

## ANIMALS ON DISPLAY: THE ETHICS OF KEEPING ANIMALS

Irena Kennedy

In this essay I will focus on my artistic practice, discussing the dialogue/influence in the use of canine as a companion species and as an accessory and commodity, with ideals of perfection implemented through breed standards set out in dog shows. I include the constructs of the zoo, and its humanistic influence, and how these themes have moulded and adapted my theoretical discourse and art practice. This paper has been written in the time of the Covid 19 lockdown, and because of this world changing event, I have added an epilogue to discuss the impact it may have on the human and non-human animals mentioned in this paper.

### ANIMAL OR ACCESSORY

Contrary to lots of dangerous and unethical projection in the Western world that makes domestic canines into furry children, dogs are not about oneself. Indeed, that is the beauty of dogs. They are not a projection, nor a realization of an intention, nor the telos of anything. They are dogs; i.e., a species in obligatory, constitutive, historical, protean relationship with human beings...<sup>1</sup> – Donna Haraway

In her companion species manifesto, Haraway has used terms such as cohabitation, symbiotic relationship, and companion animal in some of her analysis of domesticated dogs' relationship with their human companions. Her terminology, relating to this notion of companion species, speaks to an inter-relationship with non-human animals, which is genuine and equal, and contrasts with terms like master, owner, and parent (all terms of hierarchy). Haraway's referral to the Western world's "furry children", in the opening quote, resonates, when associated with pop culture and media influence. I was reading such texts in 2005, when Paris Hilton was at the height of social influencing, and constant media images of her chihuahua, Tinkerbell, appearing in her hand bag adorned with clothing and jewels matching that of her human companion, set the stage for fashion trends of accessorised companion animals.<sup>2</sup> Although the use of animals as accessories was not an entirely new concept, the media attention that this drew set off worldwide trends. Adornment of dogs, coupled with dyed hair and painted claws, anthropomorphised the non-human companion.



Figure 1. *Pink Poodle*, image of performance in Bellbird retail shop, photograph by Anne Basquin.



Figure 2. *Pink Poodle*, image Dunedin Public Art Gallery, photograph by Anne Basquin.

*Pink Poodle*, a sculptural performance-based work I created in 2005, was influenced by this farcical movement, which, in my eyes, seemed cruel and with little thought towards the animal's health and wellbeing. *Pink Poodle* (Figures 1 and 2) was photo documented in various sites around Ōtepoti/Dunedin. The act of carrying and posing with *Pink Poodle* (Figure 2) in the Dunedin Public Art Gallery, clothing shops, make-up shops and on the street, simulated that of the people I was emulating. I wore a pink wig and jewellery to compliment the pink fur and jewellery of my companion.

Carolee Shneemann's evocative work *Infinity Kisses*<sup>3</sup> further influenced my work, addressing an intimate and erotic interaction with her non-human companion, and challenging the viewer with the intimacy of a morning kiss shared with her cat. Documented in a photograph in 2004 and a video in 2008, this initiated a dialogue on boundaries between human and non-human companions. The colloquial saying "the dog's lipstick" was used in a literal, erotic manner. For the exhibition of *Pink Poodle*, a lipstick was attached to the tip of the dog's penis. One of the performances was held at MAC make-up store, where I stood evocatively applying a MAC "pink poodle" branded lipstick to my mouth with the sculpted *Pink Poodle* standing by my side. Within the act of application, I addressed the notions of erotic intimacy with my non-human companion.

To create accuracy in sculpting *Pink Poodle*, I researched dog shows and breed standards. The poodle, with its origins as a water retriever for hunting<sup>4</sup> is obscured by what we see in the modern dog show, sporting foot cuffs and kidney puffs.<sup>5</sup> United Kingdom Kennel Club statement on breed standards reminds us:

The pedigree breeds we have today are our legacy from the breeders of the past when dogs were bred to perform different jobs, from hunting and guarding to fishing and sledging. In order to ensure that dogs could do these jobs they needed to have certain physical characteristics and the appropriate temperaments. It is the fact that dogs were bred to perform such a wide variety of functions that has given us the diverse range of dogs – small and tall, energetic and laid back – that we now have. Although many dogs may not perform the same functions today, it is those physical attributes laid down in the standards and the "look" of a breed and/or its temperament which make the person decide "I want a dog like that", "I love pugs" or "I must have a whippet".<sup>6</sup>

