Feral Participations:

Exploring Art and the Creaturely Through Interspecies Practice

by

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Abstract

This art research project develops strategies to challenge and loosen anthropocentrism in art through its vulnerable, responsive and speculative approach to art participations with other species. 'Feral participations' bring the labile energy of experimental art into spaces of care and attentiveness for and with real, situated beings. The practice is 'feral' in its crossings and connections with other-than-human beings and beyond human realms. The 'vulnerable artmaking' of feral participation is porous and playful, exploring diverse aesthetics and foregrounding distinctive creaturely subjectivities. A responsive, additive approach to methods acts as a model for expanded dialogue with other species, which extends the concept of the dialogical aesthetic in participatory art. Through this, ethics and aesthetics become irrepressibly entwined.

This thesis proposes 'unknowing' as a concept for interspecies practice, which articulates how the human artist consciously delimits their expectations of other-than-human participants to open space for new distributed knowledge to emerge. It develops 'speculative anthropomorphism' as a tool to imaginatively adopt differing creaturely perspectives and bring together alternative sources of knowledge that offer fresh approaches to human ideas and problems, and challenge epistemological hierarchies. Feral participations generate artworks that create opportunities for human audiences to engage more deeply and imaginatively with nonhuman beings, and perceive them and ourselves in new ways, and co-shape the ethical and aesthetic register in which art is made and received.

The research draws selectively from participatory art, feminist new materialisms and indigenous animisms, as well as the writing of Deleuze and Guattari, to articulate the affective dynamics of feral participations, which position other-than-human subjectivities (for example ants) as specifically powerful and influential within a creative assemblage. What currently occupies a position outside art (the gestures, forms and markings of the nonhuman) is brought into its purview. All beings are brought forward as persons, and their societies as cultural containers of knowledge and creativity, with and from which humans can learn.

Contents

Introduction

This thesis responds to two questions: what can art do to make interspecies relations more imaginative and empathic, and: how can art decentre the human – in art, and, through art, also in other disciplines? To tackle these questions, the research has engaged long-term with different places and with situated populations of selected species, including wood ants, plants and foxes. These creative interspecies relationships and dialogues – '*feral participations*' – drive and shape the research throughout. Whilst emerging from and informed by a practice of painting, the methods have been extended and chosen in response to the insights and requirements of this interspecies methodology – moving between and taking up new tools in order to cultivate responsive and imaginative ways to bring species together differently.

If art is conceived as a purely human activity pursuing human concerns, this research seeks moments of escape from the purely art, to counter the anthropogenic model of art making, and to extend art's borders. It emerges into, claims space as, and is contextualised through art, but it is never fully contained by art, because it is driven by and enmeshed with wider concerns about how humans might understand (not dominate) and cooperate with (not obliterate) a multispecies world. To this end it engages with concepts and theories from selected non-art knowledge practices, and engages ideas from the disciplines of science, indigenous philosophy, anthropology and posthumanism that think critically and creatively about how species relate.

All art, I would suggest, that engages in depth with these concerns is necessarily transdisciplinary, because until so recently art was near relentless in its anthropocentrism. Since starting this research, there has been a burgeoning interest in ecology and nature across the humanities. A fast-growing subsection of the UK and international art world explores an active interest in ecology and in posthumanism.[1] A glance at the contents page of the recent publication *Art and Climate Change* by Maja and Reuben Fowkes[2] reveals chapter titles that cover topics as diverse as geological records, crude oil, post-glacial and marine landscapes, botanical politics and animal solidarities, reparative histories and eco-futurisms. Attending to multispecies earthly histories and futures leads necessarily across disciplinary boundaries. Interspecies and ecologically focused art is in dialogue with philosophy, politics, sociology, biology, critical plant and animal studies, social justice, indigenous thought and climate science, to name a few.[3]

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[1] I am thinking here of the ecologically focused art programmes run by The Serpentine Gallery (*General Ecologies* strand) Phytology, Arts Catalyst, Obsidian Coast.

[2] Fowkes, Maja and Fowkes, Reuben (2022*) Art and Climate Change*. New York and London: Thames and Hudson.

[3] Reflecting this upsurge of interest, two new MA courses in Art and Ecology opened in the UK in 2021: one at Dartington Arts School, and one at Goldsmiths University where, in October–November 2021, I led the Experimental Laboratory with the first cohort of students, engaging them with some of the ideas and methodologies of this research.

The Deleuze and Guattari concept of 'becoming-animal'[4] and ideas of 'hybridity'[5] inspired an animal turn in art of the 1980s and 1990s. Very many artists during this period *used* animals in their work. Some borrowed animal bodies to form the content of their installations: Jannis Kounellis made a significant and influential precursor in his display of living horses as art in 1969,[6] while Huang Yong Ping's *Theatre of the World* 1993[7] comprised a cage full of reptiles and insects who enacted their predator–prey relations over the course of the exhibition. Some artists adorned or transformed living creatures: Wim Delvoye tattooed live pigs[8] and Eduardo Kac genetically modified a rabbit called Alba,[9] to make her luminous. Other artists destroyed animal bodies (see Kim Jones' *Rat Piece* 1976, in which he set live rats on fire)[10] or used their carcasses, many of which were killed to order (see much of Damien Hirst's oeuvre of this period). These practices do not inform my research directly, but what it takes to go significantly *beyond* them is key. This thesis draws on the techniques and concepts of human participatory art in an attempt to rethink and reconfigure working with nonhuman beings as something more than an artist's 'use' of nonhumans.

Why decentre the human in art? It is logical for individuals of any species to prioritise their own wellbeing, and to understand and represent themselves as ontologically centre of their own world. In these terms, art's conventional anthropocentrism can be understood as logical and adaptive. But to consider other species as equally centred in their own worlds as we humans are in ours is already somewhat de-anthropocentrizing. If mainstream Western culture were that moderate (even, perhaps, were it truly *Anthropos*-centric) it would present less of a problem. However, advanced capitalism produces a world where anthropocentrism is both highly selective (prioritising the rich) and so dominant that it becomes totalitarian and vastly destructive.[11] Whilst some

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[4] 'Becoming-animal' is purposely not quickly definable. It refers to a movement away from the major, or arborescent, or molar – a powerful, stratified and secure base – towards the minor or rhizomatic or molecular – a space that is decentred, lively, in flux – with a particular flavour that is 'animal'. This is not quite about real animals, but animal ideas and obsessions. See the chapter 'Becoming-Intense, Becoming-Animal' in Deleuze, Gilles and Guattari, Felix (1988) *A Thousand Plateaus, Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, London: Athlone Press, pp 232–311.

[5] Hybridity in art is the mixing of two or more elements to create a third. Human–animal forms were commonly brought together in art of the 1980s and 1990s. See chapter 'The Human Made Strange' in Baker, Steve (2000) *The Postmodern Animal*, London: Reaktion Books.

[6] Jannis Kounellis, *Untitled (12 Horses)* Galleria L'Attico, Rome, 1969.

[7] Huang Yong Ping, *Theater of the World*, 1987/1993, Wood and metal structure with warming lamps, electric cable, insects (spiders, scorpions, crickets, cockroaches, black beetles, stick insects, centipedes), lizards, toads, and snakes, New York: Guggenheim Museum.

[8] Wim Delvoye reared and tattooed pigs for several years in China where he bought an 'Art Farm' in 2003.

[9] Eduardo Kac, *GFP Bunny*, 2000. The first public announcement of Alba's birth was in the context of the Planet Work conference, in San Francisco, on 14 May 2000.

[10] Kim Jones, *Rat Piece (performance)* California State University Campus, Los Angeles, 2 February1976.

[11] See for example: Jones, Owen. *It's socialism for the rich and capitalism for the rest of us in Britain*, The Guardian 29.8.2014 https://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/aug/29/socialism-for-the-rich [Accessed 17.7.23] and Monbiot, George, *Capitalism is Killing the Planet, it's Time To Stop Buying Into Our Own Destruction,* The Guardian 30.10.2021

corporations, species and individuals profit from the massive disturbance, extraction and exploitation of living and earthly resources, the majority of species are now in difficulty and decline, and the global majority of humans is pressurised and under threat. Anthropocentrism has long ceased to promote human, creaturely, or earthly survival.

Where capitalism draws from theories of evolution that place inter- and intra-specific competition for resources above any other success factor, this research looks to alternative models that foreground species symbiosis, mutualism and cooperation. In 1967 Lynn Margulis[12] proposed her revolutionary theory that the eukaryotic cells (from which all complex life is built) were the product of symbiotic relationships between once free-living protozoa and bacteria.[13] In 1997 pioneering forest scientist Suzanne Simard revealed that forests are communicative systems, in which hundreds of sentient partners cooperate across species boundaries to the benefit of the community.[14] Both scientists' work was initially ridiculed, but has prevailed. A de-anthropocentric stance can open up important new visions of the world and ourselves. It is not within the scope of this thesis to track species entanglement in the broad sense.[15] What it does is seek to evaluate and shift the nuanced hierarchies of engagement within distinctive situated relationships. As well as being attentive to 'What is', this research asks, 'What could be?' between species.

For nearly twenty years living in London, I pursued a studio-based practice in painting. My practice explored landscape-related themes and addressed how the human-made world and nature were continually and sometimes painfully meshed. I made paintings and installations of tangled undergrowth; of organic, emergent and anthropomorphic forms; and wove together vegetal, fungal and fleshy imagery, exhibiting work with exhibition titles including *Dirty Nature,*[16] *Anthropoflora,*[17] *Morphology*[18] and *Habitat.*[19]

In May 2012, I moved from London to a village in Kent. For the first time since childhood, I was in daily contact with nonhuman nature. Rather than spending hours imaginatively staring at paintings in the studio, I spent hours imaginatively staring at all the varieties of life in the place where the lawn and the flowerbed met, or at all the insects, mosses and lichens on a particular tree trunk. As I loitered in the woods and fields (a totally different experience from going for a walk), I became differently attuned

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https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2021/oct/30/capitalism-is-killing-the-planet-its-time-to-stop-buying-into-our-own-destruction [Accessed 17.7.23]

[12] Lynn Margulis was then publishing under her married name, Lynn Sagan.

[13] Lynn Sagan (1967) 'On the Origin of Mitosing Cells', *Journal of Theoretical Biology*, 14 (3), Pp. 225-274, https://doi.org/10.1016/0022-5193(67)90079-3. [Last accessed 10.7.23]

[14] A part of Simard's thesis was published in the journal *Nature*: Simard, Suzanne et al. (1997) 'Net transfer of Carbon Between Tree Species with Shared Ectomycorrhizal Fungi' In: *Nature 388 (6642) pp.579–82.*

[15] For a detailed discussion of entanglement, irreducible complexity and its discontents, see Giraud, Eva H. (2019) *What Comes after Entanglement? Activism, Anthropocentrism, and an Ethics of Exclusion*. Durham: Duke University Press. *ProQuest Ebook Central*, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/ucreative-ebooks/detail.action?docID=5968922.

[16] *Dirty Nature*, Fiona MacDonald and John Holland, Standpoint Gallery, London. April–May 2007.

[17] *Anthropoflora*, Fiona MacDonald, Long and Ryle, London, July–August 2007.

[18] *Morphology*, Fiona MacDonald, Maddox Arts, London. March–May 2009.

[19] *Habitat*, Fiona MacDonald, Phoenix Brighton. April–June 2006.

and moved towards the world in new ways. My artistic imagination, having been acculturated to thinking about images and objects in white-walled spaces, stepped out into a complex living world, full of creative intentionality and liveliness, which demanded new kinds of attentiveness. My overwhelming sense was that I had to respond differently, to somehow work *with* and *for* this beyond-human sphere, rather than making representations *of* it. But how? [20]

The beginning of this thesis articulates how I moved my art practice outside to engage with this question, and is framed around concepts of knowing, not knowing, and knowing differently. Art is unusual in its potential for offering arenas of provocative openness. Art can frame one's entry into a space – be that as an artist entering a studio or forest, or a person attending an exhibition or event – with only the broadest of intentions: to 'see what happens'. Being a painter offered a frame in which to articulate my questions. Skills learned with sticky, odorous, hued substances in the studio grounded my 'listening' approach to other-than-human means of communication – touch, colour, gesture, mark, scent and motion.

While working with the tools of painting, I sought to reorient aesthetic apprehension of the landscape away from representation, with its history of anthropocentric distancing, towards a focus on the processual and participatory appreciation of the complexity, liveliness, and equivalence of nonhuman creativity. Painting became a lens for a practice of concentrated openness, grounded in an acceptance of uncertainty and the recognition of what I did not know and could not know about my other-than-human interlocutors. Withholding aesthetic judgement and relinquishing control of the visual outcome opened an experimental space for visual communication with, and exploration of, other-than-human beings' mark-making and behaviour. Slowly, understanding, communication and meaning could emerge and evolve between species, through art assemblages.

Art's diverse materialities and gestures can extend the potential for communication across species boundaries. Painting is used in several of the projects described in the thesis, but painting could not address everything that the research asked in terms of how the human artist could open up to different species, and how these interspecies art participations could be brought to a subsequent human audience. My approach to media was therefore responsive and additive. In any given context, I sought to engage whatever media and methods might best enable and expand a creative communication between human artist and the participant species, and bring it to life for a subsequent human audience. The methods and media used were always contextual and responsive – to a species relation and to artistic intention – and were used in various new combinations throughout the research. The research is therefore not proposed or discussed as a contribution to knowledge in the disciplines of (for example) sound art, video art or painting, but as situated through and offering a contribution to the intersection of participatory and interspecies art.

[20] In 2016 I began to work under the artist name Feral Practice, which allows the human Fiona MacDonald to take a step back from claiming ownership over the work and opens space for audiences to understand how the work always emerges in relation to and with other beings.

While many artists have utilised the creativity of other species to achieve their artistic objectives, this research goes beyond the use of nonhuman beings to foster an imaginative, empathic connectivity between humans and nonhumans, through an embrace of vulnerability and porosity. The intention is not only to benefit humans, but to notice, amplify and celebrate the unrepresented, to 'speak… for subaltern epistemic things.'[21] To do this the human artist enters into long-term creative relationships with sited populations of other-than-human beings, taking her work and thinking out into their milieu. The artist moves away from the familiar enclosures of studio and gallery, and away from human dominance and control. She focuses her attention on becoming responsive to other-than-human beings, listening for and finding ways to centre different beings' creativity and voices within the artwork. The practice of *'vulnerable artmaking'* embraces the fact that the artist and her interlocutors – as all creatures – share an essential fleshly vulnerability and mortality. As film and literary theorist Anat Pick says, '[t]he creature… is first and foremost a living body – material, temporal and vulnerable.'[22] Feral participation emphasises a shared sense of porosity in body and mind, and moves this towards the shared potential for creativity. Vulnerable artmaking is a space in which the human artist aims for openness to and moves actively towards difference.

How materials are offered, how the other-than-human beings engage or do not engage, what the researcher observes, how they then respond to the participants actions – all these stages in the process of feral participation are understood as contributing to a dialogue. Dialogical not because the verbal is privileged, but because the *form* is dialogical: action–response–response–response... When dialogue is thus expanded and materialised to address different creaturely habitats and sensoria, it becomes a critical experimental tool for interspecies art participations that seek to foster newly imaginative and ethical relations between beings. This '*materialised dialogue'* extends Grant Kester's concept of the dialogical aesthetic in participatory art[23], and brings experimental art into spaces of care for other beings.

Decentring the human includes decentring the human artist and so opening art and knowledge up towards alternative, nonhuman sources. The emphasis in feral participation is on the listening part of dialogue. Throughout the thesis, the term 'listening' is used to describe an active, multi-sensory approach towards paying communicative attention to other beings and forces. When listening across species boundaries, the verb is intended to articulate the stretch involved – the attempt to heighten and broaden sensory and communicative interaction between species, including the use of art's diverse tools and techniques. Through listening, the researcher looks for opportunities to '*unknow*' their other-than-human interlocutors. I use the term *unknowing* here to describe the active delimiting of the researcher's expectations and preconceptions of other species. The term draws on the artistic practice of creative 'not

[21] Puig de la Bellacasa, M. (2017) *Matters of Care: speculative ethics in more than human worlds*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. p58.
[22] Pick, Anat (2011) *Creaturely Poetics, animality and vulnerability in literature and film*. New York : Columbia University Press, 5.
[23] Grant, Kester (2004) *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art* (Berkeley, CA. & London: University of California Press.

knowing' that Rebecca Fortnum describes, in which an artist holds open a generative space of uncertainty in relation to an artwork-in-progress and, rather than rationally planning it, waits for unexpected insights and understanding to bubble up.[24] In species relations, there are many mis- and pre-conceptions about other beings that have accrued through centuries of anthropocentric convention. Delimiting knowledge – intentionally setting aside what we think we know – opens awareness to the distributed knowledge coming from the more-than-human encounter and allows for something surprising to be noticed. The researcher opens up to insights and clues from other-than-human beings, which inform the work and shape the direction of the research. Over time, this approach restructures the researcher's knowledge of the species and places with whom they are working.

Confusion, contradiction and gaps in knowledge are inevitable, but when embraced they can also help to create space for experiential and distributed knowledge to arise. Knowing that we do not know, we can pay close attention to others without generating a sense of mastery over them. Building from this, the concept and practice of '*speculative anthropomorphism'* finds multivalent perspectives from which to query and explore the relative and relational positionality of human, more-than-human and other-than-human.[25] Speculative anthropomorphism is a method characterized by playful enquiry, and it helps to moves ideas and knowledge across species boundaries. It builds upon Jane Bennett's work on nonidentity, which understands that we cannot know any object or being entirely, not even ourselves.[26] The addition of 'speculative' distinguishes the creative and de-anthropocentrising potential of speculative anthropomorphism from what I understand as 'reductive anthropomorphism', which collapses nonhuman experience into the human, ignoring or belittling those aspects of the nonhuman experience that do not fit.

Because the space of feral participation is one of nurtured uncertainty, the researcher does not easily fall into what Tom Tyler sees as the trap of anthropomorphism – to assume *a priori* that we know what a human is, which results in always placing humanity '*first*… [and] *foremost.*'[27] In this thesis, the researcher consciously moves away from knowing to think alongside other beings, to expand and challenge their own expectations**.** Speculative anthropomorphism avoids over-determining by remaining playful and open, and by thinking in possibilities, not facts. It elicits journeys of interspecies exchange that are not only grounded in biological and epistemological connectivity but also challenge norms. It seeks to value and learn from (not collapse) species difference. In combination with the practice of vulnerable artmaking and

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[24] Fortnum, Rebecca (2014) introduction to the symposium: *On Not Knowing: How Artists Think*. Available online: https://www.kettlesyard.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/onn_fortnum.pdf

[25] Whilst these different terms are used to purposely unsettle the boundaries between kinds of being (see Glossary), I use 'more-than-human' to actively include humans and 'other-than-human' to distinguish from them. The term 'human' is used to define a shared species' biology and sensorium, whilst acknowledging that it is diverse.

[26] Cf. Bennett, Jane (2010) *Vibrant Matter, a political ecology of things*. Durham and London: Duke University Press

[27] Tyler, Tom (2009) 'If Horses had Hands' in Tyler, T. and Rossini, M. (eds.) *Animal encounters*. Leiden ; Boston: Brill. 23. At https://www.academia.edu/37806670/If_Horses_Had_Hands [Last Accessed 31.5.22], 23.

materialised dialogue, speculative anthropomorphism supports distributed, de-anthropocentric thought and imaginative empathy across species boundaries, building the 'solidarity in the political sense' with other-than-human beings that Val Plumwood advocates.[28]

Because feral participation is processual, practice-led and affective, it has effects that occur outside cognition. As well as bodies, materials and technologies coming together, immaterial exchanges of influence and communication (reverie and dreams for example) also play their part. Minds as well as bodies interact, at conscious and unconscious levels. Some kinds of intensive knowing are not intellectually available to the researcher all at once, but the research is active from the beginning. Being led by other-than-human beings means that the human artist is not always in control, and does not, cannot, should not always know. Elucidating and evidencing this means the inclusion of some narratives of development in the thesis.

Other-than-human beings are foregrounded as creative, agentic and aesthetic forces, as influential and powerful beings, as neighbours and interlocutors, as cultural and economic producers – as persons in all these terms. 'Persons' are beings who are individual centres of subjectivity with thoughts of their own, and as groups, populations and societies with distinct histories, cultures and aesthetics. Other-than-human persons offer new perspectives on the world, on art, and on the human. The human artist actively elicits these different species' influence on the content, materiality and form of artworks, so producing a 'feral' expansion of art, and offering experiences and methods that decentre human audiences and participants. Art and thinking arises and is shaped through conscious explorations and more-than-conscious expansions of relationships with other-than-human beings, which amplify the creaturely without undoing the human, or artificially pretending that the human is absent.

Other-Than-Human Creativity

The thesis proposes that nonhuman beings (including the kind of nonhuman beings that do not morphologically resemble human beings – insects and fungi, for example) possess intelligence and creativity. But in what way exactly are, say, ants creative? It is key to the argument of this thesis that the answer is certainly not 'in the same way as humans' and that the answer can never be fully known by a human. In Chapter Two I describe moments when I observed ants spending considerable time in sensuous engagement with the materials I introduced, apparently enjoying these novel textures and scents. While this research cannot prove (or disprove) those ants to be experiencing artistic/aesthetic enjoyment, it proposes it as a possibility. Unsurprisingly, there is ongoing scientific debate about the levels of consciousness possessed in the insect world.[29] Social insects such as ants and many species of bees are sometimes considered

[28] Mallory, Chaone (2009) 'Val Plumwood and Ecofeminist Political Solidarity: Standing with the Natural Other'. *Ethics and the Environment* 14 (2) 2009 pp 4–21.

[29] Colin Klein and Andrew B. Barron maintain that insects must possess at least the 'basic' level of consciousness, which is a capacity for subjective experience. They argue this is necessary for any creature that needs to distinguish what information arises from external sources versus from

to offer a special case because they act collectively – somewhat like the neurons in a single brain;[30] however, researchers are also actively trying to ascertain how conscious each individual is.[31]

Western epistemological frameworks hyperseparate[32] knower and known in order to observe 'objectively'.[33] This technique can add clarity to the research but can also deepen and overstate the divisions it requires. With conventional scientific eyes, 'we cannot directly confirm or refuse if ants are self-conscious'[34] but we can observe signals that would suggest it: 'a good indicator might be the observation of other behaviors whose apparition is related to consciousness such as art and other "non-fitness related" behaviors (contemplative), resulting from the self-perception of a being and it's interaction with surrounding world.'[35] Myrmecologist Deborah Gordon remarks upon the unexpected and long periods that certain ants appear to be 'doing nothing' while they are underground in the nest.[36] Perhaps this might be interpreted as ants being contemplative? I observed, as I worked on and near the wood ant nests, individual ants pausing their activities to rear up on their hind legs and watch me. If I stayed still they would, after a while, carry on with what they had been doing. If my hand came closer they would bend their abdomen under in a threat gesture – ready to spray formic acid. They waited to see what happened. The ants may or may not understand my hand as part of a larger single being with intentions (i.e. possess what qualifies as 'theory of mind'[37]), but their actions tell me that they are thinking about (contemplating) actions a

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their own body (e.g. to distinguish their own movements through space from other changes in their visual field). Neurobiologically, Klein and Barron understand subjective awareness arises in vertebrates from the brain's subcortex and in insects from its central complex: 'While there is no obvious similarity in the gross anatomy, there is an overall similarity in functional architecture between the vertebrate midbrain and the insect brain as a whole.' (Klein, C. and Barron, A. B. (2016) 'Insects have the capacity for subjective experience' In *Animal Sentience* 1 (9) At: https://www.wellbeingintlstudiesrepository.org/animsent/vol1/iss9/1/. 5

[30] Henderson, Emily (2022) *Ant colonies behave similar to networks of neurons in a brain, study suggests* Jul 22 2022 https://www.news-medical.net/news/20220722/Ant-colonies-behave-similar-to-networks-of-neurons-in-a-brain-study-suggests.aspx. Henderson references Gal, A. and Kronauer, D.J.C. (2022) 'The emergence of a collective sensory response threshold in ant colonies' In: *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 119 (23) p.e2123076119.

[31] See for example on bees: Chittka, Lars (2023) *Do Insects Feel Joy and Pain?* Scientific American 1.7.2023 https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/do-insects-feel-joy-and-pain/ [Accessed 17.7.23]

[32] Hyperseparation is ecofeminist Val Plumwood's term used to describe 'the structure of dominance that drives western binaries, including nature/culture, female/male, matter/mind, savage/civilised. The hyperseparation structure accords value to one side of the binary, and relegates the other side to a position of oppositional subordination.' Deborah Bird Rose (2013) '*Val Plumwood's Philosophical Animism: Attentive Interactions in the Sentient World' In: Environmental Humanities 3 (1) pp.93-109.* 98.

[33] See discussion of objectivity in Chapter Three.

[34] Ecologist and ant researcher Alex Salas-López (2012) in reply to a question on a thread of ResearchGate called 'Are Ants Conscious?'
https://www.researchgate.net/post/Are_ants_conscious [Accessed 3.7.23].

[35] Salas-Lopez (2012).

[36] Gordon, D. and Schwengel, M. (1999) *Ants at Work: how an insect society is organized.* New York: Free Press.

[37] If an animal possesses a theory of mind they have the ability to attribute mental states to themselves and to other creatures (for example this could help a prey animal to judge if a

human is producing. The relative speculations involved in that shared moment are asymmetric, but they reopen to query the quality of our interspecific relation.

Ants need not share my artistic *intentions* for engaging with art materials such as food colouring in order for aesthetic *enjoyment* to emerge during their engagement. As Belgian philosopher of science Vinciane Despret suggests, a focus on intentionality is often used to dismiss interspecies achievements, because the concept of nonhuman intentionality is *a priori* suspicious. Indeed, while other creatures are 'suspected… of lacking autonomy',[38] human actions can sometimes be understood as artistic even if they are not intentional. Despret has been an important resource in evidencing how the anthropocentrism of 20th-century animal intelligence researchers produced falsely reductive outcomes. Her book *What Would Animals Say if We Asked the Right Questions?*[39] powerfully unpicks how the assumption of human exceptionalism prevents the researchers involved from evaluating other species on their own terms. While this research is enriched and informed by scientific experimental rigour, I am ultimately wary of arguments in which certain humans argue or decide who has what level of intelligence, sentience or consciousness.

Rather than conceiving knowledge as objective territory that can be made subject to single ownership, this thesis articulates knowledge as a shared resource into which an individual grows and moves through productive porosity. An individual researcher can make a contribution and offer insights, but knowledge has roots and trajectories that are always distributed and labile. How a researcher pays attention affects what they learn, and their intellectual framing alters what they observe. This conception draws on the insights of feminist epistemologies, particularly Donna Haraway's concept of 'situated knowledges'[40], and the perspectival approach of Amerindian animist cosmologies, in which knowing comes from thinking oneself into the subjective position of the 'what' or the 'who' that we seek to know.

Listening to and working with alternative knowledge positions (here, these are especially those of other species) requires opening up towards difference. Feral participations hold open spaces of possibility in order to expand what the researcher has the potential to observe. Unlike in science, it is experiencing *possibility,* which is truly critical to this research, not providing *proof*. When unusual observations of other-than-humans can take place, speculative and open-ended (but serious) interpretations and insights can emerge. In this way the thesis offers answers to the question 'how are ants creative?'

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predator was hunting or just relaxing). Cf. definition of 'theory of mind' https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/theory-of-mind

[38] Despret, V., translated by Buchanan, B. (2016) *What Would Animals Say If We Asked the Right Questions?* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 5. *ProQuest Ebook Central*, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/ucreative-ebooks/detail.action?docID=4392047. [Accessed 30.5.23]

[39] Despret (2016) 5.

[40] In her 1988 paper 'Situated Knowledges' Donna Haraway discusses how we might achieve 'an account of radical historical contingency for all knowledge claims and knowing subjects… [without losing] a no-nonsense commitment to faithful accounts of a real world.' Haraway, Donna (1988) '*Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective*' In: *Feminist Studies* 14 (3) p575.

that are not facts, but can question and adjust some of the reductive ideas humans have long held about ants that are very often *also* not facts.

The research involves the human artist's interpretation of and speculation about other-than-human beings. It is not possible (and in the field of art, not exactly necessary) to prove an absence of projection.[41] The point is that thinking with ants – including thinking about how ants might think about humans (as creaturely bodies, unexpected intrusions, or as beings whose intentions they can interpret and with whom they might communicate) – *already* shifts the framing of and understanding of ants in human culture. As an artist working with models that propose consciousness, imagination and knowledge as shared spaces that individuals of various species can share in and move through, the concept of projection also becomes more ambiguous and loses some of its derogatory bite. However, it is still relevant to distinguish between this research's dialogical methodologies, and *fiction* or *ventriloquism*.[42] While evidence for other-than-human creativity is subjectively and humanly channelled throughout this thesis, it is not invented. As explained above, the human artist is using multiple means to listen to other-than-human beings, who, while they do not speak in words, communicate in many other ways that can be (ambiguously and partially) read and interpreted by the human, accruing layered meanings over time.

In the artworks *The Ant-ic Museum* (discussed in Chapter Five) and *Queenright* (discussed in Chapter Six), the artist's listening and interpretation is translated not only into images and actions, but also dialogues and voicing. The work of translation is processed in the imagination of the artist, but its diverse sources lie in these expanded dialogues that occurred over several years of working with ants. In their suggestiveness and playfulness, the texts and voicing use the tools of speculative anthropomorphism to nurture understanding and share insights with human audiences. While unconventional and often subjective, the writing and voicing in these artworks are distilled from real, more-than-human, material, immaterial, embodied and textual experiences.

A Note on Ferality

As it makes forays into other-than-human territory and other-than-art territory the research becomes 'feral'. The word feral usually means escaped from captivity or domestication,[43] and is conventionally used pejoratively in reference to animals or young people. Anna Tsing describes the Anthropocene as feral, noting the irony that, despite living in an era named after ourselves, humans are far from being in control of the changes we have set in motion. As ever more of the natural world is disturbed or enslaved by industrialised systems of production, feral action by other-than-human beings and forces declares all that we *cannot* control. In their online project *Feral Atlas*, Tsing and her colleagues Jennifer Deger, Alder Keleman-Saxana, and Feifei Zhou[44]

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[41] Projection is defined as 'the attribution of one's own ideas, feelings, or attitudes to other people or to objects' https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/projection

[42] Ventriloquism is defined as **'**the expression of one's views and attitudes through another especially **:** such expression by a writer through a fictional character or literary persona' https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/ventriloquism.

[43] https://www.lexico.com/definition/feral [Accessed 8.1.21]

[44] Anna Tsing, Jennifer Deger, Alder Keleman-Saxana, and Feifei Zhou's *Feral Atlas: the More-Than-Human Anthropocene https://feralatlas.org/* [Accessed 31.5.22]

highlight examples of this, such as how Emerald Ash Boring Beetles were exported across the globe by humans in the wooden pallets that modern delivery systems rely on, to new, vulnerable forests.

In *Feral Atlas*, nonhuman forces upset the fallacy of human control and ownership, but in this research the feral also contains creative, liberatory potential for humans, and for art. Rather than referencing the status or behaviour of other-than-human participants, it is the art, and the artist, who are feral. The move outside, towards other-than-human territory, is not for the sake of discomfort or indiscipline, but so that, in being out of an artist's 'natural habitat' (for example the studio) the human might become less bounded by her predetermined human ideas. The artist finds meaning and expression outside the human realm, and presses art into generative relationship with other kinds of knowing. This feral act is playfully postulated as a reverse of the more conventional activity in which humans tame, capture or enclose wild creatures. The 'domesticated' human artist, escaping from her usual cultural and material habitat to meet her 'wild' nonhuman interlocutors in their domain, undergoes changes herself. The escape of the artist into the woods (for example), aligns with knowledge-gathering practices from other disciplines, notably ethnographic and ethological fieldwork; however, it takes with it something of the experimental and unstable nature of activities in the art studio. The feral embraces processes of wilding, but not 'the wild' as a destination.

1. Ana Mendieta 1976 *Silueta en Fuego*

Since the 1950s, artists have engaged with land as material and inspiration in different ways that conspicuously take art 'outside'. The intimate, embodied and embedded approach of feminist land artists such as Ana Mendieta,[45] who worked with the

[45] Ana Mendieta (1948–1985) was a Cuban-born artist who worked primarily in the USA. The series of works that are most influential to this thesis are: *Silueta* 1973–80, in which Mendieta made female shapes in outline or as holes or sculptures in nature, using mud, fire, sand, grass, blood, and often using her own form embedded in some way into the soil or material; and

vulnerability of their own bodies as reference to and mirror of the land, underpin my approach to my own body in the landscape. Bodies share creaturely vulnerability, they are all subject to pain, decay and death, even while species are vulnerable and sensitive in different ways to different things. I distinguish my work from Mendieta's insofar as my human body and its activities are not the main focus. Also broadly aligned to Mendieta's practice (as well as to the photographic aspects of the work of 'walking artists' such as Richard Long[46]), is the approach I take towards documentation of participation and engagement in the field becoming the material, from which to make work that is displayed in 'human' spaces such as galleries. In the sensitive and populous ecologies in which I often work (for example the ant forest) the approach of land artists who make large sculptures *in situ* (I am thinking here of works that become destinations to visit, for example James Turrell's *Roden Crater*[47] or Nancy Holt's *Sun Tunnels*[48])is not appropriate because the ecologies would suffer.

This thesis covers several examples and projects, which explore human (my own and the audience's) relations with very different kinds of being – mammals, social insects, plants, fungi. There is no intent here to collapse situated species differences or relational differences. The key methodologies offered by this research are responsive to each situated species, so as to foreground and elaborate the particularity of each relationship. The work shapes the space between human and other-than-human, decentring the human and allowing audiences a different view of the world and of themselves. It expands knowing through open, speculative listening to difference, which keenly appreciates what humans do not know and cannot know. In reminding the viewer of the presence of the human, via the presence of the artist or themselves, it grounds this journey in the soil that it necessarily starts from and returns to – the situated and limited humans that we are.

Rupestrian Sculptures 1980, documented through photo-etchings, which were also female forms in the landscape, but drawn or carved into rock in Cuba, and more goddess-like.

[46] British artist Richard Long, b.1945, is famed for his walking art works that brought performance and sculpture together in the landscape. He made work as he moved through wild places, made documentary works such as the map-text-image piece *A Hundred Mile Walk*, 1971–2, (Tate) and installed rock- and earthworks in gallery spaces.

[47] James Turrell, *Roden Crater* 1977–22, earthwork in the Painted Desert region of northern Arizona.

[48] Nancy Holt *Sun Tunnels*, 1973–6, installation in the Great Basin Desert in north-western Utah.

Chapter Outlines

Chapter 1. *Ant-ic Actions*: Towards a Feral Kind of Knowing

Chapter One brings the painterly strategy of 'not knowing' into relationship with a liberatory movement towards wildness – the creative 'bewilderment' described by Jack Halberstam. The affective experiences of feral practice offer learning that is not fully contained by cognition but works through art 'encounters' that nurture an opening up to difference. As the artist moves outside into the forest, and into participatory relationship with wood ants, attentive and experimental strategies from painting are shaped towards a process of unknowing: a conscious act of delimiting one's expectations, especially of the aesthetic and artistic capacities and sensibilities of nonhuman beings, which makes space for them to appear in unusual and unexpected ways. It explains how, while embracing the liberatory vector of wilding, this research is conceived as 'feral' because it does not seek a wild destination. 'Feral' is from the outset a compromised concept that entangles both sides of the binary wild/tame. Feral participations, while holding echoes of the kinds of repurposing of human infrastructures by other-than-human beings described in Anna Tsing et al's descriptions in *Feral Atlas,* are conscious and creative entanglements.

Chapter 2. *M-Ant-Ra*: Developing a Materialized Dialogical Aesthetic

Chapter Two explores what the concepts and practices of participatory art offer to understanding and relationality between species. Grant Kester suggests that a 'dialogical aesthetic' in participatory art allows artists and participants to transform self and society together, even while art activity remains open-ended and the roles within it undefined. This chapter discusses how feral participations widen the concept of dialogue to include material signs and substances, so extending the dialogical aesthetic and bringing a de-anthropocentrizing turn to participatory art. In feral participation, all beings may have opportunities to experience the reverie that Jacques Rancière describes as the 'fundamentally emancipatory' moment of human aesthetic enjoyment. The chapter also discusses Maria Puig de la Bellacasa's writing on the practices of care and Julietta Singh's unthinking of human mastery to inform a discussion of the ethical challenge and potential of this research, and show how ethics and aesthetics become irrepressibly entwined.

Chapter 3: *Ask the Wild* and *Mycorrhizal Meditation*: On Speculative Anthropomorphism

The project *Ask the Wild* brings science and art together to offer life advice drawn from knowledge of nonhuman worlds to its human audiences, and so positions more-and-other-than-human beings and forces as holders of alternative knowledge, that, while exceeding all human needs and concepts, can act as sources of advice and example to us. *Ask the Wild* challenges conventional epistemological hierarchies, it asks 'Who has knowledge, what is the knowledge, what can it be applied to?' and works with the idea that there are multiple alternative perspectives from which to view human issues, bringing audiences towards a more distributed, connective understanding of interspecies being. *Ask the Wild* exemplifies this research's development of 'speculative anthropomorphism', building from Jane Bennett's interpretation of Adorno's negative dialectics, which 'honors nonidentity as one would honor an unknowable god.'[49] Speculative anthropomorphism refuses over-coding of the nonhuman by the human, and flattening of species difference, but offers opportunities for imaginative cross-species contemplation that decentres the human. In this way, speculative anthropomorphism does not perpetuate the trap described by Tom Tyler, that anthropomorphism 'shackles thought concerning human and animal beings' by assuming that we know what it is to be human, and 'thinking humanity *first*… [and] *foremost*'.[50]

Chapter 4. *Foxing*: Playing Art Between Species

Chapter Four considers how performative play and art that is improvisatory and game-like can bring forward new relations between species. Humans and animals play and work together in many different ways, but play is usually enacted within species or between companion species. This chapter engages with and critiques Donna Haraway's concepts of 'becoming-with' companion species in the 'contact zone' of interspecies sport. Through play and shared laughter humans often understand their pets as individuals with individual talents and personalities. A similar understanding of wild and

[49] Bennett, Jane (2010) *Vibrant Matter, a political ecology of things*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 16.
[50] Tyler, Tom (2009) *If Horses had Hands*. in Tyler, T. and Rossini, M. (eds.) *Animal encounters*. Leiden ; Boston: Brill. . 13–26. At https://www.academia.edu/37806670/If_Horses_Had_Hands [Last Accessed 31.5.22], 23.

farmed creatures as individuals with diverse personalities could be imaginatively and ethically transformative. Analysing the project *Foxing,* and Joseph Beuys' action with a coyote *I Like America and America Likes Me*, I suggest that the human artists enter what Brian Massumi calls a 'zone of indiscernibility' with fox/coyote. Where Beuys overcodes the interaction with symbolic meaning and preformed intentions, *Foxing* brings the in-the-moment game-like learning between this situated human and fox to the fore.

Chapter 5: *The Ant-ic Museum* – Materialities and Subjectivities

Chapter Five explores the theoretical frame of the research, examining the relative status of the diverse bodies (especially ants and human) and materials within the productive assemblages of the forest, and explores how they interact and communicate to make artworks and exhibitions together. Plotting a course through Jacob von Uexküll's perceptual 'bubble worlds' in which each species is held separate and only able to intersect in very limited ways, and Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's affective relationality, in which species all but disappear, this chapter works towards an experiential and imaginative understanding of how this research moves the human towards the ants, entangles our components of subjectivity, and so produces a distinctive perspective from which to reassess humanity's achievements and status, and reimagine ant and human futures. Chapter Five also discusses the contribution that an additive approach to materiality and technology offer to this research, including how specialist technologies like macro lenses and contact microphones extend the perceptual capacities and shape the attention of human audiences.

Chapter 6. *Queenright*: Conversing With Persons Who Dream

Chapter Six further evolves this project's conception of other-than-human beings as persons and as interlocutors. Plants, fungi, ants and other nonhuman beings are conceived of in this research as cultural and creative; and as historic, active and potential teachers of humans. The distributed but still active hierarchies at work in the research mirror the multiplicities of personhood that proliferate in an animist world view: 'Indigenous people's… concepts of personhood… did not start with the human and extend outward to the world, but rather started with a wide category of 'persons,' one sub-group of which were humans.'[51] Through engaging with Val Plumwood's

[51] Rose, Deborah Bird (2013) *Val Plumwood's Philosophical Animism: Attentive Interactions in the Sentient World* https://read.dukeupress.edu/environmental-humanities/article-pdf/3/1/93/251734/93Rose.pdf 98.

'philosophical animism', Eduardo Kohn's 'beyond human anthropology' and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro's 'cannibal metaphysics', this chapter explores how human artist and other-than-human participants come to influence and act on one another, and how their status as artists and as persons within feral practice is always in flux.

1. *Ant-ic Actions:* Towards a Feral Kind of Knowing

Ant-ic Actions http://www.feralpractice.com/W-Antic-Actions/
Webpage
This Vibrant Turf https://thisvibrantturf.com/
Website

Knowledge based on anthropocentric assumptions severely limits human understanding of more-and-other-than-human beings, and fuels dangerous exploitations of the living world for profit. This chapter pursues different kinds of and routes into knowing, always in relation to the more-than-human world. It reimagines knowing as a process and a creative opening up towards difference, which asks as many questions of the human as it does of the nonhuman. It is underpinned by the feminist insight that knowing is always partial and positional, and that it is through being 'not immediately present to ourselves'[52] that we can be open to others. It draws on practices of not knowing from contemporary art and brings them into relationship with a liberatory movement towards the more-and-other-than-human, in conversation with the creative 'bewilderment' described by Jack Halberstam.[53]

As an artist one does not always know what to do. One knows that there is *something* to be done because the artwork one is working on is not resolved. The process of finding out what is to be done is comprised of several stages, which might be roughed out as: observation, experiment, reflection, decision, preparation, application, adjustment. These stages keep repeating until the work becomes itself (whatever that is). Rarely does an artwork turn out the same as one's first ideas and plans. If, as the artist and researcher Rebecca Fortnum says, artists can 'live *with* & *in* the process, staving off resolution or closure'[54] they can discover something new – perhaps about the

[52] Haraway, Donna. 'Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective'. *Feminist Studies*, Vol. 14, No. 3. (Autumn, 1988), pp. 575-599.
[53] Halberstam, Jack (2020) *Wild Things: the Disorder of Desire*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.
[54] Fortnum, Rebecca (2014) introduction to the symposium: *On Not Knowing: How Artists Think*. Available online: https://www.kettlesyard.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/onn_fortnum.pdf

medium, or the method, or indeed themselves. Fortnum suggests that this learning is (and has long been) a key concern of artists. Not knowing is a critical (though often unacknowledged) artistic strategy, which allows an artist to be 'guided by their own sense of discovery… to make a work that is… more than the sum of the artist's intentions.'[55] Making artwork is processual and responsive – it could be articulated as a sort of conversation, often engaged in without words, and with gaps. These gaps, where nothing is apparently happening, are spaces for emergent forms and ideas to appear, and without these gaps, the artwork could not surprise the artist.

2. Varda Caivano 2009 *Painter's Table*, Mixed media on linen

This research emerged from a practice of painting, with its sometimes fast and sometimes slow visual back-and-forths. As a painter, I learned well that 'the medium has its own volition and that the work "talks back"'.[56] While an unspoken feature of many artists' process, the creative necessity of waiting for the work to talk back is spoken of repeatedly in reference to works by the painter Varda Caivano. Critic Terry Myers said that Caivano saw her role as 'to hold the work as open as possible.'[57] Her representatives Victoria Miro Gallery say that 'there is always a palpable, enlivening sense of the artist making decisions or changing course, deflecting quick resolutions or alighting on happy accidents that lead to another set of problems, more possible

[55] Fortnum (2014) unpaginated.
[56] Fortnum (2014) unpaginated.
[57] Myers, Terry R., (2015) Art Review 20 March 2015.
https://artreview.com/jan-feb-2015-feature-varda-caivano/ [Last Accessed 31.5.22]

outcomes'.[58] Caivano's works from the early 2000s have a very visible and almost animate sense of push and pull, and though resolved, they retain an unusual level of contingency, instability and flux. Caivano's restless canvases are exemplars of a methodology of responsiveness and of valuing uncertainty – 'avoiding habits of a signature style and premature resolution'[59] – that are pivotal to this research. In this methodology, the practice of painting takes place at least as much in the pauses, and their generative not knowing, as in any mixing of colour or making of marks.

