**Desiring a Connection With Others**

**Learning from and with dogs through artistic research**

How might we consider the non-human animal as equal in a political climate whereby they are eaten, enslaved and exploited, and what situations can we create to affect this change in consideration? What are the rights and agencies that are afforded when striving for such an act, specifically in a creative sense, and how might we negotiate these animal and human subjectivities through collaborative art event? Can art be used as a vehicle of positive change for the rights of non-human animals, rather than as a platform whereby they are primarily used as a living, creative material, and if so, how might this be actioned?

Ethically including non-human animal bodies for the purposes of making art can be problematic, and it is here that legislation becomes important and necessary. The Royal Society for the Prevention of Animals (RSPCA) *Policies on Animal Welfare* of 2003 states that ethical treatment of performing animals is in opposition to circumstances where distress or suffering is likely to be caused in the production of entertainment (RSPCA, 2003). The emotive terms distress and suffering, are significant, for the non-human animal should not be made to do anything against their will through the agency of a human artist. To not cause distress or suffering is (hoped to be) a guiding principle for collaborations and artworks that include non-humans. *Be Your Dog*, my practical artistic research project to which this text relates, works in affirmation of the RSPCA statement, by giving equal rights to all parties involved in collaborative and creative activity (figure 1). Responding to questions of who possesses the collaborative agency and artistic rights in interspecies artworks, the project explores how we engage participation that allows all parties to contribute freely without instruction or duress.

This is, perhaps, an unusual approach for art, which has a too long history of discussing the relevance of the non-human animal by using the animal, and more specifically it’s body, itself. Often not to the benefit of the individual animal concerned, a question of appropriateness and ethics becomes relevant at its inclusion. Several artworks do not consider the animal beyond being a present and material body, of which *Que le cheval vive en moi* (*May the Horse Live in Me*), by Marion Laval-Jeantet in 2011, is an example. In *The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow)* Jacques Derrida states, “the animal is a word, it is an appellation that men have instituted, a name they have given themselves the right and the authority to give to another creature,” which I would suggest is influential in this artwork by Laval-Jeantet (Derrida, 2002, p. 392).

The human artist, Laval-Jeantet, received an injection of blood plasma from a horse within the artwork, who was also present in the Casino de Luxembourg gallery watching on, to become hybrid through a process she terms *synthetic transi-stasis*. The intention for Laval-Jeantet is to blur the boundaries between species, but not for the advantage of both as this prioritizes human, and specifically the artist’s and audiences, perspective. The horse had no participatory agency or say in its contribution, and it is unknown if it gained anything of value from the exercise. Laval-Jeantet effectively disregards the horse as cognizant and individual, of being mindful and able to contribute beyond being a material, in favour of its physical inclusion in the performance and donation of plasma material - neither of which were willingly or consensually given by the horse. The horse did not say, ‘I will give you my plasma’ to Laval-Jeantet, nor did it agree to be present in the gallery. Yet, she used the horse’s body and identity and its unusual presence in the gallery as a projection for inter-positionality, hybridity and biogenetic mergence for the purposes of art. The site is significant, as the preserve of the artist and the artistic, and an authorative site of cultural prescription and belonging. It is a site of cultural and creative translation by others, but often not including the other (in terms of species in this case).

To extend this positing of hybridity and ‘becoming horse’, she wore stilted hooves to stand beside with equivalence in height after the transfusion. The hoof-wearing tactic endorses a mimicry of the horse, both individually and as a species. Rather than suggesting equivalence, the intended co-positional act enhances the horse’s artistic effectual negation. As affirmation of its role and through extension of the proposed hybridity, the horse should surely be positioned as a co-artist in this context. However, this was not the case and the horse was never cited thus; it was a source of bio-creative material and a spectacular and extraordinary body in the gallery. The horse additionally had no say in its agency within the performance as a material and present body within this site of cultural consumption to which it was alien (and possibly scared). It was resigned to being objectifiable and material by a human, which is a troubling positioning for any living participant, irrespective of species.

To overcome the consumptive and objective act being afforded to non-human animals when included in artworks and art projects, and any forms of entertainment, one must consider the agency which they are afforded upon, and through inclusion. To do this, an examination of the ethical and social participatory rights of all participants, irrespective of species derivation, must be established and actioned. One must consider how any animal, human or not, can and will participate if not subjected to idealized social species control and regimental hierarchy. A situation that sees all living animals in art given the same freedom of agency, whereby the non-human has the same creative rights as their human counterpart, is to be encouraged. An antithetical approach to that of Laval-Jeantet, which aims to render the non-human animal as creatively significant as the human and more than material body within the artwork, should be considered.

