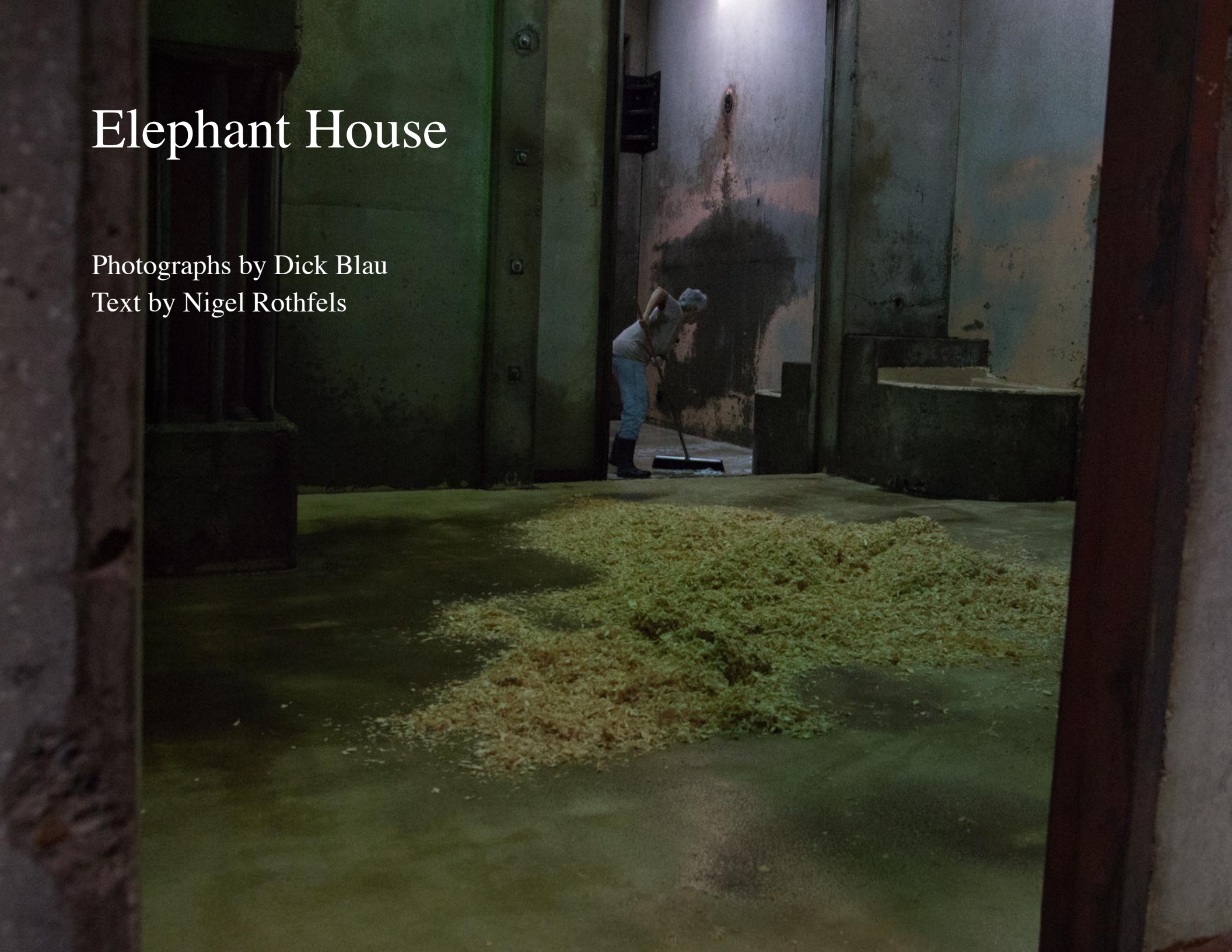


# Elephant House

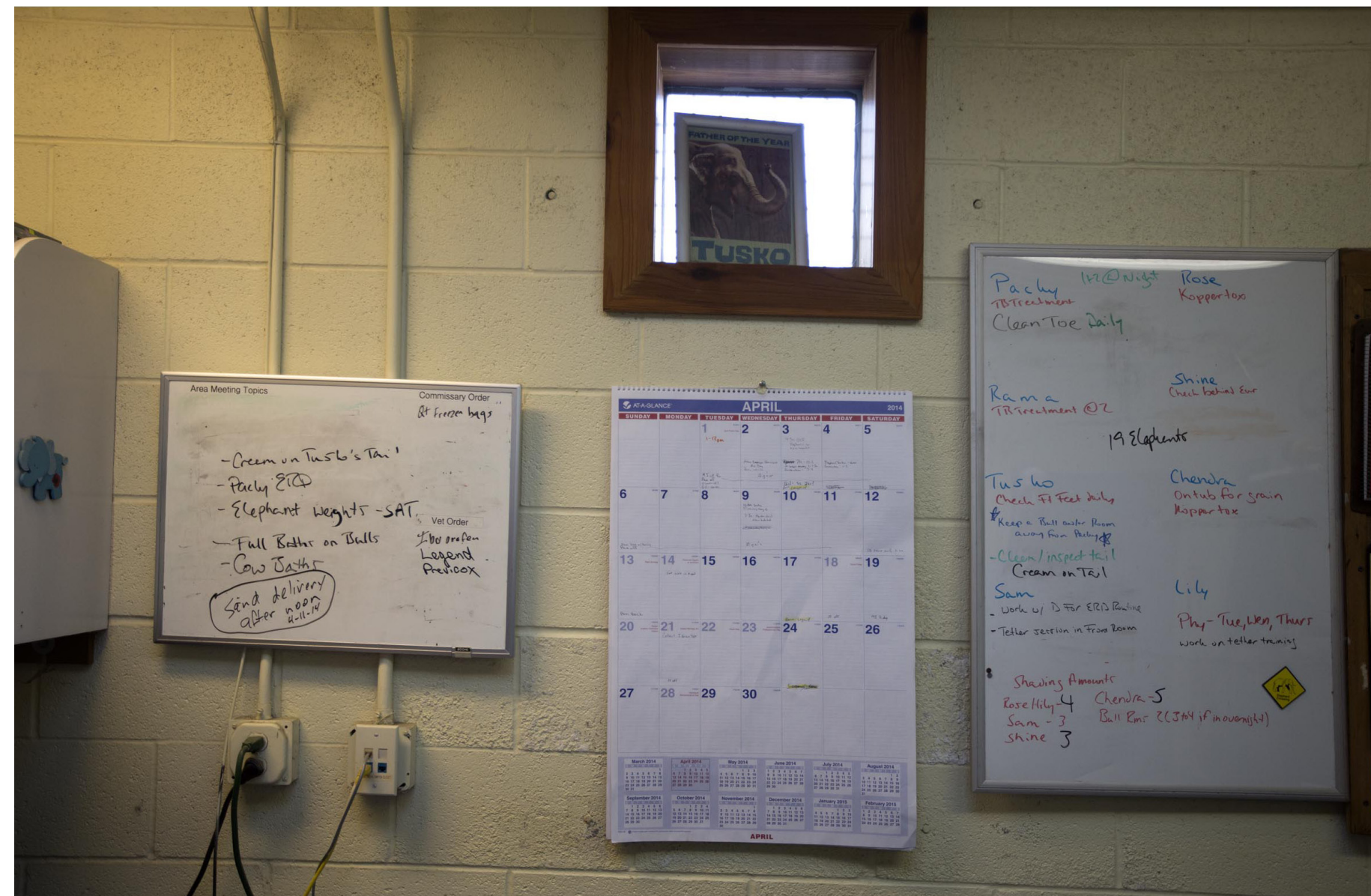
Photographs by Dick Blau

Text by Nigel Rothfels

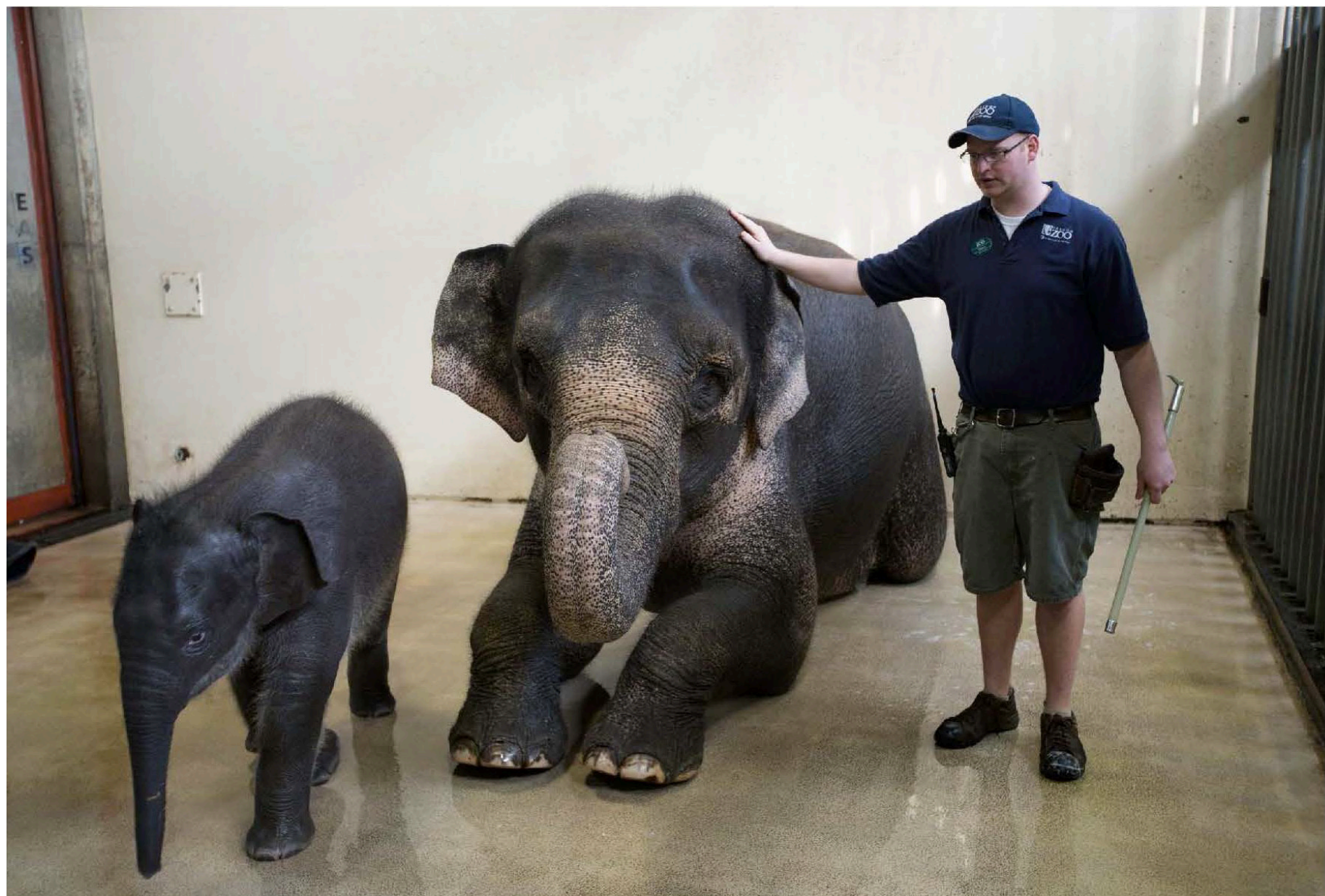


Elephant House











## Elephant House

Nigel Rothfels

By the early years of the twentieth century, every major city in Europe and the United States had either constructed a large municipal zoological garden or had ambitions to do so. As institutions designed to promote recreation, science, and education, if not yet conservation, zoological gardens at the time were built to reflect the values of an upper class hoping to appear beneficent and a middle class hoping to appear credible. Along with city art collections, orchestras, botanic gardens, natural history museums, sewage systems, streetcars, subways, and rail systems, zoological gardens signaled both the affluence and influence of the major cities and were part of the aspirational infrastructure of bourgeois culture. This was not only the case in Europe and the U.S., moreover; the major colonial cities of the world, places that sought in many respects to emulate the metropolises, also had their zoos.

There is a tendency to think about these zoological gardens of long ago as somehow less complicated and fraught institutions than they are today. This is a misreading of both the past and the present. Popular images from the later decades of the nineteenth century at the London Zoo, for example, typically show idyllic scenes of respectful couples strolling, small groups of young men or women talking animatedly, families with only one or two well-behaved children enjoying an educational outing, and animals in peak physical condition and calm temperament happily ignoring their own captivity. This was certainly the vision of the *proponents* of the zoo, but it remains a vision far removed from the reality of the actual institution. It is true that when it was conceived, this collection of living animals in Regent’s Park was expected to be a tranquil reserve for the Zoological Society’s Fellows and their guests, an institution devoted to the pursuit of science and elevated recreation. But within only a few years of its opening in 1828, this zoo’s future (and indeed the future of every zoo built since) as an approved place of mass recreation for all but the lowest orders of urban society was abundantly clear. These institutions became places of amusement for an expanding urban public; and if rank animal houses, stagnant ponds, littered lawns, bawling children, less glamorously dressed, lewd, and otherwise obnoxious adults, and bored, sick, or depressed animals do not feature prominently in what were essentially promotional images of nineteenth-century zoos, it is really not all that surprising.

Nineteenth-century zoos also had their critics. While it is true that they were not as successful in getting their views heard as they might be today, there were clearly many people who were convinced that the animals suffered in zoos and who wondered out loud about the supposed educational and recreational appeal of institutions that often seemed to exhibit little more than the pathological behaviors of caged animals. When the first zoo to attempt to exhibit captive animals systematically in naturalistic panoramas opened in 1907, a place where the animals were separated from each other through concealed moats, it was a huge sensation precisely because people had become so uncomfortable looking at animals behind bars. What has become known as the “Hagenbeck Revolution” in zoo design – the moment when animals in zoos were “freed” from their cages – was the result of the animal dealer, circus entrepreneur, and zoo designer Carl Hagenbeck’s attention to the discomfort the people who had been visiting the allegedly idyllic zoological gardens of the nineteenth century.<sup>1</sup>

But if the circumstances of nineteenth-century zoos were far less bucolic than they are often remembered, today’s zoos are actually less contentious institutions than many seem to believe. Indeed, despite the fact that critics of zoos have been ringing the death knell of the institutions for almost as long as they have existed, when I drive by the suburban zoo in my Midwestern

U.S. city, I still see the parking lots filled with the nicely ordered cars of the over 1.3 million visitors every year, and this in a metropolitan area with barely as many residents. In the end, certain aspects of zoos don't seem change very much over time. Consider the issue of feeding the animals. I can vividly remember the quickly moving, soft muzzles of the fallow deer at the zoo near where I grew up as the animals searched for pieces of popcorn in my outstretched hand. Of course, I recall this memory today with a measure of guilt because of the thought of how much popcorn, salt, and oils those deer must have consumed with all the other children doing exactly what I was doing, but it seems that feeding has pretty much been central to our curiosity about exotic animals since we started keeping them in captivity. Most large zoos today try to control the activity, of course, but the fascination with feeding continues and the prominent role of feeding in the daily programs of zoos will continue, as well. Sometimes the feeder, today, is an apparently randomly chosen representative of the audience – a young boy or girl holding a fish out to a jumping orca, for example; sometimes the feeder is a keeper sliding a tray of highly processed meat into an exhibit housing a seemingly unimpressed cat; sometimes a closely monitored feeder pays extra to place a hay-biscuit on the outstretched, twisting tongue of a giraffe; sometimes the feeder just pops a quarter into a machine and gets a handful of chow to throw to the dwarf goats. Of course, however much zoos try to meet the demand, the public will be inevitably unfulfilled and the rules will get broken. Signs variously ordering “Do Not Feed the Animals” date back, in fact, to the very beginnings of zoological gardens; indeed, signs regulating feeding were even present at the private aristocratic collections that existed before the public zoos. The point about these signs is that they exist *not* because people can be relied upon to follow clearly articulated rules, but precisely because they can't be! This was as much the case in the nineteenth century as it is today.

Nevertheless, as much as it might seem that the underlying challenges facing all zoos – controlling both ideas and animals – do not appear to change very much over time, it is also clear that the experience of visiting at least the more ambitious zoos of today is quite different from that experience a hundred years ago.<sup>2</sup> While it is often just hype when contemporary zoos announce plans for a revolutionary exhibit – a place where visitors will finally feel like neither the animals nor the visitors are actually in a zoo – the budgets, technology, and expertise behind contemporary exhibit design can and often do bring extraordinary and entirely new experiences to the public, and advances in animal care over recent decades have made zoos undeniably healthier and generally (if not uniformly) better places for animals, as well.

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I have started this essay with a few words about change and continuity in the world of zoos because this book is very much about both of these themes. The project began in a conversation between Dick Blau and me about elephants and photography. At the time, Dick was completing a project about labor in Wisconsin and, as part of that, had been photographing the activities of a large animal veterinarian; at the same time, I was in the midst of research about how ideas about elephants have been changing over the last couple of hundred years. I wanted to collaborate with Dick because it seemed to me that over his career of working at the borders between anthropology and photography, he had found ways of helping us see important things about relationships. Whether focusing on such seemingly unrelated subjects as the domestic life of his family, the lives of Romani musicians in northern Greece, a Dionysus cult, the present of polka in the United States, or a veterinarian doing a tooth extraction on a fully awake horse, Dick had managed to capture important moments of physical, emotional, and other kinds of contact that we miss when we are glancing too quickly at life. I had been trying to make sense of the relationships I had been observing between zoo elephant keepers and the animals they cared for, and I hoped that working with Dick would help me in that process.

While it is not that difficult to stand outside of a relationship and *describe it* convincingly as being about love, power, abuse, sacrifice, or whatever, it is probably impossible to stand outside a relationship and *understand it* for all it is. We can never see the whole relationship, never comprehend it in all its dimensions. Describing a relationship between a person and an animal can be even more complicated, because although both creatures can communicate aspects of the relationship, the animal's voice can often be more difficult to hear and understand. But it is precisely the relationships between the keepers and the elephants in zoos that we wanted to explore. The *relationships*, because they seemed remarkably hidden and yet we believed they would be important for people to learn more about; in *zoos*, because that is where most elephants in North America live and, in the context of constant animal rights debates, zoos seem to occupy a middle, sort of neutral ground for most people.

