

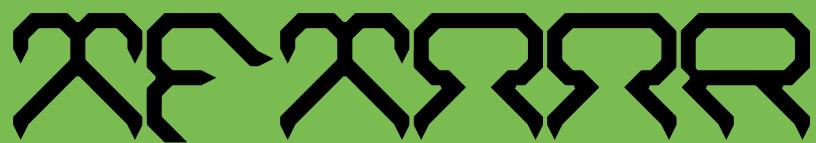
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Cristian Hernandez of DDOOGG chats with Aidan Koch about her newest project: 'the Institute For Interspecies Art And Relations' [IFIARR].

Operating at the intersection of publishing, ethics, aesthetics, research, and activism, the IFIARR endeavours to pursue creative avenues for exploring ever-changing relationships between ourselves and the many species with whom we share this planet.

To follow Koch's work visit ↵

ifiaar.org
aidankoch.com





Hi! So, I'm not very experienced with the formalities of an interview, but I reckoned we could establish some introductory remarks, just to kick things off and provide a little context for readers. You know, like, who are you and what is the Institute For Interspecies Art And Relations?

DDOOGG



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Yes of course, a very good place to start. I'm Aidan Koch, an artist currently between NY, California, and Washington State. The project started as a response to our current biodiversity crisis, as well as my own need for finding a gray area in which to connect to the animals I've always loved.

Obviously focusing on non-human animals is only one part of the ecologic story, but the rate of individual extinctions and decimation of biodiversity within formerly complex ecosystems is a very real thing to measure. While there are different approaches to coping with this loss, there's a fear that we are also starting to over-manage something we honestly don't totally understand still. All this is happening while simultaneously scientists are 'discovering' that non-human animals are far more intelligent, emotional, and sensitive than previously treated, creating new standards for legislation and legal standings, companion species are regaining footing as a necessary part of the human experience, and factory farming is beginning to face public shame for contributing to carbon emissions. All of these issues are deeply tied to the histories of religion, scientific revolution, colonization, industrialization, and globalization. It's a lot to unravel and new philosophical questions have to be asked about how these issues are being treated. I'm very under-educated on these topics and can't stop reading lately, as it feels like an endless investigation.

I guess I want to look at the big picture while also pulling things back to an intimate level by recognizing non-human animals as individuals in our lives and not simply distant species. Most people have had a significant relationship with a non-human animal at some point or had significant encounters. We should be honoring those. A big difference coming from art and not science is that art is the language of metaphor, something E. O. Wilson really pushes in his book *The Meaning of Human Existence*. There are possibilities there for nuanced communication and perception and love that you don't get in reading academic, peer reviewed papers.

My biggest focus is publishing as there is already a significant pool of people whose interests and work falls between these worlds. I really want to be a resource in getting this work out there. The first week of September I am also organizing the first IFIAAR pop up event in New York. It's still developing but will include lectures, workshops, a reading room, and resident snake :) The big dream is headquarters that can act as an animal sanctuary,

