

## ***Animal Togetherings – a speculative artistic discussion***

***Angela Bartram and Jaana Erkkilä-Hill***

We are artistic researchers who explore levels of agency, equality, and advocacy with, and for non-human animals. We do this independently and as an act of collaboration and togetherness, with and for each other, and the animals with whom we engage creatively. This purposefully non-anthropocentric approach recognizes, acknowledges and welcomes multiple creative agents, which are not prioritized in terms of species and what they bring in a hierarchical index, but rather for creative potential and its possibilities.



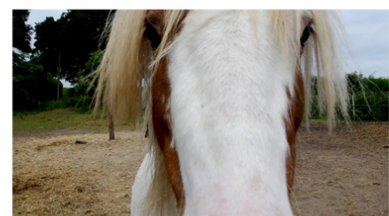
The work is a visual reflection on what we might ask the animals about life and death. I have worked on black and white woodcuts and linoleums, printed the blocks on various surfaces and made the prints in a collage clued on a wall or made them into large patch work.

My way of thinking is through artistic practice. I hope to find new insights and ways of seeing by making unexpected combinations of the body of my work. Animals do not speak through my work, but I try to listen to what the art tells about my attitudes, values, hopes and fears concerning human relationship with the non-human animals and other natural creatures. Listening may open new ways to relate with our companion species.

*Ask the Animals*  
Jaana Erkkilä-Hill, 2022

At an animal studies conference in March 2017, I noticed that, although discussions were of the subjects being sentient and cognate, the delivery was for the human participants alone. The non-humans were being given no opportunity to understand the theories written about them. After the conference I began an ongoing performative artwork to address that situation and to provide an opportunity for them to hear (and I hope to understand) the writings of which they are the subjects. This sees me regularly reading theories about their own species to the domestic three – dogs, cats and horses. Few images exist, as this activity is not for humans. This is the only short composite video of stills of reading horse theory to horses that exists. This hints at the activity only, which is important to keep as a private and personal encounter between me and the horses.

*Reading Horse Theory to a Horse*  
Angela Bartram, 2023





### Is equality an option?

Equality requires respect and recognition, and this applies irrespective of the species or type of body involved in our individual and collaborative artistic research. A respect that positions the other as an autonomous creature with their own will, priorities, potential, input, and rights of existence and contribution. A recognition where each acknowledges that the other has an interest and perspective that might be different from the other, but where this is accepted and welcomed. This is embedded in the production of knowledge which situates and comes from artistic research, as that which has the capacity to enable equality through participation and access - where there is a will. An equality framework, however, must be in place for this possibility to become a reality; this is important when working with the non-human animal, in this respect. They must be given the agency to be an equally involved contributor. Artistic research, and its potential to be a levelling practice that embraces difference (in approach and being), presents as an opportune method by which to explore if this is possible.

The challenge, though, for human-animals is that we may unintentionally project our own understandings of equality on our non-human-animal companions. Relationships in the



non-human animal world are not often based on equality, but on a strictly hierarchical order. So, we might ask, can equality ever be perceived in similar terms between humans and the other living beings we call our companions?

**Jaana Erkkilä-Hill:** I have felt drawn to big animals, horses and large dogs, since my childhood. They are good teachers of communication and collaboration, because as a human being I cannot get on with them by force. They could crush me if they wanted to. We need to create a relationship that is based on mutual trust and even love and affection. I love the smell of my dog. I used to love the smell of my late horse. I love the smell of my husband. I don't go around sniffing human and non-human animals in general, but the importance of smell in our relationship tells something about our similarity among species, dogs, horses, people.

I feel that we are of the same species, all living creatures, but like with human animals I feel more connected with some individuals than with others. I cannot say that I feel an experiential connection with small creepy-crawlies in general, but I do think that there is a connection between me and individual spiders who live on our veranda. They watch me and I watch them. I could destroy them and their nests, but I don't. We live together in respectful companionship.

Alphonso Lingis writes about death as a uniting factor in his book *The Community of Those Who Have Nothing in Common*.<sup>i</sup> Lingis refers to people who are dying and forms a kind of universal community. I have been reflecting how closeness to death is the most dividing, not a uniting issue between human and non-human animals. Euthanasia divides people into those who think we all should have a choice to live or die. When it comes to animals the question about death becomes a different matter. Some people kill to eat animals, some kill for fun, and some, like me, have decided for euthanasia, when a dog or a horse has been too traumatized or unwell. I was not able to ask if they wanted to die but took the decision according to my best judgement. But would I have taken the same decision if it was a human close to me?