So much of the debate about whether or where elephants should be held in captivity – in what are generally called zoos, circuses, or sanctuaries – turns on claims that this or that facility or staff is better able to meet the needs of the animal; that the animal, in the end, will be happiest there. This is not the place for a full description of the competing claims made by advocates for these various settings. Suffice it to say that there are about 300 elephants living today in North America. A very small number are cared for in a variety of places called “sanctuaries”; a larger number are cared for in commercial settings, including, but not exclusively, in “circuses”; and most are cared for in institutions called “zoological gardens,” themselves often quite different from one another. There is a shortcut in all this through which people quickly note that elephants are kept in zoos, circuses, and sanctuaries and then quickly move to arguing. The truth, of course, is that when these arguments start, the now well-worn positions on animal rights and welfare, as well as the “nature” of elephants, seem to inevitably trump the facts about which specific location and future might be best for a specific animal, and these are creatures, one should remember, that can live a long time and that require an immense amount of expertise and money to care for.

So, this was to be a project about elephants and keepers and relationships. It is also a project about how we can visualize an elephant and her or his life. There is actually a very old history of confusion about even the basic appearance of elephants; so much about them is different from other animals that artists in at least western countries have struggled for a very long time to portray them. Going back into late antiquity and the middle ages, there was generally a consensus that elephants had long noses and tusks, for example, but just how to draw those trunks and whether those tusks were attached to the bottom jaw, the top, or both, was never really firmly established by artists until modern times. There were also problems in depicting the scale of elephants. Some medieval works show the elephant as about the size and conformation of a horse, others imagined the creatures as more pig-like, and still others were convinced that the creatures were very big but had no idea how to represent the legs and feet of the creatures.

Obviously, by the time that photographs of elephants began to appear in the second half of the nineteenth century, most of the confusion about elephant anatomy, including that the animals had no leg joints, had been cleared up. But there still seemed to be problems with how to get the large body of an elephant into a photograph, while also depicting so many of its unusual qualities. As I began looking at more and more photographs of the animals, I began to feel as though there was a relatively small number of standard elephant photographs, and most were just variations on these standards. There were scale shots in which photographers positioned the animal near something relatively small, like a child or dog. There were side-views and headshots. There were charging elephants, usually photographed in Africa, head-on with ears projecting out to the sides. There were the photographs, especially from Asia, of working elephants in human contexts. There were all the photographs of elephants that in one way or another want us to believe that we are alone, calmly witnessing elephants in the wild, that there is no other human presence in the scene. And there were all the photographs of parts of the elephants, especially their skin, trunks, feet, tails, mouths, ears, and, more than anything else, their eyes.



Dick and I began to talk about photographing elephants differently. There were many photographs of elephants standing majestically in the wilds of Africa and Asia. There were plenty of shots, too, of elephants in zoological gardens photographed to make it look like they live in the jungle, forest, or savannah. There seemed to be plenty of sentimental shots of elephants in the wild and captivity, too. Our goal was to shoot something different, but we did not set out to reveal something more deeply authentic about the animals. We knew, though, that we were going to try to take photographs of elephants and humans together. Not because that is the best way to see them, but because the debates about elephants in human contexts engage important questions about our relationships and responsibilities to animals. The work we imagined would be straight-forward and transparent: we would try to photograph the elephants in their actual circumstances and not try to hide the fact of their captivity, nor try to score points for either side of the argument about whether elephants should be housed in zoological gardens. The facts are that the conditions and lives of elephants in zoos vary a great deal and every facility has strengths and weaknesses from animal husbandry and advocacy points of view. What we hoped to find was a zoological garden that was engaged enough with the efforts to improve the lives of elephants that it would be brave enough to allow outsiders in to photograph their animals, staff, and facilities as we saw them, and not simply as a marketing department might wish for them to appear.

Honestly, zoological gardens have every reason to be cautious when confronted with a historian and photographer showing up at the door wishing to take photographs of animals behind the scenes. We are all sensible enough to know that we would be anxious about the appearance of a “local news” team at our office, even if we hadn’t done anything wrong. If someone comes to your workplace with a camera, a microphone, and an agenda, you know you can do little to protest – in the end, they will be the ones editing the film and you will be the one who looks evasive. It says a great deal about the leadership and staff of the Oregon Zoo in Portland, Oregon, that our proposal to come and photograph their keepers and elephants in off-exhibit areas was greeted with encouragement, intellectual engagement, and pro-active steps to move the project forward. Here was a staff at a zoo that absolutely recognized that they could improve their facilities and were prepared to engage “outsiders” in the discussion. Since beginning this project, I have spoken to many people who care a great deal about elephants. Some have told me that the Oregon Zoo has a record of outstanding leadership in caring for elephants; others have told me that all zoos abuse their animals, including their elephants if they have them. I can say that from my decades of doing research on issues of animals and captivity, the places that concern me the most are those – whether zoo, sanctuary, or circus – that persistently resist any scrutiny from outside their organizations or a limited circle of accredited fellow travelers. The openness and transparency of the Oregon Zoo, including supporting this project, speaks volumes about the institution’s commitment to its elephants.

Dick and I went to Portland to spend time with and photograph the elephants and their care-givers, but we quickly realized that the building housing the elephants would also be a major focus for this project; it was so much more than just a background, more than just an artificial set upon which animal and human dramas played out.<sup>3</sup> Looking back, this should not have been in any way surprising; the history of the zoological garden has always been about the display as much as the animals. Because of their size and strength, and the extraordinary amount of physical care they need, elephants have tended to be housed in specifically designed buildings. The elephant house at the zoo near where I live now is in many ways typical of the mid twentieth century. It is a simple building with small rooms. The backs and sides are reinforced concrete and the front is steel bars. The paint on the lower part of the walls has been worn off over time; above the height of the animals, the paint is beige and green and appears old. The floors are concrete, stained in rust colors, and usually wet, as the keepers hose away and shovel relentless quantities of urine and feces. A huge tractor tire hangs on a wall at the back of one of the rooms and an arc of black rubber marks the wall behind it, indicating the tire has been the object of the bored attention of an elephant or two. During the warm days of late spring, summer, and fall, the two female African elephants living there now spend most of their days walking around

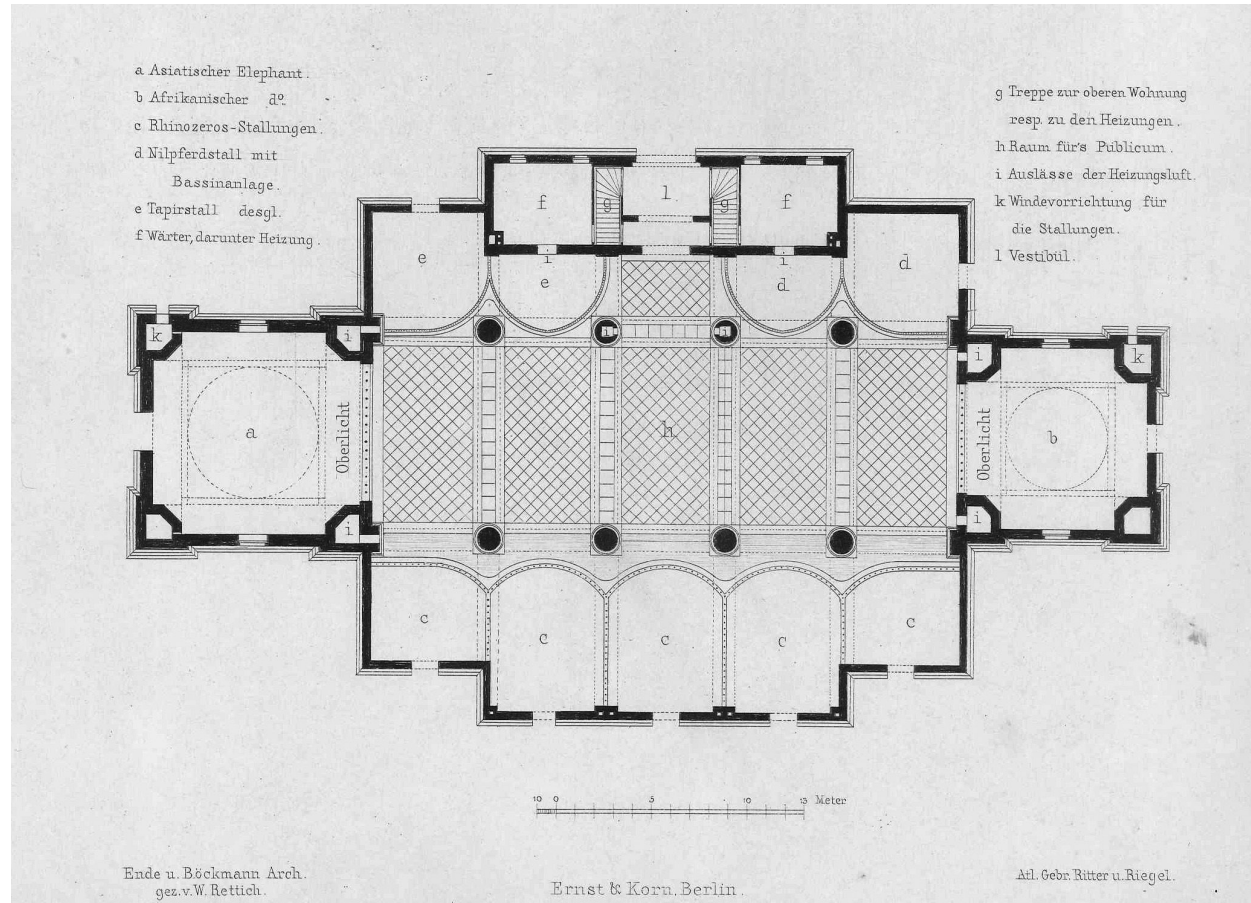
an outside, sand substrate yard surrounded by a dry moat. This yard is not that large, but the keepers keep it clean (bringing the animals inside regularly in order to clean it up) and they try to make it interesting for the animals by placing piles of logs in the middle of it – a sort of giant’s jenga to amuse the elephants as they dismantle the pile looking for interesting things to eat. There is a small pool out there, too, and a massive concrete representation of a baobab tree, put there presumably as a scratching post for the animals. During the long winter months, however, the elephants have typically only limited access to a small shoveled area outside; most of their time is spent in a building that brings little pleasure to visitors standing in the cold and looking at the animals through usually steamed-up glass panels.

This elephant house was built in the 1950s, part of a large section of the zoo constructed at that time with classic gunite, moated exhibits for everything from bears to rhinos, lions, antelopes, hippos, and camels. If it looks rather sad today, it was state-of-the-art at the time, built in a period during which designers felt that highly functional, understated buildings would encourage visitors to look at the animals in outside exhibits designed to appear as naturalistic as possible. Although originally much smaller than the Portland building – and even more so now as it has not been expanded upon and improved over the years – my city’s elephant house is in many ways similar to its Pacific-Northwest cousin of about the same vintage. They were both originally built with a focus on relatively low-cost construction and simple on-going maintenance, a commitment to showcasing the animals outside, and an awareness of the care and safety issues of housing exceptionally large, powerful, and dangerous animals that require close physical attention by keepers. Of course, it is possible to do much more with an elephant house. Arguably the most spectacular and famous elephant house built before these, for example, was the one built in Berlin some seventy-five years earlier, and comparing it to these mid twentieth-century structures makes clear just how much ideas about exhibiting elephants can change in a relatively short period.

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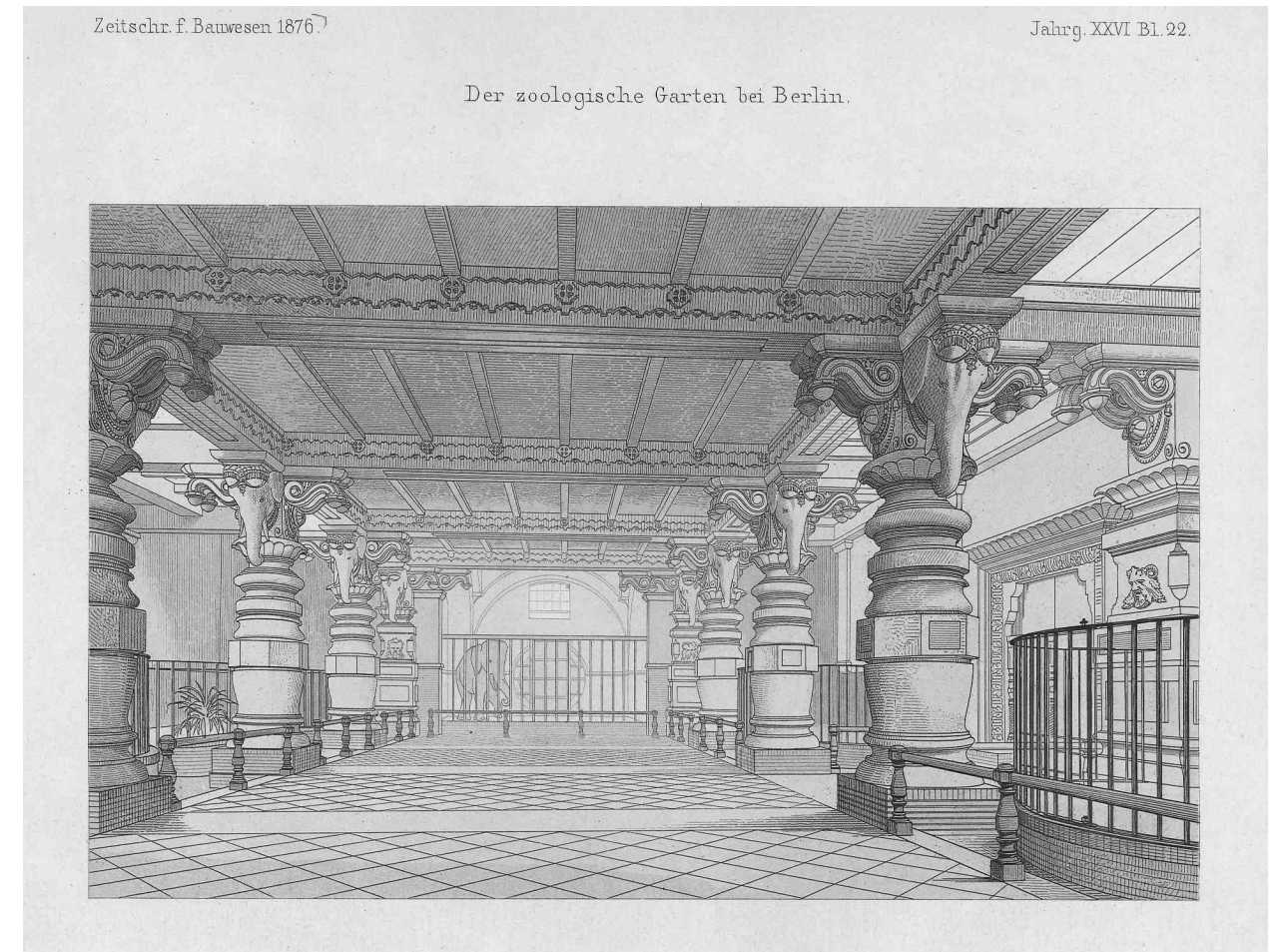
When the zoological gardens of Berlin opened in 1844, the institution was little more than a new home for the King’s private menagerie, a home on property still belonging to the King, but managed by a scientific society.<sup>4</sup> Partly the result of the waning interest of an individual in his collection, and partly the result of the efforts of a group of citizenry, the move led to a public zoological garden with modest scope and ambitions. However, in 1869 – 25 years after the zoo’s founding, three years after Prussian victory in the Austro-Prussian War, and just a couple years before the victory over France leading to the declaration of the German Empire – the zoo at the heart of the Prussian capital of Berlin began a new building phase that would reflect the rising international status of the city. In a context of accelerating economic and political power, and of an almost characteristic optimism about the roles of new public institutions, the zoological garden flourished. Of the original 1,000 shares of stock offered at the very beginning of the zoo’s history at 100 Taler each in 1845, only 191 shares had ever been purchased. A new stock offering in 1869, however, first replaced those original shares and quickly sold the remaining 809 shares yielding 80,900 Taler (almost a quarter million Marks). The success with the stock sale was followed with two bond issues in 1870 and 1873, which together raised an additional 1.5 million Marks, and with this capital the Berlin gardens began a building spree leading to some of the most spectacular buildings *ever* constructed in a zoological garden. By the end of the century, the Berlin Zoo had come to exemplify, arguably better than any other zoo in the period, the many goals of the zoological garden of the period: it was an institution committed to science, education, and recreation, but it was also an institution that was fully expected to reflect the rapidly expanding economic, political, and military power of the German Empire.





**Figure 1**

Perhaps the most remarkable achievement of the early years of the renewed expansion program at the Berlin Zoo was the construction in less than a year of the new pachyderm building, called the Elephant House, which opened in 1873. At over 300,000 Marks, the cost of the building exceeded the combined cost of *all* the construction that had previously taken place at the zoo.<sup>5</sup> As the floor plan (fig. 1) shows, the building was roughly a long symmetrical rectangle. At each end was a square indoor enclosure for an elephant – at one end there would be an Asian elephant (*a* in the plan) and at the other an African specimen (*b*), both to be exemplary of their species. The center of the building (*h*) was the largest area and accommodated the public. Five indoor enclosures on one side of the building were to be used for various species of rhinoceros (*c*), and along the opposite side were two enclosures (*e*) for tapirs and two (*d*) for hippopotami, one of the latter of which was designed as a pool. The separate stalls for the animals were not particularly large and the combined floor space of the interior was just over 12,000 square feet.



**Figure 2**

As can be seen in an illustration of the interior from the 1870s (fig. 2), the inside of the building was ornate, and the area for the public was rather dark; the exhibit spaces, on the other hand, were illuminated by skylights above the exhibits.

