

The Same Life

Never before has the path that food takes to the table has been clouded in such an impenetrable haze. In today's world it is very difficult to figure out the places where so-called industrial animals are kept. The factory farms, or facilities for intensive animal farming, cannot be reached by ordinary mortals. Ordinary mortals wouldn't even want to go there. Perhaps they sense that the haze covering the world of the animal industry is there for a reason, that it blurs the outlines of disgust and inhuman crimes committed in the name of cheap goods on living, sensing creatures. And perhaps, deeper in their soul, they are aware that humans and animals are projections of the same life and that the evil and indifference that animals face and are subject to in the industrial production of food products are not so far from the large-scale massacre and genocide of humans by other humans.

Our group has long collected information and facts about factory farms. We have searched for their precise coordinates on aerial maps and in land registers. We were outraged and saddened by what we found. We thought that our eyes were already open and nothing could surprise us. But when we saw how everything really looks, when we experienced the environment in real life, we learned that our eyes could be opened further, much further, until they popped out of their sockets. All three of us came away from those places transformed.

Part One:

What Dreams They May Have

Through a broken fence, we reached a low, elongated building at the edge of an agricultural complex. The thick, flaking walls had narrow windows with no panes that let in barely any light. We stood among the nettles that surrounded the whole building and looked in through the windows. In what light there was, we saw ten or so large pigs lying on a floor made of tamped-down dirt, around them the remnants of old stalls and partitions. As soon as the pigs noticed us, they shot up onto their feet with surprising speed and, panting and thudding, ambled off somewhere to the right outside our field of vision. It was my first encounter with pigs in industrial production. I was shaken by the speed and definite fright with which the pigs scattered – primarily, as far away as possible from us.

In another factory farm, in a truly gigantic complex whose name guilelessly contained the phrase “factory for feeding pigs on grates”, we opened doors of one of the halls on the ground floor that happened to be unlocked and found ourselves in a room the size of a village gymnasium suffused with a stench. Just like in a gymnasium, here the air was full of roaring and shouting. According to our data, there were more than a thousand pigs. The hall was symmetrically divided into a hundred or so smaller stalls. In each stall were approximately fifteen several-month-old pigs. In the nearest stall, I convinced myself that all the pigs had cut tails – a procedure that the law forbids to be done routinely or even preventatively, and yet it is done, without the use of anesthesia. At first the pigs were afraid of us, but then they began to come nearer.

If I could describe the feeling I got from them in one word, it would be “frustration”. Pigs are playful and curious animals. The law says that they must have in their stalls “a sufficient

amount of manipulable material”, so that they have something to entertain themselves with, but we didn’t see anything (not counting as manipulable material for playing and satisfying ethological needs liquid manure – a mix of excrement and urine – covering the concrete floor, the grates, and also the pigs). It was, in short, a hall full of pigs and nothing else. The pigs, full of curiosity, sniffed at us through the bars. Then the doors suddenly opened on the other side of the hall and we had to make a quick retreat to our car. As we drove away, we noticed an advertisement hung on the fence. The factory was looking for workers. The sign had a picture of two pink and happy piglets leaning with their front hooves on a wooden structure in the sunshine. I have yet to see a more shining example of false advertising.

I left shaken, in total shock. Later, before falling asleep that night, it occurred to me: would the pigs that had sniffed us have dreams about us? After all, our presence and unfamiliar smell must have been the strangest experience of their whole day, perhaps their whole life. That thought depressed me more than anything else.

