ABSTRACT

The canine photographs, videos, and photographic narratives of artist William Wegman frame questions of animal aesthetic agency. Over the past 30 years, Wegman’s dog images shift in form and content in ways that reflect the artist’s increasing anxiety over his control of the art-making process once he becomes identified, in his own words, as “the dog photographer”. Wegman’s dog images claim unique cultural prominence, appearing regularly in fine art museums as well as on broadcast television. But, as Wegman comes to use these images to document his own transition from dog photographer to dog breeder, these texts also reflect increasing restrictions on what I term the “pack aesthetics,” or collaborative production of art and artistic agency, that distinguish some of the early pieces. Accounting for the correlations between multiple and mongrel dogs in Wegman’s experimental video work and exclusively Weimaraner-breed dogs with human bodies in his recent work in large-format Polaroid photography, this article explores how Wegman’s work with his “video dog star,” his first Weimaraner dog Man Ray, troubles the erasure of the animal in contemporary conceptions of artistic authority.

I’m trying to sell you a new or used car from our downtown lot and trying to talk you into buying one and I hope that if perhaps I have this dog on my lap you’ll come to see me as a kind person, because a mean person . . . if I was a mean person and a shark so to speak, this dog wouldn’t let me
touch him and paw him so; he’d uh, he wouldn’t have such faith in me. And so too, just as this dog trusts me, I would like you out there to trust me and come down to our new and used car lot and buy some of our quality cars. (Wegman, 1978)

William Wegman, the artist whose videos and photographs of his own Weimaraner dogs claim unique cultural prominence as both the subject of a 1990 retrospective at the Whitney Museum of American Art and a recurring feature in daily episodes of the children’s public television program Sesame Street, used to try to tell people what his dog was thinking. Especially when staged in video format, these attempts to convey cross-species communication gained widespread interest not only because they struck viewers as “funny” or “true” but also because Wegman used to play directly to the video camera, usually in situations contrived to undermine the truth-value of his claims. In these texts, a crucial component of Wegman’s challenge to human authority is the presence of his then companion animal, the Weimaraner dog Man Ray, who, whether read as falling for or openly resisting Wegman’s prompts, was a key player in these pieces, undermining the all-too-human power of the artist’s statements.

For instance, in New and Used Car Salesman (1978), Wegman momentarily drops the monotone sales-pitch monologue he directs, television-advertisement-style, to the camera to turn his attention to his dog. More precisely, he has to stop talking in order to struggle with the dog, who tries to get off of his lap just at the moment when Wegman, speaking as a “new and used car salesman,” points to the dog’s presence on his lap as evidence of his own trustworthiness. The flash of resistance on the dog’s part fades immediately; having redistributed his weight, he settles down again without actually getting off Wegman’s lap, and the artist, having paused to wrangle the dog, resumes his droning sales pitch as if it never stopped (see Figure 1).

This moment of bodily interaction, formulated as human speech containing a dog’s expression of thought, in one sense outlines what Garber (1996) terms an “erotics of dominance,” the canine-human resignation to a relationship characterized by power imbalance that is predicated by dogs’ inability to speak human languages (p. 125). Yet the interaction also materializes the shifting field of “trust” on which human speech - here conceived as a tired sales
The synergy of man and dog provides not simply a competing narrative in which the dog turns on the man’s speech, quietly taking over the role of the video’s star. In this short piece, the cross-species interaction signals the development of a dialectical form in which canine-human interaction and artistic self-reflexivity intersect.²

Wegman relies heavily on the dog’s spontaneous interaction with prompts, primarily speech, to develop a video aesthetic that both establishes the material conditions of artistic production and challenges conventional conceptualizations of them, particularly the notion of singular artistic agency. The early work with Man Ray, through which Wegman develops this aesthetic, stands in pointed contrast to Wegman’s current work, which positions his relationship with his dogs as the very instrument of his own alienation, the trap of a signature-style into which the successful artist is lured and caught

---

Figure 1. *New and Used Car Salesman*. Silver Gelatin Print 8 × 10.5”. From *Selected Works: Reel 9*. © William Wegman 1975.
by the commercial structures of the fine art industry. But, as *New and Used Car Salesman* suggests, cross-species interaction offers different ways of mediating the relationships among humans, animals, and the institutions of art, a range of aesthetic possibilities that Wegman’s work, taken as a whole, explores. Staking out the poles of this spectrum, the selfsame human-canine interaction that once enabled Wegman to disrupt his own self-sales pitch - his supplication to an individualistic and static system of art - now works to confirm it.