As impressive as the inside of the building may have been, it was the outside of the Berlin Elephant House (fig. 3) that made it famous. At each end of the building, above the elephant exhibits, rose 60-foot towers, topped with shining gold suns and surrounded by four smaller towers of just over 40 feet each. The roof over the public space was flat, but those above the two side galleries arched gracefully in slightly pointed barrel vaults. The entire exterior surface was elaborately decorated with rug





**Figure 3**

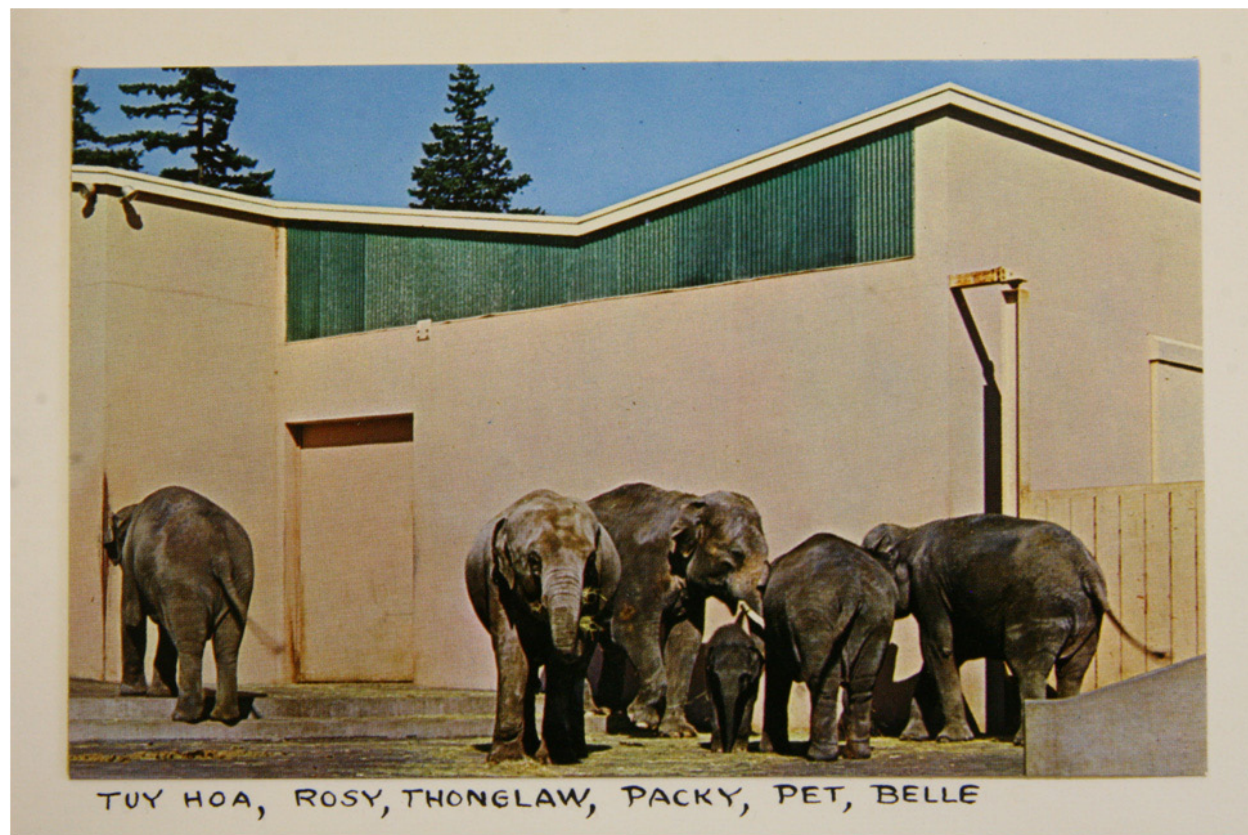
and elephant motifs designed with yellow, brown, and blue tiles. Keyhole-shaped doors led from each of the indoor exhibits to separate outer yards, which, together, provided an additional 20,000 square feet of space for the animals. Echoing the preoccupation of the scientific community of the time, the building was designed to stress zoological taxonomy – each species of a group of closely related animals was to be exhibited side-by-side with the other species so that visitors could learn to discern the relations between animals. Similar lessons of taxonomy were presented throughout the zoo as visitors stood before areas devoted to wild cattle, deer, and kangaroos, and visited the Bird House, the Large Carnivore House, the Bear Fortress, the Antelope House, the Crane and Stork Buildings, and so on. As much as these buildings were obviously designed around animal husbandry and a scientific argument, however, they were also intended as a kind of architectural collection, themselves. Like the ethnographic collections being assembled in the state museums, the buildings at the zoo were in some sense designed as aesthetic and cultural collections – animals were to be presented in buildings that somehow echoed the human cultures of the native lands of key species within the buildings. Antelopes in Berlin, then, were exhibited in a sprawling building seemingly plucked out of North Africa; the ostriches were shown in a sort of fantastic ancient Egyptian temple; and the elephants were exhibited

in a supposed Hindu temple. If these new buildings were intended to portray exotic and often religious buildings, however, in practice there was little that was sacred or even that exotic about these structures. With their animals and gawking public, the buildings quickly became merely decorative; something to suggest (but not too vividly) cultures far away. They were undoubtedly impressive buildings, buildings suited to the grandeur of the city, but in the end they still smelled of hay and animals, and it was still the animals that brought the audience to the zoo.

Constructed in the late 1950s with renovations and expansions in the ‘80s and ‘90s, the Asian Elephant Building at the Oregon Zoo today contrasts strikingly with the 1873 Elephant House in Berlin. Most obviously, while the Berlin building was fully intended to stand out as a human structure, the Oregon building is intended to be largely invisible and is designed almost entirely around the tasks of caring for elephants. Indeed, except for one room on the inside, Portland’s elephant house is almost entirely inaccessible to the public. At this zoo, the elephants are to be observed outside, something achievable in part simply because of the relatively mild weather of Portland. From the visitor’s perspective, the Asian Elephant Building consists of one relatively small indoor room and two outside yards – a front yard of 8,500 square feet and a back yard of over 25,000 square feet. Unlike the Berlin building, the outdoor spaces are not divided up into smaller enclosures for each animal of the building. These are open spaces with uneven surfaces and a sand substrate. Both yards have water elements – the water in the front serves as a barrier; the water in the back is an 80,000-gallon swimming pool allowing full submersion for the smaller elephants. Although originally a building of simple 1950s lines, the building is now hidden by artificial rockwork topped with plantings designed to look a bit like a cliff with inset cave-like entrances to the interior spaces of the building. At about 15,000 square feet, the actual building in Portland is slightly larger in footprint than the old Berlin building, but this building shows none of the spectacular aspirations of the Berlin house. This is not a facility designed to showcase individual animals and situate the viewing public centrally; this is a building designed to meet the husbandry needs of a group of elephants, and while the exhibit exists because of public interest, the public, itself, has been moved to the periphery. Rather than walk by stalls housing individuals of different species, now the public watches groups of elephants interacting with each other in larger open areas and the building itself has, as much as possible, been made to look like a natural background.

The building is currently managed by a team of five full-time staff and a larger number of volunteers and interns. It is home to eight elephants, including Packy who was born in Portland in 1962, becoming the first elephant born in North America in over forty years, and Lily who was born at the zoo exactly fifty years later in 2012. In addition to these two, there are three other males: Rama, a son of Packy’s, born at the zoo in 1983; Tusko, a large wild-caught male born around 1971 who came to Portland from California in 2005; and Samudra (Sam), a son of Tusko and brother of Lily, born at the zoo in 2008. There are three other females, as well: Sung-Surin (Shine), a daughter of Packy’s, born at the zoo in 1982; Rose-Tu who was born at the zoo in 1994 and is the mother of Sam and Lily; and Chendra, an orphaned elephant from Borneo, born in 1993. Photographs of all of these elephants and some of their recent caregivers appear in this book. There is a great deal that could be said about the personal and professional paths of the staff, their hopes and aspirations and why they think the work they do is important; there is also a great deal that could be said about the lives of each of the elephants in this collection, as well as all the many other elephants who have lived at this zoo. We all have an impulse to know these biographies; it is natural when at the zoo to wonder about how old an animal is, how long it has lived at the zoo, and how did that person get to work there? However, the focus of this book is an effort to convey a sense for the circumstances in which elephants and those who care for them interact at a zoo, and this is not the place for accounts of all the individuals. Still, it would not be possible to write this essay without noting, at least briefly, the story of the most famous animal to have ever lived at the Oregon Zoo: Packy.





**Figure 4**

When I was growing up in the 1960s and 70s, Packy was one of the first “celebrity animals” I knew about. Covered in a full-length *Life* magazine article after his birth in 1962 and then in decades of articles and TV programs, Packy’s story was part of my childhood as it mixed with those of many other animals, including Snowflake, the famous gorilla in the Barcelona Zoo, Shasta, the liger at the zoo near where I grew up, David Graybeard, the chimpanzee that reached out to Jane Goodall, or Elsa, the lion who was “born free.” It was thus with some anticipation that I found myself finally standing with Dick in the public area of the Asian Elephant Building waiting for the then fifty-year-old Packy to walk in through an open, reinforced concrete door at the back of the building’s indoor exhibit, a door operated by a hydraulic system that seems very old but is no where near as old as this elephant. Packy has lived in this building longer than almost any other animal anywhere else at the zoo. Over the decades, hundreds of staff have helped care for him and most of these have since retired. Dr. Matthew Maberry, the veterinarian who

was in his forties when Packy was born, for example, died in 2012 at the age of 94.<sup>6</sup> Countless *millions* of visitors have seen Packy, and people are bringing their grandchildren to see an elephant today whom they themselves saw when they were children. There are those who think of a very long life like this and wonder whether it is a somehow sad way to live. When I look at photographs of Packy as a very young elephant in a group of others including his mother and father (fig. 4); when I think of all the many different people who have cared for him and whom he has known, how they have spoken to him and touched him as they have washed him with brooms, soap, and water, how they have cleaned his feet, given him special treats, and attended to him when he was not well; when I think of the very many other elephants he has lived with over the years, and of the young elephants who have toddled around him; when I think of the challenges he has faced in learning new management techniques as the practices of caring for zoo elephants have changed over the decades; and when I think honestly about the very few elephants in the world (whether in captivity or in the wild) who have lived anywhere near as long and healthy a life as he has, I tend to think that he was far from unlucky to be born at this zoo.

Dick and I were standing with a group of children and their parents as Packy began pulling down and devouring hay from a high-up, sling-like contraption made of woven fire hoses. It is difficult to get a sense for just how big he is. First it is important to realize that there are relatively few adult male elephants in North America and almost all the elephants that most people have seen in zoos are females. Because of their size (male elephants are typically much larger than females), but even more so because of their nature (physiologically and otherwise), most older male elephants (and we have to say “most” because generalizing about animals both makes sense and clearly doesn’t) have not been that well-suited to zoos and circuses because they tend to be less interested in staying within a close group (which might include people). Suffice it to say that what struck Dick and me so strongly at this moment was that this animal seemed impossibly large for this room. He seemed, in fact, like one of those giant sculptural figures in a temple, a figure so big that that one can’t imagine how such an object, such an entity, could actually get inside the building.

Thinking about temples and gods actually came to us surprisingly easily when we were visiting in Oregon. In the back of my mind, I had already been thinking about how many earlier elephant buildings (like Berlin’s in the nineteenth century) were built to resemble a temple; and then Dick said something that made me consider the issue more carefully. As we began to get to know the people who were caring for the animals, as we began, too, to get a sense for the day-in and day-out patterns and habits of activity around the building – the animals moving from the yards to indoors, to the yards; the regular teams of staff and volunteers heading out to the vacated areas to shovel waste, rake, build structures, spread browse, hide food, and clean up before another group of elephants entered; the daily routines of bringing elephants individually into the “sun room” or a stall to wash them and care for any injuries or illnesses, do daily foot maintenance, and just give the animals some pleasant time with the people who care for them, time with special treats, physical contact (albeit through protective bars), and friendship – Dick described the keepers’ work to me as “devotional.” The people cared for the animals not because they had been told to do so as part of a job they didn’t like, not because it lead to a specific outcome, but because simply caring for the animals was what mattered, was what gave meaning to the work they were doing, was what made this job of cleaning up shit, hauling hay, and answering the same questions of the public every day, the job that they wanted.

Of course, few if any giants or gods are cuddly. They can be violent, wise, generous, and unpredictable, and in some cases the best that humans can do is enclose them, even if only metaphorically, in a temple. There, the god can be cared for and venerated; sacrifices can be made, and specific nourishment brought. In controlling such giants and dangerous creatures we make, it seems, a peculiar bargain, a bargain perhaps at least partly behind the origins of the veneration of the elephant-headed



god Ganesh<sup>7</sup>: we will care for you, we will honor you, and we will try to stay out of your way, but we beseech you not to hurt us. But elephants remain powerful creatures, even when we keep them in captivity, even when we form genuine friendships with them, even when we trust them and they trust us. The truth is that people have been killed caring for elephants, and this has happened in forest lumber camps, city streets, zoos, circuses, and sanctuaries. In these photographs, you will see that the staff at the Oregon Asian Elephant Building essentially always carry a “guide” (sometimes known as a “bullhook” or “ankus”) when working around the animals. For many critics of keeping elephants in captivity, the guide, the literally ancient tool for managing elephants, is very controversial. People see the hooked steel tip of the tool and think it must be used to cause pain. To be sure, the guide can and undoubtedly has been used to cause pain by elephant keepers for millennia. With that said, we have all seen people training dogs or horses and how the best trainers seem to be successful not because they are creating pain for the animals, but because of the clarity of the trainers’ expressions, their general calmness in working with the animals, their sparing use of “negative reinforcement,” and the trust that the animals seem to have in them. I can say that the elephant keepers I have come to know and respect over the course of recent decades – people working with elephants in all kinds of settings – are not monsters; they are people who care deeply for the animals and are exceptionally effective at working with them precisely because they don’t use the guide as a weapon.

That current protocols for handling elephants in facilities accredited by the American Zoo Association (AZA) stipulate that elephants should be managed wherever possible using only positive reinforcement and keeping safe barriers between staff and elephants at all times (what is usually called “protected contact”), tells me, in the end, less about what is the best approach for handling specific animals in specific facilities and more about the evolving discussion about the best kinds of relationships to have with “nature” and animals. As part of moving to a new facility, which I will discuss below, the staff is, in fact, transitioning the animals and their own procedures to a “protected contact” model. In just the very brief couple of years that Dick and I have been visiting the zoo, for example, we have noticed that it is now an exceptional circumstance that would lead the keepers into one of the yards with the elephants, but that practice was essentially daily during our first visit. Indeed, at that time, when Samudra was still quite young and Rose-Tu was pregnant with Lily, Rose-Tu had daily extensive training with the keepers to maintain her physical condition during her pregnancy and photographs of these “workouts” are included in this collection. In any case, for now the guide remains standard, though increasingly less used, equipment for this staff because they believe that ensuring the highest quality care for the animals and safety for the staff requires that the keepers still be able to enter exhibits with the animals when absolutely necessary.

The public exhibition areas at zoos tend to be places designed to be upbeat, fascinating, educational, and ultimately fun. Although there are often educational signs about the difficulties that the animals face *in the wild*, the messages in the exhibition areas usually lead to the work that is being done – ideally by the zoo itself – to protect the animals from the dangers of climate change, human encroachment, hunting, and greed. But the off-exhibit areas are always very different. If the public areas deploy the theatrical scenery with which we are all familiar at zoos, scenery designed to make us feel that we are looking into a somehow “natural” landscape, scenery designed to make us more comfortable with the captivity of the animals, the off-exhibit areas tend to be highly functional places. They are designed so that those caring for the animals can access them as necessary, clean the “cages,” “enclosures,” or “habitats” efficiently, and provide food, water, medications and other requirements safely. Most of the Asian Elephant Building in Portland is off-exhibit and consists of a series of rooms in which the animals can be accommodated for longer periods, or through which they move on their way to the outside yards. Currently, for example, although the three adult male elephants can smell and hear each other, can touch trunks and otherwise communicate with one another, they are not put in a single yard or internal room together. This means that one can be in the front yard, one can be in the back yard,

and one has to be in one of the inside rooms. The keepers frequently rotate them around so that they do not spend too much time in any one spot (the longest periods being typically overnight), and the elephants, themselves, seem to know all the moves before they even happen. As a door opens, they wait for a release command from one of the keepers (this is a bit like when your dogs are waiting while you to prepare their dinner), but the moment the command comes they move quickly to their next spot where they know they will find special treats. The females and the younger elephants (including the young bull Samudra) can be together and with the adult males, as well, so over the course of a day, the elephants will be in a variety of different size groups and combinations. Lily, at this point, is always with her mother, as was Samudra when he was younger.

The inside of the elephant house – at least where the elephants are – is a highly controlled space. The public exhibition room is larger and lighter than some of the others. There is a central room called the sunroom, because of the brightness from the skylights, where most of the direct care of the animals occurs. The floor there is rubberized and easier to clean and disinfect, and there is access for the keepers through bars so they can wash, clean, and spend time there with the animals. Then there are a number of smaller rooms with lower light that seem simultaneously both gloomy and somehow comforting in their closeness – these rooms are more like the stalls that you might find in a horse barn, but here they are made of concrete. There is also an iron “squeeze chute” for controlling the elephants when the staff are working on the animals’ feet or completing some medical procedure. I think most of us would shy away from this rather ominous looking structure, but the elephants walk in confidently, apparently knowing that during the time they are in the chute they will also be eating some of their favorite foods. It may also be, as Temple Grandin suggests, that the closeness of the chute and stalls can be fundamentally calming for the animals. Overall, the impression in these rooms is one of order and efficiency. Even the highly clipped, strikingly clear, and obviously carefully defined communication protocols of the keepers – protocols stipulating that each person declare his or her actions to everyone and that all relevant others provide a clear affirmation of their understanding of the situation (“All clear to open the door?” “Yes, ma’am, all clear!”) – emphasize that this space, from the keepers’ perspective, should be regarded as highly professional. There is simply nothing haphazard about the human activities in these rooms, even though the animals seem very relaxed. Blue wheelbarrows and white shovels are thoroughly cleaned after each use and lined up for quick access; fresh sawdust is put over the floors after each cleaning; mechanicals are regularly checked and hoses properly stowed after each use – nothing is left lying around casually.

Some people seeing this space for the first time – and seeing some of the images in this book, as well – might think that this off-exhibit area looks very stark and perhaps even a bit frightening. To be absolutely clear, this building has been designed to contain and control immensely powerful creatures; it does not pretend to be some sort of “natural landscape.” With its reinforced concrete walls and floors, its heavy steel bars, its chains hanging on racks, the building can be intimidating, but if you spend any time there, it becomes completely evident that this is a very caring space. At so many times, Dick and I noticed how much the animals and the people working with them so evidently enjoyed the time they spent with each other – a hose (not with cold water but with warm) seemed so often to be the perfect entertainment for an elephant, especially the young ones who loved to splash around the sunroom. And, for all its efficiency, for all its focus on the physical health of the animals, the building also had a softer, more relaxed, and never stressed-out quality. The building smelled of hay and sawdust and the light was soft. There were the ever-present house-sparrows hopping and chipping about stealing bits of food and nesting materials; the constant low din of an old boom-box playing classic rock; the small, relaxed keepers’ offices where foods were apparently almost constantly being prepared for the elephants and where sweet pastries brought in by the volunteers seemed ubiquitous. There is a long tradition of referring to places where elephants are kept as “barns” and that is the unofficial term used for these buildings in most zoos. While zoo visitors may come to see the “elephant house,” the animals live and the keepers work in a “barn” – a term that points to an unusual and calm domestic space shared by people and animals.

