

Susan Askew

The Museum of Human Violence

Book Four:
Critical Reflecton
New understanding and knowledge.

The images on the next pages are from the 'take away' booklet: Learning violence: Schooling. I analysed nine 'violent' schooling practices, and imagined each of these nine practices as a 'Stop' in the new Gallery in The Museum of Human violence.

1. Objectifying

Humans turned non-human, each other, children and land into objects whenever they treated them as 'things'. All the 'Stops' in this Gallery are concerned with objectification, but here Measurement is specifically explored.

In the 100 years before the Giant Rupture measurement through tests turned children into manipulable objects, and turned knowledge itself into 'objects' to be consumed and regurgitated as 'bite-size' facts.

What did you learn in school today
Dear little boy of mine?
What did you learn in school today
Dear little boy of mine?
I learned to get high marks in standardised tests.
I learned I'm brighter than the rest.
I learned to know I rule the roost
Feeling superior gives a boost
And that's what I learned in school today
That's what I learned in school.

All lyrics adapted from the song by Tom Paxton, 'What Did You Learn In School Today?' 1964



Critical Reflection

I will keep this reflection to the three questions:

1. What have I identified as successful
2. What have I identified as problematic
3. What are the next plans for research and practice?

1. What have I identified as successful?

Crucially, for Art as research, new understanding outlined below, arises from making, thinking and reading to inform the work.

1a. I have kept a focus on my research question from the start (with slight narrowing as I progressed):

What can I learn about how artistic interventions can interrupt the iconography of oppression, objectification, invisibility (as subjects) and discourses of violence, in our society; specifically toward 'other' animals?

Learning has included that installation is a useful way to challenge discourses of violence toward other animals (of course, these discourses about other animals also normalise violence to other people), because in conceiving the installation, the maker must focus primarily on imagining the viewer's experience, and because this experiences encourages dialogue about the issues. Added to this fictioning adds a second useful dimension by removing the viewer from the here and now to the future. Because of this fictioning/speculative imagining is a device that allows us to step outside of the 'world-as-is' and critique it, rather than merely describe it (and in describing it, mirror and corroborate it). Crucially this device is hopeful (because the fiction is that human violence has ended). One person at the summer show commented:

"Setting it in 2063 allows me to look back at the world as it is today and to look at my own behaviour in a slightly detached way that allows me to see it more clearly."



2. Naming

This 'Stop' explores the way language was used to confer superiority and privilege. Labels were used in relation to perception of behaviour, like 'bad' or 'good'. Labels also followed measurement; including 'talented', 'clever', 'successful' on the one hand; or 'low-ability', 'slow', 'lazy', 'failure' or even 'stupid' on the other. Labels may or may not have been shared with children.

In this 'Stop' language is also explored in relation to how it impacted relationships between different social groups and between humans and non-humans. For example, 'like an animal' might have been used when criticising human behaviour. It's likely neither tormentor nor tormented perceived that this was abusive and derogatory of non-humans. Language was used to separate and denigrate 'others'.

What did you learn in school today
Dear little girl of mine?
What did you learn in school today
Dear little girl of mine?
I learned when I talk in the class that I'm bad
Being called names makes me so sad
I learned I've got to try harder
I learned Liz and Beth are cleverer
And that's what I learned in school today
That's what I learned in school.

1b. Related to this is the, perhaps, unexpected, focus on schooling as a site for violence, alongside showing dissection in a biology class as an aspect of how violence is normalised in schooling. In our anthropocentric cultures, we perhaps think of violence, as relating to war or physical assault. We tend to overlook the smaller violences at the heart of human cultures. I hope the installation raises questions about how we regard violence and what we tolerate, and even take to be normal in our societies.

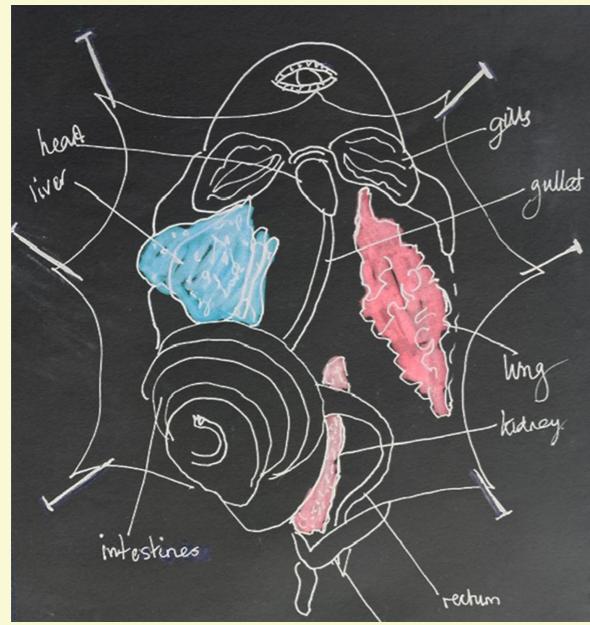
1c. Derrida wrote:

