

2023

Self – Reflective Diary

OF HANA REHORČÍKOVÁ

Green represents the most relevant aspects connected to the final artifact, which are even visible in the outcome.

Red indicates assumptions that were later proven wrong, incorrect information, or general failures.

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- **Details of my MTH place:** At the start of the course, I was really interested in working with horses and horseback riding. I even visited three horse stables in Helsinki and spent time there. But it was only after Zoë's feedback that I started to broaden my view. That's when I learned about hobbyhorsing for the first time. I reached out to Alisa Aarniomäki, met her at the Sipoon Monitoimihalli arena, and recorded shots and an interview. That place, my MTH place, is special to me because it's where I completely changed my mind about hobbyhorsing.

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(Interesting thoughts and notes from course lectures)

- What Is Really Feral?
- Are We Humans Trying to Control Everything? We Know It's Not Possible, But Still We Are Trying..
- Beyond Human Control - Unpredictable: Acknowledging that feral aspects lie beyond human control, introducing an unpredictable element to the design process.
- Raise More Questions Than Answers!
- What Kind of Data Are Right? Because Some Lead to Racism or Other Negative Results - How to Choose Data Wisely?: Questioning the ethical considerations in choosing data, particularly when certain types of data can perpetuate negative outcomes.
- Let's Turn Back to the Wild, Fun, Emotion: Encouraging a return to a more spontaneous and emotionally connected approach to the wild and fun aspects of life.
- Can We Capture Data Through Objects? How?
- Why Do We Look at the Feral Data - Reason, Need?
- Why Is It Even Feral?: Delving into the factors and circumstances that contribute to data or more-than-human beings transitioning into a feral state.
- Becoming with Each Other: Exploring interconnectedness and mutual growth.
- Social Normatives - Should They Organize the World?: Reflecting on the impact and role of social norms in shaping our world.
- We All Share This Planet!

- Embodiment - Localized, Entangled with Local Place and Its Ecologies.
- Feminist Perspectives on Making Sense of the World: Examining how feminist viewpoints contribute to understanding and interpreting the world.
- Building Bridges: Exploring ways to connect and build bridges between diverse perspectives.
- Sharpening Our Sensory Capacities.
- Re-Learning from Other-Than-Human Species.
- Not (Just) Hearing What Is Being Said, But Also Noticing What Is Not Being Expressed Through Careful Attuning: Emphasizing the importance of attentive listening to both spoken and unspoken communication.
- Whose Expertise Matters?: Questioning the validity and relevance of different perspectives and expertise.
- "I Do Not Want to Speak for Anyone - I Want Them to Speak for Themselves" - But at the Same Time, We Do Not Stop Caring, But We Will Be More Careful with Our "Truths".
- Other-than-Human Creatures Are in the Center of Attention - They Have Rights, Needs, Desires - Multispecies Nature: Shifting the focus to non-human entities, acknowledging their rights, needs, and desires, and embracing a multispecies perspective.
- Feral Ways as a Design Method: Exploring the use of feral approaches as a design methodology.
- Making Data More Visible: Enhancing transparency by making information more accessible and comprehensible.

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(Interesting thoughts and notes from course lectures)

- Experimenting with How We Can Listen to Our Creature.
- How Non-Human Beings Express Themselves?
- My Experience as a Key Source of Knowledge (My Expertise Matters!)
- Try to Have Close Contact with These Creatures – In Person, You Cannot Experience It Remotely: Emphasizing the importance of physical proximity and personal engagement for a more authentic understanding.
- Select a Spot in Helsinki and Spend Time There, Engage with Local Humans and Other-Than-Human Creatures to Observe Their Daily Lives, Rhythms, Relations, Learn and Make Sense with Them, Co-Create Knowledge and Data: Outlining a methodological approach that involves selecting a specific location, immersing oneself in the environment, and engaging with both human and non-human inhabitants to co-create knowledge and data.
- How Can I Materialize the Data I Collect?: Considering ways to translate collected data into tangible forms or expressions.
- Are We Interpreting Right? Perspective of the Creature: Reflecting on the accuracy of interpretations, particularly from the perspective of the non-human creature, to ensure a more nuanced understanding.
- Designing With and Alongside the Needs and Lived Experiences of Human and Other-Than-Human Actors Alike to Better Understand the Relations That Make Up Worlds – Design Things to Improve, to Change Something for the Better.
- Allow It to Go Beyond Your Own Expectations, Research: Encouraging an open-ended and exploratory research approach, allowing the design process to surpass initial expectations and uncover unforeseen possibilities.