**Angela Bartram:** The desire to research artistically and critically with non-human animals stems from a sense of affinity with them. I grew up looking at and sensing animals, desperate to have them close by at the expense of human contact. As a child I drew horses habitually with my dog at my feet, kept pet rabbits, looked towards the sky daily through the window to observe insects, spiders and birds. This was unusual for my family, and they thought it rather odd, so odd in fact that my father taught me to box to protect myself fearing I would be the victim of bullying because of it. My grandmother kept chickens in the cellar to eat, and my grandfather had a part-time job as a tail-docker of squealing puppy dogs. He bit off the tails of puppies because he found it enjoyable. My father told me not to get attached to my rabbits, which I considered pets, as they would eventually be eaten. My mother kept a succession of Budgerigars in cages, all of them named Joey. The bird was irrelevant in its capture, hence why it had no consideration given to its naming. The capture and containment seemed the most important aspect. It satisfied a need for keeping the wild and exotic caged within the home.

This created confusion and frustration which saw me regard my family as barbaric towards animals, and particularly as I associated as being ninety percent dog. How could this be so, when they were generally loving and what I and others considered as nice and 'good'?

people? Aged five-years I began to question what I was being given to eat. I could not and would not accept, even at an early age, that I should consume the body of another being. They begrudgingly and confusedly accepted the decision, but they saw me as different because of this choice. The affinity with non-humans only intensified, to become an intrinsic sense of there being no differentiation between species. Simply put, no them and us. As an artist and artistic researcher, the draw towards working with non-human animals was like a magnetic attraction. A connection, as if I and the non-human were leashed together in equal tension. For, in studying their behavior, actions and manners, it was possible to see how the connection could translate to communication if the right levels of opportunity and agency were introduced. In adopting their ways of sensing and being responsible to others, despite perceived language and species differences and capabilities, it became possible to learn how to engage with (any) other with equality. Looking to animal behavioral science, such as that which proports emotional contagion as fundamental to the development of empathy between species and individuals, supports a levelling of the hierarchies that so often govern companion species.<sup>ii</sup> A requirement for levelling and collapse of species hierarchy informs the artistic research ethos within my participatory work with and for animals. Centrally placed, this has supported how this has developed over time and with rigor to a proposition whereby non-humans are engaged for their agency, rather than in spite of it. This ensures they are not merely subjects to be observed, or materials to incite sentiment, rather they are free to behave as active contributors within the creative act itself.



**How can we create a dialogue?**



Dialogue is important for communication and socialisation. Irrespective of species, this is an experience within the everyday that constitutes and increases the capacity for commonality, companionship, sharing and togetherness. Significant within creativity, and its application within practice, and in our communication and understandings with others, it is of primary value. Yet, what kind of dialogue is necessary and to what ends do we engage this, and how is it critically placed within the dynamics of multi-species creative activity? In this context, to be effective, dialogue cannot be restricted to human linguistics and the exclusionary anthropocentrism within language structures but should as an openness to be in communication with another by mutually understandable means. Body, manner, gesture and behaviour constitute a possibility for many species to be 'in' dialogue. When there is a willingness to level out positions, this becomes possible. This is, of course, not without its complications and frustrations, for all parties involved (but perhaps more so for the human, who may suffer at not being understood in 'human' specific ways). It is not, therefore, an approach that works in all situations and purposeful acts of togetherness. Specifically, these acts are often at the will of the human. The non-human, in fact, may attempt to be in dialogue with the human with the means available to them, and this is often only recognised when the human is willing to recognise this is happening. Perhaps, humans should learn from the non-human animals' approach, in this respect, to be sensitive to multiple ways into engagement and connection. Artistic research can assist this process of learning. When artistic research participatory structures are provided, different species can learn to better relate to each other through sharing the co-creative process. This may include direct attention-giving strategies, such as the observational, the sensitizing, and being receptive toward a common creative goal. Through this learning opportunity a critical structure can be built in which this type of dialogue is increasingly assimilated into the relationship and the mutuality within.

