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# Where is Home? The Unpredictability of Life as a Cypriot Stray Dog.

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## Title of Talk: Where is Home? The Unpredictability of Life as a Cypriot Stray Dog

[Title Slide 1]

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[Slide 2] This paper reflects the form of the photographic work it responds to, work begun in November 2015 as part of a Nicosia Municipal Art Gallery (NiMac)/Plymouth University Residence in Cyprus. This is a fragment of that work in progress. By setting a diverse selection of visual and textual representations in dialectical opposition the work seeks to challenge ways of thinking and social policy and practices. The polyvocality of this approach allows disparate perspectives to exist simultaneously, opening an imaginative space in which notions of power and coercion, identity and representation can emerge and be subject to scrutiny.

[Slide 3]

This body of work is a response to the dog control scheme currently operating in Cyprus; introduced in 1971 “*within the context of an all-inclusive anti-echinococcosis campaign*”.

*At the time, it was estimated that there were more than 100,000 dogs in the island, almost all of which were strays...The destruction of stray dogs [was] accomplished by using guns that fire a syringe containing a euthanizing drug.<sup>1</sup>*

The 1970s Scheme resulted in the extermination of almost 86,000 stray dogs, mass spaying of females and compulsory registration, leaving an estimated 16,810 dogs on the island. “The Cyprus experience”, wrote the Director of the Department of Veterinary Service, “in which the initiative for dog control was undertaken by the Department of Veterinary Services, can well serve as an example for many other countries”. [Slide 4] Today, in the Greek controlled south, municipalities are obliged to keep strays in ‘approved pounds’ for 15 days after which, if the owner is not found or they are not re-homed, they are put to death. It is estimated that the annual number of abandoned dogs and puppies is around 200,000 that 20,000<sup>2</sup> dogs are killed by the authorities each year. In response, numerous sanctuaries have been established around the island run largely by volunteers who re-home to other European countries, principally the UK, Holland and Germany. The situation is currently at breaking point as rescues struggle to cope with unprecedented numbers.

[Slide 5]

**Sun 8 Nov, 2015 Nicosia:** I am gradually recovering this morning from the onslaught on the senses that was the Unified Pound; the heat, glare, nauseous smells, irritating flies and intermittent bursts of barking, howling and whining were at times overwhelming. The Pound itself lies amid flat, empty fields of arid sand-coloured earth, bordered by the distant Kyrenian mountains; an oasis-like compound with high fences and barbed wire. I tour the enclosure, entering the cages; mobbed by puppies, shunned by a tiny

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<sup>1</sup> 1983 paper by Kyriacos Polydorou, the Director of Veterinary Services, Ministry of Agriculture and Natural Resources, Nicosia, Cyprus

<sup>2</sup> Cyprus Voice for Animals

aging female Pinscher with teats elongated from her numerous litters, followed and gazed at and scratched and vied for by hordes of anxious, excited, restless, desperate creatures.

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Cyprus, a "...vital piece of strategic territory" is a "...cat's paw of outside powers", having been at various times in history subject to the rule of the Persians, the Egyptians, the Romans, the Ottomans, the Arabs, the Franks, the Venetians, the British, of interest to America and Russia and remains a territory of contestation between Greece and Turkey.

[Slide 7]

Postcolonialism and Feminism have familiarised us with constructions of hierarchy based on notions of difference and otherness in relation to race and gender and Posthumanism explores similar forms of repression relating to speciesism. "The human" writes Cary Wolfe, "is achieved by escaping or repressing not just its animal origins in nature, the biological, and the evolutionary, but more generally by transcending the bonds of materiality and embodiment altogether." (Wolfe 159 Kindle)

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Vision and touch in Western culture appear to be at opposite ends of sensory experience; vision is culturally ascribed as cerebral, male and distant, while touch is bodily, female and proximate<sup>3</sup>. Unlike vision, touch is not valued epistemologically. "Information gathered through touch and more proximal senses is thought to provide only subjective feeling and cannot be grounds for knowledge."<sup>4</sup>

