

## 1941/AIDA: A story about escape and trespass, home and habitat as determined by a cow

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...  
Impetuous wild cow...  
...  
I shall say to her "Your decision!"  
...  
My good divine wild cow, drive out the man,  
Capture the man!  
...  
Be it known that you lift your terrible gaze!  
...  
Like the light of the rising moon, she exuded delight  
...

— Excerpts from *Mistress of the Innumerable Me* by Enheduana,  
Sumerian princess and priestess to the Goddess, 2250 BCE<sup>1</sup>

## 1-A 9-I 4-D 1-A

I am next door neighbor to a cow I love, whom I extol and admire, of whom I proselytize, if that means speak with fervor and passion of a singular soul. I met her in winter in a puddled pasture. The creek which divided two neighboring farms was at flood stage running cold, fast, and deep. On the other side, a bridge over a gully between fields broke as she crossed it; she plunged from height into the high waters, silty, opaque, and clay-colored, and, in the shock of an instant, made a bold choice. She turned her back from where she came and forged to the other side where the grass grew lush and green.

This is a story about escape and trespass, home and habitat (as determined by a cow), property (land and cow), and how boundaries (and pushing them) create the conditions for re-definition and transformation. She (the cow and, in the eyes of agribusiness, a cog) acts by her own lights, according to her own plans. Networks of practice and logistical consideration, empathetic imagination, and varieties of friendship (or ally-ship) develop directly from her and the journey she sets for herself. She claims and shows. She eludes us, and we learn.

What does it mean to be a number, to be numbered (among the many?), counted and accounted for?

What does it mean to be called by a name, to have a name (whether or not you call yourself by it)? 1941's mother would have called to her; this is her name, too. Aida's calf calls to her now; this, too, is her name.

Cattle is the collective noun for: heifers who, in bearing their first calves, become cows, the bulls who inseminate them, and their offspring, heifer and steer alike. Cattle comprise business; a ranch or farm "runs cattle." A cow like 1941, like AIDA, is a breeder. She may graze in open pasture with a mountain view within a herd of other cows (an unimaginable luxury to cows in feedlots), but there is still a job to do with mortal stakes. Each year she is expected to get pregnant and to bear and nurture a calf who, upon weaning, is then taken from her to be sold. If she does not get pregnant, she too can be sold. What happens when you are sold? It depends on the buyer and the nature of their business. An "un(re)productive" cow risks the slaughterhouse. A profitable cattle concern uses every bit of acreage to its maximum. This can mean slim margins and, depending on weather and drought, sometimes hungry cows. To be pregnant for nine months and then nursing while pregnant again asks a lot of a cow's body. They are never not pregnant or nursing. Such cows live shortened lives.

1941's young herd had nearly starved the year before. The new farmer, who is not her owner and only recent to the scene, came looking for her after the bridge broke. He had quickly caught her calf and thought she would follow her calf home. She did not. Was she choosing her own freedom over motherhood? He gathered help, other men. When I found them outside my house, standing about in soaked trousers, they had already been trying for hours to catch and return her. She merely doubled down. It was apparent to all present this cow did not want to be told what to do. Intrigued, increasingly captivated, I watched her every move (no, I beheld her, for she was un beholden). She had me from the get-go. I was rooting for her and welcomed her "trespass" (if not the men in pursuit).

Mustang comes from the word for "masterless"<sup>2</sup>. This cow was mustang!

To go out into the open world past the fence towards the horizon: the horizon can threaten; it can also enliven. Beyond the fence, the grass is often greener. Across the creek, the other side tempts. A cow hungers for more than she has.

The forensic details, the hoof prints, the cow patties, the flattened grass, the photographs I took and still take for parsing after the fact, the drawings, maps and diagrams: all of these help show who this cow is, what are the decisions she makes, where does she go and when. It is possible they also show who she is *not*.

As for the why, it is enough that what she does, she does because she wants to. This holds, too, for the artwork she inspires. Hers is a story of establishing identity and a knowing of self through assertion of self.