Nowhere does Wegman make his movement across this aesthetic spectrum clearer than in *Puppies* (1997), his autobiographical book about how he became a dog-breeding artist. *Puppies* begins with the protest, “I didn’t really want a dog. I was too busy being an artist.”

Telling the story of how he became artistically identified with his dogs, Wegman’s retrospective narrative strategically separates these individual identity forms - a dog, an artist - from their mixed social contexts. The effect of this narrative maneuver is to posit the dog as a tool with which the artist comes to reclaim his control over the art-making process. Subtly colluding dog-breeding and art-making worlds, Wegman’s lone authorial voice, here the structuring device of singular human authorship, assumes directorship of both of these interspecific (that is, cross-species) sites of production. In this tale, the artist’s sense of his own authority grows rather than dissipates through images of dogs’ bodies, but it does so not by refuting but by avoiding examination of the ways in which hybrid human-animal art promises a radical decentralization of the human (in this case, literally, the autobiographical animal).

*Puppies* reads as Wegman’s backward glance over traveled roads, although its narrow focus on breeding aesthetics overemphasizes his work in the 1980s and 1990s at the expense of developing the cultural conditions of his initial work with dogs and art in the 1960s and 1970s. Situating this early human-canine work in its historical context, I want to develop instead how this preliminary work counterpoints the contemporaneous crisis in authorship emerging through structuralist and poststructuralist reconceptualizations of authority, especially what Foucault (1977) coyly termed the “author-function” (p. 125). Particularly through experimental video work, Wegman and the dog Man Ray engage and develop the conflicts between animal aesthetics and human ideals of autonomous artistic agency and, in this way, resist the anthropocentric closure the artist later claims for this work.
Wegman’s recent positioning of this work as augmenting his own sense of himself as a singular artist contradicts his earlier accounts of his interaction with this cross-species production process. In the years before the publication of *Puppies*, Wegman expresses profound ambivalence: He perceives the course of his career as both determined and frustrated by his work with his first Weimaraner dog Man Ray, the “omnipresent” and ultimately “famous” dog that he “didn’t really want.” After the dog’s death Wegman (1990) openly acknowledges his debt to Man Ray - “I was incredibly lucky (not apparently lucky) in getting Ray and I think this is significant” (p. 19) - yet he quickly subordinates their joint work within the larger context of his own solo productions:

> It is interesting to note that although I used [Man Ray] in only about 10 percent of the photographs and videotapes, most people think of him as omnipresent in my work. It irked me sometimes to be known as the guy with the dog, but on the other hand it was a thrill to have a famous dog. (Wegman, p. 19)

This equivocal attitude toward the dog’s contributions to his own career as an artist points to a deeper anxiety about the ways in which animal identification simultaneously compromised Wegman’s artistic legitimacy while bringing him fame.

Describing how he became successful as “the dog photographer,” Wegman (1997) downplays the fear that seemed to haunt him just a few years earlier, when Wegman (1990) openly conceded about Man Ray, “It’s frightening to think of what I would have done without him” (p. 21). Although it is unlikely that the “famous” dog’s image alone attracted critical and commercial interest, the canine form introduced a sense of consistency that was otherwise displaced by the artist’s own dilettantish approach to video and photographic media. Wegman’s career charts an unconventional series of experiments in different media - including sculpture, video, drawing, painting, and what he calls “through-the-back-door photography”5 (Wegman, 1982) - a series of multimedia, stylistically inconsistent practices. However timely in terms of the development of his critical success, this approach also often undermines the brand-name familiarity required to court the popular commercial audience that Wegman’s work presently enjoys. Entering the scene at a for-
tuitive historical moment, ripe for what Schjeldahl (1981) terms the “maverick individuals” like Wegman who achieved success in conditions peculiar to the “long-ago seventies” (p. 18), interest in Wegman’s work continued to grow almost unchecked through the 1980s and 1990s. This increasing interest intensifies in inverse proportion to the formal innovation of Wegman’s work; a peculiar serialization in terms of content bridges this gap. Canine bodily consistency links the early Wegman/Man Ray images to Wegman’s recent work with Weimaraner dogs, but it also obscures an abrupt shift away from experimentation with dialectical form, particularly evident in the video work, that directly engages these problems of self-definition through animal art practice.

