

From a Pet to a Partner. Photographs of Non-Human Animals.

- Antonina Gugąła

Zofia Chomętowska, Zofia Chomętowska and Jakub Chomętowski in Polesie, 1930 (O2-N-O5647) © Chomętowscy / FAF

When we type in the word: 'animal' in the Virtual Museum of Photography search engine, we receive over 900 results. Animals appear in the photographs from the archive in various contexts. Most often they constitute a theme of private family photos or of a reportage on animals used for scientific experiments and industrial tests. The archive also contains some examples of using animals for the advertising purposes (i.e. in case of Zofia Chomętowska's works) and in artistic projects (i.e. Antoni Zdebiak's works). Those photographs remain an invaluable testimony presenting the forms of animals' presence in the 20th century Polish people's every-day life.

Although we are not always aware of it, today we are looking at the collection of the Virtual Museum of Photography from the post-humanistic perspective, to which the authors whose photographs we can watch in the archive, in most cases, had no access to. So-called 'animal turn' in art which started in the 1960s and the 1970s resulted in the increase of interest in the subjectivity and individuality of animals as well as the unobvious relations between the human species and representants of other species. Instead of locating a human being in the opposition to animals, in line with the traditional approach of reality with the use the binary division categories: culture vs nature, the new approach makes us question and negotiate this way of thinking and look at animals as at the representatives of different species, but of the equal position. For this purpose, the term 'non-human animals' was coined; it focused on drawing our attention to the crucial common feature – we are all animals.

Jacques Derrida, the author of the famous essay „The Animal That Therefore I Am', suggests that instead of discussing whether animals can reason (Descartes) or talk (Ludwig Wittgenstein), we should focus on another substantial question, for the first time formulated by Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832), and thus: can animals suffer? . The answer to this question is quite obvious. Such an approach helps us comprehend the ethically ambiguous dimension of relations between humans and animals. It also allows us to look at the photographs from the Virtual Museum of Photography archives from a totally new perspective.



Wojciech Zamecznik, Portrait of Juliusz Zamecznik with turtles in the balcony of the apartment in Narbutta Street, 1959 (O7-E-OO353) © J. and S. Zamecznik / FAF



Krystian Jarnuszkiewicz, Anna Jarnuszkiewicz, Anna and Krystian Jarnuszkiewicz's dog Frodo, 1970 (PM-OI-E-OO538), © Anna Jarnuszkiewicz / courtesy of Pola Magnetyczne Gallery



Zofia Chomętowska, Zofia Chomętowska during phone conversation, the dog on the sofa, 1975 (O2-N-O5725) © Chomętowscy / FAF

Domestic animals appear in the photographs from the private archives of almost all the photographers whose works have been gathered in the Museum. In this virtual collection, there can be found i.e. a photograph from 1959 authored by Wojciech Zamecznik (1923-1967) – the portrait of Juliusz (the artist's son) with turtles. Another example might be a colour photograph of Frodo the dog dated from 1970 and being a part of Krystian (1930) and Anna Jarnuszkiewicz's archives. However, it was Zofia Chomętowska (1902-1991), mostly known as a chronicler of the pre- and post-war Warsaw, whose archive contained the most extensive collection of photographs depicting animals. It is significant that a vast number of photos documenting the photographer's private life depict dogs – almost as often as the other family members. Dachshunds, greyhounds, dogos, and terriers accompany Chomętowska from early morning to the late evening. They jump into bed or a car, they rest on the beach and play in the snow with the photographer. Those pictures allow perceiving Chomętowska as a person who maintained close and friendly relations with the animals from her surroundings. The photographs show the famous chronicler as a protectress of dogs, we can see how she is taking care of their hygiene and comfort.