(After discovering the term hobbyhorsing)

Hobbyhorsing

- Finnish phenomenon that began officially in Finland in 2012, gained international recognition after the 2017 documentary “Hobbyhorse Revolution” by Finnish director Selma Vilhunen. This unique subculture involves mimicking horse movements by walking/running while holding a horse’s head on a stick, replicating real arena rides, and even jumping obstacles in competitions while considering speed.

From Imagination to Physical Exercise

- Hobbyhorses are zoomorphised character toys with personalities. Hobbyhorsing is not a metaphor; it’s an art and an act that fosters creativity, imagination, and independent thinking, embracing people of all ages, genders, and backgrounds, and cultivating both sports and creative skills.
- My notes: Hobbyhorses offer possibilities for imaginative object play (nurturing, narrativizing, and creative cultivation) and use as sports equipment for physical exercise and participation in a competitive sport – which is a very unique (and positive) combination.

They do ride real horses too.

- Approximately half of the participants also have experience with horseback riding. Some horseback riders may look down on hobbyhorsing as a childlike pasttime not suitable for anyone aged over 10. My notes: This makes me really interested in learning more about hobbyhorsing, because I’ve been a rider myself for around 12 years, and until now I had no idea that this even existed, though I was also struggling with a lack of

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(After discovering the term hobbyhorsing)

financial resources for my (real) riding horse expenses. I used to play an online game called Howrse and create my own stable full of my dream horses that I could never afford in real life, and I was also giving them names and personalities. Besides that, I used to also paper-draw whatever I would buy for my horse - a new luxury saddle and bridle - and these were my ways of coping with it. Does it make sense to compare it to the real riding experience, or should we take it as a completely new hobby or sport?

Why do people see it as bizarre?

- The girls struggle with society's perception of their sport of choice. They constantly try to hide their hobby, facing fierce bullying when found out. This phenomenon prompts a reconsideration of the conventional understanding of "normal." Many people find it "bizarre" because they mistakenly assume the participants believe the hobbyhorse is alive when, in fact, they understand that it's a fabric creation. There are two stereotypes about hobbyhorsists: they are either a bunch of school kids playing, or a group of middle-aged women gone wild and jumping around the bushes. The truth is that most are 12- to 18-year-old girls, but there are plenty of adults in the community; most of them in their twenties started when they were young and just never stopped. My notes: Do we judge this hobby so quickly and jump to conclusions? What makes us so quick to label something as 'weird' or 'abnormal'? What makes us feel entitled to do so in the first place?

'Standards' and Female Empowerment

- In Finland, it's a recognized sport with over 10,000 enthusiasts, mostly young girls. Hobbyhorsing also has a strong element of female empowerment, some riders say. Young girls are building their own scene and setting their own terms, free of strict standards and the scrutiny of official committees. "No boys are coming and saying what we need to do or bossing around," Alisa Aarniomäki, 20, told the AP. "I think hobbyhorsing has a feminist agenda." My notes: Why do these young girls have the need to build their own scene, rules, etc.? Do they feel under pressure, maybe even pushed to pursue something 'more of their age' or more appropriate? Are they expected to fulfill some standards?

Reasons for Pursuing This Hobby - 1. Therapy

- Aarniomäki said she has been riding real horses since she was 10 but finds hobbyhorsing to be very therapeutic. She said it's helped her navigate her parents' divorce, bullying at school, and other painful personal issues. "It has helped me a great deal that I can occasionally just go galloping into the woods with my friends," she told the AP. "It somehow balances my mind."

Reasons for Pursuing This Hobby - 2. Supportive Community

- Many participants, especially those facing social challenges or bullying, find a supportive community in hobbyhorsing. They learn from older members, build social circles, and find an alternative to male-dominated mainstream sports. My notes: It shares the same values as other sports.

