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# Art is a Tyrant

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For several years, I have been absorbed by the French animal painter Rosa Bonheur (1822-1899). I have been fascinated by her choice of motifs, format, lifestyle, and the narrative that surround her person. But above all, I am touched by her ability to portray personalities. To me, her portraits of non-human animals do not function as representatives of an entire species, but rather she portrays individuals with feelings, experiences, and agency. Her paintings feel alive, and they have had a profound impact on my own artistic practice. The breathing through nostrils and the stomping of dry soil are felt when the fields are plowed in the painting *Ploughing in the Nivernais* (Bonheur, 1849) I can hear the whip and sounds of hooves in *The Horse Fair* (Bonheur, 1852-55). I can sense the loneliness and longing in *Lion (The Look Out)* (Bonheur, n.d.).

In Anna Klumpke's (auto)biography of Bonheur's life, Bonheur calls art a tyrant, an absorbent that demands her heart, brain, soul, and body (Klumpke, 2001). Art is her companion, someone who grants her freedom through her success as a painter, but also dictates her life. She does not allow herself to be limited and refuses to agree to the conventions of her time that require women to submit. She also talks about how much she loves the animals she surrounds herself with (ibid, p. 22). And how much they in turn love and respect her – and this is where it gets really interesting. For the love of which Bonheur speaks is conditioned by art, that is, the tyrant, and therefore has fatal consequences for those depicted when caged and killed to be studied.

The description of Bonheur as an animal lover seems to be the key personality trait brought up when describing her person in art history. Dore Ashton, an American art critic and author of the book *Rosa Bonheur: A Life and a Legend* (Ashton, 1981), describes Bonheur as having a “lifelong love affair with the nature of animals” (ibid, p. x). When reading about Rosa Bonheur it seems that the idea of her

as an animal lover is one of the first descriptions that is mentioned of her. For example, when Denver Art Museum lists “10 fascinating facts about the women artists in her Paris” Rosa Bonheur is described as an “animal lover and painter” (Denver Art Museum, 2017).

Bonheur is also well known for her portraits of lions. When she tells the world about her life and relationship with the many lions she kept in her private menagerie over the years, she fills her stories with love, devotion and affection, directed from herself towards the lions but even more so from the lions directed towards herself (Klumpke, 2001, p. 184). Her stories seem, even though animals to her have personalities and emotions and are worthy of love, highly anthropocentric, since her artistic needs have terrible consequences for the animals that she keeps. These consequences become especially apparent in her relationship to the two lions in her menagerie to whom she claims to have a special bond: Nero and Fathma.

The first lion to whom Bonheur describe this special bond is the male lion Nero who, according to Bonheur, gives her “tender looks” (Klumpke, 2001, p. 183) and misses her terribly when she sends him and his female companion back to the zoo of Jardin des Plantes in Paris when they, as she phrases it, “were of no more use to me” (ibid). Later when she visits Nero at the zoo he has gone blind and is said to be literally dying of boredom but according to Bonheur he still recognizes her voice and drags himself towards her when she calls his name (p. 184). The second is Fathma who Bonheur kisses goodnight, keeps inside the house and who follows her around “like a poodle” (ibid). Furthermore, Fathma, who dies only three years old, to great shock of Bonheur, is described as “a model of obedience and docility” (ibid). The testimony of Fathmas death as shocking is remarkable to me, when in fact she is one of the lions who lived the longest within the cages of Bonheur. Even in Fathma’s moment of death Bonheur describes herself as the centre of her life when explaining that Fathma wanted to die “someplace closer to me” (ibid) when finding her dead after falling down the stairs in Bonheur’s house.

When researching Bonheur, I become more and more fascinated by her way of portraying personality, and not only symbolic representations of other species. To me, individuality and personality is especially strong in her portraits of individual non-human animals such as the donkey in the three-quarter view portrait *The Forlorn Donkey* (Bonheur, n.d.) and the dog in the full-face portrait Martin, a Terrier (Bonheur, n.d.). To be able to portray individual expressions in this way, I believe you need to interpret and connect to the emotions of the one being por-

trayed. Therefore, together with the aforementioned testimonies in her “(auto) biography” (Klumpke, 2001) of her emotional relationship to some of her animals, I draw the conclusion that Bonheur knows of the suffering of the lions she brings to her menagerie. In fact, she even portrays it.

