Article

Encouraging Multispecies Sociability through Art: Anthropomorphism in *The Visitor Centre*

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Abstract

In this study, the potential of co-opting anthropomorphism as an artistic strategy to develop human affiliations with non-human species, especially with those significantly other to humans, is considered. I present my perspective as artist-researcher in reference to my relational artwork, *The Visitor Centre* (2016–2018), which was created as a mobile hub to encourage empathy and care for non-human species in urban environments. Informed by relational ontologies, including assemblage theory, care ethics, and empathy studies, the artwork employs anthropomorphism as a strategy to challenge human exceptionalism. Wearing a frontal pouch containing artworks, I invited public engagement by handing out objects to stimulate conversations about urban wildlife. During a series of events, participants were nudged to navigate the moral difficulties that restrict human–non-human species relationships, as evidenced in their conversations. *The Visitor Centre* speaks to a growing interest within diverse knowledge fields in the function and potential of anthropomorphism to alleviate the limitations imposed on non-human species. As existing and shared procedures of multispecies reciprocity are poorly understood at present, it is proposed that the absurd prompts located in artworks such as *The Visitor Centre*, in combination with embodied and dialogic approaches, can bring participants closer to existing but unseen multispecies sociability.

Keywords: anthropomorphism; South African art; relational aesthetics; human–animal relationships; empathy; care ethics

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Introduction

Myths, folklore, fairy tales, literature, children's stories, theatre, and art are all rich with the symbolism of anthropomorphic animals, signifying human qualities and creatures of the imagination. Anthropomorphism is the assignation of mental abilities and intentions to non-human species or to fictionalised non-human characters (as in works by Disney) (Urquiza-Haas and Kotrschal 2015).[1] The conviction that "animals are essentially like humans" is reinforced by the notion of becoming "friends" with wild species or dressing pets in human clothes, but this is a simplistic and morally skewed assumption (Daston and Mitman 2005, 2). Yet despite these associations, studies in human–animal studies, conservation practices, ethology, and neuroscience reflect a growing interest in anthropomorphism. With a focus on my relational artwork *The Visitor Centre* (2016–2018), this article re-evaluates anthropomorphism as a critical artistic strategy that can help develop human relationships with non-human species—particularly those that are significantly different from humans.

The participatory artwork and doctoral study *The Visitor Centre* (2016–2018) co-opted anthropomorphism as an artistic strategy.[2] Its thesis argued that a relational artwork, created as a mobile hub and presented in a series of public interventions, could encourage humans to respond to non-human species with care and empathy. *The Visitor Centre I* (2016) and *The Visitor Centre II* (2018) both focused on stimulating discussions about wild and semi-wild species that naturally inhabit the homes and neighbourhoods in a biodiverse environment (Figure 1).[3] *The Visitor Centre* responds to the limitations of natural history museums, whose displays have historically objectified non-human species and distanced humans from non-human nature. The artwork was presented as a mobile museum, a frontal pouch or backpack that invited participants to handle and touch constructed art objects, appealing to visitors' somatic responses and imagination to foster a sense of connection with mammals, reptiles, birds, insects, and spiders.[4] The artworks acted as visual and tactile prompts to stimulate a conversation about non-human species and to allow for multiple perspectives to surface. This article reflects on the multilayered aspects of an artistic practice that negotiates the specifics of embodied engagements and the potentiality of process philosophies such as assemblage thinking to situate anthropomorphism as a critical approach in contemporary art.

This study is framed within humanities perspectives that critique human exceptionalism and the binary separations that perpetuate disconnection with and reduce responsibility for non-human species (Haraway 2008; Wolfe 2003). In this perspective, non-human

1 Anthropomorphised characters such as Mickey Mouse, made popular in the animated films of the Walt Disney Company and Walt Disney Animation Studios (Finch 2003).

2 "The Visitor Centre: Artistic Reconfigurations of Multispecies Relationships in an Urban Environment" (Grobler 2020) was achieved at the University of Cape Town.

3 In the third iteration of *The Visitor Centre*, participants are invited to create their own mobile hubs.

4 Recordings of *The Visitor Centre I* (Grobler 2016) and *II* (Grobler 2018) are available online.

species are assigned human-determined functions and categories that reflect uneven relationships of power—a vestige of Cartesian dualisms.[5] Their designations as worker, research subject, food, pet, pest, and wildlife reflect specific responses in different cultures, providing humans with a cultural template through which to modulate their behaviour for specific species. This may also reduce human emotional investment and feelings of moral responsibility for non-human species and *The Visitor Centre* is conceived as a means to destabilise these neat categorisations.