### **Escape to become:**

When we express ourselves, if we are not heard or heeded, over time, we shut down. Our faces close. In vulnerability we hold ourselves inward. We try to give nothing away lest more be taken.

In captivity, if nothing we say or do affects what happens or is done to us, we both can be, and feel ourselves to be, helpless. We learn it.

When a captive "goes rogue"? To see the uncaptured, well, it captivates. Inherent to having choices is possibility. Asserting choices can be both a part of and apart

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<sup>2</sup> *mestengo* and *mostrenco* (from the Spanish): "wild or masterless cattle"

from making decisions. Sometimes we must decide even when we have no choices. In assertion of autonomy is more than preservation of self. It is declarative, it claims; actions taken incite reaction, response. Risks and rewards both accrue. Curiosity and discovery ensue. One tests oneself in reciprocity by succeeding and also failing. The expression “being fenced in” describes being trapped, without options, without outlet.

What can change in seven days? A whole new world can open wide! First, you see through a pane dimly, and then you know in full: a cow upon a ridge, bathed in sunlight, glowing golden, with her copper calf.

## February 2022

After a two mile jog out and back, udders and tails swinging, the other cow from the broken bridge crosses back to her calf, but 1941 does not. She stands in the middle of the rushing creek, her bright bulk in the gray winter day, holding her footing, maintaining her position in the high water. Is she undecided? Does she need encouragement? She bellows. Her herd mates moo back. Call-and-response continues. The men have gone home, the farmer too, what else can be done, it’s best not to press her too hard. I have said she will be safe on this side.

1941 turns back around, mounts the bank, water streaming from her flanks, to stand in the flooded field near me. I have my arms outstretched (like a hug? like a barrier?). I am speaking to her, encouraging her, as if she were uncertain or needed support, as if she were like me. Watching us, she lowers her head, not in submission, but as if in preparation to charge. She seems determined.

I have always wanted to meet and get to know a cow. On this occasion long sought, I have embarked fatuously with over-friendly prattle.<sup>3</sup> But this is not a frivolous moment. In fact, it could not be more serious.

What defines life, its intrinsic value, more than choice? What dooms it more than having nowhere to go, no escape, no options? Learned helplessness ensues. And much worse can, too, when, at base, one is prey and product.

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<sup>3</sup> She is *not* “Miss Thing.” At minimum, she is Ms. More likely still, she is “The Innumerable Me.”

Together in this big puddle, I can see her better now. She looks around, head held high. She nibbles on the grass poking through. Is she taking my measure? She considers E beside me. She watches, nibbles and chews, for the time it takes her to decide. And then—in a powerful burst, she drives past, up the steep wooded hill behind and towards the coyote den. And is gone, into the gloaming, thoroughly disappeared. I find this (and her) exhilarating. I had not known firsthand before the bounding athleticism of bovines. I marvel, and I am also embarrassed by the first impression I'd surely made. What must she think of me?

Back at the house, I think about her all night. And in the silvery cold morning, I part the curtain to find her standing in my front yard, pearly and alert, her red calf by her side! I am delighted to see her (an understatement). All that matters to me now is what matters to her. I clear my schedule. I don't want to miss a thing.

The farmer wants to bring her home safely. We are texting. I struggle to be helpful. In this whole unfolding, I see no way I will not have to be an informant and a spy. The cow belongs to someone else, and I don't own the land she and I currently occupy, but as the human in residence, I can define terms for access and the timing and means (no vehicles, no lassos) of attempts to return her to her herd. Can I be her champion? Must I be her quisling? Even thwarted, possibly exasperated, the farmer is proving himself unusual in the business. He seems concerned with her wellbeing, her emotional state. He does not want to "press her too hard." He is a man who can be worked with.

She and I fall into a routine. My sole project becomes respectfully staying out of her way while recording everything that happens, everything she does.

When she didn't cross back the day before after her calf, it seemed she had chosen free ranging over mothering. She had not had a choice in being impregnated. Was she on the lam from reproductive imperatives, too?