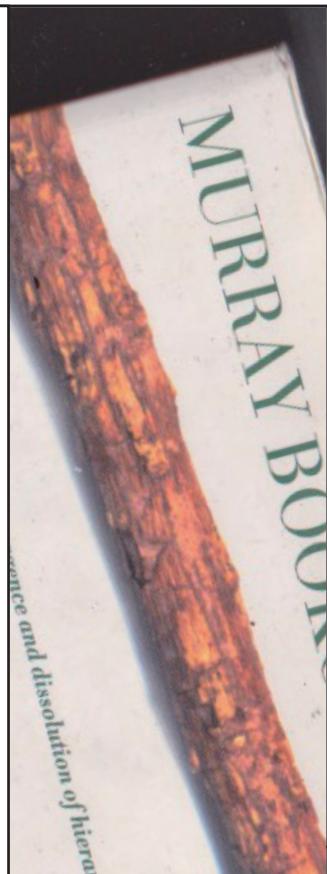


IFIaar

Yeah, you're absolutely right, there's a lot to unravel. I mean, even thinking about the sheer breadth of scope required to address the issues, concepts, and histories you're referring to. Correct me if I'm off the mark here, but personally I find it effective to capture all these ideas under the notion of the 'Anthropocene', or if one prefers a more generic term, such as 'intensified planetary state change'. Which, to me, connects to all these global biospheric crises--from extinction to amplified carbon emissions, to biodiversity loss--as well as the more localized, socio-cultural, or subjective effects it evokes--like ecological grief, or solastalgia, legislative changes, or a renewed relationship with non-human organisms. And I agree with you, there is this tendency for institutional bodies to negotiate these interrelated crises with insufficient, and often outdated models for cognizing ecological totality. Whether this is evidenced in market-oriented models that conceive of non-human nature as 'externalities', industrial agricultural practices that undermine their own material substrate, or technocratic managerialism that believes we can simply overcome environmental thresholds and perpetuate endless economic growth with only minor reforms to the global capitalist system.

So, one reason I'm so excited about endeavours like IFIAAR, is that they contribute to the conceptual and methodological diversity required to render the Anthropocene truly intelligible. Aesthetic research and production oriented around these issues shape deeply philosophical questions about the construction of value and meaning and the ethical frameworks that emerge therefrom. I'm also of the opinion that, due to the complexity of processes and events that comprise the Anthropocene, we must embrace collaborative and integrated forms of research and practice that seek to overcome barriers between disciplines, species, and perspectives.

Does that sound like something IFIAAR is hoping to accomplish? Also I'm curious about what types of practitioners you envision being a part of this forthcoming pop-up event in NYC.



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I mean that is definitely in my mind really as the mission, though maybe more as the driving factor. Part of the whole catalyst for the project was feeling deeply inefficient in my background and loneliness surrounding my own anxieties over the Anthropocene. Collaboration really feels like the way to link oneself to larger efforts and mental frameworks around this crisis. I'm curious in exploring where different people intersect and can contribute to the overall language, so I'm hoping other people are interested too. I know I have a small gauge on some people in my own community who are interested and talking and making relevant work but it's quite a minority, which is surprising. That made me feel like it's a good time to be a resource and openly engage them.

For the event, I really want to focus on education. One of my concerns that I'm very consciously trying to stay away from is having the project become pretentious or too esoteric. I want the question to continuously be "is this improving or activating people's understanding of our relationship between species?"

I'll be giving a presentation with a friend I collaborated with a few years ago who's an entomologist and percussion composer, I'm talking to someone now who's an artist and professor who does animal rehabilitation work, I'm going to go meet with a person who is really active in the pigeon scene who also does zines, etc. Once you start asking around, there are really interesting people with really varied experiences and expertise. It's exciting. There will also be a small art show, bird walk, and pop up library.



Oh! Your answer touches on something quite valuable that I wanted to bring up next, and that is accessibility and pedagogy. Your guiding question ("Is this improving or activating people's understanding of our inter-species relationships?") is generous and practical, and it doesn't hinge on high-context knowledge or deep academic literacy. Is it important for you that the IFIAAR remains accessible in such a manner? Do you perceive IFIAAR as an entry-point platform for folks who are just beginning to explore these ideas?

Considering the bleak reality of where we are at in our relations--rapidly declining species and populations all over the world, pollution and destruction of the remaining habitat, extreme industrialization of animal product production and reproduction--accessibility feels so important. We haven't improved ANY of these issues in the last 50 years, despite various groundbreaking works and activism, so the tactics have to change.

This can't just be an insular outlet. I've been vegetarian/vegan almost my whole life, but have maintained relationships with people who hunt, fish, slaughter, or raise livestock because they are also people that often care about the quality of the lives of their animals and their environments. I've never specifically pushed an agenda with my friends or family but even through accommodating me they've often shifted their own choices. I think it's part of the power of awareness and culture. If suddenly a voice appears in your head and says "well, but that came from a factory farm", or "I actually don't need meat with every meal", or "that might end up in the ocean if I throw it away", or "it's scary looking but is it actually going to hurt me?" or "how come I don't see those birds anymore?", you might start actually making changes to your life.

