

UNIFORM

A few years into the third millennium, three things happened, that at different levels may explain the thirteen images in the series Uniform.

1. One could read these kinds of headlines: " WARNING! Your winter coat may be made of dog fur"
2. My father moved into a home for people with dementia.
3. An old man went for a walk with his dog in Berlin.

Dog fur

This dealt largely with the winter's China-made parkas, which appeared on the European market. The rim around the hood was made of unspecified fur and could have been dog, fox, or any other animal that is used in China's fur production. Readers were shocked and wrote letters to the editor about the brutal Chinese people who slaughtered their dogs, and stripped them of their fur to make money. Even cat fur could be bought from China - there was no limit to their cruelty.

I started to think about how I could do a work about this cultural valuation of various animal species.

Some animals go long walks in the forest and cuddle on the couch in the evening. Their owners spend 1,000 pounds without hesitation for a surgery to extract a battery that their darling accidentally swallowed. Other animals are so stressed that they nibble at each other and run around in circles in their cramped cages.

In one of designer Stella McCartney's videos, made with a hidden camera, you can see how the foxes in fur farms are killed by electric shock in the anus. The electrocution is so weak that it takes an eternity before the foxes finally die.

"After watching this video, do you still think it 's fashionable with fur?" Stella McCartney asks at the end of the film.

Fur production is cruel all over the globe, not just in China, and not just when it comes to dogs and cats. The fur industry uses the cheapest possible methods of killing animals. Even though the meat industry is horrifying in many ways, you have to give them credit for using methods that quickly kill the animals. The meat should not taste of stress hormones. It's about profit maximization, about making as good a product as possible, so that you can charge as high a price as possible. The foxes and minks in the fur industry are suffering , but it is not visible in their coats.

Father

It was not possible for my father to stay at home anymore. Now he was so forgetful that we had to move him to a home for people with dementia. Ängslyckan, one of the municipality's homes , proved to be a very good place, and he thrived immediately with the staff and the other people there. The problem was, he constantly worried about his animals.

He had had animals all his life, and the absence of them made him confused and anxious.

Me and my sisters wondered if it would soon pass, or if there was anything we could do. One day I brought a piece of lamb fur and stroked his hands with it and he immediately calmed down. A piece of lamb fur, a dead lamb, worked just as well as a living.

It seemed absurd: fur as a substitute for the animal itself. Another memory popped up, which was about the same thing. The period of my life when I didn't have any animals of my own, a friend of mine, had a rabbit fur. Every time we met and hugged each other, I didn't want to let go. She was

like a giant rabbit.

It's no coincidence that our most common pets have a lovely, soft fur.

The man with the dog

It was winter and I was walking around in the suburb of Marzahn in Berlin. A year earlier I had interviewed some people there for the video *Es war ja nicht alles schlecht*.

Marzahn is a poor, gray "Plattenbau" suburb, which means that the houses are built of prefabricated building elements. Berliners in the GDR moved here in the 1960s and '70s, from moist, dark apartments in the inner city. Here the houses were well insulated, there was hot water in the tap and bathroom, and central heating instead of charcoal ovens. For those who had carried heavy coals from the basement up to the apartment every day, it was heaven to move out here. Half of the houses were empty now; it was only unemployed and pensioners who lived here.

I had filmed the demolition of houses during the day, and late in the afternoon, I went through a park to the S-Bahn station. Then I saw a man with his German shepherd. The man and the dog looked the same. They were both old and hunchbacked and moved laboriously. The man had a coat that came to well below the knees, probably a wolf fur, because it was the same color and texture as the German shepherd's fur. I had to sneak by and observe them until they finally disappeared into a doorway. My heart was sore, they were so great together.

Opponent to fur clothing that I am, something occurred to me. Had I been in the inner city and seen a young man or woman wearing the same coat as his dog, it would certainly not have brought out any tenderness in me, quite the opposite. Then I would have thought of the Paris Hilton syndrome, the dog as accessory, that it was all about fashion and image.

The fact that today we have to fight for animal rights in society is a sign of the times we live in now. The world's population growth has meant that we crowd out the wild animals from their home areas. The huge fishing trawlers pillage the seas. In factory farming the pigs can't live in dignity before they become bacon. The odds of humans and animals are so unfair.

Today, there are other materials that are as warm as fur. The man in Marzahn looked to be at least eighty years old and had certainly had the fur most of his life. The wolf that was in the man's coat probably had a natural wolf's life. At that time there were plenty of wolves in Germany and Poland. The farmers had to defend their sheep against them. If you shot a wolf, of course you should use the coat as well; anything else would be a waste.

I remember one Sunday thirty-five years ago when we ate Bamse for dinner. Bamse was my "horse". Actually, he was an ox, but because my parents could not afford to fulfill my desire for a horse, I pottered about with Bamse as if he were one. I curried him when I got home from school, keeping his coat shiny, and I nuzzled him as with my dog. I could sit on him, but not ride - he didn't want that. He was a very big pet in the end, who came running when I came home from school and wanted to be scratched around the horns. One day he was full grown and had to go to be slaughtered. We had a self-sufficient farm, and the animals we had, we ate. That's the way it was. This Sunday Mother's voice was wobbly, when she told us it was Bamse we would be eating. The whole family sat silent and grave and ate. I thought of my Bamse, but didn't resist eating him. I was hungry.

Lisa Strömbeck, June 2009