

THE COW QUESTION

Erika Balsom on Aria Dean's *Abattoir, U.S.A.!*

This slaughtering machine ran on, visitors or no visitors. It was like some horrible crime committed in a dungeon, all unseen and unheeded, buried out of sight and of memory. One could not stand and watch very long without becoming philosophical, without beginning to deal in symbols and similes, and to hear the hog-squeal of the universe.

UPTON SINCLAIR'S 1906 NOVEL *The Jungle* details the brutal working conditions at the Chicago stockyards. Written as part of a broader campaign for social reform, it scrutinizes the slaughterhouse as a real space of exploitation. But in this passage, the killing floor slips for a moment into something else: The noises of the animals become metaphorical, a kind of cosmic caterwauling. In Aria Dean's *Abattoir, U.S.A.!*, a moving-image installation that premiered this past February at Chicago's Renaissance Society, there are no hogs present to protest their fate and no workers either. This digital rendering of an empty slaughterhouse is devoid of the muckraking granularity that dominates Sinclair's book, untethered from any practice of documentation. Instead, Dean seizes on what Sinclair only hints at: the immense power of the abattoir as a space of figural possibility. In this hallucinatory work, on display in a city that was the center of the American meatpacking industry for decades, the slaughterhouse becomes a paradigm through which to confront the heterological outside of liberal humanism.

Abattoir, U.S.A.! was made using the Unreal Engine, a 3D-computer-graphics game engine that Dean deploys in a manner worthy of its name. The point of view it adopts would typically be called first person, but in this instance that wording rings acutely false. No human—no living being, for that matter—could be the agent of this gaze. At times, the virtual camera seems to mimic the movements of a body, only to pan mechanically, float spectrally, or spin out rapidly into the air, fluidly combining different modalities of vision into a resolutely simulated view. The space it moves through is no less synthetic. Dean defies Euclidean geometry, using computer animation to create an impossible architecture of death that eerily approaches photorealism. The absence of montage only augments the disorienting feeling of

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Aria Dean, *Abattoir, U.S.A.!*, 2023, HD video, color, sound, 10 minutes 50 seconds. Installation view, Renaissance Society, Chicago. Photo: Robert Chase Heishman.

spatial incoherence, with elements of various building styles combining seamlessly in a single trajectory: Functionally indeterminate glass-and-steel structures are followed by Richard Serra-esque corridors, which in turn segue into gleaming tracks of automated hooks. Midway through the roughly eleven-minute loop, there is a significant interruption to this *parcours*, when the virtual camera moves into a small pen and the frame is overtaken by blurs and flares of black and gold. The crisp interior of the abattoir gives way to an interlude resembling the entoptic psychedelia of closed-eye vision. When it has passed, a new and different space appears, initially seen askew, as if one's head were positioned on a floor shimmering with blood. The entity whose perspective we share then robotically rights itself and continues on—resurrected, undead. What does not live cannot be killed.

In a short text from 1929, Georges Bataille describes the slaughterhouse, a modern invention, as “cursed and quarantined like a plague-ridden ship.” Those “with an unhealthy need of cleanliness” endorse this partition, gladly exiled to a “flabby world in which nothing fearful remains.” They feel affirmed in their lofty propriety by casting out the base carnality of animal slaughter. Bataille, by contrast, was pulled toward its *bassesse*. In this, he was not alone: A fascination with the abattoir bleeds across the fringes of Surrealism, into Eli Lotar's

photographs of the Parisian slaughterhouse La Villette and Georges Franju's *Le sang des bêtes* (Blood of the Beasts, 1949), a poetic film that draws subtle links between the slaughterhouse and the Holocaust. Even though she declines to picture gushing innards and twitching carcasses as Franju does, Dean works within this lineage, approaching the abattoir as an exemplary site of industrial modernity, one at which the instability of the human/inhuman distinction shows itself. Nowhere in her video is a Surrealist twinge more palpable than when meat hooks sway in unison to the slow, lyricless rendition of “I Think We're Alone Now” that forms part of Evan Zierk's labile score. Recalling Franju's ironic use of Charles Trenet's whimsical song “*La mer*,” this moment evokes a mass ornament à la Busby Berkeley, only to invert its logic: Whereas Berkeley arranged bodies in rational patterns reminiscent of the assembly line, here all flesh has vanished. We are alone now with machines that are animated by an uncanny vitality. The virtual camera glides through an array of metal “legs,” all moving in time with music that has been stripped of language.

Abattoir, U.S.A.! appropriates a formulation that invokes American typicality (“Anytown, U.S.A.”) and remakes it as a scene of routinized death. Is the exclamation mark Dean adds suggestive of sardonic humor, or is it an earnest warning? The video's shifting tone keeps both possibilities in play. This title joins forces with the groundless images of CGI to lift the abattoir out of concrete particularity and into the realm of allegory—

specifically, into a national allegory of racial capitalism. Dean, a writer as well as an artist, has expressed her interest in how Bataille's "descriptions of base matter resonate strongly with descriptions of Blackness from recent developments in Afropessimist theory." Just as Bataille's exiles in the flabby world are constituted in their cleanliness by the bloody outside they disavow, so, too, according to theorists such as Frank B. Wilderson III, is the category of "the human" constituted by the exclusion of Blackness. In his 2020 book *Afropessimism*, Wilderson makes a bold claim: "*Blacks are not Human subjects but are instead structurally inert props.*" He is insistent that no other subaltern occupies this position; it is the abject place of Blackness alone. Yet in a 2003 article, "Gramsci's Black Marx: Whither the Slave in Civil Society?," Wilderson makes a rare foray into analogy. Here, he argues that Blackness destabilizes the traditional categories of Marxist analysis; when considering the Fordist organization of the slaughterhouse, for instance, the Black subject cannot be understood

simply as an exploited worker among workers. Instead, Blackness provokes what he calls "the cow question": "We must ask, what about the cows? The cows are not being exploited, they are being accumulated and, if need be, killed. The desiring machine of capital and white supremacy manifest in society two dreams, imbricated but, I would argue, distinct: the dream of worker exploitation and the dream of black accumulation and death." In the abattoir, a space Dean renders with oneiric intensity, both dreams meet in a nightmarish condensation. Her abattoir is not just the abattoir of the Surrealists; as a space of fungibility and disposability, it also echoes the management of Black life—and Black death—in the United States.

The worker protagonist of *The Jungle*, the Lithuanian immigrant Jurgis Rudkus, suffers and toils, killing pigs day in and day out. Still, he is thankful for something: "I'm glad I'm not a hog!" he exclaims, happy to be on the side of the butchers. Not Dean. *Abattoir, U.S.A.!* rejects anthropomorphic perspective, dispenses with

language, and endows machines with liveliness. It is fabricated by video-game algorithms, distant from any touch of the hand. This is all to say that it takes formal flight from humanism, leaving behind the realm that Wilderson deems antithetical to Blackness. The presence of glass architecture in its opening minutes brings to mind the misguided optimism of Paul McCartney's famous statement: "If slaughterhouses had glass walls, everyone would be vegetarian." In fact, everyone knows very well what takes place inside the abattoir—literally, metaphorically. Everyone sees its horrors, whether they want to or not, reproduced without end on the internet. Images of pain circulate widely, and the killing continues nevertheless. Perhaps this is why Dean leaves her slaughterhouse hauntingly empty: There is no need to render a carnage with which we are already intimately familiar. Death is what feeds the country. Listen to the hog-squeal of the universe and you will hear the unheeded crime of whiteness. □

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Four stills from Aria Dean's *Abattoir, U.S.A.!*, 2023, HD video, color, sound, 10 minutes 50 seconds.

