the use of this type of technology is to industrialized animal farming as geoengineering is to fracking — it shows a dependency on the same type of resources, and it further perpetuates the idea that complex and costly man-made inventions are superior to simpler and more sustainable solutions to curb suffering or negative environmental effects. This tension within *Pig Chase* appears unresolvable.

Pig Chase certainly makes visible a space that is often absent from our collective imagination: the pig pen. However, the concept video does not accurately reflect the conditions of the average pig farm in the Netherlands. The pigs in the video have their tails intact even though it is common to cut them off to prevent other pigs from biting them out of boredom.¹³ Viewers who do not know this common practice will unknowingly continue to participate in a sanitized visual culture. Driessen remarks, however, that if the team had chosen a pig pen with less favourable conditions, it is likely that its workers would not have been interested in collaborating at all, stalling the project.¹⁴ It is understandable that some compromises had to be made to continue working on the game prototype. During its development, the extensive fieldwork conducted on-site meant that people from different backgrounds worked closely together, which led to an ongoing conversation and a co-creation of the project based on feedback from farmers. This is an asset of *Pig Chase*, as it demonstrates the makers’ desire not to antagonize the farmers, and instead learn from their experiences, attempting to bridge the gap between the worker’s perspective and an outsider’s understanding of intensive farming. As a consequence, the pig farm features briefly in the trailer video, but remains visually absent from the game itself. If this lack of representation encourages users to imagine the pigs’ surroundings themselves, the process of re-imagining may align with the idyllic imagery put forward by the industry itself, thus failing to fully engage with the reality of slaughterhouses.

Behavioural economics academic Lisa A. Kramer and visual culture historian J. Keri Cronin argue that due to the concealed and sanitizing nature of intensive animal agriculture, “consumers are distanced from the animals

¹¹ European Commission, “Commission Directive 2001/93/EC Of 9 November 2001 Amending Directive 91/630/EEC Laying Down Minimum Standards For The Protection Of Pigs,” *Eur-Lex. Europa.Eu*, 2001, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/en/ALL/?uri=CELEX:32001L0093>.

¹² Vishwas Satgar, “The Anthropocene and Imperial Ecocide: Prospects for Just Transitions,” in *The Climate Crisis* (Wits University Press, 2018), 61.

¹³ Driessen, “Animal Deliberation,” 182.

¹⁴ Ibid.

who lived and died for their meals through both physical and conceptual means.”¹⁵ *Pig Chase* may be able to break down these barriers. Not only is the project situated inside an intensive pig farm but the use of real pigs both in the trailer and in the game itself challenges the absence of the real farm animal from the visual culture of the Capitalocene. With its efforts to render the pigs as active participants in the pig–human interaction, *Pig Chase* may be able to carve out a more present, active role for these farm animals outside of the pig pen.

The game

In order to tackle the misrepresentation of real animals hidden behind both physical walls of slaughterhouses and conceptual means of detachment and rationalization, we must scrutinize the visual culture of industrialized animal farming. “Visual imagery has been instrumental in creating a culture of invisibility around the widespread violence towards animals inherent in our modern food production systems.”¹⁶ It continues to create a comfortable distance between consumers and the animals they end up paying to eat. If visual culture helps to uphold the reign of the cheap capitalist food regime, then it also possesses the ability to interrupt the system of oppression.¹⁷ Therefore, it can bridge the gap between real animals and consumers who often battle with ethical issues as they continue to support an unjust food production system.

Establishing how successfully *Pig Chase* manages to fight against the disappearance of the animal and the iconography of oppression requires a consideration of the pigs’ role in the project. While they appear in their confined surroundings in the trailer video, the video game only features their snouts shown on the tablet through a frosted glass effect, blurring the background. What users take from the experience of the game seems rather enigmatic. It may produce a detached and distant effect, offering a brief interaction through a screen, or a quite intimate moment in its sharing of entertainment between two players. If the latter is true, it would only be experienced by the human, as the pig is not aware of its participation in a multispecies video game at all. Still, the animals in *Pig Chase* are not victims, but rather intelligent and curious creatures, intrigued by the sight of colourful images on the screen. This type of representation echoes Lauren Corman, a sociology scholar with focus on animal ethics who advocates the utmost importance of not perceiving animals as merely victims of human actions.¹⁸

Indeed, there is value in rendering pigs as more than victims, but rather participants in *Pig Chase*. Driessen argues that “setting them in an overtly technological space — at least more high-tech than the standard concrete and metal bars of their confinement — allows us to imagine how they could be granted a much more

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Lisa A. Kramer and J. Keri Cronin, “Challenging the Iconography of Oppression in Marketing: Confronting Speciesism through Art and Visual Culture,” *Journal of Animal Ethics* 8, no. 1 (2018), 81.