**Connecting with companions**

A particular issue for Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guittari, as observed by Steve Baker in *The Postmodern Animal*, “is their suspicion that in handling animal form, artists are merely imitating the animal from a safe distance” (Baker, 2000, p. 139). The animal used as object, for example through taxidermy or reproduction of image through observation, is pertinent and relevant. To construct an equitable and appropriate method for including non-human animals in art we should consider how human relationships are built with them in everyday life. The physical and psychological connection between species, and the ways in which it is evidenced and implemented, is significant, particularly concerning companionable interactions within human-pet associations. The physical gap between individuals is closed, even if only for a moment, when they touch, and can be important for how we physically and psychologically relate to that which we perceive as other to ourselves. Walter Benjamin believed full recognition of the similarity between species arose through physical contact, and this makes touch, and comprehensions of touch and sensing the other, significant for psychological interpretation (Benjamin, 1997, pp-pp. 50-51). Touching is an important construct of the human-pet relationship, as by bringing the other physically close through contact it transmits comfort and establishes a familial connectivity between species.

Yet, despite any recognition that physical and psychological touch with other species is mutually beneficial, the recognition of similarity this brings can create an unease in humans. To overcome any fear such a connection creates, humans may seek to impose mastery and hierarchy into the relationship, even with those we consider as pet. It seems we must master them to be able to live closely with them as pet. Jacques Derrida states, “it is paradoxically on the basis of a fault or failing in man that the latter will be made a subject who is master of nature and of the animal,” and this is seen in the domestication of dogs particularly (Derrida, 2002, p. 389). Barbara Noske in her analysis of questions of species in *Beyond Boundaries: Humans and Animals*, considers the dog as “the oldest domesticated animal” and the most humanized in its construct as pet (Noske, 1997, p. 5). Humans manipulate, manage and coerce dogs into an interspecies dependency in which they govern for their own gain. So long has this been the way, in fact, that it is deeply embedded behaviour within this companion species paradigm. The dog, whose payoff for being subjugated is that they (should[[1]](#footnote-1)) receive shelter, food and care, is made less significant than their human companion within the cohabiting relationship and environment. Domestic dogs have come to *need* humans as a consequence of our control over them. We have de-wild-ed them. To quote Susan McHugh from her book *Dog* “the origins of dogs – like dogs themselves – appear inseparable from those of contemporary human cultures” and this makes our interactions with them worthy of discussion (McHugh, 2004, p.16). There is order within this hierarchical arrangement, but one that is not ideal, and a reconsideration of this agenda can be of mutual benefit.

Synchronization, which is key to sympathetic and empathetic attachment and understanding in canine behaviours, is important for survival of the dog and their species. In *Canis Sensitivus: Affiliation and Dogs Sensitivity to Others’ Behavior as the Basis for Synchonization With Humans?,* Charlotte Duranton and Florence Gaunet discuss how*,* “being synchronised with others increases the fitness of [dogs] offspring by decreasing the pressure of predation, increases the chances of survival of each member by avoiding predators, increases foraging efficiency and increases social cohesion among individuals” (Duranton & Gaunet, 2015, pp-pp. 513-514). They propose synchronization and empathetic connection is possible due to “the special relationship between domestic dogs and their human caregivers are the effects of a highly ancient domestication...[e.g.] dogs sleep when humans sleep and are active when they are active…[leading to their] sensitivity to others behaviours and the ability to adjust their own behaviour accordingly” (Duranton & Gaunet, 2015, p. 514).

That equality, synchronicity and empathy can (and arguably should) exist in human and dog companion relationships informed developments leading to explorations of the pack within an art context. Art is seemingly well placed to interrogate and test this idea if we follow Deleuze and Guittari’s suggestion (through Steve Baker) that, “what becoming-animal does is close to what art does. In becoming-animal, certain things happen to the human: becomings-animal may be thought of as ‘traversing human beings and sweeping them away’” (Baker, 2000, p. 138). This sweeping, blazing, becoming, in Baker’s interpretation, occurs in both art making and becoming animal whereby the self is enveloped in the activity taking place. A consuming and all together transformative experience born of occupying territory beyond the normative and usual through which we erect and maintain as the boundary of the self.

The artistic research project *Be Your Dog* aims to investigate the potential of establishing equality through exploring interspecies synchronicity and empathy within a creative act. In examining the closeness and contingency of animal agency within creativity, dogs are significant as they are so close to humans in their companionability to be identified as the oldest ‘pet’ and companion animal,[[2]](#footnote-2) and thereby are already connected. By analyzing and exploring the opportunities within mutually engaged activity within companion relationships, and beyond the hierarchies of pet and owner within an ethical framework,[[3]](#footnote-3) it opens up the possibility for the human to understand their canine’s perspective.

