Yezua Ho 0:00

This episode of Dear Journalist extensively covers the issue of animal cruelty. Listener discretion is advised.

Jo-Anne McArthur 0:08

In photojournalism, you have to practice a lot.

Mark Henick 0:12

Welcome to Dear Journalist. This is a show where we talk with longtime Canadian journalists about their careers. They'll share with us some of the lessons that they learned from their years in the field. I'm Mark Henick.

Hannah Mercanti 0:26

I'm Hannah Mercanti.

Yezua Ho 0:28

And I'm Yezua Ho. For this episode, I talked to award-winning photojournalist and founder of We Animals. Jo-Anne McArthur.

Hannah Mercanti 0:36

we want to get right to that. So make sure you stick around, because after we're gonna come back and chat more about what we've heard.

Mark Henick 0:43

Here's Yezua's conversation with Jo-Anne McArthur, on Dear Journalist.

Yezua Ho 0:52

So to start, I was wondering about what was your window into photojournalism? What made you interested in the field? I understand your first experience with photography was when you took black and white photography as an elective?

Jo-Anne McArthur 1:05

Yeah, that's right. But the beginnings were a love for storytelling. My mom is quite a storyteller. And so, she taught me to tell an exciting story.

And you can do that in many ways, through our, our voices and through writing. And you can do it through imagery. And for me, photography combines a lot of things that I love, even if it's the really difficult material, because I want to tell a story. I want to change the world for the better, be it for animals, humans, the environment, and I want to live an artistic life.

And so with a camera, I'm able to achieve those things. And, you know, share the state of the world with people which is why, I'm I'm in love with photojournalism and in fact, always have been.

Yezua Ho 1:58

So how did you incorporate your love for storytelling into photography? I remember in my introductory photojournalism course, I could not stop taking pictures of my cat just for practice. Were your early experiences something similar to that?

Jo-Anne McArthur 2:13

I was attracted to documenting the world in a way that I knew was unique to me.

And so, I, I don't think I actually started with some simple subject matter. I think I started with concepts. Yeah, I did. I did. And, and one of my earliest ways of doing that was going to the zoo. And my experience at zoos are that they are depressing places of captivity, where animals have very little autonomy. They don't get to choose when they eat or who their friends are, who they mate with, and all this.

And so I went to a zoo in Ontario called

Papanack. And I remember that there was a donkey standing behind a sign that said "Donkey." And I thought this was so embarrassing to us as humans, like, come on, at least tell us like the Latin name and where they come from. And, and like, tell us some interesting facts about a donkey. And here was this donkey living the most boring life in this paddock with very little shade... and it said "donkey".

And so that's what I took a photo of, which is a reflection of us. It makes, you know, it's kind of a really awkward and confronting picture because of the boredom. And it's, it's almost like obscene in a way. And so this was a concept that I wanted to deliver to anyone who's going to look at the picture: an idea of how we interact with others.

Yezua Ho 3:43

So was that the foundation for We Animals? What exactly brought up the idea of for the project?

Jo-Anne McArthur 3:50

Uh, it was because I felt that I saw I saw animals, first of all, in a way that others didn't.

I looked at animals. People often say to me, "Oh, you must love animals." I do. But more so I had a concern for animals.

And I wanted to convey my concern for animals, in images and in books and in narratives. And, I saw that there weren't a lot of photographers, like almost no photographers, professional photographers, telling the stories of the animals I focus on, namely those we eat and wear, and using research and so on.

Because we see a lot of companion animals-we're very comfortable seeing those animals, we're comfortable seeing wildlife, but then there are these animals that we interact with daily, like the animals we eat. Which, which we never, who never get to see. And when I focused on... when I thought about focusing on this, I was like, "Oh my gosh, I have my life's work cut out for me."

Because yeah, like this is global. This is everywhere. This is persistent and insidious. And uh, I'm gonna go for it. And the title "We Animals," I mean, some titles are impossible to land on. But yeah, We Animals. It's like I didn't even think to myself, "What am I going to call this project?" It just was, like, it-the title was there before you hav-before I even thought about it. And We Animals, we are all animals. You could say that it's a shorten, a shorten, a shortening of that sentence. And so it has been for 20 years now.