All zoo keepers these days recognize that the interface with the public is a critical part of their jobs; a job at a zoo is no longer an escape for people who prefer to be around animals. But if engaging with the public is necessary and important, taking care of the animals in the off-exhibit areas is probably what makes the job most fulfilling for most of the keepers. I can tell you that I have seen similar expressions on the faces of people working closely with elephants in zoos, circuses, and sanctuaries, the expression is one of intense focus on caring for the animals. One day while we were in Portland, we were watching Packy being washed by the staff, while talking to Mike Keele who had cared for the elephants decades ago. The keepers asked Mike if he would like to take a turn at the broom and the soap. As he took hold of the broom, it was clear that Mike was transported back to the work he used to do every day. His face was red and glowing afterward as he explained that this was a very special day, indeed. Physically caring for such remarkable animals – cleaning them, feeding them, playing with them, learning about them and knowing that they are learning about you – is what makes this the dream-job for a group of remarkable people. I don’t really think it is that difficult for those who do not work with elephants every day to understand most aspects of this work. It is a combination of heavy physical labor, intellectual discipline, and intuitive empathy all directed at attempting to keep very large and intelligent animals clean, physically healthy and fit, and mentally engaged in circumstances which, by their very nature, work against keeping very large and intelligent animals clean, physically healthy and fit, and mentally engaged. Many of the tasks turn around the constant efforts to keep the animals and their quarters clean. This means, for example, daily bathing of the elephants and this task is simply hard work. This means constantly shoveling their droppings and Oregon is obsessive about this. This means also daily maintenance of the animals’ feet because chronic foot infections are a major – and also fortunately diminishing – problem for captive elephants. This means coming up with a range of enrichment activities that challenge the animals intellectually and physically. This means being aware of the physical and emotional health of each of the animals so that any special needs can be met. And this happens every day of the year, year after year. This also means finding time for the animals to just be together in various combinations throughout the day. And almost all of this happens in places and ways that the public doesn’t see. This is why we wanted to take these photographs; we wanted people to see and begin to understand the caring that can take place within such circumstances.

Over the course of the project, Dick and I, along with our collaborators at the zoo, realized that we were also documenting a moment in the lives of a group of remarkable animals and also a moment in the history of elephant management in zoos. At the very time this book will appear in print, the building where these photographs have been taken – a building which has served as a home for elephants for over sixty years – will have been razed and replaced by a newer, much larger, and simply much better Elephant Lands exhibit. As much as the Asian Elephant Building was among the best such buildings of its time, that time has clearly passed. Because the leadership of the Oregon zoo advocated for better facilities for the animals in their care, because of the clear interest of the public in supporting a zoo that aspires to be better and not simply carry-on, and quite possibly because of the significant place that elephants – and in particular Packy – have occupied in the awareness of Oregonians, the zoo is in the process of radically expanding the elephant area at the zoo and at a planned offsite facility. These new buildings and landscapes for the animals will make husbandry ideas that seemed like pure fantasy a few years ago into reality. In the new yards, for example, randomized automated feeders distributed around the long distances of the yards (the designs are longer rather than broad to encourage more walking) will provide smaller amounts of food 24 hours-a-day to eliminate the binge eating of current facilities and provide a digestively and physically more healthy eating-while-walking pattern for the animals. In Elephant Lands, moreover, the animals will be able to chose for themselves whether to be in the main house or in the outside yards at night and will be able to move in and out as they wish. Because of its extraordinary size, as time goes on, different groups of elephants will be able to build more stable relationships with one another by making choices for themselves about where and with whom to be. Over time, it may even be possible that a bachelor group will develop – something that has simply never been possible in a zoo before. Importantly, all these changes mean that the elephants will have less and less direct daily engagement with the staff of the

zoo. There are concerns in all this, but the vision of Elephant Lands is that the potential risks to the animals (for example, that the staff will face increased difficulty in providing immediate medical care) and the increasingly fewer opportunities for the staff and the public to be close to the animals are outweighed by the benefits to the elephants. In short, the elephants will simply have more control over their lives. Dick and I have been repeatedly struck at how much the management protocols of the elephant program at the Oregon Zoo have changed in just the two years we have been engaged in this project; it is difficult and exciting to imagine how different the place will be ten years from now.

\* \* \*

In 1991, the *New Yorker* published a translation of Haruki Murakami’s short story, “The Elephant Vanishes.” The story is told in the first-person by a man who works in the public relations department of a manufacturer of electrical appliances. The man’s life is one of pragmatic repetition, but he is also fascinated with an aging elephant and its keeper at a zoo, an elephant and keeper who one day both *vanish*. Sometime later, at a reception launching a new coordinated line of kitchen equipment, the man meets a woman and, over drinks later, he mentions the elephant. She asks him, “Weren’t you shocked when the elephant disappeared? It’s not the kind of thing that somebody could have predicted.” His response causes a great deal of confusion. He says, “No, probably not.” Just why the man is not shocked seems to be never satisfactorily answered from the woman’s perspective. I think that the answer to so much of what is confusing for people about this story turns on the peculiar – somehow incomprehensible and maybe even magical – relationship of the elephant in this story with its keeper when the animal is off exhibit and the two of them are alone and believe they are not being observed. In the end, I think the man is not surprised because he has been watching the keeper and the elephant behind the scenes through an air vent at the back of the building. Coming to understand them as more than a keeper and an elephant made it possible for this man whose life turned on the quotidian and the obvious to know different possibilities in relationships between animals and people. We hope that this book will help others to imagine these sorts of possibilities, as well.

Notes

1. For more on Hagenbeck, see Nigel Rothfels, *Savages and Beasts: The Birth of the Modern Zoo* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 2002).

2. I use the word “ambitious” here because I think it does a better job than the more common term of “good” in demarcating those contemporary zoos striving to be at the front of the industry. While there have always been a great variety of zoos and animal parks of one kind or another, from pet shops to sanctuaries, to game parks, to small private and public collections, to huge public and private institutions, there has also been a very long practice of talking about “good zoos.” We have all heard statements that begin something like: “Well, at least at good zoos, . . .” Today, “good zoos” seems to be an accepted shorthand for large, generally not-for-profit, municipally funded, accredited, institutions that foreground missions of conservation, education, and science (and usually in that order) over recreation. People inevitably quibble about what each of these terms might actually mean, though, and clearly “good” is not a very helpful term here because it is obviously the case that some so-called “good” zoos are regularly engaged in ethically dubious activities and other smaller institutions, not accreditable by the main institutional self-accrediting bodies, maintain high ethical standards.



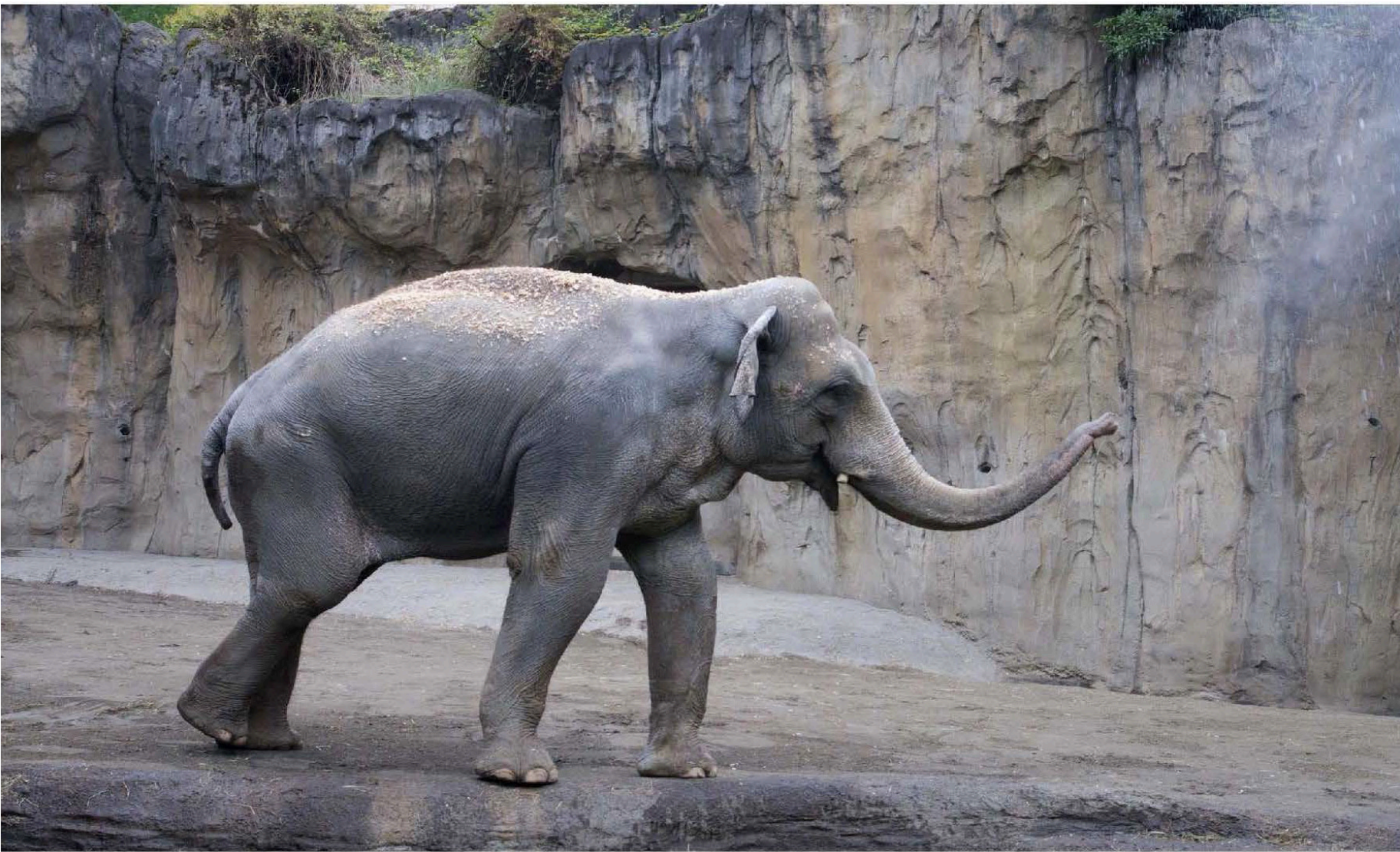
3. Many years ago, I asked Dick’s father, Herbert Blau – the prolific theater director and writer on performance theory – about connections between zoo exhibits and theatrical exhibits. He responded characteristically that of course zoos try to make dramatic sets, it is just that they do it badly!

4. For more about the history and buildings of the Berlin Zoo, see Ursula Klös, Harro Strehlow, Werner Synakiewicz, and Heinz-Georg Klös, *Der Berliner Zoo im Spiegel Seiner Bauten, 1841-1989: Eine Baugeschichtliche und Denkmalpflegerische Dokumentation über den Zoologischen Garten Berlin* (Berlin : Heenemann, 1990).

5. Ibid,

6. For more on Maberry, see *Packy and Me: The Incredible Tale of Doc Maberry and the Baby Elephant Who Made History*, by Dr. Matthew Maberry, Patricia Maberry, and Michelle Trappen (Portland, Oregon: Amica, 2011).

7. On the rise of the cult of Ganesh and its relation to the history of human-elephant conflict, see the argument by Raman Sukumar in *The Living Elephants: Evolutionary Ecology, Behavior, and Conservation* (New York: Oxford UP, 2003), esp. 64-70.