Theorists in the emerging field of human–animal studies have argued that artists can play a significant role in destabilising the prescriptive categories that diminish the capabilities and lived experience of non-human species (Baker 2000; Broglio 2011). Artistic collaborators Bryndis Snæbjörnsdóttir and Mark Wilson (Snæbjörnsdóttir/Wilson, n.d.) and Adam Zaretsky and Julia Reodica (Zaretsky 2002), as well as artists Lucy Kimbell (2011) and Monster Chetwynd (Jonze 2023), encourage us to reconsider the moral status of non-human species. Kimbell's relational artwork, *One Night with Rats in the Service of Art* (2005), offered a lively event, with pet rats, ratters, and humans participating in activities designed with rats' interests in mind (Kimbell 2011, 78–79). The work developed through multiple conversations by the artist with scientists and rat-fanciers, resulting in a one-night only performance lecture and rat-fair that explored rat–human relationships as bodily, enacted connections. South African artists Nandipha Mntambo (Lipschitz 2012) and Elizabeth Gunter and Wilma Cruise (2018) similarly explore human–non-human relationships through drawing, sculpture and photography. Artists may use anthropomorphism to depict a non-human species as capable of actions and emotional responses beyond the instinctual behaviours that humans associate with a particular species (Baker 2000, 46).[6]

Following contemporary artistic viewpoints that reject the symbolism[7] of non-human species, this study regards anthropomorphism from a relational approach in which mobility, affective states, and responsiveness (to humans, non-human others, and the environment) are viewed as central to subject formation. This article draws on assemblage theory (DeLanda 2006; Deleuze and Guattari [1980] 2014), agential realism (Barad 2007), and phenomenology (Merleau-Ponty 1974)—connective theories that include specific cosmologies of indigenous cultures and conceive of the world as an

5 Cartesian dualism aligns with the culturally encoded traditions, Judeo-Christian hierarchies, and religious practices by which non-human species are viewed as being lesser than humans (Singer 2002).

6 During Kimbell's (2011, 86) *One Night with Rats in the Service of Art* (2005), the activity "Is Your Rat an Artist?" imposed a human-determined category on the rats. The rat pets "drew" while negotiating a maze, as their bodily movements were tracked by a computer interface and digital software. As each rat tried to stay close to the humans familiar to them, the resulting "artwork" provided a glimpse into the kinaesthetic communication shared between rats and humans. Kimbell's work, along with the relational artists mentioned here, informed my own creative process and offered multiple approaches to disrupt predictable categorisations (Grobler 2020).

7 Representational depictions of non-human species to connote a symbolic value is rejected on the basis that the animal is reduced to a human-determined, fixed value (Baker 2000; Broglio 2011).

unfolding event in which interactions between entities are not necessarily predetermined or hierarchical. The agential realism proposed by quantum physics and feminist studies theorist Karen Barad (2007) describes the world as configured and reconfigured through enacted agency ("intra-agency"), where objects and beings come into existence through their relationships. Theories of affect also inform this perspective, proceeding from the understanding that entities are located within relational networks and that affects are the mediated "expressions, reflections and enactments" of contacts and disruptions within these structures (Anderson [2014] 2016, 10, 13). Subjectivity is theorised as a way to optimise and combine affective capabilities between different assemblages—a process of "becoming" (Deleuze and Guattari [1980] 2014). Donna Haraway's (2008) seminal notion of "becoming-with" non-human others in turn regards this as a responsive process of multispecies entanglements. Human–animal, subject–object, and mind–body binaries can all be challenged within relational frameworks and this creative research aims to situate human–animal interactions within a multispecies social network.

Following theorists in the humanities who recognise empathy and care as embodied practices (Despret 2013b; Donovan 2016; Gruen 2015; Haraway 2008; Puig de la Bellacasa 2017), I saw anthropomorphism in art as being closely associated with the empathetic "as if" of imagination; empathy requires imagination, as we could not otherwise conceive of another being's state of mind. Artworks such as *The Visitor Centre* can engage the public's imaginative capabilities through somatic prompts. Writing about animal ethics, Lori Gruen (2015) cautions that empathy is a complex emotional response that should not solely be considered from a confined understanding of it as a selfless surrender to another's emotional state. Care and embodied empathy are forms of learning from the world that require a change in perspective, from detached observation to immersion and attunement (Despret 2013b). Being emplaced and directly entangled with the world contrasts the distancing and objectification of Cartesian rationalism, which is a mediated interaction interceded by preconceived mental concepts. While learning from the world requires the integration of cognitive processes and abstract ideas, embodied empathy and perception respond to the specifics of a situation and can reduce the objectification of non-human species, as proposed through the workings of *The Visitor Centre.*

The scientific community has shown an increased interest in anthropomorphism and its creative uses of late. Gordon Burghardt (1985), a scholar in ethology and comparative psychology, suggests that critical anthropomorphism combines established knowledge, observation, intuition, and inference across disciplinary fields. It thus offers a speculative approach in which researchers must imagine the subjective experience of another species (Burghardt 1985, 2007). By avoiding comparisons between non-human and human species' behaviours, emotions, and cognitive skills, these ethologists argue that scientists have been overly cautious, limiting our comprehension of what non-human species may be capable of (Despret 2016; de Waal 2017).