Zofia Chomętowska, the author in the living room in Porochońsk (O2-N-OI-OIOOO) © Chomętowscy / FAF



Zofia Chomętowska, Dachshund in a bath, 1930 (O2-N-OI-OO154) © Chomętowscy / FAF



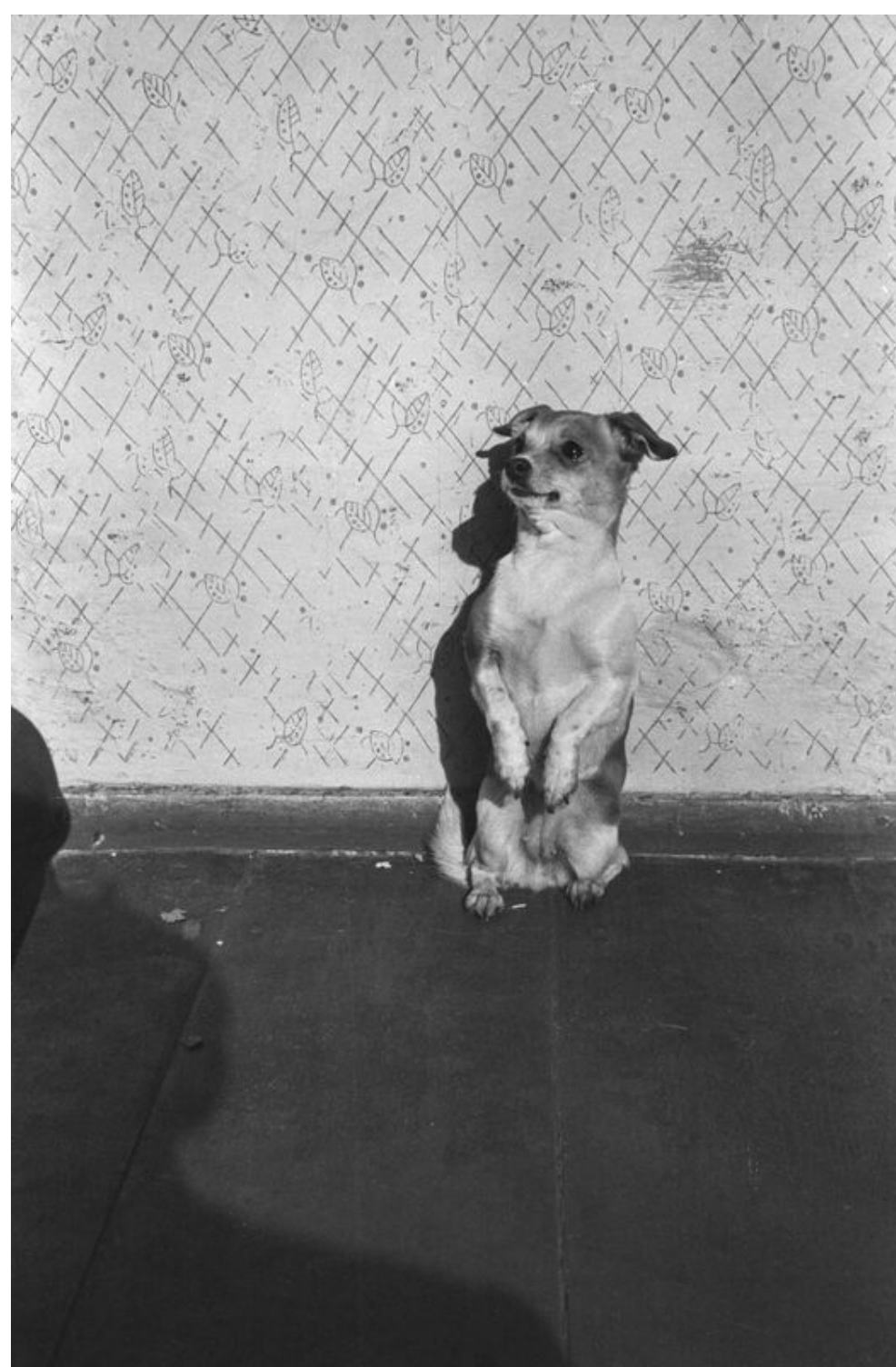
Zofia Chomętowska, Portrait of Zofia Chomętowska (O2-N-OI-OO710) © Chomętowscy / FAF

The animals captured in the photographs documenting the private lives of photographers are first and foremost pets that constitute a constant source of entertainment for other home dwellers. A dachshund standing on its hind paws waiting for the reward bears a striking resemblance to the dog, photographed in the 1970s by Marian Musiał (1916-2001). In the other photo from this series, we can see a child who gives the dog the reward. Train bodies of the animals submit to the power of their human owners.