'The Animal looks at us, and we are naked before it. Thinking perhaps begins there.' (Derrida, 2008)

I have attempted to make steps toward interrupting the human gaze. For example, a ceramic frog challenges the boy holding the scalpel. This is fundamental to the work, and it brings to mind Kahlon's (in Tali, 2022) refusal to include stereotypical images in her work on ethnographic museums. Similarly I am reluctant to include images of other animals being treated violently in my work because this maintains the human gaze. The drawing of the dissected frog comes close, but it is a fictional frog rather than say, a photograph of an actual frog being dissected.

1d. The idea of making the 40 booklets a 'take-away' was successful in the sense that they were all taken quickly. I should have printed 100 but they were costly. The thought behind making the booklet a gift, was that it would hopefully be read afterwards, and that it was unlikely to be read during the viewing. One booklet turned up on the Wednesday following the private view in someone else's MA illustration installation - the subject of which was leaflets, pamphlets and newspaper cuttings focusing on capitalism and consumption. I don't know whether it was accidental or deliberately placed there by the artist - but was glad to see it.

1e. I have moved toward one of my overarching research questions (for all my work): How can I bring my drawing into the public sphere and move toward a dialogic practice (Kester, 2010: 23).



Three month old tadpole dissected. Adapted from figure 32.5
'Introduction to Biology', D. G. MacKean. Page 170

3. Erasing

Humans made non-humans, other humans and the land invisible in many ways. Erasing involved viewing 'others' as lacking 'essential' qualities, like rationality (humans supposed they were rational). This assumed 'lack' justified abuse.

'Others' were erased in many school subjects: in History many people's stories were erased. In Domestic Science others were cooked and eaten.

In this 'Stop' a frog is dissected in Biology. (Frogs were common on Earth before the Giant Rupture. The life of the frog was ignored as a subjective being).

Classification was central to Biology. The ways that Humans looked at other life before the Giant Rupture, including classification itself, are examples of Anthropocentric views. Humans forgot that all life existed in inter-dependent and symbiotic relationships. This lead to their own near-erasure.

What did you learn in school today
Dear little boy of mine?
What did you learn in school today
Dear little boy of mine?
I learned in Biology to cut frogs apart
And that was only just the start
I leaned to slice earthworms in half
in Art was shown a pickled calf
And that's what I learned in school today
That's what I learned in school.



4. Dividing

Dividing life was a human preoccupation before the Giant Rupture. This 'Stop' explores some of the ways that division was practiced in schooling, including by age, sex, faith, and wealth.

Knowledge was also divided into separate subjects and the school day was divided into hours, as if learning happens in discrete slots and as if attention can be turned on and off like a tap.

Children were often separated by 'streaming', for example, put into the 'A', 'B', 'C' or 'D' stream for every subject, or they might be separated into 'ability' groups within the same class.

What did you learn in school today
Dear little girl of mine?
What did you learn in school today
Dear little girl of mine?
I learned we must hurry from science to math.
I learned Chemistry's not my path.
I learned my day's ruled by a bell
And I learned schooling's tiring as hell
And that's what I learned in school today
That's what I learned in school.

Dialogic art necessitates a shift in our understanding of what art is - away from the visual and sensory (which are individual experiences) and toward discursive exchange and negotiation. Quite a lot of people who saw the installation were keen to talk about it. Their questions were thoughtful and showed engagement with the work. for example:

'Who am I? Am I a human or a robot?'

I particularly enjoyed this question because I asked it myself while making the work. If I set the installation 40 years in the future, are my visitors themselves humans or robots and do I need to decide this? How might it make a difference to how I present the installation?

'Are you vegan?'

I am glad that for some viewers it was clear that my work extended beyond frog dissection in a descriptive way, to questions about normalising violence to other animals generally, and by association, to the expectation that I would have considered my own behaviour in relation to this. The question lead to a lengthy discussion with the questioner and her sister about veganism and the difficulties they experienced relating to becoming vegan.

'Where do you come from?'

I thought this was an interesting (first) question from one visitor who wanted to interview me. It lead me to talk about coming from generations of farmers. Her next question in the interview was:

'What is most important to you?'