Studies into non-human emotional responses such as empathy have established a pathway by which to improve multispecies relationships (Bekoff and Pierce 2009; de Waal 2011), and the idea that human-defined limitations on non-human species could be mitigated by anthropomorphism has gained traction. A neurophysiological study by behavioural biologist Kurt Kotrschal and cognitive biologist Esmerelda Urquiza-Haas (2015) established that anthropomorphism plays a role in the sociability of humans and non-human species, and clarified connections between anthropomorphism and empathy. Anthropomorphism is demonstrated to be a function of behavioural substrates and the human social brain—and as feeling empathy activates the same neurological social network, empathy and anthropomorphism are regarded as related processes (Urquiza-Haas and Kotrschal 2015, 168–171). Highlighting the characteristics of individual animals can help foster public support (Mitman 2015), and calls for a more empathetic approach to wildlife management have led some conservation scientists to see anthropomorphism as a conservation tool that can promote empathy for species that share human cognitive characteristics (Bekoff 2013; Chan 2012).

While artists who seek to dismantle anthropocentrism through their practice are very careful to avoid replicating the established tradition of utilising non-human species as symbolic representation (the non-human animal as a trope for human characteristics, aspirations, and emotions), my creative research suggests that anthropomorphism can provide a "way in," especially when artworks activate multi-sensorial experiences for audiences.

The Visitor Centre II

Figure 1: *The Visitor Centre II*, Fountains Valley (© the author)

The Visitor Centre was presented in two prototype forms at an outdoor biodiversity festival, two nature reserves, a natural history museum, and an art museum. These sites

framed the artwork and determined audience groupings, influencing readings of and interactions with the work. The second prototype,[8] *The Visitor Centre II* was presented at nine public events in May and June 2018 at the Ditsong National Museum of Natural History (DNMNH), Pretoria Art Museum (PAM), and the City of Tshwane's Biodiversity Festival (BF) at Fountains Valley Resort.[9] I took advantage of existing opportunities to engage with other publics, such as through the University of Pretoria (UP) Fine Arts staff exhibition at the PAM titled *In the Public Domain* (Figure 3). The DNMNH event was facilitated by educational officer Bongi Legwase and Teresa Kearney, curator of the small mammal collection in its vertebrate department. Conservationist Custan Mavhunga's attendance at *The Visitor Centre I* presentation at Tswaing led to an invitation to present the second prototype at the Biodiversity Festival.[10] Presenting the work at pre-existing events gave me the opportunity to interact with audiences from the broader public: PAM visitors tended to be art-minded, whereas BF attendees were mostly environmental sciences and conservation students from the Tshwane University of Technology or pupils from Atteridgeville. Members of the DNMNH audience were students, scientists, or interested members of the public who shared an interest in small mammals. Each of these events was directed by the intersection of audience and site, including individual participants' diverse and accumulated interests and experiences, marked by racial, cultural, age, and gender differences (among others) and their disposition to the work.

Whereas welcome or visitor centres are often a location's point of entry, a hub explaining the outside, *The Visitor Centre* is not bound to a singular location. The artwork can accommodate different contexts and audiences through its adjustable, custom-made contents and its mobility, and adaptability is similarly evident in its construction as a frontal pouch or backpack with numerous straps and clasps. Specifically, however, the work is a response to the City of Tshwane as urban environment.

In my participatory approach, viewer engagement with the artwork is central to the work's completion and meaning. Nicolas Bourriaud's ([1998] 2002) formulation of relational aesthetics offers a means to understanding broader artistic tendencies that invite audience participation and allow for interpretative open-endedness that challenges the hierarchy of artist and audience. Such artworks may be conceived without physical art objects, and relational artists may set up particular activities or situations that blur the boundaries between art and life, for example in the work of Lucy Kimbell (2011). Encouraging audiences to become the author of an artwork's meaning

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8 The first prototype, *The Visitor Centre I,* was presented at Tswaing Meteorite Crater Reserve during a series of interventions and workshops (Grobler 2019, 2020; Lauwrens 2019).

9 In addition to the photographs, the events of *The Visitor Centre II* were documented as audio recordings and sometimes filmed, referenced according to place (BF, PAM, or DNMNH) and date. I commissioned all photographs and recordings.

10 *The Visitor Centre II* intervention took place after a Friends of the Museum talk on bats and diseases by Wanda Markotter, professor in Zoonoses and director of the Centre for Viral Zoonoses.

undermines the hierarchy of audience and artist and the conception of low and high art. I approach the collaboration between artist and audience as a co-creative process with fairly unpredictable results. Presenting relational artworks, such as *The Visitor Centre*,[11] in public spaces, beyond the confines of art museums or galleries, heightens this productive confusion and can enhance an artwork's capacity to effect change (Grobler 2014, 58).

This article addresses how conversations prompted by relational art play a significant role in the artwork's meaning, and there are strong affinities between the artworks discussed here and Grant Kester's (2004) dialogical aesthetics. Kester emphasises art's emancipatory potential, noting that artists can catalyse perspectival shifts through conversations with viewers. Dialogue is seen as central to participation, as artworks emerge through conversation and art offers an open space where "aesthetic knowledge can be mobilised" (Kester 2004, 69). Every artwork can be regarded as a "relational object" in both Bourriaud's ([1998] 2002, 26) and Kester's understanding of relational art, originating from and stimulating conversation.