Although these dogs rarely perform their original task, the reverence and stature survives through a pedigree, the gene pool an evident symbol of status. Akin to buying a specific make of car, papers are issued, signed and stamped to show the authenticity of purchase. The film *Best in Show*<sup>7</sup>, directed by Christopher Guest, presents an accurate account of the strange world of dog breeding, upholding the ideals of perfection that humans place onto their non-human companions. Meanwhile, strong concerns have arisen around the wellbeing of particular breeds where the standards cause inherent ailments: brachycephalic airway syndrome, hip and elbow dysplasia, allergies, dermatitis, early onset cataracts, to name a few. The 2008 BBC One investigative documentary *Pedigree Dogs*<sup>8</sup>, was an exposé on the cruelty that dog shows enact through obsession with beauty and traditions of purity through genetic inbreeding. The commotion caused by this documentary instigated the United Kingdom Kennel Club in 2009 to put a wellness clause into their code of ethics, and launch a review of every pedigree dog breed in the United Kingdom. The late biologist and geneticist Dr John Armstrong's paper titled *The Poodle and the Chocolate Cake*,<sup>9</sup> discusses the genetic effects of inbreeding pedigree dogs, describing the loss of diversity in genetic strains, causing defects that are visible in particular breeds. He encourages breeders to record their dogs so that weakened strains are not passed on. Whilst kennel clubs have strict breed standards and lists of accredited breeders, due to price and demand, puppy mills and black markets are regularly used, perpetuating animal rights breaches and genetic malformations.

In 2006, I created the work *Best in Show*, exhibiting nine sculptures of purebred dogs: one Dalmatian sire (Figure 3), two Chihuahua sires and one stud (Figure 4), and four Pug studs and one sire (Figure 5). Creating an imbalance of breeding options, paralleled the statistics of dominance of one sex to the other; relating to the dichotomy of ideal breeding pedigrees. In my sculpting methodologies, I applied the American Kennel Club breed standards, adhering to the strict size and body characteristics. This also includes eye shape, coat colour, forms of markings, body stature, and poise. The



Figure 3. Irena Kennedy, *Dalmatian*, 2006, fiberglass, flock, glass eyes, photograph by Irena Kennedy.



Figure 4. Irena Kennedy, *Chihuahuas*, 2006, fiberglass, flock, glass eyes, photograph by Irena Kennedy.



Figure 5. Irena Kennedy, *Pug*, 2006, fiberglass, flock, glass eyes, artwork by, photograph by Irena Kennedy.



Figure 6. Irena Kennedy, *Best in Show*, 2006, photograph by Irena Kennedy.

installation of this work was staged in a walled-in room that the viewer could only visually access by crawling on hands and knees into a dog cage (Figure 6). This controlled and positioned the viewer, executing a role reversal with the companion animal being the alpha; although the dogs were chained to the walls a dichotomy of control was present.



Figure 7. Irena Kennedy, *Bronze Chihuahuas*, 2013, photograph by Irena Kennedy.

In 2013, I created the work *Trophies* (two sculpted bronze chihuahuas; Figure 7), continuing themes from the 2006 work *Best in Show*. Further acknowledging the role of the maker into the discourse, akin to Gepetto the puppet maker from *Pinocchio*, I attempted to make something that is alive but faced with the stark reality of being beheld as an object. The material bronze, suggested the notion of third place to centre the idea of being unable to achieve full perfection in creation.

## REMOVING THE ANIMAL FROM THE ZOO

The zoo animal is treated in a different manner to the companion species, exoticised by its wild animal stature, and captured as a symbol in its historic rhetoric of status and colonisation. In 2008–2009 I volunteered over a six month period at La Sende Verde (translated: Path of Green) animal sanctuary in Bolivia, South America. Working first hand with rescued animals in their natural habitat, this included monkeys, macaws, spectacled bears, ocelots, and rescued dogs. Animals that arrived at the sanctuary had been rescued from humans. They had been habituated, and this habituation meant that they were unable to be returned to the wild due to a low chance of survival (lacking hunting skills and unable to determine the intentions of humans as care-givers versus hunters/trappers). Within the ethos of the sanctuary, the animals were premier. Although paying visitors were received, the animals' health and wellbeing were foremost. Visits were short and if an animal became distressed, then visitors were asked to leave. The visitors provided the income to feed and house the animals and workers; as a not-for-profit and a non-governmental organisation they relied on external support. There are many examples of the different living situations that the animals came from, but each animal that came to La Sende Verde arrived with its separate story of abduction or being bred into captivity. For example, it is common for capuchin monkeys to be used as substitute human animal children; one named Martin arrived at the animal sanctuary with an entire wardrobe of clothes, and most of his teeth missing from decay brought about by the consumption of sweets. Wild and exoticised animals are deemed desirable, and humans aspire to own and control these animals as a status of power.

