



Our Hen House Podcast: Transcript for Episode 667, Interview with Hartmut Kiewert

Jasmin Singer: Welcome to Our Hen House, Hartmut.

Hartmut Kiewert: Yeah, thank you for having me. I'm very glad to be here.

Jasmin: Very excited to talk to you. Now, I know a podcast isn't the easiest place to discuss visual art, so can you just start out by describing your work, particularly the *Animal Utopia* series.

Hartmut: Basically it's about trying to evolve a world of scenarios in which humans and other animals encounter (each other) at eye level. And where the animal exploitation industry is gone and ruined.

Even though I call it *Animal Utopia*, it's not like I think this is a blueprint for the utopia. It's more like, in the first place, an irritation of common perceptions of so-called farm animals, mostly. And just to bring them in into completely different contexts, like in our everyday inner-city urban life, or in our living rooms. And to evoke irritation. And that's why I called this work series *Animal Utopia*. Also, I think we need to talk about counter-narratives and about possible utopian visions without knowing everything about (what will happen). But I think it's really important to go on with that.

Jasmin: That does come through. I mean, your work is very powerful and I think anybody, whether they're down with animal rights or have never considered animal rights before, would look at your work and have an immediate emotional reaction.

And you've said that, I'm quoting you, you said, "Since 2008, I've been working intensively on the human animal relationship and trying to renegotiate it with the means of painting."

So what do you hope people will think about when they see your paintings?

Hartmut: I hope that if they are not already vegan or engaged (in) animal rights, I hope they will question their own perceptions of, especially, as I said so-called farm animals, but also all other animals. And I can't say it for (everyone), of course, because I very rarely talk to people, (but) from time to time I'm talking to people on how they see and read my paintings.

And I think that there's a little bit that they (the paintings) are doing to shift their relation to other animals. I hope so. It's like you can't, (as an artist) really say I'm doing this and then this is the outcome. But I hope to be a part of the bigger movement or bigger influences on people to change the way they act or the way they see other animals.

Jasmin: Yeah, that's beautiful. I think that art has a special and unique way of doing that. That's why we love to talk to artists of all stripes, even though it's an audio podcast, because I think that one of the keys to social change and social awareness is the arts. It's what I'm personally most passionate about.

Now, why did you decide not to depict the horrors that happen to animals...Like Sue Coe comes to mind, for example...but instead to depict a better world?

Hartmut: Actually, when I first started to engage in this topic of human-animal relationships in my paintings, I did a lot of research. And that was, as I said, in 2008 where I eventually went vegan.

I was vegetarian before, since 2000, and then slowly becoming vegan, but here and there ate some pizza with cheese. And then I really did some research and from that point on it was clear I can't (make) any exceptions anymore, I have to be 100% vegan. And to cope with the horror of the animal industries, or what people do to other animals, I first had to paint paintings that are very direct and graphic and that were more like directly provoking. Or like directly reconnect the animal bodies to the product of animal exploitation, for instance. That's the series, the first work series I call(ed) *Status Quo*.

So to where we are now, from where my work started from, it was, of course, not exactly the same as Sue Coe did, or is still doing, but kind of similar. That was the first approach.

And I couldn't come directly to the next step and think about how it could be better, how animals could be liberated from this exploitation. There was first necessity to paint these kind of images. So, I really started there.

Jasmin: Yeah. Wow. We are so far from the utopia that you depict in your paintings. Why do you feel it's important to put it out there?

Hartmut: The first thing is to see what is going wrong in our society, to criticize that and to point it out and to scandalize it. But we also, as humans, we like stories and narrations. We also need to talk about the positive change.

It's the same thing with the ecological crisis, with climate crisis. There are so many positive developments that will come when we overcome this individual automobile traffic. We have to, I think, try to anticipate how we could change.

And there's, of course, projects like farmed animal sanctuaries, which are concrete utopian spaces already, which are already trying to do something which is completely different.

For instance, what Sue Donaldson and Will Kymlicka are doing with their approach to political theory and zoopolism and trying to figure out how to change relations and how to navigate in a positive direction without really knowing how it will be in the end. Because we are all children of capitalism and patriarchy and so on and we all have these things in our minds, so we can't do blueprints. But we can start to talk about it and start to think about where to go and maybe that's more motivating than...not more motivating, but that's also motivating.

Like the anger and the sadness that comes from seeing these horrible things that are happening to animals, for me always is still the motivation for what I'm doing. Especially when I talk to other activists in animal rights, animal liberation movement, they also say that the imagery I do gives them also hope.

So I really have very messy answer here.

Jasmin: But no, it's good!