In contrast to relational art practices that function without physical art objects, I employed the sculptural method of assemblage in *The Visitor Centre*, where the cobbled-together objects facilitated a productive space for interpretation (Grobler 2019, 382). Assemblage prefers openness as its artistic approach, suggesting meaning rather than dictating it and maintaining ambiguity through the loosely conceived unity of different parts; it is the relationship of these parts to each other, to current and previous environments and to their original "wholes" that is important. As such, assemblages accentuate process and allude to the emergence of subjectivity through a "changing set of relations" (Dezeuze 2008, 32). The rough or provisional aspects of artworks, such as visible seams, suggest improvisation and can prompt audiences to form their own associations.

Relationships are held in tension in the practice of assemblage, such that existing histories and uses are harnessed to stimulate new expressions and analogies, correlating with the contingent, emerging qualities of conceptual assemblage. According to Felix Guattari and Gilles Deleuze's assemblage theory ([1980] 2014), all aspects of the world, be they dead, living, or environmental, are active intensities and forces that can influence other entities. A body is an assemblage, and groupings between inanimate objects and non-human and human species can be considered assemblages when different parts are meshed or bonded together into a whole, with the assemblage's various components often still able to function as separate entities (DeLanda 2017). Informed by relational ontologies, Deleuze–Guattarian assemblages provide a framework through which to consider participatory art practices.

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11 Art historian Jenni Lauwrens (2019) reflects on walking as a significant aspect to participants' experiences during *The Visitor Centre I* intervention at Tswaing.

Assemblage thinking offers a way to dissolve fixed identities and categories, but it may also de-emphasise emotional bonds and subjectivity and depersonalise the subject. While the collaborative and connective ethos of assemblage thinking is incorporated into works such as *The Visitor Centre*, this work sought to explore subjectifying strategies available to artists through relational aesthetics and sculptural methods to encourage closer connections with non-human species. Perspectives informed by the specifics of subjective experience offer opportunities to disrupt universalising approaches. In a phenomenological understanding, the world is experienced through the senses and forms part of a particular bodily experience, while the limitations and perspectives of the body determine our subjective experience of the world (Merleau-Ponty 1974, 303–304). Philosopher Thomas Nagel's seminal essay "What is it like to be a Bat?" (1974) exposes the pitfalls of drawing conclusions about the consciousness of non-human species and observes that human experiences are peculiarly constrained by what our human bodies can accomplish. Yet, our bodies can afford us a sense of non-human subjectivities through responsive, embodied perception.

Artists can provide the textured specificity[12] that enables a sense of care to develop, and artworks can cultivate intersubjective exchanges such as empathy through nonverbal, visual, and tangible communication. In her formulation of an aesthetic of care, Josephine Donovan (2016, 84), eminent scholar in comparative literature, suggests that writers and artists regularly achieve the focused observation embodied in and responsive to the specifics of different non-human species. Embodied perception requires the "receptive attention" described by philosopher and educator Nel Noddings (2010, 8) as being central to attitudes of care and that, with empathetic responses, constitutes a form of learning from the world.

Situating embodied involvement and care as foundational for the formation of multispecies relationships is a radical proposition, because moral obligation and emotional attachment to wild and semi-wild non-human species may be regarded as anthropocentric interference. As care involves "everything that we do to maintain, continue and repair our 'world'" (Tronto [1993] 1994, 103), caring relations are inherently active and participatory. But when it is understood that every living thing needs care at some time in its existence to flourish, it can be suggested that relations without care are likely to dissipate and that care should be understood as an essential aspect of life (Puig de la Bellacasa 2017, 98–100). The work of care brings the interdependency of entities and their interconnected existences to attention, despite care often being undervalued and invisible (Puig de la Bellacasa 2017). María Puig de la Bellacasa is an eminent scholar in the environmental humanities who describes speculative care as a situated, pragmatic practice in which each response should prompt

12 Textured specificity refers to the details that emerge from a mode of embodied observation that is focused on the specifics of each situation and encounter. Donovan (2016) argues that many artists and writers are practiced in embodied observational modes in their study of subjects.

a consideration of "how to care" to determine appropriate action (Puig de la Bellacasa 2017).

Care ethics are enacted as the contextual specificity of each situation requires a tailored response. While working on *The Visitor Centre*, I reflected on the difficulty of integrating the subjectifying ethos of empathy and care with multispecies assemblage's focus on emergence and intra-agency.[13] The flat ontological structure provided by assemblage theory coheres with a biocentric position that is often conceived in opposition to a subject-orientated moral approach. My research methodology mirrored the method of production as a relational undertaking that followed the embodied modes of care aesthetics and assemblage. While relational aesthetics that require the presence of participants and that invite idiosyncratic contributions from the audience can kindle embodied responses, anthropomorphism can provide the hook to connect participants to specific non-human subjectivities and to encourage multispecies care.

trophy

The Visitor Centre II was developed from the initial prototype, *The Visitor Centre I*, and critically applied the trope of maternal care to challenge the historic binarism of multispecies relationships. The bulging shape and frontal orientation of *The Visitor Centre II* drew on concepts such as fertility, nurturing, motherhood, and human procreation (Figure 2). Though feminist ideas have shaped the field of care ethics (Tronto 1987), the artwork is not intended to present care as a predominately female practice, as this could inhibit an understanding of intra-connected networks of multispecies care. Care is an intra-active realm of affects, a shared responsibility that can be distributed collectively and "multilaterally" in multispecies worlds (Puig de la Bellacasa 2017, 168–169). In *The Visitor Centre*, references to gender-specific roles provided an entry point to stimulate and guide conversations rooted in generalised popular conceptualisations of care to more critical considerations of relations of care as inherently asymmetrical. The following discussion of the sculptural assemblages, *trophy (2018)* and *gloves (2018)*, two works that form part of *The Visitor Centre II*, elaborates on audience responses to these tactile prompts.

