

Editorial

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Special Issue of *de arte*, “Artistic Approaches to the Environmental Crisis: Re-imagining Human–Nonhuman Relations”

The four articles in this special issue were written as part of the panel “Artistic Approaches to the Environmental Crisis: Re-imagining Human–Nonhuman Relations through Drawing, Film, Relational Art, and Sculpture,” held at the inaugural conference of the Southern African Society of Environmental Philosophy (SASEP) on 24 March 2024, at Kruger National Park’s Skukuza Rest Camp. SASEP was established after a generous grant received by the National Institute for Humanities and Social Sciences, as part of their Catalytic Research Programme. The goal of this programme is, as the name suggests, to catalyse research into an under-developed field of research.

The organisation of an art panel at this conference was motivated in part by the observation that in academic research and discussions on the multiple ongoing environmental crises and their possible solutions, the focus all too often falls on policy and on scientific and technological approaches and actors, obscuring the valuable roles, methodologies, and contributions of artists in addressing these crises. Artistic contributions have been wide-ranging and include, to name but some, the creation of tangible experiences of the often intractable environmental processes informing climate change, awareness-raising of our profound dependency on other life forms, and the exposure, renegotiation, and reimagination of human–cultural attitudes and relations towards non-human nature founded on human exceptionalism. This panel especially focused on this last operation and problematic as it has been taken up in creative and philosophical work by South African artists and scholars. It must be noted that several

abstracts were received that dealt with environmental aesthetics, which, somewhat surprisingly, turned into a dominant theme at the SASEP conference.

In proposing this panel, there was also a conviction that environmentally engaged artists could be valuable interlocutors and collaborators of environmental philosophers considering their unique practice of combining a high degree of conceptualising—as is clear from all article contributions—with not only making and doing, but also, most crucially, *imagining*. As the ongoing environmental crisis also importantly involves a crisis of the imagination, especially with regard to the challenges of overcoming human exceptionalism and devising alternative positionings, we strongly felt that artistic approaches should therefore be given more prominence and recognition. To be sure, while environmental aesthetics has established itself as a significant niche within the burgeoning field of environmental philosophy, it rarely engages art practice as such, focusing more on human beings' general sensory experience of non-human nature, which is a gap the panel aimed to fill.

Each of the four contributions to this special issue reflects on a specific body of artworks, in all but one instance by the artists themselves, offering valuable insights into the intricate conceptual and creative processes involved. Chantelle Gray and Delphi Carstens focus on the speculative simulations of octopus sensibility and intelligence in multimedia works by the art collective Orphan Drift, theorising the latter as powerful evocations of an experience of reciprocal “becoming-with” involving octopi, humans, and AI, in accordance with Donna Haraway's (2016) call for alternative stories of collaborative survival that disrupt the centrality of Anthropos. In her contribution, Marili de Weerdt expounds on a series of drawings in which she experiments with different procedures and methods to engage a particular tree in a process of co-creation while forging an intimate connection with this tree. Cow Mash offers an auto-ethnographic reading of a series of mixed media sculptures through which she grieves, as a self-described urbanised black woman, the loss of her ancestral, indigenous environmental knowledge and way of life while imagining a “mythical realm” enabling her spiritual-ecological self-awakening and liberation. Nicola Grobler's article elaborates on her mobile, participatory artwork, *The Visitor Centre*, which engages different publics into conversations on their relations with and attitudes towards non-human species in their urban environment through a set of intricately crafted art objects, attempting to stimulate curiosity, empathy, and care.

In these four rich reflections and interpretations, art appears as a complex practice not only inspired and infused by some of the most potent theories within contemporary environmental philosophy—including actor-network theory, African ecofeminism, speculative care ethics, and ahuman theory—but also putting such conceptual paradigms to work in imaginative, experimental, personal, embodied, and engaging ways. Collectively—albeit from different perspectives—these four articles address and challenge the pervasive and often hidden attitudes of humans towards the non-human that lie at the heart of the ongoing environmental crises. These include human beings'

arrogation of the monopoly on intelligence (Orphan Drift) and artistic creation (de Weerd), their alienation from environmentally rooted indigenous knowledge and life forms (Cow), and their lack of empathy for other species (Grobler).

This particular grouping of articles also demonstrates how different forms of art practice engender opportunities for both artists and audiences to engage with more-than-human entities as significant actors, and to “think-with” the ethics and aesthetics of multispecies societies, as they provide valuable insight into the relationships enacted throughout the artistic process or during the works’ reception by audiences. Moreover, the articles also accentuate the potency of art as a world-making practice, whether by affirming the cultivating influence of (farming) elders and more-than-human ancestry on the artist (Cow), or by (self)reflecting on the unfolding relationship and collaboration between the artist and a particular tree (de Weerd), enabling more networked understandings of relationships-in-the-making.

Apart from interrogating human exceptionalism, these four articles also creatively appraise possibilities for stretching and reimagining human-devised categories and practices. These articles therefore present a somewhat unexpected highlight of the conference, while, at the same time, capturing the essence of the problematic discussed at SASEP. Overall, they testify to art’s singular role and potential in challenging and resetting pervasive human attitudes towards the non-human, thereby making an important contribution towards exploring and nurturing more attentive and responsive multispecies relations.

References

Haraway, Donna. 2016. “Tentacular Thinking: Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Chthulucene.” *e-flux* 75: 1–14. <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/75/67125/tentacular-thinking-anthropocene-capitalocene-chthulucene/>