I mean, it gives us a visual, right? And also, at its most basic level, so many people who care about animals, when we're going to sleep at night, the images in our mind are often really dark and really painful. They're the things that keep us up at night, and yet you offer an antidote to that. You offer a visual that we can hold onto instead. And so I think that it's almost a service you're doing, to anybody who cares. And on that note, you have said that utopian images are important. You've said, "It's not enough to just criticize the existing systems in play today. We have to offer improved alternate realities."

So do you think, in light of the ever worsening reality of what we're doing to animals and to the planet, that we run the risk of people forgetting the possibilities of what life on Earth could be? Is it one of your goals to remind them?

Hartmut: Sure. I mean, if we would overcome all these systems of domination, also in between humans and like social justice issues, the possibilities are there. We have the knowledge, we have the compassion.

And we are like trapped into these patriarchal capitalist forms. And if you like, blow that up, there's really good potential. Even if it's sometimes hard, just now here in Germany, people are complaining about, "Oh, I can't fly on my vacation because there's not enough service personnel people in the airport." And I think, "What the hell?"

I mean, we are in climate crisis. There's no reason to fly to vacations, you can do other things. And I mean, sometimes it's really frustrating. Also for me, it's sometimes hard to keep this hope, but I think the potential is definitely there. We have to try.

Jasmin: I just wrote an article about airplane travel and the carbon cost of it.

And, you know, I knew that it was bad. It was like, it felt like the first time I learned about animals and factory farms. Suddenly I was face to face with these numbers of just how bad it is. And certainly Europe is way ahead of the game with the flight free program, which is just catching on in the US.

But I don't know, you just made me think of that. It is amazing how people get so set in their ways of our consumption habits, whether it's consumption of carbon or consumption of animal products. It's really unbelievable how unimaginative we can become. Like can we think beyond these oppressive systems?

Now, you've said that there are dangers in depicting utopia and that critical theory, "Rightly points out that a brushing out of utopia, that is, an all to exact definition of what a liberated society should look like, is to be refrained from." Which is beautiful, by the way. What a beautiful turn of phrase.

So what are those dangers and why did you decide to do it anyway?

Hartmut: As I come from an anarchist approach, or like a perspective that's critical to all forms of domination, if I would come up with like, "Okay, here's

the plan, here's master plan and the blueprint.” That would be like authoritarian as well.

That can't be right, if your aim is really emancipation. So that's a bit of a contradiction or like a tension between like doing it anyways. But I think you just have to be aware of that. That we don't know how the possibilities of emancipation will evolve over time and maybe we can't predict that. And so it's a bit difficult, but still it's more to start, or to motivate, a dialogue or a debate about a positive future.

Because nowadays, it's said people can imagine the end of the world, but they can't imagine the end of capitalism, for instance. So, I think there's a lack of imagination here. A lack of talking about what could be, also. The advantages of changing our relations to each other and to other animals and nature and so on.

Jasmin: Wow. There's a lot there. I like what you just said. We can imagine the end of the world, but not the end of capitalism. It's so true.

How much of what is in your paintings is fantasy and how much do you think is the way the world could actually be?

Hartmut: A lot of parts, a lot of areas, are picked from everyday life. I walk around here in Leipzig and take some photos and I use them as reference, or sometimes I just for the spaces. It's a bit easier to just imagine or just evolve something that looks like it could be, I'll say, real.

It's not like a really complete utopian scene. If you think of images like people sitting on the street and there's asphalt and there are also pigs around there. And, of course, you can imagine a world which is also really comfortable for pigs. The asphalt is a problem, but there could be more spaces where they can dig in in the ground. There's not a complete scenario that a social, ecological and animal liberation transformation has already completely happened.

And then you get these images, they're more like in between now and then. A bit of tension. And it's also because of this thing. To not be too explicit about how it should look like or how...It's more like, “okay, I just try things out and you can try to go further in the imagination of everybody who sees the images.” And there's also people coming up with just that question. “So why (is) everything in concrete here?”

And maybe in further paintings there will be more of this transformation already visible. I don't know.

Jasmin: Yeah. So of course right now you're speaking to people who are a hundred percent behind you, and I'm sure that's not always the case. So can you tell us about some of the reactions that you've gotten to your paintings?

Hartmut: Yeah, of course. Especially the older works, which were more graphic and more pointing out the violence against other animals. People distance themselves from that, or like also don't want to start thinking about that, or I don't know. Everybody is different, of course, but I think, if you're very not conscious about what is going on with animals...everybody knows it, but it's repressed.

I think in the last few years, I can see a change in how people in the art world, besides the vegan and animal rights, animal liberation scene, also start to see the works and start to take them seriously. I think before it was like, "we don't have to take that seriously." And I think that there's a little bit of change going on there. (Where the art) can be a part of influences that bring people to real change.