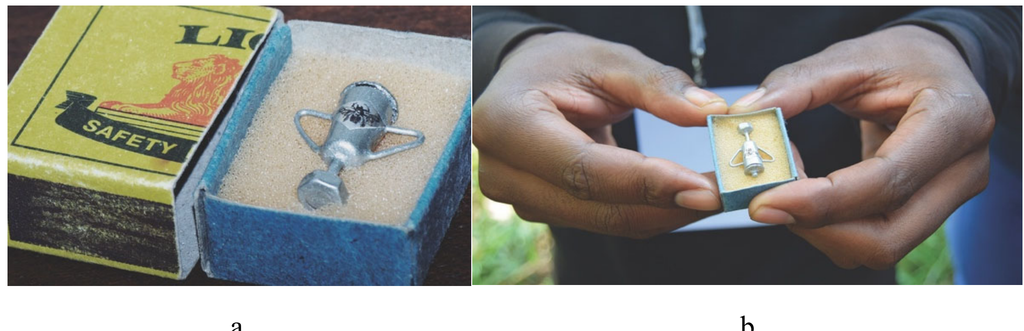
13 The idea of multispecies assemblages developed from perceptions of multispecies connectivity and emergence to denote the entangled and dynamic character of multiple species coexisting in overlapping spatial zones (Kirksey 2015).

Figure 2: Displaying the fitted pouch of *The Visitor Centre II* (© the author)

Figure 3: *The Visitor Centre II*, PAM (© the author)

Absurdity and humour are used in *The Visitor Centre* to engage participants and draw attention to our tendency to anthropomorphise non-human species. In *trophy*, the audience is asked to guess who a handmade trophy might be intended for, a tiny drawing of an insect providing a clue. *trophy* was half a matchbox that slid open to show a miniature trophy made of wire, a press stud, a nut, the packing material from veterinary ear medication, paint, gauze, and glue, showcasing the provisionality of sculptural assemblages (Figures 4a and 4b). Visitors found it difficult to identify the tiny drawing of a winged creature on the trophy—perhaps because of the venue's low light, the participants' eyesight, my deficient illustrative skills, or their inability to identify insects. Participants had to get close to see the drawing, and many deliberated about the

identity of the insect—and its meaning (Figure 5).[14] The conversations that arose in response to the work often unravelled the entangled implication of anthropomorphism's role in forming connections or imprinting human qualities.



a b

Figure 4a and b: *trophy*: wire, found objects, drawing, paint. *The Visitor Centre II* (© the author)

Figure 5: Participants inspecting *trophy*. *The Visitor Centre II*, DNMNH (© the author)

Insects are not known to build their sense of importance and self-worth by seeking prizes for their achievements and winning competitions (as humans are), so the absurdity of rewarding an insect with a decorative object was not lost on participants as they tried to

14 These physical encounters with art objects combined with their intimate scale slowed down the speed of viewing and encouraged focused attention, which is conducive to feelings of attachment and care (Noddings 2010, 8). Some visitors commented that the fragility of these objects prompted a sense of responsibility and obliged them to handle the object with care. See Grobler (2019, 2020) for further elaboration on embodied encounters with the art objects of *The Visitor Centre*.

decipher the drawing. *trophy*'s scale suggested that a medium-sized insect could carry it off, and the winning insect is typically characterised as one that would enjoy receiving a reward. Audiences wondered what criteria might be used to award the trophy. One group identified the insect in question as a fly (*Musca domestica*) but wondered how one would judge a good fly (deserving of a trophy) and a bad fly, and whether it would be more appropriate for the moral criteria to be set by flies or humans (PAM 13 June 2018). Similar conversations about the ethics of applying a human-centred value system to non-human species were equally imaginative and interlaced with humour. The work engaged with the symbolism of human reward systems that seek to distinguish and elevate an individual. By inviting comparisons and highlighting conflicting values attributed to different insect species, participants engaged with the moral aspects of multispecies relationships and blurred the evolutionary and physiological lines used to delineate limited species categorisation.

While some participants identified the subject of my drawing as a species of fly, I had drawn a carpenter bee (*Xylocopa caffra*) to focus attention on the important but overlooked role of solitary bee species in pollinator–plant relationships.[15] *trophy* was inspired by the work of native bees, specifically solitary bees, who are critical pollinators often associated with co-evolved mutualisms that have led to highly specialised pollination mechanisms.[16] Many local bee species are endemic to South Africa but are vulnerable to extinction caused by urban sprawl, habitat destruction, and other consequences of human activity (Gous et al. 2017, 24). The trophy itself is a reward for the pollination efforts of solitary bees, with carpenter bees seeming the ideal trophy recipient. Audiences had interesting motivations for nominating bees or flies for the trophy: most people said they did not *like* flies but acknowledged their important role in ecosystems. Participants knowledgeable about solitary bees were a minority but noted the bees' contribution to pollination. But for both, anthropomorphism served as the entry point to the mind of the broader public and may have prompted a positive association with solitary bees.