So, why does she keep on bringing them to a chateau filled with cages, even though they become sick and die young. Because she loves them? Because she cares for them? Or is it exactly because she doesn't care for them? Perhaps her feeling *with*, is morally detached? Is Bonheur an animal lover? The answer is no, or perhaps I should rephrase, Bonheur is an anthropocentric animal lover. If art is the tyrant that demands caged animals to exist, then Rosa Bonheur is the warden of the ones enslaved by this tyrant. To contest the written and oral histories of these paintings, centred around an “animal loving” artist, I have taken upon myself to try to imagine another perspective that derives from behind the bars of her chateau. A version of history where the consequences of Rosa Bonheur's love towards her caged animals hopefully becomes more visible with the help of one of her beloved, Nero.

*Voiceover for the video artwork*

## The Artist Named me Nero

Dear artist,

When you died in the village of Fountainblue in 1899 the town erected a sculpture in your honour, shaped as a bull. How come there was no sculpture in my honour? I died for art.

To me art is a tyrant. It demands heart, brain, soul and body. The entirety of me. Nothing less will win its highest favour. The artist is both the warden and the caretaker employed by this tyrant, feeding me, keeping me warm, caressing me but also imprisoning me and accompanying me to my death. This means the sculpture in your honour is a sculpture of oppression.

The artist named me Nero. I find myself in a courtyard of a chateaux with walls that are heavy of animal trophies. The artist lives and works here. I am surrounded by gazelle, deer, elk, mouflon, horse, bull, goat, yak, dog, pig, monkey and birds who cannot fly. The artist has built a great studio of red brick and large windows through which she can study us all.

I have permission to walk around in the courtyard. Every morning the artist passes me by, going over the courtyard and the lawn until she reaches the wall and the white wooden gate that opens towards the forest. Sometimes she travels in a carriage that has a transparent wall on one side, it is because she wants to be able to paint even though the weather doesn't permit it. Those days I stay inside the cage.

There is a place by the wall where I can see and smell the forest that she disappears into daily. People pass by every day on the small path that runs between the trees and the wall. They walk closer to the forest when they see me. Now and then the artist comes back with prey. If it is a small animal she gives it to me, but usually she takes it to the brick house.

Behind the big house there is a pasture. It is full of sheep. I can smell them, they must be plenty. The great gate to the road is opened daily. More animals than people pass. The animals are transported on carts, are tied to donkeys and horses, are imprisoned in wooden boxes. She is collecting us, studying us for her paintings and when she is done we disappear through the gate again.

Dear artist, how come you need the bodies of animals to express what you need to tell and show the world? It is as if you need to conquer me to be able to respect me. I am a beast that is formidable only when I am feared or caged.

I have seen a painting of myself where I am standing alone in a landscape so vast the horizon is almost invisible. I am looking out into the landscape with my back to the viewer. There is so much longing in me and you have understood and portrayed this longing. You must have felt what I feel to be able to portray me like this. You felt my suffering but you kept on causing it. You know of our suffering, of the knife that has to pierce our bodies for us to become material, still you keep on doing it.

I am living in a cage, on a courtyard of a chateaux that was once a hunting lodge and I am going to die in a cage at a zoo next to a natural history museum where animals will be imprisoned, exhibited and experimented on for hundreds of years. Paintings of myself, and other animals who have passed the gates of this chateaux, will be filling the walls of museums all over the world. It keeps on going. I cannot see an end to it.

I am not the first lion staying in this cage. Before me was a male lion that died the first week of entering this cage that I am in. After that came a feline who tried to climb the stairs of the house while sick and fell down and died and I will be followed by your most beloved Fathma. I am told that you looked upon us as fellow creatures and that you always thought of the soul of the animal

while painting us. That you loved me. That you loved us. But it cannot be love when you in the future send me away to a certain death.

For the last months of my life I was taken to the Jardin des Plantes in Paris when you left the chateaux for one of your longer journeys. The courtyard and the place where I used to sit and look into the forest is no more. The other animals that have surrounded me are gone. In the end you came to visit me and you were with me when I died. It felt good not being alone. That there was someone there who had once said that she loved me. And sometimes I believed that I loved you. But this isn't a love on equal terms. This is a "love" where someone is in control of the other, where someone is imprisoned.

You talk to me, you mourn me, you treat me differently than the lion next to me. You do that because you know that I have personality, I am an individual and you know this. You feel it. But it doesn't matter. These feelings don't give me freedom. Perhaps you are too lonely to let me go, or perhaps you don't think I deserve it. After all I am still only animal to you.

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