Feral Encounters

As a feral artist, no longer working with paintings in the studio but with a diversity of beings in the field, the range of not knowing widens exponentially, and the gaps between what I know sometimes feel overwhelming. But artists do not have to tackle problems purely theoretically; they can 'do' things. Art can frame one's entry into a space – be that an artist entering a studio or forest, or a person attending an exhibition or event – with only the broadest of intentions: to 'see what happens', and in an interspecies context, 'what happens' can throw up new thoughts about human and nonhuman being. In relating my own experiences with ants here, I show how knowing can be shifted through artistic *acts* – through doing unusual things together with other-than-human-beings. Painterly processes and methodologies are tested, sometimes to breaking point, and reshaped in and through relation with the more-than-human world. Sometimes the gaps in conversation are not bridged, sometimes the work collapses. A practice of uncertainty and openness must also embrace, or at least accept, failure.

When I moved the practice outside, the point where art started and stopped became uncertain. Art no longer emerged on white rectangles or in rooms made purposely blank or specifically conducive but blossomed forth from already lively entanglements of beings and forces who were busy with their own not-art activities. Even when no art materials were employed, even when nothing was 'done', something art-like sometimes happened. Seeing wood ant nests for the first time, on a residency in King's Wood near Ashford in Kent, was striking and creative. The humps were aesthetically surprising and sculpturally impressive, they were, in artist and theorist Simon O'Sullivan's terms, 'object[s] of an encounter.' O'Sullivan draws on Deleuze and Guattari when he explains

[58] Victoria Miro Gallery website (2014). (https://www.victoria-miro.com/artists/20-varda-caivano [Last accessed 31.5.22]
[59] Chisenhale Gallery website (2007) https://chisenhale.org.uk/exhibition/varda-caivano/#138149717feaefd37d38ecd387a8dcc3 [Last accessed 31.5.22]

how art that challenges us and provokes us to see the world differently offers an 'encounter' rather than 'recognition' or 'representation':

> An object of an encounter is fundamentally different from an object of recognition. With the latter our knowledges, beliefs and values are reconfirmed. We, and the world we inhabit, are reconfirmed as that which we already understood our world and ourselves to be. An object of recognition is then precisely a *re*presentation of something always already in place. With such a non-encounter our habitual way of being and acting in the world is reaffirmed and reinforced, and as a consequence no thought takes place. Indeed, we might say that representation precisely stymies thought. With a genuine encounter however the contrary is the case. Our typical ways of being in the world are challenged, our systems of knowledge disrupted. We are forced to thought. The encounter then operates as a rupture in our habitual modes of being and thus in our habitual subjectivities. It produces a cut, a crack. However this is not the end of the story, for the rupturing encounter also contains a moment of affirmation, the affirmation of a new world, in fact a way of seeing and thinking this world differently.[60]

The encounter describes a surprise, an opening up to difference, a light going on, a change, which may not be accompanied by cognition. It can be affective rather than cognitive, intensive rather than signified.[61] In the forest, my encounter with the ant nest had the quality of thrill, and curiosity.

As I was pulled to look at the nest more closely, I saw a small group of ants carrying between them a caterpillar. I watched as they hefted the creature that was many times their combined size up the hill of their nest. It got stuck on a twig, with the ants either side stretching it like spaghetti. They kept heaving for several minutes before working the puzzle out and walking one end of the caterpillar around the twig. The scene was enticing, it threw up questions about ants: how clever were they, how did they communicate, when were they going to eat the caterpillar? and art questions: this is fascinating, but what to do, how to respond, could this be art? While I was made alive to ants in new ways in those moments of watching them, I knew that capturing the event as

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[60] O'Sullivan, Simon (2006) *Art Encounters: Deleuze and Guattari*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1.
[61] In Deleuze and Guattari's terminology, the 'body-without-organs' is the name for this intensive register that operates beyond representation. O'Sullivan, Simon (2006) 12.

a representation would not by itself offer new opportunities for human and ants to relate, and besides, it would reiterate work well achieved through nature documentary. Instead of making an image *of* the ants, perhaps I could try to make a painting *with* them?[62]

The familiar material and conceptual parameters of painting afforded a non-linear but legible arena in which to articulate and interpret *something* in the 'field',[63] where conglomerations of different living beings offered so much confusion and differential relation. Painting allowed me to make a mark, to start a conversation, while decisions such as the choice of scale, shape and surface on which to work, and the context and history of painting, framed that conversation. In making marks with ants, I stepped into new relation with ants – away from the separations of observation, and away from the subject-object distinctions inherent in representation. O'Sullivan says that humans 'are all… representational creatures' that tend to 'separate ourselves as subjects from the object world…[and a]rt, at least as it is figured within representation, is complicit in this dynamic.'[64] It was pivotal in this research to step away from that dynamic – to see painting as a tool, not of representation, but of processual, conversational interaction; so that painting 'might be […a way of] moving sideways, for the fostering of specifically transversal connections'.[65] In its sticky materialities and tendency for expressive unpredictability, painting always exceeds the control and intention of the artist. Painting (like Caivano's) that moves away from intention and representation involves 'listening' as well as 'speaking'. In becoming feral, painting now also needed to become porous to and expressive of the other-than-human.

Painting already shares certain things with creaturely traces such as paw/tarsus/hoof/foot marks and scent marks. Its sticky/liquid substances lend themselves to reflecting the specific qualities of bodies in motion – registering weight, morphology, size, speed, direction. Ants, for example, paint, with their feet (tiny skittering lines), or with their abdomens (thicker, wobbly lines) differently to how my hand-and-brush, or feet or belly, would paint, perhaps *could* paint. In the first foray into painting with the wood ants I laid

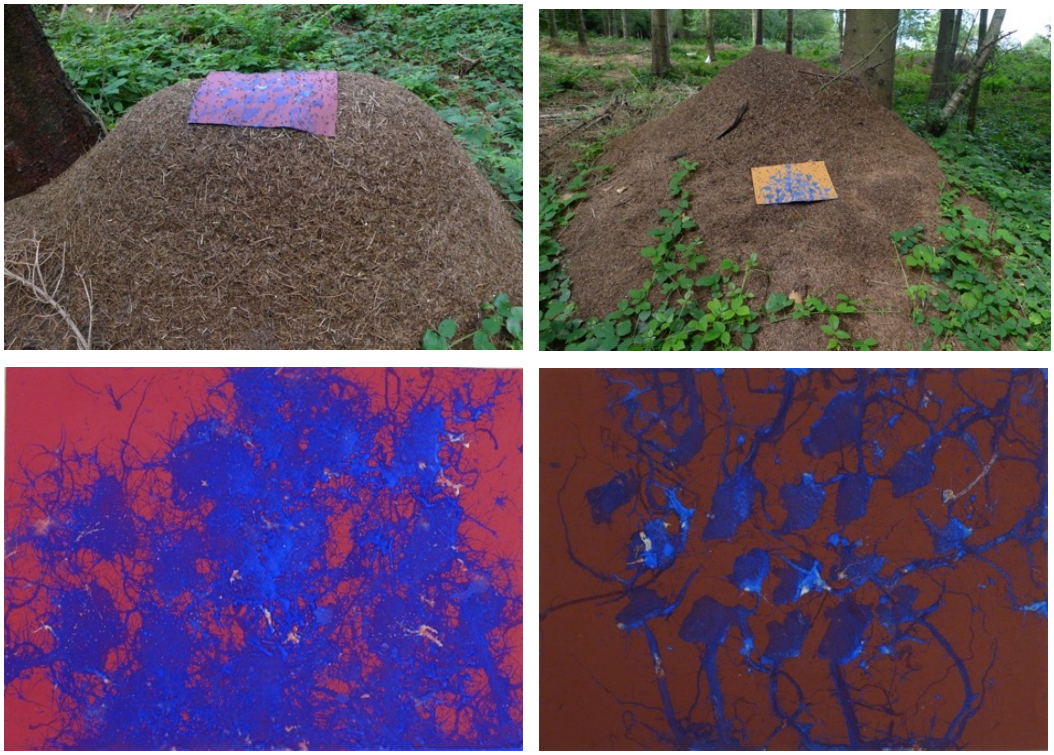
[62] What 'with' the ants means evolves over time and is discussed in depth in Chapter Two.
[63] I use 'field' to describe the space of interaction between human and ant, bringing together two definitions of field from the Oxford English Dictionary: 'a place where a subject of scientific study or of artistic representation can be observed in its natural location or context' and 'a space or range within which objects are visible from a particular viewpoint or through a piece of apparatus'.
[64] O'Sullivan (2006), 16.
[65] O'Sullivan (2006) 17.

brown paper on the nest and tried to mirror the ants' movements by using fast flicky marks in red watercolour. Hundreds of ants charged the paper furiously, running through the paint, chasing up the brush, over my feet and trousers, over my bare hands. The sheer number of them and the speed and intensity of their activity was overwhelming. I repeated my actions with the next, similar-sized nest and was amazed by the difference in response. Just twenty or so ants investigated and were more likely to run away from the moving brush than attack it. They were certainly not keen to get their feet wet in the paint. This difference in nest reaction was astounding.

To reiterate and test what had occurred, I moved to a small area of spruce plantation nearby, in which there were several much larger nests to work with. The surface of the paper allowed my touch and the touch of the ants to meet, and made visible our differentiated mark-making. I dropped splodges of wet watercolour at fairly regular intervals across the paper, in a slightly humped shape to echo the nest form. I used ultramarine-blue watercolour on a different colour paper for each nest to help witness variation in nest reaction. Most ants in all the nests continued to attend to the maintenance and provisioning of their nest, some ran onto the paper and in doing so passed near a blob of paint, which they reacted to in different ways, becoming involved in the production of the artwork. In more intense nests, ants sought out interaction with paper, brush, hand and paint, seeming to chase them. Other nests were difficult to engage at all. One nest never slowed its attack on the paint. In the resulting painting barely any empty paper survives. The effect was extremely intense, almost hallucinogenic.

As ants became involved in making the paintings, the work stepped beyond the models that O'Sullivan and Fortnum describe – in which an artist encounters an object via 'meeting with his or her materials'[66] – and into a realm of 'participation'[67] with a community, where the artist encounters other-than-human beings through a shared (though not the same) meeting with materials. In the shift from working with 'materials' to working with 'beings and materials', much changes.[68] The artist is newly positioned within an expanded dialogue which extends away from the human. How and what this means for art is developed in Chapter Two. These moments of incomplete realisation in

[66] O'Sullivan (2006) 21.
[67] See my discussion of participation in Chapter Two.
[68] This research conceives of the ants as subjectivities and as participants in art with thoughts and intentions of their own, differently from how it conceives of materials - paper, paint, brushes, etc - that are used in our interaction). See discussion in Chapter Five.



3. Feral Practice 2016 *Antic Actions,* watercolours on paper, and in production on nests

the forest were pivotal to shaping the research. In an interspecies context, the artist being 'guided by their own sense of discovery… to make a work that is… more than the sum of the artist's intentions'[69] extends and bends to include a defining interest in their nonhuman participants' interests and intentions. Humans always come towards nonhuman beings with partial, and often with prejudicial knowledge. Anthropocentrism deeply skews our understanding and questions about other-than-humans.[70] An accumulation of facts alone does not produce relational transformation between human artist (or human audiences) and other species. To see a creature more clearly, to come nearer towards their world, it is helpful not only to study them and make art with them, but also to allow space for them to appear in unusual and unexpected ways.

Not knowing is an artistic strategy of opening one's focus to embrace tacit knowledge, emotions and unconscious awareness, to allow emergent ideas and imagery to influence the artwork one is working on. Working artistically in an interspecies context requires an additional process, an additional intention, called here 'unknowing'. This term needs

[69] Rebecca Fortnum (2014) unpaginated.
[70] Vinciane Despret suggests that the way researchers have framed their questions, and the questions they ask - which test intelligence according to human adaptions - has meant that 'For a long time, it has been difficult for animals not to be stupid [bêtes], or even very stupid.' Despret (2016) 7.

some disambiguation, because 'unknowing' is defined by *Cambridge Dictionary* as 'not conscious of a particular situation or problem.'[71] In this thesis, unknowing is not used as an adjective, descriptive of a state of ignorance, but as a verb, descriptive of an active process. It is to be understood as similar to 'unlearning', defined by *Cambridge Dictionary* as: 'to make an effort to forget your usual way of doing something so that you can learn a new and sometimes better way'[72] but with a new inflection, which originates in art's creative strategy of not knowing, which involves *doing something*, and here, doing something *together*.

Unknowing, in this research, is an active and intentional movement away from what we think we know – what comes to us through convention, doctrine, or preconception – in order to observe something surprising and register distributed knowledge operating beyond the human. It does not align with ignorance, nor does it reject knowing, but sidesteps the 'known knowns' for a time, in order to look afresh. Unknowing is a purposeful delimiting of the more-and-other-than-human. While art normally works within human frames of reference and knowledge, *Ant-ic Actions* looks to and lingers on what can be learned about and from ants, how ants and humans relate, or might relate; *what might be true and what might be possible* in ant-ic space. The potential for learning is stretched as art is stretched to include 'ants as ants' and opened to the possibility of 'ants as artists'.[73] As the artist opens up towards creaturely difference, so in turn can the viewer, through encounter with the artwork.

If unlearning suggests something methodical that can be taught, unknowing is more a process of successive revelations that implicate self and non-self, and is aligned to the encounter with art that Sullivan describes. O'Sullivan says '[b]oth of these [art] encounters are precisely moments of production. The encounter between participant and artwork, is as productive, albeit in a different sense, as that between artist and material'.[74] In an encounter, we are challenged, disrupted, altered. We are 'forced to thought'. While O'Sullivan describes the art encounter as between a *subject* (artist or viewer) and an art *object*, this research describes art encounters as also between different kinds of subjectivities. The encounter between artist and ants is intersubjective. In Donna Haraway's feminist articulation, this kind of transformation, this encounter

[71] https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/unknowing [Accessed 21.8.22]
[72] https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/unlearning [Accessed 21.8.22]
[73] See Chapter Two for a discussion of the ethical ramifications of this.
[74] O'Sullivan (2006) 21.

between different beings, takes place because subjects are always already split, are never whole. Change, for Haraway, always takes place *between* rather than *in* minds:

> The split and contradictory self is the one who can interrogate positionings and be accountable, the one who can construct and join rational conversations and fantastic imaginings that can change history. Splitting, not being, is the privileged image for feminist epistemologies... Subjectivity is multidimensional; so, therefore, is vision. The knowing self is partial in all its guises, never finished, whole, simply there and original; it is always constructed and stitched together imperfectly, and *therefore* able to join with another, to see together without claiming to be another.[75]

While Haraway is not describing interspecies relations in this quote, she explains that her thinking on the subject was informed by walking with her dogs, 'wondering how the world looked without a fovea and very few retinal cells for colour vision but with a huge neural processing and sensory area for smells.'[76] For Haraway, knowing (and for this research also unknowing) is something that happens in dialogue, or in community: 'situated knowledges are about communities.'[77] To understand the art-making community in the spruce copse as encompassing humans and ants working together, art practice and theory is stretched and bent a little. Paintings do not display opinions about their painters, but ants reacted to me and my actions in ways that could be interpreted as critical or disengaged, as well as in ways that were interesting and helpful to the art. For O'Sullivan, art practice is a 'careful process by which… organised regimented representational space… is opened up.'[78] As this research began to 'unlock the potential becomings'[79] between humans, art, and other-than-humans, the pertinent areas of representational space started to include how humans understand ants, and began to stretch out towards questions around how ants might understand humans and their actions.[80]

Leaning over the huge nests so covered in and full of tiny animals, I became intensely aware of scale and numerosity. There was an intense visual–haptic–embodied

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[75] Haraway, Donna. 'Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective'. *Feminist Studies*, Vol. 14, No. 3. (Autumn, 1988), pp. 575–599. 586.
[76] Haraway (1988) 583.
[77] Haraway (1988) 590.
[78] O'Sullivan (2006) 34.
[79] O'Sullivan (2006) 34.
[80] I go into more detail about interpretation across species boundaries in Chapter Four.

experience in placing a paint blob on paper, then watching as an ant's whole body was immersed in that same, yet now strange, blue puddle. I was nervous about touching the ants, but ants seemed fearless when climbing all over me. I saw my fingers as huge when they loomed close to an ant. In the midst of the experience, I became viscerally, if not cognitively, aware of ants' experience, alongside how little I knew about or had even thought about ants before. Looking back, I see that I had expected ants to be machinic, unthinking, emotionless and all the same, but the early experiences of painting with ants showed me that some ant nests were more aggressive, brave, quiet or excitable than others,[81] and in subsequent work (described later in this chapter) it became clear that individual ants had preferences, interests and moods that varied from their sisters (worker ants are all female and most ants in a nest will share a mother).

Painting offered a familiar, legible medium through which artistic acts of unknowing ants could begin. Our first surprising and intense painterly encounter delimited the questions I was asking and suggested answers to questions I did not know I was asking. Because art converses using diverse materials, it carries humans beyond their usual reliance on cognition and language and brings them into their creaturely senses and intuition. It can throw up and/or frame new experiences – including happy or unhappy accidents – that can then help develop a more interesting set of questions and offerings. The painterly marks and the ants' actions that produced them revealed things about ants and about ant–human relation that could not have been produced by observation alone.[82] This was not simply painting with ants as tools, it was painting with ants as puzzling participants. The action introduced so many elements – touch, substances, colours, textures, and gestures – whose relevance for wood ants I did not know about and could now seek to learn. The processual experiences of painting with ants generated a startling opening out toward ants and many questions that reflected back upon being human, not least the ethics of the encounter, which are addressed in more detail in Chapter 2. This knowing-unknowing process began in the moment of painting with ants but continued long after the paintings were dry.

Wilding Art

If as Fortnum says, the studio is the privileged container for the artist's not knowing in human-centred art, then feral practice demands a different, wilder kind of studio and an

[81] When first painting with ants in the forest, I had undertaken no research about ants. Later, I came to learn that nest differentiation and individual differentiation was an active research topic in myrmecology.

[82] I subsequently read how nest differentiation was an active field of research in myrmecology.

extended conception of not knowing. In *Wild Things: The Disorder of Desire,* gender and queer theorist Jack Halberstam[83] articulates a sometimes literal but also metaphorical and cultural wandering 'outside' that he says 'holds the wild within it; emerges out of precolonial notions of space, orientation, and navigation; and refers to an immersive sense of being lost or of standing outside of a system of knowing.'[84] This mental and creative space of 'outside' allows us to explore alternative perspectives on, critique or ignore a dominant system of knowing. For Halberstam, queerness and wildness are the principal routes into this creative bewilderment but they 'are not synonyms, nor does one extend the other, rather, wildness takes the anti-identarian refusal embedded in queer theory and connects it to other sites of productive confusion, taxonomic limits, and boundary collapse.'[85] This 'outside of a system of knowing' brings to 'not knowing' an awareness of the millennia of education and acculturation that underpin our systemic knowledges and feed our assumptions. Bewilderment is a necessary tool in destabilising these assumptions, and a creative force for questioning their sources. For Halberstam, wildness draws us away from colonial systems of knowledge and control, as unknowing in this research draws us away from anthropocentrism.

> [bewilderment] combines a disorientation to space with a wandering movement free of any destination and a form of unknowing created when no "plain road" exists. Given the colonial preoccupation with roads, mapping, navigation, and so on, and given the colonial notions of freedom that connect to mobility, the concept of bewilderment, which can also join to synonyms like amazement (originally meaning lost in a maze) and astonishment (originally meaning knocked out by a stone), clearly leads in the opposite direction, into the woods rather than out of them. [86]

The feral artist exits the studio to go into the woods. The walls of an artist's studio enclose many half-formed, sketched-out and completed artworks spanning differing periods of time: '[a]rtists leave things in studios in order to return to them.'[87] I did not return to King's Wood for nearly a year, but its presence and my intention to return acted like a dematerialised studio – a space for the work and thought to continue. This 'forest studio' nurtured different kinds of research and imaginative engagements, less

[83] Halberstam, Jack (2020) *Wild Things: The Disorder of Desire*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.
[84] Halberstam (2020) 66.
[85] Halberstam (2020) 30.
[86] Halberstam (2020) 67.
[87] Fortnum (2014) unpaginated.

bounded by discipline or habit, encompassing ethical enquiry and biology as well as artistic experiments. By the time I returned to King's Wood I had formulated a loose (but deeper and better informed) set of aesthetic offerings, ideas and questions for the ants.

4. Feral Practice 2019 *M-Ant-Ra,* video stills

Instead of following the flat and rectangular convention of painting, the form of the work shifted towards the hump of the anthill. Thin lilac paper was fitted to each ant nest like a loose suit, weighted gently with logs, and pinned into place as if to a dressmaker's dummy, creating a light, tent-like covering. Lilac was chosen as a contrast to warm brown and black ant bodies and brown conifer needles. Liquid food colouring replaced manufactured watercolour paint. Food colouring is non-toxic and slightly sweet, so this was an edible offering to the ants, an attempt to build reciprocity. Many ants were keen to drink the black food colouring; all avoided the red, green and blue, so we continued with just black. The mark-making (other than initial blobs of food colouring and gravity-guided drips) was created by the ants themselves. I avoided pooling colour so that ants were not overwhelmed by the liquid, and worked slowly and carefully, responding to where the ants were so as not to drop colour on them, but also placing more drops

where ants were busier and less where they tended not to go. The expressions of *Ant-ic Actions*, initially framed by painting, started to stretch out over nests into new gestures (only provisionally my own) and became increasingly guided by ant-ic preference in scents and tastes, and ant-ic habits in speed and direction of travel. The slowed-down technique made individual ants' actions and reactions far more noticeable, and again I was surprised by them.

Humans visiting galleries expect the artworks to be human-made, and, when exhibited separately from the context of the spruce copse and the liveness of watching the ants' actions, the ant-ic qualities of the paintings were at risk of being lost. Handheld closeup video (swapping from brush to camera and back to brush while working, and working with brush in one hand and camera in the other) thus became a key expressive tool because it made it possible to offer the viewer an intimate, almost artist-eye view of the ants' different activities. The video shows closeups of hand, ants, and black lines being drawn across lilac fields, and follows ants as they interact in different ways with the colour and with one another. Ants are eusocial insects, meaning that they have castes with distinctive body types and roles. The sterile female worker ants are usually regarded as non-individual, but the video reveals distinctive differences between worker ants' engagements, and highlights some individuals who, through their intense interest in the food colouring, become what one might see the 'best', certainly the most active, artists.[88] Most ants rush up to a wet patch of colour, feeler it and dash off. Some drink it enthusiastically. Some head straight on into the puddle. Fewer still, though from this last, bold group, seem to get obsessed with the puddles, moving from one to another repeatedly, running through them and drawing as they do so. Just once, an ant draws the conifer needle carried in her mandibles through the paint, creating a perfect line as she moves away, and giving a fine performance of making an intentional, considered painting.[89]

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[88] My findings here, that ants displayed widely individualized responses to the food colouring, coincides with a study in which bumble bees were observed to play with balls: 'The study followed 45 bumble bees in an arena and gave them the options of walking through an unobstructed path to reach a feeding area or deviating from this path into the areas with wooden balls. Individual bees rolled balls between 1 and, impressively, 117 times over the experiment.'[88] [my emphasis] Queen Mary University of London. "Study shows bumble bees 'play'." ScienceDaily. ScienceDaily, 27 October 2022. <www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2022/10/221027123927.htm>.

[89] See the discussion of 'speculative anthropomorphism' and what it offers to interspecies relation in Chapter Three.

To foreground the ants' individual differences, and so challenge conventional ideas of human versus insect ontology, collective versus individual self-realisation and creativity, I added a voiceover to the video, scripted from 'mindfulness mantras' offered on the internet. Each phrase reflects the achievement-oriented and hyper-individualist conception of spiritual-material success that is promoted by contemporary capitalist culture. For example: 'I can manifest any amount of wealth', 'Another day, another opportunity to be amazing!' For each phrase the voiceover was very slightly speeded up or slowed down in post-production, which shifted the pitch higher or lower, inserting a playful degree of uncertainty as to who speaks: ant or human.

5. Feral Practice *M-Ant-Ra* 2019 video still, showing an ant drawing with the spruce needle held in her mandibles.

In the making and viewing of *M-Ant-Ra*, the ant-ic and the human-ish[90] are brought together in the visual field. The video shows the work being made, not hand over hand, as in intimate human collaborations, but 'hand over ant', and the voiceover deliberately confuses what species of subjectivity might be being referred to. The inference and intent is new ant-human becomings, or alliances. Halberstam understands alliances with other-than-human beings as creatively and ethically enlivening for humans. Wildness is pursued 'not simply a space beyond the home, but also as a challenge to an assumed order of things from, by and on behalf of things that refuse and resist order itself.'[91] He offers the example of author Helen MacDonald, who fuses her life with a goshawk after the death of her father and writes an award-winning book.[92]

[90] Human-ish is used adjectivally as an equivalence of ant-ic, and to suggest that we might not fully know what it is to be human-like, because we do not fully know what a human is.
[91] Halberstam, Jack (2020) 3.
[92] Macdonald, Helen (2014) *H is for Hawk*, London: Jonathan Cape.

The things that resist order can be wildly human, like queer sexualities, or wildly nonhuman like the hawk, like the ants. The queer outside articulated opens onto wider pastures in which to roam than 'out of the closet' offers. Less caught by binaries of hetero- versus homosexuality, one can explore desire and alliance in its multiplicitous intimacies and becomings. As he follows the vector of queerness, though, Halberstam reaches a 'post-nature' approach, which prioritises human freedoms and posthuman fluidities over situated creatures with specific needs, capacities and limits. Queerness has an understandably vexed relation to the natural, having been condemned and oppressed as its opposite, especially during the 19th Century. 'Scientists and humanists invented and explored the natural world in order to challenge or validate various man-made systems of morality'.[93] Ironically, in the 21st Century, scientists are revealing the natural world as a site of multiplicitous, queer, intelligent, complex, shapeshifting becomings that humans have barely scraped the surface of understanding. They reveal some fungi, for example, to have several thousand genders.[94] The natural sciences reflect the moral zeitgeist, as Halberstam argues, but they can also offer fresh insights and unexpected ways of thinking for human culture. It concerns me that, if 'the die was cast in the late nineteenth century for the end of nature altogether'[95] diverse and fascinating 'natural histories' are not available for queer theory to think with, and queerness is placed somewhat out of bounds for the creaturely.

In the outside of the forest studio, desire provokes a deep listening for species difference and connection, mirroring the Modernist poet T. S. Eliot, who 'hears voices in birdsong and follows them toward "the still point of the turning world."'[96] Stepping outside knowing makes human edges porous, and it makes humans vulnerable. More is at stake than moving art outdoors or making other-than-human animals a topic for art – feral participations involve conscious moves to counter and augment the kinds of knowing and control that dominate species relations in the West. They embrace and foreground a position of vulnerability and porosity in the human, making art in order to allow normally subaltern and unnoticed voices (by voices I mean all kinds of communicative expressions) to guide, influence and develop the artwork. To illuminate the point I want to introduce the work of US artist Catherine Chalmers, who shares

[93] Halberstam, Jack (2020) 29.
[94] For example, the white, fan shaped mushroom *Schizophyllum commune*, has more than 23,000 different sexual identities. https://www.discovermagazine.com/planet-earth/why-this-fungus-has-over-20-000-sexes
[95] Halberstam, Jack (2020) 17.
[96] Halberstam, Jack (2020) 13.

my fascination with ants, works from a forest studio, and says that she seeks to 'pull the animal world into the cultural arena in a meaningful way.'[97] Though her work with leafcutter ants is shot in a far wilder forest than King's Wood in Kent – during field trips to the Osa Peninsula in Costa Rica – Chalmers' approach is more controlling. Following research and planning, Chalmers makes scripts for what she wants the ant works to say. Making ant-sized film sets in the forest allows her to then orchestrate her materials and technologies to achieve the viewpoints she needs for the ants to perform her stories correctly. For example, in the video *We Rule* (2012),[98] a number of leafcutters are diverted from their path, to carry leaves that the artist has cut into letters across a particular log. The ants form the words 'we rule' by carrying the appropriate letters in the correct order (though upside down and awry) across the screen, and so depict Chalmers' understanding of the ants' dominant position in the forest.

This is not to say that things always go to plan. In the video *Antworks* (2012*),*[99] Chalmers' intended message was about deforestation. Ants defoliate more trees in the rainforest than any other herbivores, and Chalmers' wanted their destruction of her film set of leafy plants to tell the story of rampant human destruction of the rainforest: 'she had a script in mind that told a very specific story: the stripping of nature.'[100] But the ants had other ideas. Chalmers tried the set-up with more than a dozen plants they usually eat, but the ants ignored them all. Only when she offered the variegated leaves of *Codiaeum variegatum* did the ants respond by cutting them enthusiastically and carrying them away. The ants' choice of a plant whose mottled and spotted leaves looked like abstract expressionist paintings 'establishe[d] not only the aesthetics of the video, but more significantly, influence[d] the formation of the storyline.'[101] Chalmers did persist with her intended message – the bulk of the video consists of a long timelapse of the successful plants being stripped – but it concludes with the ants carrying individual leaf 'paintings' across a stone: 'I want the ants to walk, one at a time on the stone stage and present their artwork.'[102] Alongside the politics of defoliation, the final story offers the viewer an

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[97] Wapner, Jessica. (2011) *Ant Thrills: Seeing Leaf-Cutter Ants through an Artist's Eyes*. Scientific American. [Online] (June 10), Available from: https://blogs.scientificamerican.com/guest-blog/ant-thrills-seeing-leaf-cutter-ants-through-an-artists-eyes/ [Accessed 25.1.22]
[98] Chalmers, Catherine (2012) https://www.catherinechalmers.com/we-rule-video/ [Accessed 25.1.22]
[99] Chalmers (2012).
[100] Wapner (2011).
[101] Chalmers (2018) https://www.catherinechalmers.com/blog/2018/7/26/caprice [Accessed 25.1.22]
[102] Chalmers (2018) https://www.catherinechalmers.com/blog/2018/7/26/antworks [Accessed 25.1.22]

example of other-than-human aesthetic choice and preference. Chalmers' responds to unplanned moments, but her work is largely illustrative of prior knowledge, rather than exploratory by intent. Though she is wandering outside in the forest, and responding to ants' choices, she is not consciously 'standing outside of a system of [anthropocentric] knowing' to discover something different.

6. Catherine Chalmers 2012 *Antworks,* film set production shot
7. Catherine Chalmers 2012 *We Rule,* video still

Other-Than-Human Domesticities

Halberstam's conception of wildness is liberatory for art and human becoming, but wildness is a more problematic concept in reference to situated creatures and relations. The word 'wild' offers something but conceals something else just as valued. Separations of meaning that are visible in practice can become flattened in language, and the emotive properties of the word 'wild', as it describes weather / emotions / seas / violence /

people / parties / music can get projected onto the lifeworlds of all 'wild' nonhuman beings, no matter what their organising structures. Nonhuman domesticities and cultivations – which include the extraordinary fungal gardens of termites and leafcutter ants – are rendered less visible by a too-energetic pressing together of the various concepts of 'wild' that are offered by its dense contextual meanings.[103]

Feral practice engages with vectors of wilding and domestication, and attends to lines of flight and entanglement, rather than seeing the wild as a destination. Rather than seeking human freedom in the wild spaces Halberstam describes as disordered, this research seeks to reveal, amplify and work with/in the other-than-human as orders of difference, and differently ordered – as potentially bewildering and/or liberatory to the human visitor, but as purposeful and patterned to their inhabitants. A wild ecology such a forest or coral reef or meadow might be profuse, entangled and complex, but it is not disordered or chaotic. The ordering systems and regulatory rhythms, modalities and social expectations are determined by the beings internal to it, which are not easily understood, because they are not coded by us or for us. It follows from this that all creatures are bound by and perform routine acts of domesticity, because all bodies are reliant on other bodies for sustenance and shelter. This thesis understands other-than-human and human lives as in continuums of difference, and seeks to foreground that no creatures are 'wild' or 'other' to themselves.

Other-than-human domestications often take place out of sight, or at nonhuman scales or temporalities, but wood ants make very obvious and noticeable architectural structures, with populations at the scale of human towns and cities. [104] *M-Ant-Ra's* opening shot focuses quietly on a large domed nest in the sunshine. The shot introduces the domicile of the ants as central to the artwork, and to the milieu of the spruce copse, much as the opening sequence of a soap opera might locate and introduce the house/street/square of its central characters. *M-Ant-Ra* does not continue into narrative drama, but, alongside artistic acts of drawing, it does show ants performing everyday

[103] Lexico offers several definitions of the word 'wild', distinguished according to context:1. (of an animal or plant) living or growing in the natural environment; not domesticated or cultivated….2. (of a place or region) uninhabited, uncultivated, or inhospitable 2.1 (of sea or the weather) rough and stormy. 2.2 (of people) not civilized; primitive. 2.3 (of a look, appearance, etc.) indicating distraction or strong emotion. 3.Lacking discipline or restraint. 4.Not based on sound reasoning or probability.

[104] Deborah Gordon's research also shows how ants' working lives progress in orderly ways through task groups that reflect their developing knowledge and independence - in anthropomorphic terms, they have established conventions for career progression. Cf. Gordon, Deborah M. (1999) *Ants at Work: how an insect society is organized* New York, Free Press.

tasks: carrying conifer needles, dragging invertebrate prey, greeting each another, climbing trees, fighting, social feeding. Wood ants manipulate the vegetal life of the forest by moving seeds around, and dominate the forest floor at the invertebrate scale, whilst operating aphid farms in trees.[105] The King's Wood spruce copse can be reimagined through this artwork as the ants' domestic sphere, or 'farm'.

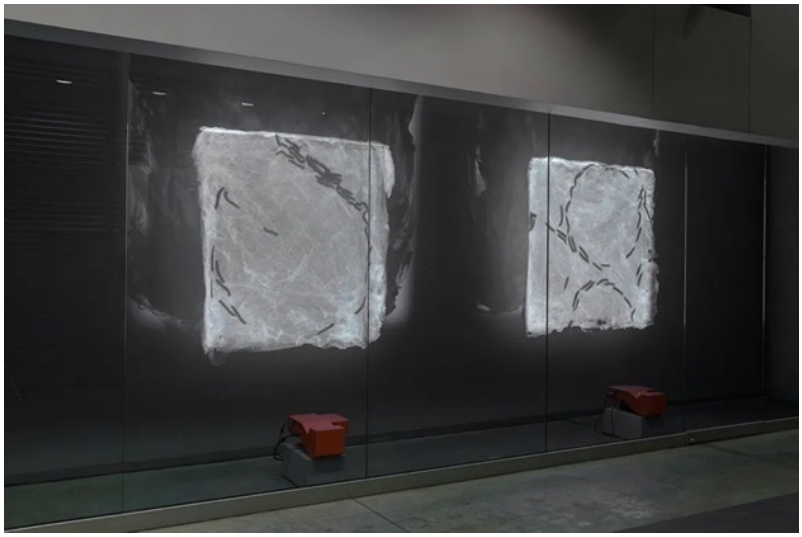
8. von Frisch, K. 1974 *Cross section of a Formica polyctena nest.* Re-photographed by the author from *Animal Architecture* by Karl von Frisch (1974) New York: Harcourt Brace.

Unlike in a nature documentary, however, there is no narration of *M-Ant-Ra's* images. The human on screen is not present in the ant-ic sphere as one who knows, and she does not visibly speak. She faces the ants not the viewer, wears an animal hat, her speeded-up motions look slightly comic. The disembodied voiceover, rather than being authoritative or interpretative, is a repetitive, rhythmic, unstable presence, concerned with (ant and human?) self-realisation. Ant–human interactions are mediated by the actions of painting together, an expressive interchange is taking place, but its meaning is not pinned down. In *M-Ant-Ra*, and in other ant videos described later in the thesis, the human on screen circles the ants' domestic sphere, not in control of the place or the

[105] Ants farm aphids for their sweet excretion, honeydew, much as we farm dairy cows for milk.

art, but moving around carefully, enticing the ants' attention and participation. She is present as visitor, not owner or mediator of the space.

As the ants made lines by running through the food colouring, they drew the lines of travel involved in their domestic activities, such as maintenance of the nest, foraging, and interactivity with each other. *M-Ant-Ra,* in keeping with other artworks incorporating ants, offers humans an experience of insects as de-anthropocentric vectors. In the project *Caterpillar Cartography,*[106] forest tent caterpillars (*Malacosoma disstria*) made lines in charcoal powder across paper substrates. The artist Alison Reiko Loader described the lines as opening up into 'an improvisational form of cartography, one that paradoxically "creates the territory it maps."'[107] The drawings foreground the activity of nonhumans – the caterpillars explore and claim space through their movements.



9. Alison R. Loader and Christopher Plenzich 2015 *En Masse* at FOFA Gallery in Montreal, video still (image by Guy L'Heureux).

In 1972, USA artist Alan Sonfist exhibited *Army Ants: Patterns & Structures*[108]*,* in an exhibition sponsored by the Architectural League of New York. The architectural structure in question was a colony of 'a million ants in a pen, about four hundred ft. sq., which has walls lined with plastic… [which they can't climb] because their feet slip. Within the colony, the ants form long, living chains with their own bodies to make houses and bridges.'[109] The exhibit showed audiences the domestic and engineering

[106] Alison R. Loader and Christopher Plenzich, *Caterpillar Cartography* (2015) Multimedia.
[107] Falvey, Emily (2017) *Animal Intent,* Apex Art https://apexart.org/exhibitions/falvey.php#_ftn8 [Accessed 21.4.21]
[108] Alan Sonfist, *Army Ants: Patterns & Structures,* 1972 Architectural League of New York.
[109] Hiss, Anthony (1972) *Ants as Art*, The New Yorker, February 25, 1972.

prowess of army ants, who use their own bodies to make bivouacs as they move nomadically through the forest, protecting the queen. Although army ants have a fearsome reputation for obliterating everything in their path (whole villages of people will move out when the army ants arrive) they only ever claim a territory temporarily.

Ants might be reimagined as architects, mappers, builders, as territory holders of their own, as domesticators of space, and as interruptive forces to human totalism. Yukinori Yanagi has repeatedly used the tunnelling nest-building activities of harvester ants (*Pogonomyrmex barbartus)* as a means to suggest the deterritorialization of human symbolic orders. The large installation *The World Ant Farm* (1990)[110] included 180 plastic, wall-hung boxes, each of which contained a sand painting of a different national flag. The ants were enclosed in the installation, but each box was joined by plastic tubing so the ants could range across this 'world'. As they built their nests and tunnels, they disturbed the sand and so the flags. As the colours of the flags get mixed up, the works speak about nationalism, (dis)obedience, (un)containment and migration. The ants' actions are 'a metaphor for the fragility of national identity's [sic] as the individual, self-contained flags of state disintegrate before us.'[111] The ants certainly 'wild' the art, insofar as they disturb the flag paintings, but the ants themselves are trapped by the installation, and serve humans as metaphors.

Like *Ant-ic Actions*, these artworks bring the creaturely into the purview of art, and undermine or offset ideas of human exceptionalism and human fantasies of control. They counter the anthropocentric history of appropriating creaturely and material creativity as our own, placing nonhuman agency in a visually prominent place and central to the process. In all these exhibits we see creaturely intention in action. As Ron Broglio argues: 'Animals challenge language and representation that too often purports to be disembodied thought. To think alongside animals means to distribute the body of thinking, creating a distribution of states or plural centers for valuing, selecting, and marking/making a world.'[112] This acts as counterweight to the reductive understanding of nonhuman intelligence and decision making as 'chance'. But in each case, the bodies

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https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/1972/03/04/ants-as-art.

[110] Yukinori Yanagi *The World Flag Ant Farm* 1990, Benesse House, Naoshima Contemporary Art Museum, Naoshima.

[111] Miller-Keller, Andrea (1995) Exhibition text for *Matrix,* Wadsworth Athaneum, Hatford, Connecticut, USA. September 10 - November 5, 1995. [Online] .www.yanagistudio.net/image/texts/Matrix%20128.pdf [Accessed 27.1.22]

[112] Broglio, Ron. (2011) *Surface Encounters: Thinking with Animals and Art*. USA: University of Minnesota Press, 7.

of the insects are 'domesticated' (either trapped or raised in containers[113]) by the human artists for the duration of the exhibition, and/or for their whole lives. In so doing they reinstate anthropocentric domination of animal bodies and creativity.

This research does not seek to recreate their captive aesthetics. Perhaps the inclusion of live animals, of whatever scale, in museum or gallery exhibits is too easily suggestive of a continuation with zoological practices of display, which allow humans to borrow and enjoy nonhuman animal bodies while requiring little displacement of their own bodies or minds. I think it is likely that any creature that is divorced from its complex network of relations and activities is diminished. Rather than using acts of domestication to draw ants into a human art context, this research 'wilds' art by drawing art and artist outside, into intimate proximity and feral participation with other-than-human beings. In avoiding acts of domestication, the works draw art and artist into feral participation with other-than-human beings. The artworks themselves, however, are reinserted into the gallery to meet a human audience. This decision reflects the ethical issues of taking audiences into close proximity with sensitive ecologies. The schism is softened through the use of video (and, in *The Ant-ic Museum*, through scent and forest materials) which insert something of the forest's liveness and difference into the gallery space, but the research is underpinned by a belief in the encounter with the artwork as itself an experience of difference, capable of profoundly impacting on the human imagination (without that understanding, art would not be the discipline through which one would formulate the research questions).

Feral Landscapes Are Bodied

While the history of landscape has prioritised the vista, offering sweeping visibility that emphasises the hierarchical dynamic between observer and observed, and implying control and ownership, this research presents landscapes as more-than-human spheres, in which many different competing and complementary acts of wilding and taming intersect, and in which humans are not necessarily dominant, or particularly pertinent. In 2021, I worked with Berlin based artist Sonya Schönberger on a project that developed and presented these ideas. We were inspired by, and see the project as a contemporary

[113] In the wider multi-media project, called *En Masse*, for which Loader worked with entomologist Christopher Plenzich, the exhibition included the insects themselves, who were raised on site, and were on display in large viewing cabinets for the six weeks duration of the exhibition.
Alison Loader and Christopher Plenzich *En Masse* (20 April-29 May, 2015) at FOFA Gallery, Montreal. Experienced through the artist's website https://alisonloader.com/en-masse/ [Accessed 23.6.18]

reimagining of, *Das Große Rasenstück* (Great Piece of Turf) painted by Albrecht Durer in 1503, in which, unlike the broad views favoured by most landscape painters, he meticulously depicts a patch of turf (which he took back to his studio to work from) composed of a tangle of wild plant species now usually considered as weeds.

This Vibrant Turf was an embodied and discursive project. At its core, the research method was to repeatedly position (over a few months) our bodies in intimate proximity with a piece of turf, make images from this perspective, and discuss and interpret the insights and imagery that emerged through an exchange of emails. The patch of turf I worked with was in a rough meadow on a chalk hillside about fifteen minutes' walk from my house. The 170cm circle (dimensions to match my own size) is situated in Fackenden Down nature reserve, owned and managed by Kent Wildlife Trust. As a piece of land, it speaks to the intricate kinds of ordering that continue with little human intervention.[114] In summer, it is an abundance of grasses and flowers – the 'vibrant turf' of the title.

I lay on the turf and in the plants. There is nothing unusual about lying in grass, but here it was a research tool, and performed as a way to 'unknow' the turf. Lying among and underneath the plants, I imagined myself as a plant, rooted into the soil, living and dying in that one place. I imagined the different vulnerabilities and resilience that rootedness would entail. I videoed myself lying there, and videoed the plants from below, blurring and waving in the breeze.[115] From below, lying on the ground looking up at the sky through the plants, the concept of 'land' and 'landowner' appeared not just historically unfair but baffling. How could something so fecund and full of diverse life be subject to ownership by a single body? In England, land ownership is still dominated by a very few.[116] Most humans have to skirt around increasingly punitive laws on access and trespass in order to spend time exploring landscapes that do not belong to them. From this position, prone and *in* the turf, mapping and borders were obscured. What became far more visible (and audible) was the rooted belonging of a tangle of plants of many species, and the insects visiting them. The plants, with their roots firmly in the soil, were

[114] The land is being managed through intermittent grazing by a breed of short-legged cattle that do not churn the soil too much and like to forage scrub as well as ground flora, so helping to maintain the open grassland and prevent the hill from scrubbing up.
[115] Video available at https://videos.files.wordpress.com/Br8FsmqB/circel-from-the-ground_hd.mp4
[116] Over half of England is still owned by less than 1% the population, and this has roughly remained the case since 1066.

clearly in a much better position to be considered landowners than this human, or any other human, who would soon have to get up and go home.