Again, this was a thoughtful question and it caused me to reflect on what really is most important to me? The fundamental purpose of my work is to identify and challenge the dominant discourses and ideologies that are taught us, and lead to abuse, constraint, and exploitation and/or death of human and non human life.



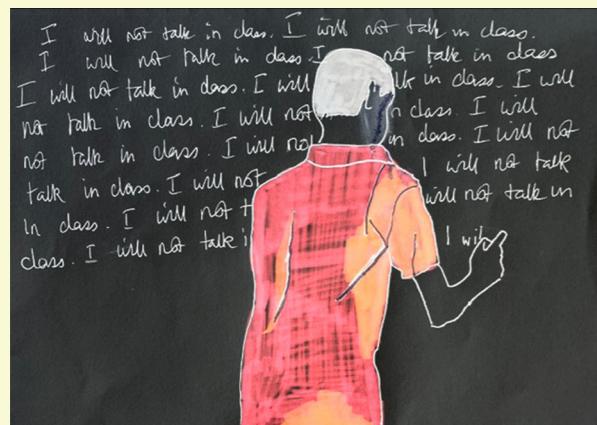
5. Controlling

'Stop 5' explores more obvious ways that Schooling ensured obedience, regimentation and 'silencing'.

Children were often discouraged from displaying individuality through dress: school uniform was usual. School rules were ubiquitous. For example, putting up the hand to speak or ask for permission to go to the toilet. Sometimes children were lined up in single file and only allowed in the classroom when they stood still and in complete silence. Infringement of rules usually meant some form of punishment, for example, staying after school for detention.

When interviewed, some survivors of the Giant Rupture talked about friendships developed during school, support from teachers and having fun. Whether Schooling was experienced as fun or traumatic, it was steeped in the message that society sanctioned control of the less powerful by the more powerful, and controlling practices, rooted in domination and subordination, should not be questioned.

What did you learn in school today
Dear little boy of mine?
What did you learn in school today
Dear little boy of mine?
I learned always to do whatever I'm told.
And keep the rules even when old
I learned to stand still, out of sight
And I learned the teacher's always right
And that's what I learned in school today
That's what I learned in school.



6. Competing

Competition was a cornerstone of pre-Giant Rupture society. Humans competed even when this was not necessary for survival. At every level of society and in every arena, prizes were given out for 'winners'. Usually the winners were ranked 1st, 2nd, or 3rd, and everyone else was a loser- so the majority were always losers.

One outcome of this obsession with 'winners' at the time was the cult of the 'celebrity': people who were revered because of how much money they had and how much time they spent on public show.

This understanding of 'success' was dominant in schools, and prizes and tokens given, for being 'top' in sport, for 'good' behaviour or, for example, judged 'best' in an essay writing competition.

What did you learn in school today
Dear little girl of mine?
What did you learn in school today
Dear little girl of mine?
I learned it's most important to win, win, win.
Coming second is like a sin.
I don't get the tokens or prize
"failure's opportunity" is lies
And that's what I learned in school today
That's what I learned in school.

1f. I have moved, in this second installation, more than other work during the year, toward one of the overarching questions for all my work:

How can drawing be used as a research method that contributes to new knowledge? (Rather than draws on knowledge already in the public sphere) (Simoniti, 2021).

This question has caused me most problems during the last year. I have referred earlier to my learning that installation and fictioning are useful artistic interventions in social justice issues. I have also learned something about how to refer to this violence so that others can engage with it rather than turn away from it - through framing the violence as having now ended. I argue that this fiction allows for less judgement and criticism of our current actions, and is less likely to make people feel attacked. Fiction also allows for the perspective from a future in which the beings of that world look back on this violence with horror.

I realise, through writing this critical reflection, that I can also add some knowledge relating to learning violence itself - the focus for the installation.

This new knowledge arises from making the booklet that accompanied the exhibition. I spent time analysing how we learn violence in school, and, as a result of drawing that violence, I identified and labelled nine 'violent' and normalising practices that I think are very damaging to children and adults. The practices that I identified: objectifying, naming, erasing, dividing, controlling, competing, conditioning, privileging, and constraining, are briefly described in the booklet, illustrated with the drawing, and with a poem about each, written in the style of the song by Tom Paxton, 'What did you learn in school today?' From my knowledge of literature about schooling (gained from being an MA Education programme leader for many years) I am quite sure that these nine practices, have not been identified in quite this way before, as key devices of schooling, and nor have they been labelled as normalising violent practices. The booklet itself, therefore, is an important research



7. Conditioning

Schools were essentially centres of conditioning: places where children learned the 'rules' of society, how to fit in, and how not to question the rules. Questioning the rules usually meant being ostracised. Some of the rules taught children to accept violence. For example, children might tolerate bullying of another child, in order not to have the bullying turned on them.