Derrida, writing on co-domesticity with his cat, observes that “as with every bottomless gaze, as with the eyes of the other, the gaze called ‘animal’ offers to my sight the abyssal limit of the human: the inhuman or the ahuman, the ends of man” (Derrida, 2000, p. 389). Conscious of making work with animals beyond hierarchy and in response to the limits of man, the project sees human and dog performing the same activity, with the former following the actions and behaviours of the latter. It offers the opportunity for humans to experience the interests and activities of their pet through the parameters of art. A transformative and traversing experience, perhaps, in the sense of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari on becoming animal in *A Thousand Plateaus:* *Capitalism and Schizophrenia,*who suggest it has a compound effect (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). This is not one where the suggestion is a complete becoming in the project, whereby the human’s transformation would be profound through the observations that take place, but one where human and dog remain as such. Rather, the participants within *Be Your Dog* maintain their species identity but the humans learn from their dogs how to interact and build relationships from their perspective. Any transformation thereafter is residual, but not at the expense of un-becoming human. This is not becoming-animal in the sense outlined by Deleuze and Guittari, but a learning from the other from a distinct species position.

**Approaching *Be Your Dog***

With their close relationship with humans and their acquired status within domesticity, dogs are part of a companionable bond that is empathetically, yet influentially, reliant. *Be Your Dog* questions and tests if human dominance and hierarchy is productive in domestic cohabitation with dogs by exploring the effects of their empathetically connected presence and way of being with others. By exploring the dynamics within interspecies companionship and domestic pack formation the research analyses how empathy informs this construction. To do this, it positions dogs and humans as equal participants within an art context - both as artists, with no hierarchy to dictate mastery and obedience. The aim is to see if humans can gain greater empathy with their dogs through action and observation, and what effect this has on understandings of, and connectivity within domestic companionship.

Learning canine empathy, and being more dog, is the driver for human participation, which is placed at the core of the activity. Dogs are natural and instinctual empaths, which is demonstrated through their close allegiance with humankind, and why we maintain the need to involve them in our domestic co-living arrangements. Without this ability they could and would not have been domesticated in the way established. Their capacity for empathetic connection with other beings is demonstrated by their ability to work and aid human life. Whether as assistance dog or protector or pet, they use their ability to establish connections that forge close relational links with humans that are of tremendous benefit. This innate ability top empathetically relate is not as pronounced or enhanced in humans, and the project creates a situation whereby this can be observed, experienced and learnt. The dog becomes the focus for learning, the teacher, allowing the human to follow their behaviours, mannerisms, and interests in order to develop the connection that informs co-existence. Hierarchy is collapsed through the co-efficiencies this creates, allowing an ethical and equitable situation to emerge to facilitate the learning environment (figure 2).

The project, which involves practical workshops followed by a public performance art event, has had two incarnations: *Be Your Dog* at Karst Gallery in Plymouth in 2016, and *Human School (Be Your Dog!)* at Animals of Manchester event at the Whitworth Gallery and Park, as part of Manchester International Festival in 2019. The first saw seven artistic bonded pairs of human and dog attend two consecutive weekend workshops at the gallery in Plymouth, followed by a public performance. An abiding principle is all participants are artistic collaborators and co-makers of the artwork, all are equal, and no dominant agency or hierarchy is welcome. The artwork was re-staged and re-shaped to include working with the shelter, Dogs4Rescue, a no-pen facility in Greater Manchester and participants from the local community in Whitworth Gallery Park, who created a performance over a short, morning or afternoon, duration. Both incarnations create the capacity for humans to observe and *be* more dog so that they may learn to empathetically be with an*other* through direct observation and physical gesture. In so doing they understand the nuances in their position and affiliations more intensely. The projects two incarnations use binaries in cultural site: the gallery, a space of normative cultural activity and consumption, in Plymouth, and a park in Manchester. Due to the variation in site, duration, human participant experience and other conditions, both produced slightly different responses. For the purposes of this text, I will focus on the first iteration at Karst in 2016, which placed participation within the context of the gallery and by association the makers as artists due to the conditions of the site (figure 3).

So, how did I do this? The first obstacle was to get a gallery engaged with the project, for most were not particularly open to dogs being in their buildings. Too much opportunity to misbehave was cited, and anxieties abounded around expressed bodily functions and other unwanted actions. Once Karst became the partner site participants were drawn from its locality of Plymouth, humans and dogs who were initially unknown to each other, with the offer of exploring strategies for interspecies companions to create a sense of equality. Selected participants then attended sessions to explore and establish empathy, equality and connection with each other and as part of a larger pack grouping. These workshops explored developmental strategies for dog and human to be situated as artistic equals with their companion, such as changing roles in leading and following towards mutual acts of engagement and synchronicity. Elisabetta Palagi, Velia Nicotra and Giada Cordoni discuss how emotional contagion is a swelling through the senses that connects beings in mutuality through an effective emotional contagion *in Rapid Mimicry and Emotional Contagion in Domestic Dogs*, which is crucial for collaborations of any kind, not just those that are interspecies (Palagi et al., 2015, p. 2). As this was not performed in domestic pair isolation, a new dog and human pack was constructed through the project. The humans are instructed to observe and follow the behaviours, manners and movements of their dog in the workshops to learn to connect through, and connect with them: they look where they look; bark when they bark; run when they run; drink when they drink; lay where they lay. This methodology tests if it is possible to establish equality through exploring acts designed to initiate human engagement and empathy with a dog, a response that is common for canines within the domestic environment and pack (figure 4).