On returning to Aotearoa, these same animals that I had so closely worked with, were kept captive in zoos, situated in man-made habitats with formatted boundaries and the human animal positioned as the viewer. Ideas generated from my Bolivian experiences, led me to re-examine the constructs of the zoo, and formed the topic of my masters thesis, *Traversing the Zoo: A Studio Research Project Examining Thresholds Between Nature and Spatial Practice*.<sup>10</sup>

Within my applied art work and research, I removed the physicality/positive space of the animal, and focused on the negative space/surroundings. I refer to this in the terms of life drawing and how negative space is highlighted, referencing the animal through its physical absence in my work. Thereby, its presence is both known and felt. Through this absence, the objects within the space are highlighted, as is the structure, enclosure, or naturalistic environment. With the removal of the animal, the staging of the viewer is foregrounded. Spaces are addressed architecturally, manipulating the viewer. Illusion is staged as John Berger writes:

“The Décor, accepting these elements as tokens, sometimes reproduces them to create pure illusion as in the case of painted prairies or painted rock pools at the back of the boxes for small animals. Sometimes it merely adds further tokens to suggest something of the animal's original landscape the dead branches of a tree for monkey, artificial rocks for bears, pebbles and shallow water for crocodiles. These added tokens serve two distinct purposes: For the spectator they are like theatre props; for the animal they constitute the bare minimum of an environment in which they can physically exist.”<sup>11</sup>

Berger describes nature backdrops as giving a visual aid to “suggest something of the animal's original landscape.” The zoo thus mimics nature to provide the guise of origin, although many of these sets are crudely executed. In recent years, zoos have spent more time and finances on developing theme park-like exhibits, with artificial nature environments. The Henry Doorly Zoo in Omaha, USA<sup>12</sup> employed the Larson Company to design the “Lied Jungle” exhibit. This company designed and fabricated artificial nature, employed by the Zoo to go into the jungle of Costa Rica to take direct casts of trees and rocks. These were taken back to Omaha and press-molded onto cement replicas for the exhibit.

The philosopher Timothy Morton, in his book *Ecology Without Nature*, discusses the word “Nature”, its over-use in the English language, and how it has lost its original meaning (this can be compared to man-made nature environments, with leaves and trees being sculpted from man-made materials):

"Nature, a Transcendental term in a material mask, stands at a potentially infinite series of other terms that collapse into it, otherwise known as a metonymic list: Fish, grass, mountain, air, chimpanzees, love, soda water; freedom of choice, heterosexuality, free markets... Nature. A metonymic series becomes a metaphor. Writing conjures this notoriously slippery term, useful to ideologies of all kinds in its slipperiness, in its refusal to maintain any consistency."<sup>13</sup>



Figure 8. Irena Kennedy, *Cement Rock*, 2010, cement, photograph by Irena Kennedy.



Figure 9. Irena Kennedy, *Anteroom* artist residency exhibition, 2013, installation view photograph by Irena Kennedy.

Within my artistic practice I began making what I have termed "nature objects". These objects pose the question: what is nature? Initial works dealt with the singular or the banal, such as the cement rock (Figure 8). In 2013, I was Artist in Residence at the Anteroom in Port Chalmers, Ōtepoti/Dunedin. Over the three week period that I was there, I explored the idea of creating artificial zoo natures. Banal in its execution, I sculpted a polystyrene cement waterfall. Also crude in its implementation, a mechanical pump, recycled water from the bottom to the top, emitting a sound not from nature but of a mechanical "whir". Logs were included as casts of dead native trees, referencing death masks - white, chalk-like and ceramic. The objects were placed with the notion of sparsity and loneliness (Figure 9), and the viewer was able to interact with the space as the human animal. This work was a precursor to other created nature objects. Glass leaves (Figure 10) were individually sculpted and cast, in an attempt to recreate nature in a material that is vulnerable, and holds romantic notions. Aluminum branches (Figure 11), titled *Perch*, sculpted from metal, invoke a discourse surrounding the sterility necessary in zoo enclosures to keep good health amongst the animals.

