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FUR

THE FEEL-GOOD FIX?



by *Brenda Shoss*

In January I saw the Broadway hit “The Producers” at Saint Louis’ elegant Fox Theatre. I also saw enough dead animals to fill a forest. Ankle-edge mink, glossy fox and lavish lynx gushed over seats. Women shed floor-length furs with choreographed precision.

Born again fur-wearers are everywhere. During a recent trip to New York, I saw pelted pedestrians from all socioeconomic backgrounds. At my bank, I saw a man in floor-sweeping mink over denim slacks. He looked really stupid. Yet fur’s comeback isn’t so much a fashion blooper as it is a state-of-mind. Post 9/11 consumers possess a live-for-the-moment indulgence. Designer Nicole Miller told Fur World magazine the terrorist siege left shoppers with a need to feel secure. Apparently “comfort furs” are America’s new pacifier.

“Once in hiding, furs now are flying out of the closet,” writes Susan Phinney in the Seattle Post-Intelligencer. “The year 2000 was the fur industry’s best ever, with sales of \$1.69 billion,” Fur Information Council executive director Keith Kaplan told The New York Times.”

On the other hand, surveys indicate that 72% of shoppers favor faux; 54% believe the sale of fur garments is socially irresponsible; and 47% frown upon fur-trimmed items. Still, fur is political attire and wearers are determined to oppose anti-wearers. “You can’t talk about fur without talking about anti-fur,” says Judie Schwartz of Style Matters, a Denver-based radio show.



When the animal rights movement gained momentum in the 1980s, fur that didn’t resemble fur emerged in day-glo orange, sizzling red, lime green, and powdery pastels. Designers still shear fur to imitate velvet. They weave the hip new hides inside jackets, scarves, hats, gloves and vests. The industry plugs fur trim to capitalize on consumers’ illogical buying habits. Somehow, a little less fur means a little less suffering and death.

Agencies such as Fur Commission USA hoodwink the public with claims “the animals die quickly and humanely.” In fact, no federal laws exist to moderate slaughter. Fur farms use the cheapest means to harvest undamaged pelts.

Anal electrocution is the primary mode of extermination, as investigator Matt Rossell learned during his undercover stint at a typical fur farm in Illinois. Rossell, who concealed a camera inside his belt while assisting in the genital



electrocution of 500 foxes, pulled each animal from the cage in a neck noose. Dan, the farm's owner, pushed a probe into the animal's rectum and a metal conductor down his throat. Dan taunted the struggling fox to chomp on the conductor before shooting 240 volts of electricity through the small body.

"In an unsuccessful electrocution, they're left convulsing until Dan can pick up the probe to shove it back inside this poor animal writhing in pain. And then it has to be done again and again until the animal finally succumbs to a heart attack," Rossell says.

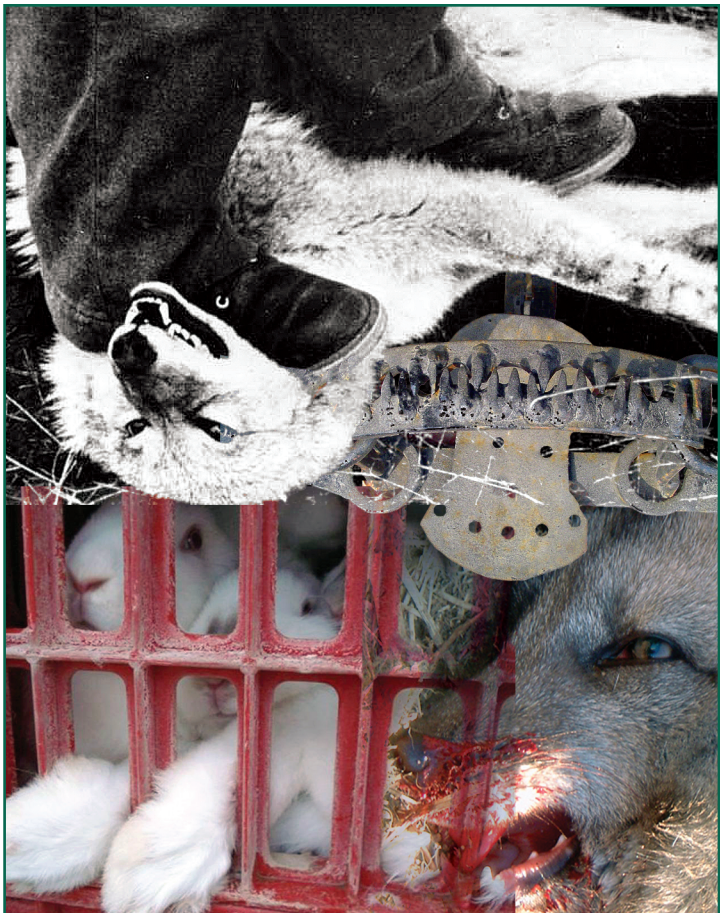
For low-cost **neck "popping,"** a preferred method for smaller animals, the killer grips the animal's neck with one hand and clutches the lower body with the other. He then yanks the animal's vertebra out of the socket. One worker at a California chinchilla farm told PETA investigators the animal spasms and kicks for nearly five minutes after the neck is broken.

