

# ANTENNAE

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# DOG VOICE: A MEMOIR

*Julie Andreyev is an artist whose recent area of practice called *Animal Lover* explores animal consciousness and creativity through modes of interspecies collaboration and chance, to produce interactive installation, video, social media, and performance.*

*Text by Julie Andreyev*

"Voice" not only stands for vocal utterance, but for expressing oneself. Having a voice is seen as representation –voicing one's mind– participating, voting, taking part in the governance of one's community and place in the world. In music, voice refers to an individual's vocal contribution to the group; the specific tonal quality of the soloist co-creates the collective character. Voice is independent expression towards social coherence. In human culture, non-human animals have tended to be deprived of voice. There is still a widespread notion that non-humans have an inability to express –or even have– thought and emotion; they are not capable of speaking for themselves. They do not have rights. But when you cohabitate with other species, such as dogs, over the years you may start to notice that they have a lot to say...

About 5 years ago (35 dog years) I was having an art-related crisis. At the time, the work I was making had little to do with animals as subjects and I kept asking myself (and those who would politely listen) "[w]hat value does art have in culture if it is not engaged in the pressing matters our time?" "Can art still be viable, meaningful, and potentially transformative in this era of global warming, famine, pandemic disease, economic disparity, consumer industries that engage in cruelty and suffering on vast scales, species extermination, and severe ecological degradation?"

In the midst of this personal crisis, Tom and Sugi and I noticed a glimmer between us: a hopeful promise. For us, narratives and activities of our everyday featured more and more prominently. Our relationship began to figure as potential for creative content. As we established *Animal Lover* (our interspecies collaborative practice), the dogs were emphatic about taking on new challenges. And in these formative stages, the answers to my questions clarified as we explored our latent creativity, tried new things, experimented.

The terms of the agreement did not include the dogs performing "tricks" or other kinds of conformity. It was deeper: we tried to find ways to represent their sensorial, emotional, and cognitive being, their *umwelt*. They were willing to teach me that their gestures and vocalizations expressed information about their thoughts, feelings, and desires. The task was to find out what modes of visual, auditory and interactive storytelling could be used to represent their subjective experience of the world, their creativity.

"Can interspecies collaboration contribute to a growing awareness of the sophisticated intentionality animals possess, and therefore help transform long standing negative beliefs in animal mind?" Our methodology developed to include aleatoric modes where content creation was generated by Tom and Sugi *on their own*, without expectation, allowing for unforeseen moments by



**Julie Andreyev**

Above, Tom and Sugi, below still from Youtube video *Dog Walking Dog* © Julie Andreyev

unique individuals. I would set up a camera or microphone, present a few instructions, see what happened.

Philosopher Vicki Hearne, and others, stress that domesticated animals be allowed to fulfill their potential in order to achieve happiness. This may take the form of work (for those who enjoy it). Most dogs have been bred over centuries –a millennia– to assist in human day-to-day business. Historically, border collies tended sheep; terriers caught rodents; hounds and pointers assisted with hunting; and so on. The human species shaped canines for behavioral traits that in our contemporary culture have little relevance. Today, the stay-at-home-companion conforms to the human domestic schedule. This is potentially problematic for a species bred to work. What voice do these people possess in their change of status from working animal to companion? They may struggle to come to terms with this existence, leading to states of hyperactivity, anxiety, frustration, boredom, depression. The voice of dysfunction.

On one particularly boring day, I was trying (without success) to get Tom and Sugi to stop barking out the window. Vocalizing is a trait we humans have selected in dogs to alert us to intruders –to guard the perimeter. The barking dog is only doing his job! I had the idea to teach Tom semiotics –what the word “bark” signified. He soon learned. From there, not only could I ask him *not* to bark, but we could formulate new modes of communication. “Tom, can you bark?” was a start. Tom honed his talents and began to express his variable relations with the world. “Hello;” “I’m happy;” “I’m having fun;” “Look at me” “I want a ricecake;” “I’m upset;” “That’s not fair!”