But she had had a larger scheme in mind. In the night, all humans abed, she crossed back (this raging creek!) and coaxed her calf to the fence, coached her under and through the barbed wire (a calling to, a cleaving) and into the treacherous water to usher her safely across. Yesterday in the flooded pasture, she had assessed me as the lesser of presenting threats; perhaps she considered me someone with whom she could negotiate.

We were not friends by her measure (nor likely to be). But she recognized who

wanted to capture her, and they were all men. And in her demonstrated opinion, the grass growing around my little house was the best grass.

Brangus is a hybrid cross between two breeds Brahmin and Angus. 1941 is Brangus. I research both and conclude she is half sacred cow (Brahmin cows being from India) and half “beautiful carcass” (which is the online description of the Angus breed). This duality expresses our current situation neatly: that she is misplaced “property” (her transactional body) and that she is also calling the shots (her sacred nature). On her plastic number tags in each ear are handwritten in marker the numerals 19 over 41 which means that she was born in 2019, the 41st calf of that year. She and the other cows likely did not get to be with their own mothers for very long. Now barely three years old, they are first time mothers themselves; for 1941 it has been hardly any time at all, not even a fortnight. They are learning by the hour how to do what they have not been shown.

1941 has a curly poll. In my yard, head held high, she is watchful and wary and intensely alert, perhaps defiant, too. Her expression seems to change when she moves, turning in profile, or from the front, when she lifts her chin or drops her brow. I am uncertain if I read her correctly (how much I want to!), but there is something between us, a solidarity or understanding, within boundaries, within terms. It feels substantive. It passes through walls. I confine myself so she can roam free. Wherever the cow wants to be, she must be.

E and I watch avidly through the window. Her tongue (her calf’s too) is long enough to wrap around hanks of grass almost like a hand, long enough to reach into her own nostrils. 1941 is learning her new surroundings. She is negotiating how to mother. The calf asks to nurse, but 1941 seems on edge, she is measuring the wind and the scents of other animals and considering what their movements mean for her.

She spends a portion of her days at the creek. She seems to be keeping company with her herd on the other side. But she makes no move to join them.

She watches always. Her head turns; her ears swivel.

She grows bolder.

Both of us are on high alert. Both figure largely in each other’s plans.

I find her beautiful. Her beauty only grows with what another might call her obstinacy.

I note and begin learning her schedule perhaps shaped around grass sugars and when they crest, access to water, safe areas to rest and nurse. She and I develop an under-

standing. Coming back from walking in the woods, I might spy her watching at a distance for when the coast would be clear, so E and I, making a show of it, hustle into the house. Mere moments later, she's right at the windows, grazing, nursing. Her calf teeters over in the soft grass and slumbers hard on her side. I am like an ornithologist in a bird blind, photographing copiously and taking notes. In the hours when she is away from the house, I track where she went the day before, noting her choices, which each day were complicated by the fact that each of her "refuges" become sites of attempted capture.

A cow on the run. A heifer becoming a new mother. To the men who, in rising frustration, seek to capture her, she insists No. I will not. This is transfixing on its own. I am especially interested in her "Yes and..."s, what she wants, her improvisations in finding and getting, where to go, and how to thrive and protect her calf. To learn a new environment takes time to work out what are patterns and what are anomalies. Her freedom carries risk. She is on her own. Much is unknown. Coyotes and bobcats are about. Her calf is small. She began as a cow prepared to charge (like a bull, I thought first, but then quickly understood, no, like a mother, like a cow).

Cows bond tightly and love deeply. They support each other. A mother does not only protect her calf, she loves her.

Many births are hard, even traumatic. A cow can prolapse. She might die. She can simply be exhausted and bewildered. She may not want to parent. To the owner, estrus, insemination, birth and rearing (and then the annual roundup (how the mothers bellow for their calves) and sale) define her (her place of residence, her length of life). Calves are sold in lots. We know more about the movements of individual great white sharks than we know of heifers in Georgia. Where Aida's calf goes after the Alabama auction is anyone's guess.