Yezua Ho 5:28

What were some of the obstacles you faced when photographing for We Animals?

Jo-Anne McArthur 5:34

I know what you're getting at. \*laugh\* A lot of people want to know about how we access... the places we go to because pigs, hens, turkeys, fish in, in on-land fish farms, octopus farms, animals and labs for farms, I mean, these are all places generally behind walls and locked doors, and fences.

Those places tend not to, and when I say "tend," I mean, they don't, invite people with cameras into their facilities. I have been invited in and when that happens, often you are shown a part of the farm. It's been cleaned up, there's proper bedding. But when you go uninvited, which is what I do quite often and what animal photojournalists do, photojournalists do quite often is we go unannounced, we might go under the cover of night, we might climb a fence or go through an open door in order to document things as they are.

So let's see, if there are... the bodies of piglets or other hens crammed into the cages. Let's see the conditions that they're in: have the hens completely plucked each other from the stress of confinement and captivity?

Yeah, like we need to know that hens can't flap their wings in the cages we keep them in, we need to know that pigs can move forward back by a foot or two in gestation crates, but that's it, they can't turn. All these things that are the realities of their day-to-day. Photojournalists need to go and, and unfortunately, we do trespass sometimes to do that work.

Yezua Ho 7:16

In the same photojournalism course I mentioned before, a lot of students, including me, were stressed about taking the perfect picture. We were so focused on making sure the angle or lighting was just right that we forgot the most important thing was to just capture a moment.

Jo-Anne McArthur 7:32

In photojournalism... You have to practice a lot. You're working for the decisive moment. It's-it's not studio work, you know, you can't-you don't have lots of time to work with light.

Or rather, let me rephrase that, you don't have time to create the light. You have to work with the light, you have to work with moving subject matter. You have to work with crappy conditions. You have to work with a busy background or a backlit background. And so, I don't think anyone in a first-year photojournalism course should expect to get good very quickly.

Now, I've been shooting for 25 years, and I'm, I feel like I'm kind of just beginning to get good. I've taken I've taken a lot of good images, but I will never, quote unquote, get there. I will be practicing my whole life to improve my composition by lighting to not mess up.

I mean, when you're in photojournalism-a photojournalist you take so many bad pictures, to get one that captures something-captures a moment that has the right elements and focus, has the right lighting, so... it's part of the beauty of being a photojournalist honestly, like you, you never get fully good at it. You practice for life, you're always on a road of discovery.

Yezua Ho 8:53

What do you consider to be your most favorite picture you've ever taken? Like, in general, it doesn't have to be something that's impactful to your career as a photojournalist or activist. It just has to be... It can be anything you want.

Jo-Anne McArthur 9:08

And my favorite image is... was taken at a Thai slaughterhouse; it was at a pig slaughterhouse and I was in the middle of everything. Was in front of the pigs as they were being clubbed over the head. I was kneeling down with them as their necks were being slit. I was covered in blood, as were the workers.

And.... here I was, this white girl,with a bunch of expensive cameras over her shoulders, covered in blood just like them. It was photographing the experience of the pigs, but I was also photographing the experience of the workers.

And I didn't want to be an outsider, which of course, I very much was. And so I was like, you know, making eye contact with them. And we don't have a similar, we don't have a common language, but... I interacted with them as best as I could. And I also just like it didn't pretend to be inert to it. Like, I expressed that this was shocking for me. I was like, "Wow," you know, and they can see me with my eyes, you know, bugged out.

And then I would like, make expressions to them of like, "holy shit." And they would laugh, you know, and they would laugh and like, slap me on the shoulder, you know? And they're like, "Yeah, this is, this is, this is harsh stuff." But because I made myself as relatable as possible, they allowed me to spend the day documenting a day in a slaughterhouse: what's that, like, what that's like for them, and what it's like for the animals.

