

Live Dog as Art By Peg Murves

Photos © Moy Wong



Jazz in front of the gallery where his performance art piece was performed.

For a couple of hours, two days a week, from the end of June through July, my 10-year old Labrador Retriever, Jazz, was in a performance art piece that was part of the provocative art exhibit titled "Dogma" at Metro Pictures Gallery in New York City.

Dogma, scheduled to run during the "dog days of summer," is an introspective look at the intertwining of dogs and people, about systems and beliefs about dogs, people, art, life, death. Many of the works are abstract and impressionist, none more so than the Nina Beier piece "Tragedy," in which Jazz participated. Dogma is on tour and the Beier piece has been done several times in Europe, most recently at Art Basel, an enormous art show in Switzerland.

Beier, a well-known Danish artist based in London, is concerned with relationships. As installed at Metro Pictures, Tragedy consists of a

Persian rug in the middle of one of the gallery rooms, illuminated by a spotlight and not separated from viewers in any way. At times, a dog would be asked to play dead on the rug. Jazz was the only dog used in NYC.

Imagine entering a fashionable NYC art gallery and rounding a corner and seeing a dog apparently collapsed on a beautiful carpet, stock still. With no

placard placed anywhere in the gallery to explain, the viewers really did not know what to make of it. The gallery did provide a critic's essay about the piece, but few saw it.

Jazz frequently had crowds of more than 20 people staring, talking, taking pictures, walking, giggling, laughing, yelling, upset, worried, whispering, trying to get his attention, even lying down with him! While I was about 4-6 feet away, most people did not initially realize I was his handler. Using hand and facial signals and targeting, we worked silently, adding a remarkable effect to the art piece.



Entering the gallery where "Tragedy" was performed.

So that people can see he is a trained dog playing dead, part of Beier's instructions to the dog and handler team are to enter the room with the dog on leash and place the dog on the rug and cue him to play dead; then release him and leash him up and walk out of the room. She also instructs the gallery to ask the handler for extra fur so that people know a dog had been there. My *all time* favorite question regarding working with a dog has to be when the gallery manager asked, "Do you have any extra fur you can provide us with?"

Viewers responses were very interesting and extreme in many cases. Is the dog real? Is he dead? Is he Animatronic? Is it cruel? Is the dog suffering? Is he being abused? One woman actually

screamed when I released the dog – she had been convinced he was stuffed. Several patrons went to find someone in charge and came back into the room, very very worried about the dog's welfare, convinced that he was there on the carpet all by himself, all day. Some mothers with children grabbed their children and pulled them out of the room. One clever boy came back in on his own after being dragged out, confirmed that the dog was indeed alive, and then left again quickly. Another woman averted her eyes and could not look at the dog – until she later realized he was OK.

I kept reflecting on whether all this concern and all these questions were what the artist intended, that having a dog in a live performance would elicit the feeling of "tragedy" regardless of what people thought was more tragic: a dead dog, or a dog being asked to lay quietly for long periods of time. The other recurring thought was, how could I remain invisible to the patrons so as not to bias their experience?

To be successful, Jazz and I had to remain totally connected, with almost continual eye contact. If people took a moment to look, they would see that the dog was not on his own. Several people did talk to me and I fielded questions politely while hopefully not influencing the artist's vision of the piece. I did get many remarks along the lines of: "Does the dog enjoy this and is he really okay?" or "My dog could do that, easy. You bring him here for his afternoon nap, right?"

All told, Jazz played dead for a total of about eighteen hours. He worked in seven- to twenty- minute sessions, depending on how well he was doing. We took 3-5 minute breaks in a back room to rest and to cool off. He did a remarkable job

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considering there was no air conditioning (one day, temperatures reached 100F outside) and the rug is smack in the middle of a huge room.

Even with Jazz's training experience, one challenge was his keeping his tail still. Jazz is motivationally marker trained (creating, using and fostering his enthusiastic, happy emotions for much of his training). His "keep-going" marker, my mouthing "good" or giving him a thumbs up, would often generate vigorous wagging. While the wagging turned out to be a huge relief to the patrons, it provided me with a good training challenge. I averted my eyes from his and smiled and then marked the not wagging to keep his wagging to a minimum. I did not attempt to control was his eye movement, however. A very still "dead" dog following people's movement around the room with his eyes to me, this was both very funny yet a little creepy.

Participating in DOGMA was a once in a lifetime experience, and one we will not forget. The training challenge was terrific – the reason I do animal acting work is primarily for the training challenges that abound and to see what needs to be done to keep my dog relaxed, engaged, motivated and happy. And, this work was really, really fun. As with many jobs we get, it's a

privilege to be a small part of a totally different work environment, a back door to many people and places that we would normally not be exposed to or have access to. As a testament to his training, Jazz always dragged us back to the gallery each day, and he enjoyed being an art object. He did

get lots of pets and greeted lots of people from all over the world who took his picture and made calls on their cell phones to get people to come and see this remarkable thing.

This link to a video made at the show opening gives you an idea of the largest crowd we had:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0Ssqm0I_nss

How we trained for this: Jazz is trained using many techniques, and for this work the use of both body and physical targets was instrumental. Having individually trained body targets, i.e. nose, cheek, chin, top of head, neck/collar, feet, shoulder, and hip allows for very low stress animal acting work. Equally important, it results in very reliable, stable behavior from the dog since he has learned to specifically place his own body where he is asked. Stress inducing physical hauling and dragging become unnecessary. Each target is taught with the 3 Ds in mind – duration, distance, and major distractions. For "Tragedy," using a foot target, a down, a hip, a shoulder and cheek target made playing dead much easier. We trained for this for about two weeks, using the targeting and stay – once he got up to about 90 seconds of real stillness in many locations, we then easily worked up to 3 minutes, then 5, then 10. I knew

AKC Chairman's Report

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U.S. Senate have issued proclamations in support of AKC's Canine Good Citizen program. An additional goal would be to have all 50 states support the program.

Training a dog is at the core of everything we do - from conformation to coursing, from heeling to herding to hunting - nobody knows how to do it better than we do. We can help make America's dogs be better members of their families and society. We can help make America's dog owners be more responsible owners. We can help make America think differently about our role in their lives...

Sincerely,
Alan Kalter
Chairman

if he could do 10 he could do more, and during his performance he did many twenty-minute stays. I bumped up the distractions, always keeping him successful with each increasing one, until he was fine laying there with his dinner scattered all around him on the floor. While he did drool during his training, that was something I did not worry about carrying into the real work since I faded the food work as early as I could – I used it just to be sure he knew what he was supposed to do.



Peg and Jazz remained connected throughout the performance. At top left, note Peg at the far left, blending into the crowd.