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# Illegal art : photography in the age of the Ag Gag

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ILLEGAL ART:  
PHOTOGRAPHY IN THE AGE OF  
THE AG GAG

by

Kai Ronald Plews

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the Master of Fine Arts  
degree in Art in the  
Graduate College of  
The University of Iowa

May 2016

Thesis Supervisor: Assistant Professor Jeff Rich

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Graduate College  
The University of Iowa  
Iowa City, Iowa

CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

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MASTER'S THESIS

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This is to certify that the Master's thesis of

Kai Ronald Plews

has been approved by the Examining Committee for  
the thesis requirement for the Master of Fine Arts degree  
in Art at the May 2016 graduation.

Thesis Committee:

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Ab Gratama

To Rachel for being my most brutal editor and making all of this possible.

## **PUBLIC ABSTRACT**

Where does your food come from?

This is a simple question that many people ask but don't truly want to have to answer to. We have some idea of the concept of farming that is cobbled together from images taken from the media and advertisements. The vision of a small pastoral farm where animals roam around in outdoor pens or live in stately wooden barns is the idea that comes to mind when we think of farming.

This concept could not be further from the actual truth. This difference between your perception and the reality is due to a widespread effort to block images of modern farming practices from public view. Those orchestrating this deception are so powerful that they have pushed censorship laws onto nineteen different states in the United States. These laws are collectively called the Ag Gag.

This series of photographs was created to shed light on modern farming practices and to bring awareness to the overreach of agricultural corporations in dictating laws limiting individual free speech. In this work you see images of what modern large scale animal farming actually looks like. You will also see what impacts this has on the environment and learn about the benefits and problems with this type of farming.

In the end the most important question I want you to ask yourself is:

Is this where I want my food coming from?

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## **Illegal Art: Photography in the Age of the Ag Gag**

We live in a society where the perception of the food that we consume is far removed from the reality of how it is produced. Every year we consume more than 8 billion chickens and over 80 million pigs. We never see where these animals lived or know about their lives. We have some concept that they are raised on farms but even that idea is nebulous. We have pieced together a composite of food packaging, advertisements, and a general concept.

Modern farming practices are vastly different than those practiced by farmers not even twenty years ago. The corporate mega-farm of today is entirely alien to those who have never experienced the scale of it.

They are truly a wonder of modern technology and farming advances. These farms, heavily automated and carefully controlled by sophisticated and interconnected computer networks, allow a small crew of individuals to tend to massive numbers of livestock extremely efficiently.

Why then are these farms hidden away from the public? Why don't we see pictures and advertisements from these enormous technological wonders everywhere? The truth is, while these farms allow a fantastic gain in the yield of meat to the space and resources utilized, the cost in both animal and environmental welfare is very high. It is high enough that there has been a deliberate and concerted effort to keep images of these farms out of the public eye. This censorship of the media through what are commonly called "ag gag laws" has gone so far as to make taking images of these places under certain situations illegal.



This is the concept that my work revolves around. Riding the fine line of legality on photographing these places to give an unfiltered view of the realities of these farms. The scale of the farms are shown in broad landscape images with the large, nondescript buildings standing in stark contrast to the expected pastoral farm scene. The living animals and their remains are shown as they lived, in tight spaces that are packed to capacity. The goal is to both enlighten and educate the viewer to the realities of modern farming practices and how these “ag gag laws” are used to manipulate our perception of modern farming. In doing that we first need to discuss how we got to this point.