But the canine world is nuanced, and vocalizing is only a small part of their relationality. Canines and other species differ from humans in the way they come to understand things. Biologist Dr. Peter Tyack points out that “since we’re such a visual species, it’s hard for us to understand this.” Dogs are primarily informed by their sense of smell which is thousands of times more sensitive than that of a human’s. Scientists note that dogs can understand a substance diluted at 3 parts *per trillion*! Clearly, they had a way of being that was unique and *importantly different*.

In our collaboration, the challenge was to translate the canine experience into human cultural form using visual and auditory media. A dog’s enjoyment of a car ride, for instance, can be imagined as a fantastic rush of the senses, a kind of psychedelic experience. By considering the canine world-view, we humans have the potential to expand our consciousness, go beyond known

modalities into experimental thought, and potentially consider the non-human experience as equally rich as that of humans.’

Sugi, a sensitive type, communicates through silent contemplation. Using gaze and gesture he quietly points out, asks for, insists on. Any other dog would say Sugi was rude to stare. But he learns a lot by observing Tom. “I can do that too!” he seems to say. Now, when I set up a camera, Sugi positions himself between it and Tom, offering a kind of persistent force. Tom complains.

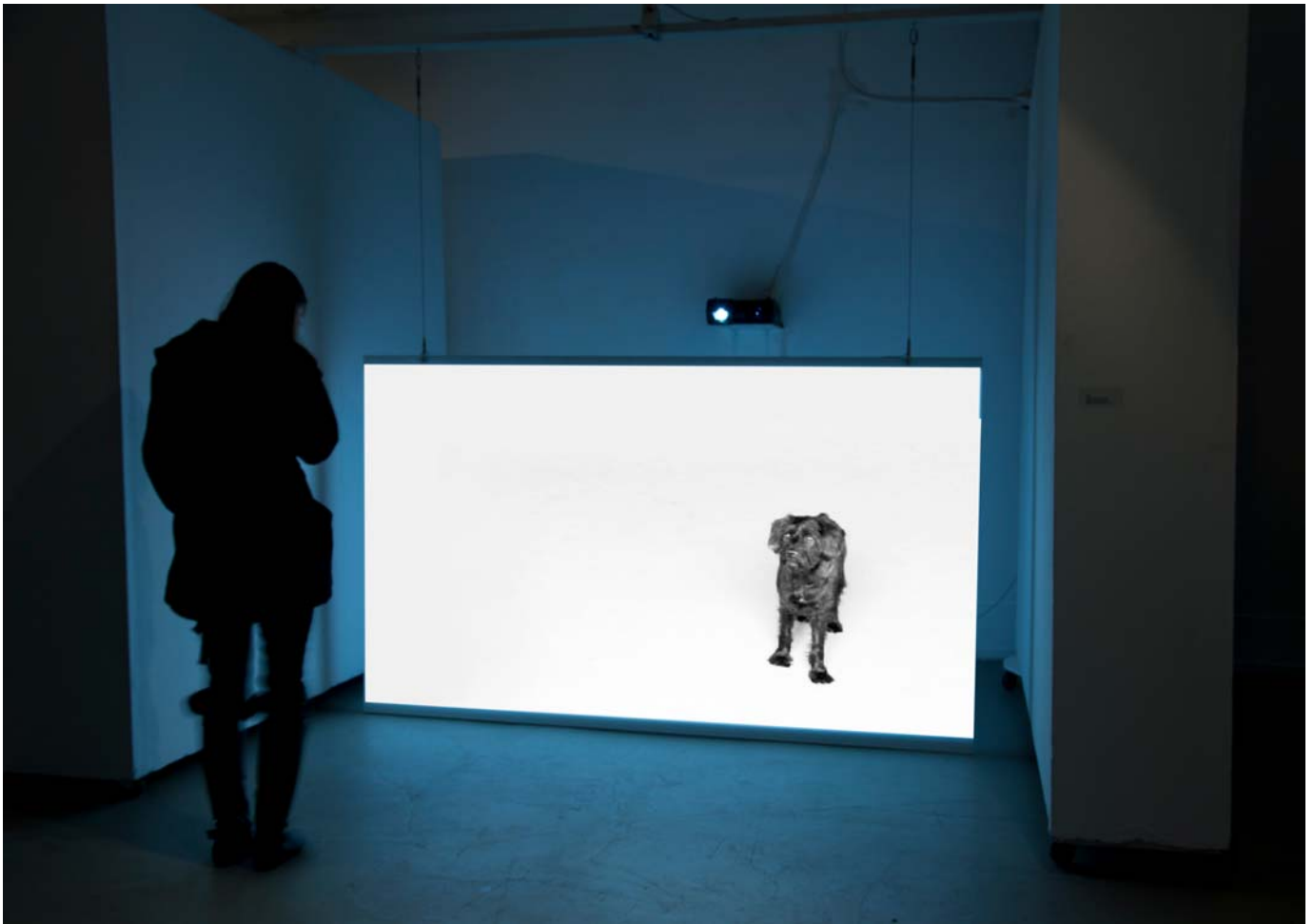
This rivalry is rich content for @TomandSugi, where they tweet about the finer points of artistic coproduction. Mostly they argue. And they’re not alone. Turns out there are thousands of people out there in cyberspace observing, contemplating, speaking and tweeting from the companion point of view: Flappitybat, Feral Pigeon, Goat on a Stump, Common Squirrel, Turtlefeed, Beaglestitch, I am Otter, Puppyjones, the late Tagi-t... Whole communities of on-line animals represent their empathic relations with humans. These voices contribute to swarms of conversations, thoughts, emotions, and animal expression. Their communicative desire is strong enough to be understood by social media savvy humans who find their lives more tolerable by entering into the imaginative space of the animal.