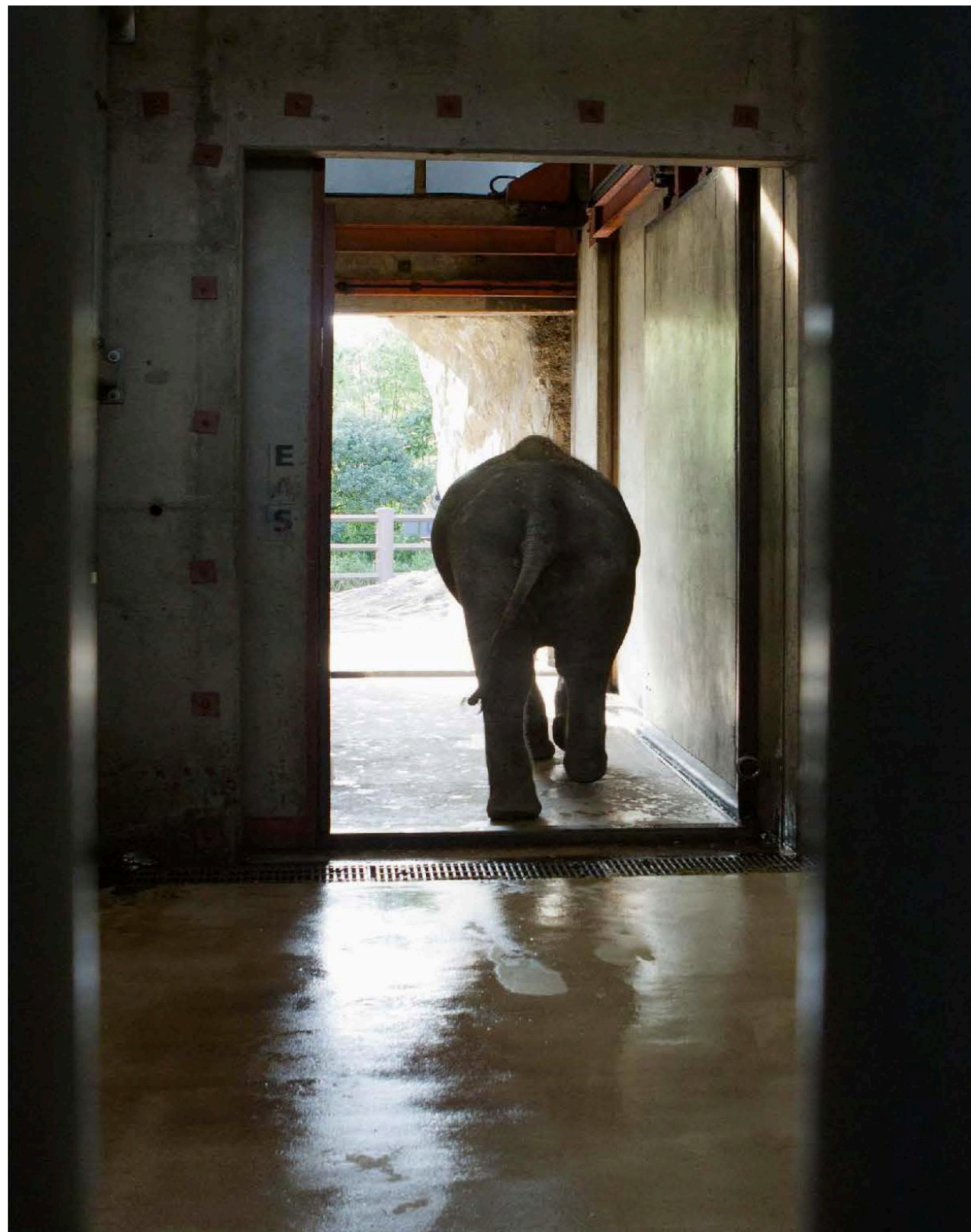












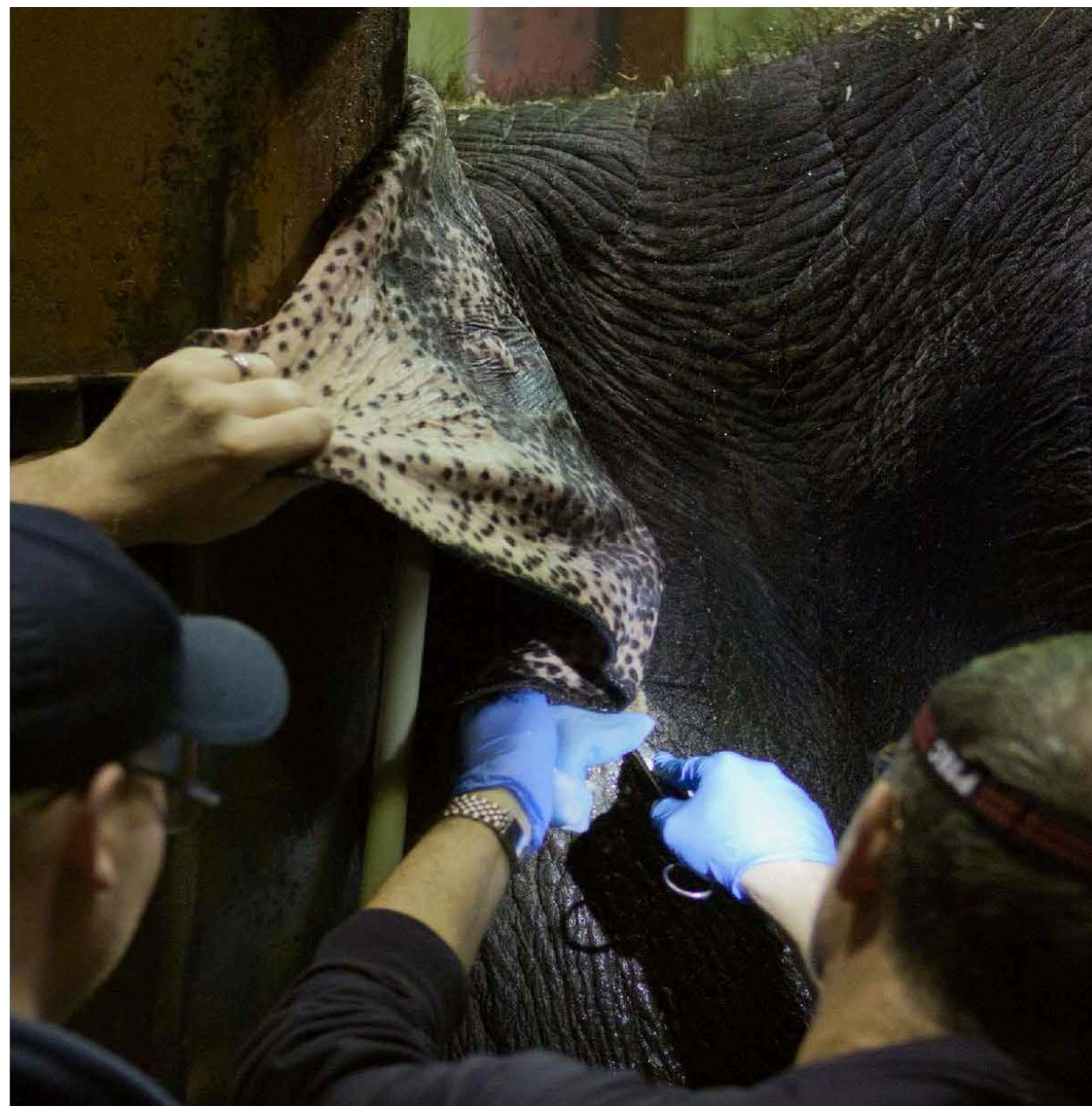




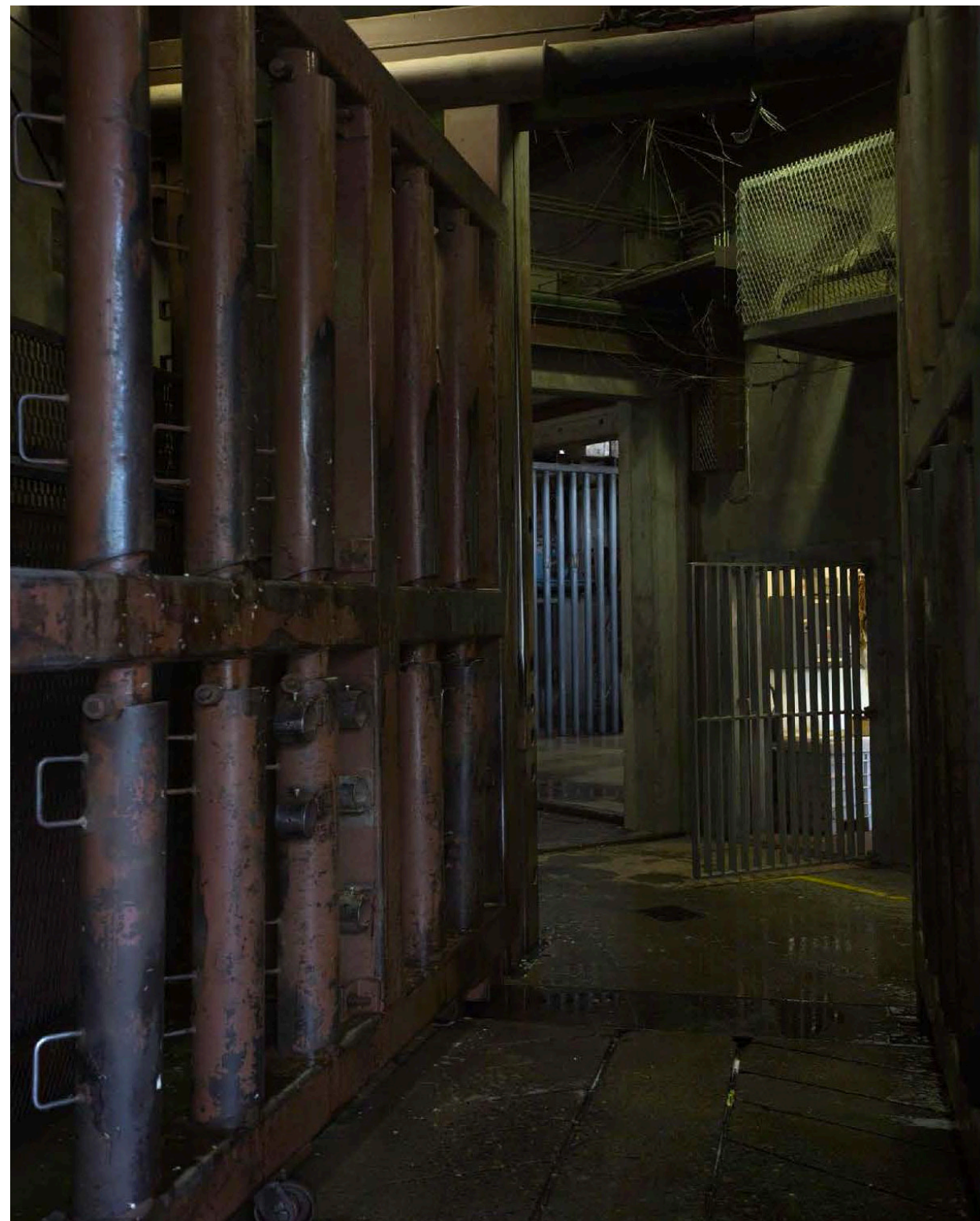
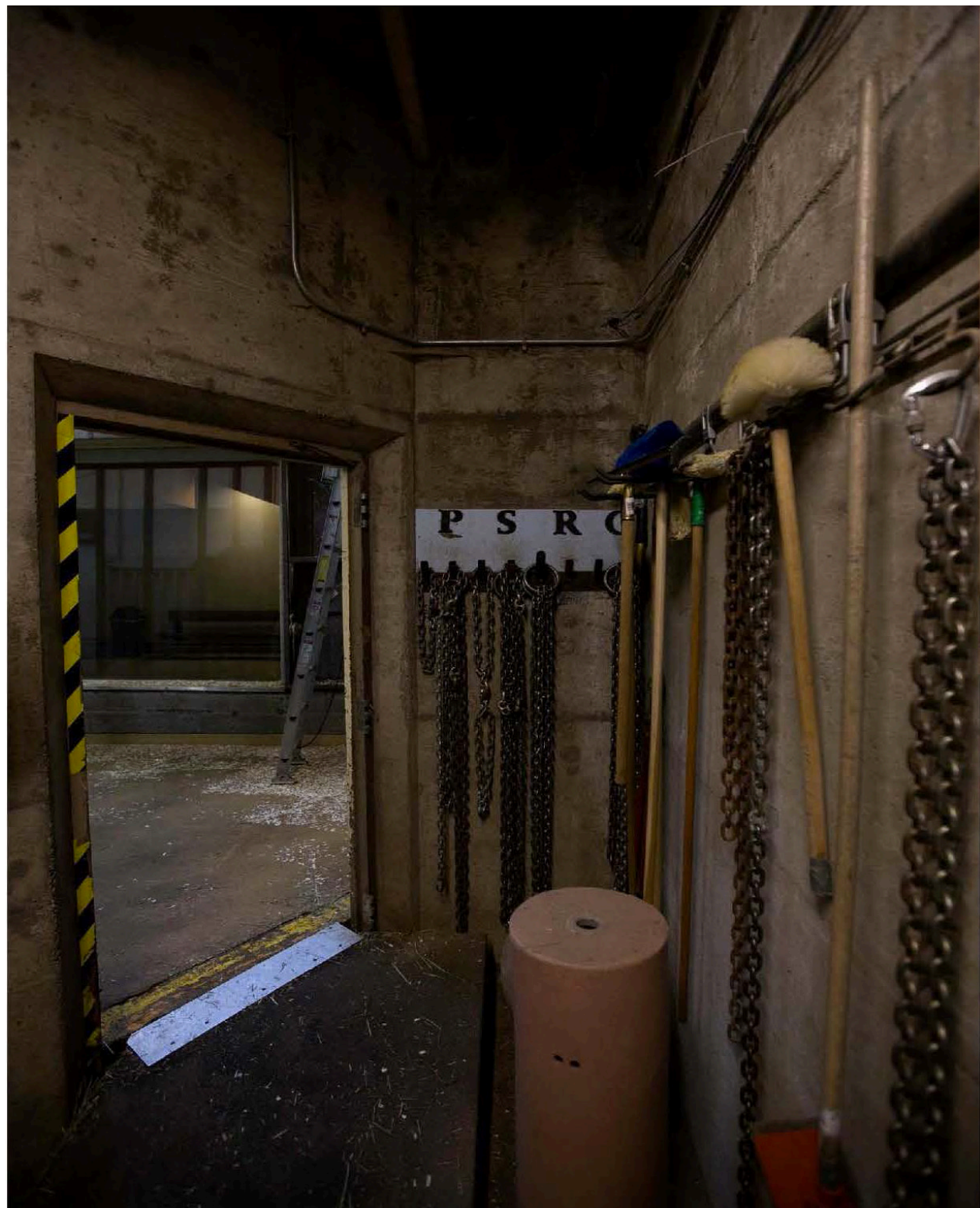