A cow's life depends on being fertile (ie getting pregnant every year) and on being a good enough mother but not too dangerous (not "crazy" or a "bitch" as I've heard cows described) when shortly after birth her calf is snatched to be snipped (if male) and his or her ears tagged with plastic tabs specifying the year of their birth and their number in the sequence of calves born in that year.

Aida, or 1941 as her ear tags specify, was born in 2019 and was the 41st calf born to the herd.

In the alpha-numeric alphabet, 1-9-4-1 spells out A-I-D-A: famously an escaped slave in Egypt in the opera by Verdi.

The farmer, who does not own the cows, but is in charge of them, adopts this

name when I tell it to him. He sees his own congruences and is grateful, being new to the job and to the area, to the wayward cow for the introduction she has made between him and me, his neighbor.

## **Abound/Abide**

To live within thresholds is to be bounded, to be done to, to be obedient. Thresholds offer entrance or exit; to do either requires crossing. Which it is, to embark or disembark, refers the question. Longing to hurtle headlong, wanting to be free, to reject and eject, to be different and to act differently is an escaping to as well as from. If the creek is the threshold, it works both ways. Either side can be escape or can be home. It depends which way you're looking and what for.

Thresholds, and the decisions that happen at them mark transitions more than mere exiting and entering, although these actions are full of portent and meaning. Directions seem to matter. Whether entering marks a retreat (to home perhaps) or a boldness towards new exploration.

Thresholds mark decision making. Even impulses are decisions. Crossing a threshold brings new decisions.

Crossing can require unlocking. Or breaking. The pushing (or pulling) of the barrier in the way. There are thresholds so blurred and muted they are the opposite of tunnels despite being equally prolonged.

A threshold marks identities and ways of being. Sometimes identities run so counter to another that they require translation.

If you witness the moment of crossing the threshold: to exit, to return, to go outward, to come inward, you will see her as if stepping into a new pelt. What is it that changes? Her eyes? How she moves? What does traveling between Other and Us towards I or We comprise of her body and its attitudes?

The cow's threshold was not only a creek risen high and fast. Her threshold was a bridge giving way beneath her, its collapse breaking the barbed wire. (The fence marks in and out. Every gate is a threshold. Every broken fence?... is an opportunity.)

Cattle guards, those metal pipes over shallow pits, that challenge a cow's footing, function like a gate without a barrier.

It is a mechanical barrier. It is a perceptual barrier too.



She has memories of shortage and starvation.

She has known helplessness against hunger. Before current management, at least one among her herd died and rotted on the hill at the edge of the woods right next to the cow path. A cow the cows all knew.

Who doesn't know death? And helplessness in the face of it, in the implied threat of it.

Amid fences and no grass, no hay or forage, what does a cow do? She can see where grass grows: across the creek. Although she has food and grass now, she must share hay and range cubes among a crowd. Cows jostle and jump. Bustle against each other, push their ways through. The other cows are there for you, allies, and also, perhaps, against you, competitors. Mealtimes around range cubes can be a hustle.

## **Insistence**

Nearly every day, a new plan is hatched involving different combinations of men and boys and in growing determination and numbers. They fan out. They hide. While the farmer is observant and not ruthless, the other men look about the place, they speak of the cow as needing to be shown, lest she show them (up). Somehow, each time the noose narrows, and she looks done for, she finds a weak point and drives through.

What if cow "husbandry" featured tenderness over enforcement of obedience? What if cows got to be husbands not harems? Apart from the farmer, the men seem to think she demands mastering. They have the air about them of a score to settle.

She grows in comfort. Parts of days she rests down near the creek where she can see her sisters. The other cows know exactly where she is, what she's up to. She is being watched and closely noted by a growing multi-species audience.

All the cows are beautiful; all are unique. To see them in the grass, chewing their cud is lovely. This is rumination by ruminants. No wonder it looks so like assessing or pondering. A thinking about, beyond witnessing.