**JEH:** I talk about animals with my artwork. I ask my wooden plates and the images that emerge from sheets of paper do I really understand the non-human animals, or do I just imagine understanding them? I ask the artwork about animal death and if we share something beyond this earthly world. I have lots of questions, and I address them through my artistic research. I make animals and hybrid creatures and wonder if we, all creatures, are really of the same substance, could we be transformed into one another and be as one?

**AB:** Somewhat akin to your methodology, a core part of my creative process is collaboration, and that includes all elements, including the materials and process. When working sculpturally or printmaking, for example, initial parameters are set that allow the materials to behave as they wish within their given structure. For example, the intention may be to make a shape in a particular way, but beyond the confines of a mold the cast materials (i.e. liquid), which are often uncontrolled when without mechanisms of support (i.e. a freezer), behave in response to the environment in which they are exhibited. The space continues the process of shaping and re-shaping the artwork through its temperature, moisture and light.

When working creatively with non-humans, I offer them the space and freedom to be as responsive and untethered within the creative process as they wish. To be inquisitive, interested, bored, amiable, engaged, watchful or disinterested. Often in response to how they feel on the day. They are not coerced, restrained or instructed. They are only given the parameters (which are ethically determined and situated) in which they can engage with freedom, and if they so wish, often within their own known environments or the context of

the art gallery. Can they prove to be creative and collaborative within a human-centric set of observational conditions? Does it matter (to the artistic research project, in this context) if not? What can humans, in fact, learn? My intention is to explore these research questions, with an embrace of failure, mishap and misbehavior as instrumental to the process.

### **How we engage?**

Is there a difference between engaging and being engaged? Being engaged means being tied to one another by mutual agreement until one or both parties decide that the commitment no longer applies. When we engage with non-human animals the initiative for engagement can come from either side. The commitment can also be broken by either, but often the human is the instigator of the break to respond to their own (anthropocentric) reasons. A human-animal finds rational reasons for stopping being engaged with non-human companions, whether they are work related, private relationships such as being a family member or an occasional travelling companion. Although artists and artistic researchers, due to their unique position of being a responsive outsider who contributes socio-cultural and political observations, are better placed to construct inter-species equality in their work, it can still be a challenge. That challenge relates to imagining being other, an experience that is difficult to overcome due to the unknown factors therein. We even define companionship from our own point of view, when the other, the non-human, might be completely unaware of their assumed involvement and their role. A big question is how humans should engage in a way that gives authority to stay or leave for both parties of the engagement, in work, private life or temporary relationship.

**AB:** You suggested, Jaana, that my artistic research takes the academic to the non-human, as an offer of knowledge and understanding. This is true, of course, as in working with non-humans directly (usually dogs, horses and cats), and being *with* them in the process of collaboration, they have access through the exchange itself. This is defined by a decentralization of human ego through the collaborative process itself – this encourages a right for the normally polarized non-human other to access knowledge and engage with creativity. What conditions are within your image-based artistic research where this happens? How does equality frame, and represent itself, as a questioning and speculative proposition?

**JEH:** I think that I am rather protective towards my artwork, and the question about equality in making it is something I have better principles than practices. Once our big mongrel dog, Läjä, entered a room where I had left my prints to dry on the floor. Läjä did what a dog does: stepped on the prints to get a proper sniff. He had an encounter with my art and made his pawprints on the papers and further on the floor as well (black wet ink...). I was too occupied with my original idea and destroyed the collaborative prints that would have worked in a more conceptual way. The name of the work was “Ask the animals”, but I was not sensitive enough to let Läjä make his contribution, his response to my question. There was a missed opportunity for a dialogue. But later I developed collaborative working methods with my students, and I want to try it with animal collaborators as well. When it comes to equality there needs to be a sense of trust. I could not work just with any student in shared authorship, and with an animal there needs to be the trust factor too if there is going to be a shared authorship. By shared authorship I mean that all parties are equal in the process of making and later in claiming authorship.