A shrewd commentary to this group of photographs might be a video GOOD BOY – BAD BOY by Neozoon collective (2009), presented during Rencontres d'Arles photography festival in France, in 2018. In a few-minutes film which consisted of fragments of publicly shared videos on YouTube, we can observe what the training of household animals looks like in the 21st century. By drawing the audience's attention to the frequency of the content which repeats in various videos, GOOD BOY – BAD BOY shows the oppressive character of 'playing' with pets.



Zofia Chomętowska, Dachshund, 1930 (O2-N-OI-OO148) © Chomętowscy / FAF



Marian Musiał, Dog. The photograph taken in Suchedniów, 1970-1979, (sddroga-OI-N-OI363) © Anna Musiałówna / FAF



Marian Musiał, Boy with a dog. The photograph taken in Suchedniów, 1970-1979, (sddroga-OI-N-OI360) © Anna Musiałówna / FAF



Neozoon, still from the video GOOD BOY - BAD BOY, 3'16, colour, sound, 2011, courtesy of the artists

Dogs are not the only animals present in the photographs by Zofia Chomętowska. One of the pastimes enjoyed by the residents of demesne in Polesie, documented by the photographer, was hunting. In the photographs from Porochońsk, Chomętowska poses - together with other hunters -with dead capercaillies arrayed on the ground. In the other photographs, we can see the chronicler pointing with a fowling piece at a bird in the sky. Edward Falkowski (1913-1998), Chomętowska's cousin, with whom she ran the photography company 'CiF' after the war, remembered his visits in Polesie as it follows: 'In 1936, I visited Porochońsk. There were vast and beautiful swamps there. As a hunting lover, I wandered around these terrains and then I hunted. Bułhak came over from Vilnius to take some photographs in Polesie, and therefore Zofia Chomętowska delegated taking care of Bułhak and showing him around to me. I must admit that I became fascinated by photography. [...] So, I replaced a shotgun with a camera'.

Replacing 'a shotgun with a camera', and thus comparing the activity of taking photographs to a hunt, in the context of animals, appears also in Susan Sontag's writings: 'One situation when people are switching from bullets to film is a photographic safari that is replacing the gun safari in East Africa. The hunters have Hasselblads instead of Winchesters; instead of looking through the telescopic sight to aim a rifle, they look through a viewfinder to frame a picture. [...] The photographer is now charging the real beasts, beleaguered and too rare to kill. Guns have metamorphosed into cameras in this earnest comedy, the ecology safari, because nature has ceased to be what it always had been - what people needed protection from. Now nature - tamed, endangered, mortal - needs to be protected from people. When we are afraid, we shoot. But when we are nostalgic, we take pictures'.



Zofia Chomętowska, Polesie. From the left: unknown man, Zofia Chomętowska, Jakub Chomętowski (O2-N-OI-OO462) © Chomętowscy / FAF

Taking photos with killed animals is an inherent element of hunting. In the film 'Les Immobiles', Marie Voignier (1974) with a specific distance listens to the stories told by a retired guide of posh safari trips in Africa. In the subsequent photographs impassively described by the guide, we can see rich Europeans proudly posing to photos with guns and killed lions, elephants, and antelopes lying next to them. According to the narrative of the guide, in the 1970s and the 1980s, the safari was an extremely popular source of entertainment for the looking for a thrill, wealthy European philistines. Marie Voignier registers the man's words in silence, the artist is not trying to manage her interlocutor, she fully allows the guide's haughty approach to be well voiced.