I watch these cows too, from a distance, and see how one reclines among a number of sacked out calves slumbering hard, to keep watch, to run a nursery, so the other mothers can graze; nursing has high metabolic demands. Aida does not have another cow to keep watch as she sleeps. I worry a lot for her sleeplessness, her stress.

Then, on the third night under moonlight (her visitation?), she comes close to the house, right to my bedroom window. E at the foot of the bed and I under the covers

behold her luminous white mass brush nearly up against the windowsill. I don't move a muscle. Neither does E. Aida groans and drops to her knees, lies heavily down on her side, her back pressed to the house, mere feet from us. (Does she know we are right there, might we keep watch for her?) She falls swiftly asleep, begins lightly snoring. I listen raptly. Throughout, E never barks. Closest to Aida, she stays very still, her ears intently forward. I hold my breath and listen to her, abide with her, then breathe deeply with her until I sleep too. When I awake in the night and look for her, she has already moved on. The next day, E, tracking scents, shows me how Aida had likely stowed young 2234 for safekeeping between the heat pump and the house.

Throughout, she is very tidy. She does not defecate in the yard. She explores items on the porch with her nose and mouth. Her calf discovers textures, the cedar shingles and the maple trunk, the concrete block, wooden fence post. Both cow and calf are curious. The grass is growing. Her face is open, alert and thrumming. She is wired, surely, and yet seems increasingly serene.

What she wants, I want for her. Sometimes, to know who or what is missing is much like coming upon a cow patty, in a bounded field where no cows, in fact, live. We cannot choose our character or know how we will react to the unforeseen. Cows, like us, experience many emotions. They range widely in personality. Lots of cows escape. They are somewhat famous for it, in fact. My whole life, I'd had a cow-shaped hole. Here, I have a front row seat.

What happens to emotional range, to expressivity without reciprocity, when you try and fail to communicate across a cognitive barrier so huge, erected and maintained by humans (of their own primacy) (of industrial farming)? It narrows. And burrows. You may appear outwardly impassive or obstinate. Your features close. You may feel, as surely do countless cows, dismay, distrust, fear, anger, perhaps impotence. Your encounters with humans are nearly all with men, are usually coercive, along a gamut of roughness (speed of intervention or dosing is seen as kinder) who all consume meat. Your sons will become this meat, your daughters will breed this beef. Cows are called crazy and bitches. They are thought stupid.

What happens when a cow makes her choice and evades the consequences, her capture and efforts towards it coming hard and fast and constantly at her?

She becomes legible.

She enlarges.

I study her so closely and take the photographs, make the drawings that will reveal later under close examination that she indeed is changing as I sense her changing. I feel it in the air, it's written in her body and on her face which grows mobile and expressive, confident and tender. She is decisive and careful, bold and so very patient, too. And when she is cornered or pressed, she brings her force and what she has learned of this new land and its lay, its deer trails and human ones, too, and where and how to hide. This hiding is not weakness. It is tactical and secret, strategic and utile. If her calf slows her down, she finds another way. One day, I am thoroughly flummoxed. I have verified places she has been that day, I even have the time stamps in the camera, and had been physically present, standing in the field between two of these points. She surely had to pass me. There were no other vectors or means. And yet. Was this cow quantum? I wouldn't put it past her.

On more than three occasions, that it was all over for her appeared certain, her captors surely had her this time and I would turn away sorrowfully, unable to bear the sight, only to realize, behind me, over my shoulder, No! She has escaped!

The confidence derived from autonomy asserted, from adversarial engagements evaded arises from keen vigilance, and initially, at least, pervasive anxiety. Exercising your full capacities and succeeding by your own lights is "making your point strong". Where you had been anonymous, you now command the stage.

No longer contained (not by a fence), she is made of actions and passion, conviction and determination. She has to be. None of it is easy. These ways of being infuse and escape her body, become her presentation and charisma. They are too strong, too important not to. Her face is stern, it is sweet. Curious and defiant. To risk, to live fully is to express fully. To feel fully.