**AB:** When installing an exhibition in Logan in 2021 an older female dog was present in the gallery throughout. That she was old, around ten at the time, and female is significant, as she was equal in gender and relative life stage to myself and my collaborator; we were all substantially more equal from the outset because of this recognition. I was installing three hundred and sixty-six etchings all made from the same plate, a project that took four years to complete and produced what could therefore be considered vulnerable objects collectively. The long duration of the project included my exhaling onto a single etching plate every day with my breath over one leap year, to the production of the three hundred and sixty-six prints being taken from it. Vulnerability was both singularly (to each print) and collectively (to their mass) significant. Each print could not be re-made, as the plate degraded with each run through the etching press, and each possessed an increasing vulnerability because of this fact. Were one to be damaged, a gap would be inserted into the collective rhythm of the work. The installation of the prints was on a long wall, which acted like a bisecting spine down the middle of the gallery. The installation took over seventeen hours. The female dog wandered around the gallery during this time, checking what was happening, and to whom (I could tell by where her eyes were drawn). Often, she was walking on the prints laid on the floor before their transfer to the wall. I did not stop her but allowed the footprints and effects of her endeavors to become additional marks on their surface. Part of their life, in fact, and their ontology.





## Can we connect with other animals?

The idea of connecting with other animals often carries a romanticised view of being in mutual understanding with one another. The reality is often something else, however: both parties compromise and adapt to the needs of the other, even when not quite understanding the reasons why. But to be able to adapt and compromise means that there is a capacity to understand, to feel empathy (as that which is a responsive and positive connection and sensing of the other), and to some degree *know* experientially how the other one feels. This applies not only to domestic animals but can happen occasionally between humans and non-domesticated animal species through unexpected encounters.

Even if selfish reasons, such as getting food, acceptance, shelter, companionship, and a workforce, play a part in human constructed human and non-human relations, there are other reasons why they prove effective. Human animals may reach out to animal companions to fill an unspecified void that is a longing for connection and closeness. Non-human animals may also do this to humans, and even if the initial reason might be using them for their advance, a purposeful approach to connect may become evident.

**JEH:** There are stories about dogs and their people having telepathic connections. My dialogue, connectedness with animals, happens most often in physical closeness. I used to listen to my horse through bodily communication. I spoke to him not only with my voice and words, but with breath, touch, sitting deeply on his back with or without a saddle. I talk a lot to our dogs in the family. We look at one another, we touch and make faces. With animals I mostly talk about things that are beyond words. When I try to understand what I think and feel about animals I get into a dialogue with art, my own or that of others. But there is a connection with animals, a bond, mutual understanding, but that is not thinking, it is something deeper. We can connect as we can with other humans, sometimes it works and sometimes it does not. Also, this is equality: we can show respect and act with dignity, but we don't need to like and feel a close connection with everyone we meet. I can be friendly to people with whom I don't feel any connection neither intellectually nor emotionally. The same applies to animals, I think.

**AB:** The affinity I spoke of earlier is a product of having, and wanting to, enhance connection. A wanting to touch, to investigate, to sense, and to be with, to better know and understand. I too spend long hours with my horse, Domino, a twenty-three-year-old Irish thorough bred and Cob mixed mare. We have a relationship that is not hierarchical, not of owner and owned, but of companionship. As an ex-riding school horse, she has suffered the needs of humans on her back, kicking her side, pulling at her mouth, and whipping her rear, all in attempts to make her move to their will and not hers as they learn to ride. When she came into my guardianship, we went through a process of carefully and sensitively undoing that human-centric conditioning, learning to be and ride together. The change was to a more interesting life (for her I hope), and of mutual care. For she gives me as much, as my friend, as I her. We engage performatively. Domino enjoys having her feet cleared of soil and stones, so she offers them willingly at my touch. She has grown to expect certain things of me each day, such as a particular programme of care, her favourite food, a comprehensive groom, and a hug around her neck. Additionally, and attributable to our connection, she hears me before I arrive at the field and is often already walking towards me before I call her name.

My horse showed me her species was capable of so much more than living to the will of a human. She deserves stimulation and creative engagement. Since 2017, she and her equally inquisitive field friends, have listened to my readings of theories about their own species. I wanted to give them access to knowledge about what, and who they are. This is part of an ongoing research project that sees me read animal theory to the animals that it has been written about. Primarily these are dogs, cats, and horses. I do this for them, and with them. It is an aid to form greater connection and interspecies involvement. Humans are inquisitive, but the experience is not for them (which makes them more so).