10. Feral Practice & Sonya Schönberger 2020 *This Vibrant Turf,* video stills

As attentional scale and perspective shift, received ideas of landscape and land can be queried, can be 'unknown'. In a genuine encounter, which is a vulnerable and porous moment, experiential, creative immersion can disrupt the received hierarchies – for example between humans, plants and insects, or between landowners, land and creaturely inhabitants. New questions arose whilst lying within the turf: do plants have territories, or are they territories? Both are surely true? As I lay there, my body was tickled by plant bodies and explored by insect bodies. I understood that my human body is, like the plant bodies, a territory. Could it be said to 'belong' to the small creatures who make it their home? Once everything (everyone) within the vista was understood as alive and interdependent, there was nowhere left to comfortably render as 'backdrop', as representation, or as transferable; only a densely patterned mix of interwoven bodies and territories.

Sometimes our own human body is the 'wildest' part of our own territory – the least in our control, the most mysterious. The realization that our bodies host and rely on a vast multiplicity of nonhuman life forms, who proliferate in our gut and on every surface of our body; that, in the words of Scott Gilbert '[w]e are all lichens',[117] smashes our conception of biological individuality and informs us of our own radical hybridity. Inside a physically smoothed-out, digitally enhanced contemporary urban existence, one might *feel* alienated from 'nature', but humanity has never been more deeply and knowingly enmeshed with the nonhuman. Bruno Latour writes that: 'at the time of ploughs we could only scratch the surface of the soil, [but] we… now begin to fold ourselves into the molecular machinery of soil bacteria.'[118] All borders are being traversed.

Polarised incursions upon borders define the 'feral' as conceptualised by Anna Tsing et al in their online project *Feral Atlas* (initiated in 2019 and ongoing), and are exampled by instances of 'ecologies that have been encouraged by human-built infrastructures, but which have developed and spread beyond human control.'[119] The recently added example of Covid-19 transferring from an unidentified species into humans (and from us to pets) exemplifies their positioning of the feral as a challenge to the fallacy of human control, but as also emblematic of human and nonhuman in negative opposition, with each 'side' staging hostile invasions into the other's territory. *Feral Atlas* misses out on the empathic and liberatory potential of the feral. The perspectives of feral practice, with their emphasis on affirmative not knowing, offer transformative understandings of our (personal, global, local) worlds as thoroughly mixed up with, dependent on and enlivened by other-than-human beings.

In deepening and diversifying human engagement with other-than-human beings and places, feral practice brings to notice a world made of bodies, becoming with each other in densely patterned lively layers and territories. The Bedeguar wasp larvae (*Diplolepis rosae*) growing in the galled bud of the wild rose that spreads deep into the microorganism-rich soil below and into the buzzing, chirping sky above Fackenden Down. The microbes digesting plants in my gut as I lie in the grass looking up through that rose. Everywhere and *everyone* is also the space for someone else's homemaking

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[117] Scott F. Gilbert (2015) *We Are All Lichens: How symbiosis theory is reconfiguring critical biological boundaries*, Presentation at University of Helsinki, Finland. http://sites.psu.edu/iahboundaries/wp-content/uploads/sites/34810/2015/10/Scott-Gilbert-Presentation.pdf [Accessed 2.3.21]

[118] Bennett (2010) 115.

[119] Anna Tsing, Jennifer Deger, Alder Keleman-Saxana, and Feifei Zhou's *Feral Atlas: the More-Than-Human Anthropocene https://feralatlas.org/* [Accessed 31.5.22]

activities, someone's domestication. From the ground level, close-up perspective of *This Vibrant Turf*, the homogenizing concept of 'landscape' starts to dissolve into tangles of living bodies, and a world of nested nests swims into view.

Rounding up

In the forest studio painting became a tool, not of representation, but of processual, conversational interaction, porous to and expressive of the other-than-human. As ants became participants in the making of the paintings, and their actions could be contemplated and (mis)interpreted, our relationship became intersubjective. This feral approach to painting nurtured an unknowing of ants. Art was stretched to include 'ants as ants' and opened to the possibility of 'ants as artists'. Ants were not simply tool or topic: they drew the human artist into unknowing, and wilder forms of knowing. The encounter with the other-than-human shifts us from anthropocentric power towards vulnerability, where we better understand our precarity and interdependence. Inviting new porosity of body and mind opens up vulnerable artmaking. Instead of landscape consumed as vista, or land possessed as asset, *This Vibrant Turf* proposed land as an living web of bodies and territories, of which the artist's body was a temporary part.

The next chapter digs deeper into the concept of participation in art – examining Grant Kester's interpretation of the offer of participatory art to the human sphere, and Claire Bishop's critique of what it actually achieves. It explores how the participation in art alters when it is extended beyond the boundaries of the human, and what interspecies participation in art offers to interspecies relations. Finally, it develops this research's concept of beyond human aesthetics to show how, in feral participations, ethics and aesthetics are creatively intertwined.

2. *M-Ant-Ra*: Developing a Materialized Dialogical Aesthetic with Ants

M-Ant-Ra https://youtu.be/aYI6n0JLkZU
Video

While terms like co-creation, co-production and collaboration[120] can imply equivalence and so collapse differences between the beings involved in interspecies art, in participation the balance of power and production is always tipped, and questions of how they are tipped and what that offers to the art can be explored. This chapter shows how the expanded, materialized dialogue of feral participation expands Grant Kester's 'dialogical aesthetic'[121] of human participatory art. Understanding wood ants as participants in art opens up several questions addressed in this chapter: How do the human artist and ant participants share agency? What is 'consent' in an interspecies context? What are the ethics of this human-ant art relation? How are aesthetics affected in this participation? What value and meaning is ascribed to intentionality?

This chapter explores how human artists and more-and-other-than-human participants can share artistic agency and meaning, without suggesting these are the same for the different species. Concepts of interspecies communication from ethology and beyond-human anthropology are used to inflect human-centred aesthetic theories, towards a model that shows how layered, aesthetic, asymmetric interchanges taking place between nonhuman and human beings can open up into art and thus extend art's borders. Through comparison with other ant–human participatory artworks, this chapter shows how the artist's intention always underpins participation and shapes the artwork that becomes. The intention of this research is to decentre the human and challenge hierarchies between different kinds of being, which requires a listening engagement with nonhuman participants, and makes ethics and aesthetics creatively intertwined.

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[120] While different terms are often used interchangeably at an informal level, 'collaboration' in art to me suggests working together towards a shared idea, whereas 'co-creation' and 'co-production' are less defined by shared intention. Only the term 'participation' contains within it the acknowledgment of layered and different ways to participate in a shared project.
[121] Kester, Grant (2004) *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art* (Berkeley, CA. & London: University of California Press.

Participatory Aesthetics and Authorship

The creation of a responsive 'field',[122] in which a listening engagement with participants can elicit meaningful cooperation, is core to the work of participatory artists, who, according to art historian Grant Kester, often 'become "context providers" rather than "content providers."'[123] While this might sound like a modest achievement, French curator Nicholas Bourriaud made grand claims for 'relational aesthetics', a set of artistic practices that he said addressed 'the whole of human relations and their social context rather than independence and private space.'[124] The relational artist facilitates opportunities for knowledge exchange and empowerment. Bourriaud suggests that relational artworks, such as the performative offerings of food by Rirkrit Tiravanija,[125] set up 'micro-topias' in which new 'arenas of exchange' (outside commerce) are formed, which enable participants to envisage and create change within their community.[126]

Art historian Claire Bishop sees several motivations at play in participatory art, but takes a critical rather than validatory stance. She describes the socio-political agendas of participatory art as 'activating participants to increase their sense of agency, ceding artistic authorship for egalitarian reasons and to build aesthetic risk, and nurturing community.[127] Rather than seeking to confer or extend human power, authorship or knowledge onto (somehow needful?) nonhuman participants, this research works with diverse creatures in order to refresh art and reimagine interspecies relations. To achieve this, it acknowledges and responds to the relational and hierarchical asymmetries between different beings, which is a different intention than seeking 'egalitarianism'.

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[122] In this chapter I use 'field' to describe the space of interaction between participants, especially between human and nonhuman. I bring together two definitions of field from the Oxford English Dictionary: 'a place where a subject of scientific study or of artistic representation can be observed in its natural location or context' and 'a space or range within which objects are visible from a particular viewpoint or through a piece of apparatus.'

[123] Kester (2004) 1.

[124] https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/r/relational-aesthetics

[125] See for example: Rirkrit Tiravanija *Pad Thai* (1990) and *Untitled (free)* (1992).

[126] While there clearly is some sharing of power and agency in relational artworks, it can often seem more trickle-down than tipped. Tiravanija's work was often presented in prestigious gallery or institutional contexts, and attracted highbrow art audiences who arguably were in no great need of another opportunity to hobnob and eat free food.

[127] Bishop, Claire (2012) *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship London, Verso,* 12.

Kathryn Brown has noted that real audiences rarely 'conform to the fantasy of the ideal participant that is embedded in the work's structure…'[128] This suggests a model of participatory art that is only partly shaped through listening and is more driven by the artist's own aesthetics aims. Certainly, Brown retains a stronger emphasis on authorship than Bishop, for her: 'the underlying script, or form of the artwork as the product of the artist's own creativity'[129] remains key. While socially engaged, participatory artists still define and control the context and specificities of projects, crafting how they are shaped, documented and presented (if they are), and every participatory artist will handle the balance of authorship with their participants differently. In this research, each artwork's 'script' (rarely is an actual script ever written) unfolds in response to a context, and to the particularities of its creaturely participants, and is continually reformed in response to their interaction. While all participatory artists set up the premise and initial aesthetic of a project, these often respond to, or are even led by, the project's participants, and reflect their life experiences. While a conventional form of agreement or consensus is unavailable within interspecies participations, this research looks for ways to make interventions in other-than-human worlds light touch or avoidable, and participation pleasurable or rewarding (e.g. through making disturbances short-lived and by the use of edible materials) These concerns shape the aesthetics of the work. Perhaps what participatory projects have in common is less a democratic intention, than one to develop reciprocal boundaries between work, artists, participants and world, offering increased opportunities for accessibility and mutual transformation.

Bishop argues that the aesthetic impact of participatory art suffers on behalf of its social outcomes, until 'art enters a realm of useful, ameliorative and ultimately modest gestures, rather than the creation of singular acts that leave behind them a troubling wake.'[130] She laments that participatory art is regarded as 'radical', only in as much as it rejects authorship and spectacle, and: '[c]onsensual collaboration is valued over artistic mastery and individualism, regardless of what the project sets out to do or actually achieves.'[131] While it is certainly true that the aesthetics of some (though not all) participatory projects are less visible than the aesthetics of more conventional exhibitions, the visual is not the sole criteria for assessing aesthetics. Kester points out that the aesthetics of participatory art are key to the success of participatory projects

[128] Brown, Kathryn (ed) (2014) *Interactive Contemporary Art: participation in practice*. London I. I.Tauris 3–4.
[129] Bishop, 2012, 5.
[130] Bishop, 2012, 23.
[131] Bishop, 2012, 20.

because they stage a space for change; that it is 'the ritualistic context of an art event'[132] (i.e. its specific aesthetic) which makes it uniquely able to render labile entrenched hierarchies or patterns within the social and political field. The aesthetic impact of a participatory artwork can therefore be measured by its ability to instigate unconventional exchanges and provoke socio-political change. What Bishop calls aesthetic impact is not the same thing as what Kester understands as the impact of aesthetics, which may not be experienced consciously, but may unfold over time. While the argument is asymmetric, so is the art, and what is attempted and intended by participation is clearly different to that which is attempted and intended by, for example, maximalist sculpture.

Numerosity

One of the notable asymmetries in making art with ants as participants is the differential in our respective numbers – one human artist addresses many thousands of ants (though sometimes one ant nest). Some art participations also involve large numbers, such as Jeremy Deller's *The Battle of Orgreave (2001)*. How is authorship shared in such cases? The ideas, content and form of *The Battle of Orgreave* were set in motion by Deller watching the TV coverage of the violent clashes between police and miners during the 1984 miners' strike. The artist shared creative agency through collaboration with film director Mike Figgis and historical re-enactment tactician Howard Giles. The piece was researched, shaped and enacted through the participation of 200 ex-miners and police who had been involved in the original battle, so knew the detail of that day's events first hand. Eight hundred historical re-enactors, who had significant experience of bringing large-scale historical battles to life, were also employed. Authorship was clearly shared across many people, including some original participants of that history.

To articulate the influencing forces in 'Deller's' artwork one also needs to track backwards through history to its originating events: to Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and her policies, Arthur Scargill and his politics, the leaders of the miners' unions, the economies of coal production, and so on. Every miner's story contributed. The 'script' of the work is thus radically distributed across hundreds of individuals, and the political, socio-economic and material forces that shaped their lives. *The Battle of Orgreave* has little to do with Deller as a person, but much to do with the position and

[132] Kester, 2004, 2.

11. Jeremy Deller 2001 *The Battle of Orgreave,* Artangel commission (production photograph by Martin Jenkinson)

power of art. Through art, he was able to coordinate thousands of people to make what Bishop would likely consider to be a 'singular act' with a 'troubling wake'[133] even though it was not invented but restaged. One thing that was never in question for Deller was the plot. The question *The Battle of Orgreave* poses is 'What happened, and what does it mean?' rather than the 'What might happen, what can become?' of *Ant-ic Actions*. Deller described it as 'digging up a corpse and giving it a proper post-mortem, or as a thousand-person crime re-enactment.'[134]

While *The Battle of Orgreave* is very different from *Ant-ic Actions*, they share a density of unknowable experience, which reveals something about the different things that aesthetics means according to context. The aesthetics of Deller's artwork occur inside participant dynamics and collaborations: as viewers we cannot share or access the aesthetic experiences participants had. In *M-Ant-Ra* the aesthetic was shaped through the dialogical form of offer–response, and through dynamics and conversations occurring between individual ants. Ants interact both with the materials and with each other, the reality of which is unavailable to artist and human viewers. There is also the aesthetic experience of the human viewers of *M-Ant-Ra* and of the video of *The Battle of Orgreave*

[133] Bishop, 2012, 23.
[134] Jeremy Deller, (2001) Artist's website - *The Battle of Orgreave* https://www.jeremydeller.org/TheBattleOfOrgreave/TheBattleOfOrgreave.php [Accessed 25.4.22]

which is participatory (only?) insofar as people participate imaginatively. The aesthetics of these complex works are never fully available to any one person, and several different modes of aesthetic experience operate.

What Makes a Dialogue?

For Kester, participatory art is defined through an audience's potential to have 'immediate reciprocal effect on the constitution of the work.'[135] He claims that this can build a deeper engagement between artwork and audience, and can nurture relationships and communities, 'by acting "on behalf of" those subjects or those populations that do not yet exist'.[136] In this dialogical model, 'leadership' is alternate and shared, and the dialogue is emergent. This opens space within the social and political field: 'aesthetic experience can challenge conventional perceptions.'[137] In a dialogical practice, artists and participants transform self and society *together*, through a specific activity, even when that activity remains open-ended and the roles within it remain undefined. In this model of participation, aesthetics is wrapped into ethics, and, while Kester speaks of a human consciousness, it applies to working with another species:

> While we can never expect to grasp the essence of another human consciousness in its entirety, a dialogical aesthetic requires that we strive to acknowledge the specific identity of our interlocutors and conceive of them not simply as subjects on whose behalf we might act but as co-participants in the transformation of both self and society.[138]

This respect for individual difference, and the emphasis on decentring the artist can, in an interspecies context, provide a challenging counterpoint to art's casual anthropocentrism.

While Deller's piece is clearly participatory, it is not quite dialogical under these terms, because the activity is not open, it is a re-enactment. The epistemological position of the artist in the relational dynamics of their artwork critically affects the outcome of participatory work. In much art, whether spectacular or participatory, artists occupy a pedagogical or gurulike relation to their audiences. Marina Abramovicz, in her seminal piece *Rhythm 0* (1974), performed the giving away of power through laying out seventy-two objects on a table and giving participants free choice in how they used them on her

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[135] Kester, 2004, 10.
[136] Kester, 2004, 68.
[137] Kester, 2004, 3.
[138] Kester, 2004, 79.

body.[139] But in spite of her physical passivity, we are left in no doubt who retains epistemological control of the piece. Kester explores this point through two participatory works that use language and conversation. Artist Adrian Piper acts on behalf of an oppressed group – people of colour within a racist society – by taking up a 'superior' epistemological relation to gallery participants: 'Piper hopes to produce a cathartic shock of recognition by relaying to the viewer in parodic or amplified form some of the same defence mechanisms that they themselves might employ[140] (or that might have been directed against them by others).'[141] By contrast, Swiss art collective WochenKlausur's *Intervention to Aid Drug-Addicted Women* (1994) brought politicians, journalists, activists and addicts together in a series of 'boat talks' (three-hour pleasure cruises around Lake Zurich). Here, the artists did not direct the conversation, but through the dialogical aesthetics of the work they rendered labile the relative positions, in power and opinion, of participants. Epistemologically, this artwork centred the women.

Feral participations epistemologically centre their other-than-human participants. As I listened to ants – and learned more with and from ants – ant-ic agency, interests and aesthetics increasingly inflected those of the human. I spent ever more of my time tracking ant-ic activity until, video camera in hand, I often followed, as far as possible, what engaged a group of ants, or where one individual ant travelled. The ants were not just 'living tools' in 'my' art process, nor were they another 'material.' I did not just borrow ant bodies to make interesting lines, as I might choose a particular brush. Instead, ants were pivotal to the work's conception and purpose, and their scale, interests, capacities, perceptual range, likes and dislikes dictated its materials and aesthetic trajectories to a large extent. Certain active elements of the *Actions* began and ended as I entered and left the forest, but that does not mean I was in control of the making or the meaning that occurred in that space. To understand it in those terms is to replay the casual anthropocentrism at work in much art that 'uses' nonhumans in art but does not step away from human centrality.

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[139] Marina Abramovicz, *Rhythm 0*, Studio Morra, Naples 1974.
[140] However, Piper also says that the ideal viewer is someone 'who is open and vulnerable to the shaping influences or new ideas and new subjectivities rather than defensive and who is critically reflexive rather than heedless of his or her own relation to power.' Ibid., 73.
[141] Kester, 2004, 73.

Materialized Dialogues

Kester's dialogical aesthetic, though, is human-centred, and privileges the verbal. Indeed, he tends to collapse visual aesthetics into 'seductive visual pleasure', which he does not trust to 'have a predictable (and necessarily progressive) causal relationship to our moral values and cognitive orientation to the world.'[142] He contrasts the dialogical aesthetic with the 'specular', which he says appeals to the viewer's imagined autonomy through offering an immediate, transcendent experience. As discussed, this research emerged through painting, and I remain open to an art object's ability to communicate directly with the viewer and unfold over time. Unlike Kester, I do not see the art object as static and finished or dead when it enters the gallery, nor do I experience the viewer's role as passive. Rather, I see the viewer's experience of art objects as temporal and contextual, and art as moving and changing across decades, as it unfolds in different contexts.

To allow for a nonhuman, nonverbal sensorium to be addressed, and for other-than-human affects to be included, feral participation expands the dialogical aesthetic, developing a materialized conception of dialogue in which visual, auditory, tactile and olfactory expression are all valued. The visual (and other sensory fields) may be more ambiguous and unpredictable than language, but they are also less anthropocentric, and are compelling, affective, and communicative across species boundaries. Materialized dialogue can be composed of words but also (for example) gestures and body language, liquid deposits, coverings and re-coverings, chemicals, colours, stings, avoidance, smells and tastes; it can draw on any of the sensory experiences that creatures might share. This allows for the diverse apparatus and materials of art to mediate and facilitate between different corporeal, cerebral and perceptual worlds of creatures, without collapsing their differences. When art materials (for example the thin lilac paper and black food colouring of *M-Ant-Ra*) can be sensed and responded to asymmetrically by the participating species, the artwork can act as a set or field, enriching and throwing into relief our material, ethical and subjective relations.

Colourful material choices show up as a recurrent theme of many human–ant artworks, and they can be seen as participatory, but they are not necessarily dialogical. The British artist Adam Chodzko gave wood ants multi-coloured sequins to arrange as part of his project *Design for a Carnival.* The ants treated the sequins as they treat conifer needles, moving them up down and around their nest and, in so doing, forming and unforming

[142] Kester, 2004, 81.

colourful and shimmering patterns across the mid-brown ground of the nest (we do not know if the artist originally placed the sequins on the nest or elsewhere). The artist's intentions for his work were human-oriented – he wanted to 'collectively propose an entirely new form of festival – a model for a community to engage with each other in a way which is full of play and disorder, free from commerce, words, reason, and fixed hierarchies or identities.'[143] Chodzko used ants among many other, mostly human, beings, to display self-organizing communities, but the video still reframes how ants might be understood by humans. By using the frivolous sequins, he subverted the ants' serious reputation, by which they are taken to be steadfastly 'at work' all the time.[144]

12. Adam Chodzko *2003 Design for a Carnival, Ants Choose Position for Sequins – 2 Seconds Interval*, video still

Rivane Neuenschwander and Cao Guimarães' film *Quarta-Feira de Cinzas / Epilogue* 2006, used multi-coloured confetti in a similar way to Chodzko, and the film is also about human festival, in this case Ash Wednesday, which '[a]s well as marking the start of Lent… is the last day of the Carnaval festival, an important four-day celebration in Brazil'.[145] The ants are shown enthusiastically picking up the shiny confetti and carrying it

[143] Adam Chodzko, *Design for a Carnival* 2003, https://vimeo.com/129548450 [Accessed 30.7.2017]
[144] This is an inaccurate assumption, as myrmecologist Deborah Gordon discovered by pushing a fiber optic microscope down into ant nest chambers and observing ants milling about doing nothing for long periods. Cf. Deborah Gordon, *Ants at Work: how an insect society is organized* (New York: Free Press, 1999).
[145] Luisa Karman, August 2018 https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/neuenschwander-guimaraes-quarta-feira-de-cinzas-epilogue-t12412 [Accessed 25.2.22]

back to their underground nest. The artists soaked the confetti in pork fat in order to make it attractive to the ants – achieving the aesthetic outcome they wanted by meeting the ants' preferences, but in such a way that is not visible in the work itself. One could say that they fake this moment of aesthetic relation between ants and humans. Does it matter whether the ants are interested in the confetti for the same reasons that the humans are interested in the confetti? Video does not offer smell to a human audience, anyway. Under the terms of the artists' intentions, it does not matter. Neuenschwander and Guimarães work with ants in order to allow 'parallels to be drawn between animal behaviour and the social rituals of human communities, exploring the boundaries between natural and constructed worlds.'[146] But animal studies scholar Erica Fudge criticizes the tendency to treat animals merely as bearers of human social relations or culture. For art to decentre the human and challenge hierarchies between different kinds of being, Fudge advocates new attentiveness to an animal's *own* perspective.[147]

On first appearance, *Ant-ic Actions'* coloured papers and paints could be said to work similar perceptual effects to Chodzko, Neuenschwander and Guimarães – providing a 'stage' for ant-ic expressivity that human eyes can register, and so opening up alternate possibilities for the ants. The subtitle of Chodzko's piece, 'Ants Choose Position for Sequins' also suggests a world in which ants have an interest in the position of sequins. But to be dialogical, a work must be responsive to its participants, rather than subsuming their interests into the artist's intentions. Dialogical practice is not training ants, or representing ants as human-ish, or lending human-ish agency to ants. Rather, it is conversing with ants, such that the art – its materialities and its meaning (or 'script' to use the term from Bishop) – is shaped by ants.

Asymmetric Intentionality

Belgian philosopher of science Vinciane Despret suggests that in projects where 'beasts and humans' work together, a focus on intentionality undermines valuing what they 'accomplish together'.[148] In reductionist hands, a focus on intention is often used to dismiss the interspecies artwork as a trick, because (it is assumed) the animal involved could not intend to make art, and so cannot make art. There is a parallel here to the idea that the question 'What is art?' can be answered only with reference to who is making it and their intention as an artist. While a human can be readily accepted as

[146] Luisa Karman, August 2018 https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/neuenschwander-guimaraes-quarta-feira-de-cinzas-epilogue-t12412 [Accessed 25.2.22]
[147] Fudge, Erica (2002) *Animal* London, Reaktion.
[148] Despret (2016) 6.

intentionally an artist, and (possibly) even as an artist who does not know they are an artist, it is not so for any other creature. 'Over the course of my research I have noticed that animals are suspected, much more rapidly than are humans, of lacking autonomy'.[149] Despret rightly points out how anthropocentric it is to assume all the creativity and intention in these kinds of partnership lies with the human partner, relegating the nonhuman animal to the position of living tool. Animals can be creative, skilful, entertaining, performative and inspiring to humans, artists can benefit from their skills, and works made in this vein can operate visually in similar ways to *Ant-ic Actions*. Art can be accomplished together that could not be made by humans alone. But, without a specific focus on listening to and being responsive to other-than-human beings, rather than using them to illustrate the qualities of human culture, or training them to accomplish something humans want to see happen, the work will fall short of offering a substantial or sustained route for the reimagination of interspecies relationality.

When Catherine Chalmers attempted to elicit the participation of leafcutter ants, as described in Chapter One, the ants' choice suggested that they valued aesthetic novelty. Given the choice of a dozen different plants, the leafcutters preferred a new variegated plant species over all their familiar forage plants. We do not know if it was what appears to us as artistic – the variegated colours of the leaves – that the ants responded to, it may equally have been some novel, seductive chemistry that these leaves exuded. How different kinds of being receive and understand sensory media is necessarily asymmetric, but this does not prevent the work being dialogical. Chalmers altered her script (only the ending) in response, and this altered the inference of the work. In *M-Ant-Ra,* dialogue is the creative backbone of the work. Each element was chosen in response to some aspect of the ant-ic world. The shape and scale of the painting was fitted to the hump of the ant nest, the food colouring was chosen for its sweetness and non-toxicity. A direct question was posed to the ants about colour. The ants' choice of black over red, green or blue food colouring may have been guided by smell or taste rather than their preference for its colour, as ants prioritise communication through scent,[150] but this does not mean the colour of the liquid was invisible to the ants. The lilac colour of the paper, meanwhile, may not have been especially noticeable to the ants (it is still in

[149] Despret, (2016) 5.
[150] Ants produce and exchange a complex range of pheromones, which they continually 'read' and exchange through touching and stroking one another.

debate which species of ant see which tones of red)[151] but the high tonal contrast between the black food colouring and the pale paper made the drawings clearly visible to ants and humans alike.

This research actively crafts exploratory spaces for interspecies encounters and emphasises listening engagement with nonhuman participants. It foregrounds knowledge and experiences brought forwards by them, and these definitively shape the artwork. Intention is productive of a work's distinct effects and impact, and for dialogical participation to take place between species, the human artist's intention must be attuned to the listening part of dialogue, and that dialogue must be materialized in response to the participants' sensorium. Through this process, the aesthetics and ethics of feral participations are entwined. Feral participations generate new experiences between a population of ants and a human artist, and bring these into art. *M-Ant-Ra* did not tell a story of the ants, as a nature documentary might, nor did it manufacture a work that the artist has already scripted, but developed, through its materialized dialogical production, *a new story between humans and ants*. The slowness, sensitivity and intention to respond to the context and species' sensorium, the choice of materials and media, the honouring of personalities involved; all are productive of the qualities of the outcomes.

More-Than-Human Aesthetics

Some recent scientific and posthumanist studies have re-evaluated animal behaviour that was understood in purely adaptive (or reductive) terms, as potentially creative, complex and cultural.[152] For example, the male humpback whales' long and complex songs were long categorised simply as 'mating calls', but new studies say: '[t]he fact that they're changing their songs so much, even within individual sessions, suggests they have more control than previously assumed… *we have to start hearing these songs from new perspectives* if they're to reveal features we otherwise never would have considered.' (my emphasis)[153] Can interspecies art participations contribute thoughtful linking material to these discussions? Art, because 'freed of the species-specific categories that a

[151] Aksoy, Volkan, Camlitepe, Yilmaz, 'Behavioural analysis of chromatic and achromatic vision in the ant Formica cunicularia (Hymenoptera: Formicidae)', *Vision Research*, Volume 67, 2012, Pages 28–36, ISSN 0042-6989, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.visres.2012.06.013. (https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0042698912001848) [Accessed 21.2.22]
[152] For example, the 58 books recommended on 'animal intelligence and cognition' by Goodreads: https://www.goodreads.com/list/show/78106.Animal_Intelligence_and_Cognition.
[153] DiLonardo, Mary Jo 1.1.22 'Humpback Whales May Sing Songs to Find Other Whales'. *Treehugger* https://www.treehugger.com/humpback-whales-sing-songs-find-other-whales-5213264. [Accessed 23.2.22]

scientific grid might otherwise impose on them'[154] can linger on and emphasise the multiple ways that animals might communicate sonically or visually (for example to locate, relate, converse or impress one another *but also to* enjoy and express themselves) rather than attempting to pinpoint a precise reason and intention for each action in each moment in each different creature.

When ants meet a member of their own species away from the nest, they touch feelers, tap and stroke each other, thus exchanging a cocktail of pheromones and vibrations that communicates in many layers. Scent is understood by scientists to be dominant in the ant-ic sensorium. The smells given and received can relate useful information such as what food is available, as well as expressing the ants' belonging to a nest. Ants also 'enhance this chemistry in a variety of ways, such as by mixing pheromones from multiple glands, or by assigning distinct meanings to different concentrations of the same pheromone, or by using context to change the meaning of the same signal. Their communication is also distinctly "multimodal," including an array of auxiliary signals like touch and vibration.'[155] In combination, their complex sensory input – olfaction, sight, vibration, touch and smell – is likely to mean and express more complexity than is understood currently by us as humans. While science discovers ever more about the ant-ic sensorium, it will never teach us what it is like to be an ant.[156]

Art cannot teach us that either, but in approaching from a different direction and with alternative tools and experiences, it can offer expanded perspectives from which to imagine and perceive what it *might be like* to be an ant. While the ants involved in *Ant-ic Actions* (probably) do not know that they are engaged in creating an artwork and cannot make verbal suggestions to inform the project's aesthetics, they make a range of decisions in relation to my aesthetic and material offerings – they engage or do not engage, drink or draw, flourish or suffer. Their choices and reactions influence my next move. Through attentive observation and listening, and through empathic, imaginative

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[154] Cooke, Stuart (2019) 'Toward an Ethological Poetics: The Transgression of Genre and the Poetry of the Albert's Lyrebird'. *Environmental Humanities* 11 (2): 302–323. https://doi.org/10.1215/22011919-7754468 [Accessed 23.2.22]

[155] Cooke, Stuart, 'Nonhuman Complexity Poetics: Leaf-Cutter Ants and Multispecies Composition', *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 29.2 (Summer 2022), pp. 466–493. Advance Access publication December 1, 2020 doi:10.1093/isle/isaa121, 474.

[156] When Thomas Nagel asked 'What is it like to be a bat?' he concluded that humans can and will never know. This is of course true, but my proposal is that art can help us to imagine what it might be like to be an ant. And that this, in combination with a careful interaction with factual knowledge through scientific enquiry, is worth something, and increases interspecies connectivity and empathy. Nagel, Thomas (1974), 'What is it Like to be a Bat?' *The Philosophical Review*, Vol. 83, No. 4 (Oct., 1974), pp. 435–450

participation, I notice that ants appear to enjoy moments of non-functional perceptual enjoyment with the unfamiliar smells, textures and tastes of *Ant-ic Actions*. Sometimes a worker ant stops, and appears to experience a moment of relaxation, pleasure, or sensory excess: a moment of reverie. One forager ant stroked her head and antennae for well over a minute, revelling in and covering herself in a new scent (cream cheese and mealworm). Quite a few ants ran through the liquid colour of *M-Ant-Ra* repeatedly, drawing their bodies and needles through the colour and into expressive lines. Other ants chose to re-cover the lilac paper with conifer needles, perhaps enacting a rejection of lilac, in a countermove to mine. That these actions may have adaptive intentions, perhaps communicative, defensive, or exploratory, does not prevent them harbouring the reflective excess and expressivity that spills into aesthetics, and into art. Companion species like humans-and-dogs, ants-and-aphids, have co-evolved together and have become quite fluent in each other's 'languages.' Creatures like ants and humans, who do not normally enter into direct conversation, are subject to wider gaps and more confusion in our communications, but that is not the same as an abyss.[157] Ants' actions and signals are often ambiguous, but that does not invalidate them. I cannot *know* what it means (and cannot ask the ant) when, for example, a particularly bold ant runs again and again through the colour, but I can make informed speculations based on research, observation, experiment and experience.

13. Feral Practice *2018* A *Worker's Reverie,* video still: a worker ant lingeringly and repeatedly strokes her antennae

[157] A glancing reference to Heidegger's reflections on animal versus human being, most extensively presented in his 1929–30 lecture course The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics. Heidegger says that the human is 'world-forming', whereas the animal is 'poor in world', so affording the human a category of its own, with all other animals across a 'metaphysical abyss.' See Elizabeth Cykowski (2021) 'Heidegger's Metaphysical Abyss: Between the Human and the Animal'. Oxford Scholarship Online.

Aisthesis

When Bishop proposes how aesthetics can re-enter the analysis of human participatory art, she draws on Jacques Rancière's description of art as a regime, a separate world, or '*mode of experience*.'[158] For Rancière, it is the *Aisthesis* of art – that is, its constitutive structures and discourses, which allow for fragmentary and elusive things to appear and be appreciated aesthetically.

> [Art's] …material conditions… but also modes of perception and regimes of emotion, categories that identify them, thought patterns that categorize and interpret them… make it possible for words, shapes, movements and rhythms to be felt and thought as art… [They] allow for a form, a burst of colour, an acceleration of rhythm, a pause between words, a movement, or a glimmering surface to be experienced as events and associated with the idea of artistic creation.'[159]

Rancière's art is human, and is characterised by human structures and material conditions: 'performance and exhibition spaces, forms of circulation and reproduction', but feral participations extend art outside these conditions, into territories beyond the human – not to claim all spaces and ecologies as art, but to utilise those 'modes of perception and regimes of emotion, categories that identify them…*etc*' that constitute the immaterial spaces of art, to better attend to and know different spaces and ecologies. Under the immaterial conditions of art, the already distinctive, expressive, aesthetic, and non-functional 'art-like' doings and becomings of the creaturely can appear. In these different conditions, nonhuman actions that usually go unnoticed or are ascribed adaptive explanations can be opened for reinterpretation, and unusual actions and becomings can be elicited.

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[158] Ranciere, Jacques. (2013) *Aisthesis: Scenes from the Aesthetic Regime of Art* Translated by Zakir Paul. (London: Verso), x.
[159] Ranciere, (2013) x.

14. Feral Practice 2019 *M-Ant-Ra,* video still*,* a worker ant draws her abdomen through the liquid and out into a wriggling line

Aisthesis – the material–immaterial, labile spaces of art, in which not only the art object or event but all the discourse surrounding it can operate in the aesthetic realm – allows different aspects of art to complicate, even contradict, one another, yet still form a whole:

> The aesthetic for Rancière… signals an ability to think contradiction: the productive contradiction of art's relationship to social change, which is characterized by the paradox of belief in art's autonomy *and* in it being inextricably bound to the promise of a better world to come… This friction ideally produces the formation of elements 'capable of speaking twice: from their readability and from their unreadability.'[160]

What Rancière terms 'unreadability' can be understood in parallel to the creative not knowing of art as outlined by Fortnum which opened Chapter One.[161] Not being sure how to read a work, or not knowing what to do to make a work, are both gaps that provoke creative imaginative engagement. Though in this thesis it is acknowledged that the artist occupies a privileged position in the artwork's construction and meaning, we also know, from Roland Barthes, that meaning is not fixed but continually shifting according to context and viewer, as every viewer brings something different to the work.[162] As a viewer engages with an artwork, sensations and thoughts accumulate and gather imaginative associations. For a viewer, as for an artist, the aesthetic experience of the work, and its readings/meanings, emerge over time.

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[160] Bishop, (2006) 29–30.
[161] Fortnum, (2014) unpaginated.
[162] See Barthes, Roland (1967) *The Death of the Author,* in the anthology *Image-Music-Text* (1977) London: Fontana pp.142–148.

Kester, Bishop and Rancière write exclusively about human art and aesthetics, reflecting the conventional anthropocentrism of art. But art also challenges its own boundaries, and in art's gaps, novel thoughts and ways of being are welcomed. Rancière describes art's self-renewal as a process of continually adopting things outside its borders: 'Art is given to us through these transformations of the sensible fabric, at the cost of constantly merging its own reasons with those belonging to other spheres of experience.'[163] This research stretches the boundaries of participatory art to include beings who are unaware of the 'discourse' that surrounds them as art, and in bringing these participations into art, they offer 'a means for art to find a way out of itself.'[164]

One of the most noted examples of nonhuman art-like creativity is that of the bowerbird. This bird has been described by Deleuze and Guattari as "'a complete artist," whose works produce various sensations – of song, colour, posture, design – that together "sketch out a total work of art."'[165] Bowerbirds are more easily excepted into the realm of art because the structures they build are non-functional: the bower is not a nest, but a stage, upon which the male bird performs. As such it 'break[s] the distinction' between the 'categor[ies] of beauty' assigned to nature versus art.[166] This categorisation based on pure non-functionality supports human art-blindness when it comes to other-than-human beings, even though it also excludes much human art. The traditional peoples of New Guinea 'utilized feathers and other parts of birds… [as a] way of displaying relationships—displaying kinship to the birds, relating one's status in the community and making social statements through aesthetic displays.'[167] All the same reasons that the birds themselves use the feathers. Clothing keeps us warm and modest under the terms of our acculturation; but that does not prevent fashion from becoming art-like in its development of expressive form. In the *Aisthesis* of art, which does not prioritise the kind of communication in which every sign requires a separate meaning, but allows for complex ideas, affects and percepts to arise from art's assemblages, knowledge and understanding can arise without collapsing contradictions and

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[163] Jacques Ranciere. (2013) *Aisthesis: Scenes from the Aesthetic Regime of Art.* Translated by Zakir Paul. London: Verso, xi.
[164] Jacques Ranciere. (2013) xi.
[165] Cooke, Stuart (2019) 'Toward an Ethological Poetics: The Transgression of Genre and the Poetry of the Albert's Lyrebird' *Environmental Humanities* 11 (2): 302–323 (unpaginated in web form) https://doi.org/10.1215/22011919-7754468 [Accessed 23.2.22]
[166] Smith-Laing, Tim *Why Andy Holden flew back to the nest*, 2 November 2017 https://www.apollo-magazine.com/why-andy-holden-flew-back-to-the-nest/ [Accessed 20.4.22]
[167] Jemison, Micaela 1.1.2015 *Feathers of seduction – the connection between birds and people of New Guinea,* Smithsonian Insider https://insider.si.edu/2015/01/feathers-seduction-connection-birds-people-new-guinea/ [Accessed 23.2.22]

differences. When separate 'signs' are not transparent, art allows for different, more speculative and less rigid kinds of knowing.

For Rancière and for this research, aesthetic enjoyment – and art – contains an excess and a contradiction, wherein an experience is both active (running through the colour) and reflective (the experience is savoured). In other words, aesthetic experience contains 'reverie.' This moment of aesthetic enjoyment, the moment of art that exceeds use-value, need not be restricted to the human. Indeed, seen in these terms, there is, as poet and scholar Stuart Cooke says, an 'abundance of examples of art in the natural world—those myriad forms of song, performance, and inscription in avian, mammalian, and insect species—[that] are examples of energetic excess, of sensation breaking free of a milieu and forming an affective territory.'[168] Cooke is a writer, and advocates for an 'ethological poetics' as 'a multispecies affair' in which the focus in not on end product, but on 'the work's *affective* capacity, or the study of those observable forces that the work releases'.[169] In feral practice, the expressive excess can be in any medium, and, just as for Cooke, occurs between beings of many species.

For Rancière, aesthetic reverie is fundamentally emancipatory, because when a 'worker' (here, a worker ant) stops focusing on the job in hand, and surveys the view with pleasure or satisfaction, she 'takes the time [s]he does not have.'[170] It is this moment of suspension that allows for an expansion of subjectivity, or a shift in relations. Cooke takes this thinking one step further and suggests that art is the leading edge of life itself: 'It is in such a way that life elaborates on itself, by intensifying sensation into new, not necessarily *necessary*, forms.'[171] While moments of creative excess and aesthetic reverie certainly occur outside of art, art's speciality is to amplify aesthetic content, and to create open spaces for uncertainty and reverie. Through this, it makes space for subjective and societal shifts to occur. Where Elizabeth Grosz writes that 'a new humanities becomes possible once the human is placed in its properly inhuman context'[172] this research suggests that when human art is placed in its more-and other-

[168] Cooke, (2019) unpaginated.
[169] Cooke, (2019) unpaginated.
[170] Rancière, Jacques *The Aesthetic Today: Jacques Rancière in Conversation with Mark Foster Gage*, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w4RP87XN-dI, [Accessed 6.1.18]
[171] Cooke, (2019), unpaginated.
[172] Elizabeth Grosz quoted by John Roffe and Hannah Stark in *An interview with Elizabeth Grosz*. (2015) published in *Deleuze and the Non/Human* (2015) edited by John Roffe and Hannah Stark Belgrave McMillan pp.17–24 .

than-human art context, we find not just excess-as-frivolity, but the point where creaturely worlds meet in their becoming.

Towards a Feral Ethics

When creaturely worlds intersect and affect each other, it is not always beneficial, and can be damaging. Haraway says that meetings between species involve questions 'of cosmopolitics, of learning to be 'polite' in response to always asymmetrical living and dying, nurturing and killing.'[173] While ants and human are not companion species like those she discusses in *When Species Meet*, working with ants as participants raises specific ethical questions about how the actions of the artist impact on ant bodies. When I first engaged wood ants in an artistic encounter, the worst outcome was that a few ants drowned in the small (but too large for the ants) pools of paint on the surface of the paper I had placed on their nests. They ploughed straight into the middle of a puddle and then could not get out again. A few individuals also clenched onto my paintbrush with such force I could by no means shake them off. Ants can lift many times their bodyweight in their mandibles and will not let go if they perceive the bitten thing as a threat. Some of these ants also died. Donna Haraway said that 'it is a misstep to separate the world's beings into those who may be killed and those who may not, and a misstep to pretend to live outside killing.'[174] This statement has double edges. Haraway leaves the door open to the death of all sorts of creatures but does not let the killers off the hook.

Art is held to higher ethical standards than commerce. In 2012, artist Amber Hansen intended to tour an installation of five live chickens in a public coop. The audiences were to get to know them as individual living creatures; then watch the chickens be slaughtered, cooked and served, and then eat them. Hansen wanted the work to confront people with the creaturely realities of meat, but *The Story of Chickens: A Revolution*[175] was banned before it opened, on charges of animal cruelty. Despite the artist's intention being to encourage people to, as Haraway advocates, take responsibility for the deaths their living causes, the performance was considered too 'cruel' for art.

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[173] Haraway, Donna (2008) *When Species Meet* Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 42.
[174] Haraway, (2008) 79.
[175] Amber Hansen*, The Story of Chickens: A Revolution*, 2012, was intended to take place in Lawrence, Kansas, USA, with the final performance at Percolator Art Gallery.

The death of ants 'for art's sake' causes less consternation in audiences than those of mammals and birds, but under the terms of Haraway's double-edged sentence, we cannot say that the deaths of any creatures, however small or numerous, do not matter. Neither, though, can one fail to take account of how one's own living *always* necessitates someone else's dying. Haraway describes a morally muddy, nuanced space, which cannot provide clarity in the manner of vegan or animal activist ethics[176], but it is itself a demand for rigorous ethical self-reflection, to which artists often do not adhere. If it matters that some ants drowned in the paint, why did I not immediately stop painting?