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(After discovering the term hobbyhorsing)

Reasons for Pursuing This Hobby - 3. Money

- The reason why most of these fans aren't heading down to the stables every day is because owning a horse is incredibly expensive, and near impossible in an urban area. My notes: They found a way to solve the situation of wanting to ride without spending huge amounts of money. Is it just a replacement or mimicking, or does it have something much more - something that's living its life on its own?

Reasons for Pursuing This Hobby - 4. Strong Social Media Presence

- The sport has spawned a social media subculture among young Finns. Online discussion boards help foster a sense of community and provide a place for swapping tips. It is a hobby that unites people. This is promising because more and more hobbyhorsists are in different cities and countries. Like-minded people not only meet and communicate with each other but also watch videos about famous athletes and their hobbyhorses, teach schemes for performances, and together create their hobbyhorses and come up with names, breeds, and stories. My notes: We have been having this horse on the stick for decades; it's nothing new, but nowadays, with the power of social media, it has gained much more power and has become a completely new field. Does (finally) social media play a positive role in this?

Making a Hobbyhorse

- Part of the fun is making hobbyhorses as realistic as possible, selling, collecting and trading them, organising competitions and so on. Most hobbyhorses are homemade, often colorful, and creatively named.

- Hobbyhorsists take pride in the sport's do-it-yourself attitude. Industrial-made hobbyhorses are rare at events, as they are considered "lower-caste hobbyhorses." There's an art involved in making the actual hobbyhorses - it's a combination of creativity and handicraft. More than that, they can give their toy horse a personality, brush, and style its mane, talk to it, stroke it, and buy or make new accessories for it in the same way they would with a real horse. My notes: I wonder if it's so strongly related to only horses, or could it be possible to do the same with a frog or cat on a stick?

Elements of the Centaur

- Hobbyhorsing presents elements of the centaur, where the lower half of a person's body emulates a horse's legs, while the upper half represents the rider. Alternatively, it can be seen as a unique form of ballet, with routines and judges awarding scores. In either interpretation, it offers a realm of fantasy, enjoyment, and an escape from the monotony of everyday life for those who are passionate about it. My notes: What if this hobby isn't an alternative to horseback riding but has instead evolved from something else, such as "wearing a mask" as in a masquerade? The real performance more closely resembles a dance or ballet. Should we still connect it to horseback riding? Yet, at the same time, it's true that they are mimicking the movements of the rider and horse.

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(After discovering the term hobbyhorsing)

Is it a real sport?

- Riding a hobbyhorse can be termed as an organized sport as it has diversified from merely a fun hobby for celebrating girlhood to mastering proper equestrian movements like dressage and show jumping to compete in tournaments. In general, it is a spontaneous invention by teenage Finnish girls. They claimed it as a passionate hobby to freely express themselves. With that said, it's up to your interpretation of what a sport really is. My notes: I find it quite fascinating how something can transition from being just a playful pastime, perhaps considered a mere toy, to evolving into a legitimate sport. Who has the authority to determine what qualifies as a sport and what should be subject to ridicule?

(After the interview with Alisa Aarniomäki on November 13, 2023)

Hana: How would you describe hobbyhorsing as a sport?

Alisa: It's running and jumping. In general, it's like gymnastics. It feels like a dance, or almost like a cardio workout, requiring precise body control.

Hana: Is there Western riding in hobbyhorsing? I'm curious because that's what I do.

Alisa: Actually, Vilma, whom you just saw, is one of the pioneers of Western hobbyhorsing in Finland. She also practices it with real horses. But it's not very popular in Finland, even with real horses. Most participants focus on jumping. Personally, I lean towards dressage since

my ankles are not in the best condition; jumping can be risky for me, although I do it occasionally.

Hana: Do you have your own horse?

Alisa: It's quite rare in Finland, like, given the prices, you know? I ride with no ambition. It's more about the horse being comfortable, and I just enjoy my time. I go to riding lessons, but I'm a student, I work, I'm an entrepreneur, I also have my own house that I need to maintain, so it's like I'm in very limited time.

Hana: But I guess you do this more often than riding real horses?

Alisa: Yeah, riding real horses is like, once a week. I go whenever I want to, but I do hobbyhorsing way more often, just because I'm good at this, so why not continue?

Hana: I'm really looking for a way to understand how it is different from riding real horses?

