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Untying the Knots: Relational Art and Interspecific Encounter

Bryndís Snæbjörnsdóttir and Mark Wilson

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In this essay, we will present some of the ways in which the relationships between humans and others are conceptually and strategically re-framed in our work and for what purpose/s. In addition, we will demonstrate how in our projects, mechanisms of 'encounter' between humans and the non-humans are established, mobilised and considered in their effects. We will look at how this approach has developed from our early practice—our first experiments with and more specifically, *in opposition to* animal representation, from our subversion of the taxidermic specimens in the installation, *nanoq: flat out and bluesome* (2001–2006) through the domestic habitats we examined in *(a)fly* (2006), to the later, structured meetings of *between you and me, Three Attempts* (2009) and *Vanishing Point* (2011) and the more recent frozen condor bodies in the photographic and video works entitled: *You Must Carry Me Now* (2014). We will demonstrate how in one of our most recent projects, *Beyond Plant Blindness* (2017), ideas of interspecific encounter, involved shifts in scale and strategic slowing down of thought in order to sense ontological 'difference'.

In all this, for us there is a driving imperative to unlock new ways of thinking and offer unfamiliar and often necessarily *odd* approaches in order to *unravel* established behavioural and perceptual knots and to create a freer and more productive flow of, (for instance), intelligent and sensitive environmental responses. In this respect, at this time, we believe that the answers to our challenging interspecific and environmental circumstances are unlikely to be found in any one established strand of thought, or one field, one philosophy, or one logic—much more likely,

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they are discoverable by means of some process of interpolation between disparate disciplines and fields. In order for this to be accomplished, mobilised and sustained we should, by suspending disbelief in any one system, put trust in a new kind of compound 'intersense', constituted interstitially and responsively, to kindle sites of productive unfamiliarity, uncertainty and not-knowing by which we may newly observe the world. For us, in pursuing this idea in our work, not only have we necessarily adopted and mobilised the experiences and knowledge of multiple others, professionals and amateurs alike, but we have found it strategically imperative to append and qualify—to resist and in some cases, surrender entirely—the significant centrality of visual representation.

1 Nanoq: Flat Out and Bluesome (2001–2006)

It is important to note that back in 2000 to 2001 at the start of our collaboration, we made no conscious decision to start working with human and animal relations. Appropriately perhaps we sort of 'stumbled' into this rich seam of enquiry when working on the project *nanoq: flat out and bluesome* (Fig. 1). The initial prompt for this project was in fact another entirely, which was triggered by Snæbjörnsdóttir's inquiry regarding a polar bear specimen belonging to the Kelvingrove Museum in Glasgow.

She was part of a group of Glasgow-based artists making an exhibition (1999–2000) for the Centre for Contemporary Arts in the City. Characteristically she had

Fig. 1 Snæbjörnsdóttir and Wilson. *nanoq: flat out and bluesome*, installation incorporating ten taxidermic polar bears, 2004. (Spike Island, Bristol, UK; © Snæbjörnsdóttir and Wilson)

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been working for some time in response to Northern landscapes, questioning the meaning of 'white' as a popular signifier of emptiness, or nothingness. She constructed environments in which female names of different cultures were systematically joined together to open up 'new' meanings in hybrid languages within these bodies of text. It was thus logical for her to consider her own surname, Snæbjörnsdóttir, which translates as daughter of [a] snow-bear or polar bear—snæ (snow) björn (bear) dóttir (daughter).

The fact that a polar bear's fur is not white, but transparent and each hair is hollow and grows from the bear's paradoxically *black* skin added further to the fascination. Permission was requested from Kelvingrove Museum to photograph the two polar bears in their zoology collection. On first contact it was reported to us that the polar bears had recently been removed from display in the Museum, a consequence of a recent policy to present only those animals in their collection, indigenous to Scotland. Still they offered us the chance to photograph them where they were kept in storage, which at that time was in the basement of the Transport Museum. On arrival, we were considerably surprised and moved by the sight of hundreds of animal bodies gathered from all over the world and stuffed in whatever poses were befitting a historically 'colonial', imaginative impulse. Coming from Iceland (which has only a very small zoology collection comprising mostly local birds, a few sheep and fish on display in Reykjavik), Snæbjörnsdóttir found it an extraordinary and overwhelming experience. Furthermore, in order to access the polar bears, many of the other animal specimens had to be moved aside—some she had only ever seen in pictures or on television.