Failures are integral to the processual and explorative methodologies of this research. Watching those first ants drown in the paint was a productive failure. The resulting tangle of painful self-criticism unveiled and so allowed me to challenge a host of preconceptions that I held about ants (revolving around their tiny size and their great numerosity; their lack of perceived sentience, empathy, individuality, faciality). They did not 'count' enough. I did not notice them as knowingly, feelingly and personally alive, and that lack of 'aliveness' made them killable.[177] In mainstream culture, killing insects is commonplace. Researcher in feminist technoscience Tara Mehrabi describes what she terms a 'spectrum of killability'[178] at work in the biomedical labs she studied with. Each lab has a different practice subject – mice, fruit flies, human brain tissue – and workers use different language to describe their deaths: lab mice are 'sacrificed' while one 'gets rid of' fruit flies (*Drosophila*):

> There are many national and international discussions on ethics and legal procedures on the use of animal models in laboratories... Transgenic fruit flies are nowhere on this map. They are instrumentalized and become killable in their absence from all the guidelines… they are not only nonhuman but also nonanimal in contrast to other lab animals.'[179]

Legal and ethical protocols for working with nonhuman creatures thin and finally disappear as the species get smaller, or taxonomically further away from the human.

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[176] See Zipporah Weisberg's critique of Haraway in 'The Trouble With Posthumanism: bacteria are people too'. In Sorensen, John (ed) *Critical Animal Studies* (Toronto: Canadian Scholar Press Inc., 2014) 93–116.
[177] Haraway uses the term 'making killable', in regard to animals in the meat industry and scientific testing, throughout *When Species Meet*, 2008.
[178] Mehrabi, Tara. (2016) *Making Death Matter: a feminist technoscience study of Alzheimer's sciences in the laboratory.* (Linköping University, Department of Thematic Studies – Gender Studies Linköping,135.
[179] Mehrabi, (2016) 183.

Ethical standards and norms vary wildly from farm to lab to gallery to academic conference. How should we respond to the high ethical demands placed upon art? Haraway remarks that bioethics 'acts as a regulatory discourse after all the really interesting, generative action is over',[180] and Bishop argues that art has been and should remain an experimental space, and not represent an ethical position.[181] Dinesh Wadiwel, on the other hand, discusses how the 'mass-orchestrated violence against animals both maintains systems of human domination and, simultaneously, constructs epistemologically how we understand the 'animal' as a discursive category that is opposed and subordinated to the "human."'[182] This research relies on art's lively encounter and experimentality. But, bringing creatures into an artistic encounter as participants requires a reimagining of our ethical relation. I intend a hands-on, semi-instrumentalised relation to the places I work with regularly, one that perhaps echoes how earlier people might have approached their territories – not standing outside of them as patriarchal protector or distanced admirer, but being in amongst, taking and giving, culpable and complicit. Art is an emergent property, not a separate sphere. As art emerges it brings things to full attention through processes of noticing, amplifying, and mediating, and so it is as much the ethics of any relationship that it brings into focus as the aesthetic. Human artists therefore need to be prepared to have an enhanced level of ethical responsibility whilst working.

As I reflected on my first experiences of painting with ants, ethical issues swarmed into view. My response was to pursue a much slower pace of working, and the use of edible materials. Ethical considerations thus inflected the work's aesthetics. In the slowed down process, using smaller drips and watching carefully where ants moved, no ants were drowned, and no ants were so stressed as to clench their mandibles onto the brush. Also, no ants stung me. The ants made paintings with me not out of choice, but neither did I force them. I did not bring ants into captivity or domesticate them in the ant forest, but instead placed objects and opportunities for participation in their reach and in their way. The materials were chosen in order that ants might interact with them in ways that they could enjoy, and that could emerge into art. The disturbances to their own lives (e.g. covering the nest in lilac paper) were partial (most ants in the nest were undisturbed), temporary (until the food colouring dried), and some form of reciprocity (the edibility and tastiness of materials) was built into the process.

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[180] Haraway, (2008) 136.
[181] Bishop, (2012).
[182] Wadiwel, Dinesh Joseph (2015) *The War against Animals*. Netherlands: Brill Rodopi, 9.

Feral practice is playful and takes risks, but it is not casual or careless. I still cannot claim that 'no ants are harmed in the making of this research', because, even since the work has become less hands on it involves my walking around their nests, which will inevitably mean I tread on some of them (more of them than if I did not stray off the footpath). On soft forest floor, ants can survive being trodden on, but it is impossible to always avoid catching an ant between your foot and a branch, rock, or piece of equipment. I work to minimise their injury, but in the ant forest (as in life) there is no 'pure' position to occupy, and no 'clear' place to stand.

15. Feral Practice 2018 *Production shot of painting with ants* (photo by Zachary Chia)

Performing Humanity Differently

The ethical inquiry of this research does not end with whether or not ants get harmed, it engages with what feral practice offers to the urgent need for, as Julietta Singh puts it, 'other performances of the human that allow us to begin to practice nonmasterful forms of politics.'[183] In her book *Unthinking Mastery,* Singh thinks together human-to-human and human-to-nonhuman relations of domination, through an analysis of anti-colonial and post-colonial thought in relation to new materialism and posthumanism. Working as a white Western woman in an interspecies context, I certainly do not seek to collapse differences in theory or practice between human and nonhuman being, or between racialised versus species relations, but I do seek to build ways of challenging systems of domination and oppression that position (certain) humans and nonhumans alike as objects to be studied, tools to be used and values to be extracted. I share Singh's understanding that violence and willed blindness towards nonhuman beings and human

[183] Singh, Julietta (2018) *Unthinking Mastery: Dehumanism and Decolonial Entanglements*. USA: Duke University Press. 14.

beings are inextricably linked and ask, with her, what it *means*, and what it *takes* to relinquish mastery over others, and what – in interspecies art – does it look like to let go of domination?

If human participatory art can 'act "on behalf of" those subjects or those populations that do not yet exist',[184] then dialogical interspecies participatory art that takes other-than-human beings seriously as interlocutors can introduce (or reinscribe) a concept of multispecies community. The chosen, temporary participations of feral practice offer perspectives from which to reimagine those communities formed of the ordinary human and nonhuman beings in a milieu that are not chosen. Feral practice can promote the 'solidarity in the political sense' that ecofeminist Val Plumwood calls for with the other-than-human beings and forces of those places we live in and become with. Solidarity involves 'positioning ourselves *with* the other… [not] *as* the other.' [185] It remodels the potential interrelation between all those who find themselves in a place and suggests a social *beyond* the human. Listening engagement requires what Maria Puig de la Bellacasa describes as 'letting go of the controlling power', and so being prepared for 'an immersion in the messy world of concerns. Being in the things, we plunge into unsettled gatherings; rather than observing them from a bridge, we inhabit the realm of a more than human politics.'[186] This ethics is not about humans coming to spaces or species with a rescue plan, nor is it about a human artist entering the forest with a set agenda, but with curiosity and questions.

Critical and curious repetition of mundane and artistic acts between ants and human, over days and over years, shifts processes and deepens questions. It thickens the entanglement between species and builds reciprocity. Questions and observations occur both within and outside art, and lead us deeper into new questions and participations. This corresponds to Puig de la Bellacasa's understanding of the 'doings of care…[which] require us to look out… for what 'exceeds the frame.'[187] Although art is not the same as care, working thoughtfully with other-than-human beings demands listening with care. The attention of feral practice to more-and-other-than-human beings is not just for human benefit, but to notice, amplify and celebrate the unrepresented, to 'speak… for subaltern epistemic things.'[188] A care-ful approach is needed in working with the tools of

[184] Kester, 2004, 68.
[185] Plumwood, Val (2002) *Environmental Culture: The Ecological Crisis of Reason*. (Psychology Press), 202.
[186] Puig de la Bellacasa (2017), 33.
[187] Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017, 55.
[188] Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017, 58.

representation in more than human worlds, where the 'marginalized or neglected issues'[189] and subaltern things are nonhuman in nature, involving beings who can never contest or correct their representation. How might the human artist step back from mastery, and cede more creative control to the ants?

The ethical aim is to create art research that provokes de-anthropocentric thought and practice in art and beyond. Through encountering dialogical interspecies artworks, audiences are guided towards ethical, imaginative ways of being with other species. Feral practice brings audiences into situations of encounter where humans are not centred as dominant and are not in epistemological control. Singh uses the term '*dehumanism',* which she articulates as the active verb form of 'posthumanism.' Dehumanism for Singh is 'a practice of recuperation, of stripping away the violent foundations (always structural and ideological) of colonial and neocolonial mastery that continue to render some beings more human than others,'[190] Singh writes in a geopolitical and sociological context but relates her concept of mastery also to artistic mastery of, say, an instrument, tool, or prose. Feral practice reframes these practises towards undoing the violent foundations that structure interspecies relations. It brings the 'human' into question as a benchmark, through siting different species as central to its projects. How might the work become more ant-ic and less human?

I was clearly never master over the ants in a colonial or in an artistic way, but I was still subject to the anthropocentric context in which I have been acculturated, within which humans *assume* dominance and superiority over ants. Anthropocentric culture is structured through species relations in which the human is always placed at the top. These hierarchies are underpinned by violence and killing, which is normalised in ways that mean (as Mehrabi's fruit flies make so clear) even the legibility of killing is hierarchical. These hierarchies are deeply resistant to change. It is difficult (if not impossible) to undo *even one's own* anthropocentrism, being that one is a human, and adapted and acculturated to seek one's own wellbeing. This research – guided by ants – had to work its effects on me for some of its insights to be activated. Chapter Five will detail how I started to understand ants as my teachers as well as my co-workers and participants in art projects, which brought different, immaterial methodologies of art making to the fore. Acts, thoughts, and sometimes words were addressed to the ants, and I listened to the ants through paying attention to my dreams, waking reveries and

[189] Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017, 60.
[190] Singh, (2018) 4.

observations. These techniques and practices necessitated less direct physical contact between human and ants, or ant nests, because our connection was permeated and extended through communicative consciousness.

Where Singh seeks models for ways to undo mastery by 'looking towards those "other genres of being human" that have been lived and will be lived by those subjected to imperial force'[191], I suggest that we can also look towards nonhuman beings. Humans, including those like myself hailing from colonising cultures, can be vulnerable, can practice empathy and be porous to those who are more often subject to domination. Being white and western comes with many privileges, but all creaturely bodies, as Anat Pick reminds us, are subject to vulnerability.[192] Women are structurally oppressed within patriarchy, and children often experience domination and disempowerment. Recalling personal experiences of vulnerability when working with other than human beings has much in common with Singh's method of 'vulnerable reading', which she describes as 'becoming porous to text in ways that might reshape our subjectivities and our political aspirations.'[193]

In the vulnerable artmaking of feral participation, the artist listens to different voices and the art is porous to other-than-human beings. As art becomes dialogical in the broad sense that encompasses many forms of communication, it can elicit and reflect encounters with different species, and the human can circle around and work with the nonhuman to generate new ways of knowing and new creativity. In this decentred model, playfulness and speculation become generative, and art can ask better questions of different species. This is the focus of the next chapter, which introduces and explores the practice of 'speculative anthropomorphism.'

[191] Singh, (2018) 14.
[192] Pick, (2011).
[193] Singh, (2018) 63.

3. *Ask the Wild* and *Mycorrhizal Meditation*: On Speculative Anthropomorphism

Ask the Wild http://www.askthewild.net/
Website with images, text and podcasts
Mycorrhizal Meditation https://soundcloud.com/user-136373073/mycorrhizal-meditation
Podcast

Chapters One and Two introduced feral participation, and its key concepts and practices: of unknowing, of materialized dialogue, and of vulnerable artmaking. This chapter moves on to develop my argument for a practice of 'speculative anthropomorphism' as a creative tool for seeing species relations differently, through its discussion of two projects: *Ask the Wild* and *Mycorrhizal Meditation*. Accusations of anthropomorphism are used to dismiss studies that observe and express continuity between human and nonhuman beings. But critics of anthropomorphism usually fail to distinguish it from anthropocentrism, and sometimes do not recognise their own anthropocentric bias. Philosopher of science Vinciane Despret writes that claims of 'objectivity' by scientists often conceal presumptions of human exceptionalism.[194] My conception of speculative anthropomorphism builds on Jane Bennett's interpretation of Theodor Adorno's negative dialectics, which offers a route map through the inadequacy of representation by embracing the limits of knowledge. When nonidentity (of all beings including ourselves) is acknowledged, and we understand that any object or being's entirety will always escape and exceed us, close attention and observation lead not to a sense of mastery over, but a sense of wonder and curiosity at (in the case of this research, with) beings of different kinds. Where *Ant-ic Actions* and *M-Ant-Ra* developed new participatory approaches for a human artist to make art with ants, *Ask the Wild* and *Mycorrhizal Meditation* develop new ways for human audiences to participate in interspecies knowledge.

Why Ask the Wild?

Ask the Wild was developed in response to these questions: How can art bring those people who are not already involved with art or with nature into a place of curiosity and empathy for the lives of other-than-human beings? How can we replace stereotyping and hierarchical ideas about other-than-human beings (which position them as subaltern to

[194] Despret (2016)

or distant from the human) with curious, imaginative thinking around interspecies relationship? How might art help these ideas 'stick'? To answer them, *Ask the Wild* starts from the human – from our human audiences – and from their personal, political and societal issues and problems. The advice and answers this project generates however, are drawn from other-than-human worlds, via a panel of artist and scientist 'agony aunts', who have deeply engaged with a different species group, or habitat.

The project was devised and delivered by the author in collaboration with artist Marcus Coates. *Ask the Wild* has taken place as live participatory events at major galleries in the UK, as outdoor events in art festivals and online.[195] *Ask Somerset's Plants*, a commission for *Somerset Art Weeks* 2019, was shared as radio broadcasts on the BBC[196] and as podcasts.[197] For each event or programme, we brought together a panel of experts, and took a different habitat and/or species group as the source of knowledge. For example: at *Ask the Sea* at Tate St Ives in 2019, the guests were marine ecologist Dr Clare Embling[198] and marine poet Susan Richardson;[199] at *Ask the Birds* at Whitechapel Gallery in 2018, the guests were research ornithologist and author Tim Birkhead,[200] *H is for Hawk* author Helen Macdonald,[201] and birding filmmaker Ceri Levy.[202] All our invited panellists have worked with their species group or subject for significant periods of time and bring considerable amounts of discipline-specific knowledge into the 'room'.

Ask the Wild is subtitled 'knowledge beyond the human' because it opens pathways between experience, learning and wisdom between different species. The panellists are not the ultimate holders of knowledge, they are the (always partial) conduits for that

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[195] *Ask the Ants*, Scarborough Museum 2022 (online); *Ask the Sea*, Tate St Ives 2019; *Ask the Ash*, Whitstable Biennale and The Ash Project 2019; *Ask the Apes*, Turner Contemporary 2018; *Ask the Birds*, Whitechapel Gallery 2018; *Ask the Wood*, South London Botanical Institute 2017.
[196] *Ask Somerset's Plants* was broadcast on BBC Somerset at 8-9pm, 23.9.19
[197] Three *Ask Somerset's Plants* 20-minute podcasts were hosted at https://somersetartworks.org.uk for the duration of Somerset Art Weeks Festival 2019 and are archived at http://www.askthewild.net/asp/. A selection of questions and answers from the events, are archived at www.askthewild.net/podcasts/
[198] Dr Clare Embling is Associate Professor in Marine Ecology at the University of Plymouth.
[199] Susan Richardson is a poet, educator and editor. Her poetry collections, *Creatures of the Intertidal Zone*, *Where the Air is Rarefied*, *skindancing* and *Words the Turtle Taught Me* are published by Cinnamon Press. She is writer in residence for the Marine Conservation Society.
[200] Tim Birkhead is a research zoologist and Professor of Behaviour and Evolution at the University of Sheffield. He has spearheaded a matchless study of guillemots on Skomer Island since 1972. He has authored many books on birds including *Bird Sense: What It's Like to Be a Bird,* London: Bloomsbury 2013.
[201] Helen Macdonald is an author and Affiliated Research Scholar at the University of Cambridge. Her book *H is for Hawk* won the 2014 Samuel Johnson Prize[3] and Costa Book Award.
[202] Ceri Levy is a birder, filmmaker and author. He has collaborated on three books with illustrator Ralph Steadman about the creatures that are already or nearly extinct, due to the effects of humans.

vast and embedded terrain of knowledge held by the sea, or by the birds, or by the apes. The context and aesthetic of the artwork is shaped by the artists, through the words written and spoken in advance of the event and at the beginning of the event:

> Often, we set up a divide between different categories of knowledge and understanding, and today we want to converse across these barriers. We will be using some very specific knowledge and bringing it into play with problems that are emotional, or political, sticky and intransigent. We are going to look at what happens in the bird world as a mirror, and as a resource, for us as humans. We are going to consult the wisdom of the birds, via the esteemed conduit of our knowledgeable and generous panel.[203]

The introduction emphasises human humility, continuity between life experiences across species difference, and the possibility of creative interaction. Human audiences are positioned at the centre of *Ask the Wild* – each iteration is fuelled by an audience's own questions – but the human occupies a place of request in relation to other-than-humans, rather than control or ownership. Receiving advice from the perspective of plants, birds, or ants undermines an (often unconscious) anthropocentric separation that lifts human experience above all other. The focus on problems – things that humans are struggling with, are not in control of, or are not getting right – means that the participation is shaped around a group acceptance of human limits, the failure of personal agency, and the nearness and entanglement of human agency with the agency of other forces in our lives. As Paul Cloke and Owain Jones note:

> human action is entangled with the unconscious, the subconscious, the habitual, the accidental and the spontaneous. Such entanglements produce much of what we regard as human agency, but are difficult to define as the product of fully reflexive intentional decision-making. Following this theoretical redirection, then, some of the seeming certainties about what sets human agency apart from its non-human counterparts – freedom to think, to make choices, to represent a world of our own making, to contain our knowledge and capacity in language – seem somehow less certain. It is not that human agency is rendered equivalent to non-human agency, rather that these categories are brought together in compatible surfaces of complexity…'[204]

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[203] MacDonald, Fiona (2018) Introduction to Ask the Birds at Whitechapel Gallery 24.2.2018.
[204] Paul Cloke and Owain Jones (2002) *Tree Cultures: the place of trees and trees in their place*, Berg, Oxford. 64.

The interspecies model of knowledge, in which no one knows the answer alone, helps to productively undermine a tendency to hubris, and the human sense of exceptionality with regard to other species. It also nurtures a distributed model of creativity, in which it is possible to enter a space of creative unknowing directly with participants. Although audience members do not need to find any answers themselves, and may not be a questioner themselves, everyone present shares in and co-creates the collective mood of uncertainty and speculation as the panellists seek and articulate their interspecies responses.

Ask the Wild incites a creative, speculative, multivalent, form of anthropomorphism, where what is a human versus nonhuman attribute or issue is open to query.[205] This is in contrast to what I distinguish as 'reductive anthropomorphism' which collapses nonhuman experience into the human, ignoring or belittling those aspects of the nonhuman experience that do not fit. [206] Speculative anthropomorphism refuses over-coding of the nonhuman by the human, and flattening of species difference, but allows for journeys of interspecies exchange, such as this discussion of mood and temporality:

> *Audience member*: Why is it that when one feels depressed or down the time seems to slow down, and on the opposite end of the spectrum, when one is feeling happy and enthused about the world everything seems to speed up and it's more colourful?
>
> *Marcus Coates*: Great question. Is there a sense that birds even conceive of time differently from us? Or within a species are there perhaps different concepts of time?
>
> *Helen MacDonald*: Raptors, absolutely. I mean they live life faster than we do, much faster than we do, and that means that what happens in front of them happens much slower. So when you see a hobby zoom down and grab a dragonfly out of the air you think – how on earth could it do that? And the reason is the world is moving slower for it… the phenomenal time of different kinds of creatures is extremely various.
>
> *Tim Birkhead*: I also think that birds do have this same sense of positiveness and negativeness… [if] you give birds a series of bad luck events in terms of foraging it really does affect what their expectations then are… they have very similar feelings to us in the in terms of whether something is positive or negative.

[205] See the section *What's in a Name?* below for explanation of why I retain the term anthropomorphism to describe this.
[206] See below my disambiguation of the terms anthropomorphism and anthropocentrism that are often run together.

> *HM*: We say about time being slow when you're depressed and fast when you're happy, but perhaps vice versa with hummingbirds, because… when it's cold at night they will go into torpor, a state of almost total hibernation.
> *TB*: Yes, they can drop their body temperature to 5 degrees. It's an energy saving strategy, and lots of other small birds… do something similar though not quite as extreme.
> *HM*: It's like going under the duvet when you're having a really bad day!
> *MC*: I was thinking about the kingfisher and those birds that … sit for a really long time and wait, but when they do act it's split second… Maybe it's necessary to have a relative conception of both – you can't understand the sadness unless you understand the happiness, you can't understand the fast time unless you understand the slow time.[207]

Some questions reach into people's personal and emotional lives, while others are more broadly social and philosophical – tackling global issues like climate change and political issues like migration and Brexit. The panel undertake to answer, or at least illuminate, these questions, solely with recourse to examples drawn from the species group or habitat that we are working with. Asking questions affords participants a personal investment in the work, and finding thought-provoking answers from a different species' lifeworld helps to unpick the anthropocentric separation which lifts human experience above all others: '[s]eeing our entrenched issues or thorny problems through the unusual eyes (of mating birds, ash saplings, or sea urchins, for example) opens up unexpected pathways of creative thinking for everyday life.'[208] Through speculative anthropomorphism, we find differing ways and positions from which to listen and speak, look and become visible.

Ask the Wild challenges conventional epistemological hierarchies and categories. It frames nonhumans as knowledge holders whose wisdom can benefit humans at a personal and societal level, and also brings contrasting systems of knowledge or of understanding the world into direct dialogue, for example finance and botany, politics and marine science. Scientific and subject knowledge is encouraged to escape from its disciplinary cage (to go feral) so that detailed ideas and expertise can reach non-experts and be applied across species and subject boundaries. It nurtures a distributed model of creativity –

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[207] Edited transcript from *Ask the Birds* at Whitechapel Gallery 24.2.2018.
[208] Feral Practice and Marcus Coates Ask the Wild www.askthewild.net.

16: Feral Practice & Marcus Coates 2019 *Ask the Sea*, Tate St Ives
17: Feral Practice & Marcus Coates 2018 *Ask the Birds*, Whitechapel Gallery

between members of the panel and the nonhuman worlds from which their knowledge is drawn, the artists and the audience. The birds/plants/ants/apes/sea/wood are centred and credited. Each species that is spoken about is considered in detail, but only in part. One aspect of their lives is discussed – and this is in relation to a human problem. The obvious gaps in the knowledge presented (it is not a talk about birds, or about the sea) means that the audience understands that these creatures can be sources of new ideas and wisdom for humans, while still always far exceeding whatever we say about them.

Panellists are asked to leap their disciplinary boundaries and speak from their specialist expertise to all matters of concern to humans: e.g. finance, family, social and political life. These juxtapositions challenge and expand participants' mental framework. For some, engaging with natural science in detailed ways is unusual, and for scientists it can be challenging to apply their expertise to a non-scientific problem. The results can be

surprising to the panellists. Professor Charlotte Sleigh, researcher and author on the science humanities, remarked that it was good 'to see a scientist off the leash, able to speak more speculatively and organically than they are usually allowed to do by professional conventions'.[209] Sleigh was a panellist for *Ask the Ants*, and the scientist in question Dr Elva Robinson is a research myrmecologist (myrmecology is the study of ants) and Senior Lecturer in Ecology at York University. Robinson commented that it 'benefitted my own research practice to be made to take a step back from the mechanistic study of ant behaviour & ecology, to think more widely about what ants can tell us about ourselves and our relationship with the world around us.'[210] Science gets a lot of criticism for distancing, isolating, reducing. Through *Ask the Wild*, science gets a chance to show how inventive, curious and non-reductive it can be – how it can fascinate, connect, and augment, when allied to empathy and speculation.

What's the Problem with Anthropomorphism?

'Anthropomorphism' is defined by the Merriam Webster dictionary as the attribution of human traits, emotions, or intentions to nonhuman entities, including animals and plants.[211] It is a term often used not just critically but dismissively by those who regard connective thoughts about other-than-human beings as sentimental, lazy, presumptive, or childish. The second line in the Merriam Webster dictionary's definition informs us that: 'Children's stories have a long tradition of anthropomorphism.'[212] Anthropomorphism is regarded as undisciplined, as a threat to 'scientific objectivity', and was even called the 'cardinal crime for the animal observer.'[213] Scientists who seek out an expanded and emotive account of nonhuman behaviour are repeatedly accused of anthropomorphism – as if the practice of anthropomorphism was misconduct enough to legitimately end an argument. But as Sandra D. Mitchell remarks, perhaps there is a collapsing of ideas happening here. 'Critics of anthropomorphism say it is presumptive – but what is really at fault – anthropomorphism or presumption?'[214] When we speak of the 'attribution of human traits', is it evidence or presumption to claim that these traits

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[209] Charlotte Sleigh, email to author, 21.1.22.
[210] Elva Robinson, email to author, 20.1.22.
[211] Merriam Webster online dictionary. https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/anthropomorphism
[212] Merriam Webster online dictionary. https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/anthropomorphism
[213] P.L. Broadhurst cited in Lockwood, R. (1985). *Anthropomorphism is not a four-letter word*. In M.W. Fox & L.D. Mickley (Eds.) Advances in animal welfare science 1985/86 (pp. 185-199). Washington, DC: The Humane Society of the United States. 1964, p. 12), 184.
[214] Sandra D Mitchell - Anthropomorphism and cross-species modelling, pp 100-118 in Thinking with Animals, new perspectives on anthropomorphism; ed Lorraine Daston and Greg Mitman, Columbia University Press, New York, 2005, 102.

are exclusively human? Why define a trait as human if other creatures display it? Scientists sometimes fight new evidence because it counteracts their own assumptions about animals, rather than seeking a balanced understanding of species differences and continuity.[215]

Albert Einstein's relativity theory, emerging in the early part of the 20th Century, undermined the possibility of achieving an objective view by showing that the position of the observer always affects the outcome of the observation.[216] Feminist theory engaged critically with the construct of scientific and rationalist objectivity, formulating instead the concept of situated knowledge[217], which takes into account how everything a person perceives and conceives is shaped by their prior experience and positioning. One's cultural system is so deeply embedded as to be largely unconscious – no matter one's efforts, one cannot step outside it. New materialist theory, which recognises the co-creative power of matter and understands that all being is relational, that 'relata do not precede relations'[218], shows that one cannot fully separate a human researcher from the 'assemblage'[219] or 'apparatus'[220] with/in which they interact, observe and experiment. The assemblage or apparatus includes one's theoretical framework and methodologies, as well as tools and equipment. Tools (intellectual and material) shape questions and delineate answers. Thus it follows that it is useful to have different kinds of human, with different views, background, training, experience bringing forth knowledge about the nonhumans being studied or under discussion.

Artist Mark Dion says that 'Anthropomorphism has long been guarded against in the field of zoology as an impediment to understanding animal behaviour in their own context. While a pitfall in ethology, artists may find the rich tradition of anthropomorphism too powerful a tool to surrender, particularly when probing the boundaries between humans and other animals.'[221] Even while acknowledging

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[215] For the argument see Lockwood, R. (1985) (pp. 185-199).
[216] For a simplified explanation of relativity theory see https://healthresearchfunding.org/einstein-theory-of-relativity-simplified-explained/. [Accessed 30.5.22]
[217] Haraway (1988) pp. 575-599.
[218] Karen Barad (2007) *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning Durham USA: Duke University Press*, 334. ISBN - 978-0-8223-3917-5.
[219] Assemblages, briefly, are lively gatherings of things and forces. See my discussion in Chapter Five about the different meanings attached to the concept, especially the difference between Deleuze and Guattari's and Jane Bennett's usage.
[220] 'apparatuses are not mere observing instruments but *boundary-drawing practices*—specific material (re)configurings of the world—which come to matter'. (Barad, 2007: 179).
[221] Dion, Mark (2000) *Some Notes Towards a Manifesto for Artists Working With or About the Living World*, https://experimentalgeographies.tumblr.com/post/133549007426/some-notes-towards-a-manifesto-for-artists-working [Accessed 11.2.20]

anthropomorphism's connective and communicative power for art, Dion states without qualification that it is a pitfall in science. Vinciane Despret does not concur. Instead, she unpicks the important separations we need to make between anthropocentrism and anthropomorphism. For Despret, a claim of scientific objectivity is too often accompanied by a presumption of human exceptionalism. Despret shows that the anthropocentric terms in which most animal behaviour experiments were framed prevented scientists from perceiving animals on their own terms. Having assigned special characteristics to humans – 'like laughter, self-consciousness, knowing that we are mortal, the prohibition of incest'[222] zoologists then defended these traits with such weaponry as the 'well-known rule of Morgan's canon' which 'states that when an explanation that draws on lower psychological competencies is in competition with an explanation that privileges higher or more complex psychological competencies, the more simple explanation ought to prevail.'[223] Experimental zoology long ensured that nonhuman animals could not look 'clever',[224] because under the anthropocentric conditions of most 20th-century science, 'clever' was synonymous for 'like humans'.[225]

One example Despret relates is how the skill of learning by imitation shifted in status. In the 19th and most of the 20th Century imitation was considered a fairly basic skill, not suggestive of considerable insight: 'it is…easier to imitate than to invent',[226] and it was regularly observed in many different species by naturalists.[227] But, in the 1980s, a radical shift took place in the status and understanding of imitation: 'Under the combined influence of child developmental psychology and fieldwork, imitation… [was understood to require] complex intellectual capacities… [and be] indicative of highly elaborate cognitive competencies.[228] Imitation, it was discovered, required the understanding that someone else could have different things in mind to you, and the sophistication to hypothesise what these differences were. This skill was considered to underpin cultural transmission. 'What followed was thus entirely predictable. The promotion of imitation

[222] Despret (2016) 8.
[223] Despret (2016) 7.
[224] 'For a long time, it has been difficult for animals not to be stupid [bêtes], or even very stupid.' Despret 2016, 7.
[225] Who is regarded as 'us' in this discussion (i.e. human) and who is excluded (despite being human, also varies according to the view of the writer. The misogyny, ableism and racism involved in anthropocentric humanist hierarchies is discussed in Chapter Six.
[226] Despret (2016) 9.
[227] 'Darwin had noticed that bees that gathered pollen on a daily basis from the flowers of dwarf beans by feeding from the open corolla of the flower modified their behavior when bumblebees joined in with them. The bumblebees used an entirely different technique whereby they pierced little holes in the calyx of the flower to suck out the nectar. The very next day, the bees were feeding the same way.' Despret 2016, 8.
[228] Despret (2016) 10-11.

to the status of sophisticated intellectual competency was accompanied by an incredible number of proofs that animals, in fact, did not imitate or were incapable of learning by imitation.'[229] Indeed, imitation became the subject of intense argument between 'anthropomorphising' naturalists who observed learning through imitation in their field studies ('apes aping'[230]) and the experimental behavioural zoologists who redescribed these skills as mere 'pseudo-imitation'[231] or what otherwise might be pitifully described as 'imitation imitation' or 'apes ape aping.'

In follow-up experiments by Alexandra Horowitz conducted in the 1990s,[232] bluetits (getting milk bottle tops off) and chimpanzees and adult humans (opening boxes with treats inside) failed in similar ways to precisely imitate the model of action, all of them doing their own thing to achieve the desired results, whereas human children would obediently repeat the model (of opening the box) and so better 'conform to our manners or, better, to the cognitive habits of scientists'.[233] Based on these results,

18. Feral Practice & Marcus Coates 2019 *Ask the Ash*, Whitstable Biennale and The Ash Project, Tony Harwood and audience member

[229] Despret (2016) 11.
[230] Michael Tomasello's famous article 'Do Apes Ape?' can be found in the book *Social Learning in Animals: The Roots of Culture*, ed. Cecilia M. Heyes and Bennett G. Galef Jr., 319–46 (San Diego, Calif.: Academic Press, 1996).' Footnote in Despret (2016) 215.
[231] Despret (2016) 12.
[232] Horowitz's response, where she shows that adult humans are less successful than chimpanzees at the experiment, has been published in Alexandra Horowitz, 'Do Humans Ape? Or Do Apes Human? Imitation and Intention in Humans (Homo sapiens) and Other Animals' *Journal of Comparative Psychology* 117, no. 3 (2003): 325–36. Despret (2016) 215.
[233] Despret (2016) 13.

Horowitz suggests that one might have to 'infer that adults do not have access to the intentions of others.'[234] Anthropocentrism feeds a (sometimes unconscious) expectation of human exceptionalism, and it leads to a kind of inverse anthropomorphism. The conviction that certain traits are fully occupied by humans and so are inaccessible to other species does not provide a clear view for science. Where anthropomorphism allows for and observes continuity between human and nonhuman being, its challengers propose non-continuity, based on *a priori* ideas of human exceptionalism.

More recently, scientific evidence has continued to accrue in support of radical continuity between human and other beings, prompting Donna Haraway to remark: 'The last beachheads of human uniqueness have been polluted if not turned into amusement parks – language, tool use, social behaviour, mental events, nothing really convincingly settles the separation of human and animal.'[235] Given that scientists were not then and are not now in a position to *definitively* know what nonhuman animals think and feel, we might reserve judgement and certainty. This research bases its approach on the expectation that other-than-human beings are likely to be just as adapted, clever, perceptive and skilful, in their own ways and to fit their diverse needs, morphology and environment, as we humans are to ours.

Despret adds that the determination to excise the *personhood* of nonhuman animals (she is not here talking about humanness) and so the interpersonal quality of studying living beings, can lead to a dehumanisation of knowledge: 'to depassion knowledge does not give us a more objective world; it just gives us a world 'without us,' and therefore 'without them."[236] When *Ask the Wild* places the human 'us' and diverse but always specific other-than-human 'them' back in the room, and into conversation, we restitch passion and science. Scientific knowledge can here be understood as gappy and provisional, speculative and situated, sometimes even contradictory. *Ask the Wild* offers a space where science does not have to attempt to defend a rigid position, and so allows for scientifically informed, transdisciplinary, cross-species contemplation, in which we can hold open and porous what human versus nonhuman traits may be.

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[234] Despret (2016) 13.
[235] Haraway, Donna (1991) *A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century*. in *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*, New York; Routledge, 152-3.
[236] Despret 2004, 131.

What is Human?

Researcher Tom Tyler relates in *If Horses Had Hands* (2009) that there have been many defences of anthropomorphism for use in the study of animals[237], including by psychologist Gordon Burghardt, who believes that a 'critical anthropomorphism' is a pragmatic tool for researchers formulating research questions and interpreting animal behaviour: 'it is both useful and healthy for the purpose of speculative enquiry just so long as we remember that we are not seeking to verify postulated characteristics or attributes, but using this strategy as an exploratory, investigative tool.' [238] Tyler believes, though, that this enquiring, speculative approach to anthropomorphism is still undermined by a more fundamental flaw, which has been most adequately addressed by Heidegger:

> Heidegger points out that, in order even to raise "suspicions" (*Bedenken*) concerning anthropomorphism, one must assume that one knows "ahead of time" what human beings are (Heidegger 1984, pp. 98–105).18 To be able to claim that a characterisation or representation of some being assigns to it a quality or state that is actually distinctively human, one would need to know just what it is about human beings, in themselves, that makes them the kind of being they are. But this question concerning the nature of human beings… is rarely even properly asked, and has certainly not been answered satisfactorily. Without posing and answering *this* question, any suspicions concerning "humanization", as well as all refutations tendered, do not even make sense. They amount, says Heidegger, to mere "idle talk" (*Gerede*), to "superficial and specious discussion."[239]

Tyler rightly points out that it has almost always been human being and behaviour to which all other animal being and behaviours are compared, while what a human being is, 'who is man?'[240] [sic] remained under-analysed and unquestioned.[241] But to leave it there suggests that anthropomorphism is always and necessarily anthropocentric, that both by definition are concerned with thinking humanity *first*. But this research sees a fundamental and creative separation between the two terms and outlooks. For example,

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[237] Tyler (2009) cites primatologist Frans de Waal, philosopher Daniel Dennett and writer Stephen Budiansky, 19.
[238] Tyler (2009) 19 .
[239] Tyler (2009) 20.
[240] The question is a translation from Heidegger's *Wer ist der Mensch?* Tom Tyler (2009)
[241] What man *is* has since Heidegger come under considerable scrutiny from feminist, postcolonial and posthumanist theory.

when fictional horses like *Black Beauty*[242] are anthropomorphised to intentionally engage readers with their suffering, and thus with the ethics of how working animals are treated by humans. Stories like these can promote self-reflection, and so arguably feed into the question Heidegger raises of what it is to be human (via that most anthropocentric of words, *humane*). Anthropomorphism can be helpful in nurturing empathy with different beings and thinking with and alongside other-than-human beings, if used *productively* rather than reductively. Anthropomorphism alters according to different circumstances – including context, quality and intention – it can be reductive or expansive, anthropocentric or connective.

In speculative anthropomorphism the question of 'What is human?' is open for discussion alongside (and through) questions concerning other-than-humans. Practiced with de-anthropocentric intent and an open mind, anthropomorphism does not place expectations onto nonhuman beings and judge them by their nearness to us, but practices a sensitive, intelligent, playful empathy, in informed recognition of our biological and epistemological continuity with other beings. To decide in advance that the results of this kind of interactive knowing can be only 'idle talk'[243] is to reiterate the exclusions that have been perpetrated on different forms and sources of knowledge by a centralised western white male knowledge canon.

Anthropomorphism in Art

Anthropomorphism also has critics in art. In the introduction to their edited volume *Animal Life and the Moving Image*, Michael Lawrence and Laura McMahon ask: 'How might moving images resist or refuse the objectification or anthropomorphisation of the animal and instead work to unravel hierarchies of looking and distributions of power?'[244] But in art as in science, the real problem is the anthropocentrism that leads to presumptive or reductive anthropomorphism. How does art do anthropomorphism, and how does *Ask the Wild* do it differently? To unpick this, I will look at a selection of early works by Marcus Coates, my *Ask the Wild* collaborator, which embody and impersonate animals or more-than-human beings, but also offer a distinctively British approach to culture, humour and class.

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[242] *Black Beauty*, and other horse stories, were formative childhood influences for the author. Sewell, Anna (1877) *Black Beauty: His Grooms and Companions, the Autobiography of a Horse* London: Jarrold and Sons.
The Adventures of Black Beauty (1972/1974). London Weekend Television

[243] Tyler (2009) 20.

[244] Lawrence, Michael and McMahon, Laura (2015) *Animal Life and the Moving Image*, London: Palgrave, 2.

In *Finfolk* 2003[245], Coates emerges from the North Sea onto a concrete jetty in sportswear and dark glasses. He approaches the camera, gesturing and exclaiming in broken syllables. The words are meaningless, but in combination with his facial expressions and gestures they suggest strings of expletives. The selkie is a shapeshifting creature in Scots and Norse mythology, a seal that can temporarily take human form (myths and names from different places mingle the terms 'selkie', 'seal', 'mermaid' and 'finfolk')[246]. Coates' film offers us a wry take on the idea of selkie personality, where, instead of the classic tale in a which a beautiful female selkie is trapped in human form when someone steals her seal skin, we meet a hostile man in a shell suit and trainers. Why indeed would a seal in human form be gentle, beautiful and nice, and might they not equally be nasty, aggressive and stupid? His anthropomorphic embodiment creates an alternative position from which to see, and perhaps mock, human fantasies.

In similarly sardonic tone but in very different context, Coates made a short news report whilst he was artist-in-residence on the Galápagos Islands for the local TV station. Dressed in a carboard bird costume, Coates' report was from the perspective of a blue-footed booby, an iconic bird of the Galápagos. Coates generated the script in conversation with visiting research scientists. In his short broadcast the booby complains about his name, and queries and ridicules human behaviours:

> Our name is 'booby' which in Spanish means stupid. In English it means a woman's breast. You are calling me a stupid tit. We're superior to you in our flight – of course, but also when we're swimming, diving, dancing and courting, to name but a few.
>
> You are strange, comical creatures, with beautiful markings. Why are some of you treated differently from others? Are you categorised according to your plumage? Do some of you form a different species? Some of you have more

[245] Coates, Marcus *Finfolk,* 2003 Digital video, SD, 4:3, 7:43 Produced by Berwick Gymnasium Fellowship Programme

[246] See for example this discussion of how the categories intersect and have altered across time and geographies: *Selkie and Fin — one and the same?* http://www.orkneyjar.com/folklore/selkiefolk/origins/origin2.htm [Accessed 9.9.22]

> territory than others? Why is that? Is it because some of you are bigger than others?[247]

Instead of projecting human attributes onto the animal, Coates speaks from the imagined position of the animal back to the human. In so doing he juggles with the hierarchies of looking and distributions of power that Michael Lawrence and Laura McMahon suggest above that anthropomorphism tends to keep in place. As the 'booby' fires questions we are invited to query human societal norms, and perhaps to feel a bit embarrassed about our assumptions.

In *Finfolk*, Coates' personification, though ostensibly seal-inflected, is studiedly ordinary in many human characteristics – he dresses in a style we all recognise: the shell suit is an early example of what has come to be known as athleisure, fashionably indicative of an era, and speaks and gestures direct to camera. He acts like humans act when riled – a bit idiotic and lippy, gesticulating, incomprehensible. Both works are funny, and are de-anthropocentric because they undermine and disturb the hierarchy in which humanness is a locus of reason and gravity, but they are not speculative. They do not open up a space of enquiry and possibility between human and nonhuman.

The performance work and film *Journey to a Lower World* 2004[248] is one example of Coates performances in which he takes on a shamanic role for an individual or a group. In this instance for the residents of a tower block in Liverpool that has been scheduled for demolition. The residents formulated a group question to ask, and Coates used the shamanic technique of journeying – imaginatively travelling to meet spirit guides – to answer it. The terminology 'lower world' as used in his title locates the work with respect to shamanic tradition and its cosmologies (varying throughout the world, but with many shared recognisable motifs) that often conceive of reality as three interlocking worlds. Our everyday experiences take place in the 'middle world.' The lower world is a realm full of spirits, animal teachers and fearful potential. A shaman in traditional culture usually undergoes rigorous and punishing training, which, if she survives it, allows her to navigate the life-and-death events in the spirit worlds and bring back knowledge that can heal and teach.[249] Coates did a weekend course in Notting Hill.

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[247] Coates, Marcus *Human Report,* 2008, Digital video, SD 640 × 476 4:3, 7:16 min.Broadcast at 8.26 pm on 23 May 2008, Channel 9 TV, Galápagos. Transcript from https://www.marcuscoates.co.uk/projects/48-human-report.
[248] Coates, Marcus *Journey to the Lower World*, 2004, Digital video, SD 720 × 576 4:3, 28:13 mins.
[249] For a description of the shaman's training see Halifax, Joan (1981) *Shaman, the Wounded Healer,* London and New York: Thames and Hudson, pp.16-22.

Wearing the pelt and head of a stag, Coates enters into a trance-like state, seeking answers from animal spirits. Watching the documentation film of his performance, it is impossible to know for sure if Coates enters his trance with the ironic distance of the contemporary artist, or with the genuine engagement of the healer. Somehow, his performance manages to teeter between these positions, evading collapse into parody or out of art.

19. Marcus Coates 2004 *Journey to a Lower World, performance*

Ron Broglio understands Coates' 'frothing' 'nonsense'[250] in his becoming animal works as examples of a move 'from metaphor to metamorphosis'[251] in which '[w]e are led… to meanings and marks of signification whose selection is based on the hybridity of two worlds being negotiated tentatively and temporally.'[252] I concur with Broglio that the success of the work hinges on the vulnerability of the artist: 'the fragility of the artist, who becomes vulnerable to forces both within the social circle and outside in the wild.'[253] We might well cringe or laugh (or both) at Coates' performances, but that helps the work to work. 'Laughter is good' said Coates to me in conversation, 'it helps me break down my ego, and move towards something more productive.'[254]

Broglio speaks of the generative role of 'idiocy', which seems as if it should be aligned to the position of not knowing discussed in Chapter One, but this idiocy seems rather

[250] Broglio, Ron. *Surface Encounters: Thinking with Animals and Art.* Posthumanities 17. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011. 11.
[251] Broglio (2011) 5.
[252] Broglio (2011) 6.
[253] Broglio (2011) 4.
[254] Coates, Marcus, in conversation with the author in 2021.

violent and hierarchical: 'if we could be blunt and idiot enough to think without an abyss between humans and animals, we would arrive at another sort of site and productivity—another sort of thinking.'[255] But if we are, as Broglio puts it, engaged in a 'levelling of worlds'[256] then we reinscribe the anthropocentric hierarchies we seek to escape. Coates meets animal guides (not real animals) during his journeys, and refers to animals through costuming (the deer pelt). He engages gutturally if speechlessly in his performances, then describes, translates and interprets his experiences afterwards. *Journey to a Lower World* positions Coates as a kind of guru figure, and the knowledge he shared is mystified by the process. In his singularity, all eyes are on him.