Jasmin: Yeah. How do you account for the fact that people can see animals, or paintings of animals, and care about them and empathize with them, and yet can participate in violence against them? How do you do that, right?! Like, how do you look at the animal utopia paintings and say, "Oh, wouldn't this be a beautiful world?" and then go order a burger?

Hartmut: Yeah. It's really hard to say what goes on in people's minds, but it's so divided between like "here the humans and there are all the other animals." But there's really like a big divide between that. And to overcome this, I think it's time. It needs a different kind of approach (to) influence the people. And it's not like one action or like one painting can do all the work.

Of course, it's convenient, as you talked about in your most recent podcast, I guess, people do what is the most convenient to them. And if it wouldn't be the cheapest way or most convenient way to eat food that contains animal exploitation products, they maybe wouldn't mind. But we also have to consider the point that it's also a very big part, changing or getting pressure on the companies that profit from animal exploitation and doing political pressure.

The psychological aspect of it is right, it's really hard to to say. But for me, it was like when I found out, when I was little, where meat was coming from and I didn't want to eat it anymore. I liked animals and I didn't understand what was going on there But my parents taught me, no, it's...Melanie Joy coined the term The Three Ns. It's normal, it's natural, and it's necessary. I buy that as a child,

because I believe my parents, there was like a process for me as well. And everybody has to go through this process.

And of course, back in the eighties when I realized what was going on with meat and so on, it was a whole different scenario. I mean, there were no vegans and vegan options and so on. And today, I think (it) can go a lot quicker.

And sometimes it's really also annoying how people still try to find some excuses why they can't. And I don't know, it's sometimes also frustrating to see that, but still, I wasn't born vegan and I had to evolve, so we have to be patient and do impressions. So what maybe makes most sense to us in certain situations.

Jasmin: Yeah, I also grew up in the eighties and I remember...you know, as kids we just have that innate thing, like we love animals, we don't wanna hurt them. And somehow our parents became so adjusted to this idea that it is those three Ns, as you just said.

I had it with dissecting, which in retrospect, I don't even understand why my third grade class was dissecting a worm. But I was like, "Absolutely not. No way!"

You know, and this is well before PETA had any kind of campaigns, I'm sure I didn't even know what a campaign was. So they did let me sit out from dissecting the worm. You know, when you think about it, if at that time we were able to actually embolden children and give them the agency to see through their values rather than squelch them, maybe we would have a world closer to the animal utopia.

You've said that, I'm quoting you again...our researcher really enjoyed researching you, by the way, we have so many quotes from you. So you've said that, "The social status of animals has played a role in visual art since the early cave paintings. On the other hand, art can question norms, power relations, and traditional conditions and reveal new perspectives."

Are there many artists who are struggling with the animal issue in a revolutionary way?

Hartmut: You mean if they also contribute their work to this kind of social struggle?

Jasmin: Yeah, and maybe their struggle is coming out in their work. You know, maybe they haven't quite gotten it.

Hartmut: Yeah, I think as it is spoken of, like an animal turn in academia, I can see that in the arts as well. There are more and more artists caring about these questions and then doing artworks (about) how human animal relations are shaped today. Especially for the younger generation, or even younger than we are. Maybe like the phrase for future generation, I think they have a different approach where they consider this already, a lot of them. A lot of these people consider this kind of problem already.

So as you said, we just let children keep their compassion. You have so (many) stories of children realizing what is going on with meat, where it comes from. And they immediately want to stop eating it. And the ideology of carnism and speciesism, it already has a lot of cracks, I think. So I hope it starts to crumble down.

Jasmin: Yeah. I hope so too. What are you working on now?

Hartmut: I'm working on trying to include also the sea or water into the imagery. And (for) maybe two or four years, I am also focusing on connecting animal liberation with the transformation of mobility, or transformation of transportation systems.

I don't know... In German, there's this term *verkehrswende*, which means like how mobility can be structured completely in new ways. If you think of young children, they can't really move the way they could, or they want, because they have to be held back (out of) the street and for the animals (it's) the same.

And you see (it's) really dangerous to other animals and to children to walk through our towns and cities. And I think if we take the idea of animal liberation and think about how the infrastructure and how the cities and towns must be changed, then I think it's absolutely clear that we need to keep the cars out of it completely. And also because of climate change, we need more green, more trees, which is immediately new habitats for other animals and, as well a much better place to live for us. So that's the images I'm about to do, things about connecting these ideas. They were already there, somehow. That the animals came into the shopping malls or the cafes and somehow reclaimed the streets or reclaimed the public space. Like also another connection to the climate crisis, which is obviously at the agricultural sector. But here as well, I think there's a strong connection.

Jasmin: Yeah. Wow. I love the idea of incorporating the sea. Here in the US, I swear every news program has something about someone getting attacked, quote/unquote, attacked by a shark, and I'm like, "Oh my God, this is so one little piece of the story." I would love to see a utopia with sea life incorporated into it.