Other aspects of conditioning related to not having an opinion different to the acknowledged leader. Eating was strongly socially conditioned. In schools most children ate the lunch provided. This included 'serving' the flesh of other animals.

Conditioning meant that autonomy and freedom was severely restricted.

What did you learn in school today
Dear little boy of mine?
What did you learn in school today
Dear little boy of mine?
I learned to be part of the group to survive.
Alone I am barely alive.
I learned to fit in and play dumb
I learned to pretend better than some
And that's what I learned in school today
That's what I learned in school.



8. Privileging

Along with systems of dividing, were systems of privileging and classifying that contributed to notions of superiority and inferiority and to separating humans from each other and from 'other' nature. Hierarchical relationships are one example. In some schools, particularly in the fee-paying system, it was common to have a 'head' prefect. All schools had a 'Head' teacher.

Privileging was closely related to 'ranking': schools themselves were ranked according to their test results, adding to competition and division.

Many of the examples in all the 'Stops' draw a picture of lack of collaboration in schools, but this only reflects lack of collaboration within Nations and between Nations. It is this lack of collaboration that is now seen as responsible for the destruction of all non-human species, the land and other humans in the years leading up to the Giant Rupture.

What did you learn in school today
Dear little girl of mine?
What did you learn in school today
Dear little girl of mine?
I learned I'm a leader and have to stand tall.
I'm a beacon of light for all
I learned the school depends on me
My essential qualities are key
And that's what I learned in school today
That's what I learned in school.

outcome, and reminds me that I should retain the element of analysis in my work going forward.

My understanding of 'violence' might be challenged. I believe I could make a strong argument for emotional and spiritual harm resulting from the practices outlined, and find substantive arguments in the literature to back me up. There could also be disagreements about the difference between 'violence' and 'harm'. The National Institute of Health, for example offers this :

Violence is defined by the World Health Organization in the WRVH as "the intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community, that either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment or deprivation

This definition emphasises that a person or group must intend to use force or power against another person or group in order for an act to be classified as violent (NCBI).

1g. I have paid attention to another overarching question for my work:

How can I synthesise social critique with emotional experience?

I hope that emotional connection was achieved by the fact that every single one of us has experience of schooling. I was surprised by how many (young) people had experience of dissecting other animals. Several retold stories of their own experience. For example, two technicians who had recently finished their BA - one from the North of the country and one from the South - told me that they had dissected other animals in biology - one a sheep's heart, and one a rat. They both talked about feeling that this was a violent, and, in their view, unnecessary experience. Another student told me of her experience of dissecting an eye ball.



9. Constraining

The idea of constraint relates to practices that physically limited what children were allowed to do. They imposed rigidity, rather than flexibility. Like other practices explored in the Gallery, they were aimed at surveillance and domination. Examples at 'Stop' 9 include seating arrangements that made the children sit in rows facing forward where the teacher stood as a figure of authority who could easily watch everyone. Twelve feet high fences were built around some schools, locks on entrance doors were common; these measures were justified on health and safety grounds. It seems attacks on schools were increasing before the Giant Rupture. However, they were exceedingly rare and these practices add to the impression that schools were places of detention.

Constraint on 'others' against their will was a common feature of society, including of humans who disagreed with the system; and non-humans in zoos constrained as a spectacle for human entertainment, or other non-humans constrained for experimental purposes.

What did you learn in school today
Dear little boy of mine?
What did you learn in school today
Dear little boy of mine?
Learned I'm a prisoner though I did no crime
I Learned I'm shut in for all time
I learned to be chained to my seat
learned to accept it and get my treat
And that's what I learned in school today
That's what I learned in school.

It seems that the choice to make ceramic frogs, as well as the drawing of the frog on copper, were engaging. For example, I spotted one adult male stroking the top of one frog's head. Another visitor studied the drawing of the frog for some time and commented that he had not appreciated how beautiful frogs are before.