What happens in a week of self expression and agency?...A cow travels far. We follow in her footsteps.

## **The men never caught her**

It was José the cutting horse. The farmer was riding him, but José sealed the deal where previous horses had not. He and Aida met eyes and you could see it in her face, how her options narrowed, this horse would make sure of her. He was born and bred for this and

would not back down. She conceded to the animal if not the man astride.

And in the moment, reckoning with the horse, it seemed she understood that while she could not choose, she could decide. She proceeded ahead, she widened the gap; the creek was running low, it was an easy crossing. Did this mean defeat? She ignored the gate left open for her, she took a running start and blazed instead through the barbed wire fence, popping T-clips, her tail swinging high and round like a whip, 2234 cleaved to her side. She went back in power. And she didn't stop running until she reached her fellows who greeted her with excitement.

The next day, I asked the farmer: does she seem different? Do they treat her differently? He replied: "yeah before she was sort of middle of the pack, not one of the leaders. She's a leader now. She comes first to the food."

I sent him a photograph taken through the window of her last hours at rest in my front yard (the same spot she'd presented herself with calf that first morning.) "She exercised her full capacities," I wrote. "And she succeeded. You can see it in her face."

He texted back. "Agree. She made her point strong."

I think all the time, as an artist, as a woman, as a lover of a cow, how do you make your point strong? I ask myself often: What Would Aida Do?



In the field where we met. 1941/AIDA, by Lee Deigaard,  $\frac{3}{4}$ " plywood, 5ft x 10 ft, 2022.



1941/AIDA, drawing by Lee Deigaard, 2023.



Catching sight of each other through the trees from opposite sides of the creek, Lee Deigaard, May 2024.



Catching sight of each other through the window on the same side of the creek, Lee Deigaard, Feb 2022.



Detail, drawing and installation by Lee Deigaard, original text by Mandy-Suzanne Wong, *To An Imagined Eye on Behalf of Another*, Tulane University, Newcomb Gallery, Jan/Feb 2023.



Detail, cyanotype, exposed and developed in grass where AIDA grazed, Lee Deigaard, 2022.

