

# Expanding Our Circle of Compassion: Compassion Arts

BY MARY HOLMES

According to their website, "Compassion Arts Festival is an annual project of Compassion Arts, an all-volunteer grassroots arts and education collective for exploring our connection with all life, and expanding our circle of compassion. The festival's mission is to provide a platform for sharing ways that creativity can be an instrument for deepening our understanding of, and respect for, other animals and nature." The 2021 Festival took place in November, and was inspired by the themes of *The Ten Trusts*, by Jane Goodall and Marc Bekoff. Each of the 2021 festival's virtual events represented one of the Ten Trusts. The virtual art exhibit was based on the Fifth Trust – Be Wise Stewards of Life on Earth. To quote Jane Goodall, "There is a lot that we can do, each in our own way. We must not lose hope, we must not give up. Above all, we must share what we have learned, encourage our friends to help in this most vital task--the stewardship of the Earth."

L.A. Watson, *The Roadside Memorial Project—Rabbit*, Reflective road sign installation consisting of plywood, reflective tape, wood, bolts, Size varied, 2013.



The Fifth Trust promo card.



Isa Lesko, **Pot Belly Pig**, Age 12 from *Allowed to Grow Old*, Archival pigment print, Image size: 9" x 9", Paper size: 11" x 14", 2011.

The Fifth Trust Exhibit website states, "As artists whose work focuses on a critical representation of animal life and nature there is a lot we can do to 'be wise stewards of life on earth.' We have made a conscious choice to create work that is more-than-human and in doing so we blur the boundaries, confront uncertainty and embrace unexpected outcomes. Often the more we learn the more it propels us, the more it becomes integral to our work. How as human artists, can we imagine and connect with the creative lives of other animal beings without hierarchy, without sentimentality? There are new progressive shifts in ideologies that are chipping away at the false dichotomies that have long separated us from them. We may not know what it is like to be a pig, a caterpillar or a pigeon, but we know that it is like something. Sentience lives in all of us." The virtual exhibit features the work of fifteen artists:

- Linda Brant
- Lee Deigaard
- Patricia Denys
- Alise Eastgate
- Kathryn Eddy
- Karen Fiorito
- Erica Gajewski
- Suzy González
- Isa Leshko
- Jane O'Hara
- Janell O'Rourke
- Colleen Plumb
- Linnea Ryshke
- L.A. Watson
- Gretchen Woodman

We interviewed curators Jane O'Hara and Janell O'Rourke for some background about the exhibit, and Ellie Sarty, Founder and Director of Compassion Arts. Jane O'Hara is a painter and curator living in Providence, RI. Her curatorial projects exist alongside her studio practice with focus on issues relating to animals' disparate experience in society. Using surrealism she creates a narrative in her work to point out how the animal condition poses a duality - animals raised in captivity at odds with the casting of human traits on our pampered pets. Janell O'Rourke is an interdisciplinary artist who works in the field of critical animal studies. Through art making, she explores the mechanisms of unwarranted prejudices that objectify other animals and our relationships with them. As an eco-feminist artist, she recognizes non-human animal subjectivity and values diverse and non-hierarchal modes of being in the world. Ellie Sarty is an animal advocate and music artist. The three women have worked together before.

Sarty remarked that, because of the pandemic, the 2020 was the first time the festival became a virtual event; not only was this year's virtual but 2022 will be. The Fifth Trust exhibit came into being according to O'Rourke when, "Ellie asked Jane and I if we would like to co-curate and participate as artists in an online art exhibition for this year's festival based on the book: *The Ten Trusts* by Jane Goodall and Marc Bekoff; we selected The Fifth Trust: Be Wise Stewards of Life

on Earth as our focal point. We want people from all walks of life to be able to make a connection while looking at the exhibition. It's not a vegan show, it's much, much more than that, it's an opportunity to engage with visionary artists who think about their place in the more-than human world." O'Hara added, "Our role as curators was to feature a group of committed artists whose work involves speaking for animals. Last year became the first virtual festival, as we all isolated in our homes due to the pandemic.... When Janell and I took this on, finding artists, designing the website, planning an opening event, I kept thinking of the advantages. These artists are spread out over the country. An opening could have visitors, and participants from anywhere – and did – and the Fifth Trust exhibition is accessible at any time. All you need is a Wi-Fi connection."

Sarty chooses a theme for each year's festival. "Since everything is volunteer, people's level of involvement

to the artists for their statements, but Jane and I made the selections based on materiality, style and process of the artwork in relation to the many thoughts of how art can educate through a visual language that is unique; artwork that would also collaborate and create a dialogue between the works." O'Hara added, "My hope is that people will now spend some time with the exhibition, go to each artist's page to look at the artwork, expand the images, read the text on their pieces and their statements and if interested go to their websites with inquiries and to learn more. There is a guest book as well so we hope visitors will comment on the exhibition and see what others have written."

Sarty concluded with her vision for the future of Compassion Arts. "There are several long-term goals for Compassion Arts, but the first is to use the next few years to transition to become a small online non-profit institute with year-round exhibits, programs, workshops, performances



Karen Fiorito, **Disappearing Bees**, 2019, 3 Monoprints (Triptych), 10" x 12" each, 2019.

is different based on what they are able to do. This year was more complicated because there were 12 programs based on exploring The Ten Trusts (inspired by the book *The Ten Trusts: What We Must Do To Care For The Animals We Love* by Jane Goodall & Marc Bekoff). The different festival events were overseen by the individual program hosts for each Trust event, and then I put it all together." O'Hara commented on the choice of themes, "I think using the Ten Trusts to set guidelines for the many aspects of animal compassion and the arts was kind of brilliant! The Fifth Trust: Be Wise Stewards of Life on Earth seemed an interesting way to feature a group of artists and create a paradigm to work with."

When asked how the work was chosen, O'Rourke responded, "Our artist choices were egalitarian in nature, each one of these artists can stand alone with her work. We felt that The Fifth Trust could function as an inspiration

and special presenters.

"As part of making this change towards becoming an online institute, starting 2022 the annual Compassion Arts Festival will only present original works from Compassion Arts or co-partnered projects, and it will also host two kinds of 'artists in residence' programs that will be featured in the festival - one for a guest artist, as a platform for an established person or group in the arts using their work for advocacy, and the other as a resource of support for an emerging animal advocate artist seeking to develop an original project." *Animal Culture* looks forward to following Compassion Arts' continued success!

For more information on Compassion Arts, go to: [compassionarts.org](https://compassionarts.org)

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Kathryn Eddy, *From the Farm to a Grocery Store Near You*, variable size, sculpey clay with acrylic paint, 2013.