Alisa: Of course, we have inspired from the basic idea of disciplines when it comes to real horses, but at the same time, you don't include any animals in this sport. You have to do everything yourself. It's more about your body and your way of doing it instead of this cooperation with you and the horse. And it makes this more or less like a gymnastics, and even more about how do you make yourself look good when it comes to dressage, how do you make yourself jump higher when it comes to show jumping... It's not only about mimicking real horsing. No.

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(After the interview with Alisa Aarniomäki on November 13, 2023)

Hana: So, it's like a completely new field?

Alisa: Yeah, it is. Especially here are a lot of stables in Finland, like real horse stables, that want to associate hobbyhorsing in their events in a way that it's your gateway to real horses. Whereas we see this as you can do both. We have developed a hobby and a sport that requires definitely different skill set than real horses. I'm way better with hobbyhorsing than I am with real horses. I am not a Finnish national champion in real horse riding, whereas, like, real horse people, if they don't have any hobbyhorsing background, they don't know how to do it.

Hana: I think that you are the first generation of hobbyhorsists, do you see yourself as a role model for beginners?

Alisa: Yeah, that's like the most common misinformation that I am the founder of this. I have friends who have done this way longer. I just was in the hobby when it was super underground. But there was an established online community already existing when I started. And it's hard to say from my perspective, but I acknowledge that I've been around and I've been in media quite a lot. So I know that people like my presence, kind of. I'm a coach and people for example, the Czechia event I just did, it was like they made a whole event about me coming to the country. And then I coached there for two days. But yeah, because of the movie and because I started to give interviews. It was huge after the movie. And media really caught on to their whole what they call phenomenon or subculture. I heard so many terms...

Hana: Is it a subculture?

Alisa: Well, it's not a subculture in a way. I know that we have a close community and we have this dynamic that's maybe more open, kind of like especially since a lot of us got bullied when we were young kids. So we kind of have that affection towards each other that we take care of the community and we accept everyone and we welcome everyone, kind of just because.

Hana: Does it apply also to boys or men?

Alisa: Yes. We do not have as many boys or men as women, but I know a lot of boys and men who have been in this scene and competed, and they've always been very much welcome. Of course, I can't speak for them, but from my perspective and how people talk about each other, people are cool with that. In Finland, riding horses is considered a very feminine hobby. So doing hobbyhorsing, which is more creative, it kind of then leans towards the same feminine ideology of your pastime. So I feel like that's what keeps boys and men in the margin, unfortunately, that they are not, maybe because of social pressure, able to consider this as an option usually or something. But that's just, like, what I would suspect it would be because "horse girls" in Finland, it's also a pretty famous term.

Hana: How did you even get into this?

Alisa: I was...eleven? Do you know Star Stable? Those horse games? Star Stable was this offline PC game at first, and I loved it, so I wanted to buy it because it was coming with this magazine that you have to order,

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(After the interview with Alisa Aarniomäki on November 13, 2023)

and it was not in the stores. So I had to find it somewhere. And I ran into this forum about horses, and there was also a subtopic for hobbyhorsing, and the same person who was selling the PC game was also selling a hobbyhorse. And I was like, that's interesting, that's cool. And I was like, I'll look into it. But I didn't buy the hobbyhorse, I bought the PC game. And later on, I suggested to my friends who were kind of like-minded like me, I asked them if they want to try hobbyhorsing. Let's make our own hobbyhorses and ride and let's play. And that's how it got started. It was in 2008.

Hana: Was it called hobbyhorsing back then?

Alisa: Well, keppihevosten, which is like a straight translation to hobbyhorsing from Finnish language. But hobbyhorsing as a term came around the same time as the movie. I feel like we agreed, for the sake of the movie, that we will call this hobbyhorsing now because it needs to be translated.

Hana: Do you give your hobbyhorses names or how do you treat them? Would you call it like, I don't know, a connection?

Alisa: Well, I mean imagination is a very individual thing in this hobby. Some people are like this is just the sports equipment, and some people really lean on to the whole imagination thing and come up with personalities and find these what you call connections. It does happen. I feel like of course for me it has worn away by time and when I got older it's not that important anymore but no matter who you are in this hobby,

you always name your horse. Most of the people maybe don't come up with personalities. At least I don't, but everyone names their hobbyhorses.