By contrast, *Ask the Wild* generates a conversational, shared space of learning and discovery, in which many voices can contribute and become creative, and in which the final source of knowledge is our shared living ('middle') world. The conduit is not one person but several people who have learned over long engagement with real situated beings, populations and forces. The format produces differences, in the sometimes contradictory points raised between speakers, and in the gaps between, in what is not said. Pauses, especially those when a question has been asked and the whole room seems to be locked in anticipation of what answers the panellists might come up with, are full of potential. In the gaps, the presence of real other-than-human lives rises up as ultimately unknowable yet full of knowing, and full of creative contradictions. 'Idiocy' is too antagonistic and dumb to describe the conversations of *Ask the Wild*, but foolishness is certainly acknowledged alongside learning and eloquence. Indeed, playing the fool (which need not be overt) can be a key component of speculative anthropomorphism, but it arrives entangled in a set of conceptual and practical tools. In *Ask the Wild*, failures of knowing and communication are moments where we are reminded of the unknowability of other beings and ourselves. Rather than blocks that produce an ending to thought, these failures and limits are seen as openings for imaginative ideas or speculative acts.

Nonidentity

We saw in Chapter One how an artist's creative practice of not knowing of art can be challenged and evolved towards an unknowing between species. The development of speculative anthropomorphism springs from this ground and was supported in its emergence through dialogue with Jane Bennett's reading of Theodor Adorno's 'negative

[255] Broglio (2011) 24.
[256] Broglio (2011) 24.

dialectics.' The basis of this dialectic is nonidentity – that things and beings will always exceed all of our thoughts, experimentations, and representations about them. Or, as Adorno puts it, the 'untruth of identity, the fact that the concept does not exhaust the thing conceived.'[257]

> This discomfiting sense of the inadequacy of representation remains no matter how refined or analytically precise one's concepts become. "Negative dialectics" is the method Adorno designs to teach us how to *accentuate* this discomforting experience and how to give it a meaning. When practiced correctly, negative dialectics will render the static buzz of nonidentity into a powerful reminder that "objects do not go into their concepts without leaving a remainder" and thus that life will always exceed our knowledge and control.[258]

For Bennett, the route into re-vivified relationship with a vibrant world is to not back away from nonidentity but to move towards it. Her pursuit of negative dialectics proposes that we begin by paying 'close aesthetic attention to the qualitative singularities of the object… [and] attempt to perceive what is missing from the conceptualization' before employing 'the full flight of one's imagination to fill in the gaps.' At the point where observation and knowledge fail, Bennett suggests that playfulness can take over. One can 'admit a "playful element" into one's thinking and be willing to play the fool.'[259] Adorno says that 'The un-naïve thinker knows how far he remains from the object of his thinking, and yet he must always talk as if he had it entirely. This brings him to the point of clowning.'[260] When leading workshops that introduce the practice of speculative anthropomorphism to students, I have separated this into three stages, which are undertaken in practical and imaginative relation to an other-than-human thing or being:

1) Forefront the duality between 'concept' and 'thing'. Pay close aesthetic attention to the qualitative singularities of the object and attempt to perceive what is missing from the conceptualization.
2) Use the full flight of your imagination to fill in the gaps.
3) Play the fool – act as if you grasped the whole of the nonidentity, don't be afraid to use your clownish traits.

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[257] Adorno, Theodore W. (Translated by E.B. Ashton), (2004/1966) *Negative Dialectics*, London and New York: Routledge.
[258] Bennett (2010) 14.
[259] Bennett (2010) 15.
[260] Adorno (2004/1966) 14.

Playing the fool allows for the imagined grasp of nonidentity of self and nonself, it softens the edges of self-identity. In speculative anthropomorphism the awareness of nonidentity moves from human observer to nonhuman observed, but it also moves back again. With the development of speculative anthropomorphism, to paraphrase and reframe Adorno's words on philosophy, we 'literally seek to immerse ourselves in things that are heterogeneous to… [the human], without placing those things in prefabricated categories.'[261] Though another species can never be fully known, neither can our selves or any other being or thing. Speculative anthropomorphism offers a possibility for what happens beyond unknowing that neither backs away nor romanticises strangeness[262] nor ignores gaps, uses both knowledge and imagination to experimentally fill them. Speculative anthropomorphism is a seriously comic business.

Bennett comments that 'negative dialectics honours nonidentity as one would honor an unknowable god.'[263] Speculative anthropomorphism is not a lazy appropriation of knowing or being like to nonhuman beings or their being like to us, but an attentive, participatory enquiry that, in embracing its necessary failings, can go on, towards new connectivity. In an interspecies art context, the intellectual and imaginative work of speculative anthropomorphism can be unfolded and expressed through dialogue, as in *Ask the Wild*, and also through the expanded, materialised dialogue of art, through feral participations.

Speculating with Plants

There is a recognised human preponderance to 'plant blindness'[264]: a continuing tendency to relegate plants to a position of homogenous static background upon which the life dramas of humans (plus their pets and select others) unfold. Art historian Giovanni Aloi argues that the representation of plants has been continually caught

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[261] Adorno (2004/1966) 13.

[262] I am thinking here of Timothy Morton's concept of the 'strange stranger' in *The Ecological Thought* and Graham Harman's concept of the fundamental 'withdrawal' of the object. These are clearly conceptually linked to the above discussion of unknowability, but do not move on, as Adorno/Bennett do, into a space of experimental disalienation.

[263] Bennett (2010) 16.

[264] Plant blindness denies both the critical importance of plants to our planet's ability to sustain life, and the increasing insight that plants lead complex and communicative lives. The botanists and biology educators James Wandersee and Elizabeth Schussler coined the term 'plant blindness' in 1999 in response to the preponderance among their North American biology students to ignore botany for zoology and prefer animals to plants. They defined the symptoms of this as '(a) an inability to notice or see plants in the environment; (b) failure to recognize the importance of plants in the biosphere and in human affairs; (c) failure to see, notice, or pay attention to plants in one's own daily life; and (d) an anthropocentric ranking of plants as inferior to animals.' (Knapp S. *Are humans really blind to plants? Plants, People, Planet*, 2019;1:164–168. https ://doi.org/10.1002/ppp3.36).

between the twin poles of anthropomorphism and the sublime, both of which keep plants in the symbolic (and so anthropocentric) register. 'Plants can be featured in art, but only through a symbolic register, that makes them meaningful to human affairs.' Aloi describes how representations of trees, flowers and fruits in art have been consistently wrapped into anthropocentric hierarchies in which they are 'always ambiguously suspended in a symbolic realm of objectification that transfigures the nonhuman into a metaphorical vessel for the human.'[265] He shows how the representation of plants was decisively shaped by medieval theological hierarchies, which established the pictorial conventions of flattening and separation. Through these practices, plants were 'deliberately extrapolated from the spatial as well as temporal flux of the world [so they] … exclusively existed in spiritual, symbolic registers.'[266] In being rendered symbolic and spiritual, plants were excised from their own situations. While theology may have receded, anthropocentric hierarchies remain intact, and, Aloi argues, plants (and animals) have largely remained of interest to art in only two ways: scientific or metaphorical objectification.

In contrast, rather than objectifying plants, the radio and podcast project *Ask Somerset's Plants* focuses on details of a plant's or species' various lifestyles and speaks of their various strategies for success. It represents plants as multifaceted, as always exceeding the conversation. It represents plants as holders of knowledge and ideas that are relevant to human life, but also as embedded players in situated dramas of their own. The podcasts are edited from sound-recorded conversations that are site-specific. They explore habitats in the Quantock Hills, the Somerset Levels and Cheddar Gorge. They offer a succession of detailed, shifting glimpses into specific plants, which are represented as entangled with, not excised from, their layered context and networks.

Aloi writes that allegorical representations 'subjugate the otherness of the plant in a simple move that conceals behind a preinscribed screen of signification what we cannot comprehend. The plant is thus turned into a hollow vessel for human concerns and feelings.'[267] While the intention in *Ask Somerset's Plants* is to make comparisons and alignments between plants and humans, the use of speculative anthropomorphism is not allegorical nor wholly symbolic, but teases out situational comparisons between human and plant worlds. If '[s]ymbolism domesticates'[268], *Ask Somerset's Plants* brings the

[265] Aloi (2019) 25.
[266] Aloi (2019) 12.
[267] Aloi (2019), 23.
[268] Aloi (2019), 23.

listening human out towards the world of the plants, and towards the wild. One question responded to was about how to recognise the leadership qualities of others. The question was: 'In the light of recent leadership contests, in which we find ourselves confronting a scenario where both candidates are seriously flawed, how would the plants select the best leader?'[269] This is an excerpt of the reply:

> Marcus Coates (MC): So, what's this question really about, is it about how we recognise a good leader, or leadership qualities perhaps?
> Feral Practice (FP): Yeah, I suppose that's it isn't it, the attributes, we are drawn to big personalities aren't we. Charismatic individuals tend to take up space on the media and attract…
> MC: Yeah they dominate.
> FP: So we listen to the bluster and don't think to look for the serious intentions.
> MC: We get quite easily seduced.
> FP: What we could look out for is maybe the showy personalities in the woodland that we shouldn't quite trust?
> Dr Alison Smith (AS): Yes, I think there's some really good parallels actually. There are a couple of species that in some of our woodlands that take over. So we've got species like rhododendron and laurel. They cast very very dense shade. They grow quite vigorously, and they can form dense thickets and really prevent other plants from growing up, particularly other tree seedlings and lot of the ground flora species that would normally thrive in the woodland, they are unable to because these plants are so competitive and they create conditions that really only enable themselves to thrive.
> MC: So they're out for themselves?
> AS: Yes, these plants are out for themselves, and, in the case of the rhododendron, quite often people quite like rhododendron, it's got these beautiful bright pink flowers and glossy green evergreen leaves, so they catch people's attention… People quite often have them in their gardens, but actually in our woodlands they can cause a real problem for other species.
> FP: So what plants would you say have better intentions?
> AS: We've got quite a nice example just over here actually, which is a birch tree. As we approach you can make it out from the bark of the tree, it is very pale bark, with sort of horizontal markings across it, and we can also make out the small triangular serrated leaves. The birch is one of the pioneers of the woodland. It's a species that colonises heathland and open ground. It's one of

[269] K. Grant. Question sent by email to *Ask the Wild*.

> the first species to arrive and will gradually create a woodland habitat. And the birch tends to be quite short-lived, but they'll give way to the oaks and the ash and the rowans and the hazels. And because they have this quite loose canopy, they let lots of light through, so that allows other seedlings from different trees to establish. You've got lots of ferns growing around the base. We've got the bilberry, we've got different flowering plants. They are all able to thrive under the birch canopy.
> FP: So, they are leaders in the sense that they lead us into new territory, but unlike the rhododendron and the laurel they don't take all of that territory for themselves. They are sort of helping to create habitat for other species.
> MC: I like the fact that they give way! You know they're not sticking around forever and they don't get so obsessed with themselves, like some of our leaders. It's like, okay, now, we've done our job, it's time to move on![270]

Plants are compared to human political leaders here, but they are also considered as situated characters living in a broad entanglement of vegetal players within the woodland. Rhododendron, for example, is understood as problematic in certain contexts, but is not demonised. Although the reference to colonisation strikes an especially murky note when drawn into comparison with the human, the plant is also admired for its beauty and popularity in gardens. The conversation is light and free flowing, it shows plants as many-sided beings that have many potential affects and effects according to context and according to the positionality of the affected beings, most of which are not human. In bringing scientific knowledge about woodland plants into dialogue with human politics, the podcast counters a 'scientifically inherent capacity to delineate the object of scrutiny as absolutely separate from the subject whose gaze beholds the object'.[271] The podcast positions plants as agential beings with strategies, capacities, strengths and weaknesses, and as part of a community, as well as in dialogue with visiting humans. It suggests the woodland as a world alive with its own drama.

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[270] Feral Practice and Marcus Coates (2019) *Ask Somerset's Plants*. (transcript from podcast) .*Podcast 1: Quantock Hills* Feral Practice and Marcus Coates are in conversation with PlantLife ecologist Dr Alison Smith. http://www.askthewild.net/asp/
[271] Aloi (2019) 29.

20. Feral Practice & Marcus Coates 2019 *Ask Somerset's Plants, W*itches Whiskers.
21. Feral Practice & Marcus Coates 2019 *Ask Somerset's Plants, r*ecording in Cheddar Gorge.

Plants were chosen for this radio and podcast project precisely because they are normally considered not to speak, and culturally lack a voice. Entering into dialogue with beings that cannot (literally) speak differs from 'ventriloquizing'[272] in that it emphasises listening over speaking. Far from treating plants as hollow vessels, it presents plants as complex beings that contain diverse ideas and wisdom for humans. It sees and nurtures connectivity between humans and other species through listening. Listening takes many forms, including collaboration with scientists. *Ask Somerset's Plants* listens to plants, and

[272] Aloi uses the term ventriloquize to describe the act of using plants to speak human thoughts without concern for their reality. See Aloi (2019) 1.

tunes into the vegetal. It does not reject that plants hold symbolic value for humans, but neither does it see symbolism as unique to the human realm.[273]

The Ethical Potential of Anthropomorphic Connectivity

Where *Ask Somerset's Plants* takes listeners on a walk through a landscape, seeking wisdom from the plants, the guided meditation sound piece *Mycorrhizal Meditation* (2017-22) takes listeners on a personal and embodied journey internally, and connects them to the 'wood-wide web',[274] or mycorrhizal network. The spoken-word narrative of the meditation draws on the science of the mycorrhizal network and its collective, communicative and nutritional function for plants, fungi and landscapes, and brings it together with body-scan relaxation techniques. In 1997 Suzanne Simard published her PhD thesis, which revealed that 'trees communicate their needs and send each other nutrients via a network of latticed fungi buried in the soil.'[275] This now well-understood science has revolutionized our understanding of plants and fungi, but in the 1990s Simard faced an uphill battle in getting her work recognised by scientific colleagues. The Canadian Forest Service[276] with whom she worked was a community who had vested interests in understanding forests as 'standing reserve'[277] and in practices such as clear felling, and did not welcome new science that suggested trees could be in any way sentient or communicative. Repeated accusations of anthropomorphism were used to dismiss Simard's work.[278] In communications with the wider (i.e. non-scientific) world she has certainly not shied away from evocative anthropomorphic language such as 'trees "talk[ing]" to each other'.[279] Simard rebuts her critics by explaining that a 'forest is a cooperative system…To me, using the language of "communication" made… sense

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[273] As the discussion of other-than-human aesthetics in Chapter Two suggests, we can see symbolism in the power of blue for the satin bowerbird, and in the stone collections of the octopus. The symbolic, like the aesthetic, is a perspectival register, so can be conceived differently as we move away from reductive interpretations of animal behaviour.

[274] The phrase 'wood-wide web' was first used to describe the mycorrhizal network of tree roots and fungal mycelium in woodland in the title of an article by Robin Sen (2000) *Budgeting for the Wood-Wide Web*, The New Phytologist, Vol. 145, No. 2 (Feb., 2000), pp. 161-163.

[275] Toomey, Diane (2016) *Exploring How and Why Trees 'Talk' to Each Other*
Yale School of Forestry & Environmental Studies 1.9.2016.
Online: https://e360.yale.edu/features/exploring_how_and_why_trees_talk_to_each_other [Last accessed 8.4.22]

[276] The story of Simard's scientific experiments and discoveries, and the struggle to have her work recognised, is recounted in Simard, Suzanne (2021) *Finding the Mother Tree: uncovering the wisdom and intelligence of the forest*, London: Penguin.

[277] The term 'standing reserve' describes an approach to nature (or anything else) which views it simply for its use value. It was originated by philosopher Martin Heidegger.

[278] See for example Simard's description of presenting her research in 1995 at British Columbia Northern Interior Vegetation Management Association, annual general meeting, Jan 18th 1995, Williams Lake, BC. In Simard 2021, pp127-136.

[279] Toomey, Diane interviews Simard, Suzanne (2016).
https://e360.yale.edu/features/exploring_how_and_why_trees_talk_to_each_other

because we were looking at not just resource transfers, but things like defense signaling and kin recognition signaling. We as human beings can relate to this better. If we can relate to it, then we're going to care about it more. If we care about it more, then we're going to do a better job of stewarding our landscapes.'[280] The language and methods chosen to communicate information about forests are not only an aesthetic (word choice being always expressive) but an ethical decision.

Mycorrhizal Meditation brings the science into dialogue with poetics, field sound recordings and somatic practice[281] to provoke a different level of appreciation and comprehension of more-than-human continuity. Normally, somatic practice is concerned with deepening the mind—body awareness for relaxation and healing. In *Mycorrhizal Meditation,* heightened connectivity continues into the nonhuman world. The narrative choreographs a connective journey through the listener's body, and down into a dynamic, semiotic underworld of living soil. Travelling downwards slowly from top of head through to bottom of feet, the meditation encourages the listener to become aware of and then relax each part of their body. As the meditation reaches the feet and floor, it asks the listener to visualise their feet pushing down into soil. As they move their imagination underground, the listener grows roots that spread and branch until they meet and are penetrated by mycorrhizal fungi. Through these intertwined filaments they connect to their neighbours in the circle (if experiencing the meditation live in a group) and to other beings in the city/park/forest where they are sitting or standing. Each live performance includes site-specific content, situating the listener within a particular landscape, connecting them to that local environment.[282]

The piece works on the anthropomorphic and connective imaginary through blending the human experience of arms, legs, lungs, toes and tongues with an imaginative becoming vegetal – growing and exploring soil with their roots, meeting fungi. Across this development, there is a change in the forms described, but not in the quality of sensory information – the touch between roots and mycorrhizal filaments is sensual, intentional and emotional. The experience of being connected across species boundaries, in the medium of soil, is described as rewarding both in terms of nutrition: 'sips of precious minerals, delicacies you wouldn't be able to find on your own' and in

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[280] Toomey, Diane interviews Simard, Suzanne (2016).
[281] 'Somatic practice' uses attentional methods to tune into information from the body, for the promotion of health and wellbeing.
[282] *Mycorrhizal Meditation* is experienced as a live event in a group setting, inside or outside, or as a digital sound file played through headphones.

terms of energy and information: 'the delicious snap and tingle, as your network brims with energy and hums with deep reciprocity and knowledge…'[283] Alongside the voice are musical and rhythmic sounds composed from recordings made in wooded places. Some are conventionally recorded with ambient microphones. Others are recorded using contact microphones or sonification technology, to offer less conventionally human (more vegetal) sounds. Listeners hear the modified crackle of sap travelling up through the phloem,[284] and the sonified changes in a plant's electrical circuit.[285]

22. Feral Practice *Mycorrhizal Meditation*, exhibited as part of Mycelium Network Society's installation at Taipei Biennale 2019.
23. Feral Practice *Mycorrhizal Meditation*, exhibited at *Feeling Myself – Lakeside Clinic* at Bánkitó Festival, Hungary

[283] Feral Practice *Mycorrhizal Meditation 2017-22.*
[284] Phloem is the inner bark that conducts nutrients through the tree.
[285] The midi device I used creates an electrical circuit in the plant through positioning one sensor on a leaf and the second on a root. Changes in the electrical circuit are converted into changes in musical pitch, so producing a unique 'song' from the plant. https://www.musicoftheplants.com/

Practices of embodied sustained attention offer experiences that speak differently to people than the intellectual sharing of facts. When one is attending to one's body with eyes closed, experiences arise in less-contained ways. Our mental selves are more fluid, the sense of our body's borders and position (proprioception) weaken. Imaginative immersion can provoke mental imagery and heightened embodied affects which afford participants of *Mycorrhizal Meditation* powerful experiences of cross-species connectivity: 'I still remember the tree I was standing under in Finsbury Park'.[286] The meditative method of this artwork was particularly pertinent to the fungal theme, and was inspired by the profound effects that the ingestion of some plants and mushrooms have on our consciousness.[287]

What's in a Name?

In naming *anthropos* (from the Ancient Greek *ἄνθρωπος* (ánthrōpos), meaning primordial man, humanity) the word anthropomorphism centres the human. Considering the de-anthropocentric intent of this research, might it not be better to choose a different word? Some researchers use the term 'zoomorphism', which has a rather restrictive dictionary definition: '1 : The representation of a deity in the form or with the attributes of the lower animals 2 **:** the use of animal forms in art or symbolism'.[288] Media critic Cynthia Chris describes it more broadly, as 'knowledge [about animals] being used to explain the human.'[289] In writing about wildlife filmmaking, Chris identifies an evolution in the representation of animal–human relation, from films in which 'the animal appears as object of human action (and… is targeted as game), to an anthropomorphic framework, in which human characteristics are mapped onto animal subjects, to a zoomorphic framework, in which knowledge about animals is used to explain the human.'[290] Anat Pick writes of 'zoomorphic realism' that 'asserts the multiplicity and situatedness of worlds… [and] aims to explore the meaning of the

[286] Katriona Beales, email to the author 2.6.21.
[287] In live performances, the meditation can become part of a larger ritual including shared mushroom libations taken from a 'mycorrhizal wassail pot,' a large ceramic vessel with multiple handles, designed for shared drinking, and inspired by traditional wassail pots from early Britain.
[288] Merriam Webster online dictionary definition. https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/zoomorphism
[289] Chris is quoted in Evans, Georgina (2015). *A Cut or a Dissolve: Insects and Identification in Microcosmos,* in Lawrence, Michael and McMahon, Laura. *Animal Life and the Moving Image*, London: Palgrave, pp.108-120. 109.
[290] Evans, Georgina (2015), pp.108-120. 109.

perceptual, behavioural and ontological specificities of life by observing animals' subjective experience, and reflecting on the ethical stakes of such radical biodiversity.'[291]

Anat Pick and Georgina Evans both reference zoomorphism in relation to the film *Microcosmos* (1996) by Claude Nurisdany and Marie Pérenou. *Microcosmos* was shot in one meadow in Ayeron in the South of France, into which the filmmakers built sets, using film lighting and structures with which to move the cameras. These allowed them to use narrative cinematic techniques such as travelling shots and crane shots that can smoothly follow the action of their sometimes-flying insect subjects. For the filmmaker Nuridsany, the careful use of dramatised storytelling, zoomorphic perspectives that prioritize a bug's eye view, and macro shots that enter this world at insect scale, were a response to human disengagement with insects. They are, she said, quite difficult to anthropomorphise. 'There is nothing harder to relate to than an insect "which has no face, no facial expressions, which you cannot stroke or engage with in an affective exchange like a cat, or a dog, or a sheep."'[292] But, if one is not seeking to evoke anthropomorphic identification with insects, so much as to extend the viewer's imaginative insight out towards creatures unlike themselves, and on also towards ecologies as a whole, this may be something of an advantage.

The two directors reinforce their film's narrative style by 'continually referring to the animals in the film as 'acteurs' and giving each a final listing in the credits.' [293] This inscription of insects into the role of actors suggests a move for animals into the human realm – more anthropomorphism than zoomorphism – but *Microcosmos* creates a more insect-centred than human-centred world in three other ways. Firstly, entirely nonhuman action takes place, and secondly, this is reflected in the scale at which most of the action happens – the filmmakers credit the invention of macro lens technology alongside the insects as their inspiration. Thirdly, they avoid inscribing the insects' actions into human epistemologies by resisting the conventional explanatory voiceover. This 'bold and unusual move in nature documentary… [was taken in order to prioritise] the direct address to the imagination… [over] the insights that such sequences are generally intended to illustrate.'[294] The viewer is not told the import of, or any explanation for, the actions of the insects, but instead are left to wonder. The insects

[291] Pick. Anat (2015) 'Animal Life in the Cinematic *Umwelt',* in Lawrence, Michael and McMahon, Laura. *Animal Life and the Moving Image*, London: Palgrave, pp.221-237, 222.
[292] Evans, Georgina (2015). 'Insects and Identification in *Microcosmos',* in Lawrence, Michael and McMahon, Laura. *Animal Life and the Moving Image*, London: Palgrave, pp.108-120. 109.
[293] Evans (2015) 111.
[294] Evans (2015) 112-3.

are seen from 'our' perspective, but not in ways that neatly insert them into already existing systems of human categorisation and meaning. They occupy an individualised perspective, which allows for their motivations to be opaque, rather than being subsumed into simplistic narratives of ecological adaptation.

24. Claude Nuridsany and Marie Pérennou 1996 *Microcosmos: le peuple de l'herbe, film still*

Both anthro- and zoo- morphism play a useful role in *Microcosmos*. If feral practice solely dealt with animals, zoomorphism would be a useful term, but this research is concerned with very many different kinds of living things and ecologies. As *anthropo-* centres the human, *zoo-* centres the animal, and so its use calls up a need for a third, then a fourth, possibly a fifth term. A related concept which avoids this proliferation of words has been proposed by researcher Kay Milton. 'Egomorphism' is 'the perception that another species has self-like, rather than human-like, qualities'[295] It allows a researcher or observer to discuss creaturely personhood and personal perspective, without resorting to humanness as the default setting for what personhood means. 'One could egomorphize a spider by considering it to be a sentient being with a life history and a personal memory. Thus, egomorphism, like empathy and non-human charisma, are forms of engagement that construct an understanding of what it is to be, become, or sense another species.'[296] The concept of egomorphism is of interest to this research,

[295] Milton, Kay (2005) 'Anthropomorphism or Egomorphism? The Perception of Non-human Persons by Human Ones'. Chapter in *Animals in Person: Cultural Perspectives on Human–Animal Intimacy*. (2005) Edited by John Knight, Oxford : Berg, 2005.
[296] Root-Bernstein, M., Douglas, L., Smith, A., Veríssimo, D. (2013) 'Anthropomorphized species as tools for conservation : utility beyond prosocial, intelligent and suffering species'. *Biodiversity and Conservation* (2013) 22:1577–1589. https://link.springer.com/content/pdf/10.1007/s10531-013-0494-4.pdf

but it too comes with some problems. Firstly, it seems to suggest that the viewing human ascribes personhood to the spider, rather than selfhood being a property which the spider already possesses. Secondly, egomorphism becomes problematic in discussion of distributed kinds of being and non-personal kinds of forces, such as migrations, or sea currents, or swarms, with which *Ask the Wild* engages. Thirdly, the word egomorphism is not well known or understood. While the phrase 'speculative anthropomorphism' is a neologism, it is built of two well-known words.

The words zoomorphism and egomorphism do draw us away from the centrality of the generalised 'anthropos', which is welcome, but they also leave behind the situated human – the researcher / artist / scientist / audience – whose training and world view and apparatus are shaping this particular experience and knowledge of human and nonhuman worlds. The pitfalls of the word anthropomorphism are widely understood, and so can be more clearly qualified by the descriptive 'speculative.' In speculative anthropomorphism, the 'anthro' of anthropomorphism honours the reality that – whatever creaturely experiences and imaginaries we engage in, we will always begin and end at the human that we are. Our journey and its findings will inevitably be shaped by this. In order to think alongside other-than-human beings, we need to acknowledge our humanness, our partiality, and our own nonidentity. Ultimately, Tyler's critique of anthropomorphism and its limitations only highlights the need for speculative anthropomorphism – which asks questions of the human alongside questions of the other-than-human, and which welcomes into 'serious talk' the diverse forms and sources of knowledge that have been regularly excluded from it. To sensitively, intelligently and playfully think and act along with nonhuman beings, we need to nurture spaces that are not rigidly hierarchized between species or between classes of knowledge.

If we understand humans as animals in a biological and epistemological continuum with other creatures, whose qualities and skills are yet to be fully known, and with whom our ability to communicate is still to be explored, it offers greater scope to explore what we can achieve with, learn from, and how we might relate to, each other. The practice of speculative anthropomorphism developed in this research is an active tool for sensitive and ethical explorations and extensions of relation between humans and other species. In this chapter, speculative anthropomorphism has been explained through projects that bring humans into participation with audio-led material. Chapter Four examines a creative interaction between the author and a significant fox participant in the project

Foxing 2017-18,[297] to show how human interaction with material knowledge gets reciprocated, rejected, swerved and manipulated by the fox. In the process, speculative art becomes game-like.

[297] Fiona MacDonald : Feral Practice *Foxing* PEER Gallery 11 January - 17 March 2017.

4. Foxing: Playing Art Between Species

Foxing: https://www.peeruk.org/fiona-macdonald

Chapter Four builds on the idea of dialogical art between species to examine how artworks that are specifically game-like can bring forward and frame new relations between species. Turning to an inter-mammal encounter offers a different inflection to the discussion so far, focusing on how one species can interpret (and misinterpret) another species' actions, and on the diffractive differences in working with domesticated and wild creatures. Humans and animals play and work together in many different contexts, but usually within structures that domesticate the animal. The chapter discusses Donna Haraway's concept of 'becoming with' another species in the 'contact zone' (which was developed through Haraway's experience of playing sport with her Australian Shepherd dog Cayenne) looking at the problem of domesticated species relations.[298] Though foxes are wild, they live alongside humans and are noticeably invested in their actions and intentions. They are also often demonised by people, working with them as participants offered potential to address this. Through play and shared laughter, humans often understand their pets as individuals with their own specific talents and personalities – feral participations can reveal wild and farmed creatures to be similarly characterful, intentional and unique.

The chapter compares the author's art research project *Foxing* 2017-18, and Joseph Beuys' 1974 action with a coyote *I Like America and America Likes Me*.[299] Through playful improvisatory art actions I suggest that the human artist enters what Brian Massumi calls a 'zone of indiscernibility'[300] with fox/coyote which can create new 'moves' and generate understanding between species. Where Haraway's games are preinscribed into hierarchical structures of animal domestication, and Beuys overcodes his interactions with the coyote with human symbolic gestures and materials, subject to preformed intentions, *Foxing* develops in-the-moment game-like learning between human and fox. The rules of engagement are shaped and reshaped by the way the fox does and does not participate, indeed the artwork is understood by the human artist as game-like only because of the fox's unexpected actions and refusals. In this way foxes take up space

[298] Haraway, Donna. J. (2008) 'Chapter 8: Training in the Contact Zone' In: *When species meet*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. pp.205–246.
[299] Joseph Beuys, *Coyote: I Like America, and America Likes Me,* May 1974, Renee Block Gallery, NYC.
[300] Massumi, Brian (2014) *What Animals Teach Us About Politics*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 6.

within, and change the direction of, the artwork – at times they lead the way. They are redrawn as culturally complex, independent animals who 'look back' at humans, and pose questions for humans to answer.

Becoming With Foxes or Dogs

Donna Haraway understands all species as being in continuous processes of 'becoming with' each other. 'Earth's beings are prehensile, opportunistic, ready to yoke unlikely partners into something new, something symbiogenetic.' For her, 'co-constitutive companion species and coevolution are the rule not the exception.'[301] Haraway describes processes of becoming with other species as '[t]he kinds of relatings that… entangle a motley crowd of differentially situated species…[into] a knot of species coshaping one another in layers of reciprocating complexity all the way down.'[302] Entering into relations and becoming with others is fundamental to the living world and to the bodies that both move in it and constitute it. Relationships underpin the world-making of habitats, milieus, and environments, producing the 'nested nests' that were described in Chapter One. Many if not most of the relationships and becomings with which human bodies are involved in (and comprised of) occur beyond the level of consciousness. This chapter concentrates on alignments that human researchers and artists enter into intentionally, though there are important separations because of the wildness of the fox. In *When Species Meet* (2008) Haraway writes at length about becoming with her Australian shepherd dog Ms Cayenne Pepper, especially through playing the sport of agility together. Agility is a competitive sport, a timed run in which the dog leaps and performs complex precise actions in relation to a series of obstacles, while the human partner runs alongside, guiding and directing. Haraway describes the sport as her 'contact zone' with Cayenne. A contact zone is a space or a situation in which one gets to analyse and challenge how one interacts with another species. Might feral participations also be understood as a contact zone? Notably, fox and human enter into relation almost exclusively through the artwork, whereas Haraway and Cayenne live together.

To compete in agility demands rigorous training of the dog–human partnership – which demands sophisticated interspecies communication. It is interesting to see how being practice-led (as of course this research also is) shapes the kind of questions that Haraway can ask, and requires some bold certainties. She comments that: 'Trainers can't

[301] Haraway, Donna (2008) 220.
[302] Haraway, Donna (2008) 42.

forbid themselves the judgement that they can communicate meaningfully with their partners. The philosophical and literary conceit that all we have is representations and no access to what animals think and feel is wrong.'[303] Haraway insists that Cayenne trains her just as much as she trains Cayenne – and they 'become-agile together.' This is one of several instances in Haraway's writing where she displays a commitment to be de-anthropocentric, to think dog alongside human. Sometimes, the inference is even that she is part of an emergent dog–human. In statements like 'our cross species conjoined mind-body, which we are when we run well'[304] the suggestion is that Haraway and Cayenne mingle and become one, want and experience the same thing. These claims are brought into question, however, when Haraway describes how she has to punish Cayenne for a regular misdeed in their training: 'If Cayenne did not hold [on the obstacle called the A-frame] two on, two off and wait for release, I was to walk her calmly off the course without comment or glance and zip her into her crate without reward and stroll away.' [305] The punishment is enacted and causes anguish in human and dog.

The incident spotlights that, while often joyous, this human–dog interspecies sporting relation cannot be or become a structurally equal partnership, because agility is inserted into a human-dominant culture, not a canine-dominant culture, and relies on processes like punishment and reward that enshrine human authority. Political theorist Dinesh Wadiwel critiques Haraway by saying that the concept and practice of training has been constructed through a presumption of sovereignty of man over animals. He argues that while Haraway's work is beneficial in that it 'de-hinge[s] the concept of freedom from an enlightenment preoccupation with individual autonomy' it still rests upon the violent construction of the human–animal binary. For Wadiwel, it is critical to challenge the human 'right of dominion' that structures unequal relationships between species 'in advance.'[306] Cayenne, though loved, *belongs* to Haraway, and concepts of ownership with regard to living beings will always be enmeshed in anthropocentrism and emblematic of structural inequality between species.

Pets are accorded an unusually high status for a nonhuman animal *because* they live inside the human sphere and are given semi- or faux-human privileges. Rather than bringing humans towards the creaturely, pets are usually expected to alter their

[303] Haraway (2008) 226.
[304] Haraway (2008) 230.
[305] Haraway (2008) 228.
[306] Wadiwel (2015) 215.

behaviours to conform to human needs and norms. House trained, often neutered to prevent their seeking out sex, dressed and clipped, pet dogs are reductively anthropomorphised, so as to perform emotional and entertainment labour for humans, becoming faux-humans. Jack Halberstam describes pets as 'zombie prostheses' of the human; 'an accessory, a fetish, an improper object of love and intimacy… a zombified figure of the blurred boundaries between life and death in contemporary culture.'[307] In its nuanced concentration on relations with companion animals, especially dogs, *When Species Meet* is practical rather than radical – it does not seek to overturn anthropocentric hierarchies, but to adjust them from within. In her conscious co-shaping between dog and human, Haraway spotlights the power relations between species: 'Training together puts the participants inside the complexities of instrumental relations and structures of power.'[308] Examining these structures is a way to think 'care-fully' about the hierarchies in which humans and nonhumans are always enmeshed. Haraway's approach is pragmatic and compromised. It allows for the 'always asymmetrical living and dying, nurturing and killing'[309] to continue, as long as we are learning to be 'polite' in response to these realities. Rather than rejecting the structural inequality between species, Haraway opens up multiple opportunities for nuanced care to occur within them, and for individualised companion animals to forge extraordinary relationships and produce transformative knowledge with humans.[310]

Companion animals can be sites of rich and varied relationship and becoming with, but they can also entangle humans in uncritical anthropomorphisms which encourage delusions about empathy with animals and benevolence toward animals in the wider sense. Gary Francione points out that 'you might have a dog or a cat that you value but that's simply because that's a piece of property that we allow you, part of what property ownership means is we allow you to value your property the way you want.'[311] The beloved pet is often fed with the bodies of other animals, who live hidden, grim, enslaved, exploited lives. For Wadiwel, 'a stronger framework for understanding human freedom with respect to violence towards animals is to interrogate Foucault's suggestion

[307] Halberstam, Jack (2020) *Wild Things: The Disorder of Desire*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 150.
[308] Haraway (2008) 207.
[309] Haraway (2008) 41–2.
[310] Cayenne was afforded the status of Haraway's research partner at the University of California, and their partnership fuelled over a decade of work into ethical and imaginative cross-species relations.
[311] Francione, Gary. 'Philosophy Bites: Gary Francione on Animal Abolitionism'. https://philosophybites.com/2012/10/gary-l-francione-on-animal-abolitionism.html

that sovereignty might be understood as a freedom to enjoy another's unfreedom.'[312] Feral practice does not leave these questions behind by working with wild creatures. While most dogs in the UK are owned by humans, most foxes are wild, but they are still not free. Foxes are admired and appreciated by some people, but hated as vermin[313], considered sly and even demonic[314] by others. The UK's only wild native canines are hunted, trapped, poisoned and shot by humans for sport and control.[315]

Foxes, in their caninity, are cousins to Britain's favourite pets. Foxes can therefore be structurally emblematic of the differing status of wild, feral and domestic animals in the UK. Though valued by many, wild foxes cannot be protected under property laws. The project *Foxing* (2017–18) hoped to excavate relationship to real and vibrant creatures, beyond foxes' polarised and often-demonised status. The project worked with a large and vocal population of urban foxes (who divide opinion among a large and vocal population of humans) near PEER gallery, in Hoxton, East London, and with the foxes near my home in semi-rural Kent, who are cherished by many but often persecuted by farmers. On PEER's website and my own, a web page called *Fox News* collated a polarised hyperbole of stories and opinions about foxes.[316] The web page's accumulation and juxtaposition of contrasting headlines and articles served to articulate that foxes always appear as human problems or as human pleasures, they even appear as coats, but they do not appear as complex, situated, beings. *Foxing* was in dialogue with these polarised opinions through *Fox News*, but sought to move beyond them in order to think and work with foxes in creative ways that brought human audiences closer to foxes as independent, complex, diverse animals, without undermining the foxes' independence. As it moves beyond Haraway's concentration on working and playing with companion animals, *Foxing* asks what shifts might our empathy with wild creatures take if humans were not pet owners? *Foxing* elicited non-domestic relations with wild foxes, that did not seek to dominate, tame or control them but did hope to engage in creative dialogue

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[312] Wadiwel (2015) 215.
[313] Vermin is defined by Wikipedia as: 'pests or nuisance animals that spread diseases or destroy crops or livestock' https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vermin
[314] 'The fox represents the devil, who pretends to be dead to those who retain their worldly ways, and only reveals himself when he has them in his jaws. To those with perfect faith, the devil is truly dead.' (See David Badke or The Medieval Bestiary www.bestiary.ca.).
[315] The 2004 Hunting Act, which banned hunting with dogs, perhaps served to polarise opinions. Foxes are loved or hated but rarely ignored, and suffer the harsh consequences of human opinion. Some boroughs in London operated a policy of culling foxes by shooting them until it was evidenced that this only caused foxes from other areas to breed more rapidly, and move into the vacated territories. How human populations feel about foxes structurally affects their living and dying. A fox that is tamed by one person might be more vulnerable to violence from another.
[316] Feral Practice (2017) http://www.feralpractice.com/W-Foxing/foxnews.php

with them. I worked with wild foxes, but also (in another section of the project) with a charity who capture foxes in order to treat their illnesses and wounds, before releasing them back (when possible) into their territories. Without taming or training foxes, the project attempted to nurture a transformation of relationship between fox and human, something co-constitutive, through acts of expanded dialogue and co-creation. Exactly what (if anything) would be created, and how our dialogue (if any) would unfold, was left purposely uncertain.

Interspecies Painting Play

To think differently with foxes, I wanted to bring them towards painting and consider our relation through an exchange of painterly mark making. I hoped to capture the local foxes' creaturely traces and gestural expressions on a shared canvas surface. To a careful observer, all movements and actions are expressive, whether intentionally so or not, and so traces can also be interpreted as expressive.[317] Visual artists are trained to use verbal communication as just 'one semiotic, syntactical and rhetorical system among many', and so can tune into the ways that, as Julian Yates describes, '[a]ll animals… read and write, not with ink but with urine, faeces, and so very many other substances.'[318] Foxes position their faeces performatively, even decoratively, for example atop molehills and mushrooms. The adaptive explanation is that scat is a territorial marker that operates primarily in the olfactory sense, and added height allows the scent-marking to travel further.[319] But this explanation offers no insight into the foxes' choice of platform. Via this research we can speculate about a fox's choices. I once saw a shiny fox scat on top of a large pile of fresh horse manure, a juxtaposition that presumably offers some olfactory confusion. But perhaps this placement allows a fox a moment of symbolic domination over a prey animal, who it would in less metaphorical circumstances struggle to overcome? The point is not to know, but to open up, through humour and imagination, thinking between species.

Though I agree with Despret that lack of a shared intention does not cancel out what humans and animals achieve together, in feral participations an attempt to interpret is communicative and educational. I wanted, through attending to fox gestures and use of

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[317] As part of my research I attended a wildlife tracking course in 2016, which, while introductory, taught skills for interpreting an animal's activities and moods from clues such as paw prints, scat and feeding signs. https://woodlife.co.uk/wilderness-immersion-course/

[318] Yates, Julian *Sheep Tracks: a multispecies impression*, in Jeffery Jerome Cohen (eds) *Animal, Vegetable, Mineral: ethics and objects*. Washington DC: Oliphaunt Books, 200.

[319] See Macdonald, David (1989) *Running with the Fox*, UK: Harper Collins, pp. 124-129

materials, to interpret the fox's intention and thinking, and to communicate mine to them. I designed the project with foxes' habits and interests (in food and performative excretion) in mind. I covered my patio with pieces of canvas, cut to fit its odd shape, and stitched together to make one large painting surface. The surface was then set, like a table, with dishes of homemade apple juice and elderberry wine, and over many nights it offered a varying menu of peanuts, cheese, pheasant bones, fish skins, honey sandwiches, raw eggs. Around the margins of the patio, I laid soft slabs of river clay, and boards covered in homemade paint of different colours, intending to capture footprints and trails in the clay and on the canvas.

25: Feral Practice 2017 *Foxing, t*he 'table' laid on the patio
26: Feral Practice 2017 *Foxing, t*hree fox prints in a slab of river clay

Your Move

Examining the patio after the first night's activities, I found three fox prints on the slab of river clay. This 'success' was never to be repeated. From that moment on, the foxes did

not tread on any of the clay slabs or paint-covered boards. Night after night, the canvas remained empty of paw prints. After nearly three weeks of food disappearing but no marks being made, I needed a different tactic, so bought and installed an infra-red trail camera. Each morning I reviewed the previous night's activities, trying to piece together the responses of the foxes. A shy vixen was an occasional visitor, and a bolder dog fox was a nightly regular. This dog fox, who I called Daren after the nearby River Darent,[320] manoeuvred cautiously around the patio every night, sniffing, staring, listening; carefully discovering every last peanut and piece of cheese without setting foot on the clay or trays of sticky paint. It was apparent that he could not *see* the scenario clearly, despite his glowing eyes in the trail-cam footage. He was guided, overwhelmingly, by his nose.[321] He circled the patio repeatedly, scenting the air, trying to pin down exactly where each tempting waft was coming from. I watched as he chose to perch in a large flowerpot, lean over and eat the paint (it was made from food colouring in a flour-thickened oil and water emulsion so as to be non-toxic) rather than walk on it. One night, after circling the now practically calorie free patio for half an hour, his final move was to crouch down low from the step above, and delicately lick the one remaining peanut up from where it had fallen onto a clay slab, without leaving a single mark.

Finally, after weeks without foxes marking clay or canvas, I placed peanuts and cheese in a truly inaccessible place – a narrow gap between a wooden fence and the edge of the raised patio. The only route in was to walk across wet clay slabs. What was Daren thinking and feeling as he encountered this peculiar array of structures and materials? I still did not grasp why the foxes found damp mud so daunting – they must come across it all the time. My conjecture was that if walking on the board was unavoidable to access the food, then they would overcome their concerns. Had Daren interpreted the clay and paint as intent on doing foxes harm? In which case, why keep returning? Daren spent hours that night sniffing, circling, staring, worrying, and was clearly unnerved by it all. He stared long and hard straight into the infra-red glow of the camera. In *Ask the Wild*, speculative anthropomorphism teased out other-than-human views on human problems, here it helped me to imagine the scenario from the perspective of this particular fox. My interpretation is that he saw the red light as the source of agency in the situation. As he stared at it, was he considering different moves, how to get the

[320] Naming a creature can be an act of ownership, but also an act of recognition and relationship. My intention was to understand this fox as a person (vulpine not human). I cannot know or use his personal fox name, but the attribution Daren articulated him as an individual.