These experimental video pieces, weaving together questions of influence with questions of misprision, trouble readings that insist on the absolute identification of artist and dog. They betray, in the broadest sense, Wegman’s later “anxiety of influence” (Bloom, 1973) concerning the dog, Man Ray. Although the pieces suggest that Wegman began working with the dog to interrogate the problem of artistic authority, his critics’ identification of “the” artist with “his” dog works in tandem with the artist’s own retroactive adoption of these terms to exacerbate this very problem by subordinating the contributions of the dog to the promotion of the artist’s career. I read the images against these responses, however, to suggest that the success of the early pieces depends on dog and artist’s joint ability to erode the one-to-one correspondence framed by their critics’ anthropocentric aesthetics.

Confounding this approach to the artwork as the property of a singular author and the dog as therefore a human substitute or object, the Wegman/Man Ray art opens up questions about how such art involves a collective process, an alternate approach that I term “pack aesthetics.” To foster this alternate approach, the interspecific context of these pieces is wielded in such a way that it triangulates the process of art making, opening out from a dynamic between human artist and dog model and incorporating multiple artists, assistants, and models in ways that unsettle species boundaries. Without wholly promoting or critiquing a single set of artistic values, the early Wegman/Man Ray images in this way cultivate pack aesthetics, provoking conceptualizations of history, aesthetics, and communication that situate the human within the context of other animal cultures.
The formal structures of some of Wegman’s early pieces in this respect correspond with their content to outline this evolution of pack aesthetics. Wegman develops these structures in the late 1960s through his own brief engagement with the exceptionally self-centered form of Body Art. In several early video shorts, Wegman, himself, appears as a solitary actor, adding bizarre props or using camera framing to frustrate identification. One of the simplest and most successful, *Stomach Song* (1978), is an extended, extreme close-up of Wegman’s own belly, in which coordinated lighting, contortions, and vocalizations make the stomach look like a face and the navel, in turn, its mouth. As Wegman continued his experiments with video media through the early 1970s, he began to include Man Ray in his productions in ways that maintained the body-centered aesthetic. Formal aspects of Body Art structure pieces such as *Treat Bottle* (1978), a continuous close-up shot of Man Ray on his own, taking several minutes to figure out how to extract a treat from an otherwise empty milk bottle. While the dog expresses palpable interest, frustration, and ultimately satisfaction in the course of this video, his centralized and solitary presence makes this film a mirror in form of *Stomach Song*. *Treat Bottle*’s formal success in communicating animal emotion, while an important precursor to the videos that foster pack aesthetics, is exemplary of the pieces featuring Man Ray alone insofar as it only indirectly engages the problems of logic, speech, and facial presence that trouble theories of animal subjectivity.⁸

These problems become the subject of subsequent videos, in which Wegman and Man Ray appear onscreen together in situations that directly address human-canine interactions. Like *New and Used Car Salesman*, the video shorts *Spelling Lesson* (1978) and *Smoking* (1978) feature Wegman as both director and prop, trying, respectively, to teach the dog how to spell and how to smoke cigarettes. Both pieces are characteristically humorous in that, as Wegman (1990) notes, they “proceed logically from a preposterous premise” (p. 26): In the first, Wegman talks to Man Ray about the dog’s mediocre “performance” on a spelling test; in the second, Wegman, again in sales-pitch mode, tries to persuade the dog to take “just one puff” of the cigarette he is smoking. Of course, Man Ray does not try (let alone learn) to spell or to smoke, but he does interact with the man in front of the camera. These pieces frame images of frustrated attempts at communication. Also, the videos, themselves, actively frustrate some overt human attempts to force the dog to assimilate
to human culture while taking others - namely the codes, systems, and conventions of human communication systems - for granted. Wegman, “more adept than most at quietly taking the mickey out of anthropomorphism” (Baker 2000, p. 43), uses these situations to garner sympathy (if not empathy) for the dog, often at his own expense.

Moreover, the videos make plain the clash between species-specific cultures that makes the interspecific premise simultaneously evident and preposterous. In other words, their sharp demarcation of the limit of cross-species understanding reveals a distinct, if limited, exchange of ideas between dog and man and across overlapping systems of thought. The dog expresses discomfort with both situations by audibly whining and turning his head toward, and away from, Wegman. His other actions show that Man Ray is making an effort to go along with the gag. In the former, he cocks his head, indicating his own attachment of meaning to word-cues like “beach.” And, in the latter, the dog first thrusts his front paws in the air in marked aversion to the cigarette smoke enveloping Wegman, then walks away only to return to lick Wegman’s hand on request, and finally walks off screen, in spite of the fact that Wegman persistently calls him to return. The videos’ narrative structures are open, codependent on Wegman’s provision of narrative prompts and props and on the dog’s spontaneous interaction with the situations unfolding around him. Significantly, the camera positions Wegman and Man Ray as each occupying half of the frame; in conjunction with the content, this framing focuses attention on neither man nor dog but on what occurs between them.

