

## Art on a Leash

In his show at the Cristinerose Gallery in New York, Robert F. Hammerstiel examines our conditioning as social animals and the emotions and desires we project on our pets.

If you and your dog want to be famous, come to the museum!" an advertisement in a Saarbrücken daily read two years ago. At that time, Austrian artist Robert F. Hammerstiel was looking for subjects to photograph for his exhibition at the Center for Contemporary Art in this German town. Many dogowners followed his call. "I might have made contemporary art less alien to many people," recalls Robert F. Hammerstiel with a chuckle.

Since the mid-1980s, the 43-year-old photographer-turned-conceptual artist has created works that dwell on the familiar, arising perhaps from a casual glance or an interest in scarcely noticed everyday phenomena. Hammerstiel removes subjects from their natural settings and recontextualizes them in group works and installations. The work, rather than focusing on a precise representation of real objects, emphasizes the perceptual and associative relationship between viewer and depiction.

For his large-scale show in Saarbrücken, Hammerstiel printed oversized portrait shots of dogs. They looked directly at the viewer and their gaze seemed to bespeak a stronger individuality than the police-like, diminutive mugshot Hammerstiel took of their owners. In an ironic twist, the artist reversed the roles of man and his best friend.

In the exhibition *A Dog's Life* at Cristinerose Gallery in New York (February 24 to March 31, 2001), he continues to elaborate on the subject. Hammerstiel juxtaposes dog leashes with portraits of dog owners. He match-

es portraits of dogs with syringes used to implant identification microchips (a device commonly inserted under a dog's skin to detect its whereabouts in case of bites), and assembles photographs of a variety of plastic toys for dogs. A subtly satirical commentary addresses issues on many scales, from the personal to the global. Emotional dependence, desire for power and subjugation, channeling emotions through the promise of the world of mass production, and the threat of the impending spread of technologies of absolute control are among the topics.

The leash, physically and visually analogous to a noose, describes the relationship between master and dog, referencing Western attitudes towards nature or the individual's desire for an object to love and dominate.

Hammerstiel presents a complicit link between society and an industry that thrives on dogs and their owners. From the production of food to the marketing of toys, there is a legible anthropomorphization of the animal. The microchip implanted beneath the skin of the dogs can be read as an expression of this humanization because, as does a fingerprint or genetic code, it testifies to the individuality of the bearer. Yet, Hammerstiel's work makes us aware that it only confirms the existence of a product and its location within a system.

Hammerstiel's photographic investigations also examine background, the visual scenery that informs our conceptions of happiness, intimacy and privacy. Viewers, all too accustomed to the role this background plays in their private



realm in defining their experiences, often remain unaware of its importance as a surface for projecting wishes and emotions. In Saarbrücken, for example, Hammerstiel aimed his lens at the potted plant, relating it to our desire to return to the Garden of Eden.

The thematically organized work of Hammerstiel's recent past may be seen as descriptive catalogues of conflicts between our conditioning as social animals and our desire for protected intimacy. The work begins with the observation that in the realm of images and objects man is an unconscious actor rather than a director in full command. Hammerstiel asks to what extent an individual can express his or her identity through the objects they choose to surround them.

A complex tension is generated between unique images and their serial production; the individual motifs provide the foundation for exploration and inquiries into the mechanisms or presentation and their resultant physical manifestations. These issues of representation (symbolism, possession, production, functionality) and the subtext behind their physical counterparts (artificiality, pretense, imitation) are recurrent themes in Hammerstiel's work.

For more information on the exhibit *A Dog's Life*, please see the calendar section of this issue.

The article is based on information provided by the Cristinerose Gallery.