As an artistic researcher there is often a risk. The risk in *Be Your Dog* concerned the pack, unknown interspecies contributors I did not know beforehand. Despite some informed anticipations, I also did not know what the dynamics of the pack would be, or how they would interact with each other – and this concerns both dogs and humans. There was also a risk in my not being the active agent visually, in that I would not take part, but perform as the artist and creator of the event. Being an unpaired and non-integral member of the ensemble, through self-positioning I would be displaced from the pack itself. The term for my role as creator is important, as this was not direction or staging in a theatrical sense, but one of creating the conditions and opportunities to optimize engagement and test possibilities. As artistic research which I created, my role as artist was one which saw me positioned just beyond the parameters of visibility. The collaboration created was the important element; the activity made by the participatory co-opted interspecies artists.

The aim was to dissolve the distinctions between animals (as human or dog) to be artists through the explorations by the cohabiting pairs and the newly conceived pack. John Berger states in *About Looking*, “animals are always the observed,” and I intended to make observational rights and agency as mutual and dually significant for both (Berger, 1980, p. 16). I am also invested in the dog getting something back, to be involved, not as a subject but as an active and significant collaborator. To quote Haraway, "dogs are not surrogates for theory: they are not here just to think with," and this is a sentiment that influenced the project (Berger, 1980, p. 16). *Be Your Dog* intends to test ideas, theories, preconceived ways of relating and being, and new opportunities for cohabitation, and to analyze if emotional contagion and synchronization is functional and informative for all within interspecies artwork. *Be Your Dog* is not an exercise in mimicry, but a learning experience forged through observation and artistic endeavour. The project seeks to agitate a question of dogs’ companionable co-equivalence, and to raise a question of their degradation within animal hierarchies and its relevance in domesticity. By demonstrating dogs’ potential and willingness to be artistic inter-species collaborators, it asks why we function through hierarchy within companionship and not through a co-effectiveness for mutual benefit and happiness.

**Dogs and humans in collaboration in the gallery**

John Berger suggests in *About Looking* that, “animals are always the observed. The fact that they can observe us has lost all significance. They are the objects of our ever-extending knowledge” (Berger, 1980, p. 16). *Be Your Dog* aims to redress the balance in this respect, to bring the human and non-human back into an equivalence *as* animals, as observable and equal bodies beyond the rules of species-specific orders of dominance. The recognition and acceptance of difference makes collaboration active and generative, through what individuality and individual perspective and knowledge brings. Such recognition informs aspects of collaboration and life irrespective of species. Progression and productivity occur through mutuality born of respect and equality, and this can be as effective in art in its questioning of the world as any other area.

Once assembled the artistic pairs of cohabiting dogs and humans were invited to engage in the practicalities of making the project achievable. The ethos sees all afforded equal status from the outset, irrespective of species. An experimental approach within the process, whereby the actuality of events could not be pre-determined with any absolute resolution, allowed this to flourish. The dogs are offered the freedom to be artistic, to contribute and create the artwork with humans with equality, and go beyond inclusion as mere matter and ‘stuff.’ The humans are informed of this from the outset, and, although they are not to lose their human-ness, they are instructed to think and be more *dog*-like. The dogs were not given rules, but allowed to just *be* dogs, and this created a certain amount of unpredictability. Although this was well-researched and formulated, the unknown dynamics of the pack, and the individuals therein, would shape developments collaboratively. Walter Benjamin states in *True Dog Stories* that, “no single dog is physically or temperamentally like another,” in fact just like with humans, and a recognition of intellectual, physical and individual difference informs how the pack might and would be enabled within the project (Benjamin, 2014, p. 183).

Led creatively by a desire to ethically include any animal involved in gallery-based creative practice as an artist, who contribute free of duress or human imposition, the artwork finds strategy for that to happen. Effectively the dogs are invited to collaborate, never forced – it is up to them if they respond, collaborate, take part or not. Should they wish to opt out, that would inform the collaborative process. Collaboration is key, a working and (be)coming together, of one not dominating the other. A specific interest in terms of the way collaboration is productive in art is in response to Donna Haraway’s concept of companion species, in that there has to be at least two participants of equal significance to make a functional and trusting affiliation (Haraway, 2003, p. 12). Through Haraway, companionable binaries positions beings as equivalent and without bias, despite an acknowledgement of species difference, with no pecking order in place, and no one in charge. Haraway’s theory concerns human-pet companions as cohabitees in domesticity, and my interest is in adopting that premise to position it in the realm of art.