In attempting to weigh out the costs and benefits of human-canine exchange in the Wegman/Man Ray images, what often gets overlooked is their striking potential for documenting cross-species cultural assimilation. At once displaying and critiquing these exchanges, the pieces sweep aside deadlocked questions of exploitation or manipulation by actively engaging interspecific, collective configurations of their author-function. Negotiation, not subjugation, characterizes these early pieces, as Man Ray’s participation quickly and irrevocably becomes an integral part of Wegman’s photography and video.

What distinguishes these pieces, I contend, is their movements toward pack aesthetics, their interlacing of human and canine engagements with the art-making scene. Although it is clear that these images contribute to Man Ray’s
transformation into the archetypal “celebrity Weimaraner” (Wegman, 1982, p. 11), what has yet to be developed in the critical history of this work is the way in which the videos, as Wegman (1997) notes, “changed the way I thought about my work.” This acknowledgment of the artist’s shifting aesthetic reflects how the interlacing of human and canine engagements with the art-making scene compels reconceptualization of human as well as animal aesthetic agency.

Wegman’s (1991) reminiscences about this period indicate how he struggled with this reconceptualization while working on these pieces. He traces a movement from individuating toward pack aesthetics by positioning the inter-species work as preempting the development of his own individual artwork:

He [Man Ray] was very interested in working, so, when I didn’t want to use him, he would persuade me that it would be in my best interest to use him. [. . .] In 1978 I didn’t photograph him, as a challenge, and he was very unhappy. He hated not working. Like a lot of people who are out of work, he was sullen, miserable. He started biting, attacked four or five postmen; I was forced to get another divorce. [. . .] In Man Ray’s last years, since each picture seemed like it would be his last, I wasn’t able to do my own work. I was compelled to photograph Man Ray.⁹ (On videocassette)

Wegman’s differentiation between “my own” and another kind of work here is key: Wegman describes a growing awareness of choosing between making “my own” art as opposed to work involving Man Ray. But the artist’s own clean separation glides over the more complicated issue of how his own independent work became entangled with Man Ray’s participation. Because the end of Man Ray’s life coincided with a significant turning-point in Wegman’s career (characterized by internationally traveling exhibits, television appearances, steady sales, and widespread merchandising), Wegman’s (1991) vague claim that he “was compelled” to make images with the dog allows that market forces influence this compulsion. But, while the story of the Wegman/Man Ray images suggests that the difference between “my own” and the interspecific work positions the human in a determining role, it also involves the construction of different modes of authority and, by extension, authorship. Particularly in the video work, as the dog’s action comes to contribute to the aesthetic process, it becomes difficult to read him as simply an art object manipulated by the human artist.
Wegman’s evolving account of this process contributes to this interpretive difficulty. Wegman (1997), describing the lone picture of Man Ray included in *Puppies*, explains that he initially conceptualized the dog in terms of inanimate, visual form. This most recent description of Man Ray as primarily an object of visual interest echoes passages in earlier interviews with Wegman, in which he openly courts charges of animal exploitation by defining Man Ray against the human as an inanimate prop: “In a way he’s like an object... You can look at him and say, now how am I going to use you, whereas you can’t with a person” (Lyons, 1982a, p. 15). The distance Wegman subsequently creates for himself from these initial formulations indicates how the dog came to permeate the art in ways that were no longer so easy to dismiss in terms of subject/object binaries. As he moves from using the dog, unlike a person, to fusing dogs with people in art, Wegman not only alters his conception of the dog’s contribution to art-making but also frames larger questions about the ways in which the incorporation of actual animals invigorates a dialectical approach to subject-/objectivity in art.

In this way, the Wegman/Man Ray pieces open a common ground for shifting and multiple negotiations of interspecies and species-specific social systems including, but not limited to, aesthetics. Wegman (1990) alludes to his own changing sensibilities toward dog models in *Puppies*; but, earlier, he more explicitly charts a progression in his own ideas of Man Ray’s artistic career from working as a stage prop and an “extra” to taking on supporting and lead roles.