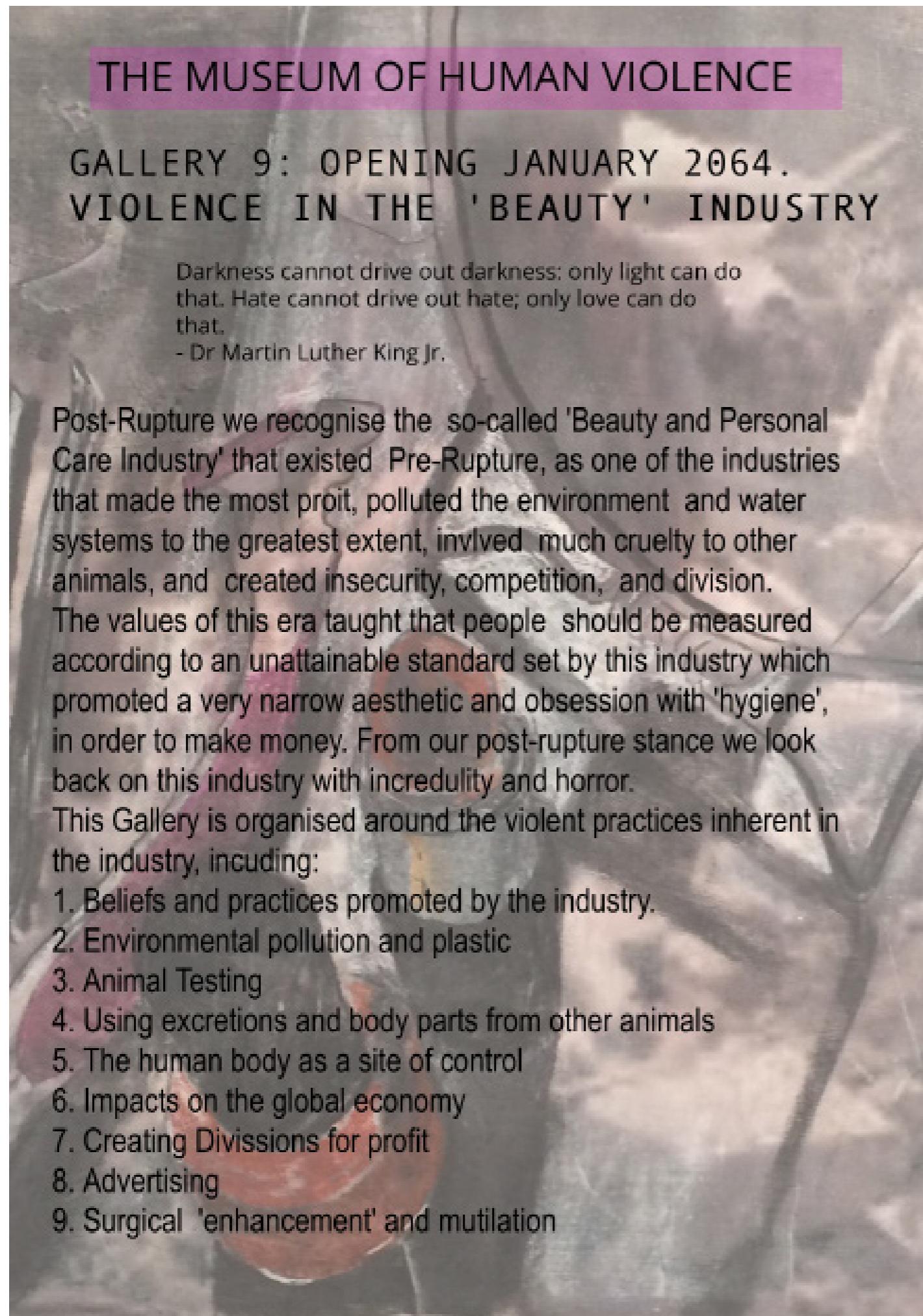
1h. The choice to focus on Biology itself was, in my view, successful, because Biology is at the heart of many contemporary discussions about human-other nature relationships. Indeed Biology, and science more generally, has been identified as problematic in supporting the privileging and supremacy of humans over the rest of the living world:

Biological sciences have been especially potent in fermenting notions about all the mortal inhabitants of the earth since the imperializing eighteenth century. *Homo sapiens* - the human as species, the *Anthropos* as the human species, *Modern man* - was a chief product of these knowledge practices. What happens when the best biologies of the 21st century cannot do their job with bounded individuals plus contexts, when organisms plus environments, or genes plus whatever they need, no longer sustain the overflowing richness of biological knowledge, if they ever did? (Haraway, 2016:30)

1i. The concept of the Museum of Human Violence is itself a useful and broad idea within which to site my ongoing practice. It has many possibilities for development. I like the idea of conceptualising it rather like a Russian doll - with the actual installation being a tiny corner of one 'spot' within one conceptual space, within one gallery, within the whole museum. I have included ideas for further development later in this booklet.

