

Sound Thoughts on Art – Season 1, Episode 6
Emily Wells and David Wojnarowicz's *Untitled (Falling Buffalos)*
National Gallery of Art

[MUSIC PLAYING]

CELESTE HEADLEE: Welcome to *Sound Thoughts On Art*, a podcast from the National Gallery of Art. I'm your host, Celeste Headlee. Art can engage all of our senses. We hear music, we see a photo, we walk around a sculpture, we taste fine food.

Standing close to a favorite painting, we can even smell the wood or oil paint. But it's when our senses work together that things get really interesting. When we listen, what do we see in our mind's eye? When we stand in front of a painting, what do we hear?

This podcast lives in that convergence. In every episode, you'll learn about a work in the National Gallery's collection from someone who knows the art and its context. You'll also hear a musician respond to that work through sound, creating a dialogue between the visual art and music. *Sound Thoughts On Art* tells the stories of how we experience art and how it connects us.

Time flies, we're told, when you're enjoying yourself. But the other side of that cliché is that time slows to a crawl when you're *not* having fun. When you're going through something painful, time can feel infinite, as though the Earth has stopped turning. But in that still and exquisite moment, we can also find grace.

We see that kind of beauty in *Untitled (Falling Buffalos)*, a 1988 photograph by David Wojnarowicz. In it, a group of buffalo are frozen in time as they stumble off a rocky cliff side. The landscape behind them is picturesque and calm, and so in a way, are the doomed buffalo. As this episode's curator Sarah Greenough will tell you, the buffalo and their environment aren't actually real, but they were photographed in a tumultuous time when many Americans were frozen in their own painful situations.

Musician Emily Wells says, this photograph evokes the sound of silence for her—the heart-stopping apex of a freefall. It's a sensation that she says is all too familiar.

So we begin by asking both Sarah and Emily the same question: In the vacuum of this photograph, do the buffalo symbolize humans, or are we the unseen force that's driving them over the edge? Here's Emily's take.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

EMILY WELLS: (SINGING) That's why you love me.

I think we're the buffalo. I feel like human beings are innately good, and we can be so ignorant and distracted. So driven. So yeah, I see us as the buffalo.

(SINGING) That's why you love me.

CELESTE HEADLEE: Sarah Greenough, same question. Are we the buffalo or the reason they're falling?

SARAH GREENOUGH: We're probably both. We're the people driving the buffalo over, as long as we perpetuate misinformation and stereotypes, as long as we demonize any one group or race of people—or even support governments or institutions that do.

I think, though, that many people can also feel that they are the buffalo. They are the people who are being victimized by those who don't have insight, who don't have caring or concern about them because somehow they are perceived as different. And I think that's where the strength of this photograph really lies, because I think most people can easily see both sides of the emotions that it's expressing.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

One senses that Wojnarowicz drew a line between the brutality that led to the near extinction of the buffalo and this horrific disregard for the suffering of gay men during the AIDS epidemic and the government's inaction and refusal to address the epidemic head on.

He came to Washington, DC, in 1988, apparently. He went to the Natural History Museum here, and he saw a diorama. One of those 3D installations of the American West that had a painted background, as dioramas do, that depicted buffalos being driven off a cliff to their death.

And instead of taking a picture of the whole diorama, he took a photograph of just that one portion of it, because he clearly saw a parallel between the sense of doom that he was feeling with his own AIDS diagnosis, but also more generally with the way AIDS was ravishing the gay community. He saw a parallel between that and the wholesale extermination of the buffalo that was condoned by the US government in the 19th century.

Native Americans had, of course, relied on buffalo for food and clothing and shelter, and they worshiped buffalo. It was a sacred animal to many Native Americans. But when the white trappers went to the West starting in the 1830s, they began killing off the buffalos with rifles for their hides or just for sport.

They even began killing them from railroads. And it was estimated that, between 1830 and 1885, 40 million buffalo were killed. So that image of buffalo being driven off the cliff really can be seen as just this senseless destruction of life.

CELESTE HEADLEE: Why this particular piece?

EMILY WELLS: This piece is—obviously, it’s pretty iconic. If you only know one David Wojnarowicz piece, you might just know this one. And so I think it’s pretty easy to connect to.

And when I look at it, I see us.