For me, Ray started as a space modulator [that is, a visual object breaking up the monotony of the space in the camera’s frame], then became a kind of narrative device, then a character actor and, ultimately, a Roman coin. (p. 21)

Wegman (1991) points to the dog’s aging body as motivating this progressive appropriation of agency: “When Man Ray lost his figure he was no longer a sculpture or a space modulator but a character actor” (on videocassette). The concurrent shift between predominant uses of video and photographic media during this period obscures this development of animal aesthetic agency. The stillness of the photographs, as opposed to the movement central to the videos, masks the interaction involved in this mode of production, lending it to interpretation in terms of exploitation.10 The dynamic video form
frustrates such reduction, instead figuring the distinction that Man Ray makes between recognition of, and response to, authority, contrasting the cross-species confusion or failures with corresponding communication or successes. But, because the Wegman/Man Ray images often thematize interspecies communicative problems, they are read at face value as failures of communication. Such interpretations, although predominantly characterizing the critical reception of the Wegman/Man Ray work, invariably position the dog as a substitute - whether as “victim” or “alter ego” - for the artist, in lieu of taking on the difficult task of imagining an interspecies relationship that structurally invalidates this kind of hierarchy.  

Reading the dog as a figure of the artist, it becomes easier to construe the animal as a mirror who amplifies the image of the tragic human hero but harder to reconcile the form and content of the interspecific work. Lyons (1982), insisting that the humor of the work “arises from our tendency to interpret the dog’s behavior in human terms,” illustrates how readings of the dog as victimized derive from the denial of the dog’s creative engagement with the process:

[Man Ray’s] contorted pose is funny in and of itself. But it’s all the more comical because, if only for a moment, we catch ourselves thinking that it is the result of a decision-making process - one that involves imagination and creativity. Of course, to interpret Ray’s behavior in such human terms is absurd; dogs just don’t think that way. The performance is sheer sleight of paw and we know that Wegman has manipulated us, just as surely as he has manipulated Man Ray. (p. 27)

In this instance, by denying the dog “imagination and creativity,” the reading reinforces the distinction between human artist and dog object in order to insist that intercultural exchanges across species lines are “absurd.” By raising the question of manipulation as a cross-species common denominator, however, even this dismissive reading suggests that the work itself puts such distinctions under erasure.

What remains at stake throughout these discussions are ideas of the social, particularly the viability of a social model that challenges the human monopoly on subject-construction. Outlining how some of the Wegman/Man Ray work sustains such a social model, Owens (1983), although limiting Man Ray’s involvement to “acquiescence” and “submission” (p. 108) to Wegman’s desires, develops the implications of the communicative ambivalence of the
videos - the notion that these texts “often narrate the failure of [Wegman’s] attempts to impose himself on, and at the expense of, his pet” (p. 102). Owens directly repudiates Lyons's claim, “it is undeniable that Ray often appears as a surrogate for human presence in Wegman’s work,” by developing Wegman’s own description of Ray as a “diversion,” as the means by which Wegman avoided “being narcissistic” in a process in which the dog becomes the “third person” (Owens, 1983, p. 108). In this account, the dog’s high profile within the work more clearly opens up the politics of agency: Man Ray emerges not as a mirror for the artist but as an active contributor to an artistic process geared to critique rather than to sustain artistic narcissism.12

Dog and man must work together in order to activate such a critique. But because the man, unlike the dog, is both behind and in front of the camera, their participation is uneven, opening up many possibilities for what Wegman is doing with the dog. Again, Wegman’s own account indicates that more is involved than exploitation, whether of viewer or dog. The idea of the dog's “consent” to model (or how the dog is to be involved in making art) for Wegman is precluded by the question of why the dog should be included in the first place. Seemingly arguing against himself, he claims that his art, increasingly involving dogs dressed as humans and other animals, is humorous and, from an artistic standpoint, inappropriate. But, he continues, the startling photographic effect produced by this technique and introduced through his work with Man Ray justifies its continued production. For Wegman, it is a question not simply of innovation but of the artist's participation in defining art, in determining what constitutes art: “Why does art have to be so serious? Why can't art be funny?” (Dunye, 1996). In one sense, this approach dodges the question posed by Weider (Wegman, 1982) - “Does Man Ray understand his place in art? Or perhaps more plausibly, does he understand that works of art exist, and that he has an image?” (p. 10) - by returning the focus of interpretation to Wegman's own determining role in the process, from initial set-up through final edit.

