

PORTRAYING WITHOUT FRAMING OR HOW TO SHOOT A POODLE WITHOUT HER STRIKING A POSE

Indrė Liškauskaitė and Delta

I noticed her unusual behaviour around the phone a few years ago. We were at the seaside and she was happily running at the beach and playing with the sticks. I started filming her with my phone. She immediately stopped and froze. I didn't pay attention and encouraged her to continue her play. Later I tried to film her wild fun a couple of times more and she acted the same—the moment she saw me holding the phone towards her, she stopped playing and gazed at me with little dribbles on the lips. Her mouth was slightly open with the flirty tip of her pink tongue shown. She was striking a pose.

Delta is a 5 year old brown medium size poodle. She is a very quirky and hearty dog who loves to steal things and play with squeaky toys. She is extremely cute and I am obsessed with taking pictures of her.



When Delta was a puppy, each time she stood or sat still while I was taking pictures of her, she received a treat. As a smart little dog, the poodle learned to pose and froze without asking, only reacting to my body language and

understanding that the phone camera directed to her means a big chance to get a tasty treat if she will stand without moving.

My phone is overloaded with pictures of the poodle. Most of the pictures are taken in a very similar composition—the dog is in the middle of the frame, frozen and gazing towards the camera. The focus is sharp, the dog is facing the photographer. The dog is aware of the phone camera.

What does the innocent sit, stay, and look at the camera uncover about human relation with companion animal species? What cultural and philosophical questions may this poodle behavior illustrate?

This short text could start reflecting on the history of photography and patterns of camera awareness of human and non-human animals. Or question looking at and mirroring the Other, an animal in this case, and how, in Donna Haraway's words, we "polish an animal mirror to look for ourselves." We could analyze virtuality as a hyperobject with Timothy Morton and its effects on the companion animals with or without their awareness of the virtuality. Or we could compare examples of petishism, which Anne Friedberg described years before the emergence of social media and especially the rise of animal accounts on Instagram.

Beneath the flirty look of the poodle towards me and my iPhone, I understand that this situation carries multiple layers of meaning. I would like to focus on Randy Malamud's terms of framing and unframing in the following photo series prepared for this publication.

In the book *An Introduction to Animals and Visual culture* (2012), Malamud rethinks how human-created representational systems about animals dislocate the meanings and the contexts in which animals are seen and understood; from the natural to the cultural. Frames like photography, painting, phone, tv or cinema screen, and the others, according to Malamud, shape the animal's existence and relation to humans. Any animal visibility initiated by humans could be considered as framing.

I guess animal Instagram accounts perfectly match the description of framing, as it is humans, not animals themselves, who are capturing cute moments, describing the

thoughts of the furry ones, and making them take on the role of an entertainer.

While thinking about framing, I review the pictures I took of Delta and posted on her personal Instagram profile @delta_the_non_human. All of the photos are showing a very human-like version of her, there are repeated face angles, even her expressions all look the same. I think I did it unintentionally, following other pet accounts and repeating the same approach.

I wonder how I can change this pattern and capture a wilder and more natural version of the poodle.

"Being put into a cultural frame means being taken out of a natural frame. One might argue that 'natural frame' is a contradiction in terms, and perhaps it is: perhaps we should think of an animal's natural existence as frameless by definition". Malamud suggests the idea "of an animal's 'natural frame' as an antithesis to the 'cultural frame', which the author describes as a place "where we frame animals when we are not framing them, or when we think we are not framing them.

The frameless animal image may be described as an animal representation, without posing, without the feeling of the human presence behind the camera, without human directing of the situation or the surroundings, trying to minimize human impact and an attempt to make the one on the screen display human traits. Rethinking if a frameless animal portrait or image even exists, and pondering its necessity, I believe that conscious animal representation decisions may also transfer to our engagement with the companion (or other) species in general.

One might say that the frameless animal image is no image at all. But in our frames, images, and screens dominating the world, it is naïve to expect to reduce all the animal visual representations. As an alternative representation, I may suggest exploring the different ways, angles, and focus settings, to portray the animals and how a switch in our picture-taking modes can shift our approach towards the other, in our case—the dog.

The photo series *Portraying Without Framing, or How to Shoot a Poodle Without Her Striking a Pose* is an attempt

is an attempt at unframing. The photos are arranged by thinking about the definition of framing and how images can be classified as more natural or more human-like. It is an interpretation of the term based on Delta's case, and I don't aim to generalize or make particular conclusions.

We were at the seaside, the same place where I first saw her posing behavior a couple of years ago. We went for a walk in the sandy forest. I took my phone and a photo camera.

In order to break down the poodle posing behavior, I needed to change the tools and my own body language—instead of pointing the phone towards the dog, I took the pictures from resting my lowered arm. It switched the angle and the composition—I couldn't see the frame through the camera lens or the phone screen and captured accidental pictures.

I switched from the phone to my photo camera. In the beginning, the poodle was expecting some treats for standing still, but soon became bored and started sniffing and playing with the sticks. She didn't seem to notice the camera. She was smelling the mosses and chewing pine cones. I observed her with the camera eye but didn't interrupt.

I played with the focus and exposure settings, trying to capture the light on her silvery curls and nimble moves. Focus and image sharpness felt more *framing* than *unframing*. I avoided freezing myself while taking pictures and we kept moving. I followed her through the forest on her chosen path. We remained silent the whole time.

Co-existing with our companion animals with less intention to control their behavior in safe situations, such as posing towards the camera, can open up different ways of being together. The posing dog and the innocent finger press to take a photo is not just about the way of taking the pictures; it reflects how we look and interact with them. Walking together with Delta and trying not to impact her with my human thoughts and rules allowed me to observe a more genuine version of herself and be more attentive to the details of the environment—the cones she found, the light on her curls, the patterns of her gaze while observing the forest. She was teaching me to be in the moment. We cannot deny the existing hierarchies in this relationship, but we

can be more aware and attentive to the little details of our behaviour and how it could be shifted for a more unframed look and understanding of our companion species.

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