

Anastasia Koutsogiannis  
Marissa Sean Cruz  
*PLAY(ing) IN MY PEN(ding doom)* (2019)

*Marissa Sean Cruz on (Robotic) Puppy Love*

A pile of dog food bordered by a puppy playpen immediately sets the playful tone of Marissa Sean Cruz's installation. Sitting on top of the dog food is an iPad, playing a three-minute animated video performance by the artist herself. Quirky and shocking, viewers are simultaneously drawn in and pushed back, unable to look away.

Parallel to our seemingly failed relationship with real dogs, Marissa Sean Cruz's *PLAY(ing) IN MY PEN(ding doom)* critiques Boston Dynamic's animatronic dog robot and their 2018 promotional video<sup>1</sup>. Treating it like any other break-up, a dog-masked Cruz includes herself singing along to Demi Lovato's heartbreak anthem, "Don't Forget."

Cruz's digitally enhanced wide eyes look tearful and confrontational, as though we have fully dismissed our connection to dogs. She lip-syncs the melancholic lyrics with a pleading look in her eyes—"did you forget about me?"

"*Pop music is pop music for a reason, it's a part of self-indulgence,*" said the artist in an interview<sup>2</sup>. "*There's a lot of context and personal connections for people; that's what can make it special. Judging that is unfair.*" Appreciation for certain mainstream culture, like pop music and reality television is a guilty pleasure.

Our relationship with dogs has been greatly impacted by popular culture as well. Cruz's work presents the idea that we have betrayed the animal we call "man's best friend." With so many expectations when it comes to our pets and technology, the relationship we have with both fascinates her. "*When robotic dogs come into the equation, the relationship becomes even more complicated, the dog becomes a tool, feeding into a non-reciprocal relationship.*" If the relationship is non-reciprocal, can we call it a relationship at all? Where both parties should be mutually benefitting, our stubborn human selfishness takes precedence as it is always looking for better. By inevitably pushing our furry friends away with new technologies, we have shown disloyalty to the animal we have known to be so loyal to us.

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<sup>1</sup> Boston Dynamics, "Hey, Buddy Can You Give Me a Hand?", February 12, 2018, video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fUyU3lKzoio>.

<sup>2</sup> Marissa Sean Cruz, interview by Anastasia Koutsogiannis, virtual interview, June 30, 2020.

On the iPad, a pink puppy travels across the screen, gazes back at the viewer as if to provoke guilt. *“That little dog was actually given to me by an ex-lover; I ended up destroying it later on,”* Cruz confessed with a laugh.

The video stimulates a sensorial experience with the expressive sounds and images of flesh and bone, microscopic images of human bone marrow, wiring and metals. The anatomies that make up humans, dogs as well as their robotic versions bring forward how different we truly are. It is hard to look away, especially with Cruz's compelling sound design. The strong bass beats as a heart would, drawing us in as if we could walk into the video ourselves.

The overlapped images and intense glares from both Cruz and the puppy toy are unsettling. The “creepiness” around doll culture and the eeriness of being watched by someone through a camera can create an uncomfortable feeling. *“Creepy things are worthy of discussion. There is something honest about dancing around your room and singing break-up songs. It is only weird because you do it in private,”* Cruz explained.

When its promotional video came out in 2018, Boston Dynamic's dog robot was widely received as unsettling and disturbing. Nonetheless, the original video attempts to present the robot as a sophisticated and admirable technological advancement. *PLAY(ing) IN MY PEN(ding doom)* removes this image and instead offers us an unglamourized version. Cruz includes the robot dog spinning around upside down and moving to the beat of her chosen music as if to make it look like it is dancing. Boston Dynamic's creation starts to look ridiculous and allows us to see it in a different light.

*“Really what is to be feared are the corporations, not the technology itself. Coding is never neutral; in the end, it could be fruitful, but it could be problematic. Technology will always be made from the hands of people with their own ideologies.”*

With this in mind, Cruz offers us a nostalgic atmosphere where we can return to our trusty old friends and reflect on the mechanics of our past love.

### Works Cited

Boston Dynamics. "Hey, Buddy Can You Give Me a Hand?". February 12, 2018. Promotional video, 0:45. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fUyU3IKzoio>.

Marissa Sean Cruz, interview by Anastasia Koutsogiannis, virtual interview, June 30, 2020.