This abundance of apparently discarded animal bodies, prompted a variety of emotions in touching their different skins and fur. In short it was clear that these skins had once been animals, each with its own individual life—taken by humans solely in order to act as representative of a species in accordance with human significations of conquest and classification. In a new taxonomic significance—here they were—apparently deemed and doomed as an embarrassment, even in their representations of British colonial excess.

We wondered about other polar bears housed in collections up and down the country. Were they equally troublesome in respect of post-colonial sensibility?

And so, our project *nanoq: flat and bluesome* (2001–2006) was born and a 5-year period began in which we set out to locate, photograph and gather the historical provenances for each of the UK specimens we found. In our project, we sought to research and return the individuality of each polar bear to the idea of its former living self. We did this both in the photographic work—for which a constituent of each image is the respective provenance, as a text—and in the installation, we made for Spike Island in Bristol, in which we gathered and presented 10 stuffed polar bears together in the same space. (In our installation, although these histories were available elsewhere within the exhibition, all this and any other information normally associated with the museum presentation of taxidermy, was actually removed from the specimens themselves, forcing the public to engage with the specific material individuality of each respective mount). Their poses had of course been imagined and crafted at different times over the previous 200 years,

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with varying degrees of expertise and as such, they depicted less reliably the anatomy of bears and more, our human desires, ignorance and colonial hubris.

Despite that, we found that as the general public encountered and engaged with what was on display they were able to arrive at certain conclusions or projections concerning former, individual polar bear lives—for example, whether each had lived last in the wild or in captivity, by the sharpness or bluntness of the claws. So, as artists, the focus on individuality—and the anomalous—became *key* in our minds, not only to the development of this project but notionally as a mechanism, in almost all our subsequent work, by which to engage the imagination of audience.

This was for us, the beginning of an art practice within a field that has kept us intensely occupied to this day. Throughout this time, we have both individually written doctoral theses on particular aspects of our research and practice. In Snæbjornsdóttir's thesis, entitled *Spaces of Encounter: Art and Revision in Human—Animal Relations* (2009), the human and animal encounter in our work was deconstructed in relation to lens-based media. In Wilson's thesis, *Beyond Control: Towards an Ecology of Uncertainty* (2012), in the specific context of our practice, he examined the mechanics and intricacies of the relational, the virtues of art's capacity to dismantle cultural faculties and the merits of engaging and prompting the engagement of audiences with the consequentially unfamiliar and its productive, conceptual potential.

Of particular significance to us were the capacities, shortcomings and effects of 'glass' in the processes both of representation and presentation—whether in the form of lenses, TV screens or as used for instance, in zoo enclosures—as membranes that divide and create distance from the subject of the non-human. It was thus increasingly important to consider carefully the position of the camera (both conceptually and physically) in any artwork featuring human and animal encounters and to identify possibilities when exhibiting through photography or installation, to reappraise and reconfigure the apparent situation, to shift its parameters and to perform a deconstructive re-evaluation of any presentation that pretends to 'capture' the animal. This we would come to do across a number of projects by 'untying' or 'unhitching' individual animal beings again from their generic and plurally reductive representations.

2 (a)Fly: Between Nature and Culture (2006)

An example of this strategy can be seen in our project *(a)fly* (Fig. 2) in which we photographed the animal dwellings of pets within the homes of their human cohabitants.

So let's look at some of the spaces of encounter as they were mobilised in this project. On the 13th November, 2005 we rendezvoused with four ptarmigan hunters in a disused quarry on the outskirts of the city of Reykjavík. The quarry is used on a fairly regular basis by local hunters for target practice. We wished to undertake a survey, designed to enable us to identify urban homes where humans

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Fig. 2 Snæbjörnsdóttir and Wilson. *(a) fly*, shooter and shot map (photograph, 85 × 100 cm and map, 70 × 90 cm), 2006. (National Museum of Iceland, Reykjavík; © Snæbjörnsdóttir and Wilson)