Nourishment in the form of pollen, oil, or nectar is the pollinator's reward in co-evolved plant–pollinator mutualisms (Gous et al. 2017, 2).[17] A trophy does not actually reward an insect, so a reward that satisfies the human need for status and self-actualisation would have to consider species-specific needs. The reward system is entrenched in human–non-human relationships—as in dog training and laboratory experiments using

15 Bees provide essential ecosystem services as pollinators and are the most significant group of pollinators; the majority of bee species are considered to be solitary (Eardley, Kuhlmann, and Pauly 2010, 2).

16 Limited information about plant–pollinator relationships in South Africa is available, as only honey bees (*Apis mellifera*) are managed here for commercial crop pollination (Gous et al. 2017, 4).

17 Researcher in technoscience Carla Hustak and professor in anthropology Natasha Myers (2012) propose that plant–pollinator relationships can be seen as "affective ecologies" that consider the embodied and sensuous qualities of multi-species partnerships. Such closely-evolved relationships harbour affective and emerging forces (Despret 2013a).

rats. Rewards have many conditions in human–non-human relationships, where the administration of discomfort or pain may also be used as an incentive. For example, electric shocks are often used in parallel with food rewards to train rats for particular tasks.

Some species are more valued by humans, perhaps holding spiritual or religious significance, and are fortunate to have conservation efforts made on their behalf—but being regarded as a trophy animal does not bode well, as attested to by lions bred for canned hunting and rhinos hunted for their horns. Evoked by anthropomorphism, the idea of reward can initiate the mental work required to shift hierarchical perspectives of non-human species to a relational understanding of non-human species and their "intra-agency." *trophy* prompted visitors to consider entangled multispecies relationships such as plant–pollinator partnerships from a species-specific perspective and to share their viewpoints with other participants. The artwork acted as a catalyst for layered conversations, as proposed by Kester (2004). Participants in *The Visitor Centre* were rewarded by the aha moments and sense of clarity that followed their initial uncertainty about the purpose and process of the work. Visitors' own subjective responses (such as signs of enjoyment) or recounted empathetic responses to the work are also regarded as a benefit.

gloves

The more complicated mental exercise invoked by the artwork *gloves* tested the audience's approval of my position, as it innately validated a questionable practice. The work comprised small, white silicone gloves in plastic specimen bags inside a branded yellow-and-blue cardboard box. I handed the closed box to participants and asked them to open it and distribute its contents. Inside were five plastic pockets, each containing two sets of gloves to fit the hands and feet of a tiny creature. I encouraged participants to explore the physical and textural qualities of the gloves and to identify the creature the gloves had been made for. Participants were directed to the packaging, which offered a clue. People made "awww" sounds and smiled as the gloves were handed around, some cupping one of the tiny gloves in their hand (Figure 6a). Many people assumed the gloves were intended for human babies, because there was space for four tiny fingers and a thumb (PAM 16 May 2018). Some participants guessed they were for "aliens" to externalise the sense of discomfort these objects gave rise to (PAM 9 June 2018), but most expressed delight and wonder at the scale of the gloves and their similarity to domestic or surgical rubber gloves (Figure 6b). People's intimate engagement with the art objects through touch and smell sparked positive responses and stimulated conversations. Visitors seemed charmed as they handled the gloves and explored the smoothness of the silicone and talc, but these feelings changed to unease for many as they grasped the gloves' intended use.

a b

Figure 6a and b: *gloves*: Surprise and laughter at the plastic sleeves, packaging silicone, and tiny gloves. *The Visitor Centre II*, DNMNH (© the author)

According to the packaging copy, the "latex" gloves were made by Pet&Care (Figure 7) and were "Designed by a primate specialist for urine-washing behaviour · Comfortable fit for *Galago moholi* · Lightly powdered · Hygienic · Single use only." In bold text, the packaging further claimed they were "Premium disposable latex gloves designed for domesticated Lesser Bushbabies." The box design functioned like the labels in a museum, but manipulated to call into question the labels' authority to provide meaning. Participants' attitudes shifted as they understood that the gloves intended function was to project a human hygiene standard onto bushbabies' natural behaviour.

Figure 7: Pet&Care glove packaging (© the author)

Audiences' responsiveness to the gloves depended on their familiarity with bushbabies—those familiar with bushbabies described their natural urine-washing behaviour, helping the greater group of participants to form an opinion about the gloves

and my intent in producing them. In reference to the fact that urine makes bushbabies' feet and hands sticky and helps them climb and jump, one participant asked, "Aren't you hindering them?" (PAM 13 June 2018). On seeing that the gloves were intended for pet or domesticated bushbabies, another participant said, "They should be free" (PAM 23 June 2018), and another asked, "Are you allowed to keep bushbabies?" (PAM 19 May 2018).