I guess that's why 'relations' is central to the institute--when you realize your actions have direct affects on someone else's well-being it becomes something you take into account. So the agenda here is expanding the ways in which awareness can be directed and influenced and art feels like a way to do that that certainly hasn't been exhausted.

Of course, I personally am very interested in delving deeper into philosophical inquiries as a backbone to being the director here. Beyond fighting against everything going wrong right now, there needs to be an image of positive co-habitation. The academic world really helps with that. Some books that helped me see positives were *Zoopolis: A Political Theory of Animal Rights* by Sue Donaldson and Will Kymlicka, *Emergent Strategy* by Adrienne Maree Brown, and *The Ecology of Freedom* by Murray Bookchin. These are part of the library I'm trying to assemble even as a guide to anyone who wants to delve further.

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It baffles me to think that some folks overlook the relational entanglement that our species maintains with non-human life. Especially considering the massive complexity of terrestrial life and the biospheric systems that everything on this planet is integrated with. Just seems like a no-brainer to accept our inter-related and co-dependent condition. However, one thing that complicates this (at least for our species) is the difficulty of delineating the often overwhelming totality of our relationships with the living world, and focusing on something local, manageable, or intelligible to ourselves. It seems to me like the IFIAAR is well on its way to achieving and sustaining this objective, fostering the attention of its audience and generating the resources to honour, intervene, and transform





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these relationships in constructive and radical ways. For instance, throughout the interview you've often returned to the centrality of interspecies relations from the perspective of an agential human subject--whether it be sustained bonds with non-human organisms, an awareness of the direct affects one has on other animals' well-being, mindful dietary choices, etc. However, it's worth noting as well that many interspecies relations are often difficult to perceive and act upon, yet are nonetheless deeply ingrained in our species' social and evolutionary development. I find it fascinating to consider that our interspecies relationships are often shaping us, co-evolving with us, in a myriad of ways irrespective of our intentions, ethics, or awareness. I'm thinking of things like the mutualism we maintain with our microbiome, the positive feedback cycles between domesticated plants and labor practices, insect-environment-population networks that have altered our geographic history, or human-bacteria horizontal gene transfers. I don't know if I'm splitting hairs here but I think these kinds of relationships--ones which are not explicitly visible, or which are distributed across relatively inaccessible scales of space and time--are qualitatively different than, say, those shared by humans and companion species. Sorry, this is a really roundabout and kinda convoluted way of asking whether you think it's possible to facilitate forms of cultural production and awareness that somewhat exceed the human purview, yet remain fundamentally interspecies oriented and biospherically-aligned, and whether you think IFIAAR is interested in such efforts, whatever they might be.

Right now, I feel like a lot of the awareness I'm focused on is part of a re-awakening. We are having things that make sense (tree communication, animal consciousness) validated by science after being ridiculed and eradicated from western thinking and religion for centuries. I feel like our capability of perception is growing, and it's good.

What's interesting about examining and encompassing things like microscopic flora and bacteria is that it's an awareness that is only possible through science and only becoming part of our awareness now. It's maybe not as 'natural' an instinct to understand these things because we have never before had the technology to confirm such existences but I think including it will be really significant to how we register our bodies in space (not necessarily 'space' space, but existence) in the future. It feels like it's offering us a tool that can also be utilized to envision how we might relate to 'alien' species, or A.I. and life that maybe right now still seems imperceivable. As someone who enjoys Sci-Fi and Fantasy, this is a cool concept and mental challenge.

Beyond that interest though, kind of how we've talked already, I try to not get lost from what feels most relevant to changing conditions now. In the way that ancient knowledge really had a lot of things pretty right through observation alone, I'm always skeptical that relying too heavily on research, innovation, and technology to explain and validate can lead us away from grounding ourselves or finding stability.

