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DUMB ANIMALS, CRAZY BROADS AND UGLY TRUTHS:
ROOTING FOR THE AVANT-GARDE

A Dissertation Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies and Research in Partial
Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree Doctor of Philosophy

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This dissertation will sympathetically critique the avant-garde, investigating why it has failed to make a significant and lasting impact outside of the institution of art. With the post-WWI Surrealists as an historical starting point, I define the avant-garde as any person or group who uses aesthetic and artistic means to challenge cultural, political, and intellectual norms. But avant-gardes have failed, do fail, and will fail as long as they remain in the grip of Western patriarchy.

I propose to root out the contemporary avant-garde in its most complex and contradictory form yet, the Animal Liberation Movement (ALM), a movement in crisis because it too is in the patriarchal vise. The histories and philosophies of these two groups are diverse, but they intersect at and on several points. When these intersections occur, the disparate movements become deeply and profoundly similar, most especially when they seek to expose Western rationalist conceptions of truth.

The most problematic of those cultural realities, and one with which the avant-garde and ALM struggle most fiercely, is the beauty imperative/myth. A collection of women—Mina Loy, Valerie Solanas, Katherine Dunn, Carolee Schneemann, and Coco Fusco—have written, performed, and acted on a destructivist solution to the beauty problem, and each has been avant-garde in a way that both recapitulates and critiques the relationship between sexism and speciesism. I will explore these topics—avant-garde history and theory, ALM contradictions, the work of female artists and writers, and the

cultural politics of beauty—in light of contemporary global commodity culture to explore a cycle mandating a cultural and trans-species dependence on beauty and fashion products to achieve an ideal that the avant-garde, ALM, and avant-garde ALM both oppose and propagate. Despite these ingrained contradictions and outright hypocrisies, these movements are still founded on fundamental ideas of disruption that offer the most promise for a world remade.