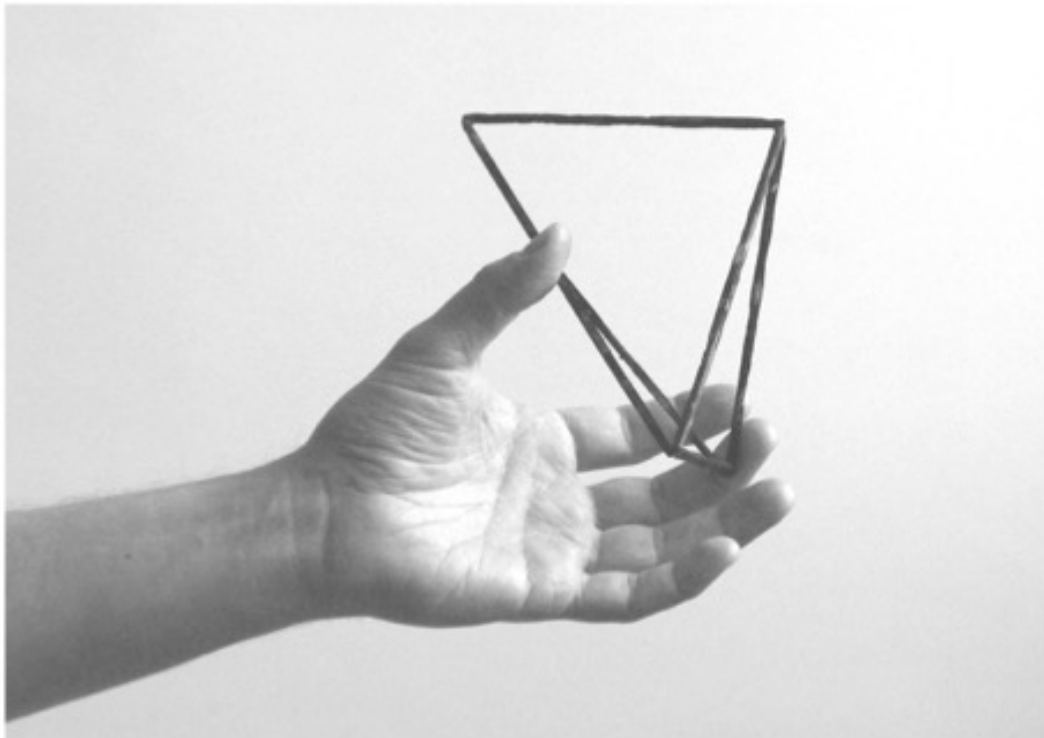


—SPACES

# On carpets, cats, cages, and three films by Gernot Wieland

by Barbara Casavecchia



Gernot Wieland, *Ink in Milk*, 2018. Still from video, 12:30 minutes. Image courtesy of the artist.

I am not working, so I'm working out. Crunch and plank, back and forth. I do it next to my desk, on the ragged carpet brought back from Morocco decades ago, immersed in the most familiar of interior landscapes.

When I was in elementary school, an unspeakable fear of going blind (ommetaphobia; suggested treatment: hypnotherapy) made me secretly walk around my room at night, eyes wide shut, just to rote-learn every inch of its perimeter. Now, there's an irony in using this domiciliary setting for exercise. On the wall above my desk there are black cats stretching, bending, and arching their backs, stencil-sprayed there by an artist friend, Riccardo Previdi, and inspired by Gatto Meo Romeo, a foam

## Press Review

e-flux, Barbara Casavecchia, April 2020

rubber toy designed by Bruno Munari in 1949 as a playful contortionist for young hands. They are a daily remainder of my sentimental education, based among other things on graffiti, punk comics, squatting, absurdist jokes, yoga, and modernist Milanese design.

In Berlin, I think it was the mid-2000s, Riccardo introduced me to his friend and fellow artist Gernot Wieland. We've been in touch ever since and I intended to visit his exhibition at Salzburger Kunstverein, which opened in February. But now I can't. The three films on show (*Thievery and Songs*, 2016; *Ink in Milk*, 2018; and *Square, Circle, Square*, 2020), which were projected there in their original analogue film format, are now accessible as videos through the institution's website. I watch the films under the sardonic gaze of my black cats and laugh at their deadpan humor. When they move me, I curl up on the rug, glad to hide my feelings from other eyes. I'm mourning the loss of a much-loved member of my family. Of course I miss white cubes, which abstract us from the vulnerability of our "daily persons," in Brian O'Doherty's term, and allow us to move around unnoticed, as "The Spectator" and "The Eye." In his introduction to the 1986 edition of O'Doherty's *Inside the White Cube*, art critic and poet Thomas McEvelley writes: "In classical modernist galleries, as in churches, one does not speak in a normal voice; one does not laugh, eat, drink, lie down, or sleep; one does not get ill, go mad, sing, dance, or make love."<sup>(1)</sup>

But in housebound quarantine, people do all these things. This housetraining shapes our ways of seeing. John Berger compared visitors to an art gallery, "who stop in front of one painting and then move on to the next or the one after next,"<sup>(2)</sup> to those at a zoo, proceeding from cage to cage, where subjects waver between lethargy and hyperactivity. (In the temporary absence of both galleries and zoos, I guess it's not by chance that millions of viewers are obsessed by *Tiger King* on Netflix.) In an attempt to cope with intensive scrutiny within our own captivity, some of us even decorate our Zoom backgrounds with fake en-plein-air views. "Within limits, the animals are free, but both themselves and their spectators presume on their close confinement," Berger writes. He cites the zoologist (and surrealist painter) Desmond Morris, who suggests that observing the unnatural behavior of caged animals may help humans understand the strain of living in consumer societies. Isolation and artificial environments affect the reactions of all creatures, who become "immunized to encounter, because nothing can any more occupy a *central* place in their attention." When faces and images meet my gaze, now, through the screen, I struggle to sustain it: it's as if they are visitors staring into my moat. Of course I miss my Responsive Eye.

Gernot's films have plenty to do with animals, human and nonhuman: their domestication and their encounters. What makes them so compelling to me, at this moment, is their tactful supply of humor and imagination as strategies for survival, as well as their treatment of the psychopathologies of the everyday (anxiety, depression, grief) as part of everybody's lives on the planet. They take in pain and process it. Small catharses ensue.

The stories are personal, narrated in voiceover by the artist himself and illustrated with simple media (pen and pencil drawings, watercolors, photos, plasticine animations, Super 8 films). Meticulously annotated maps reconstruct the backdrops of certain autobiographical episodes, often drawn from the narrator's youth, but their childlike style makes it difficult to situate them either in the past or the present, as is common with dreams or memories. Likewise, they appear full of mistakes, exaggerations, fictional twists, and sentimental overtones.

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where they want, without paying much attention to us. This morning, swallows returned to Milan. I think it's a good sign.

**Online viewing room**

["Gernot Wieland" at Salzburger Kunstverein](#)

(1) Brian O'Doherty, *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space* (San Francisco: The Lapis Press, 1986), 10.

(2) John Berger, "Why Look at Animals," in Filipa Ramos (ed.), *Animals: Documents of Contemporary Art* (London: Whitechapel Gallery, 2016), 68–69.

(3) Rudolf Steiner, *The Story of My Life* (London: Anthroposophical Publishing Co., 1928), 11.

(4) See [gernotwieland.com](http://gernotwieland.com).

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