I talked to someone recently whose parent, I believe, got a really crazy HD camera and their photos were literally so high quality that you could zoom in and see more details than you can even with the naked eye. They said it was horrible! I'm not anti-technology or science but there are some things that I do dwell on questioning the need for expansion. Is it good to know what something looks like that up close? Is it important? Does it improve our relation to our bodies and the world? Will there ever be

a point where someone isn't trying to create an even sharper image? How many resources have been used to achieve this? I don't know... obviously there's no 'going back', so I guess this awareness is part of something unique for our time, but I do wish things could slow down. Maybe if I believed in our human state as one generally heading towards a more positive future I could be more excitable.

Yeah, that makes a lot of sense. If I understand you correctly, the most valuable technologies or scientific resources are those which are coupled with efforts to direct our species towards more positive, ecological futures--ones which, in some fundamental, perhaps almost spiritual way, share an affinity with prior, more interconnected modes of existence or awareness that have since been eclipsed by modern western thought.

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Yeah, I think there's a part of me that's just scared of people always believing they can 'innovate' their way out of messes or that they need to prove their generation by scrapping vetted technology from the past. Or even like those things don't matter because they can literally, or digitally, float away from the earth and dirt that they evolved from.

That reminds me of an interesting article in Scientific American by Kim Stanley Robinson titled *What Will It Take for Humans to Colonize the Milky Way?* where some of these issues are put into perspective in a concise, approachable, and humbling manner.

I'd love to read it!

It's a pretty sobering read for many reasons, one being that he advances this claim that developing a sustainable, long-term, eco-social civilization is the bare minimum prerequisite for even beginning to consider leaving this planet. Arguably, contemporary global capitalism is far from achieving anything resembling such a paradigm.

Oh wow that sounds fantastic. I'd actually love for children to never dream of being astronauts again.

Looping back to the topic of intersections between ancient wisdom and technology, would you mind talking about the IFIAAR library a bit more? What are some really important titles you think everyone should be familiar with? Also, do you see any comic art or graphic novels doing comparable work in this intellectual, creative, or socio-political arena?



I genuinely have a paranoia of losing information, or philosophies, we have gained from studying the planet and ourselves for so long, simply due to digitization of media or infrastructural carelessness (like communities opting to close libraries over paying the minuscule extra amount in taxes, or the lack of preparedness to extinguish fires like the one that just happened in the National Museum in Brazil). Of course there's this belief now that digitizing actually prolongs something's archival quality, but will we always have the power to keep these data centers accessible? Will there be an end to excessive privatization that will make these things open to any that seek them?

I wanted to collect books for multiple reasons. One: so that I have something tangible to organize my thoughts around and to self-educate through. I can't say for sure, but my current trajectory doesn't include grad school. I love learning though and finding connections that pull together disparate fantasies and ideologies that I have. I've read probably 25 or so of what I've collected so far and am steadfastly working on it. Two: so that I personally can be a resource to others. By knowing the books I can help direct others on their own area of interest. Right now, I won't actually be lending anything out for long term usage, but hopefully when I have my permanent structure,



anyone staying in residency or passing through can sit back and spend some personal time with them. All the books are actually together for the first time right now at Entrance (NYC) where I'm hosting my event and it feels really good. I organized them into three categories: Animal/Ecology Art & Literature, Animal Welfare & History, and Anthropology/Philosophy/Human Impact. From each of these subjects, my favorites might be *Butterfly Cooing like a Dove* by Miriam Rothschild, *Animals Make us Human* by Temple Grandin, *Earth's Insights: A Multicultural Survey of Ecological Ethics from the Mediterranean Basin to the Australian Outback* by J. Baird Callicott. That's tough still though... there's quite a few top contenders... These are really splendid, approachable books though.