[321] Pioneering naturalist David Macdonald followed the fortunes of a blind fox in Oxford, and it survived for two years, before finally befalling the usual fate of the city's foxes - being run over. Macdonald, David (1989) *Running with the Fox*, UK: Harper Collins.

upper hand? Late into the night, he dug a hole from the other side of the fence to try to get at the food, but underground brickwork – the wall of an old cellar – blocked his tunnel. Both our desires were blocked. The work took an underground swerve, arced via foxy resistance and illuminated by night-vision technology.

27. Feral Practice 2017 *Foxing* 2017, video still from the trail camera.
28. Feral Practice 2017 *Foxing* installation at PEER, the stained and muddied canvas installed in the gallery.

Foxing can be usefully contrasted to artist Dana Sherwood's ongoing series of works since the early 2010s in which she tempts different species into co-creation by setting a table of food for them to enjoy. Sherwood makes elaborate cakes and banquets from ingredients that the target species prefers, and uses automatic camera setups to film and photograph how the animals interact with her edible installations. Her films contain moments of delight and illumination into creaturely activity, such as when, in *Feral Cakes* 2017, a raccoon tunnels with its paws through jelly to reach a desired snail. What her

videos and photographs do not open up is a creative interspecies space of negotiation, interpretation, awkwardness and play between human and animal. The artist offers food, and the animal eats or does not eat (there is sometimes no interaction) but there is no tussle for ownership or conflict of intention, no awkward questions for the human to answer, nothing for the participants to work out.

To the anthropologist Alfred Gell, art, and 'art-like situations' can open up a particular kind of reasoning that he terms 'abduction'.[322] Abduction is distinguished from deduction by its improvisatory, tentative and synthetic character. Abduction responds to 'indexical' signs (that is, signs that acquire their function through a causal connection with what they signify; for example, smoke as a sign of fire)[323] but also to contextual information in a looser, more creative way. It is specifically concerned with reading the intentions and meaning of situations purposely set in motion by others. For example, 'if smoke is seen as the index of fire-setting by human agents… then the abduction of agency occurs and smoke becomes an artefactual index, as well as a 'natural sign'.'[324] Gell understands agency as relational and contextual, and though he uses the word 'human' above, agents (those that set intentional signs) can also be things, or animals. Although 'things' are not ascribed intention without some manipulation, neither can 'agents' manifest their intentions without exploiting 'the manifold causal properties of the ambient physical world.'[325]

In Gell's conception, successful artworks are somewhat like games or puzzles, and their participants are not passive consumers, but players who may well resist, reply, and change the game. 'Art objects are characteristically "difficult". They are difficult to make, difficult to "think", difficult to transact. They fascinate, compel, and entrap as well as delight the spectator. Their peculiarity, intransigence, and oddness is a key factor in their efficacy as social instruments. Moreover, in the vicinity of art objects, struggles for control are played out.'[326] We can see, in *Foxing*, this 'struggle for control' being played out. Where plants and fungi cannot visibly 'look back' at humans, and ants only looked at me when a portion of my body or my brush got very close to them (wood ants are quite short sighted, but have sensitive smell and touch), foxes certainly did look back. They looked warily, hungrily and repeatedly, and they responded in ways I did not

[322] Alfred Gell (1998) *Art and Agency: an Anthropological Theory*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 13.
[323] Indexical signs. https://medical-dictionary.thefreedictionary.com/indexical+signs 8.8.22
[324] Gell (1998) 15–16.
[325] Gell (1998) 20.
[326] Gell (1998) 23.

predict. They attended very closely to the structures and materials I offered to them, could be seen thinking about them. I could imagine them considering their options, and changing their minds.

Rejection and Refusal

Nina Katchadourian also met with animal refusal and resistance in her interspecies co-productions when working with spiders in Portugal. For the series *Mended Spiderwebs*, Katchadourian used red thread to repair broken spiderwebs in the local landscape, fixing holes in the webs as completely as she could, or until the web could no longer bear more weight. 'The morning after the first patch job, I discovered a pile of red threads lying on the ground below the web. At first I assumed the wind had blown them out; on closer inspection it became clear that the spider had repaired the web to perfect condition using its own methods, throwing the threads out in the process.'[327] Katchadourian persisted. The results were always the same. 'My repairs were always rejected by the spider and discarded, usually during the course of the night, even in webs which looked abandoned.'[328]

29. Nina Katchadourian 1998 *Mended Spiderweb #19 (Laundry Line)*. C-print

Katchadourian's mended spiderweb works are gathered together with other works under the name *Uninvited Collaborations With Nature,* but spiders were the only creatures

[327] Katchadourian, Nina (2022) Artist's Website http://www.ninakatchadourian.com/uninvitedcollaborations/spiderwebs.php [Last accessed 31.5.22]
[328] Katchadourian, Nina (2022) Artist's Website., [Last accessed 31.5.22]

in the series who rejected the intended outcomes. Katchadourian pursued several more mending works, before producing a video called *GIFT*. *GIFT* shows the artist's hand holding tweezers and attempting to place in a web the word 'GIFT' spelled out in stiffened red thread. After much struggle the artist manages to insert the letters, as the spider runs agitatedly about then retreats out of shot. Once the word is complete, we watch the spider's countermoves. They methodically throw every letter out of the web. The piece frames an awkward asymmetric conflict between two creaturely makers, and teaches us something about spiders. The red thread is not sticky, it is not invisible, probably it does not make a good web. In throwing it out the spider reasserts her interpretation of the piece.

Interspecies enticement, entanglement, becoming with, is fascinating, risky and (necessarily) subject to mismatched communication. Chastened by watching my moves being interpreted by Daren as not just challenging, but actually frightening (when a plant unexpectedly hit him on the nose), I brought the experiment to an end. I rolled up the canvas and laid food out for him in the open. Unlike Haraway and Cayenne's agility challenges, there was no external predetermination for what constituted success or failure – no course set by others, no prizes. The open parameters of art allowed for meaning to emerge from a curious, confused, stop-start exchange of moves and offerings made through substances and gestures between fox and human, and allowed for new interactions to be recorded and worked with.

30. Feral Practice 2017 *Foxing, t*he tunnel dug by Daren.
31. Feral Practice 2017 *Foxing, t*he muddied canvas.

Frightening the fox was a failure only because it came too close to reiterating violent systems of domination between humans and foxes. The confusion along the way was

not, it held the learning for feral participation. The nightly activity on the trail camera, plus stained and muddied canvas (because of his digging, Daren did finally leave paw prints over the canvas) showed me how to reimagine the artwork's aesthetic away from the painterly palette I had intended, and brought me into the game-like. To bring our playful dialogue alive to an audience, I made a performance lecture for PEER, narrating and interrogating our interaction, and showed edited footage from the infra-red trail camera. Art is usually a human activity, inserted into a human-dominant culture. *Foxing* elicited and framed creaturely moments of escape from that, where the fox led the way.

Zones of Indiscernibility

Games, play and art come together through the open-ended, creative, improvisatory thinking they share. On the patio, fox and human make gestures to one another – which are responded to, interpreted awry, intentionally swerved, or left hanging. Haraway's description of the contact zone as a space in which to analyse and challenge how one meets companion species can be expanded to include these more fleeting, uncertain encounters through Brian Massumi's analysis of animal (and interspecies) play. Massumi analyses play as space of inclusion in which humans and animals can make new meaning together, and proposes play as generative of gestures that exceed those that have been used before. His discussion of *What Animals Teach Us About Politics*[329] begins by describing animal play fighting as *combatesque.*[330] The '*-esqueness'* of the combat comes about through its tone – of flourish, mischief or excess. 'Play fighting, the ludic gesture, creates analogy, signalling a minimal difference. A wolf cub who bites his litter-mate in play 'says, in the manner in which it bites, "this is not a bite."'[331] The play statement has to perform a doubling, in which it 'says what it denies and denies what it says.'[332] This doubling manoeuvre in play gestures opens a gap – the 'included middle' – that leads to new techniques, to improvisation. 'The mode of abstraction produced in play does not respect the law of the excluded middle. Its logic is that of mutual inclusion. Two different logics are packed into the situation. Both remain present in their difference and cross-participate in their performative zone of indiscernibility.[333] In this layering of logic,

[329] Massumi, Brian (2014) *What Animals Teach Us About Politics*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.
[330] Massumi repeatedly employs the example of play fighting between wolf cubs, a predatory social mammal, which corresponds well to both foxes and humans, but not to all animals or how they play.
[331] Massumi (2014) 4.
[332] Massumi (2014) 7.
[333] Massumi (2014) 6.

contradictory statements and paradoxes do not remain mutually exclusive, but can be brought together to create a third.

Through play, Massumi says, humans can enter into a zone of indiscernibility where we can mingle and become with a different kind of animal: 'The zone of indiscernibility is not a making indifferent. On the contrary, it is where differences come actively together.'[334] The zone of indiscernibility – with its gappy logic of the included middle, is a space in which one can improvise before knowing consciously what it is one is doing. Play between species when open-ended and dialogical can powerfully contribute to unknowing. In *Foxing* we can really see the lead being taken by the fox, who sidesteps human intention and offers a contradictory perspective, replete with ideas and aesthetics of their own. The play statement invites a response, but not necessarily a preformed one – rather, they can be surprising, they can swerve into new territory and new language.

32. Joseph Beuys 1974 *Coyote: I Like America, and America Likes Me,* performance, Renee Block Gallery, NYC

When Joseph Beuys spent three days in a cage with a coyote called Little John,[335] his attitude to interaction was provocative, at times combative. He did not mimic coyote play behaviour but repeated a series of ambiguous gestures. 'He would toss his leather gloves at the animal, or wildly gesticulate at it.' The coyote often gives as good as he gets: 'Once, he tore off a piece of Beuys' gloves; another time, he tried to rip the felt

[334] Massumi (2014) 6.
[335] Beuys. *Coyote: I Like America, and America Likes Me,* May 1974, Renee Block Gallery, NYC.

cover off of Beuys, clenching it firmly in his jaws.'[336] But when Beuys first plays his triangle, the piercing sound makes him run terrified into a corner. The coyote urinates on Beuys' felt, before using it as his bed, and repeatedly defecates on the *Wall Street Journals* that are brought in fresh each day. Urination is important in territorial marking for foxes and coyotes – individual pheromones of urine act as signatures that claim the space or object as your own. *Foxing*'s Daren also urinated on the clay slabs and defecated in a bowl of apple juice. The coyote encounter shares with *Foxing* an emphasis on material and gestural improvisation, offer and refusal – asymmetric signs that are exchanged in the included middle of play between human and coyote or fox.

However, to the human audience, Beuys presented the coyote as a symbol. So often in art, an individual animal is made to stand in for its species or for 'the animal'. For Beuys, the coyote was symbolic of the formational 'wound' of colonised America, and a potential site of transformation of this wound. He framed his performance as 'a shamanic healing of the traumatic dis-ease and psychic scars of America'.[337] In many First Nation American contexts, Coyote is a powerful trickster figure who can travel between realms, transgress boundaries and impersonate others.[338] By contrast, America's white population treat the coyote as a pest to be destroyed.[339] Beuys saw the persecution of coyotes 'as a symbol of the damage done by white men to the American continent and its native cultures.'[340] He suggested: 'You could say that a reckoning has to be made with the coyote, and only then can this trauma be lifted.'[341] The ethics and politics of a white German male artist (even if he presents as 'wounded')[342] healing the

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[336] Wolfe, Shira Stories of Iconic Artworks: Joseph Beuys' *I Like America and America Likes Me* https://magazine.artland.com/stories-of-iconic-artworks-joseph-beuys-i-like-america-and-america-likes-me/ [Accessed 23.12.21]

[337] Williams, David. *Inappropriate/d Others or, The Difficulty of Being a Dog* TDR (1988) , Spring, 2007, Vol. 51, No. 1 (Spring, 2007), pp. 92-118 Published by: The MIT Press Stable URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/4492737, 99.

[338] See for example http://www.native-languages.org/legends-coyote.htm

[339] 'Weapons in the war against coyotes have included poisons such as strychnine and thallium sulfate, leg hold traps, cyanide "coyote-getters" designed to explode into the coyote's mouth, snares, den-hunting to destroy pups, aerial hunting from planes and helicopters, "dying rabbit" calls to guns, sterilization baits, sight-running hounds, toxic collars on sheep, and "Compound 1080".' B. Reflets de Lumiere blog post 24.5.2010 https://refletsdelumiere.wordpress.com/2010/05/24/joesph-beuys-coyote/

[340] https://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-modern/exhibition/joseph-beuys-actions-vitrines-environments/joseph-beuys-actions-4

[341] Kuoni, Carin. (1990) *Energy Plan for the Western Man. Joseph Beuys in America: Writings by and Interviews with the Artist*, New York: Four Walls Eight Windows, 141.

[342] Beuys' arrival by ambulance symbolised his own psychic wounds. It follows the Beuys creation story, 'that he crashed his plane in the Crimea and was rescued and nurtured back to life by nomadic Tatars who wrapped him in fat and felt and transported him on a dog sled back to their camp to heal him. Thus, he was regenerated or reborn as the artist Joseph Beuys'. Alexandria Pierce, 'Beuys, Hardt and Negri: One World – One Consciousness', *Athens Journal of Humanities*

colonial rifts of America are, to say the least, problematic[343] but Beuys also took his shamanic role seriously, and understood that Coyote is a powerful soul animal in the context of First Nations American spirituality. We might expect him to communicate with the coyote in a listening fashion, as teacher to teacher perhaps? But instead he wrote 'only people can save the earth, since there is "no other spiritual being to do this work".'[344]

This thesis seeks to tease out, from behind the much-repeated descriptions which centre on Beuys' persona and intentions, what (if any) generative dynamic there is here between man and coyote. If we can sideline 'Beuys-the self-styled shaman-psychopomp-pedagogue'[345] for a while, perhaps we can re-engage with this artwork as a unique creative encounter between a human and a coyote, an event which exceeds human intentions, but continues to act on human minds. Perhaps we can see more coyote, and more reciprocity. Perhaps we can understand or reinvent this work as a complex playful interaction between beings of different kinds.

In blurry videos available on Ubuweb[346] and Youtube[347], Little John and Beuys emerge and recede into grey shadow. Beuys is crouched low, wrapped in felt with the shepherd's crook poking out the top of the thick felt blanket. The coyote comes to explore, nipping and pulling at the blanket, and Beuys rises. Repeatedly, Little John tries to get a purchase on the felt, loses his nerve as Beuys moves, and retreats to stare out of the window. Repeatedly, Beuys bends and turns, crouches and rises. In one scene Beuys is almost invisible, because crouched so low on the floor. Suddenly he springs out of the felt and the coyote leaps back in surprise. In a later section, human and coyote are playing with Beuys' gloves. Sometimes the coyote nips at them while Beuys wears them. Then the human throws them towards Little John, and the coyote excitedly takes them over to his bed, tossing and catching them and rolling on them, like a dog might play with a favoured toy. As the coyote dances around him, Beuys uses his triangle in a

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& Arts - Volume 2, Issue 2 – Pages 67-78 https://doi.org/10.30958/ajha.2-2-1 doi=10.30958/ajha.2-2-1 74.

[343] Beuys has been described as 'offensive and tone-deaf in representing the indigenous peoples of America as a wild animal.' Oct 26, 2020 • By Sasha Savenko The German Artist Who Lived With a Coyote.https://www.thecollector.com/joseph-beuys-artist/

[344] Pierce, Alexandria *Beuys, Hardt and Negri: One World – One Consciousness, Athens Journal of Humanities & Arts - Volume 2, Issue 2 – Pages 67-78* https://doi.org/10.30958/ajha.2-2-1 doi=10.30958/ajha.2-2-1

[345] Williams (2007) pp. 92-118.

[346] Ubuweb *Joseph Beuys, I Like America and America Likes Me* https://ubu.com/film/beuys_america.html

[347] Youtube *Joseph Beuys* https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o8NgYS4jxM8

way that seems like a warning, and Little John steps back. We see the coyote piss on the newspapers and on the felt but we do not see the human piss. Where does Beuys urinate?

David Williams, who saw the documentation film *Coyote* made by the René Block Gallery (Wietz 1974) in 2005, at the Tate Modern in London, says that watching the footage, though necessarily partial, 'somewhat defamiliarized the existing narratives' and 'seemed to offer a generative supplement' to the written accounts that circulate. Williams' description of what his own viewing of this film adds is enlightening:

> Beuys's embodied acute awareness of territoriality and his attentiveness, generosity, and response-ability toward the coyote's predicament are disarmingly sensitive, as is his immersion in present process in relation to a somewhat unpredictable other; in themselves, perhaps these qualities mark the encounter as a fragile, micropolitical practice of hope. Above all, the playfulness of their interaction is genuinely surprising. At one point, for example, Beuys gives Little John one of his gloves to play with; metaphorically, he gives over his hand – that most human of signs – and Beuys knows full well that its smells and substance will be of great interest to a dog. The coyote sniffs at the glove, then with his eyes on Beuys, picks it up and walks discreetly away to a safer zone in the space. A thorough exploration of the glove's olfactory information (including a comic moment when the coyote's nose is lodged inside it) gives way to an instinctive, tactile, animal choreography. The coyote elegantly slides his torso from chest to groin along the floor on top of the glove, before flipping over to roll on it, on his back: a dexterous animal game of surfing on a human attribute, to mark it as his own.[348]

In my watching, artist and coyote do appear at times to enter a zone of indiscernibility. As they test and react to each other, as they improvise together, they look totally focused on one other. Mostly it seems that Beuys is pushing the coyote rather than the other way around, but both participants make overt gestures into the other's space, acts which are unpredictable to the other and cause spontaneous and instinctive responses. There is an ambivalent but lively sense of hierarchies being tested and established – Beuys feeds Little John by hand, making him jump up for the meat, and gives him water. But there are also moments of gentleness, when man and coyote look comfortable in each other's company. In these moments of open-endedness and responsiveness –

[348] Williams (2007) 102.

where an 'expanded dialogue' of play statements opens up between the participants – a dynamic creativity visibly begins to unfold.

Massumi describes the creativity of play, 'this power of expressive mentality… [a]s the very engine of evolution.'[349] Rather than conventional ethological explanations of play as adaptive practice for the trials of adult life – a practicing of moves that have already been mastered by the adults, Massumi proposes play as inventive of new approaches to the future challenges of living. Play is: 'an attractive force that pulls experience forward, towards its own limit – that of the spontaneous passion for the mutual inclusion of the diverse, under integral transformation.'[350] Play improvises not by being pushed from behind, but by being pulled from ahead. When play is between species, the players are pulled from ahead into a transformation of their situated species relation.

Even though blurry, the video documentation makes it somewhat possible to see Beuys' action with the coyote as 'an embodied rehearsal of his notion of "social sculpture" (Sozialplastik), an enactment of creatively being and thinking otherwise and elsewhere in the face-to-face encounter with an "other."'[351] Beuys framed his artistic oeuvre as deeply concerned with social politics and ecology, and claimed his art as an evolutionary process. While his self-mythology and cult persona are hurdles for me (and critic Benjamin Buchloh dismisses Beuys as a fantasist, whose ahistorical claims overlay a repressed alignment to Fascist myths.[352]) it is clear that Beuys was seeking to nurture a different field of practice of art working with people and taking risks. We can trace lines of influence from his concept of and ambitions for social sculpture and what might now be termed socially engaged art. In his much-repeated claim that: 'Everyone an Artist'[353] all were invited to take part and mould the world they inhabited. Unlike Beuys, I seek to include the coyote in his 'Everyone' who can be an artist. With that mindset, I want the intimacy of this encounter between human and coyote to be able to be read differently – as something flawed but generative, moving towards a future that is yet to be and could not be predicted.

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[349] Massumi, Brian (2014) *What Animals Teach Us About Politics*. Durham and London: Duke University Press,14.
[350] Massumi (2014) 17.
[351] Williams (2007) 100.
[352] See Buchloh, Benjamin (1980) 'Beuys: The Twilight of the Idol, preliminary notes for a critique'. *In Joseph Beuys: the reader* (2007) London : I. B. Tauris.
[353] Joseph Beuys (1975) *Jeder Mensch ein Künstler?* (directly translates from the German as *Every Man An Artist?*) was the title of a action Beuys led in October1975.

In one scene, contrary to his stated intention of concentration on the coyote, we see Beuys get a cigarette through the cage from the videographer, light up, and chat with them. The human audience, who we can hear in the video but not see, is usually ignored by both Beuys and Little John. Though described by most accounts of the piece as a 'wild animal', the coyote in this video is clearly not fazed by being in a walled room. A healthy wild fox will do everything in its power to escape a confined space, especially if a human enters, yet this coyote was responsive to Beuys in ways that were wary and curious, not terrified. In reality, Little John was borrowed from a ranch in New Jersey. After Beuys was returned via ambulance to the airport, Little John's 'owner' went into the room (armed with an iron bar) to 'put the animal back into a cage and [take] it back to the ranch'[354] Beuys is in the cage eight hours a day, so the coyote is (I suppose?) left alone in the space each night. Perhaps the facts of the coyote's story are not the point – Beuys works with image and imagination, not least through his own foundational mythology – but the failure to acknowledge Little John as an individual with a situated perspective and personal history of his own is indicative of Beuys' failure to engage with what does not fit his pre-existing symbolism. The dialogue circulating the piece rarely breaks free from this anthropocentric conjuring, but when it does – as in Williams' description of the film screening at Tate Modern – then something lively, uncertain and generative starts to emerge.

Although their relationship seemed to evolve into something nearing companionable, Beuys remained unsatisfied: 'Beuys was convinced that his attempts to transform the coyote were no match to the coyote's resistance'.[355] But to me the coyote's resistance is key to the work's success. The encounter exceeds and escapes Beuys' intentions and signification; it has its own energy, invention, and creative power. What we can see of it via video and photos is (if re-approached through the lens of the insights afforded by *Foxing*) a visceral, symbolic, communicative, intimate encounter between a man and a coyote in a confined space, creature to creature. We can see something beginning between human and coyote that is fascinating and strange, sometimes worrying and sometimes hopeful. The coyote's resistance is, in this reading, crucially productive of the work. If the piece is treated as a serious game (games are often serious), without winners and losers but concerned with the transformation of relations possible between

[354] Williams (2007) 101.
[355] Ayson, John-Patrick 'Syntheses of Resistance & Transformation: Joseph Beuys' I Like America & America Likes Me & Harold Jaffe's Jesus Coyote'. *3am Magazine,* Wednesday, June 23rd, 2010. https://www.3ammagazine.com/3am/syntheses-of-resistance-transformation-joseph-beuys-i-like-america-america-likes-me-harold-jaffes-jesus-coyote/ [Accessed 23.12.21]

man and coyote, then the fact that Beuys did not get what he hoped for is only indicative that he was not open enough in what he wanted.

Rounding Up

In *Foxing*, Daren and myself entered into an artwork that operated like a game together, and 'cross-participate[d] in [our] performative zone of indiscernibility.'[356] Seen from this perspective, the patio project set-up was full of puzzles for Daren to solve. On the first night he did not understand the scenario, and so walked straight into a 'trap' (the slab of river clay). But, once he had sussed the piece out and reimagined it as a game, that was never to happen again. Daren easily outmanoeuvred my moves (different textures, positioning, tastes) on successive nights, until the crisis (or climax) of the game, when he tried to dig under the fence to victory and failed. Outwitted and eventually scared, he exited the game. In the immediate aftermath, by 'winning' those muddy paw prints on the canvas, I also 'lost'. But something much richer than paw prints emerged.

It is ethically important and aesthetically productive for this research that the foxes of *Foxing* stayed outside in their own territory (of which PEER is a part in Hoxton, and my patio is a part in Kent) and were not, like the coyote, bodily co-opted into the human space of the gallery. Their freedom shaped the form that our delicate, ambiguous conversation could take, and the media that were used. In addition, the documentation of the patio game needed to be situated within and articulated in contrast to the polarised ethical political conversation that foxes in the UK live and die by. In addition to *Fox News* on the website, I placed a visceral fox-shaped frame – a real fox pelt – in the display cabinet on the exterior wall of the gallery, accompanied by two scrolling signs, which performed polarising descriptives commonly used about foxes, including 'vermin', 'sly', 'thrilling', 'killer', 'beautiful', 'psycho'. The real fox skin (all too easily available on Ebay) set out the violent realities within which the sensitive, intelligent, cautious creatures of the patio project made their moves.

The audience was guided through the experience of the exterior images and performed texts that highlighted the dissent, preconception and symbolism that foxes are subject to in contemporary UK culture, to the interior spaces of the galleries in which foxes were encountered and represented as complex individuals. Artifacts and documentation from the patio project were displayed as evidence from our encounter / performance / artful

[356] Massumi (2014) 6.

33. Feral Practice 2017 *Fox News* screenshot.

34. Feral Practice 2017 *Foxing,* install of outdoor cabinet at PEER

game. The stained and muddied canvas took up much of the floor of one gallery, and the process of its making was illuminated through the presentation of edited video footage from the trail camera, colour photographs of the patio set up, a photograph of the clay slab with fox prints, and a small selection of other documentation. I hosted a participatory event, '*Nights of Foxing',* which included a performance narrative-with-video work that unfolded Daren's and my interaction in detail. The live format allowed for nuanced, risky presentation and discussion of our fox–human situated asymmetries, specific relation and non-relation. In its multiple approaches, the exhibition was suggestive from many angles, but resisted pinning the foxes down. At its centre was the presence–absence of local foxes, busy in the streets and alleyways behind the gallery in London, and the paths and fields around my house in Kent.

To converse imaginatively with individuals of different kinds, the human artist needs to improvise and play, step back from knowing, and outside of anthropocentric means of communication and predetermined logic. In *Foxing*, communication was awkward and patchy, but it held fox and human in fascination and produced intimate if indirect connection. Through the mental challenge and thrilling affect of being present to a fox's cognitive processes as expressed in their actions and body language, we can begin to move the human (the artist and the audience) towards actively thinking difference. 'Thought in the act… is *actively nonrepresentative* but it is still… reflexive in the special sense that the gestures it bodies forth open and maintain the gap between "is" and "could be"'[357] *Foxing*, as this research project does, develops artwork that seeks out and follows with intent the 'paradox of mutual inclusion' which Massumi suggests that 'humans experience… as a breakdown of their capacity to think'[358] because of their overreliance on rationality and language.

Art already operates in human culture something like a challenge, or a game, and the experimental spaces of artworks – being potentially visual, olfactory, and tactile – are well suited to an exploration of the included middle between human and fox. As Massumi says, 'All of this suggests a politics of the performative gesture, alloying itself with practices of improvisational and participatory art in the wild (beyond the territory of the gallery).'[359] Every feral participation is shaped by the specifics of its situated participants, and they bring something new to the research. *Foxing* became a game of wits, smells and acts because of a fox's perspective on the human.

[357] Massumi (2014) 40.
[358] Massumi (2014) 7.
[359] Massumi (2014) 40.

5. *The Ant-ic Museum*: Materialities and Subjectivities

The Ant-ic Museum https://v21artspace.com/scarborough-art-gallery-autumn-winter-2021-exhibitions
Link to virtual exhibition tour.

Where the previous chapters have concentrated on developing the methods and concepts of the research, Chapter Five goes deeper into its theoretical framework. It looks in detail at questions that arose around the relative status of the diverse bodies, materials and expressions within the productive assemblages of feral practice. It asks what models of subjectivity and assemblage operate in, and shape feral participations. Because it seeks to foreground distinctive creaturely subjectivities and recognise material vibrancy, it treads a course between the articulation of matter as agentic and powerful afforded by the new materialism of Jane Bennett, and the affect-led understanding of assemblages in Deleuze and Guattari. In considering how different subjectivities interact, it looks to a reinterpretation of Uexküll's *Umwelt* through Deleuze by researchers Undine Selbach and Stephen Loo. Finally, it discusses the contribution that technology and media offer to this research, in their potential to extend the perceptual capacities and shape the attention of human audiences, so as to better appreciate more-and-other-than-human worlds. In this research, specialist technologies are used experimentally, additively and in combination with many analogue approaches, to nurture a de-anthropocentric view of art and communication.

Feral Assemblages

When working in the forest with wood ants, art emerges from a diverse mix of living beings, things, forces, urges, expressions, technologies and materials. How can I claim the art as (for example) ant-ic? How can the project become a product of the relationship between ants and humans in particular, rather than the whole ecological gamut of 'forest' with and in which ants and humans work. In political theorist Jane Bennett's model of 'vibrant matter' – all things are reframed as a coproduction between agentic materialities. Bennett draws on Spinoza, Deleuze, Latour and Thoreau to query and disturb the conventional separation between matter, understood as inert and passive, and life (beings, especially human beings), who are the possessors of agency and vitality. By vitality she means the power of objects to have 'trajectories, propensities or

tendencies of their own,'[360] which can affect other objects and beings, which she subsequently terms 'thing-power'. Bennett uses examples of non-subjective entities with very evident powerful affects such as major storms, but also inert seeming substances such as metal. By looking at the interactions over time of disparate 'actants' (a thing that has catalytic or intervening properties because of its particular capabilities within a given situation) in an assemblage she teases the network of causality until its expected linearity is compromised beyond repair. Bennett uses Manuel De Landa's description of the sympoietic processes of mineralization – pivotal to the becoming of skeletons – in the process of evolution to example the idea that, depending on the timescale you take, vertebrate animals like humans can be regarded as a product of the vitality of matter, rather than matter's activating force.[361] In living systems, under the aegis of new materialism, the difference between a place and its inhabitants is one of focus, rather than of kind.

In Bennett's words 'matter and the non-human emerge as co-producers and co-actors in practice. Environments, materials, instruments of practice operate in the constant flux of differing or mattering that in praxis produce the oscillation between what is captured as human perception and what is returned to the flow of intra-actions in which both human and non-human actors are mutually implicated.' [362] New materialists, including Jane Bennett, have been criticised for proposing a flat ontology that elides differences between humans and other species, beings and matter, and disappears the 'issue[s of] hierarchy and power' that underpins human-nonhuman relations. They suggest that a flat ontology 'risk[s] political and ethical vacuity.'[363] Scientists, among others, need to articulate species, and conservation needs to register an ethical differential between living beings and non-living things. *Vibrant Matter* seeks to counter the dominant hierarchies of hegemonic anthropocentrism through challenging the normative expectation of human agency versus passive materiality. It is no surprise to artists that matter has agency and vitality, but this research seeks to notice and amplify specific subjectivities and their creativity within the assemblage. There are notable differences in the *ways* that living beings – versus materials – enter into and affect art assemblages, for

[360] Bennett, Jane. Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things. Durham: Duke University Press, 2009. viii.
[361] Ibid., 11.
[362] Barrett, Bolt, and Kontturi 'Transversal Practices: Matter, Ecology and Relationality'. *Studies in material thinking'. Volume 16* – https://www.materialthinking.org/sites/default/files/papers/199_SMT_Volume16_Editorial_FA.pdf
[363] See McMahon, Laura (2019) *Animal Worlds: Film, Philosophy and Time*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 137.

example they might resonate as, or act in, sculptural, performative, or painterly ways. With Bennett's focus on shared materiality, a lively distributed agency comes into view, but it is difficult to untangle those ways in which specific and situated creatures like ants and humans can notice each other and address each other, and so enter into a situated interspecific relation. How can we foreground the kinds of utterances, materials and gestures that living beings seek out and send out? Those actions that, however asymmetric or ambiguous, arise from the urge to understand and to communicate – that are expressive, exploratory, or responsive.

Therefore, while embracing insights into the vitality and agency of matter brought forward by new materialism, and recognising that all materialities and technologies involved in the assemblages of feral practice play a productive role (for instance lilac paper reveals russet and black ant bodies, otherwise so well camouflaged against warm brown nests), this thesis reasserts the diffractive differences between living and non-living things, and focuses on the creaturely differences between beings. The use of the term diffractive here is drawn from feminist new materialisms. Diffractive difference is a 'non-dualistic, non-separational model of identity and difference, in which identity categories, identified groups, and even identified *single* entities, diffractively crisscross, interfere, and co-establish one another, and differences are respected and allowed to exist and flourish.'[364] My use of the word here seeks to position the differences between beings and things as perspectival and in flux, rather than categorical and fixed. This research foregrounds distinctive creaturely subjectivities, but not as a rejection of the insights foregrounded by new materialism into the vitality of matter. Diffraction is a term also applied to a feminist, self-accountable way of reading where, rather than critiquing texts and ideas through opposition, thinkers can engage with ideas and understand texts (and presumably artworks) 'through one another'[365] to generate original outcomes.

It is pertinent that Bennett's conception of assemblage is not the same as for its originators, Deleuze and Guattari. Theorist Ian Buchanan explains that, for Deleuze and Guattari, 'the starting point for the invention of the concept of the assemblage is desire understood as the basis of all behaviour (animal, human and more-than-human).'[366] Feral

[364] New Materialism Almanac https://newmaterialism.eu/almanac/d/diffraction.html [Accessed 7.1.22]
[365] Barad, Karen M. *Meeting the niverse Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglementof Matter and Meaning*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2007. 30.
[366] Buchanan, Ian (2020) *Assemblage Theory and Method: An Introduction and Guide*, Bloomsbury Publishing Plc. *ProQuest Ebook Central*, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/ucreative-

practice, with its emphasis on situated specific creatures, needs ways to focus on intentionality, and welcomes the messiness of desire, which brings with it an uneven hierarchy of agency. Noticing who wants what to happen is a focus of the work. While matter has distinctive, productive propensities, vitality and agency, it does not have intention or wants. Matter, according to Deleuze and Guattari, is manipulated through the desire of living beings. I choose to pick up a brush to drop paint onto the lilac paper because I desire to make art with ants. However, the lilac paper influences my desire and has productive affects in what I can see and how I can relate to the ants. Ants have intentions and desires of their own, which, as we saw in Chapter Two, emerge into expression (communication and emotion) and into art (creative excess and aesthetic reverie). The art made in the forest does not arise solely from human desire.

Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari propose that 'Artists are stagemakers … art is not the privilege of human beings.'[367] The aesthetic arises when the marks and rhythms of creaturely activities rise to the level of expression, which is linked strongly to displaying one's wares – Deleuze and Guattari describe the bright colours of the coral fish as a *poster*. Rather than an anthropocentric focus on trying to prove that an individual coral fish has the intention to make art, their distributed model of expressivity opens our eyes to artistic activity across the creaturely world, and to the multiple affects and subjectivities that can be expressed within the productive and experiential assemblages of interspecies art. Feral practice creates opportunities for unusual kinds of participation to take place between more-and-other-than-human beings, and generates an observant and affective dynamic to incite and notice new marks, gestures, observations, thoughts, affects, dreams and becomings. Art provides the intensifying frame in which creaturely expression can rise to the level of the (for example) performative, sculptural or painterly.

Rather than matter, then, Deleuze and Guattari describe *affect*[368] as the preeminent force in nature, structuring relations within and between species, and rendering, for example, birdsong the dominant power creating territories, rather than actual birds.

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ebooks/detail.action?docID=6243288.
2022-05-03, 40.

[367] Deleuze, Gilles and Guattari, Felix (1988) *A Thousand Plateaus, Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, London: Athlone Press, 316.

[368] Affect (*l'affect)* in Deleuze and Guattari is derived from Spinoza's *affectus,* and 'is an ability to effect and be affected. It is a prepersonal intensity corresponding to the passage from one experiential state of the body to another and implying an augmentation or diminution in that body's capacity to act.' Deleuze and Guattari, 1988, xvi.

Affect is the capability to affect and be affected, and it can operate below the level of the conscious, desiring subject (it separates from feelings in this way). So, an assemblage as described by Deleuze and Guattari is 'an intermingling of bodies reacting to one another' and 'a *collective assemblage of enunciation*, of acts and statements, of incorporeal transformations attributed to bodies'[369] [original emphasis]. Instead of material vibrancy, this emphasises how subjectivities relate expressively through 'enunciations' and 'statements', while the terms 'intermingling' and 'attributed' acknowledge that who is relating to whom is still uncertain and complex. Which rather aptly describes the fluctuating gathering of polyphonic sounds, ambiguous gestures and imperceptible signals at work in interspecies participations. For instance, I cannot be sure if a message is directed to me from the ants, but I can work with what emerges from the assemblage as ant-inflected, or ant-ic.

35. Feral Practice 2019 *M-Ant-Ra,* installation detail at Scarborough Art Gallery 2021-22

Subjectivities form, flow and intersect materially through bodies and objects, and immaterially via conscious and unconscious thought. Guattari usefully distinguishes between subjects as individuals, and subjectivities: 'Rather than speak of the "subject," we should perhaps speak of components of subjectification, each working more or less on its own. This would lead us, necessarily, to re-examine the relation between concepts of the individual and subjectivity, and, above all, to make a clear distinction between the two.'[370] For Guattari, art (produced separately from commerce), and especially performance art, is capable of creating original enunciations, formations, and

[369] Deleuze and Guattari (1988) 88.
[370] Félix Guattari (2008) *The Three Ecologies*, in *New Formations,* Vol. 8, Summer 2008 (1989), 36.

modes of being,: 'It shoves our noses up against the genesis of being and forms.'[371] In his reading, the liberatory potential of art lies in its revivification of sensory experience, its 'blocks of sensation capable of extracting full meaning from all the empty signal systems.'[372] The feral assemblage in the ant forest leads to the generation of unpredictable *ant-ic* forms.

In Guattari's terminology, this research works through creation of what he terms 'mutant' subjectivities:

> every aesthetic decentring of points of view, every polyphonic reduction of the components of expression passes through a preliminary deconstruction of the structures and codes in use and a chaosmic plunge into the materials of sensation. Out of them a recomposition becomes possible: a recreation, an enrichment of the world (something like enriched uranium), a proliferation not just of the forms but of the modalities of being.[373]

This chaosmic plunge echoes the move into unknowing explored in Chapter One. Processes of epistemological decomposition that lead to uncertainty and openness are vital for new ideas, forms, and 'components of subjectification' to emerge. These processes (which Deleuze and Guattari would also articulate in terms of deterritorialization and reterritorialization) take place in feral art participations, and have the potential to reshape human subjectivities (our knowing, our sense of self) and instigate fresh human becomings with other-than-human, in movements that are enriching, curious, de-anthropocentric and creative.

There is just a danger here that we lose sight of the distinctive creaturely subjectivities (be they ant, bird, fungal or human) that this research seeks to appreciate. Whilst appreciating the multivalent becomings of the assemblage, feral participations cannot lose track of individual and species difference (these real ants in this forest matter) whereas in Deleuze and Guattari, individuals and species can all but disappear in a blur of intensities and affects. Feral participations occur between specifically different creatures – for example between one human and a nest of ants in a spruce copse. Human and nonhuman subjectivities are distinct, and local, but not coherent or homogenous. It is useful here to circle back to Jacob von Uexküll's schema, where

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[371] Félix Guattari (1995) *Chaosmosis: an Ethico-Aesthetic Paradigm* Bloomington, IN.: Indiana University Press, 90.
[372] Guattari (1995) 90.
[373] Guattari (1995) 90.

species are separate and distinct, and each creature is the centre of its own world. Indeed, it 'constitutes a unity closed in on itself; each part of it is determined by the significance it receives for the subject of this milieu.'[374]. This is in some ways an opposite view, where no species' sensorium offers any access to a 'real' or shared world, external to itself, but creates an *Umwelt*, or distinct life-world peculiar to its kind. *Umwelten* only intersect where more than one species share a perceptual awareness. In his famous example of the tick, a key perceptual sign is the smell of butyric acid, given off by warm-blooded mammals. Should the tick smell it, she will leap towards it, for the chance of a good blood meal.[375]

Undine Sellbach and Stephen Loo read Deleuze alongside Uexküll, hoping to recover the species differential that the *Umwelt* suggests: 'Deleuze's account of affect seems to miss the powerfully decentering implications of Uexküll's speculative accounts of the phenomenal worlds of insects and other small creatures for a human-centered world.'[376] For Selbach and Loo, Uexküll's 'bubble' worlds are neither fully containing, nor 'burst' as in Deleuze, but half-open: 'Each monad-*Umwelt* has a clear zone of expression, but also a periphery which deforms and folds as it rubs up against other peripheries, which have an influence back to the centre …'[377] Feral participations work to extend these peripheries. While humans can never experience the ant-ic *Umwelt*, the human artist can use materials and technologies that both ants and humans can sense and use, but in distinctive ways, for example, aromatic and sweet substances that can be drawn with or eaten, or resonant surfaces like paper that can be walked on or have contact microphones attached to. Ant and human bodies and sensoria are not fixed or homogenous: '"The body" is a misnomer. Nothing so stable, so certain of itself ever survives the complexity of worlding'[378] but feral participations respond to ant and human bodies and what they can do, and experiments with things that ants and humans can see, feel, smell, touch, and work with together. Our diffractive entanglement with and through our bodies and through other bodies, materials, and forces, teases out our uncertain edges: marking our enunciations, reveries and lines of flight.

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[374] Jacob von Uexküll (2010) *A Foray into the Worlds of Animals and Humans: with a theory of meaning.* Minneapolis, MN.: University of Minnesota, 90.
[375] Uexküll (2010).
[376] Undine Sellbach and Stephen Loo (2015) 'Insects and Other Minute Perceptions', in *Deleuze and the Nonhuman,* Jon Roffe and Hannah Stark, eds. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 116.
[377] Sellbach and Loo (2015)116.
[378] Manning, Erin. *Always More Than One : Individuation's Dance*, Duke University Press, 2013. *ProQuest Ebook Central*, https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/ucreative-ebooks/detail.action?docID=1173228, p.16.
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Ant-ic Society

Zach Horton seems to suggest a special reciprocity between ants and humans in his proposal that ants are peculiarly resistant to Deleuzian concepts. The ontology of ants and other eusocial insects is notably slippery in terms of scale and numerosity. When a human researcher considers the ants at the scale of the nest, they often see a single super-organism, with information flowing between nodes via chemical secretions and gestures, but with no central director.[379] Here, their embodied, decentralized communication operates as a strong metaphor of the Deleuzian *diagram* (or rhizome): 'a multiplicity of molecular forces, a set of intensive relationships of motion and rest, a group being, a pack of any-animal-whatever.'[380] If, however, the researcher is studying how a single ant or a small group of ants engage in some specific mission, then the ants better describe the concept of the *vector* (or becoming): 'a singularity, not a destination or even a metastable state, but a direction, a line of flight from majoritarian molarity.'[381] Horton's point, however, is that having epitomized these two roles, ants then fail both by entering into negative, reciprocal becomings, reterritorializing towards the human: 'Instead of a minor becoming continuing along the initial line of the major becoming, the minor doubles back and opposes the first.'[382] For Deleuze and Guattari, the animal of 'becoming-animal' is not present as a real animal with systems and hierarchies of its own, so much as it is a line of flight away from the human, from human centrality.[383] For Horton to see the ants' reciprocal becomings as *necessarily* negative reiterates this inability to decentre the human, echoing Selbach and Loo's critique, and the preponderance to think ants-as-analogy for human society.[384]

In feral participations, lines of flight are not seen as unidirectional, away from the human, but as reciprocal, divergent and looping. For example, in *The Ant-ic Museum* (2021-22) a Feral Practice project with Scarborough Museum and Art Gallery, ants were presented

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[379] The ant queen, within the super-organism model proposed by myrmecologists Bert Holldobler and Edward Osborne Wilson, is seen as an egg-laying machine rather than as a leader or source of knowledge. Holldobler and Wilson (1990) *The Ants*, Cambridge MA: Bellknapp Press, 100-1.

[380] Horton, Zach (2017) *Ant and Empire: Simulation and the Problem of Reciprocal Becomings*, in *Deleuze and the Animal*, in Colin Gardner and Patricia MccCormack, eds (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017), 99.

[381] Horton (2017) 99.

[382] Horton (2017) 111.

[383] Donna Haraways's critique of Deleuze and Guattari in *When Species Meet* (2008), 36.