One has to anticipate, connect with and sense the will of the other body or bodies to make collaboration and creativity productive and possible. Without an unbiased connection it becomes something other, a potentially fractured, dysfunctional and chaotic activity held together only by unrealized intent. For Jean-Luc Nancy, as discussed by Derrida in *On Touching – Jean-Luc Nancy*, the notion of interior resonance and its connectivity is aligned to the body, which he *regards* as a phenomenological chamber that contains and constructs creativity (Derrida, 2000). How a body resonates and feels is important for bonding and sensing the other within collaboration and for forming connections that establish responsiveness. This resonance, of communication by means unsaid, is not restricted to particular species, as all bodies possess the potential for creativity to be felt, imagined and experienced. To the outsider this demonstrates what it is to be absorbed by connectivity between bodies that are immediate, personal and empathetically responsive. The bonded artistic interspecies pairs brought the potential of collaboration to the project. Duranton and Gaunet state in *Canis Sensitivitus* that “dogs showed more synchrony with individuals they considered as their favourite social partners” and this is significant for these developments (Duranton & Gaunet, 2015, p. 515). Collaborative potential is enhanced by familiarity and attraction, of being fond of, friendly with, and attached to the other body. As a result, for the human-dog cohabitees in *Be Your Dog* it was important that they were in synchrony as much as possible in their daily lives to inform the collaborative experiment research and artwork.

The gallery, as in the work of Laval-Jeantet and the blood donor horse, is significant as a privileged site of influence and how it determines the artist, the artistic,and the artwork as a consequence. In positioning *Be Your Dog* and its activity within a gallery, and the dogs and their humans as active and present bodies within an exhibition space, the event is situated *as* art, and the visible participants *as* artists, by the provenance of the site. The gallery is not the preserve of the human in this context, which may come as a surprise to those who wish this priority of agency. Usually, any object of observation placed within a gallery is determinable as art; usually, the maker of the art, whether performance or not, is by extension an artist. The gallery environment brings provocation concerning performing agency and established roles, and its place-making use for *Be Your Dog* is a specific tactic to allow empathetic and mutually engaged activity to be made apparent through its establishment as art as provided by the conventions and regularities of the site.

The gallery has the capability to sanction an event or happening as art. Specifically, the art is of performance and event, and the artists’ its performers. To be a performer is to utilize one’s self agency for direct and experiential delivery, and this heightens the role of the participants in this context. This is not passive inclusion, but one that is active, present and vital. The site influences reception and understanding, and the canine artists experienced a subtle transformation in status within its prevailing circumstantial shift. Performing activity usual to their species and levels of interest becomes of spectacular note when staged within a gallery for the moment of its presentation to an audience. Events with dogs that occur in a park or another type of non-human animal friendly space, can lose this aspect in favour of more normative and familiar practices and happenings (this was explored in the second iteration, *Human School (Be Your Dog*!) staged as part of Manchester International [art] Festival at Whitworth Park, 2019).[[4]](#footnote-4) Essentially the dogs and their humans may seem to be at play in the park, nothing out of the ordinary, and certainly not appearing as art unless the context was prescribed (figure 5).

**The influence of sexuality and gender**

Following Donna Haraway’s thoughts on the alignment of animal studies with feminism in *The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People, and Significant Otherness*, gender is given significance in equality politics, as this provides a reminder of the everyday social disproportionality of dogs and women to men. Haraway suggests, “dog writing [appears] to be a branch of feminist theory, or the other way around” (Haraway, 2003, p. 3). Dogs are traditionally termed Man’s Best Friend, the companion pet for the male human and, as like women, they are essentially situated as other to man (women by gender and dogs by species in respect of the generic term for human). The oldest domesticated animal and a quasi-human, as pet they are near to man, but like women they are separate. Equality, therefore, was intended to be established not just across species, but also genders, and this has significance in the practicalities of this exercise and how it was portrayed.

Those watching the performance are, of course, initially reminded upon seeing *Be Your Dog* of the binary between human and non-human animals. As the performance progresses, however, this quickly develops to offer an alternative beyond that paradigm. The binary becomes almost irrelevant through the affective attention to human and dog consciousness, human of dog, dog of human, dog seeking dog, and human following human. Being animal for Deleuze and Guattari is “an absolute deterritorialization of the man,” and this is, perhaps, an experience felt by the human participants (Deleuze & Guattari, 1986, pp-pp. 35-36). The status of animal became particularly prevalent due to the sexual receptiveness of a female dog participant, which elevated the significance of sexuality within the pack. The dogs were, quite literally, led by their noses by the unexpected pheromonal influence on nascent relationships. Sex, and being mindful of its availability, became an overwhelming interest for the dogs until they became acquainted and settled into a routine.

Most possibilities I had prepared for, but not a female dog coming in heat, or season, two days before the first workshop. The term ‘heat’ is, perhaps, pertinent, as tensions, for dog and human alike, increased because of her receptiveness to sexual advance. The heated activity of the workshop and event was stoked by the in-heat female dog. Suddenly, sex and sexuality were high on the agenda, but this was of no matter to the research, as this is a feature of a dog’s everyday life and therefore should not be excluded from this new pack’s introduction and engagement.