The Art & Literature section is by far the smallest. Maybe it's just that I've been sucked into this non-fiction world for a year or two now, but I haven't found a massive amount of work I deemed relevant in this way (although I'm hoping to add a children's section which would be very rich I think, having grown up with Beatrix Potter and Hugh Lofting's Dr Doolittle). This did remind me though that there's still a Sue Coe show up at MoMA PS1 that's closing this weekend. She is massively relevant and influential in creating a visual story world around animal-welfare. I think most of what is presented to society though is simply the use of animals as symbols or stand-ins (i.e. *Maus*). It can be an interesting twist, and I do have Aesop's Fables in the library, but often this has little influence of the perception of animals themselves (i.e. *Animal Farm*) apart from maybe misleading villainization. Of course there is ample room here for one to take it to that level.



DONNA J. HARAWAY WHEN SPECIES MEET

Well at the very least I think interspecies considerations are quite explicit in your own pre-IFIaar work, like *The Hylaeus Project* (which you mentioned previously), some exhibitions like *A to Zed*, or even the recent mini *KUS!* zine *Daughter*. But there are also indirect references, or connections, to such ideas naturally embedded in subjects such as mysticism or symbolism--subjects that have often been a central focus of your work in the past. Would you say there is a clear trajectory to the development of your art that has brought you to where you are now? Like as though your creative interests have become refined over time, and culminated in an endeavour like IFIAAR, or does that sound too linear or deterministic?

If anything I feel like IFIAAR was something I felt I wanted/needed to do because my previous work feels so far from a natural focus. And it's very likely that's just my brain saying that, but I've always felt the work I'm often inclined to do, especially in comics, is heavier in this very subtle, emotional/psychological way. It's more wrapped up in mental exploration. It's true more recently I've expanded and am seeing how I can access the other part of my interests, but I also get scared it is 'forced' or something, whereas IFIAAR is a very straight forward way to express those topics. It almost frees me up by knowing I'm covering that base since I care about it so much. Of course my very first graphic novel in 2010 was called *The Whale*, haha so I guess maybe it has been a theme...

Lastly, I've noticed some activity brewing on your Instagram around what appears to be a site in Yucca Valley, California. Is this the dream headquarters you mentioned at the beginning of this conversation? The sanctuary, residency and research centre? What can you tell us about its development, and what are you looking forward to in 2019?



Yes, it's happening! And actually since we started this conversation, many things have definitely taken shape, including the programming I was planning in NYC! I'm no longer based in Yucca though, but ended up with property in Landers, CA which is only another 20 minutes away. It's about two acres with a house and garage. I'm not much of a builder, but this is where I'm hoping to have some kind of structural base. It's a really incredible environment out there, and even before I have things totally set I will probably have friends come out who are interested since it's very easy to be involved with the conservation community and explore the various habitats. We already have an abundance of giant hairy scorpions, night lizards, black widows and ladder backed woodpeckers hanging around the house which I'm sure could inspire someone!

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That sounds really interesting and hopefully we could make our way out there sometime in the near future! Any final remarks you'd like to add before we wrap this up?

Please come :-)

I know it's just one more thing when so many other issues are directly imperiling many humans a lot faster. And while I support directing energy towards themes Americans have been preaching constantly in the last 2 years: to vote, to donate, to volunteer, to research, to listen, to communicate and participate outside of their digital lives... it's also emotionally draining and often depressing. It doesn't feel like it will be successful long-term to simply pit people against negative action. It's important to take note from positive reinforcement training and remember that animals (us) do better when we are stimulated via positive emotions. Find something that feels personally fulfilling--experimental vegan cooking nights, putting up hummingbird feeders, fostering kittens, raising beetles--and take it from there.

Images in order of appearance:

- IFIAAR Logo
- Instagram Post - Aidan Koch
- Untitled Drawing - Aidan Koch
- Murray Bookchin - *The Ecology of Freedom*
- Lala Albert - Recent Visits and Observations
- Snake
- Gecko
- Selection from A to Zed, Park View Gallery, LA
- Aidan & Pidgeon
- Drawing by Aidan's Father
- Donna Haraway - *When Species Meet*
- Illustration from *The Hylaeus Project*, collaboration with Lisa Schonberg