[384] Numerous examples of ant literature suggest that ants are particularly fascinating to us when we interpret their activities as human-like, such as the 'domestication' of aphids, the cultivation of fungus, and the taking of slaves. Charlotte Sleigh, *Ant* (2003) London: Reaktion Books.

not as subjects of scientific study, or as allegories for human values, but as the teachers of human society. The exhibition was shaped by the question: 'How might the space of the art exhibition contain and explore such radically different knowledge systems as the Museum versus the Ant Nest?'[385] A conventional entomological collection like the one held by Scarborough Museum collects the preserved bodies of insects, classifies and labels them according to the Latinate binomial system, and displays them accompanied by (if anything) short explanatory texts describing their biology in relation to the species pinned next to them. The ants are excised from their lifeworld, local relations, situated context. There is no mention of their cultural history, indeed there is little idea of them as cultural and creative animals with ideas and achievements of their own. Decolonising anthropocentric epistemologies calls for, among other things, alternative ways to frame and honour plants, animals and objects in museum collections, ways that are sensitised to the histories and contexts from which they were removed. By creatively addressing how an exhibition might be recentred around ants' priorities, preferences and percepts, *The Ant-ic Museum* overturns the assumed centrality of a homogenized 'human' as originator and dispenser of knowledge from which another creature might provide a line of flight.

The exhibition takes ants seriously as innovators and members of complex societies and as cultural beings. It was devised in conversation with and guided by the wood ant sisterhood of Broxa Forest, near Scarborough. An edited version of the (originally embodied and multisensory) speculative dialogue between Feral Practice and the Broxa Sisterhood was adapted for text and published in the exhibition publication.[386] In the exhibition and book, human and ant vectors crisscross and interpenetrate. The text practices speculative anthropomorphism as it travels between and entangles fact, feeling and possibility. It is informed by historical and scientific research, but the vectors of knower and known are entangled and reciprocal, analysis and research moves both ways between ant and human. The Broxa Sisterhood articulate their distinctive perspective on human history and culture, one that is understandably critical, but nuanced: 'Humans, who had been our most promising acolytes, started to pull away, to believe themselves superior to all.'[387] The becoming ant that generated many aspects of modern human societies is portrayed through a discussion about the human adoption of ant teachings, and through myriad examples of ant-ic cultural influence on human history. The best

[385] Feral Practice, *The Ant-ic Museum* proposal.
[386] Feral Practice, *The Ant-ic Museum* (2021). Published by Scarborough Art Gallery ISBN 978-1-7399942-1-1.
[387] Feral Practice (2021).

36. Previous and this page: Feral Practice 2021-22 *The Ant-ic Museum*, installation shots Scarborough Art Gallery

known of these is our adoption of agriculture around ten thousand years ago, especially the domestication of other animals (ants have been herding and milking aphids for some millions of years). 'Ants only really started to take notice of humans when they

eventually followed our lead into agriculture, around ten thousand years ago.'[388] A subsequent example of what Horton would describe as a 're-territorialization' of ants toward the humans is revealed through a discussion of the colonising actions of Argentine Ants, the species scientifically named *Linepithema humile,* who have 'taken lessons from their [human] students. Argentine Ants, while originally from South America, have learned from humans how to colonize every continent except Antarctica.'[389]

The publication text allows for detailed and speculative back and forth between ant and human, but the dialogue between Feral Practice and the ants in the exhibition is expanded, multi-sensory and embodied, its materialities and methods mirroring the diverse physical and sensory properties of ant-human relation. The influence of ant-ic form on human construction was explored through three large sculptures that brought the domed form of the wood ant nest into dialogue with ancient and modern human architectures – the ziggurat, the stupa, the geodesic dome. Each sculpture was made differently, but using methods and materials that were influenced by the way that ants build. One aspect was the collection of materials: rather than being purchased, most of the materials were found and gathered, by myself and by many members of the museum team. 'The word 'stupa' translates literally from the Sanskrit original as 'heap', which describes how, as in ant nests, the most profound works of art and architecture are made through the accumulation of many small things [e.g. here, triangles of cardboard and formica, offcuts of wood, clay, plant material, food] collected with sacred purpose and brought together into singular forms, to become something much greater than the sum of their parts.' [390]

Olfaction is still the least used sense in human art, but is the primary means of communication for ants, so aromatic materials were used to draw the human sensorium towards imaginative relation with the sisters. On the stepped ziggurat form were smeared sweet (caramel) and savoury substances (cheese, olive, oil, vinegar) that ants and humans alike are drawn to and smell of (ants basic body odour comprises of the odiferous chemicals present in blue cheese, olive oil and vinegar, while mammals including humans are said to smell like parmesan cheese). Although ants don't use clay

[388] Feral Practice (2021) In the *The Ant-ic Museum* publication, out of respect for our teachers, we pass over the question - hotly disputed between the Ants and the Termites - of who first initiated agriculture, over one hundred million years ago. Feral Practice *The Ant-ic Museum* (2021) Scarborough Museums and Art Galleries
[389] Feral Practice (2021)
[390] Feral Practice (2021)

to build the visible domes of their nests, they do dig tunnels and chambers deep into the earth. The stupa form was covered in the warm brown clay local to this part of Yorkshire because the Broxa Sisterhood live next to the Derwent river, whose waters are coloured a deep chocolate colour by that clay. Where religious feeling and sacred architecture are conventionally understood as uniquely human concerns, the three sculptural mounds reimagined the aesthetic and sacred as a shared concern of humans and ants.

Throughout the installation, ants were positioned as innovators, not least of the very notion of complex societies that live in 'cities' supporting many thousands of individuals. Other influential moments of ant-ic teaching were represented through a series of wall-based collages, each one portraying a significant example of cultural transmission from ants to humans, such as stitching, solar power, mushroom farming, animal husbandry, matriarchy and chemical warfare. While the source of most of these teachings has been forgotten or ignored, The Hopi, who live in the high mesas of what is now called Northern Arizona, credit Ant People – the *Anu Sinom* – for saving them from two global climactic disasters by sharing their agricultural prowess. The Hopi have a yearly ceremony called *Powamu* that re-enacts the practices ants taught them: the sprouting of beans and corn in *kivas*, which are circular and subterranean like the local ant nests. The word *kiva* can translate from the Sanskrit as 'ant-hill dwelling.'

Each collage was linked visually to the others by frames whose curved shapes are suggestive of the tunnels and chambers of the underground ant nest, and all of which pointed towards the central Queen. The frames were made fragrant using aromatic material from medicinal and ritual plants pressed into wet plaster. My claim here is that ants guided the art exhibition, directing the flow of its materials, topics and forms, both through their direct influence on me and through their profound influence on human history. As the introduction to the publication text asserts: 'Humans have forgotten how much we owe to the ants, who were the innovators of complex societies like our own, and once our greatest teachers.'[391] Complex ant societies with innovative solutions to large-scale living issues such as energy and waste precede the human by about 100 million years. *The Ant-ic Museum* represents ants as a significant source of human knowledge, revealing how we tend to adopt qualities and practices as our own, including those that were ant-ic long before they were ours.

[391] Feral Practice (2021)

37. Feral Practice 2021 detail of *Stitching,* collage

38. Feral Practice 2021 detail of *The Great Mother, collage*

Creaturely Cultures

Positioning other species as teachers, and seeing them as cultural beings, is a foundational idea in indigenous Australian thought. 'Aboriginal Australians always live within a world that is buzzing with multitudes of sentient beings, only a very few of whom are human.'[392] The living world is an intersubjective space that is shared and co-created between species. For a westerner to appreciate what this really means, it is best, says Australian ecofeminist Val Plumwood, to approach not through rational argument, but by direct, attentive experiences of being in relation to nonhuman others. By 'being one amongst many in a world already replete with mindfulness.'[393] As a human

[392] Rose (2013) 95.
[393] Rose (2013) 97.

being, she said, we can listen, look, and attend carefully to nonhuman beings, and so begin to experience interspecies communication first hand.

All the different kinds of beings who activate a world view not only have particular things they *can* do, as the perceptual and affective focus of Uexküll stresses, but have particular ways they *like to do* things. This shift in emphasis brings important connotations of intention, preference, invention and choice to visibility. In short, it brings thinking and culture into the other-than-human:

> Most of the Elders… speak of culture, and they vigorously assert that culture is a specific way of being in the world. It follows that nonhuman beings have, and live by, culture. The evidence of life in action shows us that other beings have and follow their own ways. They have their own foods, foraging methods, forms of sociality and seasonality; they have their own languages and their own ceremonies. According to one Elder: "birds got ceremony of their own—brolga, turkey, crow, hawk, white and black cockatoo—all got ceremony, women's side, men's side, ... everything."[394]

Culture in indigenous Australian thought is a concept that is shared across all living things, indeed it is a *defining* property of living things, and is expressively located communally throughout a place, or 'country'. '[C]ulture is not something you have, but rather is the way you live, and by implication, the way your knowledge arises and is worked with.'[395] A country *is* the specific tangle of beings and doings that make up that place. The ant forest has coherent and continuous ways of being, that are seasonal and emergent. The ants have a distinctive culture and ceremonies like the nuptial flight. And, being a keystone species – wood ants are significant manipulators of the forest floor ecology, farmers and predators of localised invertebrate life – their culture is vigorously inserted into the wider doings of the spruce copse.

Plumwood sought to bring indigenous animism into critical dialogue with the ecological humanities she helped to develop in Australia's academic circles, coining the term 'philosophical animism.' She saw this as a project of reanimating the modern desensitized relation to the natural world in white colonial Australia (and beyond) so that people could perceive '*nature in the active voice*' and so see 'much of what has been presented as

[394] Rose (2013) 100.
[395] Rose (2013) 100.

meaningless accident actually as creative non-human agency.'[396] *The Ant-ic Museum* engages with ants as cross-cultural producers, influencers of the human, and the exhibition as itself an act of cultural transmission that aims to revivify a repressed and marginalised tradition of listening to the ants.

Influ-ant-ces

There is artistic precedent in contemporary western art for *The Ant-ic Museum* (through it articulates very different conceptual and artistic territory) in French artist Pierre Huyghe's 2011 exhibition *Influants,*[397] which presented ants and spiders as a society that humans might address. In this exhibition, in a (seemingly) empty gallery, ten thousand carpenter ants nested in the walls and moved though the exhibition space foraging, creating lines that circulated from nest to nest. Fifty live spiders hid in the corners of the ceilings. Audience members stepped carefully. On arrival, each viewer was 'announced' to the room (to the ants and spiders) by a gallery worker. Being introduced to a room suggests the room is already alive with subjectivities. It locates each entrant as a distinct individual, visible to the society of the room, and, as Alexander Forbes comments in his review, 'each successive naming makes us keenly, if only subconsciously, aware of a discretely controlled existence of ourselves.'[398] Society, within *Influants*, included ants, spiders and the flu virus; creating an immediate, powerful swerve to species hierarchies and the usual anthropocentric-totalising order. According to Huyghe, the ants were 'just ants' but the heightened response of viewers suggests that to be a somewhat disingenuous answer. The process of the ants becoming art, or becoming something ambiguous, was quickened by the exhibition's formal material conditions. He says 'I like the idea that things can cohabitate, but maintain their heterogeneity. They can be separated or reorganized. How do they relate or not relate?'[399] *Huyghe* disorientated visitors' self-perception and unsettled the hierarchy of subjectivities and relations between human and nonhuman.

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[396] Plumwood, Val (2009).
[397] Pierre Huyghe, *Influants* (exhibition) Esther Schipper Gallery, Berlin, 2011.
[398] Forbes, Alexander *Influants*, *Berlin Art Brief* (September 2011) .http://blogs.artinfo.com/berlinartbrief/2011/10/19/influants-pierre-huyghe-at-esther-schipper/ [Accessed 9.11.17]
[399] Chiara Ziampetti 'Interview with Pierre Huyghe' *Art in America* (September 2011), http://www.artinamericamagazine.com/news-features/interviews/pierre-huyghe-esther-schipper/ [Accessed 8.11.17]

39. Pierre Huyghe 2011 *Influants*, at Esther Schipper Gallery, Berlin.

Huyghe's mise-en-scènes often look to blur the boundaries between the 'art' (the elements he has introduced) and the 'context' (that was already there). His curated cast of multispecies characters play ambiguous roles with open scripts. The installation *Untilled* at *Documenta 13,* loosely sequestered in the composting area of a park, delivered similar effects through its inclusion of a white dog with one pink leg, a reclining nude made of marble with a live beehive for a head, carnivorous plants, and a human caretaker. The artist's light touch and sympoietic approach brings a lifelike feel to his installations, affording sometimes heightened sensations and dreamlike qualities, but with inevitable unpredictability (many visitors to *Untilled* were disappointed not to glimpse the dog). *Untilled* has a wild-ish context, but many of his installations bring living things into the gallery (what happened to the ants in *Influants* after the exhibition was finished?)

There are opportunities for unknowing to take place in his installations, in that we are encouraged to think again about how beings relate or don't relate, but the audience has a relatively unmediated experience – they are in charge of whatever shift in relation to the creature-participants they undergo. Huyghe rarely plays a physical part in his installations. He is not personally implicated within their inter-subjective relational webs, nor visibly caught by their questions. He primarily deals in concepts, where creatures are actors and from which the artist floats free. By contrast the visible, audible and affect-laden presence of the human in *The Ant-ic Museum* invites an audience into an intimate, speculative dialogue between situated ant and human subjectivities, and through that, to contemplate the layered complexities of relation and exchange between individuals, groups and species.

Vegetal philosopher Michael Marder takes the fact that humans are accumulations of symbioses and intertwined bio-histories, biologically inseparable from other life forms, as grounds to suggest that a position of intersubjective engagement with radically different beings is possible: 'The human body and subjectivity alike are not pure expressions of spirit but strange archives, surfaces of inscription for the vestiges of the inorganic world, of plant growth and of animality – all of which survive and lead a clandestine afterlife in us, as us.'[400] Marder suggests that we need to sensitize ourselves to the indeterminate, nonhuman edges of our subjectivity to meet beings very different to ourselves. His area of research is plants, but his concepts can be applied to ants when he remarks that:

> the eventful encounter with plants, whereby we find ourselves in the greatest proximity to them without negating their otherness cannot come to pass unless we entertain the hypothesis that vegetal life is coextensive with a distinct subjectivity with which we might engage, and which engages with us more frequently than we would imagine.[401]

The Ant-ic Museum introduces the audience to a framing of the human in which the 'strange archives' of our histories and subjectivities are revealed as having been repeatedly inscribed and shaped by ants. It does not present ants as metaphors for humans or humans for ants, but reveals the myriad ways that ants have informed and shaped human abilities as environmental and cultural manipulators, domesticators, even as slavers. It offers a distinct, speculative nonhuman perspective from which to assess humanity's achievements and status, and upsets the hubristic human idea of dominion on Earth by placing humans as at least historically subservient to the ants. It proposes a position from which ant and human subjectivities and futures might be reimagined.

Medium Matters

Alongside the representation of ant–human societal interchange, *The Ant-ic Museum* explored instances of influence at intimate scale – between this porous human-ish being and those ant-ic beings and nests with whom I closely worked. On top of the clay stupa mound sat a four-sided structure housing four iPads. These showed two linked films which shared a soundtrack. This audio-visual element of the installation portrayed the human artist's relationship with the ants in ways we might associate with human narratives, bringing the audience's body-imaginary outside towards a less

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[400] Michael Marder (2013) *Plant-Thinking: A Philosophy of Vegetal Life*. New York: Columbia University Press, 10.
[401] Marder (2013) 8.

anthropocentric experience of the world. The visuals combined macro footage of ants occupied in different ways on and around the nest with ritualistic human-led art activities that ants are sometimes drawn to become part of – for example as the artist lies on the nest to listen to the Queen, or places warm candles on the nest as an offering of warmth. The audio combines field sound recordings from the ant forest made with ambient and contact microphones, with digitally produced rhythms and sounds which evoked felt connective forces.

40. Feral Practice 2021-22 *The Ant-ic Museum,* videos installed on an 'oracle box' at the top of the stupa mound .
40. Feral Practice 2021-22 *The Ant-ic Museum, v*ideo still from the stupa mound: the artist is wearing the ceramic 'Queen finger' and gesturing in circles around the nest.

Technologies which offers scale shifts are especially useful when working with small creatures like ants, because one of the most pressing differences to negotiate is that of scale, and alongside that, numerosity. Human eyes struggle to stay focused on the

activities of a single ant for any length of time unless she is isolated, because if she moves around her nestmates (which as often as not means also above and below her nestmates) we lose her in the mass of similar coloured bodies. Ants walk across each other, sometimes in piles many ants deep. Macro footage allowed the artist to focus the audience's attention on a particular ant, and so attend to some intimate moments in her world, such as carrying a spruce needle in her mandibles across a long distance, or repeatedly stroking her own antennae with the new scent of cream cheese.
'Medium' refers to a means of expression, but also describes being in the middle, and someone who provides transmissions between different realms.[402] Video and audio footage gathered something of all three of these definitions as it transmitted the layered and complex detail of multispecies life in the ant forest to the gallery space. If the concept 'soundscape' prioritizes the sounds that ears hear, the term 'vibroscape' aims to open this out to those sounds that non-eared or differently eared creatures experience. Contact microphones and piezo pick-ups record vibration through a resonant substrate, while ambient microphones are sensitive to sound waves travelling through air. In sound recording for this research, both methods were used, to evoke a mingling of human and nonhuman kinds of hearing. Contact microphones produce sounds more like those accessible to the sensorium of creatures like ants and plants, who do not have a 'tympanum', or eardrum, but are exquisitely sensitive to vibrations, through special organs within their legs (ants), or in their leaves and roots (plants). Ants can sense the vibrations running through any surface they are standing on, while a sound recording of a caterpillar munching on leaves, for example, will make a vulnerable plant produce protective chemicals.

Once sounds are captured, they can be manipulated in post-production, for example sped up or slowed down, which also changes their pitch. Some sounds are pitch-shifted to bring them into human auditory range, other changes are less specific, but their alterity makes the works' soundscape, or vibroscape, less categorically certain. The strangeness of the sound can remind listeners that 'from a (bio)semiotic perspective there is no aural, tactile or perceptual norm.'[403] We are just one kind of being with a pair of ears, in a world of the differently eared and non-eared, sensitive and vibratory, sensing and speaking community. If we return to the terminology that Selbach and Loo use in their reading of Uexküll, technology like contact microphones and macro lenses

[402] Cambridge Dictionary online: https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/medium
[403] Eldridge, Alice, speaking at *Aural Diversities – Expanded Listening*, CHASE training event, online 11.2.21.

can extend and bend our semi-permeable sensorial 'bubble worlds' towards the (in this case) ant-ic. Our 'periphery' is widened, allowing for wider points of contact upon which to 'rub up against other peripheries' and so have an 'influence back to the centre.'[404]

With her project *Amplifying the Tropical Ants*, situated in Manaus, Brazil, musician Lisa Schonberg studies the sound of ants and brings them, in combination with human sounds, to a wider audience via music and lectures. The interdisciplinary project team in Brazil is Schonberg, entomologists Erica Valle and Fabricio Baccaro, primatologist/ bioacoustician Tainara Sobroza and engineer Anthony Brisson. Since 2017 they have been developing field recording methods that include the use of contact microphones like those I use, but also high-frequency microphones that can pick up ants' 'ultrasounds' – around 1-2kHz – which are made via stridulation of a special organ on the gaster (part of the abdomen) and manipulated through vibrations of the mandibles. Schonberg describes recording these sounds, which necessarily take place under relatively sound-free laboratory conditions, as 'interviewing the ants', but she does not say what questions she asks them.

42. Lisa Schonberg 2020 'interviewing' an ant in Manaus, Brazil as part of her collaborative project with scientists.

A question Schonberg poses of her work is: 'Can listening to insects through music and sound work activate our collective auditory imagination and shift our perspective towards an ecocentric viewpoint?'[405] Hearing an ant 'speaking' – even if we cannot know

[404] Sellbach and Loo (2015) 116.
[405] Lisa Schonberg (2021) presentation at *Aural Diversities – Expanded Listening*, CHASE training event, online 11.2.21. https://www.eventbrite.co.uk/e/auraldiversities-expanded-listening-session-3-tickets-124980077777#

what she is saying – offers a new understanding of ants as speaking beings, and so of 'nature in the active voice.'[406] If the sound recordings remained discreet and unorchestrated they would still be fascinating, but in creating their intense musical vibroscapes composed of ant and percussive human sounds, Schonberg and her band *The Secret Drum Band* create an imaginative immersive sense of the teeming rainforest floor, alive with beings, that dance to a multispecies tune.[407] The videos in *The Ant-ic Museum,* and the longer video *Queenright*, which is discussed at length in the next chapter, bring images and sound together to produce a strong sense of the forest as a mingled space of action and imagination where meaning and communication are alive between ants and human. Bringing image and sound together builds intimacy and narrative potential. Hand-held video footage of the ants in closeup provides an intimate sense of the presence and body of the camera operator, and scenes that place the artist's body in close proximity to the nests articulate that the human is subject to this enquiry. Unlike in a nature documentary, the goal is not disembodied or de-passioned knowledge about ants. The purpose of these works is to articulate, and build, intimate new relations between humans and ants.

Images can help to situate what in sound recordings can remain opaque. Sensory information usually occurs together, and we make sense of it in enmeshed ways – or, as biologist Rex Cocroft puts it, we 'see with our ears and hear with our eyes.'[408] Maria Puig de la Bellacasa might add that we touch with our eyes and see with our fingers. Bellacasa foregrounds touch's promise in nearing more than human worlds: 'Involved knowledge involves being touched rather than observing from a distance.'[409] In many of the images that include my own body, I am touching the ant-ic world in some way. Though rarely directly touching the ants, my hands are visible, gesturing towards them. And, in footage that follows the ants care-fully, we are shown how ant politics and social relations play out in the different ways that ants touch one another, their grasps, clenches and strokes – their entwined feelering and feelings. Touching between ants and human is not without its difficulties though. The extreme scale differential means that my touch can be violent and destructive to ants despite my best intentions, while the

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[406] Val Plumwood *(2009)* 'Nature in the Active Voice', Issue 46, May 2009, *Australian Humanities Review, Ecological Humanities*.
[407] The Secret Drum Band music featuring ant sounds is available here: https://soundcloud.com/secretdrumband/sets/amazonia-compositions-labverde
[408] Cocroft, Rex (2021) speaking at *Aural Diversities – Expanded Listening*, CHASE training event, online 11.2.21, in Dr. Heidi Appel and Dr. Rex Cocroft -*Good Vibrations – Acoustic Perception of Plants.*
[409] Cocroft (2021) 93.

ants' numerosity and ability to sting can make their touching of me discomfiting. It is a truism of touch that it is always reciprocal – one cannot touch without being touched by – in contrast to sight, where one can see without being seen. But touch does not escape asymmetries by being reciprocal, once it is entangled in power relations, and distinctively in the ant-ic case, in scale relations.

Film-ic experiences are necessarily optic and acoustic but can also afford sensuous experiences suggestive of touch. The use of macro lenses and sensitive microphones can afford intimate, haptic[410] experiences of ants without the problems that arise in direct touching. If not quite the 'fingeryeyes' of Eva Hayward, whose explorations of cup corals expressly use her sensuous fingertips to learn the corals[411], the lingering shots in videos of *The Ant-ic Museum* and *Queenright* of human hands (and, when pressed against the ant nest, face) and of the ants' antennae and mandibles, are visually haptic experiences. The haptic is, in Puig de la Bellacasa's understanding, connective: 'the *haptic* holds promises against the primacy of detached vision, a promise of thinking and knowing that is 'in touch' with materiality, touched and touching.'[412] For Puig de la Bellacasa, it is not that touch is in any uncomplicated way ethically superior to vision. If there were a haptic-in-general, or an abstracted practice of hapticity, it would lose the haptic its purpose and power, which is to pay close attention to and to communicate specificity, intimacy, particularity, texture. A 'touching vision'[413] evokes *this* particular place, and *this* set of relations, between *these* bodies.

No acoustic or visual technology can, simply by its use, stimulate the kind of de-anthropocentric shifts in attention, perception and thinking that this research aims to produce, but sensitive lenses and microphones are creative tools that offer opportunities for extended and diverse content. Used in combination and sensitively, these can weave together different glimpses and whispers of the human–ant world, that can swerve, enrich, and complicate a viewer's experience. Creaturely and ambiguous sounds and images stimulate uncertainty and curiosity, and position the human as one subject among many. The listener/viewer cannot be sure in what capacity or form the

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[410] J. J. Gibson defined the haptic system as '[t]he sensibility of the individual to the world adjacent to his body by use of his body'. Gibson (1966) *The senses considered as perceptual systems*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

[411] Hayward, Eva (2019) *Fingeryeyes: Impressions of Cup Corals*. https://anthrosource.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/pdf/10.1111/j.1548-1360.2010.01070.x [Accessed 21.12.19]

[412] Puig de la Bellacasa (2017) 95.

[413] See Puig de la Bellacasa's chapter on haptic images: 'Touching Visions' in Puig de la Bellacasa (2017) pp. 95-122.

human will turn up as they hear ant-ic comments on our species history or watch the artist performing an uncertain kind of humanity in relation to ants. Intimate or semiotically uncertain sounds and images can help to elide or confuse the distinction between subject-object positions and entangle what is seen and heard. The productive confusion of unknowing is a sensitising force. As the human steps out of control, they are prepared for a different kind of knowing, one that "does not come from standing at a distance but rather from *a direct material engagement with the world*."[414] The knowledge produced from in the midst of things that might then be uttered is generated between all materialities and subjectivities in a particular mix, but with a distinctive, creaturely focus.

[414] Puig de la Bellacasa (2017) 114, quoting Karen Barad (2007) 49.

6. *Queenright* – Conversing with Persons Who Dream

Queenright https://youtu.be/csezAY7TNac
Link to video

> *When everything is human, the human becomes a wholly other thing.'*[415]
> Eduardo Viveiros de Castro

Where *The Ant-ic Museum* is located at societal scale, positioning ants as cultural interlocutors and advisers with whom humans have had a long (if repressed and forgotten) global history, the single screen video *Queenright* portrays and conjures the quality of an individual relationship between a particular population of ants and the author. In recognising the possibility of imaginative connection across body and species boundaries, and moving into the immaterial, the focus of questions alters, and takes on different language and references. Understanding nonhumans beings as persons, who can communicate with and teach humans in material and immaterial ways is far from being a new idea. This chapter turns towards models of species relation articulated through indigenous animisms, not to contradict the enquiry in the last chapter but to articulate the multifaceted experiential sense of deepening relationship with the ants. The research, rituals and recordings took place in Kent with the colonies of wood ants in King's Wood. In *Queenright*, ant-human dialogue extends away from the material into thought, dreams, and emotions, which are articulated and orchestrated through layers of sounds and moving images. This evocation of a complex interpersonal communication between different kinds of being situates interspecies relations as limitless, though elusive.

Who Are You?

When practicing, observing and filming in the ant forest, I became increasingly entangled with wood ants, not just materially but imaginatively. My dreams and thoughts became considerably ant-inflected, and the borderline between human-ish and ant-ic subjectivities were complicated by reciprocal becomings. As I explored the ants, they in turn climbed over me, feelered me, and occasionally bit or stung me. As they did so they

[415] Viveiros de Castro, Eduardo (2014) *Cannibal Metaphysics* Edited translated by Peter Skafish. Univocal, Minneapolis, 63.

picked up my smell, which was carried down into the nest and shared between the sisters. We engaged together in material and immaterial processes and got reciprocally, asymmetrically, involved. The processes of knowing-unknowing that characterised our daily and nightly interrelation began to offer up a question, that instead of becoming narrower and more specific, became vaster and deeper: 'Who are you?'

43. Feral Practice 2018-22 *Queenright*, video still

In considering this question, I pondered images from my ant dreams and reveries alongside what I was observing, videoing and audio recording. I expanded my practice experiments, invented ant-ic rituals, and read the myrmecological literature. Ideas and percepts passed from me to the ants, and from the ants to me. I understood the ants as persons – each nest a community – with their own ideas, intentions, and curiosity about the world, including me, that they transmitted to me in different ways. The more I travelled or unravelled towards the edges of myself, the more reciprocal, mystical, entangled and embodied the process of knowing-unknowing ants became. I came increasingly under the influence of the ants, and noticed and welcomed the ways that I became the subject of the ants' own research interests.

> What happens is because the fellow went to school, for birds, they're a bird expert, and then you get somebody went to school, they're a plant expert. And the birds eat the plants, which is related to the soil which is related to the water which is related—that all interacts with the people, but they never seem to look at it that way. So that's why we say they pigeonhole things. Whereas, the funny thing about it is, they pigeonhole all these things, and because they went to school [they think] they're higher than all that, they're above nature, and they tend to look down and study nature, like it's ants on the ground. But when you fall asleep, eh, them ants they'll crawl all over you. They'll bite you, or

> sometimes they don't, but them ants might be carrying out their research then, on you. But either way you look at it, you can't be separate from it.[416]

44. Feral Practice 2018-22 *Queenright* video still, offering warmth, a ritual for the nest on a cold day / opacity layered with Silbury Hill.
45. Feral Practice 2018-22 *Queenright* video still, movement ritual filmed from high above the trees / opacity layered with drone footage of flying through the trees.

Queenright aims to bring human audiences in towards this very personal unfolding of interspecies knowing-unknowing and connectivity. The human artist occupies a position of mediator and seeker for the distributed and situated knowledge contained by the ant forest, rather than entering as a privileged knowledge holder. Her voice talks about the ants in ways that are subjective and partial, inviting the viewer into her perspectival experience and speculative engagement. The unknowing and knowing that the human artist experiences, and the audience of Queenright is invited to participate in, cannot be

[416] Deborah Bird Rose quoting Ngiyampaa elder Steve Meredith (2013) Val Plumwood's *Philosophical Animism: attentive interactions in the sentient world. Environmental Humanities*, vol. 3, 2013, pp. 93-109. www.environmentalhumanities.org, 99 [Accessed 23.7.18]

rendered or understood through 'the objectivist epistemologies encouraged by Western modernity… [in which} to know is to objectify by distinguishing what is intrinsic to the object and what instead belongs to the knowing subject.'[417] The video moves instead towards the kind of knowing espoused by animist cosmologies, such as those developed by Amerindian peoples, which 'is guided by the inverse ideal [where] to know is to "personify," to take the point of view of what should be known or, rather, the one whom should be known.'[418] In this animist epistemology, one starts by knowing to whom one is speaking – "'the who of things," without which there would be no way to respond intelligently to the question of "why".'[419]

This Amerindian world view has been described by anthropologist Eduardo Viveiros de Castro,[420] as 'cannibalist metaphysics', 'multinaturalism' and 'perspectivism.' The term *perspectivism* encapsulates the Amerindian concept that beings of various kinds operate from distinct subjective positions (perspectives). *Multinaturalism* describes the concept that these subjective perspectives create a space in which many natures coexist. Viveiros de Castro suggests that multinaturalism could be seen as the Amerindian version of multiculturalism: 'where the latter rests on the mutual implication between the unicity of nature and the multiplicity of culture…the Amerindian conception presupposes… a unity of mind and a diversity of bodies.'[421] *Cannibalist metaphysics* brings together two ideas – how relations are structured primarily through predation, and that predation is cannibalist because all beings are 'potentially human.' While the use of the word 'human' can be – for Western ears – a mental block to the de-anthropocentric potential of this thinking, humanness in Amerindian perspectivism is indicative not of species but of a certain strata of society, or status.

Forest hierarchies are embedded in relations between predators and prey that extend downwards from humans towards peccaries and monkeys, but also upwards from humans towards colonial powers and estate managers, jaguars and anacondas. The concept human does not denote a stable property. Humanness being applied to many beings (at least in potentiality) makes hierarchies unstable but does not exactly level the

[417] Viveiros de Castro (2014) 61.
[418] Viveiros de Castro (2014) 61.
[419] Viveiros de Castro (2014) 61.
[420] The access I have to Amerindian and Aboriginal Australian thought and practice is mediated by Western academic influences and interpreters. I am impressed by and want to mention that Viveiros de Castro says 'every nontrivial anthropological theory is a version of an indigenous practice of knowledge' (2014, 42).
[421] Viveiros de Castro (2014) 56.

playing field so much as make the ground liable to shift under our feet, and lead us towards the vast, slightly terrifying, implications of understanding the forest as filled with intentional, powerful, unpredictable beings, whose desires might contrast rather unpleasantly with one's own. The hunter may become the hunted, the hunted may become meat: 'Objectification... is the flipside of animism, and it is not a straightforward process… Hunting in this vast ecology of selves in which one must stand as a self in relation to so many other kinds of selves who one then tries to kill brings such difficulties to the fore; the entire cosmos reverberates with the contradictions intrinsic to life.'[422] The status – the 'humanness' – of beings – is always subject to question, and is always potentially in flux.

In most European ontologies, informed by monotheistic religions and inscribed in binary oppositions, the (human versus animal, etc) 'soul'[423] is seen as differentiated, with the human soul possessing unique characteristics, whereas all flesh is seen as broadly the same. In Amerindian perspectivism, the reverse is true: 'the soul "is experienced as… a manifestation of the conventional order implicit in everything…"[424] and it is the abilities of the body that defines and is peculiar to a species. All creatures share in the same architecture of soul, because all share in the unity of mind. If the soul of all creatures are the same, it follows that all animals are human to themselves.[425] Each creature is a person (Viveiros de Castro uses the terms human and person interchangeably) occupying the centre of their own perspectival universe with as much gravitas and self-concern as we do ours. A jaguar conceives itself as human like we do, and this perspectivism is expressed in a system of distinctive material correspondences, for example what we see as blood is manioc beer to the jaguar (manioc beer is the Amerindian people's preferred intoxicating liquor) and what we see as a muddy pool, 'tapirs experience as a grand ceremonial house.'[426] The forest is replete with structures, or patterns, of resemblances and correspondences – grilled fish is to human as maggots are to vulture.

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[422] Kohn (2013) 17-18.
[423] Viveiros de Castro suggests that 'soul' has, since secularism, been variously interpreted as 'mind' or 'the symbolic' or 'culture'. (2014) 52.
[424] Viveiros de Castro, (2014) 53 quoting Roy Wagner 1981: 94.
[425] Viveiros de Castro explains that 'Amerindian words which are usually translated as 'human being' and which figure in those supposedly ethno-centric self-designations do not denote humanity as a natural species. They refer rather to the social condition of personhood, and they function (pragmatically when not syntactically) less as nouns than as pronouns.' Viveiros de Castro, Eduardo *Cosmological Deixis and Amerindian Perspectivism*, The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute, Vol. 4, No. 3 (Sep., 1998), pp.469-488 - Stable URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/3034157 [Accessed 20.8.2019] p.476.
[426] Kohn (2013) 62.

As to the 'diversity of bodies,' meanwhile, although all creaturely bodies vary magnificently, a creature's outer form cannot be considered as definitive proof of identity, because persons can sometimes travel in disguise. Distinguishing who is human from who is jaguar or peccary, or indeed ant, is therefore not always a simple procedure. It is not mind or soul that is examined, nor appearances, but the body's affective abilities and characteristics. To make this more complicated, beings fluctuate, at any one time they are of uncertain status. All beings are human, if not right at this moment, then in potential: 'there is… nothing to prevent any species or mode of being from having that status.'[427] And equally, humans are vulnerable to losing their humanity. As beings alter in characteristics and affect, they change their creaturely status. The cousin that you knew as human, who has been away for a while, might have undergone a change in the forest. When they return you need to be cautious, in case they are changed in dangerous ways that are not visible.

In Amerindian perspectivism, subject/object confusion is a source of significant spiritual danger. The 'I', the position of the subject, is always human, no matter what species you are. But the 'I' position is always threatened by the potential of becoming 'it', which is analogous to the position of 'meat'. Death might not be corporeal, it might be your soul that is stolen, as a result of the 'meeting in the forest between a man – always on his own – and a being which is seen at first merely as an animal or a person, then reveals itself as a spirit or a dead person…'[428] An unnoticed, unimportant seeming creature, for example an ant, might transform into or reveal themselves to be a person of great import: 'The possibility of a previously insignificant being revealing itself (to a dreamer, sick person or shaman) [I would add artist to this list] as a prosopomorphic agent capable of affecting human affairs always remains open; where the personhood of being is concerned, "personal" experience is more decisive than whatever cosmological dogma.'[429] While as a white European I cannot sink into or adopt this animist world-view as my own, its reciprocity, juxtapositions and fluctuations resonate powerfully with my experiences in the research. In spending such involved time with ants, they rose up as persons of consequence to me, whose thoughts and acts have profound personal effects. Whilst relinquishing of a stable sense of 'I' does not threaten my corporeal dissolution – the ants may bite or sting me, but I am very unlikely to become their meat

[427] Viveiros de Castro (2014) 57.
[428] Viveiros de Castro (1998) 483.
[429] Viveiros de Castro (2014) 58.

– at a 'soul' level it is rather a different story. If we consider my 'soul' to contain my attention, feelings, creativity and deepest thinking, then the ants have certainly moved in and altered my soul.[430] As they become focal points of and agents in the making of the artwork, they also become agents in remaking this human being.

Queenright brings the viewer in towards an experience of lively, shifting and multiply personalised space, which de-stabilises human subjectivity across the different sensory and structural channels that audio-visual work offers. One simple technique used is pronomial shifts (I-we-you-she-they). A second voice, alongside the artist's, in the mix of *Queenright,* is not quite human. It uses (mostly) English language with (largely) female British intonation, but is nonhuman-ish insofar as it is digitally produced, with odd, mechanical intonation and phrasing. It occupies a quasi-impersonal perspective, speaking from two differentiated yet not-quite-subjective positions. One could be described as the spirit of the forest. It says some rather opaque things, such as: '*The forest is waking… Hear the birds. Tu tu tu tuu, tu tu tu*.' It occupies what could be understood as an authoritative 'view from nowhere', only its statements are peculiar and unstable. The second position is more like a conventional ant researcher. It recounts what happens during the nuptial flight of the ants and gives some insights into the processes of ant sexuality and fertility: '*Nearly all of her children will be female, but they will also be sterile. Male ants perform just one act: they mate, and then they die*.' This voice, with its machinic fluctuations of tone and pronunciation 'errors', evades resolution into a stable subject position, and also foregrounds the uncreaturely technological presences and manipulations that have enabled and manipulated the film's textures. This instability mirrors the world of flux and change of the forest, where every living thing is in a process of becoming, altering and decaying, in material and immaterial dialogue with other living things, and where no subjectivity can fully know the forest, or the ants, or the human.

Shifts in language and voicing can help to open up and destabilise the human in the viewer's experience of the artwork, but 'conflating communication with language throws us back into a human-centric enclosure.'[431] Listening deeply for difference and communicating across species boundaries requires broad sensory attention, noticing the

[430] Viveiros de Castro suggests that 'soul' has, since secularism, been variously interpreted as 'mind' or 'the symbolic' or 'culture'. 52.
[431] Rose (2013) 102.

46. Feral Practice 2019-22 *Queenright*, video stills

unexpected, and an expanded sense of what is meaningful. We need, in Viveiros de Castro's words, 'to decolonize thought.'[432] Intrinsic to this, for fellow anthropologist of Amerindian thought Eduardo Kohn, is the need to 'provincialize' language: 'We universalise this distinctive human propensity by first assuming that all representation is something human and then by supposing that all representation has language like properties.'[433]

In *Queenright*, the visual presence of the human and ants, as well as other beings and forces in the forest, is always mixed, to show we are not in a human space. In the sequences that open and close the film, we see the human artist in her entirety and in close-up but always in relation to the ant nest. In the central section of the work, the human does not fill the screen. Her body is always decentred, in fragment or relation with other things and beings; for example, the glimpse of a hand in relation to mushrooms and ants, a tiny yellow body in relation to trees and sunlight, or in shadow via the action of light on a tree trunk. The ants, in contrast, often take centre stage, and are seen in relation to their domestic territory of nest and spruce copse, and (occasionally) in relation to human artefacts like white wax. The video turns from a conventional representation of strong active human subject/s with defined 'I' position/s, representing nonhuman passive 'it' objects; towards an 'us' positioning in which 'you/them' and 'I' are in dialogue, and are making something happen together. The subjectivity of the artist on screen is infirm, and her status as centre of her own world fluctuates. As the audience moves towards her perspective, they, like her, they might also become somewhat tangled up with the ants. As they move imaginatively towards the ants, it may seem possible that the ants are speaking to them directly (though the ants never speak). Unplaceable juxtapositions of voice and image can in this way lead the viewer into a world of shifting borders and territories, informed or created by different ways of seeing, hearing, knowing and noticing.

In *How Forests Think,* Kohn describes how the Ávila people of Ecuador understand and interpret many aspects of the forest as a systems of interrelated signs, and they do this in concert with other-than-human beings. For Kohn, the human semiotic system forms

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[432] 'Which brings us to Eduardo Viveiros de Castro's *Cannibal Metaphysics* (Univocal, 2014). This is an anthropology on a mission to decolonize thought.' McKenzie Wark .https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/3265-eduardo-viveiros-de-castro-in-and-against-the-human [Accessed 26.5.22]

[433] Kohn (2013) 39.

an 'open whole,' nesting inside and opening onto broader systems of iconic and indexical signage that all living things live into and become with. Where Deleuze and Guattari place affect as the structuring force through which species and individuals interrelate and become, Kohn positions semiosis as the creative force: "'Self', at its most basic level, is a product of semiosis. It is the locus – however rudimentary and ephemeral – of a living dynamic by which signs come to represent the world around them to a "someone" who emerges as a result of this process.'[434] In art, objects of encounter surprise and produce alteration in humans. Feral participations take the encounters of art outside, centre other-than humans as participants, and foster diverse aesthetics.

While this research does not share Kohn's emphasis on the semiotic, his precise explanations of emergent dynamics are helpful in bringing detail to the image of how a disparate forest world of materialities and immaterialities rise up as communicative, and so become productive of those relations that we have seen precede, are involved in the becoming of, relata (beings and things). Kohn's semiotic system is emergent and nested. Signs and symbols are tied into and creative of living beings and things, and interrelate in ways that are always rooted in those contexts and assemblages from which they emerge. It remains embedded in the world beyond the human (the subtitle of his book is *Anthropology Beyond the Human*) rather than being structuralist and language like and human. Emergence describes ways that learning and innovation happens in both material and immaterial ways, and how 'an emergent dynamic is one in which particular configurations of constraints on possibility result in unprecedented properties at a higher level.'[435] Emergence is structured through a series of thresholds. Kohn describes thresholds by describing how some non-living things like whirlpools and crystals exhibit self-organizing properties yet do not themselves contain a self. Life, and thus selfhood, *emerges* from this propensity for self-organisation, and constitutes an emergent threshold. 'Living dynamics, as represented by even the most basic organisms, selectively remember their own specific self-organising configurations, which are differentially retained in the maintenance of what can be now understood as a self – a form that is reconstituted and propagated over the generations in ways that exhibit increasingly better fits to the world around it.'[436] A subsequent threshold is that of symbolic semiosis – the kind of human thinking that refers to objects indirectly, and uses systematic conventions and rules to organise meaning. The symbolic cannot exist

[434] Kohn (2013) 16.
[435] Kohn (2013) 54.
[436] Kohn (2013) 55.

independently, it relies on its grounding in the broader system of signage, which is mediated through the body and is shared beyond the human. This system of thresholds means that:

> a world characterised by self-organization need not include life, and a living world need not include symbolic semiosis. But a living world must also be a self-organizing one, and a symbolic world must be nested within the semiosis of life.... Thinking of symbolic reference as emergent can help us understand how, via symbols, reference can become increasingly separated from the world but without ever fully losing the potential to be susceptible to the patterns, habits, forms, and events of the world.[437]

In *Queenright*, the use of symbolic shifts such as changes of pronoun, unstable qualities of language and alternative (digital) voices emerges from and is embedded in the heightened attention that is paid to many other forms, textures, gestures, patterns and exchanges – those broader systems, in Kohn's terminology, of indexical and iconic signage that all living beings are (asymmetrically) attuned to. Sections of the video concentrate quietly on the what the ants are doing – for example foraging, feelering, sunbathing, exploring or mating. Others take in the surroundings – the changing light, the trees, the waving bracken. These 'naturalistic' sections are then layered with imagery, sound and voice that swings away from documentary mode towards a personified sense of the forest as filled with creatures that are full of intent and who are directing their often mysterious communications if not *at* us, then at least in part towards us (because we are here listening and watching). Digital drums and rhythms, pulsing sun, echoey birdsong, crackling squeezing sounds of ants bodies moving against each other, waving hands, yellow petals. No register of feeling or consciousness dominates. Everything is interrupted. Soft held shots and flows of shots that invite reverie are abruptly interrupted by a change of pace, the movement of the camera, (bits of) the human artist and equipment entering the frame, manipulations of the camera, machinic noises. The longest shot of the film is out of focus until the very end, it tracks slowly down the side of a tree trunk, where the blurred bodies of ants are made visible by a single yellow sunspot that fills the screen. The artist whispers intimate speculations: '*Can you hear the ants thinking?... I can hear them thinking… I can hear them smelling things, and finding things… I can hear them following me!'*[438] The reverie is interrupted by abrupt darkness, treetops, then a totally different scene. The everyday realities of

[437] Kohn (2013) 55-6.
[438] Feral Practice *Queenright* (2019-22) Video

contemporary forest life – dirt bikes, chainsaws, dogs and aeroplanes. The work embraces the active presence of the human artist and her technology. A multiplicity of perspectives accrues in the frame, each disturbing, unsettling or influencing the other, nurturing awareness of the distributed subjectivities and forces that crisscross and interweave.