I see all of us in this moment frozen before our downfall. My work deals a lot with climate crisis, so I feel a bit frozen in this moment. Yeah, I was drawn to that.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

SARAH GREENOUGH: He made this photograph in 1988. So that was really the height of the AIDS epidemic, and I think that it’s something that many people today will have a renewed appreciation of that epidemic and how scary it was. AIDS was something that apparently there were a few cases that were diagnosed in the 1970s, but it really wasn’t until the early 1980s that it came on other people’s radar.

I think the CDC diagnosed it in 1981, but because it was initially seen mainly in drug users and gay men, it was thought to be, hoped to be a disease that would not affect the wider population. And indeed, there was a lot of fear about AIDS, about how you contract it. Could you contract AIDS just by touching somebody?

And so the fear of AIDS throughout the 1980s was intense, and the government did very little—at least initially—in order to try and diagnose it and then to get out solid information into the public.

So it was an incredibly contentious period. It was a period when many gay people, like Wojnarowicz, were terrified of getting AIDS. He had just been diagnosed with AIDS just shortly before he made this photograph, so there’s all of that background behind this picture.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

CELESTE HEADLEE: What kind of music do you hear, even if it’s not your own. But the first time you encountered this, maybe, can you imagine what kind of music played in your head?

EMILY WELLS: The first thing I see when I see this is silence. So maybe it’s John Cage, but yeah, I think it’s—I can’t help but evoke that feeling of falling. There’s a kind of excitement and sorrow to it.

CELESTE HEADLEE: And in your piece, I mean the sound of falling is wind, right? I mean—

EMILY WELLS: Yeah.

CELESTE HEADLEE: That’s what it sounds like. And you kind of included a bit of that sound in your piece.

EMILY WELLS: Yeah, so initially, this is a song that I wrote about David Wojnarowicz. And I was on tour at the time. And I was in Brussels staying in a friend's home, which is a sprawling, multilevel town house that all the windows face a gigantic gothic church. And on the first floor is this creaky old piano, which belonged to the mother of my host.

And I had just finished reading this chapter from Olivia Laing's book *The Lonely City*, which is this chapter is called "The beginning of the end of the world," I think, something like that. And she talks about David Wojnarowicz in detail. She was a bit obsessed with his taped journals. She would go to the archives and listen to them. So you felt, again, this intimacy.

You felt her having this relationship that I'm—we were discussing that I have this friendship because of his generosity and how intimate he is in his writings and these taped journals.

Anyway, so I went downstairs to this old creaky piano and wrote what became "David's Got a Problem." So when this adventure of what we're doing now came across my screen, I thought, well, maybe I could take a piece of that song, because David Wojnarowicz is already so present in that song and turn it to the buffalos and create that feeling.

But have this starting place that already was so present for me.

So yeah, I really meditated on that feeling. And there's a lot of breath inside that song, because the buffalos aren't—they're not dead yet. It's still very much alive in that moment.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

CELESTE HEADLEE: So it's odd for me, because when I looked at this piece and thought about the music that would accompany it, the thing that kind of got me stuck was the pace and the rhythm. Because there's so much urgency and panic, obviously, in those buffalos' movements. And yet, as you say, it's this still captured moment. How do you handle that musically?

EMILY WELLS: I think it could be handled however one pleases. If someone wanted to rush in and create something that was wild and chaotic, I think that would be absolutely suitable for this if that's what that photograph evoked for them. For me, it's just silence and stillness. So that's where I went with it.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

CELESTE HEADLEE: Had you already given thought to the connection between visual art and music before?

EMILY WELLS: Oh, yeah. It's such a big part of my practice—my creative practice, my process, all of that. So yes, it's very much there.

CELESTE HEADLEE: Why is it such a big part of your music?

EMILY WELLS: Its food. It's a way in. It's a place that I'm able to begin so often—especially the work I've been making lately, almost in a conscious way. Forming friendships with artists, some dead, some alive, but it's an imaginary friendship that I create through their work.

CELESTE HEADLEE: So you feel—that sounds to me, and I don't want to put words in your mouth, but you feel as though you have a relationship with the artist when you are looking at a piece of visual art? Is that correct?

EMILY WELLS: Yes—I can. I can get there. Yeah, for sure. And somebody like David Wojnarowicz, who we're here to discuss. His work is so broad, and he was also a writer. And so he's giving us so much more in, such a deeper way in. I think I'm drawn to artists who use text, and—not always, but oftentimes, yeah, that's just a different road into their work and their minds.