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"In an aversion to animals" writes Walter Benjamin, "the predominant feeling is fear of being recognized by them through contact. The horror that stirs deep in man [sic] is an obscure awareness that in him something lives so akin to the animal that it might be recognized. All disgust is originally disgust at touching."<sup>5</sup> (Gloves)

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Edward Said writes of a type of knowledge<sup>6</sup> that seeks to control, that rises "above immediacy, beyond self, into the foreign and distant. The object of such knowledge, he writes, is inherently vulnerable to scrutiny... To have such knowledge of such a thing is to dominate it, to have authority over it. And authority here means for "us" to deny autonomy to "it"...since we know it and it exists, in a sense, as we know it."<sup>7</sup>

[Slide 11]

**Wed 11 Nov, 2015 Moni, Limassol:** Sandwiched between a Power Plant and a Limestone Quarry, an hour's drive along the coast road from the old town of Limassol, Sirius Dog Sanctuary is not signposted and doesn't appear on the map; this prevents people from using it as a dumping ground for dogs. Walking into the centre of their colossal shed, my eyes adjust to the darkness pierced by shafts of dazzling sunlight. A deafening cacophony of sound, of

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<sup>3</sup> Rodaway 1994: 122-3

<sup>4</sup> Vasseleu 1998: 12

<sup>5</sup> Walter Benjamin 'Gloves', in *One-Way Street and Other Writings*, 1997

<sup>6</sup> Used by Balfour to justify the British occupation of Egypt

<sup>7</sup> Said, E *Orientalism* p32

every register, erupts from the surrounding enclosures and intensifies, assaulting my ears.

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“The emergence of the prison” writes Foucault “marks the institutionalization of the power [and the will] to punish...” “The body, according to this penalty is caught up in a system of constraints and privations, obligations and prohibitions.... Punishment has become an economy of suspended rights.” (Michel Foucault *Discipline and Punish: the Birth of the Prison*, Penguin, 1991 p130/p11)

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It is believed that dogs were domesticated more than 15,000 years ago. Scientists in Lyon (Morgane Oliver) have recently discovered that, beyond the range of shapes and sizes, domesticated dogs substantially differ from wolves in their DNA, including an ability to digest a wider range of foods, like starch. This bio-cultural co-evolution of dog genes and human culture developed around 6,000 years ago, coinciding with the spread of human farming.

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The pet, according to Berger,<sup>8</sup> is a reduced animal; merely a reflection of its owner. And Weil affirms the prevalence of this view, “[f]rom Rousseau through Nietzsche to Deleuze and Guattari, we find similar condemnation of the domestic pet as a deanimalized creature that has been stripped of its original virile wildness and tamed into a “feminine” and inauthentic servitude.” (Weil chp3)

[Slide 15] Such a view focuses on the pet as property; domestication is something done to them by humans. More recent scholarship suggests the idea of the animal *choosing* domestication, thereby granting them a degree of agency; evincing a model of coevolution that views domestication as “a symbiotic and dynamic affective relationship between humans and animals...”.

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“Attentiveness to agency may enable us to see beyond stereotypical representations of species on display, so that we encounter real, live whole individuals and appreciate their significant otherness without reducing them to aesthetic, consumable objects.” (McFarland & Hediger *Animals and Agency: An Interdisciplinary Exploration*)

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“If we accept that animals other than human beings may be conscious, intentional agents, then we have also to ascribe to them personal as well as natural powers.” writes Ingold, “That is, we are forced to recognize that they embody attributes of personhood which in the West are popularly identified with the condition of ‘humanity’.”<sup>9</sup>

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The work has emerged from a ‘Critical Realist’<sup>10</sup> method of committed investigative practice, of rigorous research, which seeks to uncover and understand a pre-existing social reality. As ‘socially engaged practice’, it lies between art and documentary, employing diverse mediums which dialectically traverse the territory, uncovering synergies, contradictions, paradoxes, perspectives in the social fabric. [Slide 19] Photography, in its mimetic

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<sup>8</sup> Berger, J ‘Why Look at Animals’

<sup>9</sup> p9 Tim Ingold *What is an Animal?* 1994

<sup>10</sup> Baetens and Van Gelder interrogate Sekula’s notion of Critical Realism

relationship to reality, suits this form of social critique; although not realistic in itself, it “arises from reality”<sup>11</sup>, and invites reflection on the nature of reality. The photograph itself cannot tell us the history of dog control in Cyprus, nor of its socio-political imperatives, but it can point to its consequences and engage us in philosophical reflection.