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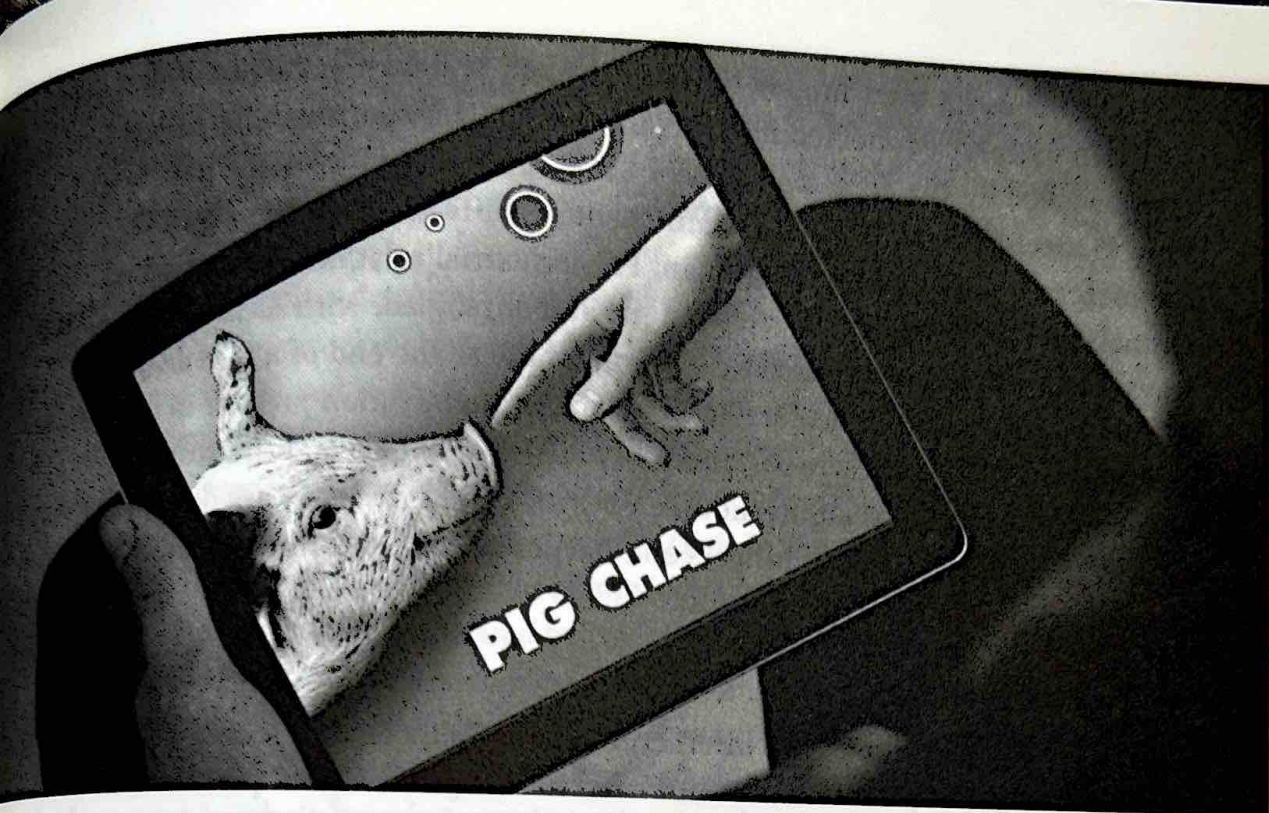
Ibid., 80.

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Ibid., 84.

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Lauren Corman, “The Ventriloquist’s Burden: Animal Advocacy and the Problem of Speaking for Others,” in *Animal Subjects 2.0* (WLU Press, 2008), 473–512.



2 HKU/WUR: Hein Lagerweij, Kars Alfrink, Irene van Peer, Marinka Copier, Clemens Driessen, Pig Chase home screen, 2012

active role in what is mostly considered a purely human domain: learning to appropriate artefacts and the planned use of tools.”¹⁹ The project leaves it up to the user to decide how to engage with the topic of seeing pigs participate in entertainment through the use of tools. This can be seen as an asset, and is definitely a welcome change considering many animal rights campaigns avoid nuance and often use graphic, violent imagery to encourage viewers to fight against such mistreatment. While that strategy works on some viewers, others experience fatigue parallel to seeing documentation of climate change-driven disasters. Feelings of guilt mixed with a deep awareness of a lack of control over large-scale effects and suffering can leave an individual unable to engage at all. In this context, *Pig Chase* uses different tools to ultimately engage with similar topics to those of animal rights campaigns, and while it may not spark interest or deeper contemplation in some viewers, it may influence others. In the era of the Capitalocene, multiple strategies must be implemented to work against the invisibility of industries that uphold it.