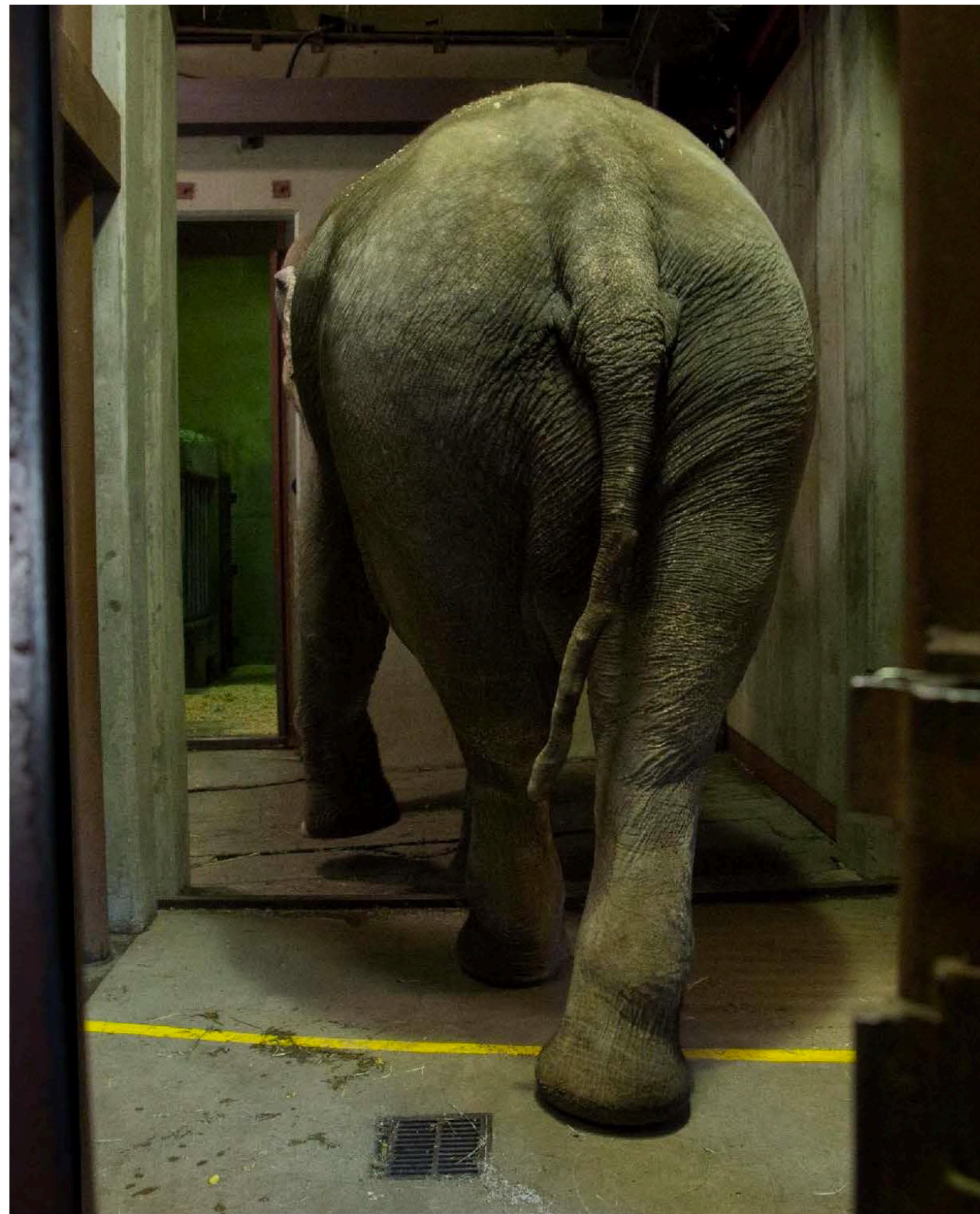




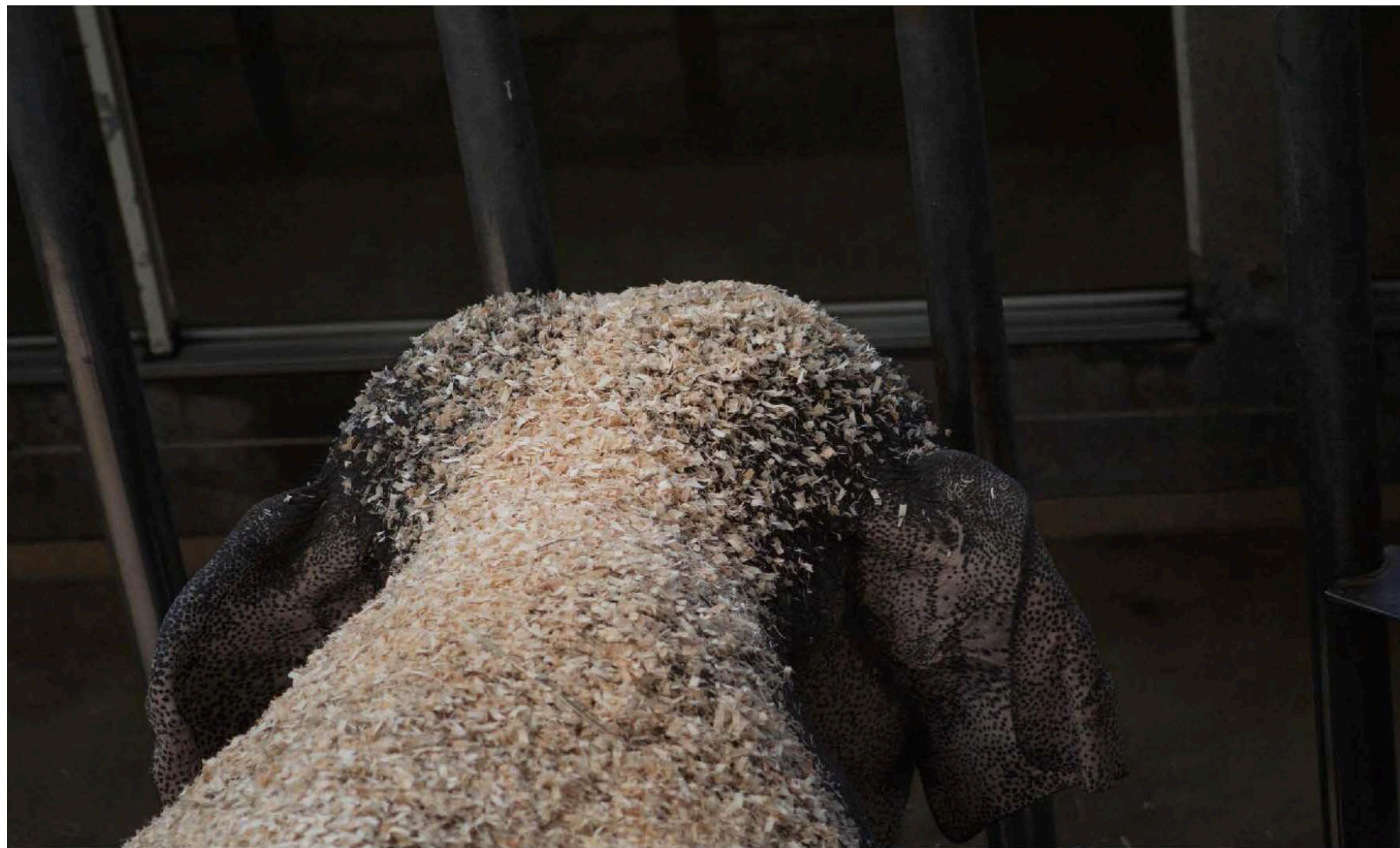












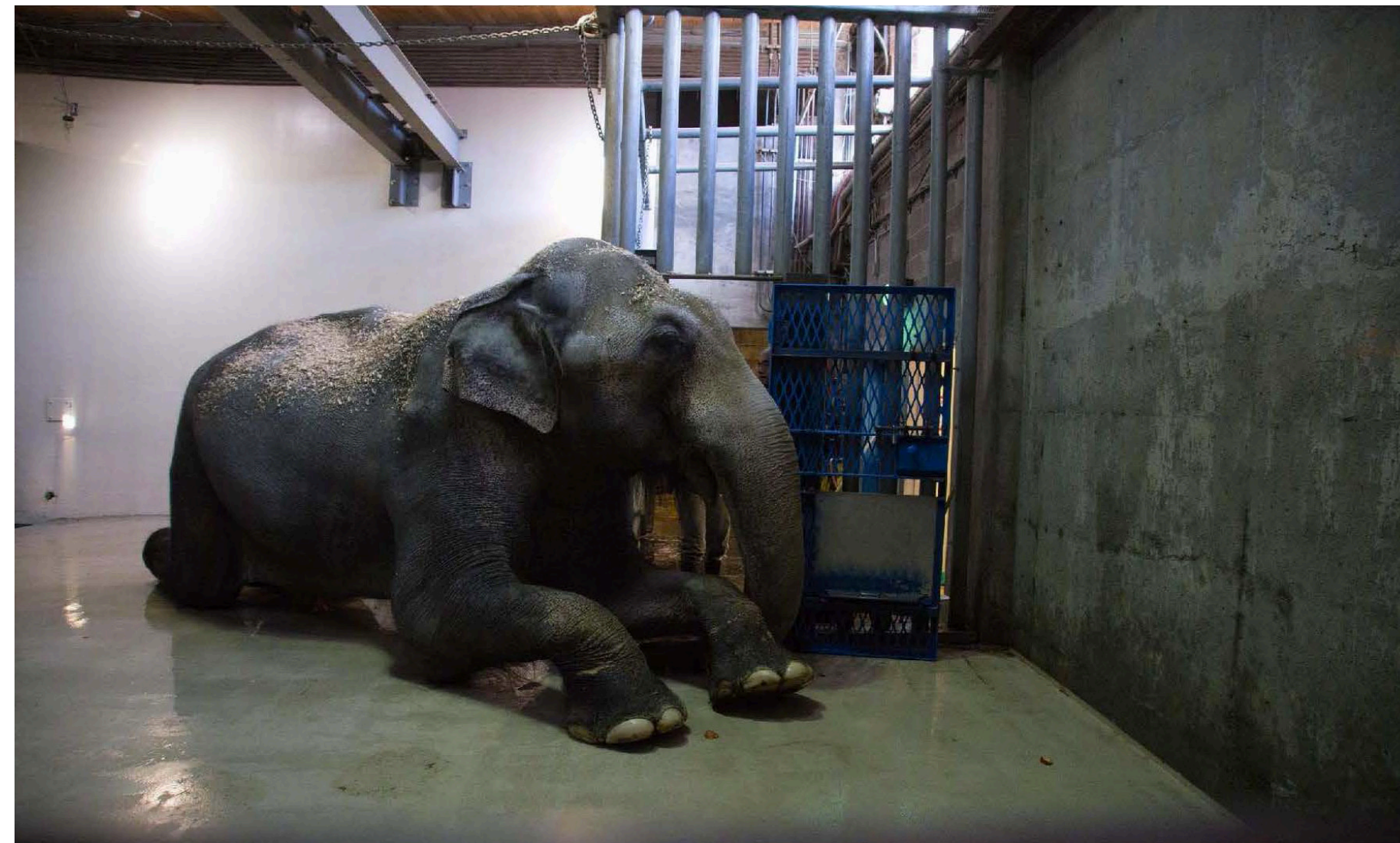
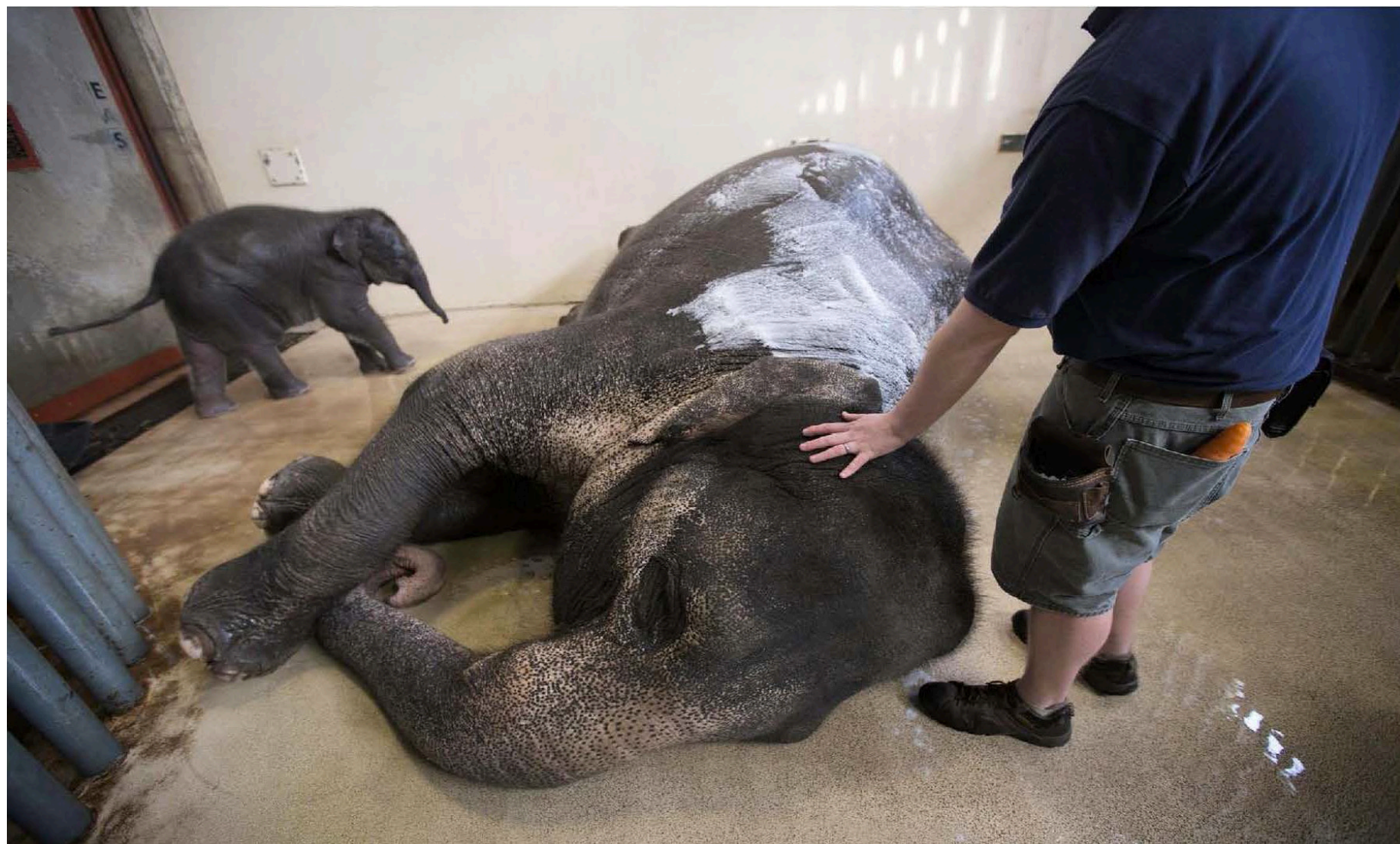




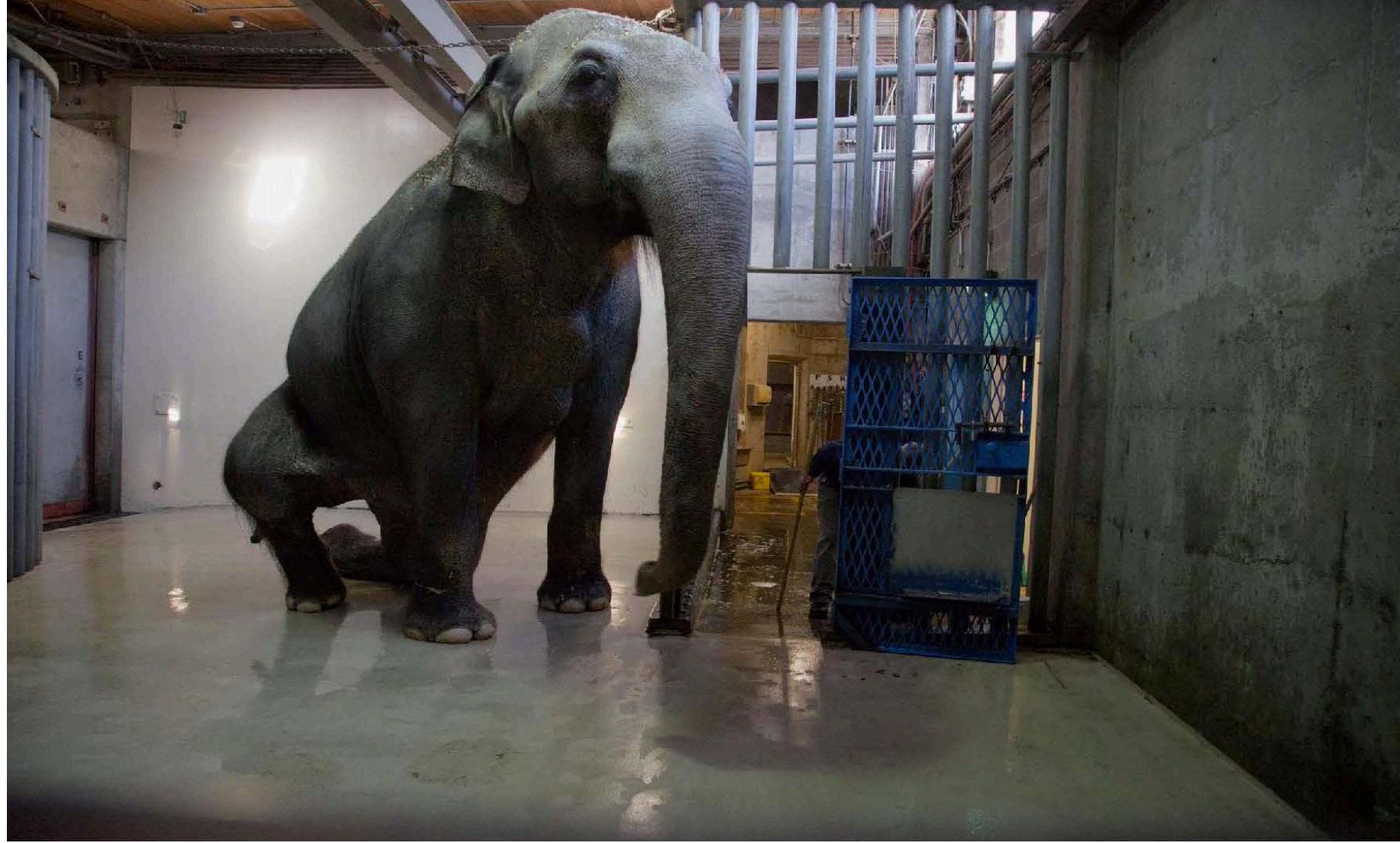












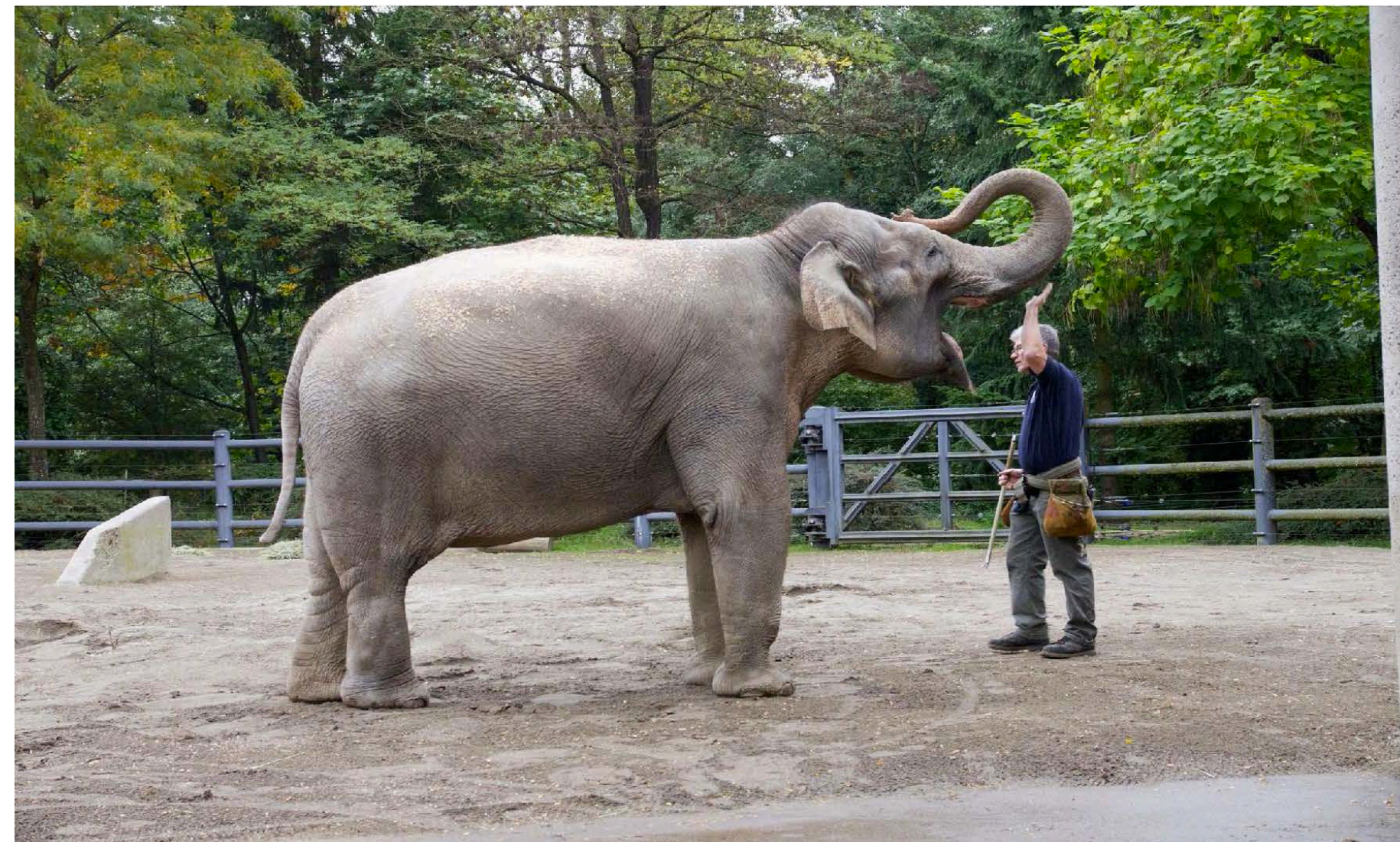
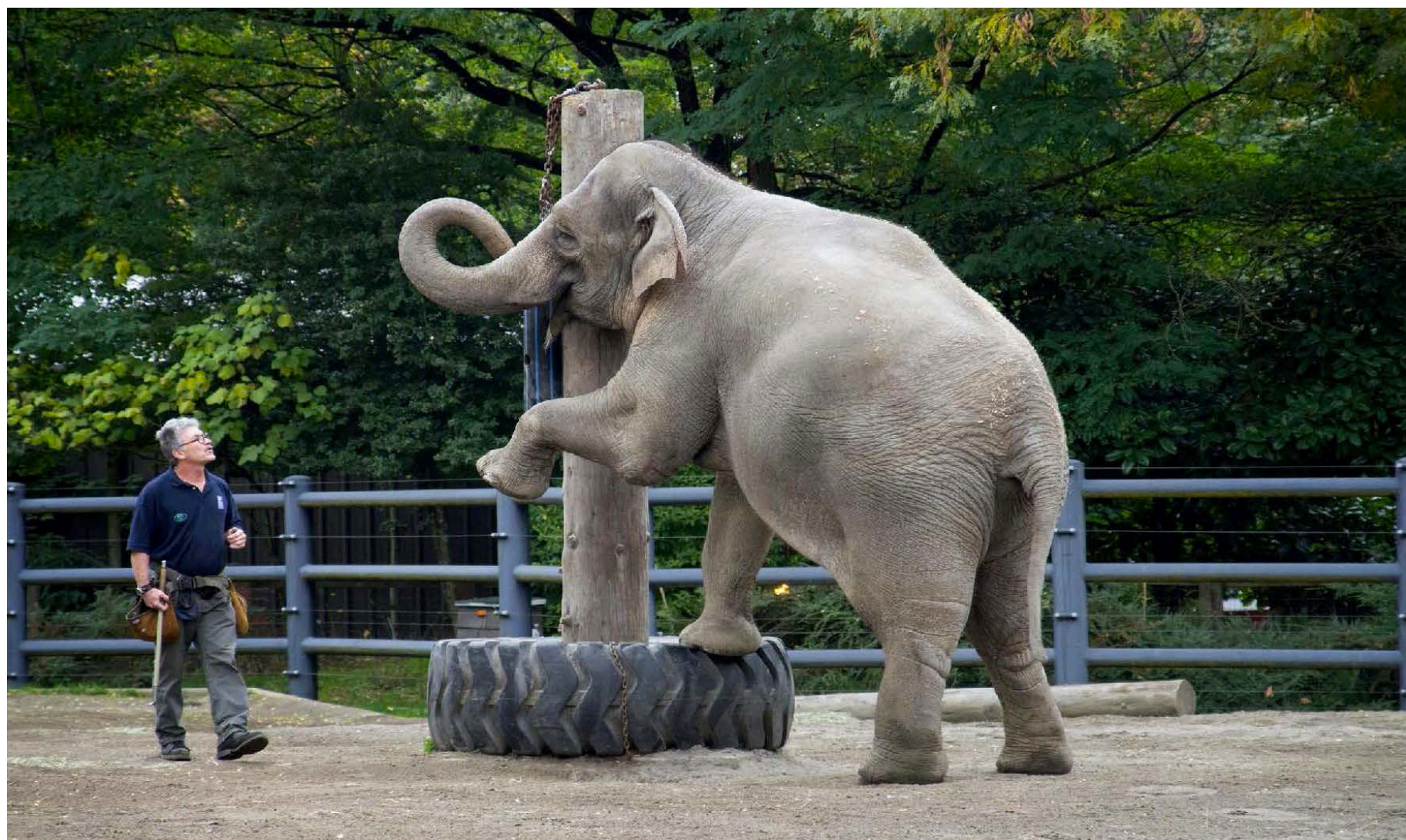