CELESTE HEADLEE: So tell me about your friend, then. The David Wojnarowicz that you have a relationship. What is he like?

EMILY WELLS: Oh, he's so gentle, and he's so willing to be intimate with you and bare his fears and his rage and his wildest escapades. And he's calm, present—there's like an omniscience to him, I guess, at this point in my imagination.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

CELESTE HEADLEE: Sarah, let's talk about David Wojnarowicz so we can place *Falling Buffalos* in context. Who was he as an artist?

SARAH GREENOUGH: He was an immensely talented artist—really, in many ways, the ultimate outsider artist, who also had a very short career that lasted really not much longer than a decade. But during that time, he was immensely innovative and tackled a large number of subjects that few other people before then had addressed, such as homophobia, gay life, the AIDS crisis, censorship in the arts, death, and grief.

He was a painter, he was a sculptor, he was an installation artist, he was a photographer. He also played in a band. So he was multi-, multitalented. And one can almost think of him as like this star shooting very brightly across the sky that just burned out much too quickly.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

CELESTE HEADLEE: It's impossible to put David's work into context without talking about his activism, I think. And I wonder how his activism influences this feeling you have that you have a relationship with him, or at least with his art.

EMILY WELLS: Yes! This is so what I'm thinking about right now. His activism is, for me, central to the questions I think we're facing now around—again coming back to climate crisis. The

project I'm working on right now wants to ask that question. What are the connections? How can we look at these AIDS activists, Wojnarowicz being so central to that, who were working at the beginning of the epidemic here in the US.

And what can we learn from them? What are the crossovers? Where did they succeed? And I come back with Wojnarowicz always to his humor, his rage.

I think those two things are so central to what makes him the AIDS activist icon that he has now become. And I think that's why I keep turning to him.

Because if you read what he says about AIDS, it is so relevant to what we've been going through—looking at climate crisis, what we're still going through—but particularly during the Trump years. It seems things might be shifting now, but—let's hope so.

But he also spoke about the experience of being queer with such just complete lack of shame, even though he grew up with having shame put on him for his queerness, as many people his age did.

But I had this thought about how he went to the natural world as a mirror to hold up to himself. Like OK, I am of this world. And he saw such inherent goodness in the natural world. And so I think he turned to that a lot to make himself understand his goodness.

And I try to do the same: Take his role model and just keep looking at the natural world as a mirror for my own goodness.

CELESTE HEADLEE: What do you mean when you say you keep looking at his goodness? What does that mean?

EMILY WELLS: It just means that his queerness didn't condemn him, didn't make him sick in both the literal and figurative sense of things—that him and his friends contracting AIDS wasn't punishment from God. That he was of God, so to speak, if you see God as being the natural world.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

CELESTE HEADLEE: Here is "David's Got a Problem/Falling Buffalo" one more time uninterrupted.

[MUSIC - EMILY WELLS, "DAVID'S GOT A PROBLEM"]

EMILY WELLS: (SINGING) That's why you love me. That's why you love me. That's why you love me when I can't be loved.

That's why you love me. That's why you love me. That's why you love me when I can't be loved.

Throw a little grass out, throw a little seed. Throw a little grass out, then go lie among the weeds. Then go lie among the weeds.

CELESTE HEADLEE: Thanks once again to Emily Wells for joining us.

[MUSIC - VIJAY IYER, "ENTRUSTMENT"]

Right now, you're hearing "Entrustment" from Vijay Iyer's new album *Uneasy*. Vijay will join us on our next episode to discuss his work and how he draws inspiration from I. M. Pei's East Building at the National Gallery.

[MUSIC - VIJAY IYER, "ENTRUSTMENT"]

Sound Thoughts On Art is a production of the National Gallery of Art's music department. The show was created by Danielle DeSwert Hahn, the National Gallery's head of music programs and mixed and produced by Maura Currie. You can find more information about everything in today's episode at the National Gallery's website, nga.gov/podcast.

If you enjoyed this episode of *Sound Thoughts On Art*, we would love for you to subscribe. Also, leave us a review wherever you're listening. I'm Celeste Headlee. Until next time, be well.

[MUSIC PLAYING]