Some furbearers are **gassed with carbon monoxide** derived from hot, unfiltered engine exhaust. Minks, agile swimmers able to hold their breath for long periods, often awaken to be skinned alive.

Leghold traps are reserved for wild animals who cannot be ranch-raised. These indiscriminate devices snap shut on dogs, cats, deer, livestock and 2 to 10 times as many non-target animals. One of every four animals caught in the traps gnaw their teeth to the jawbone or chew off their feet to escape. Trappers may fatally crush surviving animals or club, drown, suffocate, shoot or strangle them.

Fur Commission USA alleges, "Farm-raised furbearers are among the world's best cared-for livestock." Yet inquiries reveal rows of animals frantically pacing in feces- and urine-saturated cages. Some perish from dehydration, starvation or self-mutilation. Rossell's photographic evidence shows cannibalized cagemates and a fox who'd chewed off his entangled leg to reach food.

The fur industry defends its product as an environment-friendly resource. "By feeding their domesticated carnivores the 'leftovers' from human food production (beef, fish, dairy, poultry), fur farmers reduce the environmental impact of the agricultural sector as a whole," the Commission contends.



The fur trade's use of meat/dairy remnants merely supports modern mega-farms. Livestock already outnumber humans 3 to 1 and ingest at least half the world's grain supply. The feed it takes to fatten industrialized livestock could nourish billions of impoverished people.

Does a society in search of feel-good fixes need to wear tortured animals? Calvin Klein, J. Crew, Polo Ralph Lauren, Stella McCartney, Tommy Hilfiger, Todd Oldham, and other prominent fur-free designers don't think so. For those who gotta get furry, synthetics now have the movement, sheen and warmth of real fur — minus the misery.



- **12/18/10: President Obama signs Truth In Fur Labeling Act** to legally require all fur labels show animals used and country of origin.
- **5/5/09: European Parliament bans seal items from import-export across EU's 27 nations.** Canada sealers lose big customer: EUROPE!
- **2004-2009, U.S. fur retail sales steadily drop** from \$1.81 billion in 2004 to \$1.26 billion in 2009. *Fur Information Council of America*
- **3/27/09: International Fur Trade Federation** notes global fur sales fall to 2005/2006 levels. **Fur Commission USA** reports loss of approx. \$2 billion from 2006/2007 to 2007/2008. *Fur Information Council of America* shows a 12% decline in U.S. 2006 fur sales from prior year.
- **3/24/09: Urban Outfitters goes fur-free,** joining Zappos, Zara, Juicy Couture, Polo Ralph Lauren, Gap, Forever 21, JC Penney, American Eagle, Calvin Klein, Donna Karan, Abercrombie & Fitch, J. Crew, Ann Taylor, Stella McCartney, Tommy Hilfiger, Kenneth Cole, Vivienne Westwood, Todd Oldham, Marc Bouwer...(140 names, as of 3/09).
- **3/18/09: Russia bans hunting of harp seals less than 1 year of age** in the White Sea, placing Russia far ahead of Canada in terms of government response to public opinion on seal hunts.
- **2/13/09: Grey Seals Spared In Canada's "Other Hunt."** Authorities okay a 2009 grey seal kill, but processors tell hunters they'll refuse to buy skins of baby grey seals...so sealers stay home. For 2009, at least, grey seal pups are safe with mom...unlike the poor harp seals.
- **1/1/09: European Union Dog And Cat Fur Ban.** The ban on import, export and sale of cat and dog fur enters into force on 1 January 2009
- **Fur farming is banned in the UK.**
- **8/28/07: New York is first state to ban anal electrocution for fur.**
- **1/25/07: Belgian Parliament unanimously bans seal goods.**
- **74% of Americans want traps banned nationwide.** *Gallup Poll.*
- **80% of Americans and Europeans disapprove of Canada's seal hunt** [*Penn, Schoen & Berland, 2002 and MORI, 2002*], with a growing contingent devoted to a Canadian seafood boycott.