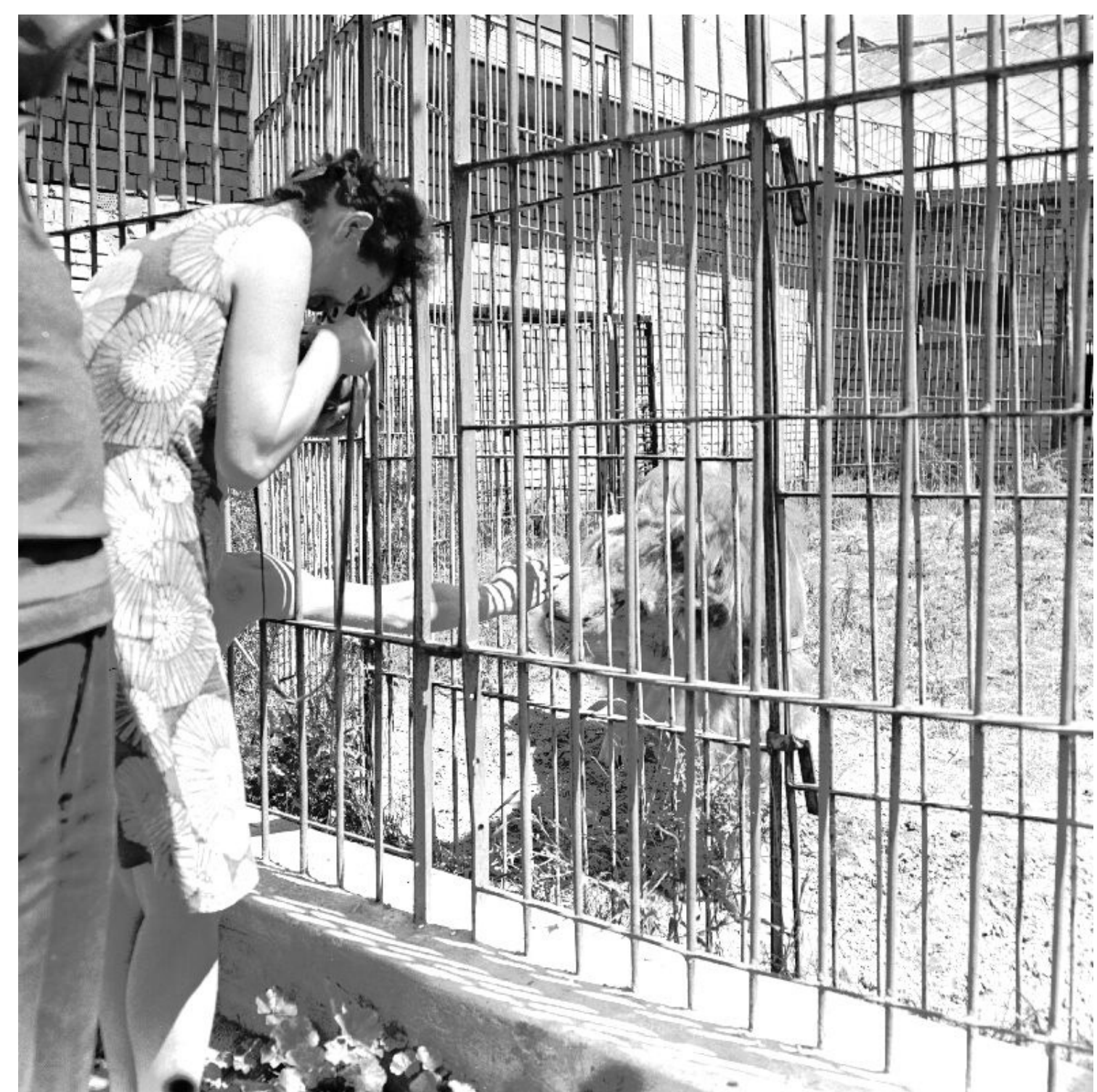
Another example of photographs in the Virtual Museum archive which document the unequal relation between a human and animals is the reportage by Janusz Bąkowski (1922-2005) from the Circus Base which came into being in 1950, in Julinek near Warsaw. A circus in its Polish reveal, for Bąkowski, is a folksy place. Wild animals have been tamed. Admittedly, the lion is kept in a cage, but in one of the pictures, we see an employee of the circus putting his hand between the cage bars and stroking the animal. In the other photograph, in the same cage, a local dog accompanies the lion. A bear, diminutively called by Bąkowski 'a teddy bear', evidently does not feel like posing to pictures. The photographs depict the bear forced to stand on the hind paws by two men. In the next photos from the series, we can observe the bear trying to free itself from the rope around its neck, providing this way a proof for the scale of animals' enslavement in the circus.