I found it curious to note and consider how other (and particularly human male) participants found the very present sexual tensions and dynamics affecting the pack, both individually, and overall. The awkwardness that could arise in the humans, the uncomfortability of how to be seen responding was of curious and analytical interest. One participant commented he found his male Terrier dog Barney’s enthusiastic pursuit of Lucy, a small King Charles Spaniel and the in-heat female, quite uncomfortable and surprising, as was the effect it had on his role within the collaboration. By extension, and through following the behaviour of his dog, he was also pursuing Lucy the dog and Monica, her female human companion. This included following Barney’s urge’s and acting them out publicly, first within the pack and secondly to an audience in the public event. This element of the human performances (not just in artistic terms, but in Judith Butler’s sense of performative gender identity, as that made through stylized and repetitive acts, of a becoming that which we do, as discussed in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*) and of being led by canine sexual pheromones is a reminder of Deleuze and Guattari’s discussion of the pack and of contagion (Butler, 2006). They suggest that, “contagion and involution are like hybrids, which are in themselves sterile, born of a sexual union that will not reproduce itself, but which begins over again, every time, gaining that much more ground” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, pp-pp. 241-242). The largely sterile sexuality of the dogs (all but one of the dogs were castrated in our constructed pack) was nonetheless enthusiastic and lascivious. Rather than politely turning his eyes away, as one might do in the park, when a dog humps or is humped by another, he suggests he *became* his dog’s sex, as Lucy’s human became hers (figure 6).

There is emphasis on the female and dog being visually equal in action and status in the pack, as gendering became apparent. The unexpected nature of Lucy being ‘in heat’ acted like an intervention in itself, as her in sexness bore its influence on the behavioral gestures and exploits. Lucy’s coquettish behaviour in the pack, a type of alluring ‘catch me’ ensuing scenario, and the male dogs’ lust eventually waned once they became familiar and accustomed to the pheromonal surge. Although she initially enjoyed the attention, inviting it in fact, Lucy was happiest being watchful and sitting on a gallery plinth, an observational device to allow objects to be viewed unencumbered, with her female human once the pack settled into being a group. This created an additional affective situation whereby the females in the pack were put on a device designed to aid viewing of inert art objects. To be staged in this way is a dangerous affair for gender politics that spectacularizes and objectifies the female body.

The males were active and the female’s passive, which saw accidental and regulatory gender bias occurring quite naturally. King Charles Spaniels are considered lap dogs, and as a Kennel Club toy breed this served as a reminder of Lucy’s historic socialization as a lady’s luxury. The lap dog breeds, of which the King Charles Spaniel is typical, are often seen in portraits of society Renaissance women, as they were an encouraged companion for the childless. This classification of dog is also a referent to the archaic treatment of women as they are said to act as a reminder of their domestic place, to be deferent to man, and to take a good beating now and then willingly (like their pet dog). A troubling social situation that was brought to mind and emphasized through the practicalities of the performative gender identities within the performance.

The adopted neutral position of Lucy and her human on the plinth unsettles ideas of spectatorship and agency. Whilst at the heart of the initial activity on the ground, it was Lucy’s pheromones that were the catalyst, with male humans and dogs its actively engaged. Whilst these interspecies females watched, the males, and two pairs specifically, feverishly explored the surrounding area, other bodies, its furniture and offering of food and water. Physical exertion was evident in the two humans sweat-drenched clothes at the end of the pubic performance, as their engagement and interest increased with the addition of the audience, seemingly adopted as new pack members. The dogs enjoyed the attention given to them by others, the smiles, the warm gestures, the occasional stroke as they passed, and the odd pat on the head. Increased interest and involvement are evident when considered in contrast to the workshop, where the dogs were engaged for approximately thirty-minutes at each trial – for when the dogs lost interest or wanted to stop, the activity ceased. That was a predetermined rule. However, presented with an audience the dogs stimulation grew and they engaged for one hour and forty-five minutes. While Lucy’s gaze may have shifted attention from human lines of spectatorship, it went unnoticed by the other participants within the pack’s (secondary, functional, performer’s) vision.

Statically placed and visible at height (the top of the plinth measured approximately one metre from the floor) the in-heat Lucy’s calm observations of the, at times, chaotic performance of the interspecies pack was noticeable, as were the polite bemusements of the human audience looking on (figure 7). The latter was, perhaps, a humoured and awkward response to the sense of the abyssal (and also *abysmal)* limit of the human, and theirs particularly. The ridiculousness of their efforts at adopting other species behaviour can see the human, despite their efforts, as a category, fail. A failure and liberation when attempting to be dog on the dog’s terms, but one that allows for a closer engagement and connection regardless. The attempts to empathize and connect with the domestic familial other is a willing and delightful gesture, but perhaps we have too much too learn, and there is too much human ego that prevents a real and encompassing engagement.