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cohabit with animals. In addition to the four hunters, we had brought along four large-scale, mounted maps of the central area of Reykjavík 101, which were sufficiently detailed to show the specific footprints of individual dwellings and residential blocks. For pragmatic reasons, we chose a quarry as the site at which to conduct a performative shooting because (like most quarries), it is away from the city and so our activity would be relatively discreet and unnoticed—but in so doing we were mindful also of a number of other associations of the term 'quarry', not least as the object of a hunt. Symbolically, we were interested in its functions typically described as an open excavation from which material is extracted by blasting and a rich source of something. Another pertinent and typical definition of 'quarry' is an animal or bird that is hunted by something or somebody—and somebody or something that is chased or hunted by another. Finally, the transitive use of the verb, denotes the 'act of extraction' and (of particular note in this case) the obtaining of something, such as facts or information, by searching laboriously and carefully. Once more, it will be seen that there is an emphasis here for us on process and methodology and how these aspects of our practice are deployed and managed in specific accordance and resonance with the objectives of each project. A prevailing structure, conceptually, and often practically, is that of the search, where our investigative work and that of our collaborators and/or participants in the projects often from within other disciplinary fields, is made visible, as a constituent of the artwork itself.

The weapon used for ptarmigan hunting, in common with game shooting in the UK, is the shotgun (also known as scattergun). Following the trajectory of pellets from a discharged cartridge, this part of the work imagines a passage through several different kinds of space—in the first instance, following the real journey down the 60 cm barrel of the gun and from there, a further 50 m across the open space of the quarry to the symbolic space of the map. At this interface, the metal pellets punched holes through (and in some cases, remained embedded) in the

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map, thereby identifying specific houses or apartment blocks. Ultimately, through this and subsequent enquiries, we were able to identify the presence of specific animal occupancy within homes in Reykjavík 101, at some 30 km distance from the quarry. By further extrapolation, by means of the camera, we extended the symbolic journey of the initial shots into the very real, domestic sites of human/non-human animal cohabitation. This set of maps, was the document of an event and became a tool for our subsequent inquiry—as both, it constituted one of the exhibits in the art work.

In the four photographic portraits we made, each hunter stands, legs apart and braced to absorb the recoil from the gun at his shoulder. At this time of year, from 15 October to 15 December using this type of gun and shot, the Icelandic hunter would be focusing his attention on the ptarmigan, the mountain bird whose plumage turns to white in winter. The bird is used for the traditional Icelandic Christmas meal. As he shoots, we 'shot' the shooter and so an image of the act was recorded on film. This suite of photographs constituted the second part of the artwork and was exhibited together with the maps, in the National Museum of Iceland.

> The number of households hit was 273. Of these, 161 were special flats for the elderly where pets are not allowed. The survey therefore comprised 112 households. 91 households responded to a follow---up call. Of these, 25 had pets. 16 households had cats. 9 households had dogs. 2 households had birds and 1, a snake (a forbidden animal). (Snæbjörnsdóttir and Wilson, *(A)fly* 77)

When at a later time, we entered into the respective homes, on our request we were shown to the specific places where the animal chooses to reside or rest—the place where he or she sleeps and wakes up, to look out on the world about. Here in front of this place, we set up the camera for another shoot; this time, the place made intimate by the implicit, recent presence of the animal. We were interested in the question embedded in the images, that in the absence of the animal, what was it—there on the film, on the photograph?

A photograph can never contain the present; it always records the past but presents itself to us as the basis of some imagined future. Thus, according to Roland Barthes, it has the ability to blur the boundaries between life and death (Barthes 96).

When looking at the often rather forlorn images of the dwellings, one senses the departure, or loss of a subject. The given name of the respective animal incorporated below the photographic element, adds to this sense of loss in a way that invokes what we might understand as a 'haunting' presence. It is an unbalancing experience when we suddenly find ourselves in the presence of something which prompts us to think beyond our terms of reference—even more so, when the mechanism for this seems to be constituted by the utterly familiar.

This unsettling is not about what we see, but stems instead from the absence of what we expect to see. In compositional and affective terms this might be what we once referred to as a centre of interest, or as Barthes put it, the 'punctum' or point.

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(Barthes 40). In this context, into every disconcerting or disquieting gap we try instinctively to pour some sort of light or knowledge. The audience might escape the constraints of his/her own learned response by asking, if the animal is absent, as is the human, then whose home is this?

We saw the process and the exhibited work as an instrument whereby momentarily we might visualise our own 'othering' in the world of the animal. But another way of looking at these images is to approach them as we might a forensic investigation.