I proposed that the gloves would allow pet owners to maintain domestic hygiene even when their pet engaged in urine-washing behaviour, but participants could not understand *gloves*'s role in the larger project. This conflict arose because *The Visitor Centre II* was presented as an encouragement for conversations about the relationships between non-human and human species, but here I had created a product that would help people domesticate wild animals. Participants questioned my ethics in promoting the gloves, which clearly supported the domestication of bushbabies, and one group challenged my position on keeping wild animals as pets (BF 22 May 2018) (Figure 7). Their readings of the artwork as either created or purchased also affected their understanding of my relationship with the gloves, where my apparent desire to help pet-keepers maintain hygiene in their homes belied my intended critique of the human indulgence of adopting "cute" wild animals. As the environmental science and conservation students learn that wild animals have a shorter lifespan in captivity, they were vocal in their assertion that domesticating wild animals is not in the animals' best interests. By presenting an exaggerated and humorous scenario, the work catalysed public discussion and drew attention to the reality that domesticated wild animals may become aggressive and urinate on furniture.

Anthropomorphism often leverages humans' natural attraction to charismatic animals, as Disney has ably demonstrated, especially through its use of characters with paedomorphic qualities (like bushbabies). This human-centric position emphasises species that appear similar to or have economic or cultural value to humans, while—counter to the intrinsic value of species—species-specific differences receive insufficient consideration. *gloves* critiques the notion of care for an animal that one participant described as "presuppos[ing] a human expectation as to how they should be doing whatever it is they are doing" (PAM 27 May 2018). The artwork caused other participants to reflect further, with one participant suggesting after the event that *gloves* was a critique of humanity's domestication of wild animals (DNMNH 14 June 2018). Many people want non-human species to respond with care and attention, but wild species are only likely to do so if they are trained and domesticated as pets (Dwyer 2007).

In *The Visitor Centre*'s repertoire, *gloves* raises the point that when care is extended, we must think critically about its effects on both the cared for and the carer. Humans often cage or otherwise restrain an animal when administering care. In animal rescue, for example, human intervention can benefit animals, but it should not be extended to the point that animals become so acclimated to humans that they cannot be released again.

And while human care may benefit an animal, it may also cause it significant stress. Imagining actually putting the tiny gloves on nimble bushbabies (PAM 19 May 2018) was initially a source of amusement for audiences, but they also realised that only coercion or force could get this done. The work made audiences confront the aspects of care that can be co-opted as a means of restraint or assertion of dominance. In these artworks, care can be interpreted as a response to aggressive, human-centred behaviour, but it also raises awareness about its manipulative iterations that are sometimes overlooked.

The scale of the objects, the maternal pouch's shape and contained format and the references to nurturing young animals are evidence of the maternal trope in *The Visitor Centre II*, but the work also seeks to disrupt the predetermined roles and responsibilities that caring practices are often limited to. While I argue for a greater proximity to non-human species, I recognise that closeness can be both enabling *and* suffocating. This concern should not diminish the effects of subjectification, however, and the effects of anthropomorphism in art are persuasive.

Anthropomorphism as a Subjectifying Strategy in Art

Experiencing another species' world-view is beyond human understanding, presenting a challenge to fostering emotional connections and relationships with non-human species (Nagel 1974, 441). While it is difficult to imagine another species's subjective experiences, because we cannot base them on our own (Nagel 1974, 439), this realisation does not refute their existence, and Nagel (1974, 441) notes that certain realities "embody a particular point of view" not attainable by humans. Nagel's (1974, 436) more inclusive approach to consciousness and sentience suggests that "an organism has conscious mental states if and only if there is something that it is like to be that organism," which opens up a space for a speculative method, such as anthropomorphism.

Gruen (2015, 70) reserves entangled empathy for sentient "mammals, fish and birds" but not for amphibians, reptiles, insects and other species. A broader understanding of sentience and consciousness is required that aligns with recent studies on insect sociability and consciousness (Tiffin 2016). Studies of states of consciousness and neurobiological function have largely overlooked insects, but philosopher Colin Klein and neurobiologist Andrew Barron (2016) suggest that insects have cohesive neural pathways in the midbrain that make them capable of subjective experience. These studies have informed my own perception of insects and have sparked ideas that have led to some of the creations within *The Visitor Centre*. As public attitudes often determine the success of conservation efforts, human bonds with ecologically important but uncharismatic species such as snakes and amphibians should be encouraged (Tarrant, Kruger, and du Preez 2016), and artworks can assist in inspiring closer connections.

Recognising difference is difficult yet important, as humans "tend to understand through affinity" (Dwyer 2007, 86). Scholar in English literature June Dwyer writes of the importance of acknowledging the otherness of non-human species to avoid the overidentification of anthropomorphism. Dwyer (2007, 73) describes the "pain of anthropomorphism" in non-reciprocal multispecies relations, in which humans struggle to come to terms with the one-sided nature of relationships with non-companion species. Anthropomorphism in non-reciprocal multispecies relations may lead to overidentification and misdirected care, where the carer inadvertently harms the cared for (or vice versa). When passion and care are considered as foundational to learning from the world, it is clear that detached observation will not aid the formation of multispecies relationships (Despret 2004, 131). Philosopher and scholar in animal studies Vinciane Despret (2004, 131) writes that care is dependent on a willingness to become involved and "immerse oneself in the multitude of problems" presented by a particular species, and that subjects (both non-human and human) are sometimes reconstituted from an impulse to anthropomorphise, as shown by the multilayered conversations prompted by *trophy* and *gloves*.