Janusz Bąkowski, Circus School in Julinek, circus employee with a bear (O3-N-O2-OO481) © J. Bąkowski



Janusz Bąkowski, Circus School in Julinek, circus employee with a bear (O3-N-O2-OO469) © J. Bąkowski



Janusz Bąkowski, Circus School in Julinek, Jadwiga Przybylak taking photo of a lion (O3-N-O2-OO3O9) © J. Bąkowski



Janusz Bąkowski, Circus School in Julinek, a lion and a dog in one cage (O3-N-O2-OO485) © J. Bąkowski

Among the photographs from the archive, we will also find images of animals abused in the industrial production process and scientific tests. The reportage by Jan Jastrzębski (1925-2001) from Polfa Tarchomin Pharmaceutical Factory in Warsaw shows drug tests conducted on animals. In the context of the question asked by Bentham (Can animals suffer?), it is difficult to accept the images we see in these photographs. Especially for the fact that in this case, we deal with colour photographs. It is not a distant memory from the bygone era, which could be suggested by the monochromatic version of the photos, but quite a contemporary one – we could say: ‘a familiar’ situation. One of the photographs from this series depicts a young woman wearing white smock who poses to the photo with a delicate smile, just next to the immobilized body of a cat. The animal in this photograph was fully objectified – treated the same way as the specialist equipment around.

The same cat appears in a few pictures, at neither of them, however, we can see its eyes. The similar situation looks totally different in the photographs by Tadeusz Sumiński (1924-2009). If we compare Sumiński’s photographs taken at the Fur Animals Farm in Skolimów to the photographs from ‘Stomil’ tires factory in Dębica taken one month before, we will notice a significant difference of perspective. The photographs from Dębica maintain a character of formal exploration, the photographer studies the shape of the plant and registers the repetitive rhythm of production. While photographing fur animals, Sumiński focuses on the foreground models. Mins and raccoons, in contrary to the factory workers, look straight into the camera lens. A simple gesture of the photographer turns animals into fully-fledged characters of the reportage, and not just objects in the hands of factory workers.



Jan Jastrzębski, Polfa Tarchomin Pharmaceutical Plant, Warsaw, the Institute of Antibiotics, employee of laboratories performing tests on animals, 1960-1965, (12-N-OO017) © Maria Jastrzębska / FAF



Tadeusz Sumiński, Skolimów, fur animals farm (O8-N-OO498), © Tad Boniecki / FAF



Tadeusz Sumiński, Skolimów, fur animals farm (O8-N-OO476) © Tad Boniecki / FAF

At present, more and more artistic projects draw attention to the unequal treatment of animals in industrial contexts. A great example of work which beaks with the conventional way of thinking about farm animals is ‘Novogen’ , the project by Daniel Szalai (born in 1991). The Hungarian photographer took 168 individual portrait photographs of Novogen White Light hens. Novogen is an artificially bred species of hens which eggs are used in the pharmaceutical industry and vaccine production. Szalai directs our attention to the corporation language which is used by the creators of the breed to describe it. Hens are supposed to be: efficient and easy to manage, resistant and able to perform in various environments. The artist indicates the ways technology contributes to even more radical reification of animals and draws our attention to the similarities between animal farm management and working conditions of late capitalism.

In the already mentioned essay on the complex relations between humans and non-human animals, Jacques Derrida tells an anecdote about an unexpected encounter with his cat, the encounter which evoked a feeling of embarrassment for the fact that the cat saw him naked. Derrida suggests that a human being is the only animal which covers its body with clothes and therefore, is the only animal which can be ashamed of its nudity. The moment of meeting another non-human animal without an outfit and the feeling of embarrassment which accompanies the incident, makes Derrida realise that there exists a specific correlation. The philosopher is not sure if the source of his embarrassment lies in a human’s awkwardness caused by revealing the naked body in public or the discomfort which a human feels like an animal which lost the freedom of being naked, and which at the same time still remembers that in the mythical past had no problem with so . Resolving this identity crisis lies in the gaze of the cat/ ‘the other’, in which a human may find a confirmation of his connection to the universe. As Derrida states: ‘the animal looks at us, and we are naked before it. Thinking perhaps begins there’.



Daniel Szalai, 'Hen 4310' from Novogen series, 2018, courtesy of the artist



Daniel Szalai, 'Hen 5329' from Novogen series, 2018, courtesy of the artist

Inspired by Derrida's thought, an American photographer, Ed Panar (1976), created a series of photographs 'Animals That Saw Me', which consisted of the photographs of the animals encountered by the author in his daily life. The title of the project cleverly reverses the anthropocentric way of perceiving reality. It is interesting to see what changes if we start to perceive the images of non-human animals from the collection of the Virtual Museum of Photography in the analogous manner.

Translated by Aleksandra Szymczyk



Ed Panar, Animals That Saw Me, 1993-2016, courtesy of the artist