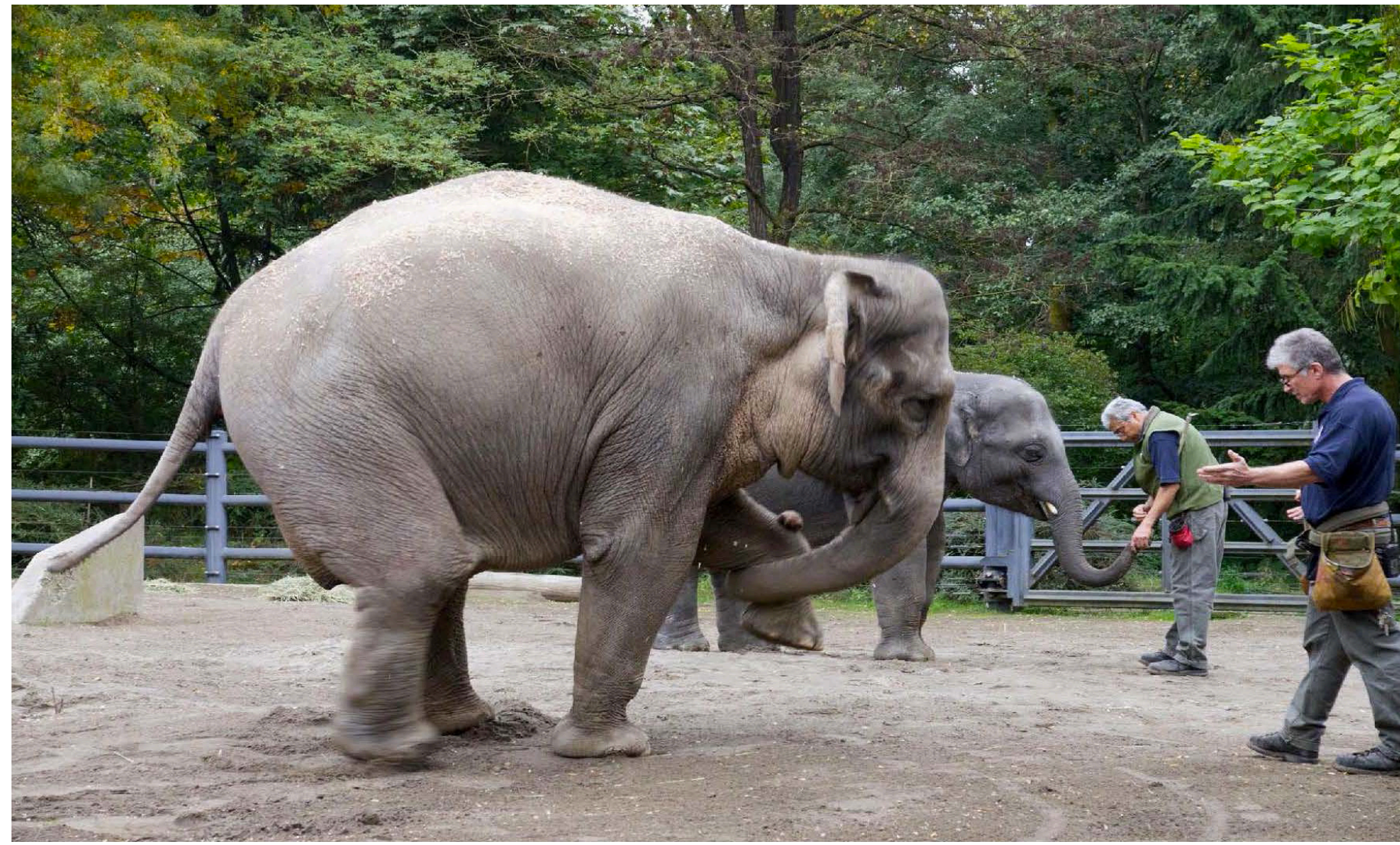
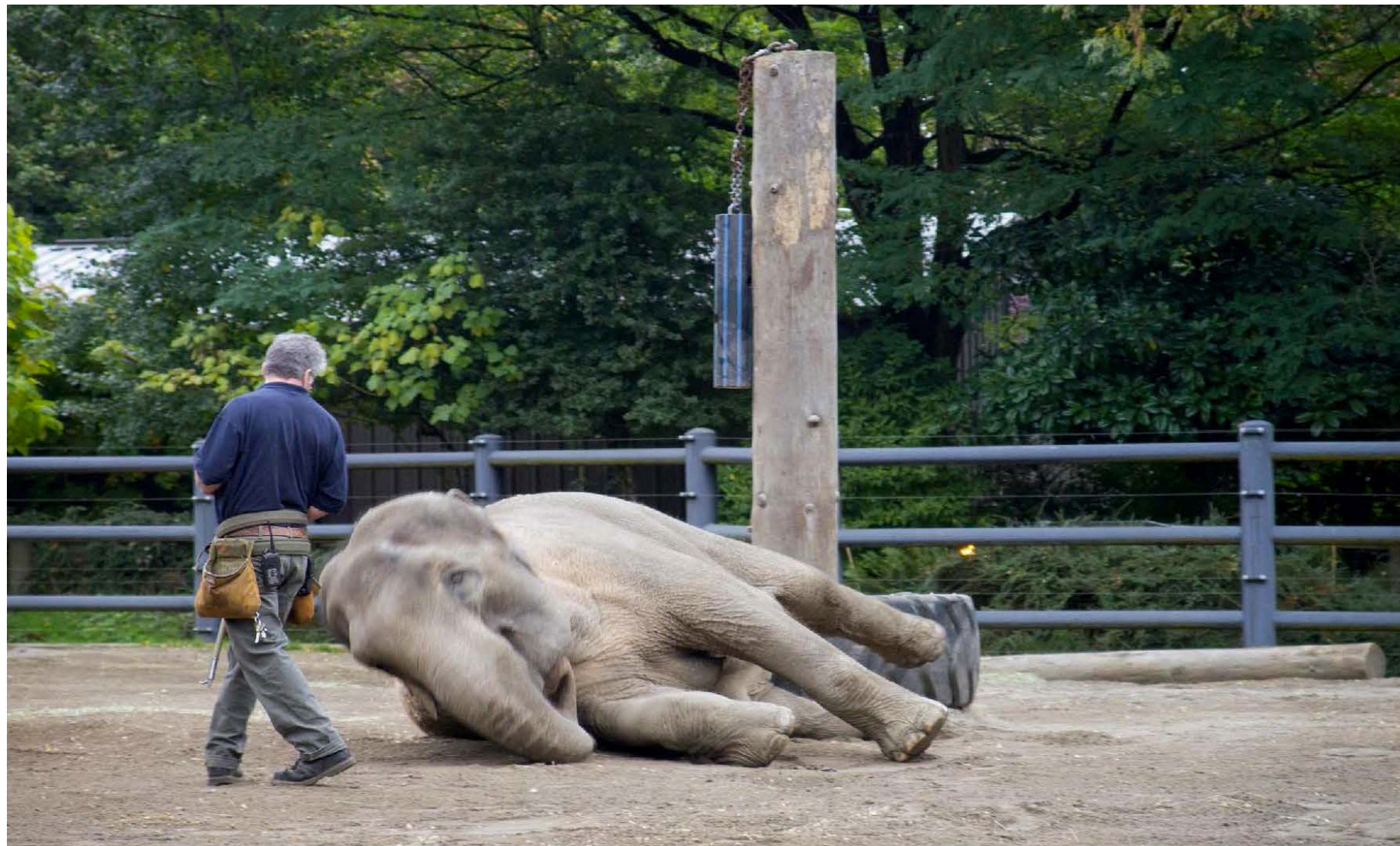