Emotional contagion and synchronization explored in the scientific research into animal behaviour within inter- canine and human coexistence by Palagi, Nicotra and Cordoni states it is a “basic building block of empathy, [which] occurs when a subject shares the same affective state of another” (Palagi et al., 2015, p. 2). The exploration of this through artistic research was very much at the core of *Be Your Dog*, to test how human and non-human animals can work within an equal framework when the right conditions are in place and the participants are willing. As the observer it was possible to see empathetic engagement in motion in this sexual game between eager canine predator and willing predated, but an awkwardness was evident in the willing, but not too willing human others. Led by the instinctual response of the dogs, emotional contagion and synchronicity was infectious in the pack, and this could be sensed through their amorous play. Just like Deleuze and Guattari’s reference to contagion being a hybrid epidemic, it produced an inter-sexual heterogeneity whereby the pursuit of the others sex became dominant (even if unwelcome and unwanted).

**The canine effect and lessons learnt**

*Be Your Dog* explores the hinterlands, the grey zones and meeting grounds of the bodies, positions, sensibilities and artistic influences of a group of dogs and their humans, both *as* artists and *for* art and the myriad possibilities in ethically created collaborations. The aim is not to confuse species or provoke a sense of one not being true to the animal or human, but it attempts instead to offer a space where the breathing rights and corporeal and cognate attributes of the other are acknowledged through direct co-artistic experience and position. This is not practice that is anthropomorphic or animalistic in the sense of borrowing the sensibilities and behaviours of other, or therianthropic as shape-shifting and human identification as a non-human animal, but of being aware of and in connection with the other’s body that is normally socially opposed within taxonomies of species. In *Be Your Dog* the dog is not anthropomorphized at a loss to its’ animal-ness, or the human animalized to the point of redundant human-ness, but the project acknowledges equality despite of difference through a disrespect of animal pet hierarchies. This allows a hybrid of sorts to emerge through the collaborative act, a fused singular entity made of distinct dog and human parts. Joined by action and tension, these networking bodies become connected and responsive within their bonded pairs and larger pack.

The intensity of this open experiment in dog-ness (for the canines) was significant for all in *Be Your Dog*. Individuals worked in tension with the others in the gallery to inform a collaboration operational on two levels: the first as domestic cohabitees working to mutual and reflexive end, and secondly as a larger collaborative group where pack dynamics informed activity beyond its constituent individual pairings. Often this moved between the two concerns, with activities of pairs influencing those of the group as a whole. As an example, four participants were lapping the room, jumping over obstacles and seeking adventure, both in their pairs and increasingly in tandem with each other, becoming a multiple body agency. The persistent and relentless activity of these four participants created a vortex that ensnared others at varying points, affecting a change in dynamic and collaborative direction.

*Be Your Dog* is different to the more usual and likely types of performances and art events that one might have the opportunity to see. Whether in the context of the gallery or the art festival in the park, the ethos stays true. The dog comes to it *as* dog, and the human comes to it *as* human to build a collaborative and social approach to performance. All participants come to a pack. There was definitely anxiety as the humans in the pack were all, prior to the workshop, strangers. Perhaps the artists among the humans could imagine making a similar performance with friends or existing collaborators, whose boundaries were more familiar and trusted, but their human-ness got in the way. The dogs, however, transitioned from strangers to pack quite swiftly. Hierarchies, allegiances, boundaries all seemed to be quite well negotiated – through sniffing, urinating, exploring and playing with toys. For one participant, the human of the lascivious Barney, the workshop remains the most memorable time to have witnessed or been among a pack of dogs, of simply *being* dogs.

In some ways, the humans were more transfixed by their dogs than by each other in the project, yet their actions determined that they interact with (human and dog) strangers. Dogs have no issue with approaching another without a ritual performance of introductory entreaties and civilities, but polite sensibilities can see this present a struggle for humans. There were no rules verbally agreed, and no safe words in use, for example; if one gets too close or sniffs too much, getting out means walking away from the experience. Had the event been in the evening, at an underground performance space or night club with just humans acting dog, and without the dogs being present, it may have produced another performance, and it is here where *Be Your Dog* sits in interesting tension. It is far less problematic to romanticize about the erotics of animality, the sensuous, the instinctive, the hot and sticky “breakdown of the human itself,” that Leo Bersani describes in *Is the Rectum a Grave?,* in the imagination than to project and enact, and more importantly be seen to enact (Bersani, 1987, p. 221)*.* It may have been, for the dogs, a sensuous, erotic adventure, but for the humans it represented a version of sexuality that is, to quote Alphonso Lingis *in Animal Body, Inhuman Face,* “what priggish suburbanites call animal sex, the random and mindless copulation of their domestic dogs” (Lingis, 2003, p. 172). By entering into interspecies becomings, we became more aware both of our own humanity and our repressed animality (and of how strongly we were repressing it).