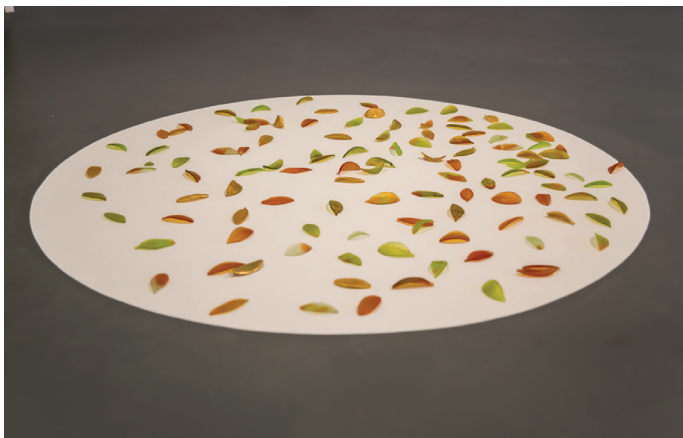


Figure 10. Irena Kennedy, *Glass Leaves*, 2014, cast glass, photograph by Theresa Harrison.



Figure 11. Irena Kennedy, *Perch*, 2014, aluminium, photograph by Theresa Harrison.



Artificial nature and man-made environments have played a significant role in my art works. These environments, that captive animals are expected to spend their living days in, seem so far from their land of origin. The modern zoo is focusing more on bioclimatic enclosures, including species diversity, environmental weather control, and with spaces for the animals to hide. Some focus on enrichment-based enclosures. The chimpanzee enclosure at Wellington Zoo (New Zealand), features an outside area with climbing frames and a large play space. The inside feeding area is the old enclosure, and appears cold and archaic, with its tiled floors and the only stimulus in rope and tyre swings (Figure 12). These enrichment enclosures are seen to help keep the animal stimulated and engaged, instigating play. For the exhibition *Traversing the Zoo*, I also produced enrichment devices, mimicking those found in zoos. The idea that such a device might stimulate an animal for a prolonged period of time, saddens me, as the animals I worked with (particularly the monkeys) moved quickly between tasks. A ceramic tyre swing (Figure 13) was exhibited in *Traversing the Zoo*. I sculpted this in white clay, to enhance the feeling of fragility around time, with the suggestion of sterility creating a feeling of loneliness.



Figure 12. The indoor chimpanzee enclosure Wellington Zoo, 2013, photograph by Irena Kennedy.



Figure 13. Irena Kennedy, *Ceramic Tyre Swing*, 2014, white clay, photograph by Theresa Harrison.



Figure 14. Irena Kennedy, *Traversing the Zoo*, 2014, photograph by Theresa Harrison.

I have been unable to address all the complexities of this project here, and the discourse it entailed. Instead, I highlight the staging of space that animals are placed in. I opened with my work in an animal sanctuary, to highlight the differences between the taxonomy of the zoo and its replicas of nature, and a place for humans to view and be entertained by their non-human counterparts (in juxtaposition to the animal sanctuary where the non-human animals are the priority).

A further installation art work from *Traversing the Zoo* (Figure 14) presents minimal chosen “nature” objects and an enrichment device, carefully spaced to promote the negative space where the animal would reside. The spacing of objects aids the feeling of loneliness, and the static nature of the objects also provides a feeling of loss. The viewer has access to the internal space of the installation, where on entering, they become the human animal, transformed from viewer to the viewed. The sculpted objects included in this installation included: a glass waterfall, tyre swing, two white ceramic logs, and two aluminum perches. The nature objects were based on the natural environment found in Aotearoa/New Zealand, for a work exhibited in Melbourne, Australia. Thus, like the “Lied Jungle”, it became a man-made copy as representation of actualised nature.

## EPILOGUE

The work included here reminds the reader of the power/control dynamic that humans have with non-human animals, as objects of desire, these non-human animals are commodified, objectified, anthropomorphized, and set on stages for viewing. Statements of equality between human and non-human in the pedigree world of dog shows are insufficient; unless there is a societal change, the animal will always come out as the lesser. When zoo environments treat the animal as premium and stand true to their statements of retaining animals for conservation purposes in the name of species survival, rather than providing the staged spectacle for the viewer, then animals may have some of the respect they deserve.