The imaginative space of the animal: this is where I find myself dwelling now. Tom and Sugi and I have answered the questions I asked years ago. But these answers have produced more questions: “What are the ethical modes of working with interspecies collaborators that involve respect, and attention to their dignity and happiness?”

For years I wondered why Tom would scratch and rub his face on the carpets and upholstery, sometimes in the snow. From research, I learned that canines do this to express their contentment. Tom was demonstrating, smearing his scent with exuberance, seeming to take possession –claiming territory– using his voice.

Last summer, Tom and I enrolled in a theremin building workshop. “Could I build a theremin that we could both play– a kind of instrument for 4 hands/paws?” I imagined Tom contributing vibrato by scratching on a rug interfaced with a pitch-control antenna, while I tuned the volume and tonal range. We got gigs. But things didn’t go exactly as expected. Before each rehearsal and performance Tom got anxious: his eyes widened; his legs shook; he hyperventilated; he petitioned to go home.

It did not occur to me that dogs could



**Julie Andreyev**

*Wait*, interactive video installation © Julie Andreyev

suffer from stage-fright. What I did notice was that he was fine at home, contentedly scratching his rug, making sound and growling in accompaniment. Here, we could play and he could enjoy himself. I listened and adapted. OK, he's not a live performer; he's a *studio-recording artist!* We agreed that he could practice and record at home and I would remix these during the performances.

I am starting to hear more clearly now. Tom and Sugi are good companions and they demonstrate this to me in many ways, moment by moment. They create the social coherence and richness within the family, each with his own voice contributing to the group chorus. But they are also asking that I be a good companion. They let me know that they need to be respected or challenged. They want me to take responsibility. I believe they too want to feel that their existence has meaning.

**Julie Andreyev**, [www.animallover.ca](http://www.animallover.ca), is an artist whose recent area of practice called Animal Lover explores animal consciousness and creativity through modes of interspecies collaboration and chance, to produce interactive installation, video, social media, and performance. Her work has been shown across Canada, in the US, Europe and Japan in galleries and festivals such as The Vancouver Art Gallery, SIGGRAPH, Cultural Olympiad Vancouver 2011, Viper, CHI, Japan Media Arts Festival, Digital Art Weeks, Nuit Blanche. Andreyev's work is supported by The Canada Council for the Arts, The British Columbia Arts Council, Foreign Affairs Canada, and The Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. She is Associate Professor at Emily Carr University of Art + Design in Vancouver, and Artistic Director of Interactive Futures, [www.interactivefutures.ca](http://www.interactivefutures.ca).