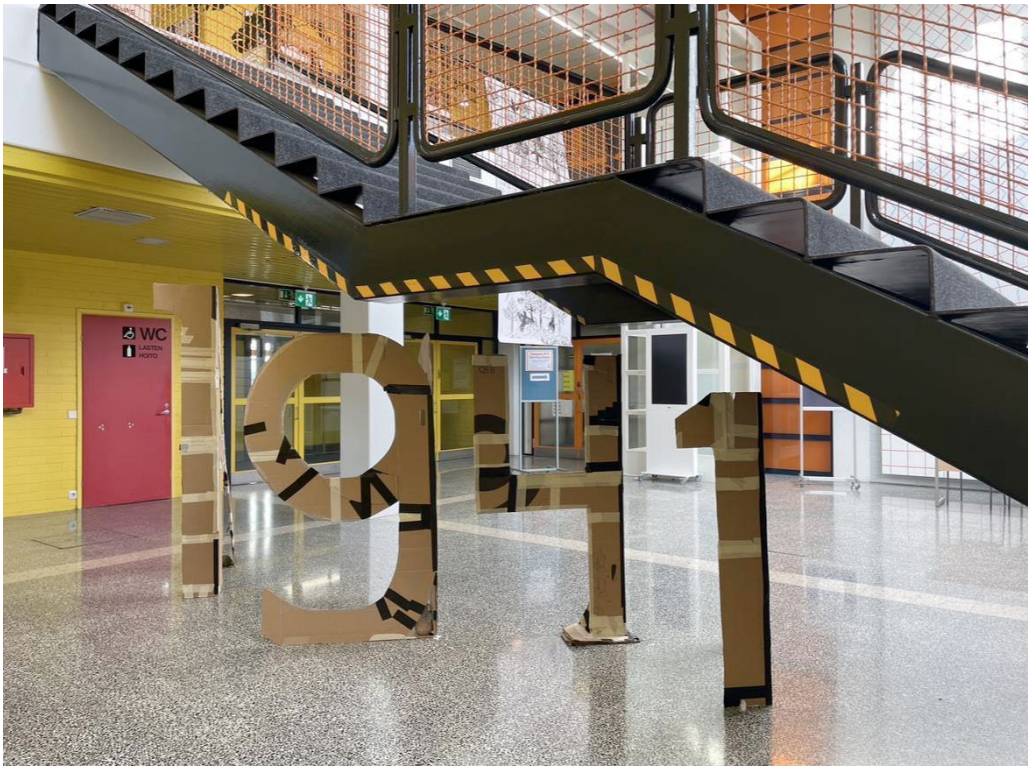


*Detail, drawing, cyanotypes, and installation by Lee Deigaard with original text by Mandy-Suzanne Wong, To An Imagined Eye on Behalf of Another, Tulane University, Newcomb Gallery, Jan/Feb 2023.*

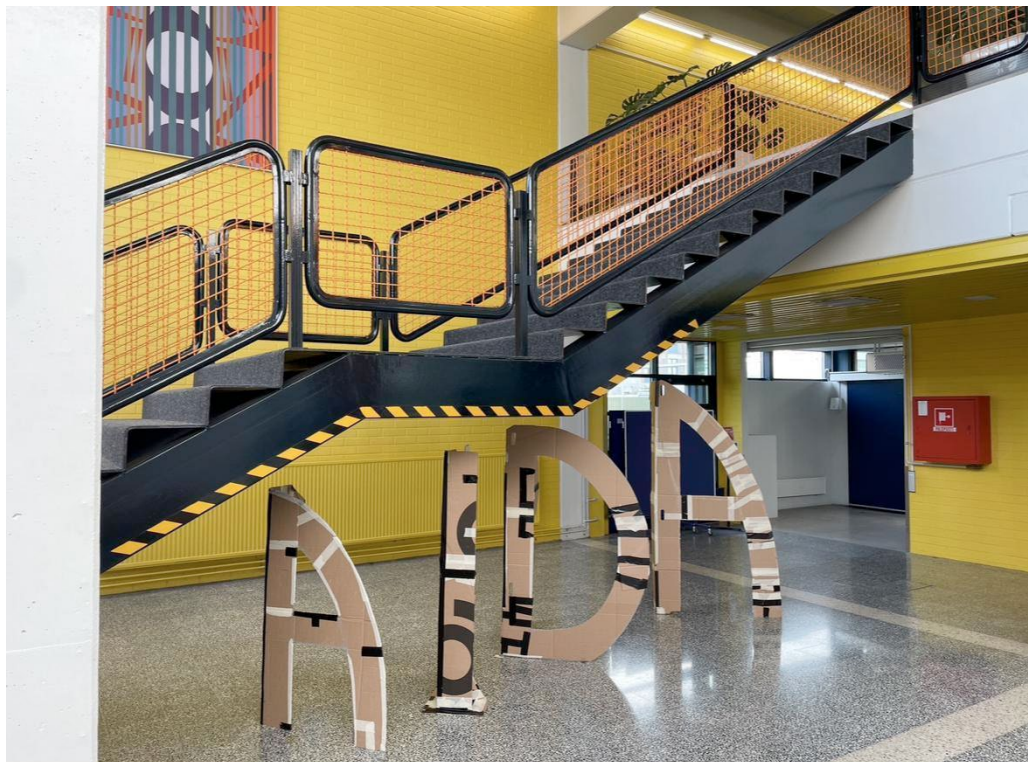


*Detail, installation of cyanotypes made from forensic gleanings by Lee Deigaard, To An Imagined Eye on Behalf of Another, with original text by Mandy-Suzanne Wong, 2022.*





1941/AIDA, Lee Deigaard, cardboard, packing tape, University of Oulu, Finland, Oct 2023.



1941/AIDA, view, other side of the stairwell, cardboard, 5 ft x 10 ft, 2022/3.