And the image that is, that was really good is of a club coming down on the head of a pig, you see the water and the blood splattering off of the club, the pig is on her knees, her eyes are closed, and she's screaming, and she's lying in a-and she's kneeling in a pool of blood. And all of these people around are holding knives, or whatever it is they're doing and that they're kind of-everyone's interacting with one another. And they're interacting with the pig. And... it's a moment frozen in time, of something that we never get to see. And it, and it provides a lot of information about what a day in a slaughterhouse is like.

Yezua Ho 11:13

So that was my conversation with Jo-Anne. Hannah, Mark, what did you both take away from it? Especially that description of what her favorite photo was?

Mark Henick 11:22

Well, yes, well, first of all, great interview, and I really liked how she talked right off the top, about her love for storytelling, and how to tell an exciting story with pictures. You know, it really made me reflect on the idea that we only really see the frames of a story. And then our brain fills in the gaps in between. So which frames were shown, and the order in which they're shown: the composition of the scene. These are all creative choices of the photojournalist, of course.

But I think this applies to all journalists. We construct these scenes, either consciously, or unconsciously. And this can be with pictures, but it can be with written and spoken word as well. So it almost reminds me, listening to Jo-Anne speak about the, the sort of screenwriting approach to journalism. That stories, all stories are sequences of freeze frames, that we then string together to tell a narrative.

Hannah Mercanti 12:21

Yeah, I definitely agree with you there. Like, it doesn't just have to be a.... 3000-word feature and, things like photos and videos and audio can tell stories just as well as a print story can. The other thing from this that I really, really enjoyed was um, her explanation, I guess, of how she's still takes bad photos, and she never kind of thinks she's a great photojournalist, like, my own experience-I think me and Yezua were in the same photojournalism class. I, I think we might have been, I think. I might be wrong.

But, when I was in that class, I was.... I've never been very good at photography. So hearing an accomplished 20-year photojournalist say like, "You're never going to take a great photo in your first year," "It takes practice," "It takes time." It's just very, like comforting, in a way, you know, like, we've got so much time to get good at stuff like that. And even people with loads and loads of experience and practice, still kind of feel that impostor syndrome a little bit, I guess.

Yezua Ho 13:29

I mean, yeah, I took a photojournalism course, as I mentioned throughout the interview, in my third year, it was with Marta Iwanek.

And the funny thing is, I think the most memorable thing about it was that everyone in that class, when we were taking photos, like our main goal was probably just to emulate the examples she gave us. And that's what made it really difficult, because these are photojournalists with like, years of experience. And then we're just people who are just starting to hold a camera for the first time probably, or like a camera of, or a very old fashioned camera, not like a phone that we usually use and stuff like that.

But the reason why that made it so much harder to take photos is that we're trying to compare ourselves to people who have been doing this for a very long time. And because of that, it was, how do you say it? It was hard trying to just tie yourself to the photo you're taking, you're just trying to become someone that you're not, you don't really have- your identity doesn't really appear on your photo, it just appears like you're trying to do a copy of someone else. So that was very interesting to me.

And it was very fulfilling-not fulfilling, it was very relieving to hear Jo-Anne say that even after all of her experience, she still has trouble, trying to take the most-trying take a good photo and that she's still learning and I think that's the most important thing that come out of it is that you're never going to be-it's important to realize that... you're never....How do you say, not that"you're never."

You're always going to be learning, there's always gonna be something new that you can learn when it comes to photojournalism and not just photojournalism. This applies to basically everything in general. And it's that mindset allows you to improve constantly.

This has been Dear Journalist for the Review of Journalism. For more episodes, subscribe wherever you get your podcasts. While you're there, check out Reviewed. It's a celebration of 40 years of the Review of Journalism, with conversations from future writers and emerging journalists.

Hannah Mercanti 15:30

Make sure that you also pick up a copy of the 40th anniversary issue of the Review of Journalism available on newsstands across Canada in April 2024. You can head to reviewofjournalism.ca to find out more. For extra online content, you can also connect with the review on X and TikTok. Until next time, I'm Hannah Mercanti.

Mark Henick 15:51

I'm Mark Henick.

Yezua Ho 15:52

And I'm Yezua Ho. Thanks to Jo-Anne McArthur for talking with me, and thank you, dear journalist, for listening.

Transcribed by https://otter.ai