2. What have you identified as problematic

2a. I want to be clearer about the world of 2063. For example, I'm imagining that it might be a world in which AI has gained power over humans. But I'm seeing this as benevolent: AI has brought about the end of violence. However I'm not clear how this has come about.



Also, I'm not totally sure of the relationship between human and AI, and I'm not sure whether this is a divided world between AI and humans or a cyborg world. Reading the post humanist literature on Cyborgs, and AI take-over would be useful in regard to clarifying my position. Science fiction would also be a useful resource.

Similarly, someone asked me "What happened in the Giant rupture?"

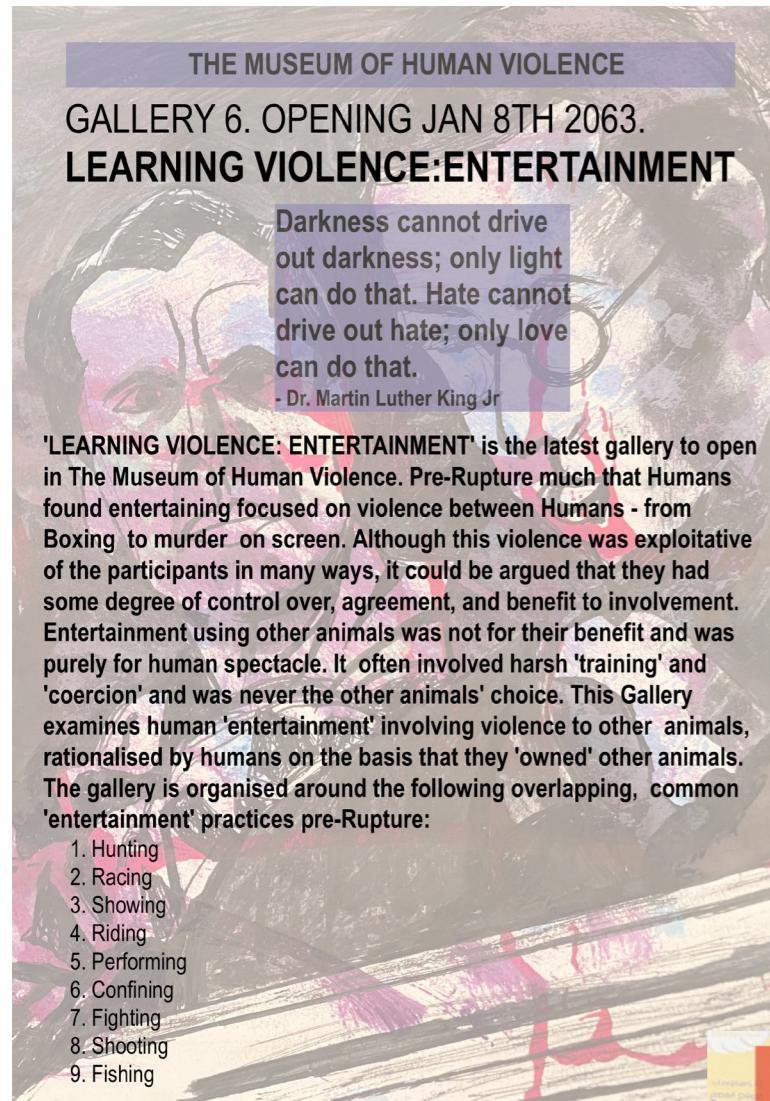
I have deliberately not decided and I replied by asking them what they thought might have happened.

I need to be clearer about this fictional world because it might impact my decisions about what to include in the installation and how I frame it (even if the decisions themselves are not shared, which perhaps they should not be - leaving space for engagement/ interpretation).