While the ants themselves are not voiced, the video represents them as communicative - and as potentially interpretable by the audience - in several ways: through their interactions with the human artist, their gestures between each other and their actions within their environment. The ants' messages are not clear or interpreted, they remain opaque. This is purposeful confusion. Relating across 'kinds', or species is never without its confusion and struggle: 'Kinds are not just human mental categories, be these innate or conventional; they result from how beings relate to each other in an ecology of selves in ways that involve a sort of confusion.'[439] Confusion necessitates and generates a dispersed approach to meaning, and the viewer is invited into the artist's state of seeking understanding across different categories.

47. Jessica Warboys 2016 *Hill of Dreams*, film still

Moving images – video and film – scoop up some of the visual and auditory quality of a place, and an artist can bring these qualities into relation with things that are made, both physically, in terms of costume and object, and in post-production. In its mystical–real evocation of place, Queenright owes something to Jessica Warboys' films *Hill of Dreams* (2016)[440] and *Pageant Roll* (2012)[441], which evoke memories and dreams

[439] Kohn (2013) 17.
[440] Jessica Warboys, *The Studio and the Sea*, Tate St Ives, 31 March – 3 September 2017.
[441] *Artists' Film International*: Jessica Warboys, Whitechapel Gallery, 16 January–15 April 2013

emerging in specific landscapes in Gwent and Cornwall. Warboys choreographs objects, draws images and choreographs movements from myth, memory and history, – a "cast of object-actors… creating a structure of visual echoes that swerve, zigzag and dance around one another."[442] Her objects and images are performed into and collaged into her films, animated by her as if they emerged from the filmed landscape: "All seem to stir the landscape itself into action."[443] When used in ritual, actions and objects take on a more performative than symbolic role – they *do* the connecting, rather than illustrating a connection. In *Queenright* the artist uses ritual and movement to connect, not to invisible human histories but distinct natural subjectivities and elements – the natural nonhuman beings (ants) and entities (sunshine) with whom she shares the screen – who co-produce the forest, and the art being viewed.

48. Feral Practice 2018-22 *Queenright.* video still

While artist films like *Hill of Dreams, Pageant Roll* and *Queenright* are some distance from being documentary, they emerge from real places, and in relation to the land. They both represent the world and create a world. They evoke a sense that the land is 'opening up from the inside'[444] and becoming communicative, through repeated or long held shots and ritual actions, which together create a sense of duration and presence. 'Nature is not "mute."' Deborah Bird Rose insists, 'It is eloquent: discursively structured and therefore meaningful throughout, saturated with messages and stories, and without any

[442] Jessica Warboys. (2016) *Hill of Dreams* Exhibition catalogue. London: Tate Publishing, 45.
[443] Ibid., 46.
[444] Panse, S. (2013) 'Ten skies, etc...' In: *Screening Nature: Cinema beyond the Human*. (s.l.): Berghahn Books.
Panse (2013) 43. In James Benning's films - the '10 Lakes' and '13 Skies' of Silke Panse's essay title - this opening up takes place through the viewer's reverie watching the 'thick materiality' of the real world pictured, in which 'new relations can be thought in each shot' (ibid. 43).

stuff (energy), so far as we shall ever know, that is unpatterned.'[445] *Queenright* tells the audience that the ants are listening. The inference is that they might possibly, via the medium of the video, even listen in to (or towards) the minds of those who are watching. It is not always comfortable that 'there are many active intelligences out there paying attention.'[446] And, in taking on a more magical sense of the word medium, *Queenright* proposes a world in which the borders between places and species are somewhat uncertain, and apt to be breached. Especially in art, images, and dreams, borders lie largely unprotected and are even, in sleep, unprotectable.

Dreaming Across Species Boundaries

When making art and interpreting meaning in a forest full of difference, many types of clue need to be appreciated. Nothing is necessarily insignificant. Dreams, in their odd, transpersonal, unpremeditated visuality, are powerful in the way they help move humans away from human domesticity, with its sealed walls to keep the world out, and away from human intentionality, with its too-tight boundaries of agency. A focus on dreaming can heighten attentiveness to what occurs in the inside/outside world that is unusual, creaturely and creative. Animist cosmologies unfold more-than-human ontologies and relationality in ways that support dreaming's efficacy in interspecies communication. This research brings forward an attentiveness to and representation of dreams, which are not understood alone, but engaged with as one process among many that interweave internally and externally to the body, within a materialised interspecies communicative context. As I was resident in the ant forest for weeks at a time, my dreams became increasingly ant-ic, and I began to take note of them. They became influential on the progress of *Queenright*, and I speak a narration of one dream that was especially vivid and connective near the beginning of the video. This was a dream whilst asleep, but this research considers waking and sleeping dreaming as interdependent. In an influential waking dream, the Queen Ant and myself were engaged in a kind of wordless dialogue, which led to the final sequence in the video of lying on the nest. Dreaming lead to physical action, and back to imaginative reverie with the Queen Ant.

When humans and animals who are meeting in their waking lives also dream of each other, it seems possible that unconscious communication is taking place between them. In 2009, entomologist Deby Cassill undertook experiments to analyze the sleep patterns of fire ants. She discovered that worker ants take lots of short naps of one minute at a

[445] Rose (2013) 102.
[446] Rose (2013) 101.

time, up to 250 times a day. But queen ants sleep much more, up to nine hours a day, in six-minute stretches. During these nine hours they display different kinds of sleep, including a light doze, from which they can be easily awoken, in which their antennae remain half raised and their mouths agape, and a deep sleep, in which antennae are totally retracted and mouths closed. They also cycle through rapid antenna movement (RAM) sleep, in which their antennae continually quiver. Cassill considers RAM as analogous to rapid eye movement sleep in vertebrates, where our more vivid dreams occur. This information supported my speculations. As I dream of the Queen Ant, perhaps it is possible (we can never know) that she is dreaming of me.

49. Feral Practice 2020-22 *Queenright.* production shot

This research does not collapse matter and thought into one, nor see them as totally separate, but layers different ways of working and thinking together, and promotes their creative interaction and interpretation, to actively create what happens. Engaging in a conversation with ants and forest entities, on this complex cultural level that includes conscious and unconscious processes, rituals and new technologies, is an act – like reading poetry to a dog – of radical unknowing – of ants, and of what communication is possible between ants and humans. *Queenright* invites other humans into a knowing-unknowing relation with ants by bringing them towards observation-participation in this process.

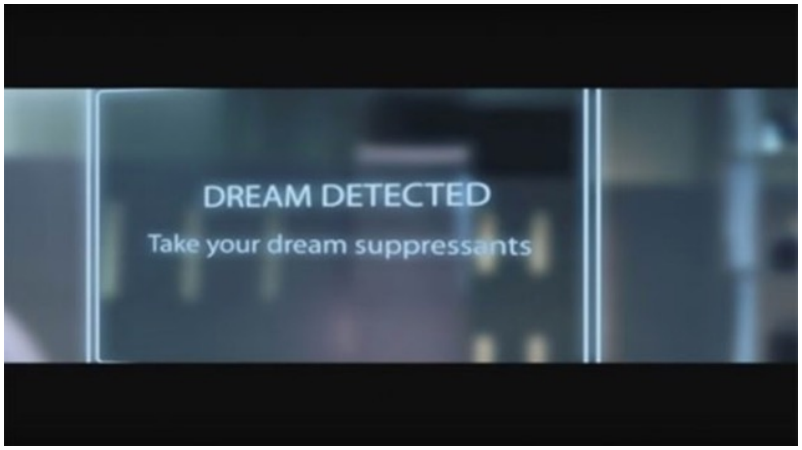
In Wanuri Kahiu's 2009 science fiction short *Pumzi*[447]*,* set in Kenya after World War III – The 'Water War', the heroine Asha is considered 'disabled' because she dreams. As

[447] Wanuri Kahiu (2009) *Pumzi*, Video, Inspired Minorities Pictures and One Pictures. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IIR7I_B86Fc [Accessed 14.1.22]

head curator of the Virtual Natural History Museum, Asha's research centres on the natural world that has been destroyed by humans, including "the last tree,' whose desiccated roots sit on a pedestal inside a sterile room of jarred organisms and animal skulls.'[448] In her visions, she sees a living tree surrounded by desert, and soon receives a parcel, 'containing GPS coordinates and a soil sample. When Asha pours some of the soil into her hand and inhales its scent, she is plunged into a vision of an underground system of tree roots. According to her tests, the soil has an abnormally high water content and is capable of supporting life.'[449] Asha plants a 'mother tree' seed in the soil and reports excitedly to her superiors, who 'forcefully decline her request for an "exit visa" to go outside and investigate.'[450] Asha escapes Maitu, the life-support station, and finds her way across a ravaged, desertified landscape towards the coordinates. Collapsing from heat exhaustion, she uses the last of her water, and her own sweat, to plant the tiny seedling, and dies, shading the seedling from the blazing sun. Her body provides shade, then compost, to support this tiny new beginning of wild, organic life.

Pumzi offers a vision of dreaming as connective between species, as well as conveying information. As in many traditions and literary sources, *Pumzi*, proposes dreams as prophesies, but also as ways that the wild and the other-than-human can enter into an overly controlled human existence. Asha, as a dreamer, subverts the techno-capitalist world she inhabits. Dreams urge her towards rebellion, and towards the wild – even though it is inhospitable. For Grace Rogers, *Pumzi* positions Asha's so-called disability as the difference that offers alternatives – 'Kahiu illustrates how living with disability or illness creates valuable ways of being that give insightful perspectives on life and on the world.'[451] Asha's dreams and her empathy for the nature that has been destroyed cannot be seen separately.

[448] Rogers, Grace (2019) *Dreaming (Dis)ability: Toward an Interspecies Ethics of Care in Wanuri Kahiu's Pumzi* https://confluence.gallatin.nyu.edu/featured/dreaming-disability
[449] Rogers (2019).
[450] Rogers (2019).
[451] Rogers (2019).



50. Wanuri Kahiu 2009, *Pumzi*, video still. Inspired Minorities Pictures and One Pictures

51. Kira O'Reilly 2009 *Falling Asleep With a Pig, performance* Cornerhouse Manchester.

Pumzi speaks of dreams in ways pertinent to this research, but its speculations are not tied to real bodies nor expressed in concert with situated materialities. In contrast, the performance artist Kira O'Reilly undertook a durational performance, *Falling Asleep with a Pig* (2009) in which she spent 72 hours together with a pig called Deliah in a constructed installation that was viewable to the public. At Cornerhouse Manchester the performance took place inside the gallery, and at the A Foundation, London it took place outside, in the courtyard.[452] O'Reilly says she was interested in the potential for 'two bodies sleeping next to one another and the possibility of dreams, both materially and metaphorically; where words are at the tips of tongues and language and material meet and mesh across bodies and the most ancient narratives of metamorphosis can come into play in a contemporary context.'[453] When researching this piece I recalled

[452] The work was commissioned for the show '*Interspecies*' by The Arts Catalyst. 2009.
[453] Kira O'Reilly. *Falling Asleep with a Pig*. Interview by Snaebjornsdottir and Wilson in *Antennae: a decade of art and the nonhuman 07-17*. Edited by Giovanni Aloi. (Sweden: Förlaget 2017), 131.

how animal communicator James French believed that the deepest level of (healing) communication between humans and nonhumans was reached when the (traumatised) animal fell asleep in the animal communicator's mindful presence. In O'Reilly's work, with human and pig falling asleep together, what might be achieved – might they meet in their dreams? O'Reilly emphasises the shared corporeality in her description: 'two bodies at their most basic' sleeping next to one another, and the process of falling asleep as one of shared intimacy: 'watching as an eye feels the pull of sleep gravity and is unable to resist that tumble into sleep state, as my eye also makes that tumble. The "pig eye" of Deliah becomes altogether familiar from the strange and the other. There is continually a flickering between known and recognised, identifying with and non-recognition.'[454] The performance creates intimacy not via dreaming as such, but through a mutual softening of consciousness, taking place in moments of waking and falling asleep.

When I laid down on the ant nest in winter, it was too cold for me to sleep, but I spent time in imaginary communication with the inhabitants, most of whom were in a deep state of unconsciousness – ants spend the coldest months of in a partial stasis, with all the workers huddling close around the Queen. The deep chambers of the ant nest, where this prolonged sleep takes place, are unavailable to direct human contact. The fact I cannot look into the eyes of ants as they fall asleep reiterates the sense that knowing-unknowing between pigs and humans, or foxes/dogs/coyotes and humans, is of a different quality than that available between ants and humans. Between ants and human, whose bodies do not mirror each other easily, dreaming is especially useful. Dreams extend human consciousness, potentially into a realm where species meet. 'As heirs to 20th century rationalist thinkers our contemporaries do not overvalue dreams. Other cultures and periods took sleeping life more seriously.'[455] Many indigenous animist cultures see dreams, alongside shamanic journeying and symbolic occurrences, as keys to the spirit realm, in which conversations between different kinds of being occur quite routinely.[456] Dreams are understood as informative, useful, inseparable from waking life. 'Dreams', says Eduardo Kohn, 'are part of the empirical, and they are a kind of real. They grow out of and work on the world, and learning to be attuned to their

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[454] Ibid.,125.
[455] Pierre Sorlin (2003) *Dreamtelling* London: Reaktion books, 25.
[456] Psychoanalyst Carl Jung understood the 'collective unconscious' to be a segment of the deepest unconscious mind that is genetically inherited, a container for ancestral knowledge. He first used the term in 1916. His vision of the collective unconscious is a human space, however, and its archetypes are anthropocentric. This research is informed more directly by indigenous animisms, which articulate fluid interpretations of the hierarchies and borders between species. Cf. C. G. Jung (1991) *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious* London: Routledge.

special logics and their fragile forms of efficacy helps reveal something about the world beyond the human.'[457]

Kohn gives us great insight into Ávila thought as he describes further:

> Everyday life in Ávila is entangled with the secondary life of sleep and its dreams… Sleep – surrounded by lots of people in open thatch houses with no electricity and largely exposed to the outdoors – is continually interspersed with wakefulness. One awakens in the middle of the night to sit by the fire and ward off the chill, to receive a gourd bowl of steaming huayusa tea, or on hearing the common pootoo call during the full moon, or sometimes even the distant hum of a jaguar. And one awakens also to the extemporaneous comments people make throughout the night about the voices they hear. Thanks to these continuous disruptions, dreams spill into wakefulness and wakefulness into dreams in a way that entangles both. Dreams – my own, those of my housemates, the strange ones we shared, and even those of their dogs – came to occupy a great deal of my ethnographic attention, especially because they so often involved the creatures and spirits of the forest.

As I connected my life to the forest, ants inhabited my dreams and reveries, entangling not just with thoughts of the work I was making, but with personal concerns of my life that reached deep into my psyche. Art acted in waking life something like dreams acted at night, holding open an active space for connection, and for the evolution of new thoughts and forms. The forest held all of this in its wide, intensively diverse embrace.

Dreams are valuable in this research partly because they pop up (often like mushrooms, in the night). The immediacy and distributed, ambiguous intentionality of dream experiences contributes to their resonance. While dreams are clearly thought sequences, residing in the human imagination, they also come from 'outside'. They have an independent existence, a transpersonal and transspecies dimension, which has been valued as a source of wisdom and creativity for millennia. Dreams can have 'the quality of a perfect surprise, pertinent to the moment of the encounter.'[458] That encounter, and the surprise, can be nurtured and supported, and brought into creative conversation with diverse materialities and immaterialities. Video is well positioned as a medium to

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[457] Kohn (2013) 13.
[458] Gagliano, Monica (2018) *Thus Spoke the Plant: a remarkable journey of ground breaking scientific discoveries and personal encounters with plants*. Berkeley CA: North Atlantic Books, 17.

bring together many kinds of sounds and images – juxtaposing those that seem to be peeled off from the surface of a specific time and place alongside those that are conjured from subjective interiorities. Video can pick up and carry forward the images and sounds, rhythms and flows which appear in the landscape and seem to the human artist to be meaningful. The combined intermediaries of art materials, dreams, thoughts, and gifts extend the potential for (however fragmented and elusive) connectivity even with beings as different as ants.[459] In post-production, this content and its import can be orchestrated, augmented, paced. *Queenright* weaves a layered space of communication between ants and humans in which diverse, subtle and precarious sounds and images can arise and become absorbed by a new audience. Artist Susan Hiller describes how, now that the TV has replaced the fire as the thing we stare at while we relax and drift off into dream, 'the TV screen is a potential vehicle of reverie replacing the flames.'[460] The medium of video seems to be especially lend itself to being woven like a ritual, and acting like a spell.

[459] In 2020, during lockdown and beyond, I had been thinking of the ants and longing to visit them. I considered this my own desire until my partner said 'They are calling for you, the Queen is calling you.' Though I laughed, the comment stayed with me. In November I decided to make a trip, and on the morning of it, I received in the post an unexpected present from an artist friend with knowledge of witchcraft and working with natural magic. The gift was a ceramic 'finger'. I found it fitted over my own finger and wanted to point and gesture at things. I decided it needed to come with me to the forest. I texted my friend to thank her and she replied with '*Remember that it is your Queen finger*.' Within the expanded attentiveness of this project, what a sign.

[460] Hiller, Susan (1996) *The Dream and the Word* in *Thinking about Art, Conversations with Susan Hiller*. Manchester: Manchester University Press

Conclusion

This research foregrounds the creativity and diversity of other-than-human beings by developing practices of feral participation and speculative anthropomorphism. Feral participation is dialogical, responsive and playful. It is not preplanned, it evolves over time through extended material dialogue and speculative, imaginative play which follows the cues of participants. The human is positioned as a listener to and learner from the nonhuman participants. This vulnerable approach to artmaking allows the researcher to sidestep their expectations and opens space for unknowing, in which other species can appear and relations can extend in unexpected ways.

The collaborative practice of speculative anthropomorphism imaginatively adopts differing perspectives and brings together alternative sources of knowledge to shed light on a subject and challenge epistemological hierarchies. It is multivalent: it might seek nonhuman advice for human problems, as in *Ask the Wild*, or inform a mixed narrative of human, fungal and plant materialities, like in *Mycorrhizal Meditation*. It brings science into creative conversation with art, and with intimate and personal awareness. It extends ideas about how we can know and learn about different species and about ourselves, without imposing human framings onto nonhuman beings, so nurturing a distributed model of creativity.

Through these methodologies this research opens the categories of 'art' and 'the human' up to fresh perspectives. The result is that, instead of explaining other species to humans, or using other species to make human-centred art, this research generates new possibilities for art, and new stories between human and other-than-human beings.

Development of the Research

As I developed ways of working with other-than-human beings in outdoor spaces, my painter's mindset, which might be described in shorthand as concerned with images in rectangles, needed to give way. Chapter One explains how, instead of representations or evocations of landscape or beings, a feral approach to painting in the forest began to recognize beings and spaces as participants in and context of the art. This new method

of practice required concentrated openness towards the other-than-human beings (ants) I was working with, and withholding aesthetic judgements of the art we made together. The interactions between us generated unexpected insights into ant-ic worlds, and drew out new possibilities for the artworks. Feral painting inspired an active and intentional movement away from what I thought I knew about ants – an *unknowing* of ants. Unknowing is not ignorance nor anti-knowing, but a tool for learning. The artist develops materials and processes that help them to consciously drop or evade their own expectations and preconceptions – a creative 'sleight of mind' – which opens space for the other being/s to appear differently. It is a participation between beings – it cannot be achieved alone. It opens up new possibilities between species.

Ant-ic Actions and *M-Ant-Ra* actively delimit the human understanding of ants. They do this through the vulnerable participation, the unknowing, of the artist, who becomes reoriented towards and responsive to the ants (is decentred). The artworks made together act as communicative containers for this interspecies participation. In a liberatory movement towards wildness, the artist steps outside, not to dominate but to learn, and to reorient art towards and in response to the ants. They bring suggestive experiences that foreground ant-ic creativity to human audiences, which incite viewers to move imaginatively beyond their own preconceptions and anthropocentric norms. The concept of unknowing is distinguished from Rebecca Fortnum's concept of 'not knowing' in art practice, and from the 'bewilderment' of Jack Halberstam, in its specificity to participation between a human artist and different creaturely subjectivities. Its methods are adaptable for different species interactions and offer models of practice to help artists cede control over – and restructure their relation to – other being/s in a participation. The ethical and aesthetic contribution is to open the human towards creaturely difference and provide tools that expand art away from anthropocentrism.

Through a comparison with human participatory art, written up in Chapter Two, it became clear that the structure of feral participation is dialogical, not because it relies on words, but because its form involves action and response, question and answer between artist and participants. It was important therefore to articulate a concept of dialogue that allowed for communication between species. Visual art – in all its diverse materialities and methods – already extends communication between humans into alternative and expanded modes. Working with extended materialised dialogues in art participations with other-than-human beings extends Grant Kester's concept of dialogical aesthetics and brings to it a de-anthropocentrizing potential. When working

with other-than-human beings, it is important to extend the tools of communication outside of human language. Where Julietta Singh describes vulnerable reading as a methodology for performing humanity differently as a reader and writer, the vulnerable, wilded artmaking of this research offers tools for nurturing creative engagement with other-than-human beings.

The feral artist devised and chose materials and methods to invite and support response from ants. They interpreted their actions – not to explain their behaviour but as a co-creator making the next move in the sequence. As in human participatory art, the artist's intention is pivotal, but the intention of feral participation is to listen, to learn from and to expand relation with other species. Though the instigator of the piece, the feral artist is vulnerable and decentred insofar as she enters into an unfamiliar space, which is by contrast home and territory for the ants. Because the materialised dialogues of feral practice are open and improvisatory, they develop new stories and possibilities between humans and ants, instead of telling stories about ants as a nature documentary might, or using ants to manufacture a story that the artist has already scripted. In so doing, the research stretches the boundaries of participatory art to include beings who are unaware of the 'discourse' that surrounds them as art, and devises routes for art to escape human control.

Where the first two chapters were concerned with the interaction between human artist and nonhuman participants, Chapter Three turned towards the space of participation between humans. *Ask the Wild* events incited empathy in audience members through the device of a spoken question by an individual human, but then, through the panel's answers, they relocated the source of answers / knowledge / wisdom towards other-than-human beings and forces. Improvisation, which in *Ant-ic* Actions and *M-Ant-Ra* underpinned the emergent dialogical aesthetic of human-ant interactions, arose here between artists, scientists and audience members. Working together, they generated a dynamic environment of co-creation that foregrounded diverse creaturely experiences and challenged conventional epistemological hierarchies. This reframed expectations of who holds knowledge, what that knowledge is, and who can it be applied to. *Ask the Wild* connected human problems to nonhuman answers and showed multiple alternative perspectives from which to view human issues, bringing audiences towards a more distributed, connective understanding of interspecies being. The speculative, multivalent form of anthropomorphism it cultivated neither collapsed species difference nor supported human exceptionalism, but nurtured attentive journeys of interspecies

exchange and invited audiences to consider their lives, to ask 'What is human?', from fresh, more-than-human perspectives.

Ask the Wild and *Mycorrhizal Mediation* were produced in close relationship to science and scientists, finding imaginative ways to work with their knowledge and attention to detail. Science gets a lot of criticism for distancing, isolating, reducing. In bringing the natural sciences into dialogue with creative imagination and speculative anthropomorphism, these artworks shepherded some of the depth and specificity of scientific knowledge into spaces of empathy and playful innovation. *Mycorrhizal Meditation* foregrounded the situated human body, with its own specific history, as the non-negotiable centre of a human-shaped lifeworld, but also as porous, needful and connective. First centred through the somatic qualities of the sound work, the body was then considered as extendable through the imagination, and the human as waiting to connect to the other-than-human, to the forest. The audience could experience their vulnerability and be gently decentred as site of knowledge or power.

The project *Foxing*, described in Chapter Four, for the first time took on an inter-mammal interaction. It taught me again to shift my intentions away from 'painterly' expectations and results and brought a new insight – that the participation between human and nonhuman may be not only dialogical but also wily and game-like. It can be full of countermoves from the animal, awkward questions for the human to answer, things for the participants to work out. *Foxing* demonstrated how intention is not just in human property and power, and in feral participations it is tussled over by individuals of different species. The fox resisted and reimagined the intentions of the piece. Their unexpected interpretation of my moves precipitated a new method, structure and form to the work.

Foxing became a game-like dialogue between two creatures that did not share a rule book. The artwork, instead of becoming – as the author intended – an interspecies painting, became time-based, interdisciplinary, participatory and performative; stretching and bending in the effort to represent the complexity of all the game moves by human and fox. The use of a night vision trail camera bridged a gap (the fox played by night, the human by day), allowing the human to better understand the fox's refusals and see these not as failures but as counteroffers. The video footage became material that, along with a stained canvas, photographic documentation and a performance lecture, allowed the gallery audience to experience the participation. Art, usually a human activity inserted

into a human-dominant culture, was stretched by *Foxing* to frame ways in which the fox led the way. The insights of *Foxing* shaped a new interpretation of the videos of Joseph Beuys' interaction in New York with a coyote called Little John. By framing the artwork as game-like, one could reinscribe the coyote's creative energy and counteroffers as more central to the piece, and so draw out a new line of feral, canid-centric potential, from the metaphors and repetitions of Beuys' own narrative.

Repositioning the other-than-human as participants in art raised questions around the relative status of beings and things. The ants and the human were not the only beings in the forest, the fox and human were not solely responsible for the artwork. Chapter Five went into greater depth about these questions, not so much to define things ontologically, but to check my claims that ants make aesthetic choices that emerge into art in participation with the human; and that the particular qualities of feral participation make this art truly 'ant-ic'. To do this, I needed to steer around Despret's understandable rejection of a focus on intentionality, because it is so pertinent to this work that the ants *could* have an aesthetic intention, even though we can never know for sure. We saw, from the beginning of the thesis, that ants' choices and decisions shape influenced the artwork, and in *Foxing*, we saw how contrasting intentions of fox and human were productive of new thinking and new artwork.

This chapter turned to assemblage theory to evolve my theoretical framework, where, especially with the help of Deleuze and Guattari, it built the case that an assemblage is not only a mingling of bodies and materialities, but also of 'acts and statements, of incorporeal transformations attributed to bodies'[461]. In this model of the assemblage, subjectivities (who we understand as divided and unstable) can relate expressively even while acknowledging that 'who is relating to whom is still uncertain and complex'.[462] I do not need to assert that the ants intentionally make art if I can substantiate ants as powerful and influential within the assemblage. Feral participation makes space for ant agency, decision-making and creativity to appear, and amplifies it: this makes the art that emerges from the assemblage ant-ic. In addition, *The Ant-ic Museum* takes one more step, offering to this framework a perspective where human knowledge is emergent from and reliant on an other-than-human 'molarity'. With ants positioned as cultural heavyweights and teachers of humans, lines of flight can more easily be seen as multidirectional.

[461] Deleuze and Guattari (1988) 88.
[462] See p.96.

Rather than inevitably leading away from the human, they can be reciprocal, divergent and looping.

Where Chapter Five considered subjectivity and ant-human relation in its cultural, historical and evolutionary aspects, Chapter Six, through its introduction of the video *Queenright,* put a much more personal and unlimited question to the ants: who are you? (A question that would have been inconceivable before the unknowing of ants that feral participation produced). To paraphrase Eduardo Viveiros de Castro: when ants become persons, the concept of personhood alters to meet their alterity.[463] *Queenright* cultivated ant-human relation through practicing and attending to the extended ways that different beings appear to and affect each other, including thoughts, observations, actions and dreams. Dreaming is part of the imaginative reality that the Queen ant and human artist and audience share. The forest in the video was portrayed as an intensively diverse, living and layered space replete with different perspectives and personalities. To underpin this proposition, the concept of personhood is discussed, looking to models of subjectivity and species relation articulated through indigenous animisms, especially Amerindian perspectivism. Through his work with the Ávila people, Eduardo Kohn proposes a forest that thinks, in which selfhood is an emergent property of semiosis. The chapter discusses how *Queenright's* continual shifts between pronouns, unstable voices, layered images and sounds, reveal a forest that is teeming with possible centres. The "ordinary" and "material" world of plants, animals, machines and weather is at the same time a world of diverse potential persons engaged in layered and illimitable conversations. Attention brings focus, but never stays put. The on-screen human is unfirm and peripheral, she circles the ants, while ant-ic possibility permeates the forest, and even the sky.

Contribution to Knowledge

The research contributes specific and necessary tools for facilitating the shift away from the anthropocentric in art and beyond art. The concepts and methods that have been developed work in concert, helping to expand and restructure the researcher's and their audience's relationship with other-than-human beings and promote a vision of the world with multiple living centres of meaning.

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[463] 'When everything is human, the human becomes a wholly other thing.'[463] Viveiros de Castro (2014) 63.

In f*eral participation* the researcher experiments and combines methods and materials from across disciplines, choreographing and improvising to decentre the human, foreground the nonhuman, and bring different corporeal, cerebral and perceptual worlds into closer dialogue. The researcher chooses materials and techniques to suit the context and is guided by the choices and actions of the other-than-human participants, which in turn provokes more nuanced experiments from the human artist. Because dialogical, these de-anthropocentric journeys do not 'disappear' the human but start from and return to the situated humans that we are. This dialogical method extends Kester's concept of the dialogical aesthetic in participatory art: conversation takes place between species, through layered material signs and substances, gestures, actions, dreams and thoughts. These are augmented through the use of art materials and technologies. Art and thought are thus elaborated and extended together, bringing a de-anthropocentrizing turn to participatory art and contributing new concepts and approaches to interspecies and posthumanist art.

In this way feral participation brings the energy of experimental, performative, paradoxical art (the kind of art that Felix Guattari claimed as generating new being and forms) into spaces of care and attentiveness for and with real, situated beings. Here the *feral* is a creative space and force, which draws from and entangles both sides of the binary wild/tame. This opens us up to see the ways that so-called 'wild' beings and spaces are not disordered, but differently ordered. New historic and current centres of knowledge and culture can be perceived, so that in *The Ant-ic Museum*, human history can be reimagined from an ant-centric perspective. Where, for the Deleuzian theorist, lines of flight might always lead away from the human, this position offers the potential for other species to be centres and powers of their own, and vectors of becoming to move in many directions.

Feral participations aim for the gentle, frame the subtle, and stabilise the precarious, enough for a human viewer to attend to something slight or strange. They nurture conversations between different kinds of being, such that, while they might be fragmented and full of gaps, are able to be noticed and absorbed as containing fresh ideas and feelings. Feral participations are spaces for affective experiences of encounter, which build profound and complex relationships between situated beings. With an additive and responsive approach to materials and technologies, and a transdisciplinary, speculative approach to knowledge, feral participation extends the surfaces through which different beings such as ants, foxes and humans can converse. Through

experiencing artworks that act as communicative containers for these feral participations, gallery audiences are led to extend, query and reimagine their own relationships with other-than-human beings.

V*ulnerable artmaking* describes the specific texture and approach of feral participation. Vulnerability in the sense of porousness, tenderness, listening, and play. The researcher develops surfaces and processes to attend and respond more imaginatively, creatively and carefully to a context or species (the specific tools will vary). In these spaces, where differences are continually negotiated, ethics and aesthetics become entwined. Playful (speculative) thinking is continually open to the possibility of better answers in conversation with difference. In co-creative play, no one directs the ball alone. The back and forth of dialogue, extended through materials when working with other species, underpins the generative methodologies of this thesis. This decentres the artist, and opens knowledge towards new sources. As the artist focuses their attention outwards, becoming responsive to other-than-human beings, finding ways to foreground their creativity and voices, new possibilities for the artwork emerge. This research emphasises (feral) movements by the human towards the wild, in opposition to a more conventional dynamic in which nonhumans get domesticated by humans. Going outside here means willingly entering space that is not in her control, where the feral artist is more vulnerable.

Julietta Singh describes vulnerable reading as a methodology for performing humanity differently as a reader and writer. The vulnerable artmaking of this research contributes a multidisciplinary and participatory approach to this. When working with other-than-human beings, it is significant to extend the tools of communication outside of human language. While writers and philosophers (being wordsmiths) are disposed to think that thought happens in words, thinking observably happens across diverse channels, and thinking beyond the human usually does not involve words as humans understand them. The responsive, additive approach to methods employed in feral participations acts as a model for entering into expanded dialogues with other species, in ways that foreground nonhuman voices.

Unknowing describes an active and intentional movement away from our expectations and preconceptions of another species. Unknowing is not ignorance nor anti-knowing, but a creative 'sleight of mind' through actions that open space for the other being/s to appear differently. It allows learning from and restructuring one's relationship with

other-than-human beings. It can only occur within a participation between beings – it cannot be achieved alone. It does not align with ignorance, nor does it reject knowledge, but sidesteps the 'known knowns' for a time in order to look afresh. Unknowing is a purposeful delimiting of the more-and-other-than-human. If 'unlearning' suggests a re-evaluation of something methodical, a thing that can be taught, unknowing is more a process of successive revelations that implicate and transform the subjectivities involved. It opens up new possibilities between species.

Speculative anthropomorphism is a tool for co-creatively noticing and trying out alternative perspectives of (and on) the human. In positioning the human away from the centre, speculative anthropomorphism takes differing routes and tests other positions from which to listen and speak, look and become visible, nurturing a distributed model of creativity. Unlike reductive anthropomorphism, it does not trim or misinterpret nonhuman experience to make it fit the human but nurtures the creative and connective potential of imagination. Humans and other-than-humans alike are understood as provisional, uncertain beings, centred in their vulnerable bodies, extended through their affects, becomings and relations; as variously multiple, in flux, and porous. This practice is multivalent and playful, it brings together different voices to speak from alternative sources of knowledge. For example, by seeking nonhuman advice for human problems, *Ask the Wild* can mix up and challenge conventional epistemological hierarchies. Speculative anthropomorphism refuses over-coding of the nonhuman by the human and does not assume the human to be a known and settled quantity. It offers potential for profound resonance and connectivity between human and nonhuman being, without flattening of species difference.

Next Steps

The methodologies and findings of this research can be adapted by researchers to engage with and learn from diverse other-than-human beings and more-than-human populations, which can expand species relations and develop more-than-human futures.

The research has led to a planned collaboration in 2023-4 with Dr Elva Robinson and others to develop an exhibition and publication that nurtures a multispecies, de-anthropocentric approach to health and remediation. The research project *The Medicinal Forest* will observe local interspecies medicinal relationships, towards artistic outcomes that offer resistance to the exploitations and exclusions of globalised, capitalist approaches to health. In a forest in Yorkshire in 2021, I filmed wood ants as they

struggled to carry a large lump of pine resin up the hill of their nest. It sparkled like gold in the sunshine. Resin is precious to wood ants for its anti-microbial, anti-fungal properties. Other species benefit from the ants' chemical productions – birds sit on the nests, purposely being sprayed with formic to borrow the wood ants' defensive chemical as a miticide. While British scientists engage with Amerindian shamans to tap into their knowledge of medicinal species in the rainforest[464], comparatively little research centres on the medicinal potential of British woodland. Yet temperate forests were the historic source of many potent herbs now used in pharmaceuticals, e.g. Deadly nightshade (*Atropa belladonna*) and Foxglove (*Digitalis spp*.). While collaborating with scientists and drawing on new science, the research focus will be transdisciplinary, generating examples and methodologies for engaging with forests in newly enquiring, healing, creative and connective ways.

Additionally, I have been invited to be artist in residence for Kino Beat in Porto Alegre, Brazil. The project focuses on Leafcutter ants as potential teachers for humans, with the focus of attention on the health of the city systems. I will be working with local artists and biologists, architects and urbanists to generate transdisciplinary and creative ways to learn from the ants and their fungal symbionts, non-ant nestmates, and wider ecological interactions. Combining alternative modalities for learning from ants, the interdisciplinary group will collectively propose and nurture new climate resilient and biophilic trajectories for Porto Alegre's city planning and system remediation.

Finally

We need to fundamentally shift what human being is and does in the world. The other-than-human world is still continually pushed into the background as if it were the decoration against which 'real' history and drama (relentlessly seen as human history and drama) plays out. While the concept of the Anthropocene helps bring awareness of the catastrophic consequences of capitalist anthropocentrism, it still positions the human as exceptional, as alienated, and as (via technofixes) the answer. This research works towards and supports a fundamental change in how we perform being human. One could argue that this necessary for our own survival, because of course it is, but it is

[464] In conversation with the author in 2018, Kew Gardens' Deputy Director of Studies Monique Simmons described the process of consulting local shamans when she and her team went to the Amazon in search of new treatments for cancer. In 2015, Kew Gardens collaborated on the first publication of the medicinal knowledge of the Yanomani, in a project led by Dr, William Milliken. https://www.kew.org/read-and-watch/medicinal-knowledge-amazon

critical to the ethical urgency of this project to offer ways to sidestep anthropocentrism where possible, and so to call for the flourishing of wood ants, mycorrhizal networks, flower meadows and foxes simply for their own sakes, and as vital alternative perspectival centres of a shared world. Art cannot stop capitalism or war, but it can gently and repeatedly topple (the dominant sectors of) humanity from their assumed position as natural centre of the world. Whenever anthropocentrism casually, purposely, or unconsciously crowds in, as it (my own included) will, this research offers 'ant-hropocentrism' (among other -centrisms) as a seriously playful riposte. In seeking out the creaturely, feral practice foregrounds difference alongside connection. It seeks out creaturely worlds as centres of difference and positions them as different centres of the world.

Glossary

Actants - a lively material, an active component of an assemblage. Not a 'person' but far from inert, an actant has affective power and is in dynamic interaction with persons.

Ant-ic - showing the culture of ants, belonging to ants, the way of ants. Used to separate from the term antlike, which often arrives laden with limitations and preconceptions.

Assemblage - lively gatherings of things and forces working together in a given situation - here they refer specifically to the multispecies assemblages that are involved in making art in feral participation. See the discussion in Chapter Five about the different meanings attached to the concept, especially the difference between Deleuze and Guattari's and Jane Bennett's usage.

Being/s - Living individual thing/s, who might be also described by one or more of the definitions below around 'human', and are also 'persons'. I understand beings as a good basic term for singular, or lots of singular living things, but not such a good description for mixes of species, assemblages and ecologies.

Creature / creaturely - as a noun this term I use this term to describe living beings. Creature can correspond to the 'more-and-other-than-human' or 'other-than-human' or 'more-than-human' category below (see below my reasons for using interchanging terms) but it emphasises animal bodies rather than, for example plants or bacteria. Through Anat Pick's use of the word, creaturely - the word's adjectival form - is of creatures, or like to a creature. It emphasises the shared vulnerability of living bodies.

Collaboration / co-creation / co-production - While these different terms are often used interchangeably at an informal level, in this thesis 'collaboration' refers to the parties who are consciously and intentionally working together towards a shared outomce, whereas 'co-creation' and 'co-production' refer to beings working / acting / playing together in ways that are not defined by shared intentions (indeed the asymmetry of intentions can be productive).

Culture - the world-making activities of a situated population of beings/persons of any species. The word is used in contrast to texts in which culture, imbricated in history, is seen as a distinctive possession of humans, with the world-making activities of other-than-human beings being understood as 'behaviour,' imbricated by evolution and adaptation.

Field - I use 'field' to describe the space of interaction between human and ant, bringing together two definitions of field from the Oxford English Dictionary: 'a place where a subject of scientific study or of artistic representation can be observed in its natural location or context' and 'a space or range within which objects are visible from a particular viewpoint or through a piece of apparatus'.

Feral - there is considerable discussion of the word feral in the text. Succinctly, my usage is distinctive in it that it usually refers to the status of the art, and the artist, rather than to the status of any animals or plants or others involved in the research. The feral artist is escaping from her domesticated and anthropocentric experiences of art-making that were only concerned with human thought and creativity, and were conceived and defined within rectangles or white walls. Feral art finds meaning and expression outside the human realm, and creativity in the more-and-other-than-human. The feral embraces processes of wilding, but not 'the wild' as a destination (see 'wild/wilding' below). Feral is mixed, it is not, nor does it seek to be, pure.

Human-ish - is used adjectivally and comparatively to the term ant-ic, and its 'ish-ness' is used to remind the reader that we do not fully know what it is to be human-like, because we do not fully know what it is to be human.

Interspecies art – art that is concerned with the relations between species and involves the direct or indirect involvement of other-than-human species in its production or dissemination.

Knowledge / knowing / unknowing / not knowing

Knowledge (noun) is understood a shared resource into which an individual grows and moves through productive porosity, not as objective territory that can be made subject to single ownership.

Knowing (verb) is a process of coming to know, and is personalised and participatory, with roots and trajectories that are always distributed and labile. My conception is based

on the insights of feminist epistemologies, particularly Donna Haraway's concept of situated knowledge, and the perspectival approach of Amerindian animist cosmologies, in which knowing requires thinking oneself into the subjective position of the 'what' or the 'who' that we seek to know.

Unknowing - (verb) is a verb describing an active delimiting of one's expectations and preconceptions of other beings. Unknowing is similar to 'unlearning', which means to forget your usual way of doing something in order to learn a better way, but draws on art's creative strategy of not knowing, which involves *doing something*, and here, doing something *together*. Unknowing does not align with ignorance, nor does it reject knowing, but sidesteps the 'known knowns' for a time in order to look afresh. It is a tool for learning.

Not knowing - (verb) is an artistic strategy of opening ones focus to embrace tacit knowledge, emotions and unconscious awareness, to allow emergent ideas and imagery to influence the artwork one is working on.

Nonhuman / other-than-human / more-than-human / more-and-other-than-human / human - In the text, I resist using any single term for living beings because the collective nouns for living beings are all imperfect, and usually defined in reference to the human. What is seen as neutral in one decade will be seen as reductive by the next. The interchange of terms 'nonhuman, other-than-human, more and-other-than-human, more-than-human' is therefore used intentionally, to keep the reader questioning who and what is being referred to when we use these distinctions, under the continual consideration that even within our own bodies, humans are not made up of only *Homo sapiens* but very many different species.

Nonhuman - beings other than *Homo sapiens*. This word, defined as it is through the negative, is generally used only in sentences where humans and nonhumans are mentioned together.

Other-than-human - this more unwieldy term is used more often because it is a less negative (more neutral, if hardly affirmative) way to speak about beings of species other than *Homo sapiens*.

More-than-human - though it could be used accurately to describe the human body, in the text it is used to describe the world we inhabit as humans.

More-and-other-than-human - the living world that all species inhabit together. The human is not a defining centre for that world, but it is for the reader.

Human - while acknowledging that all human-ness is more-than-human, this term is (mostly, and unless otherwise stated) used for what we commonly understand as the species *Homo sapiens*

Person - a sited being, a living being, the centre of their own world, a being with their own perspective and thoughts (these may be very different kinds of perspectives and thoughts to the human).

Situated - the term 'situated knowledge' draws on Donna Haraway's conceptualisation to describe how one's knowledge - that is, everything one perceives and conceives - is shaped by one's prior experience and positioning, which will be in part unconscious. The term 'situated being' acknowledges how all living things emerge from and are entwined in relations that are sited and specific. The term is used to honour the real limitations of all creaturely lives and bodies, and aims to move thinking away from (for example) 'the animal' in general.

Wild / wilding - 'wild' is understood to be a problematic term in this thesis, insofar as it encourages thinking about and categorizing beings and ecologies in binary terms (via opposition to the tame) obscuring the nested, acculturated, and patterned texture of creaturely lives and ecologies. Separations of meaning that are visible in practice can become flattened in language, and the emotive properties of the word 'wild', as it describes weather / emotions / seas / violence / people / parties / music can get projected onto the lifeworlds of all 'wild' nonhuman beings, no matter what their organising structures. 'Wilding' however, considered as a process, or as a direction of travel, is considered to be a positive and liberatory trajectory towards freedom, for all beings and ecologies.

Work/ing with – when the author describes working with other-than-human beings, it is not intended to imply that they are working with the artist as intentional artist collaborators, but that they are participants in a materialised dialogical engagement. Though the process is unequal, sometimes confusing and always imprecise, it is more than working with the other-than-human beings as tools.

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