Hana: How many hobbyhorses do you have?

Alisa: I typically buy these nostalgic (hobby)horses that were a big deal when I was a kid. I share ownership of many hobbyhorses with my friends, where each of us contributes a bit of money towards one. It's like a collective ownership, and sometimes people just give me hobbyhorses that I find it hard to refuse. So, I end up with hobbyhorses that I didn't purchase or request. But I'm grateful for them, and I own eight hobby horses, including gifted ones.

Hana: Do people always create their own hobbyhorses?

Alisa: When I began, there wasn't a single legally recognized entrepreneur in the hobbyhorse community. Now, there are hundreds in Finland alone. As people established the appearance of their hobbyhorses, the trend of buying rather than making them only has grown from there. It has evolved into a phenomenon where people take pride in owning hobbyhorses from specific makers.

Hana: What about the specifications like shape and weight?

Alisa: My hobbyhorses are quite narrow. I needed an upgrade from a lighter dressage horse, and that's how my current preferences evolved. Some people prefer heavier ones or different postures. There are no strict rules; individuals craft them based on personal preferences, as long as they respect basic requirements like having a stick and reins, and for higher

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dressage classes, two reins.

Hana: When riding a hobbyhorse, do you feel like the rider or the horse?

Alisa: I don't identify as either the rider or the horse; I'm simply myself engaging in hobbyhorsing. When teaching others about using their bodies in hobbyhorsing and dressage, I suggest imagining the upper body as the rider and the legs as the horse. It helps to find a balance where the upper body remains stable while the legs provide power and movement. It's not about becoming a horse or rider; it's about being a hobbyhorsist.

Hana: If it wasn't a horse, but something else on a stick, like a cat or a zebra, how would that change things?

Alisa: While I've seen hobbyhorses shaped like zebras, donkeys, reindeers, and even unicorns, I prefer a more realistic approach. People can get creative with shapes, but if competing, there might be rules about authenticity. However, generally, the community appreciates diverse ideas and craftsmanship.

Hana: How do you handle criticism and comments on your hobbyhorsing?

Alisa: I've faced horrendous comments...With platforms like TikTok, negative comments can be extreme. I've also experienced physical violence and lost all my friends during elementary school due to hobbyhorsing. I see it as people's confusion and resistance to understanding something different. I delete such comments to create a positive space for those who may feel insecure about the hobby. Critique doesn't bother me much; I've learned to ignore misconceptions and focus on my passion. Just like

someone might find football fascinating, the same happened with hobbyhorsing for me. It's about finding an interest, a community, and sometimes losing one along the way.

Hana: Have you ever felt objectified or sexualized in your hobbyhorsing journey?

Alisa: Unfortunately, yes. Especially on platforms like Instagram, I've received inappropriate comments. After the movie Hobbyhorse Revolution, my inbox was filled with disgusting messages from men. Or another incident involved a video reportage of a hobbyhorse competition with mostly young children. It was a terrible comment from a person who speculated on motivations for the girls, guessing that the stick placement was there for a pleasure. Even in conversations with journalists, there were jokes about how I handle and ride the stick. Online forums have discussed me since I was 14, consistently focusing on inappropriate topics. It's a disturbing aspect of being a woman engaging in unconventional activities, and it extends to my work in the movie and TV industry.

Hana: Do you attribute the growth of hobbyhorsing from nothing to something to social media?

Alisa: Yes, social media played a significant role. When one person excels, it becomes a competition, turning it into a sport. Social media allows us to share our skills and progress, which helps with the recognition of hobbyhorsing as a sport.

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(Considering possible directions for the project = excerpts from readings, readings, readings...)

- Gender and sexuality norms in equestrian sports - becoming 'horse girls' and 'horse boys'
- As a consequence of feminization of equestrian sports, horses and horseback riding are considered 'girlish'. Girls' relationship with horses has above all been seen as emotional and characterized as one of caring. These ideals have dominated the image of females, especially girls, active in equestrian sports.
- The boys/men in the dialogue also enact that gender intra-acts with age. Doing horse riding is problematic for boys in their teens, but as they grow older and gender expectations change, it rather gives them appreciation.
- The expectations on how to live and act as a boy/man differ depending on your intersectional location.
- Horse cultures can be gendered in several ways, from little girls and their ponies to modern versions of the cowboy. Horses themselves, however, play an important role in the way that horsey cultures become experienced as gendered. Gender is experienced and expressed through the body; but, in human-horse relationships it is also expressed in conjunction with the body and character of the horse.
- Myths about women's relationships with horses, however, are plentiful. On a cultural level, women's relationships with horses are often submerged within the language of "misplacement", centered on unfulfilled human desires, such as a desire for a man, or for a child.