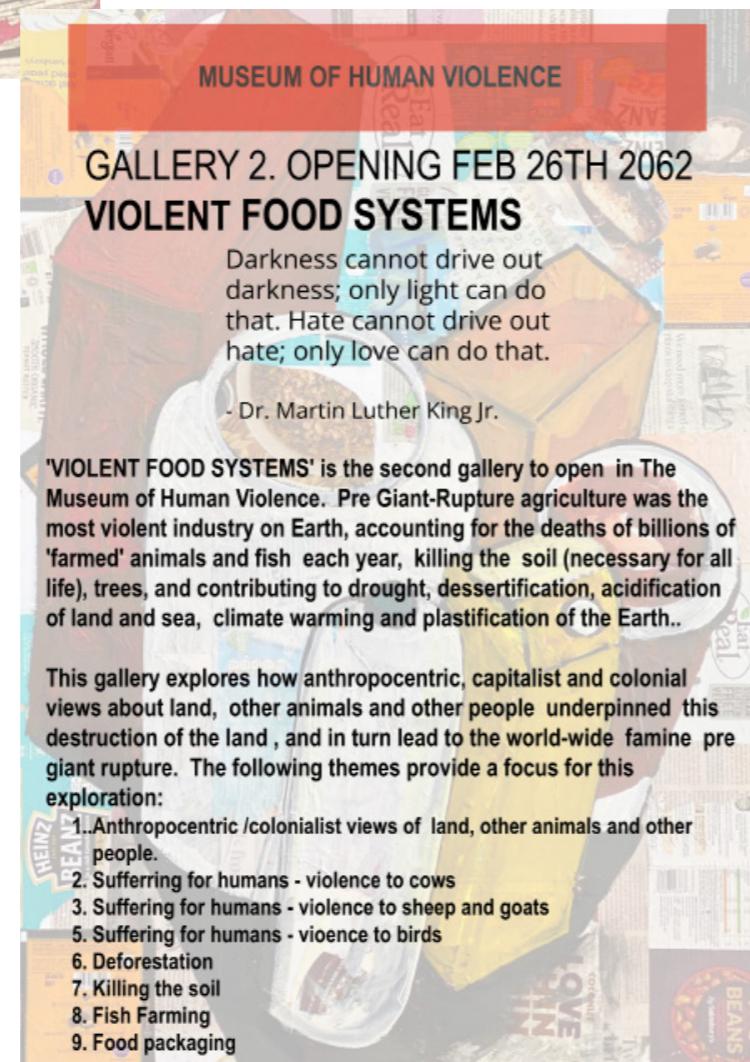
2b. Authorship is the big issue and was immediately picked up in my group crit - who made the frog drawing and why was it there? In fact I decided to leave out the second drawing below after this question was asked during installation:



Title: 'I Think'. Drawing in ink and biro on paper attached to wooden frame with starch paste. 55 x 75 cm



On the preceding page, here and below, I explore ideas for the next installation in the Museum of Human Violence.



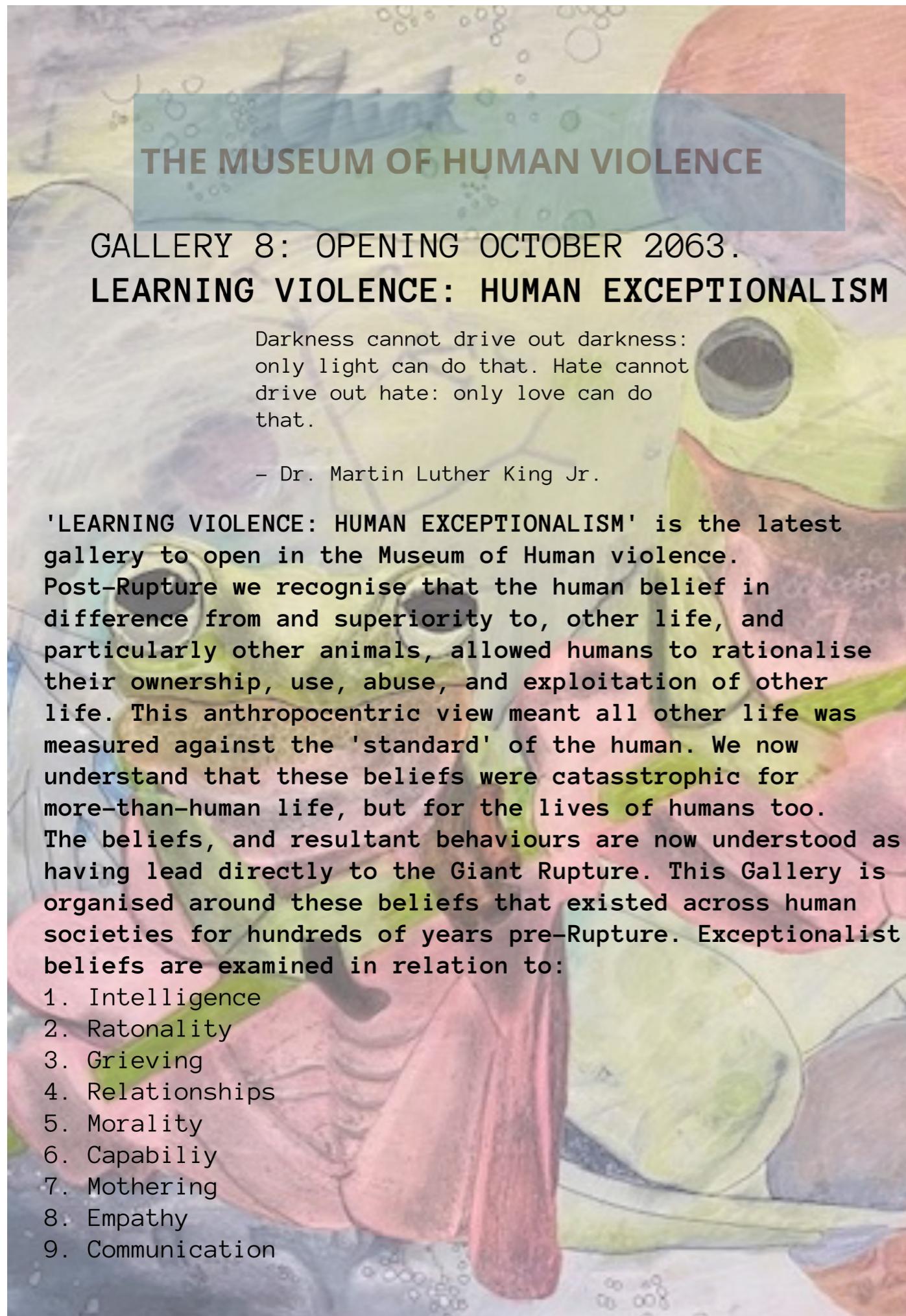
I had a persistent sense of incoherence relating to both frog drawings beforehand. I should have taken this awareness seriously. I need to sort out the question of authorship before I embark on the next installation. The question is 'What are these drawings doing in a fictional, curated museum about learning violence and who drew them?' (asked in the context of a museum curated by AI or a cyborg or a an AI/Human collaboration.)

