

# ArtReview

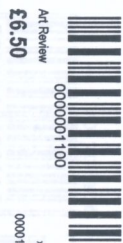
# How do you feel?



UK £6.50

# Javier Téllez

# Kemang Wa Lehulere, Vincent Fecteau





It's a mistake to think that Jennet Thomas's eye-boggling, comic, sinister, techno-folkloric videos are 'about' something. They are, but it does them an injustice to say that they're about nothing *more*. Set in motion by some recognisable bit of subject-matter, Thomas's narrative spins kaleidoscopically, ideas tumbling out, other ideas spooling out of those. At Tintype, the first two parts of a projected trilogy are present – 2016's *Animal Condensed>Animal Expanded #1*, and 2018's *Animal Condensed>>Animal Expanded #2*, shown on monitor and projection screen respectively.

What these are 'about' is something to do with animal life and technology. In the arid, black-and-white-striped virtual landscape of #1 (echoed in the decor Thomas has conceived for the gallery), we find a forlorn, oversize humanoid chicken figure in dialogue with a faceless entity dressed in a sort of primitivist wicker cage. Chicken explains its misery to this being – which calls itself Authenticity Fetish – through gesture and halting subtitles. Among shots of hanging chicken carcasses streaming endlessly along industrial conveyors, it communicates that it is suffering from "Animal Expanded", its true 'animal' nature corrupted, "animal enhanced... animal suspended... animal abstracted". CGI versions of Chicken warp, collapse and melt like "animal cake". "Release me from this," it pleads.

What to make of this? Beyond animal rights or intensive farming, Chicken is the victim of a situation in which materiality, or the distinctness

of an object or being, seems to be unravelling, dislocated from its original identity. If animals appear as the ostensible subject, it might be because their industrialisation serves as metaphor for the loss of an original behind the systematic mediation and unmooring of reality that now defines networked digital culture.

It's this opposition, between the virtual and the material, that really drives Thomas's hallucinatory, spiralling narrative. So *Animal Condensed>Animal Expanded #2* takes us into the midcentury-modern lifestyle interior of an urbanite male, who explains, in tones at once measured and evangelical, the benefits of his family's ingestion of a course of "Animal Condensed". This neoliberal paterfamilias is the epitome of means-ends rationality – "My family is an indoor harvest," he declares, smugly. "We are self-improving systems." His young daughter, meanwhile, plays iPad games in which piglets proliferate digitally and Peppa Pig has her teeth extracted.

#2 unpacks the idea that human identity and self-presence are embodied, and that this corporeal and cognitive site is threatened, invaded and expropriated by instrumental, economic power. It's also a retort, of sorts, to Hito Steyerl's influential *How Not to Be Seen: A Fucking Didactic Educational .MOV File* (2013), and its relentlessly narrow meditation on the politics of visibility in the age of digital surveillance. Thomas robs Steyerl's video of various elements – the catatonic

male-female voice-synthed narrators, the face-recognition disruption patterns and calibration targets – and hands them to a female antagonist, a dystopian freedom-fighter who, dressed in leaf camouflage and hiding in the forest, explains how she evaded those who want to impose "Animal Expanded" on everyone, after the "acceptance vote".

Thomas's critical skill lies in how her fables – fashioned, stream-of-consciousness-style, out of the detritus of pop-cultural neologism – tie everyday experience, through their use of the bizarre, to far bigger political and philosophical questions. Part of that skill is to do with how half-recognised elements from our current social and psychic landscape wander in and out, triggering connections: taking the Donald Trump rubber mask offered to it by Authenticity Fetish, Chicken pulls from the mask's mouth a strip of paper, on which is scrawled 'COMPLEXITY IS FRAUD'. But complexity is what is most needed right now. Authenticity – a hankering after the simple, the back-to-basics and the materially unadulterated – are indeed fetishistic reactions to the obliterating indifference of the networked world, but it's a retrenchment Thomas refuses to take sides with. What instead comes through is more complicated; an intuition about reclaiming active, collective human agency – in the guerrilla's fractured near-future syntax, "expel fake animal, reopen the face". J.J. Charlesworth



*Animal Condensed>Animal Expanded*, 2018 (installation view).  
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