Even though the pigs in *Pig Chase* are rendered to be more than victims, there is something rather sinister in the design of the interaction. When the game is over and the human participant continues their day, the pigs are killed after growing big enough according to industry standards. While this imbalance might prompt some users to reflect on their eating habits, it is challenging to see this multispecies interaction as symmetrical, despite the creators’ intentions to make it so.²⁰ The design of the loading screen (fig. 2), which brings to mind Michelangelo’s *Creation of Adam*, emphasizes this inequality. A human hand reaches out to a pig, while the pig remains unphased by the incoming touch. Even though the hand gesture may be referring to the game mechanics — human

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Driessen, “Animal Deliberation,” 187.

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Clemens Driessen et al., “What Could Playing With Pigs Do To Us? Game Design As Multispecies Philosophy,” *Antennae: The Journal Of Nature In Visual Culture*, no. 30 (2014): 81-104, 98.

participants using their fingers to move the ball of light — it carries with it a certain hierarchy reflected in the reality of slaughterhouses, where pigs are surveilled by the all-seeing eyes of CCTV cameras and workers, until it is time to meet their end from the same hands that feed them. The pigs are at the mercy of the all-powerful human. Pre-industrial relations between farm animals and farmers were more personal and entangled, with farmers finding ways to reconcile the eventual loss of animal life at the end of a nurturing relationship. However, the current scale and mechanization present in animal farming continues to create distance between the animals and the workers, to the point where in slaughterhouses no worker believes they are doing the killing.²¹ This distance both reflects and deepens the crisis of representation of farm animals in the Capitalocene.

Entangled relations

The nature of the multispecies interaction in *Pig Chase* creates a kind of anthropomorphism, but this does not need to be a point of critique. As much as we can try to understand how other nonhuman animals experience the world, it is impossible to fully step away from a human-centric perspective, since it is all that we know. By offering the pigs some agency and showing that they are not mere victims of the food production system, *Pig Chase* probes cultural expectations of what animals are, where they belong, and what they are supposed to do.²² If pigs are interested in partaking in a technologized game, it sparks questions about what other activities they may enjoy. The project leaves these questions unanswered, instead letting the participants ponder them on their own, perhaps for the first time.

While the practicality and ethics of installing interactive screens inside intensive pig farms remain dubious at best, and dystopian at worst, the online presence of *Pig Chase* probes individuals' awareness of welfare issues in intensive farms. The mechanics of the video game blur carefully constructed boundaries between humans and other animals, which help to excuse mistreatment of nonhuman animals by rendering them intrinsically different and therefore inferior. If we can bridge this gap, even just a little, it may create a ripple effect that can help deconstruct this outdated dichotomy loaded with value judgements which always colour the human superior.

Raj Patel and Jason W. Moore argue that “the danger is in believing the division between nature and society is real, in seeing *factory farming* as an environmental question and *factory production* as a social question. Social questions are environmental questions, and vice versa.”²³ In the context of the Capitalocene, which transformed primordial relations with animals and nature in general, intensive animal farming continues to operate at a rate that is unsustainable and contributes to the acceleration of the climate crisis. While a variety of

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Timothy Pachirat, *Every Twelve Seconds: Industrialized Slaughter and the Politics of Sight* (Yale University Press, 2011).

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Clemens Driessen, “Animal Deliberation,” 187.

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Raj Patel and Jason Moore, “How the Chicken Nugget Became the True Symbol of Our Era,” *The Guardian*, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2018/may/08/how-the-chicken-nugget-became-the-true-symbol-of-our-era>.

changes need to occur to curb this destructive trajectory, tackling the skewed representation of animals has the potential to not only make us re-examine our relationship with other forms of life, but also spark demand for change in intensive farming practices and other flawed industries.

What *Pig Chase* offers is a nuanced multispecies interaction that questions the constructed human-animal dichotomy, thus undermining an anthropocentric point of view that assisted in both the emergence and reign of capitalism. It is up to each individual to decide how they view the game. It can act as a provocative interventionist project able to spark a public debate about pork consumption in the Netherlands, or a gimmick that, in the end, does not enact change but instead continues the cycle of unproductive discussions in which any feelings of guilt become concealed behind indifference. Engaging with pigs living on intensive farms allows *Pig Chase* to politicize the visual culture of the Capitalocene. The animals in *Pig Chase* are not one-dimensional victims, but smart and curious creatures who fall victim behind-the-scenes. By asking whether enriching their lives is something the user deems important, the project attempts to bring a more just representation of farm animals to our consideration. We must realize the current rate of often inhumane killings (is there such a thing as a *humane* death, if one is deprived of the chance to have a long uninterrupted life in the first place?) performed within a system set on optimization and constant growth, is a disservice not only to the animals who suffer, but also to the underpaid and unsupported workers, and the biosphere crumbling under the influence of the industry's harmful by-products. *Pig Chase* does not reverse or counteract the skewed representation of farm animals in the Capitalocene, but it exposes the animals' absence, rendering visible the frosted glass and the outlines of pigs hidden on the other side.

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