Working together as interspecies equals in collaboration can bring tensions for the human participants. Becoming animal for Deleuze and Guittari is understood as absolute human deterritorialization, which makes John Berger’s statement that “the pet completes [the average human]” as it “offers its owner a mirror to a part that it otherwise never reflected” slightly troublesome (Deleuze & Guattari, 1986, pp-pp. 35-36) (Berger, 1980, p. 14) (Berger, 1980, p. 15). By self-deterritorialization, and by severing and denying political, cultural and social normative practice the human is rendered neutral. Particularly, when we consider further that for Deleuze and Guittari becoming-animal is a sweeping away of the human to expose the animal within (Baker, 2000, p. 138). The project acknowledges and responds to the idea of traversing the realm of human as a point of analysis, yet does not buy into it completely. For both human *and* dog might be regarded by observers as exposed as animal, yet neither operates beyond their own species and sense of self despite being collaborating artists, as one and of the same status. They remain individual and of their species, not human being dog, or dog being human.

The limitation and failure to be truly acquainted and receptive to our animal self, concerns social embarrassment and ego. A dog does not care who is watching or what they think, yet the human being dog cannot fully do so because the intimidation of being seen to be primal and animal gets in the way. Ultimately it stops a becoming in a real and perhaps abandoned sense. Awkwardness perhaps, always gets in the way of a true becoming animal. This opens up a discussion on the recognition of animal – of identifying the normative rules of socialization, of owner and pet and how they can be dissolved through a sensing and watchful knowledge of the familiar body, and how this informs an understanding of the propositional and positional dynamics between, and of, inter-species cohabitees. The potential of ‘inter-’ in regard to positionality and subjectivity is encouraged and allowed to flourish through collaborative engagement and agreement in this project to demonstrate how equality of species can fit into, and potentially contribute to, a new perspective in the economy of animal politics beyond conventional discussions placing activity within, or adjacent to, animality or anthropomorphism. This has value for animal studies, for in recognizing and acknowledging the equal contributions of each species and how equality has bearing and value, it brings consequences for domestic animal relationships. It suggests that we perhaps do not need hierarchy or species pecking orders, but more mutually established and reliant living conditions for cohabitation to prosper. Science is beginning to discover and discuss this, but it has yet to be the governing standard that directs animal behaviourial studies and its developments. The project puts the science into practice, art practice specifically, to prove that harmonious living is profitable for companion species. In essence, it suggests an inter- perspective, an animal-anthropological dualistic hybrid where each participant is allowed to contribute fully without negation of identity of species. *Be Your Dog* is a demonstration of touching without contact, of connectivity without any visible threads, an attachment witnessable in convivial cohabitation in non-cohabiting settings.

Non-human animals have the will, potential and capabilities to contribute to discussions of animal and what it is to be thus, and will do so if humans stop dominating and allow them to collaborate. Equality, even in creative practice, is productive in discussions of the animal and our engagement with it, as non-humans can effectively contribute to the subject too. By being visibly equal with humans, as artists in this context, animals describe what inter-species practice can be in an equitable framework. The balance that comes from a relationship set around involved and equal participatory dynamics can teach us more about what it is to be inter- and animal perhaps, than those produced by imposition and dominant will alone (figure 8).

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**List of Figures**

All figures, 1-8:

*Be Your Dog*, public event, Karst Gallery, 2016.

Image credit: Dom Moore

1. Of course, this is the typical situation, but as cases pertaining to cruelty suggest these payoffs are not general or received by all. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Specifically, this concerns my artistic research practice as typical of *Licking Dogs*, 2008, a video artwork that analyses dangerous mouths, and with whom the danger lies, by positioning dogs and human as collaborators. Using supposedly dangerous or problematic breeds, marked thus by their mouths and histories, saw them initially considered as the primary danger in the work. However, the inter-relational play shifted attention to the human by their active and dangerous agency. The dog as collaborator is significant in the work as the four dogs, who contributed to their level of interest, were given the freedom to partake or not. Additionally, all are cited as artists in response to the questions outlined regarding the dissolution of hierarchy and acknowledging animal contributions. The act of willing involvement and of the artist dog is a constant concern that has now been expanded to involve other unknown artists, whether human or dog, through collaborative practice most recently in *Be Your Dog*. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. *Be Your Dog* was funded by the Live Art Development Agency’s DIY scheme in 2016. Karst, Plymouth, was the organizational partner and host gallery. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The inclusion of the project in Manchester International 2019’s event, *Animals of Manchester,* a takeover ofWhitworth Gallery and Park, presented an opportunity for slight modification to its delivery in Karst Gallery. Its placement in Whitworth Gallery Park created an engaging dynamic for it is a space imbued with the practice of dog walking for leisure and play, but in being devoted entirely to a series of art events and happenings, it was cloaked in a temporary cultural transformation that allows for a testing of significance of event. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)