

EPISODE 5: DEPRESSION IN ANIMALS

[00:04 Narrator:]

The Law is a White Dog is a podcast series developed for TULCA Festival of Visual Arts 2020. Made during the global pandemic, the series places artists and artworks in dialogue with lawyers, advocates and activists. As a festival of visual art produced in a time of confinement and restriction for many, the podcast series explores unseen dimensions of the artists' work.

[00:37]

Gernot Wieland is an artist from Austria, based in Berlin. He makes artworks that question the idea of humans as the ideal measure of all things. His works float humorously between the fictional and the documentary and illustrate the absurdities of everyday life, be it with humans or animals. Scientific and para-academic research is the foundation of his reflections. In exhibitions, he shows sketches, diagrams, lecture performances, photographs, and 16mm films, which are often supplemented with his own early childhood memories.

This episode presents an audio-only adaptation of a lecture by Wieland titled *Depression in Animals*, originally made in 2016.

Content note: this lecture contains reference to mental illness and suicide.

[01:34 Gernot:]

I had my first experience with depression in animals when I was fourteen. There was this schoolmate of mine who was an orphan and lived in a home. He was considered a bit weird, not least because he brought his dog, a German shepherd to school and to classes, even sports. There was some fuss, especially with the cleaning stuff, but after a while everybody accepted that.

One day we had biology class and we learned about sodomy, and my classmate with the German shepherd all of a sudden raised his hand and said:
“But Sir, my dog likes that.”

[02:19]

I made a drawing of our classroom, and tried to reconstruct the moment he said that.

A few months later he killed himself and his German shepherd with sleeping pills. He always told me how sad and depressed they both were. When making the drawing of the classroom I realised that I remember distinctly the situation, where everyone was sitting when he said that. I even remembered that the dog had a walk around in the classroom, always the precise same walk. I remember the stuffed animals in the back of the classroom being placed on plinths. Like an art exhibition. Our biology teacher had stuffed them, because that was his hobby. His only hobby, as he often said.

[03:14]

There was a taxidermized dog on one of the plinths, a poodle called Lucky, the former dog of the teacher. He taxidermized it after it had died. There were something like at least 50 animals starring at us, many birds like a falcon, a sparrow, a pigeon, even an eagle of a species which has died out, and then a fox family, a mouse, a badger, all sorts of weasels, he even had stuffed lamb, their dead eyes were starring at us at all time - it did something with us.

[03:48]

Depression derives from the Latin word *deprimere*, to press down. Depressed animals show similar symptoms as depressed humans, dogs for instance bite and scratch themselves until they bleed.

[04:03]

In wild animals depression is hard to diagnose. But compared with pets the depression rates are extremely low.

[04:14]

Animals kept as pets have a much higher rate of depression diagnosis and are often treated with psychopharmaca called Prozac.

The financial magazine *The Economist* estimates the overall rate of the anti-depressant market for animals at an annual 1 Billion dollars, in the US alone. Depression in animals is almost only caused by humans and goes hand in hand with the repression of 'wildness.'

[04:51]

The construction of human identity can also be determined by the exclusion and control of the other - namely the animal. This history is largely a history of control and power.

[05:07]

Historically, the relationship between humans and animals has been dualistic. Both humans and animals were autonomous and related. Aristoteles, for example, emphasizes this kin-like relationship.

Or Plutarch, who in his collection *Moralia* posed the question: which animals are more reasonable, more intelligent – creatures of the land, or creatures of the sea?

[05:37]

The significant break came with René Descartes, who made a separation between body and soul.

In his perception, animals did not have a soul, and their body was reduced to the principles of physics and therefore nothing but a machine.

Descartes defined the human by excluding the wildness of the humans, because the mind is meant to rule. Karl Marx mentioned that Descartes saw the animals

already with the eyes of the manufacturing period, he saw them as a product. And the products serve the humans.

[06:20]

This significant break by Descartes is still obvious when we are talking about 'nature'. We always mean an area without humans. The human being became a stranger, a disturbing factor.