Yet, Wegman's counter questions defer such authoritative definition and, juxtaposed with Weider’s, serve as a hedge against reading human concerns into the dog’s and more broadly the animal’s place in art. Although I think this process is ultimately mitigated by Wegman's current role as a breeder in the production of his current dog models, the recent series of cross-species-
dressing images that begin with Man Ray (featuring the dog as frog, bat, elephant, human, dinosaur, etc.) exhibit the “tattiness, imperfection, and botched form” that, Baker (2000) argues, delineates postmodern animal aesthetics of “botched taxidermy,” a broader movement in contemporary art characterized by an image that “render[s] the animal abrasively visible” (p. 62). Contextualized within a dichotomy of “funny” (animal) and “serious” (anthropocentric) art, such images rout the problems of dog-model intentionality with the broader and stickier questions of how this art frames animal cultures.

The crucial point here is that the images trouble the separation between nonhuman cognition and aesthetic systematization, between individual thoughts and their consolidation into cultural forms. What is striking about the Wegman/Man Ray images is that, when these images incorporate the dog’s thought processes, they hold the potential not only to resist reduction to simply human terms but also to validate canine culture and, by extension, pack aesthetics. In this respect, the grounds of animal-rights philosopher Regan’s objection to Wegman’s current cross-species-dressing images are illuminating. Regan notes that the images are “offensive,” not because they demonstrate cruelty to the dogs but because they erode species boundaries in a way that compromises the dog’s difference from the human. The images offer, in Regan's terms, “a way of denying their dogness, so to speak.”

This rupture of species essentialism is not so problematic for me as is Wegman’s inability to sustain it. Even when Wegman now seems at his most self-conscious, as in the image of current dog model Chip - a third-generation Wegman Weimaraner model - dressed as a photographer (see Figure 2), he affixes the dog to exclusively human culture and thereby abandons the dialectical form characteristic of the earlier interspecies work. In contrast to these later photographs, the Wegman/Man Ray videos that incorporate others throw species difference into stark relief, encouraging and inscribing contemplation of their object as well as of these thought processes themselves. Particularly when the texts incorporate other dogs, they not only challenge the exceptional status of the video dog star but also demonstrate how pack aesthetics can inscribe multiple aesthetics across species lines.

Confounding singular interpretation in terms of a one-to-one, human-canine correspondence, the 1977 video “Two Dogs, sometimes known as Dog Duet,”
Figure 2. From Our Town. C-Print. © William Wegman 1998.
Wegman (1990) claims, was transitional because it incorporated multiple agents in the production-process: “What made this work exceptional was working in the presence of others” (p. 26), presumably both human and canine. Demonstrating the critical difficulty of articulating what makes this piece so special, Levin (1982) flounders as she tries to qualify her impression that this “[m]odest, black and white, of unremarkable technical quality, scarcely longer than a TV commercial” piece, “this double dog dance,” is also “Wegman’s video masterpiece” (p. 63). Both the actual human-canine “work” and the incorporation of traces of this work in the video itself inscribe this sense of otherness into the video text, making it a compelling statement about the everyday conditions underpinning not only interactions between humans and their companion animals but also interactions among companion animals. Its refinement of dialectical form enables this piece to address the assimilation of humans and other animals to various species-specific and interspecific cultural formations.

*Dog Duet*, a nearly silent video piece, focuses on Man Ray and another dog, side-by-side, intently watching something off-screen (see Figure 3). The dogs’ heads move in unison, almost always in the same direction, following the trajectory of an object, the identity of which is only at the end revealed: a human-hand-held tennis ball, “among Weimaraners an almost universal object of desire” (Wegman, 1997). The video quietly reverses its structure of human manipulation (teasing the dogs with the ball) by positioning the shared intelligence of the dogs as coming before the human, “magically” revealed at the end. In addition, the dogs, unlike the video’s often-irritated first-time viewers, have the advantage of knowing what is holding everyone’s attention, including their own. Read as a conjunction of human, canine, and interspecific sociality, *Two Dogs* stands apart even among the Wegman/Man Ray pieces because it realizes the potential of their interspecies work to figure intracanine as coming before intrahuman and interspecific aesthetics. The dogs' shared interest in and, to Wegman, “desire” for, the tennis ball gains human interest in the dogs, the ball, and the hand, which enter the frame in that order. Additionally, first-time viewers share in the dogs' frustration by being prevented from seeing the object of their attention, thus crossing the line from watching the dogs as objects to watching along with them for signs of the object.
What is more, Man Ray’s anonymous canine companion fails to cooperate completely: The other dog slowly slides down to the floor from a sitting position, leading to what Levin (1982, p. 63) calls the “excruciatingly funny” moment at which the dogs' invisibly locked heads separate as they turn in opposite directions to look behind them (see Figure 4). This failure signals the pack structure of the video’s production: Rather than coercively blocked or edited away, this nonscripted interaction runs freely into the work, establishing the dogs' difference from each other even as it reinforces their shared interest in the ball. This formal structure singularly highlights intracanine sociality and, in light of Wegman’s subsequent breed-specific work, seems peculiarly amplified by the other dog’s mongrel body. Subtly, Man Ray, the breed dog, embodies the imposition of human aesthetics on canine biology while his unnamed random-bred companion exemplifies a concurrent history of canine aesthetics through self-selected breeding. In retrospect, Dog
Duet marks a brief and splendid alignment of human and animal aesthetics, configuring a range of aesthetics appropriate to what Midgley (1983) terms the “mixed community” of domesticated animals and humans.