- For many girls growing up around horses, riding provides opportunities to challenge conventional concepts of femininity: messing around with horses allows them to be tomboys, and to develop self-esteem and confidence. In many ways, the horse and its specific abilities helps humans to shape their identities as horsepeople.
- The maleness of the horse in mounted statues reflects the masculinity of the rider - "To the men, riding a mare for their job is unthinkable."
- Today's My Little Pony is actively seductive, selling a certain version of pre-adolescent female sexuality. The images these toys offer girls, along with the scripts that accompany each toy, are fantasies of female sexual availability, very much reflecting heteropatriarchal consumer culture, quaintly packaged in the "innocent" body of a little pony-girl.
- Depictions of what Susan McHugh calls the "horse-crazy" girl are common in fiction, including Enid Bagnold's 1935 novel National Velvet, in which a fourteen-year-old girl, Velvet Brown, rides a horse to victory in the Grand National Steeplechase. In these narratives, the girl and her horse pose a threat to heterosexual norms: the horse distracts her from boys, and her sexual interests may turn to women or to the horse itself. Though the heteronormative narrative is usually recuperated by having the girl "outgrow" her horse obsession, it is difficult to deny the force of Velvet's words: "I don't ever want children" she says, "only horses."

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(Considering possible directions for the project = excerpts from readings, readings, readings...)

- This is the position of one Youtuber who asks, “What do you think when you see, in the worst case scenario, a forty-year-old adult woman [...] riding a hobbyhorse? What could she [be thinking]? Free her inner child? Deny reality? [Does she do it] because it feels good?” The video associates hobbyhorsists with “adults who play as children or babies, or those who are roleplaying different genders, like queer, nonbinary, [or] transgender.” The video ends by suggesting that the hobbyhorse trend and supposedly related queer phenomenon may represent “the degeneration of minds in [the] Western world” and “Armageddon.”
- Yet, these supposed threats are precisely what hobbyhorsists celebrate: as one hobbyhorsist says, “I can be as childish as I want to be” (Barry 2019); one adult woman sees hobbyhorsing as a way “to run away from your boring and maybe exhausting normal life” (Barry 2019). If “denying reality” means denouncing the constraints of female adulthood in a patriarchal world, the hobbyhorsists appear to be on board.
- So, if the hobbyhorsists are not civilization-wreckers, what are they? Two figures - the centaur and the cyborg are helpful in suggesting that the girl on her hobbyhorse is a posthumanist figuration. Maurstad, Davis and Dean define “centaurability” as “the embodied feeling of being one and acting as one” (2015).
- The centaur, on the other hand, is a fully imaginary, and predominantly male being, with the word coming to English from Latin and/or French, taking its origins in Greek mythology.

- It’s like the assemblage demonstrated by the girl whose legs become an extension of the hobbyhorse’s body.
- Hobbyhorsists can be understood as queer figures.
- I read the girl on her hobbyhorse as an inspiring posthumanist figuration that invites viewers to consider the possibilities of transgressing and transcending bounds of gender, species, and matter itself.
- Equiscapes are settings which allow humans insight into the lives of horses by interacting in and acknowledging the world from the horse’s perspective. Equiscapes are the practical manifestation of the post-humanist concept, as humans and non-human animals are considered equals and work together as companions. Equiscapes encourage interconnectedness, emotional exchange and cross-species communication, and can result in positive mutual understanding and the development of trusting relationships. This espouses post-humanist ideals whereby humans are able to view the world through a non-human lens.

The highlighted information shaped my creative essay and a short film. I focused on what I found to be the most “game-changing” and interesting aspects, influenced not only by Alisa’s interview but also by my insights and relevant readings on the subject. While other interesting topics deserved more exploration, time constraints allowed only highlighting key points. (By the way, I really enjoyed the process, and thank you so much!)

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