[06:37]

In the progress of civilization, the often-quoted 'humanization' of the animal demonstrates the desire of humans for an animal—which must not be autonomous and independent, and has to be 'humanized', in a zoo, or as a comic figure, as a pet or toy.

Keeping an animal as a pet is also a symbol of control and dependence. Humans buy an animal, name it, feed it, castrate it –walk with it on a leash, keep it at home, often in a cage, and what is most important – we define their space.

If you look at caged animals in a zoo, this becomes obvious. Defining and controlling their space, it is a symbol of the victory of the mind over the body, a victory of control.

[07:32]

A floorplan of a zoo is – to me – an epitaph of a relationship between humans and animals, which has definitely ended. Nearly all modern techniques of social conditioning were first established with animal experiments.

This eagerness of isolating, of defining space, can be detected as the wish and the desire to symbolically control your own unpredictable animalistic wildness. To control the uncanny.

The uncanny, says Sigmund Freud, is not something new or something strange, but something familiar, which became alienated through repression. This could also explain our melancholic view on nature, which derives from the fact, that the human is excluded from it, and nature has only a significance if it is without any human intervention.

[08:40]

Depression in animals can lead to suicide and is often documented. During my childhood there was an animal park near where we lived.

One zebra often tried to escape, but got caught every time and according to a member of the staff of the park, became obviously depressed.

But each time, after a while, the zebra pulled itself together – in order to escape again.

Having been caught after its seventh attempt at escape, they took the zebra back on a truck, and the zebra jumped off the truck with its legs pressed tightly to its body and its head outstretched.

As a result, it broke its neck and died immediately.

A zebra jump like this had never been observed before: and zebras actually never do that. All the park-workers and vets were certain that it had committed suicide. I visited that park as a child and this is where I heard the story.

It left me sleepless and moved me so much, that for a long while I constantly drew zebras. I couldn't stop, making drawings of zebras. At one point my parents motivated me to do potato prints of zebras, because of my obsession we constantly ran out of paper and it takes longer to do one potato print than to just make a drawing.

I think my parents often, without telling me, regretted having introduced potato prints to me, now we not only had no paper but often also no potatoes at home, and if we had any, they were full of colours.

I stole potatoes from our neighbours, from the land of the farmers, there were literally no potatoes left in my village, and of course I got caught.

I remember sitting with this child psychiatrist in his room full of pictures of Flipper, Donald Duck, nice but imbecile-looking dogs, and she asked me, Gernot, how did you get here, why did you steal half a million of potatoes?

And I remember it was not my voice but something in me said: because of a zebra. There are many artists who painted with monkeys in order to acquire an original, free-of-the-mind, kind of painting.

[11:22]

Some monkeys actually became quite famous through that, and the most famous one was a monkey called Congo.

Congo made more than 400 drawings and paintings, and he belonged to the well-known natural scientist Desmond Morris. That is the kind of language you find all the time, he *belonged*. Amongst others, Pablo Picasso bought paintings by Congo. Congo had an exhibition in the ICA in London in 1957, it was sold out immediately. Desmond Morris experimented with Congo in order to analyze his motivations for doing paintings; which led to Congo just drawing some lines quickly in order to get a banana.

Desmond Morris said: "It's the sickest way of commercial artistic expression," and he also said: "The motivation of a monkey painting pictures has hardly any other reasons than an artist painting a picture."

We are constructing our human identity by the exclusion and the control of the other and we are building nations, governments, societies on this exclusion.

Karl Marx wrote in 1847:

"In proportion as the exploitation of one individual by another will be put to an end, the exploitation of one nation by another will be put to an end!" This quote can be read in a psychological way and be used to study our relationship to animals.

Today the exploitation of any other is so enormous, we don't even know what a banana tastes like anymore.

[13:26 Narrator:]

The Law is a White Dog podcast series was commissioned by TULCA Festival of Visual Arts curated in 2020 by Sarah Browne

Produced by Orla Higgins & Sarah Browne

Performed by Gernot Wieland

Introduction narrated by Orla Higgins

Editor Alan Meaney

Music by Rory Pilgrim