[Slide 20]

Berger interprets the look between human and animal as an “abyss of non-comprehension” resulting from the lack of a common language. The animal’s silence, he writes, “guarantees its distance, its distinctness, its exclusion, from and of man.”<sup>12</sup> But Weil offers another interpretation,

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To be dumb... is not to be lacking in language, but to have an alternate means of apprehending the other and the world.”<sup>13</sup>

And similarly, McFarlane & Hediger argue for the significance of “...all living beings [living] in relatively unique perceptual worlds...”<sup>14</sup> (McFarlane & Hediger p23). Sensory capacities dictate how an animal modulates its explorations of, and interactions with, other beings and things, which are distinctly meaningful for them. [Slide 22] Humans and dogs are “animals of unequal lexicons and unequal capacities for scent, touch and hearing” writes Weil, and concludes that, “each of whom must be acknowledged as “having a world” and having something to say.” This perspective, writes Weil signifies, [Slide 23]

“The ethical turn... a concern with and for alterity, especially insofar as alterity brings us to the limits of our own self-certainty and certainty about the world.”<sup>15</sup>

[Slide 24]

**Sat 21 Nov, 2015 Paphos:** Having tried, and failed, the previous afternoon to locate the entrance to Paphiakos Animal Sanctuary, I return with renewed determination and my persistence pays off. The enclosures contain nothing but blue barrels for sleeping, and the dogs are anxious and fractious and readily break into barking and howling; some are bullied aggressively by others lacking any alternative stimulation. [Slide 25] The small dogs flock to the wire to lick my fingers, but soon become bored as I remain there silently and they eventually wander off to sit or lie down. Suddenly a donkey appears and the whole enclosure erupts in frantic noise and chaos.

[Slide 26]

Ultimately, the Critical Realist photographer aims to generate social change, through focussing on that which has been ignored, marginalised and dispossessed; and by revealing the socio-political narratives hidden beneath the everyday surface of civilized societies. [Slide 27] Activists seek to illuminate that invisible picture, to amplify that unheard voice, to reveal that untold story; they are “...always seeking some evidence necessary to maintain, retain, or restore liberty for someone somewhere...”<sup>16</sup> This change

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<sup>11</sup> WJT Mitchell

<sup>12</sup> Berger, J 'Why Look at Animals' p6

<sup>13</sup> Weill, K *Thinking Animals: Why Animal Studies Now*, 2012 p87

<sup>14</sup> McFarland and Hediger p23

<sup>15</sup> Weill, K *Thinking Animals: Why Animal Studies Now*, 2012, p15

<sup>16</sup> Bogue, M *Photography as Activism*

may be gradual, a forced reflection leading to an awakening consciousness, an expanded awareness, but ultimately, a catalyst for socially responsible action.

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Perhaps this disparate enquiry can be drawn together with a particular definition of 'home'. What I am suggesting here is not a physical space; a cosy fireside sofa shared by canine and human, but a *state of being*; a feeling of belonging, of completeness that comes about from being allowed to be *who you are*. [Slide 29] Bell Hooks, writing of her Kentucky childhood, describes *nature* as "the place where one could escape the world of man made constructions of race and identity." (*Belonging* p7). David Harvey argues that 'the artificial break between "society" and "nature" must be eroded, rendered porous, and eventually dissolved'<sup>17</sup>, while Tim Ingold suggests that there is a need to dissolve 'the category of the social' and 'to re-embed these [human] relationships within the continuum of organic life'.<sup>18</sup> [Slide 30] The nature of thought itself" writes Wolfe, "must change if it is to be posthumanist", in order to face the evolutionary, ecological and technological challenges that lie ahead."

Word Count: 2,008

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<sup>17</sup> Harvey, D 1996: 192

<sup>18</sup> Ingold, T 1997: 249-50