Hartmut: Yeah, I'm thinking about that longer. And it's not our natural surrounding to be in water, of course. So it's a bit harder to evolve some scenarios which include this as well, but we're trying to do as well. I did a lot of like this ruin thread, image thread with the ruins of slaughterhouses and so on, and I thought of like aquacultures as well, how to depict something like this. So I'm working on it and I don't know if it will work out in the end, but yeah, of course. It's also, I think, ac thing, which is not considered so much.

Jasmin: I was listening to an audio book this morning, on coaching actually. And they were giving an example of Thomas Edison and how Thomas Edison would go fishing but wouldn't have any bait on the pole, so obviously never caught any fish. It was just he sat there with the pole to think and eventually came up with his great inventions.

It was kind of making the point of slowing down and I know that the point wasn't as literal as I was making it about like, leave the fish alone. But I loved the fact that like, yeah, the reason a lot of people like fishing is because of the experience. Just like the reason a lot of people like eating meat is because of the barbecue sauce put on it.

It doesn't matter if it's an animal flesh or if it's just like a piece of seitan with the same sauce on it. So maybe the utopia is sort of like humans sitting there while the fish are just coexisting and instead of catching them, we're appreciating them and appreciating the time to unwind and think in that moment.

Hartmut: It's like somehow...there's a slogan "shoot photos, not animals."

I mean, there's a lot about hunting is to be connected with nature and so on. But I mean, it's just brutal. And you can just be in the woods and enjoy nature, enjoy the woods but you don't have to kill (an) animal. And it's the same, you can be at a seaside or at the river and enjoy just being there and calm down.

I also have to think of Janosch, which is a quite famous illustrator here in Germany. I dunno if you know...I think he has an illustration with someone who is standing at (the) water with an angle or how...what is called in English? The thing where you catch the fish with?

Jasmin: The hook?

Hartmut: It is saying that it is looking quite good if someone is standing there on the water with the thing, but be careful that there's no hook on the end of the rope because a fish could get hurt. So exactly like the same thing as you just said.

Jasmin: I love that. Yeah, I love that.

So, okay, switching gears. We hear a lot about the progress of veganism in Germany. Do you feel that attitudes toward animals are fundamentally shifting?

Hartmut: Very slowly, too slowly. Of course, as I said, I think with the young generation, definitely there's a lot of people who refuse using animal products. But I think one of the problems, or what is also discussed here, or maybe the same discussion in the US probably as well, that we did a lot of vegan outreach over the last decades or years and of course, it also were successful and it's also useful to do it. We have to also get back to putting pressure on companies and on the politics. Because if you look at the meat industry or dairy industry in Europe, without subsidies, they would not work. So actually like without the state put(ing) in money into the companies, they couldn't run, probably, under market conditions.

Same thing with a lot of of destructive industries, but here, very much so. We have to be active at this point, definitely. And of course keep going on with the vegan outreach as well. But, it may be also the harder way, I mean, there's more resistance because their profits, (it will) really threaten them, really confront them. It maybe has more consequences as well, in the actions. But I think we as a movement need to do that, somehow.

Jasmin: Okay. Well it's funny cuz the perception here is that Germany is a bit of a vegan utopia. So just to let you know how we see it on the outside.

Yeah. Like just see a lot of interesting vegan companies popping up and vegan food being very mainstreamed. And so we're looking to you, basically is the point!

Alright. I would love it if you would stick on for our bonus content, but before we do that, can you tell our listeners how they can see your work and also is it possible to buy your work online?

Hartmut: Yes. So you can find my work on hartmutkiewert.de, or the English version is en.hartmutkiewert.de and also on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and on Mastodon. And you can buy prints on my website as well, but unfortunately, I ship only to the European Union since this month, because (the) postal service has stopped there cheaper service to ship to the US as well, or to other non-EU countries. But you can also order them via rootsofcompassion.org. And if you are interested in buying original artwork, then email me and yeah...

Jasmin: Okay. We'll include all of that in the show notes. Do you know if Roots of Compassion ships to the US?

Hartmut: I'm pretty sure they do. I think they ship worldwide.

Jasmin: Cool. All right. Cuz your work is very beautiful. It's very powerful. And it's also...you know, I do have some Sue Coe prints in my house and also on my body, she designed one of my tattoos. But it's sad, like I kind of want something that I look at and I'm like, "Oh, okay. That's what we're working towards."

So I very much appreciate it. Thank you so much for joining us today on Our Hen House, Hartmut. It's very, very inspiring to talk to you and I definitely encourage our listeners to take a look at your work. Click on the show note link and we'll keep you on the line for a minute but I appreciate you talking to us.

Hartmut: Thank you so much and yeah, I really appreciate it.