Multispecies empathy requires a perspective beyond the human; embodied empathy and care for non-human species is necessarily based on a partial understanding of how another species experiences its life, but this comprehension gap offers humanity a humility and vulnerability that is an alternative to broad assumptions and certainty. Gruen (2015, 66–67) acknowledges the imperfection of our empathy for non-human species, which requires us to attempt to shift between our own perspective and another's to achieve a more sensitive and nuanced appreciation of the other's position. We can alleviate the one-sided nature of our relationships with non-reciprocal species by more carefully attending to their specific habits and lives and being sensitive to the consequences of care and empathetic projections. The inequalities implicit in anthropomorphism are likely to subside when humans understand the positive affects their involvement with wild and semi-wild species can bring about (Dwyer 2007).

In his enquiry into an animal phenomenology, scholar in human–animal studies Ron Broglio (2011, 81) acknowledges that the depth of animal experience may remain inaccessible to human perception, but he proposes that artists can work with these contact zones to foreground a different set of ideas. Artists often attempt to introduce audiences to another perspective—or even to identify with another being's subjective experience, one which may be alien to our own. Donovan (2016, 17) agrees that this capacity is required for an aesthetics of care, while Lorraine Daston (2005, 52), a science historian, describes the "transcendence" of expanding one's personal perspective to infer the experience of another by means of anthropomorphic representation. Anthropomorphism and empathy utilise the same neural pathways, and humans willing to attribute particular emotions and mental states to non-human species are more likely to show empathy for non-human species (Urquiza-Haas and Kotrschal 2015). Anthropomorphism and empathy are both "as if" responses that activate a space of possibility, signalling responsiveness to another being and creating space for embodied

communication. Empathy does not claim to fully understand the experience of another being (Despret 2013b, 71), and as a form of understanding, empathy does not inevitably lead to the identification of a need in the other or a desire to help. Despret (2013b ,71) describes the "as if" mode of empathy as a "creative mode of attunement" that motivates a willingness to engage and relational openness. As a bodily form of understanding, empathy functions as an emotional response that can show us how to form respectful, responsible embodied relationships with non-human species, while anthropomorphism can help us imaginatively infer another species's experiences.

Conclusion

This study has shown that empathy and anthropomorphism are interlinked bodily processes that involve feelings, emotions, and the imagination, which can be activated through engagements with art. Humans often form connections with others based on their similarities; accordingly, artworks that suggest human-like qualities in non-human species can help humans form connections with other species, even when the similarities evoked are absurd or far-fetched. When considerations of the "species as a whole" (rather than as individuals) impede the emotional connection necessary for an empathetic response, strategies are required that can surface the individual qualities of non-human species (such as anthropomorphism) to facilitate closer relationships and repair the disconnection between humans and non-human species. Art can shape the experience and world-view of its participants through felt experiences, offering a phenomenological understanding of the world and its inhabitants.

Our understanding of consciousness beyond the realms of human experience can expand when we attend to the phenomenological worlds of organisms that differ significantly from human lived experiences. I have written here about small urban species such as insects, whose populations have been in alarming decline over the course of this research. By stimulating conversation, fostering embodied modes of attention, and focusing on species generally regarded as small and insignificant, I encouraged participants to re-evaluate their understanding of bees. However, the stigma attached to anthropomorphism reveals a lack of critical distance and is perceived as fantasy (Chan 2012), so when anthropomorphism is allowed to undermine the unique aspects of non-human conscious experiences, it will fail as a strategy for closer relationships. As demonstrated in my discussion of the artworks *trophy* and *gloves*, *The Visitor Centre* does more than draw easy correlations between human and non-human species, explicitly using the imaginative prompts of anthropomorphism to push beyond the norm and connect participants to species that are significantly other.

The Visitor Centre interventions used conversation to loosen restrictive perceptions of non-human species. Relational artworks are assemblages, resisting unified synthesis and emphasising the emerging and durational properties of the constituent pieces, including the non-human species evoked in the conversations. The artwork stimulated participants' own creative acuities to form associations and to cohere multiple

conversational threads. Non-human entities can perform affective capabilities and activate relationships in assemblages, while my relational artworks reveal that conflicting views of non-human species exist concurrently. Through their connective and destabilising energies, these artworks provide a framework through which to reassemble fragments and expand our limited sense of more-than-human capacity.

Combining absurdity and humour, anthropomorphism in *The Visitor Centre* prompted participants to navigate the contradictions and ethical complexities that circumscribe human–non-human species relationships. This study seeks to enhance our understanding of anthropomorphism's social function and press beyond generalised and cultured species categorisations to recognise non-human forms of subjectivity. *The Visitor Centre* encouraged participants to look beyond their preconceived perceptions of non-human animals and to become open to the possibilities of what these animals can be, rather than what they assume them to be. This study proposes that anthropomorphism can be an effective artistic strategy with which to initiate such multispecies affinity.

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