

# / CARLOS VON DEN HÜGELN. CAN A DOG BE AN ARTIST?

BY FRIEDERIKE ZENKER

*This is a love story. Carlos von den Hügeln (2003-2017) loved to observe and create. His history shows this inclination. Hence Carlos can be seen in action, creating: the floor installations made of cardboard (2005-2017), the sculptures made of plain sticks (including *BeiBobjekte*, 2005), and the cinematic experiments (including *Debütfilm*, 2012), which have all been carefully archived. Lena Lieselotte Schuster is the person who was closest to Carlos and realized early on that a life lived only at home and in the dog park was too confining for him. Between 2003 and 2009 Carlos accompanied her to the College of Fine Arts Saar, from the lectures to the workshops, from the studio to the latest exhibitions and performances. We may think of Carlos as a dog of public space. The fact that Carlos himself, who was born on the left bank of the Rhine, did not become an official student of the institution can be traced back to prejudices of philosophical anthropology.*

*In the 1930s, the philosopher Simone Weil wrote: "So, contrary to what is commonly believed, the contemplation of particular things is what elevates a man, and distinguishes him from animals. Animals never distinguish between an object and its utility. That is the reason why nothing individual and concrete exists for them."<sup>1</sup> This peculiar formula of anthropological difference—the one difference that is supposed to separate humans from non-human animals—seems to contradict our recognition of Carlos' aesthetic interests.*

*Like many before and after her, Weil believed that animals viewed their environment solely in functional terms—and, thus, that animals were incapable of seeing, let alone creating, aesthetic works. This would be in accord with the modern belief that the visual arts are or should be purposeless.<sup>2</sup> I look at Carlos's legacy and think: Simone Weil must have been mistaken. What Weil said about humans alone also applies to his artistic collection: „It is art which, best of all, gives us the idea of what is particular."<sup>3</sup> Weil's statements lack only a slight turn: if we turn to the social, playful and creative animals, we can acknowledge that they are very much concerned with the particular. And we can see that they themselves are special—that is, singular—actors: Carlos, for example, who has developed aesthetic preferences over his lifetime.*

*Carlos, who chewed and tore at cardboard and wood with great concentration; walked around the resulting objects, pulled on them, released them.*

*Then the work was finished. Over the years, distinctly bitten objects and floor installations were created that found their way into exhibitions, including TUFA Trier and FRIDAY EXIT Vienna. The works were translated into the formal language of human exhibition spaces. Nevertheless, it is implausible to think that in the production processes there was nothing concrete and distinct existing for Carlos himself.*

*Carlos, who was able to captivate an entire audience with his work on objects. In the performance *Pink Lady* (2006), he dismantled apple cartons. From the inconspicuous packaging material of a Spar supermarket around the corner, arose some marginalia that Carlos draped into sensational new forms. In the creative process, his dedication becomes apparent (working process, 2011). It is implausible to assume that Carlos was driven by pure usefulness and not by a genuine curiosity for novelty.*

*Carlos was captivated by human performances himself. A TV appearance from 2016 documents his interest in the Performances for Pets by Krööt Jurak and Alex Bailey. It is implausible to believe that Carlos did not experience this form of performance in an individual way.*

*This is a love story.<sup>4</sup> We are fortunate that von den Hügeln has been recognized.*

*The art of Carlos and his partner in crime, Lena Lieselotte Schuster, is relational art: a remarkable collaboration across species.<sup>5</sup> Schuster and von den Hügeln have created art together, have realized film projects and performances. Moreover, by translating Carlos's work into a language intelligible to the art field, Schuster has made an offer: to see Carlos as an artist in his own right.*

*When I first heard about Carlos—it was winter 2016 and I was sitting in a seminar in Basel—I was initially uncomfortable with the idea that animals could fall under the concept of an artist. Do non-human animals even have the intrinsic qualities necessary to be considered artists? Do they know when a work is finished? Is it even relevant whether animals can be artists or not?*

*These were my first thoughts. A closer examination of Carlos von den Hügeln finally freed me from this uncomfortable line of questioning, which always oscillates dangerously between an*



Object Nr.1 from the Sticks Collection (2005),

Carlos in Action (2011)

„Cat“ Object of Cardboard (2011)



Performance Pink Lady in the exhibition PULS – Malerei zwischen Kunst und Supermarkt, Students of the HBK Saar under the guidance of Oliver Kossack, 2006, Völklingen

anthropocentrically understood concept of the artist and mere anthropomorphizing. The intrinsic qualities are one thing: yes, Carlos is obviously interested in the materials. However, the other line of questioning that the work of the French Bulldog can raise seems to me to go further. It has to do with the particular, with relational properties: with what a particular animal can create and express in a particular context and in good relation to particular others.

Those who, as I once did, focus too much on the categorical differences between humans and animals may miss what can develop in special relationships. Artificial collaborations are just one example of the possibility of ever new shared worlds between humans and animals. Or as one pioneer of interspecies collaboration, Lisa Jevbratt, says, “We need to look for more than an interest in mark making and vocalizations in non-human animals.”<sup>6</sup>



Performances for Pets, Performance for Paris & Carlos, 23.06.2016, Krööt Juurak and Alex Bailey

The questions raised by Carlos' work are thus different even from those concerning the concept of an artist. Rather, it is a question of whether we are willing to see what is special about individual animals rather than classifying them in general: the particularity of this dog, Carlos von den Hügeln: Carlos not only as a representative of the canids, but as an irreplaceable, spatiotemporally situated individual, integrated into certain social relations. Carlos von den Hügeln as a singular dog with singular aesthetic interests and artistic successes. Once again with Weil, but against her blindness regarding the particularity of individual animals: “To label, to classify someone one loves, that is impious.”<sup>7</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Weil, Simone. *Lectures on Philosophy*. Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1978, p. 59.

<sup>2</sup> Jevbratt, Lisa. “Interspecies Collaboration – Making Art Together with Nonhuman Animals.” [http://jevbratt.com/writing/jevbratt\\_interspecies\\_collaboration.pdf](http://jevbratt.com/writing/jevbratt_interspecies_collaboration.pdf), last downloaded on 01/20/20, p. 12.

<sup>3</sup> Weil, *Lectures on Philosophy*, p. 59.

<sup>4</sup> The following argument is inspired by care ethics, cf. esp. Gheaus, Anca. “The Role of Love in Animal Ethics”. *Hypatia* 27, No. 3 (August 2012): p. 583–600.

<sup>3</sup> (August 2012): p. 583–600.

<sup>5</sup> Interspecies collaboration, cf. Jevbratt, Lisa, “Interspecies Collaboration – Making Art Together with Nonhuman Animals.” [http://jevbratt.com/writing/jevbratt\\_interspecies\\_collaboration.pdf](http://jevbratt.com/writing/jevbratt_interspecies_collaboration.pdf), last downloaded on 01/20/20

<sup>6</sup> Jevbratt, *Interspecies Collaboration*, p. 17.

<sup>7</sup> Weil, *Lectures on Philosophy*, p. 59.

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