I have been writing this paper during the Covid 19 outbreak, a time when a lot of the world has had to forcibly slow. Humans will not be the only ones to feel affected by this pathogen, their non-human counterparts will also receive the blow. While in lockdown, programs like the Tiger King “documentary” have been released online. What seems, on the face, to be about large exotic cats, rather highlights the dysfunction of humans and their desire to own and acquire an animal that should be wild. Even as the viewer of this spectacle, we are drawn away from the animals and into the farcical story of the human participants. Like many animals in this article, human-centric needs outweigh that of our non-human counterparts. My thoughts have also gone out to the animals that appear in dog shows. What will happen to the pedigree puppies born at this time? Dog breeding will not stop during the lockdown, however; the economic impacts may affect the sales and commodity value of these dogs. There are many newspaper articles about the struggles for zoos, when they rely on visitor payments to cover the cost of feeding the animals and staffing the facilities. There is uncertainty in what the future will hold for these animals. These news articles prompted me to make contact with the animal sanctuary La Sende Verde, where I had volunteered, and they are struggling to cover their US\$800/day food costs, and are worried about veterinary and food supplies diminishing. With no volunteers, they now rely on donations from first world countries, where they will be up against a plethora of other organizations in desperate need of capital.

My hope is that the non-human animal is not sacrificed in this time... my awareness tells me otherwise.

**Irena Kennedy** is a multidisciplinary artist, holding a Master's Degree in Fine Art from Monash University Melbourne, Australia. Sculpting in mixed mediums Irena has exhibited in Aotearoa/New Zealand, Australia, and Thailand.

- 1 Donna Haraway, *The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, people and significant otherness* (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2003), 11–12.
- 2 Paris Hilton and Tinkerbell, composite image sourced from [https://www.instagram.com/p/1wv1QrKgCC/?utm\\_source=ig\\_embed](https://www.instagram.com/p/1wv1QrKgCC/?utm_source=ig_embed)
- 3 Carolee Shneemann, *Infinity Kisses II*, 1990-99, photogrid, 2004, 24 self-shot 35mm Ilfachrome prints, 48 x 56 cm (each), The Merchant House, <https://www.halesgallery.com/news/251/>
- 4 American Kennel Club, *Historical Image of a Standard poodle*, see image at <https://www.akc.org/dog-breeds/poodle-standard/>
- 5 American Kennel Club, *Pure bred Standard show poodle*, see image at <https://www.akc.org/dog-breeds/poodle-standard/>
- 6 Frank Kane, *Maintaining the Breed*, <https://www.thekennelclub.org.uk/activities/dog-showing/breed-standards/about-breed-standards/> (accessed 12 January 2020).
- 7 Christopher Guest (Director), *Best in Show*, Warner Bros, 2000.
- 8 Jemima Harrison (Producer), *Pedigree Dogs*, BBC One, (2008).
- 9 John Armstrong, *The Poodle and the Chocolate Cake*, August 2, 2008, <https://putthepentothepaper.wordpress.com/2008/08/02/the-poodle-and-the-chocolate-cake-by-dr-john-armstrong/>
- 10 Irena Kennedy, *Traversing the Zoo: A Studio Research Project Examining Thresholds Between Nature and Spatial Practice*. Fine Art Thesis, 2017, submitted to Faculty of Art, Design and Architecture, Monash University available at . [https://bridges.monash.edu/articles/Traversing\\_the\\_zoo\\_a\\_studio\\_research\\_project\\_examining\\_thresholds\\_between\\_nature\\_and\\_spatial\\_practice/4679818/1](https://bridges.monash.edu/articles/Traversing_the_zoo_a_studio_research_project_examining_thresholds_between_nature_and_spatial_practice/4679818/1)
- 11 John Berger; "Why Look at Animals," in *About Seeing. Selected Essays* (New York: Pantheon Publishing, 1991), 3–28.
- 12 Balder, *The Lied Jungle At Henry Doorly Zoo*, 2010, image sourced from <https://www.zoochat.com/community/media/henry-doorly-zoo-2010-blue-monkey-exhibit-in-lied-jungle.131063/>
- 13 Timothy Morton, *Ecology Without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics* (USA: Harvard University Press, 2007).