The frog drawings are the most obvious concern, but the question of authorship could equally be asked about the ceramic frogs, the paper mache boy and the drawings in the booklet.

The drawing above started with a focus on evolution and the differing explanations between the (competitive) Darwinian explanation and the (interdependent) symbiotic Margulis explanation, but developed as a way of challenging the anthropocentric view that only humans are intelligent (Braidotti, 2013) Returning to this now I believe I could have used the drawing with a curatorial note pointing to the anthropocentric belief, pre giant-rupture, that only human life was intelligent - these frogs 'think'. This would have added an important dimension.

2c. I like, and intend continuing, to make things. This was pointed out in the Group Crit too. At this point I don't know how to resolve this tension - directly related to the point above about authorship. A museum is a collection of found objects, not a collection of found objects, alongside objects made by the curator. I was in fact thinking before the problem became clear to me, that the concept I have come up with, of the Museum of Human Violence, gives me licence to make things using any method I choose: this felt very freeing. Now I'm faced with the dilemma that possibly the concept means I cannot make anything!

2d. Because of this, the concept of a Museum is a double edged sword. On the one hand it has all the advantages identified above, in relation to providing some distance and also providing a device for being critical of current practices; on the other it could be suggested that I should meet the conventions of the contemporary Museum (of which I am critical).



Museums today, as Marten Snickare, Professor of Art History and Co-ordinator of Research at Stockholm University, talked about, are in large part colonial institutions, that present stolen objects in an exoticising form behind glass, where they are distanced, objectified and observed as 'different' (I wrote about this in the report of attendance at the research week in Stockholm, January 2023). Professor Snickare wondered aloud whether Museums should be shut down, and everything in them given back. I suggested that they should not be shut but renamed as memorials to colonial violence: the objects could be cloned, and originals returned. One way around the expectations from using the word 'Museum' could be to change the language used to 'Memorial' (but I find myself hesitant to do so).

3. What are the next plans for research and practice?

I have started thinking about other galleries in the museum: see the examples here. Currently I am thinking of working on how 'other' animals are used in the 'Beauty' industry: this gives possibilities for intersectional work on feminism and non-human animal injustice. I intend sticking with installation and fictioning. I will work toward resolving the 3 core problems identified above: clarity about the world of 2063 (I have signed up for a sci fi writing workshop); authorship, and expectations about museums. I will work on understanding the posthumanist writing on AI and human-non human worlds, as well as read more ecofeminist literature and think about how new materialism fits/is in tension with Critical Discourse Analysis. I will think more about shifting away from the human gaze toward the 'other' animal gaze and how to avoid repetition of violence while exposing it. I also want to think further about emotional connection, and contributing new knowledge,

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