The notion of human exceptionalism is deeply rooted in the traditional values of western culture. The Aristotelian heritage, Christianity, scientific rationalism and the Enlightenment have all made their own contribution to the idea of human rights and of the inherent value of human life. The same philosophical traditions have simultaneously promoted anthropocentrism and thus worsened the ever-deepening divide separating humans from nature and other animals.

The concept of “human” needed a counterpart, something to reflect human superiority. The entire world of other species was forced into the reductive category of “the animal”, while the human being remained alone in his own realm.

The divide between human and nonhuman has, however, never been clear. Aristotle set up the free Greek man as the representative of the human in his most evolved form. Other genders and nationalities, as well as enslaved humans, were merely imperfect versions of the free Greek man, and therefore, in their very essence, born to lead a less dignified life. The soldiers of Christian nations forced not only their culture but also death on those who they defined as being of lesser value than themselves or even as subhuman. The European colonial period brought centuries-long tragedy to numerous peoples, who were murdered, ended up in institutionalized slavery, or were driven from their homelands. The monstrous genocides of the 20th century seem to have taken place far from the heritage of humanism, but they are, nevertheless, manifestations of an ideology that asserts the superiority of one group over another.

In anthropocentric traditions the definition of what constitutes humanity relies on essential difference. Considering one’s own group to be more human than others is not only a western construct: many tribes and peoples throughout history have named their own group using a word that denotes “human”. Xenophobia is instinctive: other apes also make a distinction between “us” and “them”. However, chimpanzees, our closest relatives, do not possess the equipment for mass destruction – they do not even know how to strangle. But we are all too familiar with the achievements of human technology in this field. The first step in killing one’s own kin is a difficult one. But once the line has been crossed, unforeseen horrors can occur.

A common factor in genocides is a doctrine that other people are not humans, but rats, cockroaches, brutes, pests or bacteria, threatening the purity of the human. Rhetoric paves the way for action: the murdering can begin once the words have done their job.

The dualistic world order with the human/animal dichotomy at its core has not just been disastrous to fellow human beings who have been pushed onto the other side of the line. Intensive animal agriculture grew to unforeseen dimensions during the course of the 20th century. Using and abusing other animals is at the very foundation of modern cultures. The presence of these others has simultaneously been rendered invisible. The belief that nature is of no more than instrumental value and that it exists merely to be exploited – or “cultivated” – by the human species is at the core of the environmental crisis of today: a crisis that comes ever closer to those who used to profit from this exploitative relationship.

The problem does not lie in the act of calling a man an animal: by definition we all belong to the animal kingdom. Contemporary science does not recognize the superiority of the species Homo sapiens that was assumed by the religion, science and philosophy of the past. In fact the similarities between humans and other species in terms of communication, cognitive capacity and emotions have been verified by numerous fields of scientific research. But looking for similarities also serves as a way to develop a category that views the (western, white, male) human” as the ideal, and thus it can function as a justification for excluding anyone that the ones in power wish to oppress. Consequently ethical norms cannot be based on similarities but on respect for differences and plurality.

Museum of Nonhumanity is a temporary, touring memorial museum that presents the history of the distinction between humans and other animals, and the way that this artificial boundary has been used to oppress human and nonhuman beings.

Museum of Nonhumanity consists of an Archive of Nonhumanity that is presented in the permanent exhibit of the museum, and an extensive programming in which local civil rights and environmental organizations, activists, artists and academics propose paths towards a more sustainable understanding of our shared world.

Museum of Nonhumanity calls for the deconstruction of the categories of animality and humanity in order to enter a new, more inclusive era.