Although Wegman’s rare experiments with film media introduce more dogs, they also wield splicing and other production techniques to impose greater restrictions on canine expression. For instance, ten years later, Wegman’s 1986 short film Dog Baseball will return to the same theme of human and canine shared but species-coded interest in playing ball. But the voice-over, repeatedly insisting that Wegman’s then Weimaraner companion Fay Ray is an obedient and therefore “good dog” in contrast to the more indeterminately bred “bad dogs,” who prefer each other’s company, equivocates aesthetics of breed and behavior under the sign of the human. This distinction adumbrates the removal of mongrel bodies from Wegman’s work and its incorporation of dog breeding practices into what becomes a human-centered aesthetic. In Dog Baseball, the human hand that holds the ball and later rocks the cradle is never
revealed as such, but its control over the dogs becomes all the more confirmed by its absence from the camera’s frame.

The images continuing to proliferate in and of Wegman’s World work in conjunction with their various (and often contradictory) narratives to position Man Ray as claiming a special position in respect to the Wegman-Weimaraner legacy. This dog, unlike the ensuing ones, alters the artist’s sense of “my own work,” thereby activating the animal contributions that characterize pack aesthetics as well as, with his death, signaling their meltdown. While Wegman writes in Puppies of randomly acquiring a Weimaraner, this choice of the breed dog Man Ray initiates a pattern that leads Wegman to breed more Weimaraners as dog models. Retroactively, Man Ray’s position in these stories as a singular and indirect ancestor creates peculiar inheritances, both intra- and inter-species. As Wegman’s work becomes increasingly inextricable from dog breeding, his dog models become exclusively Weimaraners, and Man Ray’s place in Wegman’s World takes on the new and posthumous significance of ancestry.

That is, Man Ray, as the singularly non-blood relative of Wegman’s subsequent Weimaraners, bequeaths to these “descendent[s]” (Sayag, 1990, p. 49) a conflicted inheritance that involves Wegman’s attempts to breed and to contain the changes that this dog effected on the artist’s self-perception. The Wegman/Man Ray work communicates the idea that dogs contribute to the art-making process, yet Wegman’s work after Man Ray’s death compromises this point by promoting interspecies art at the expense of imagining canine aesthetics. In pointed contrast to the early Wegman/Man Ray videos, characterized by distinct canine and human figures, the dog-breeding narrative Puppies works in conjunction with Wegman’s most recent interspecific images to materialize a final aesthetic displacement of dog by human cultures. Specifically, through the breeding bitch’s body, the human artist regains control over the terms on which dogs contribute to the production of Wegman’s art, emptying out the revolutionary potential for conceptualizing animal cultures and reinventing Man Ray’s legacy as a breed body, a cipher through which Wegman reclaims a human-exceptionalist sense of artistic agency. In this way, the first Wegman Weimaraner’s shifting status as video dog star fosters, then frustrates, a sustained critique of the confluence of anthropocentrism and artistic agency.
Notes

1 Correspondence should be sent to Susan McHugh, School of Literature and Communication, Georgia Institute of Technology, Atlanta, GA 30332. Email: susan.mchugh@lcc.gatech.edu.

2 My conception of this video piece in terms of dialectical form derives from Jameson’s (1971) idea that “dialectical thought is in its very structure self-consciousness and may be described as the attempt to think about a given object on one level and, at the same time, to observe our own thought processes as we do so: or to use a more scientific figure, to reckon the position of the observer into the experiment itself” (p. 340). As I will argue, Wegman’s experimental work engages dialectical thinking by fostering a sense of sociality that includes dogs and, as Jameson argues in his reading of Sartre, in turn emphasizes dynamic and “collective[,] rather than individualistic” and static, systems (p. 244).