Part Two:

The Torment of the Everyday

It’s a pleasant late afternoon, a normal day like any other, it seems. The whole activity at times resembles a nighttime activity at summer camp. We climb the fence, crawl under the gate, help each other up through the windows. When we approach one of the apparently ordinary buildings of the factory farm, it’s clear to us that we’re going the right way. The unimaginable stink of excrement and cacophony of squeaking piglets. But what we saw surpassed even our worst visions. Overstuffed stalls full of several-month-old piglets covered in excrement and forced to live on a grate floor instead of straw. Instead of digging in the ground, all they had for fun was a single tire hanging from the ceiling. All of the piglets had already undergone procedures like neutering without anesthesia, tooth filing, or preventative tail clipping – which is, by the way, an illegal but common practice. The awful conditions and minimal space make piglets very frustrated and sometimes even aggressive, so they often bite each other’s tails. The next part of the building offers us perhaps an even worse sight: a hall full of gestation crates. The sows, who would ordinarily have built a straw nest for their children long before giving birth, are forced to give birth where they defecate, in a cage where they can’t even turn around. The blood on the walls only adds to the hellish atmosphere.

Both parts of the building have just small windows in the top half of the wall, so the pigs live their whole lives under halogen lights in the unending noise of ventilators and other pigs crying for sympathy and freedom that they will never get. They only learn what the outside world looks like on their way to the slaughterhouse. It is shocking and unacceptable to me that, for all animals farmed in this way, the slaughterhouse is really liberation.

After coming home from our first trip, I went out to get drunk. The alcohol, though, only deepened my emotions, just like when I returned from the Auschwitz concentration camp. The difference is that that time, it was a historical trip.

Part Three:

From the Cage to the Heart

At the beginning it's always a bit of an adrenaline rush. You step onto someone else's property and look for the right building. With you is the unusual feeling that you're crossing the boundary of the law, taking a stand against society's rules. But this time, of course, without any feelings of guilt, and even with conviction that you're doing the right thing. When they were a kid, probably everyone sometimes imagined what it would be like to be a thief, a spy, a secret agent... These roles always came with a certain excitement. Now we have the opportunity to climb fences, sneak in, and open locks without having to feel guilty. In a certain sense, we can even be proud.

Contact with animals in factory farms is always very distinctive. Sometimes you can hardly manage to take a few photos through the ventilator that's meanwhile blowing an unbelievable stench directly into your face; such meetings are quick and impersonal. Sometimes, of course, there's time to stay in the place and take photos for longer. These moments are always very powerful, because you have the chance to establish contact with the animals. You start to notice their individuality. Each animal looks in a slightly different way. For example, pigs often move me: some are worn down by the unnatural conditions, lying on the ground as the others step on them. Others are skittish and the slightest movement startles them; they start to run in fright and bump into the walls of their cramped stalls. Some squeal, others screech, and still others give off wheezing coughs.

As soon as you start to take more of an interest in one specific pig and look it in the eye, you learn the mad desperation of their world. All of a sudden it seems as though you're looking right into its soul. It is a true meeting of two living creatures. When this happens, I personally am often struck by a sense of shame that I, a person, am standing in front of this pig, and I would best like to apologize for all that it must suffer thanks to human insatiability. How little of that my testimony will change.

Forgive me that I can't get you out of this. Even after all I've seen, I won't be able to convince others to stop paying for your killing. When I reveal your suffering to others, most simply close their eyes. When I get home in the evening, washed clean of the stench of the factory farm, you'll still be there. In the dirt and darkness, on the cold floor, waiting for death with thousands of others.

Ending these meetings is always difficult. I don't want to leave them there, I don't want to stay with the feelings of anxiety and powerlessness from what I've seen there. At the same time, I'm glad that I visited these creatures. As a brief flicker of hope. As a demonstration that humans are not just cruel tyrants, and as evidence that there is a world outside that isn't made of concrete grates and metal cages.

Away from the Abyss

Today we often hear that we're living in a great boon and that our quality of life has never before reached such heights (at least in the rich North). So how is it possible that we are so indifferent to other creatures and degrade them to the level of business products with no regard for their natural needs or ability to suffer? Why do we love some animals as house pets and lock away others, equally if not more intelligent, in inaccessible, concentrated breeding areas? If a creature is suffering and we just ignore it, even though it's in our power to make a change

and stop contributing *to* its suffering, there is no moral justification for such a stance. This is neither a vicious cycle nor a catch-22. We can't close our eyes to the obvious reality. Let's make the intensive production of suffering a thing of the past!