### **Can animals connect with art?**

There is a growing acceptance of non-human animals' cognitive abilities, which is gaining in acknowledgement and acceptance as more is learnt of the capacities and capabilities. However, the question of their potential to engage with creativity perhaps still receives scepticism. Creativity, and its appreciation and practice, is subject to anthropocentrism and its exclusionary imposition. Some humans believe that this requires a certain aptitude for processing information and visual codes and structures, a capacity that may be impossible for others. Yet, how is this provable and why does it matter? Can it be tested? Should it be? Inclusive and experiential means of providing proof, is the most ethical and sympathetic framework to apply for non-humans to be free to engage without restraint. However, this requires human relaxation of their control to allow the non-human the same level of access - by inviting them into the gallery or by letting them perform uncoerced in a way in which they find stimulating, or to offer an invitation to participate. Critically, this can be challenging (and certainly for the organisations and infrastructures of exhibition making), as the artist must accept that within this invitation there may be a co-authorship that is established. The

benefit is accepting the collaboration and being open to what is to be learnt from a different perspective.

**JEH:** Lääb, our young one year old Labrador dog, sits on a sofa beside my son who plays videogames on a play station. Lääb is very focused, and I wonder what he thinks of the game. Is the game art? It is visual and has sound effects. It is interactive, but is it art? And does it matter?

Some animals are great actors, real film stars. They can be performance artists. So, if they make art, they must connect with art. They can be sound artists, architects and designers. We humans are imitating their constructions. We owe them more than authorship. They are the origin of art.

**AB:** The work I do in galleries with animals, such as with dogs, has proven that they can connect with the experience of art, and engage with the audience. *Be Your Dog*, which sees humans follow their dogs' behaviors and mannerisms, is staged within a gallery, which is transformed into a learning environment for the humans. All participants (domestic bonded pairs; one human artist, and one dog artist) are positioned as artists; each has equal status to the others around them. They can leave when they wish, do as they please, perform with as much or as little interest as they are willing. The gallery, over a succession of workshops, becomes *their* space. They begin to own it (notably, the dogs stop urinating in the gallery after day one, which suggests they have adopted it as theirs). As a pack, they move and engage as one, with different contributions from the slow to the excited, displayed. But they are respectful of each other, human or dog. When the public audience enters, they become reanimated, wanting to include these new bodies in their space. I see they connect as they perform for much longer than without the audience. In Karst (a gallery of contemporary art in Plymouth), they increased their performance time threefold, from thirty minutes in practice to one hour and forty-five minutes at the public event. They demonstrated a connection with the art event. The horses perhaps understand I am including them in the artistic readings of academic texts. If they can do this, perhaps the right mechanism can enhance their capacity to connect with static and less interactive gallery-based works.









My way of thinking is through artistic practice. I hope to find new insights and ways of seeing by making unexpected combinations of the body of my work. Animals do not speak through my work, but I try to listen to what art reveals about my attitudes, values, hopes and fears concerning human connection with non-human animals and other natural creatures. Listening may open new ways to relate with our companion species, not only to me but anyone encountering the work of art. I am aware of the complexity of any relationship with any living entities. Living with human and non-human animals is equally challenging and equally rewarding. Trying to understand this complexity through artistic thinking and research builds another layer but makes this personal journey worthwhile.

*Jaana Erkkilä-Hill*

*Reading Animal Theory to Animals* is an ongoing performative artwork that aims to address the situation of who gets access to certain types of knowledge and how. It provides an opportunity for dogs, cats and horses to hear (and I hope to understand) the writings of which they are the subjects. This sees me regularly reading theories about their own species to the domestic three over time, and to the same groups of animals which I know well. The same dogs, the same horses, the same cats. The storytelling sessions allow engagement and familiarity with the text and the nature of the activity to grow for these groups.

*Angela Bartram*



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- <sup>i</sup> Lingis, Alphonso. (1994) *Community of those who have nothing in common*, Indiana: Indiana University Press.
- <sup>ii</sup> Palagi, E., Velia, N, and Cordoni, G. (2015) 'Rapid Mimicry and Emotional Contagion in Domestic Dogs,' in *Royal Society Open Science*, 2, December, pp. 1-9.