3 Puppies is not paginated.

4 Foucault’s neologism aims to situate the “‘author’ as a function of discourse,” underscoring how discourse is first and foremost an “action” or “gesture” (p. 124). The contrast between this and Barthes’s more structuralist (and static) if contemporaneous proclamation of “the death of the author” marks Foucault’s transitional position as what Leitch (1983) terms “a most structuralist poststructuralist” (p. 144).

5 Elsewhere Wegman elaborates that his early photographic images “are fine art photographs, not fine photography photographs” and distinguishes these from his later Polaroid photographs, in which the quality of “slickness is a given.” These Polaroids also may seem technically finer because in this process Wegman hires a trained camera operator and assistants (1990a): “Wegman snaps the shots but doesn’t actually position the camera (technicians do that). ‘I have enough problems,’ he says, ‘lugging those 80-pound dogs around’” (Wegman, 1999).

6 By flagging these images with the admittedly awkward adjectival use of “Wegman/Man Ray,” I aim to underscore the interspecific ways in which these images negotiate what Foucault (1977) more broadly describes as the “problematic nature of the word ‘work’ and the unity it designates” (p. 119).

7 This concept proceeds from Deleuze and Guattari’s (1987) claim that the same individualized animals can function as metaphors for humans as well as metonyms of heterogeneous “packs” (pp. 240-241). Elsewhere, I relate this dynamic to the emergence of the dog breeding narrative in the twentieth century by developing the related concept of “pack sexualities” (McHugh, 2000, p. 23).

8 Llewelyn’s discussion of the indebtedness of the ethics of Lévinas to those conceptualized by Kant provides a concise overview of the barriers to theorizing what
he playfully terms “the humanism of the other animal.” In spite of the fact that these two philosophers construct a nonutilitarian context for thinking of interspecies sociality, Llewelyn argues, Kant’s stipulation that the subject have the capacity for “pure practical reason” (p. 241) and Lévinas’s parallel codicil that it can speak (or “have a face”) limits the idea of the social to human animals.

This self-description is also striking because here Wegman constructs art-making for the dog as an alternative to “biting” humans, which in Hearne’s (1986) analysis of canine training models indicates “a response to incoherent authority” (p. 45).

For instance, Schjeldahl (1990) positions these images as evidence of Wegman’s dominance over his dog, sharpened by the artist’s awareness of their joint subordination to the demands of their artistic context: in “Wegman’s photographs of himself and his dog Man Ray,” Shejeldahl claims, “the dog focused all its animal resources and neurotic intelligence in agonized efforts to anticipate the man’s wish. Together within art’s austere frame [. . .] the dog and the man labored to ingratiate” (p. 181).

Following this vein, Levin (1982) claims that “the dog Man Ray impersonates Wegman, becoming an alter ego for the abdicating artist” (p. 65), such that the dog paradoxically asserts his agency only to have it consumed by the artist. Asserting that the man/dog relationship “parodies” that of the artist with his audience, Lavin (1975) entertains the concept of spectatorship only at the expense of the dog’s agency: “Man Ray assumes the viewer’s role as he becomes the helpless victim of an endless pattern beyond his control” (p. 45).

Owens concludes: “[W]hen we laugh at Man Ray’s foiling of Wegman’s designs, we are also acknowledging the possibility, indeed the necessity, of another, non-narcissistic mode of relating to the Other - one based not on the denial of difference, but upon its recognition” (p. 108). In at least one instance, Wegman (1991) encourages and supports such readings: “Specifically, I liked the strategy of using a dog [because], when the dog was on, it would take the focus away from me and put it on the dog.”

Regan initially addressed these concerns at a public lecture and later was contacted by Wegman, who, as Regan recalls, “was surprised that I would take exception to his work” and, after a brief discussion, “relieved to learn that I was not accusing him of cruelty” (personal communication, January 17, 2001). This exchange is striking as well because it is a rare instance of the worlds of art and of animal rights coming into contact.

Animal inheritances, in Derrida’s (1996) expansive sense, operate as “traces without discourses” (p. 99) that organize sociality within and without the human. These traces of interspecific multiplicity compound the problem - framed by Foucault (1977) as that of “how a work can be extracted from the millions of traces left by
an individual after his death” (p. 119) - because Man Ray’s death retrospectively seems to spur rather than to halt Wegman’s artwork with Weimaraner dogs.

References