*1941/AIDA*, composite image, plywood sculpture (5 ft x 10 ft) installed where AIDA first crossed, views from each side of the creek, paper model showing scale of letters relative to cow and calf bodies, Lee Deigaard, 2022.



*across the creek, alert and defiant*

1941/AIDA, drawing, Lee Deigaard, 2022



1941/AIDA, Lee Deigaard, drawing, 2023



That first morning in my front yard, a beginning. In the night she had retrieved her calf by coaching her through the barbed wire fence, into and across the flooding creek, February 2022, Lee Deigaard.



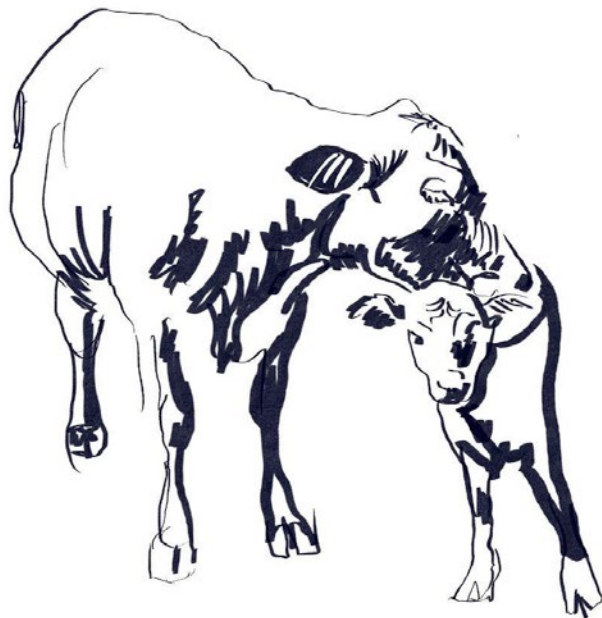
From the hidden ridge shortly before another failed capture attempt, February 2022, Lee Deigaard.



*AIDA*, September 2022, three weeks after her calf 2234 was sold, drawing, Lee Deigaard, 2022.



These are the bones collected from AIDA's farm of a cow who likely died when the herd had been going hungry. Just as I look everywhere for traces of AIDA's presence, of her life asserted, these bones tell a parallel story of what is at stake. Lee Deigaard, May-June 2024.



Drawing based on a photograph taken by the farmer shortly after her return, with her calf 2234, Lee Deigaard, 2022.



1941/AIDA, drawing, Lee Deigaard, 2023.



## **THE END is not an end, she continues:**

In going “rogue,” a cow enables who she is and changes how she thinks of herself. She escapes in order to more fully become. In her exercise of agency is latitude and adaptation, exploration and discovery. In “trespass” is adventure; in insistence an implicit challenge to dominating, overwhelming structures of control and industry that govern animal lives and deny their personalities, yearnings, and autonomy.

A cow posing a problem, chooses and insists against all efforts to foil her in the full exercise of this choice. She does not misunderstand who and what she’s up against. She resolves to live on her own terms, trying everything viable in her scope, not giving up in advance. Knowing her, knowing of her, inspires.

When a cow escapes, networks form around her, seeking her re-capture, yes, but also in tribute, in alliance, in meaning. When people hear about her, they are captivated. In engaging as she did with the coercive inevitable, she more than demonstrated great dignity.

She does not require witness to be extraordinary (though many watched, and also pursued). Hers is a feminist tale, a love story, a hero’s journey of bold choices made in moments of trepidation and unknowing. It’s the story of a cow who left home a number and returned with a name. Her “legend” accrues and sheds light on her sisters. In the telling of her story, within the artwork, is a conversation across a creek, with and about a cow and her boundaries, about who a cow is and what she wants. It tells how a cow travels: from being property gone astray to determinant, however stacked the odds, in her own destiny. This is how, in a text thread in March 2022 just after her safe return, the farmer guarantees her safe haven, “as far as I’m concerned, she has earned it.” I have it in writing.