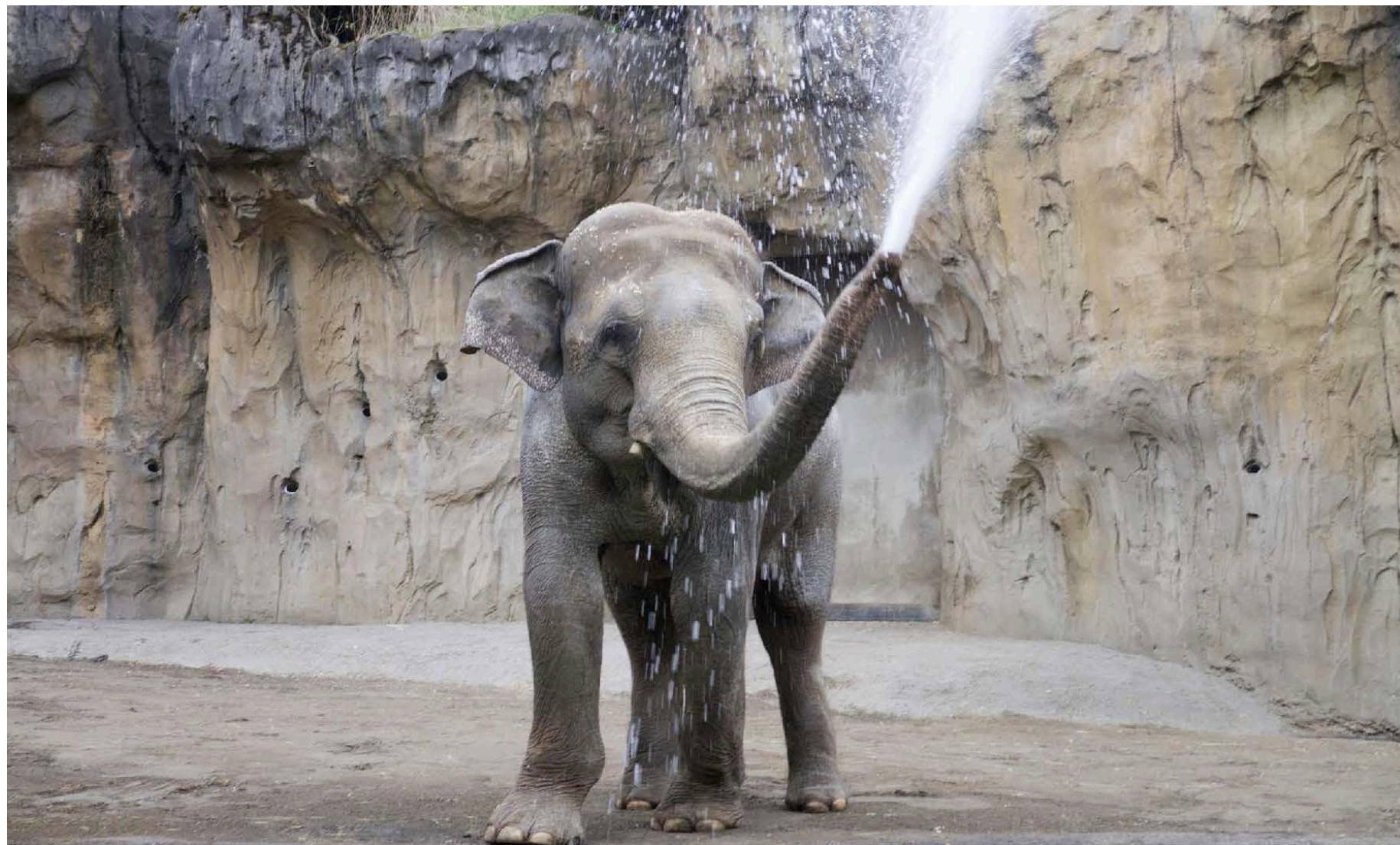








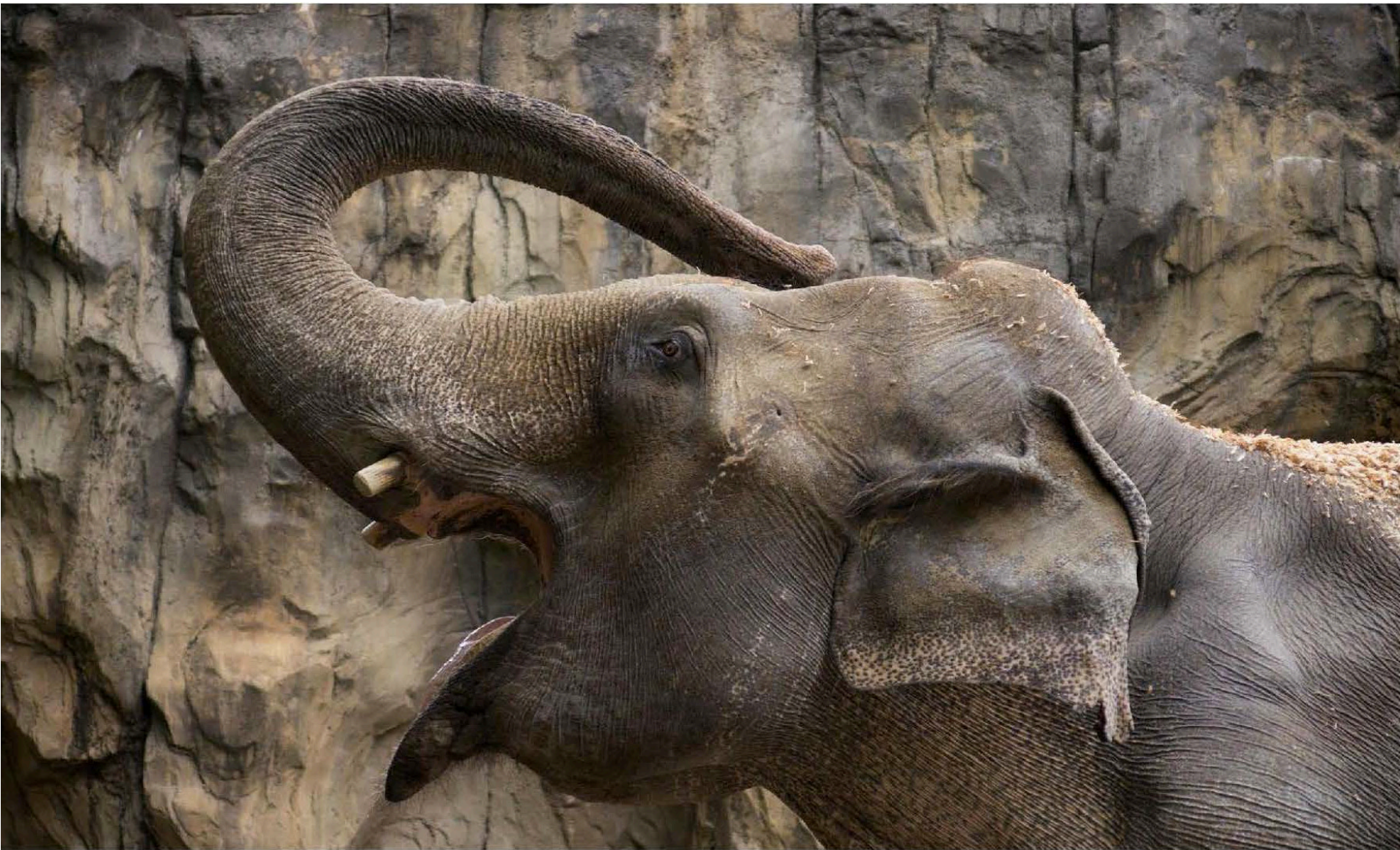








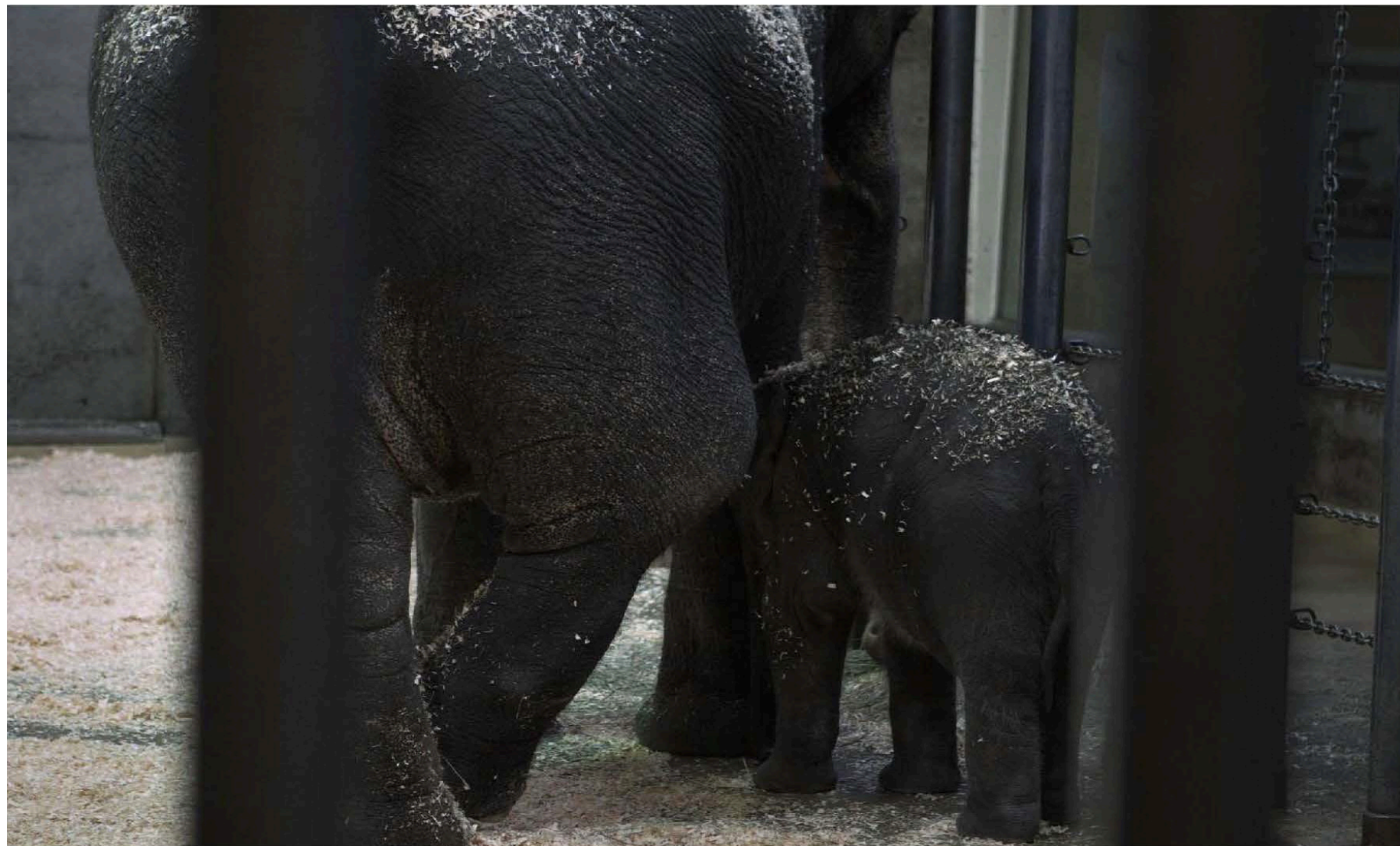




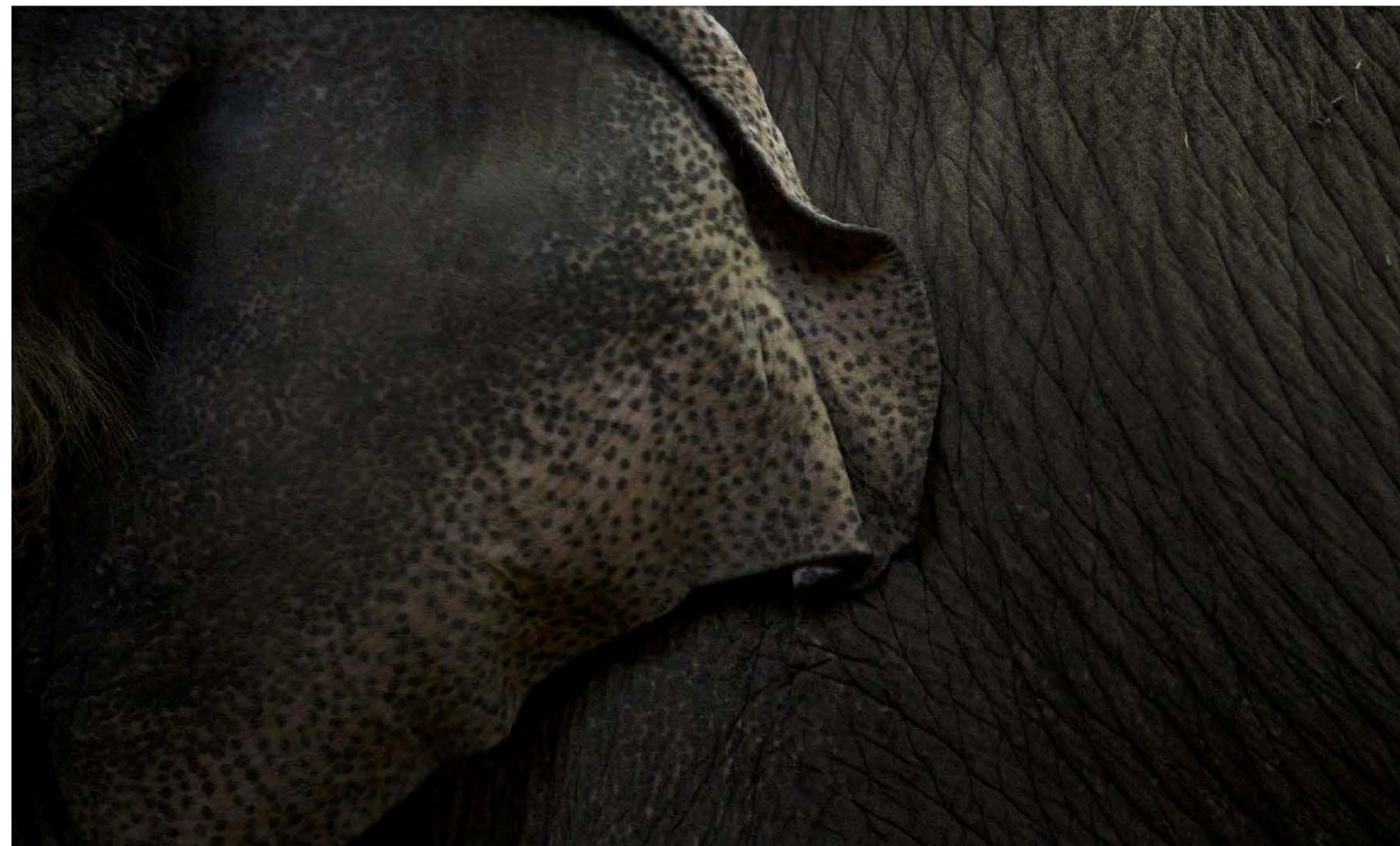




















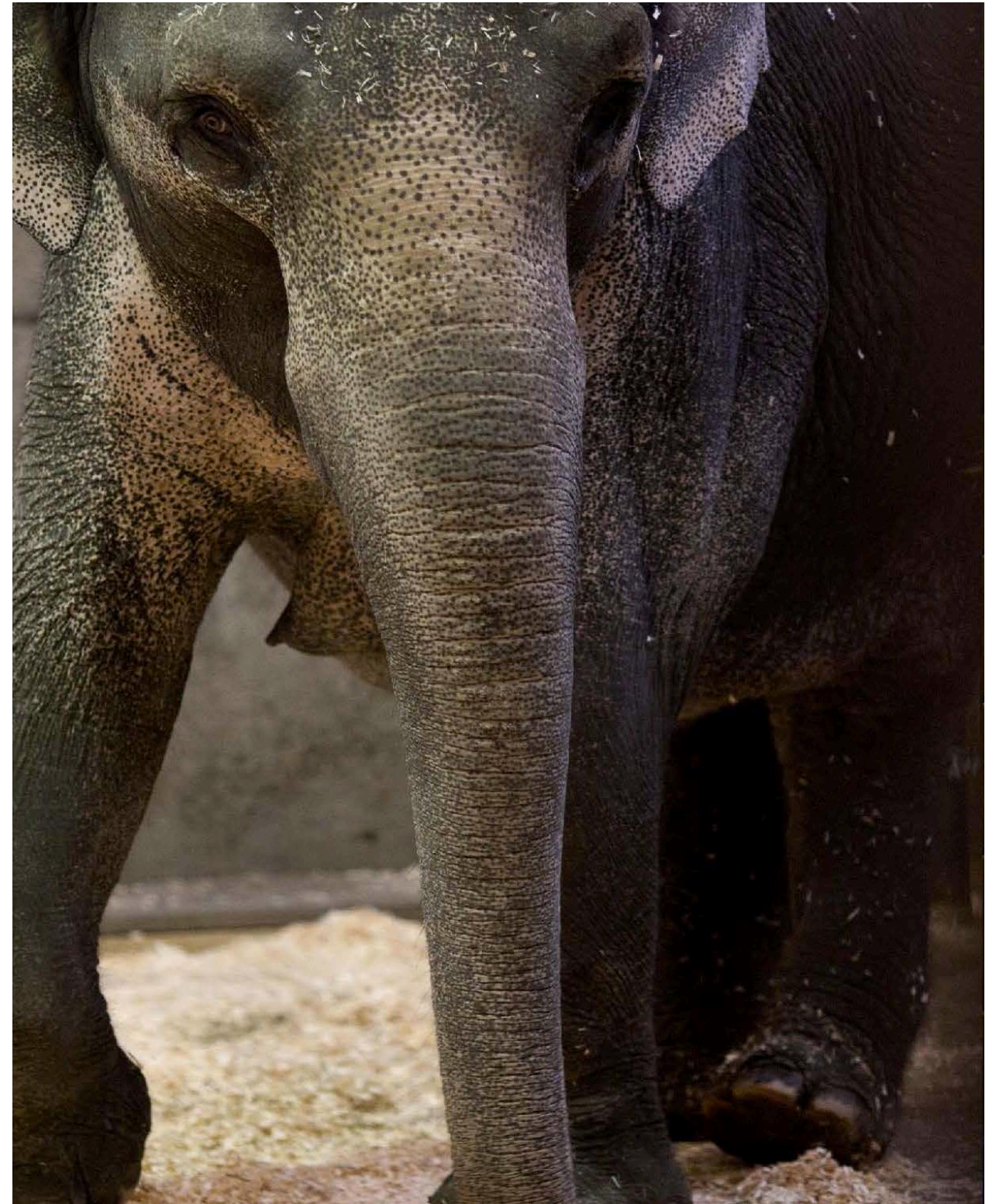
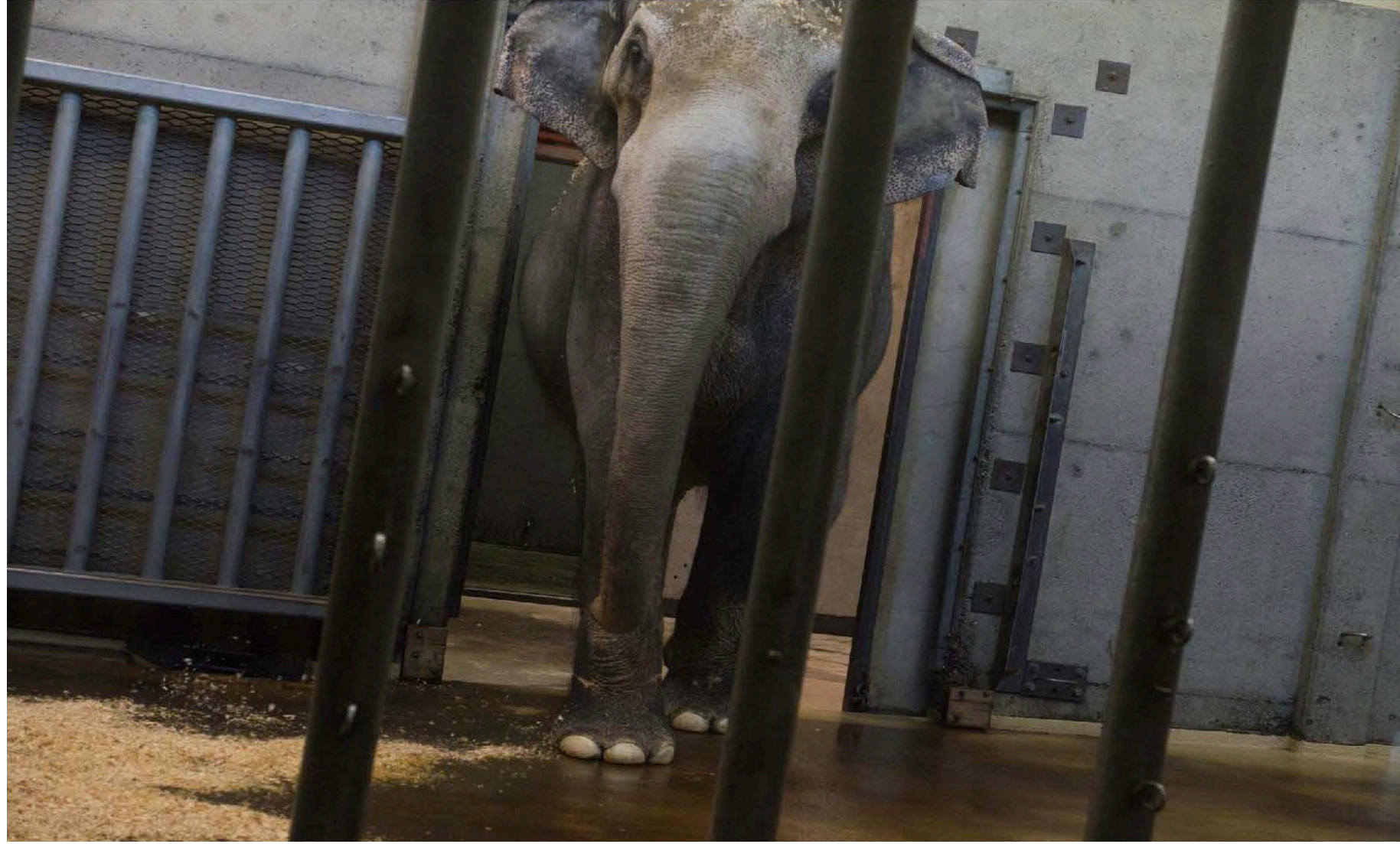




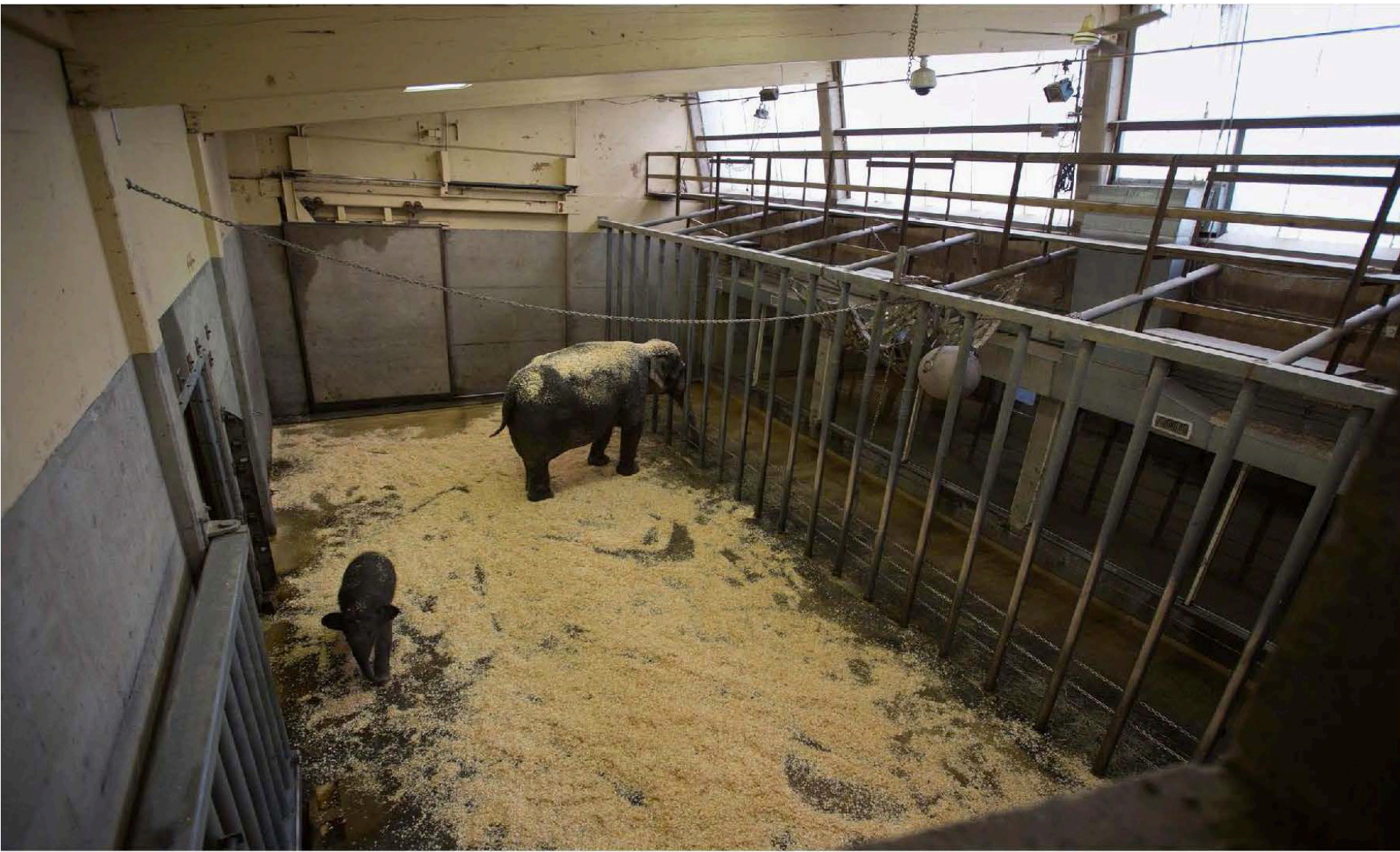
























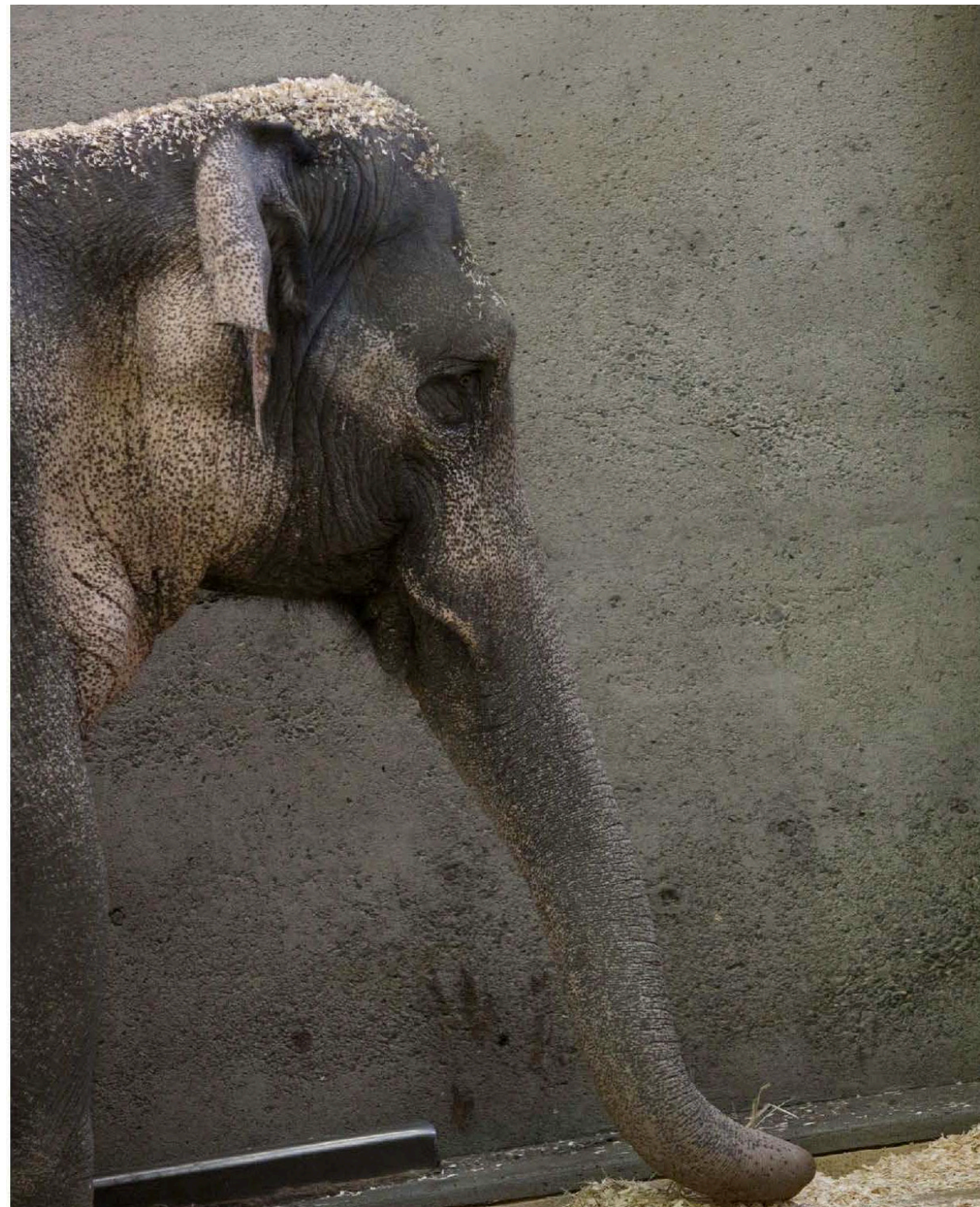
























Chendra



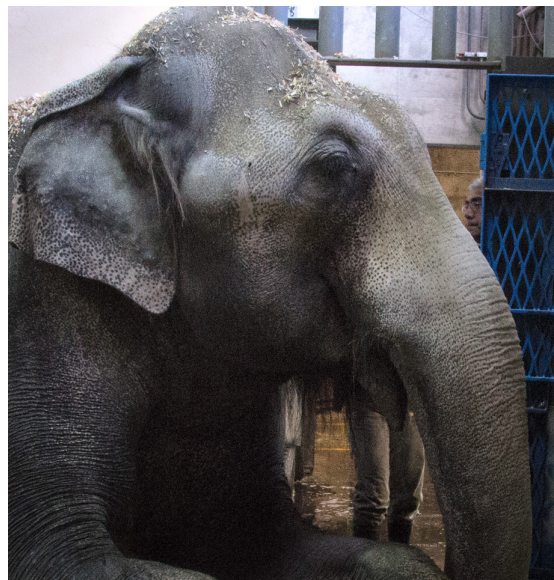
Lily



Rose-Tu (Rose)



Samudra (Sam)



Packy



Rama



Sung-Surin (Shine)



Tusko