The photograph directs our attention in seeming to give importance to a context rather than a specific subject—is this not how we imagine a crime or investigation scene after some fateful event has taken place? If it is the scene of a crime, there is certainly no sign of any violence. Nothing is disturbed, overturned or in disarray. On the contrary the scene is more or less ordered and things seem in their place. When we encounter the scene of a police investigation, typically characterized by exclusion tapes and notices we are still compelled to look. Fleetingly, surreptitiously as we pass, we search for clues to tell us who, what and how? Furtively, in turn we survey these interiors and here too we are made aware of our voyeuristic transgression when moving through the closets, the bedrooms, the cupboards, ledges and lounges of these essentially private spaces. What clues are there to be found here? What signs? What are the residual and tell-tale traces left by animals and humans?

By some means, the apparent removal of an identifiable subject leaves us in a quandary and since we cannot help but acknowledge that all occupancy is implicit only, there is a balancing effect where all possible presences, human and animal—existing as they do in the imagination of the viewer—are of equal value.

As to the investigation and our forensic enquiry—are both parties, in their equality, therefore under threat? Is their relationship what we thought it was? How does this relationship reflect our diminished sense of a meaningful interface with the wider environment? How is the animal itself complicit in this? What has domesticity done here? What effect does symbiosis have on the respective agents and their position in the world? And is there the possibility still, that the animal, even the domestic, detached animal, despite all its derisive negation by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (265), can after all serve in some way to reconnect us to our own lost 'animality' and so beyond, to the idea and practice of 'cohabitation' in a global, non-domesticated sense?

The project interrogates our disparate approaches to animal others—down the barrel of a gun we acknowledge the distance that is a part of our conception of wildness—without that sense of distance, could there be so strong a desire to narrow the gap between ourselves and them, through hunting, through field study, eco-tourism and the absorption of the unfamiliarity of its nature—or indeed through its eradication and taming through agriculture?

If by looking at these habitat photographs and observing the approach, which is the approach of each respective animal through the environment, to the bed or to the nest or den within our homes and we are moved to imagine our animal selves, without being sure necessarily, *what* animal—if by doing this, instead of furniture,

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clothes and window sills, we are able to see simply the likely places we might clean ourselves, scratch, curl up in or perch upon, then some slight transformation or shift has taken place and we may be reminded that our civilizing ways are really froth on a turbulence almost impossible to see from here.

Nevertheless, that 'turmoil' or unrest *is* present and altogether suddenly darker, more chthonian and ultimately and pressingly, just below the skin.

3 Performative Encounters (2009–2011)

In our multi-media installation, *between you and me* (2009), one of the key components, *Three Attempts* is a performance-video work showing a live encounter between a human being and a colony of seals in an estuary on the north coast of Iceland (Fig. 3). Our intention for the piece was to engineer an encounter between seals and humans in a situation where having presented ourselves, it was then entirely the seals' choice as to whether the 'meeting' actually took place. Seals are thought of as curious animals and according to local folklore are attracted to the colour orange and this influenced the choice of the performer's outfit. A camera was set up behind the figure as she knelt down on the shore looking out to sea, emulating as much as possible the body contours of a seal. For a long time (as is playfully reflected in the title of this work *Three Attempts*) nothing happened. The tide was coming in and in the film one can see the seals popping into the sea from the bank on the far side of the estuary; but still they kept their distance. The performer whistled various tunes but stayed mostly still—finally the seals started to come closer and to bob up in the sea in front of the performer—one after another. When this work was shown in association with the *Minding Animals #1 Conference* in Newcastle, Australia (2009) there were some who supposed we had tapped into some kind of 'magic' or shamanistic method to call the seals out of the

Fig. 3 Snæbjörnsdóttir and Wilson. *Three Attempts*, still from single channel video work, from the installation *between you and me*, 2009. (© Snæbjörnsdóttir and Wilson)

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sea. Needless to say, this was not the case. What was ultimately clear to us, was the unequal respective positions of those involved in the work—that is the non-human animal and the human. It was us who decided and contrived to set up and record this and to turn this 'interaction' into a work of art. In that respect, the seal had no choice in being thus instrumentalised and once again, the distinction between an event and its recording, indicates an ethical threshold and some of the dilemmas of representation.

For *Vanishing Point: Where Species Meet* (2011), a work commissioned for *Pandemonium,* the 2011 Göteborg International Biennial for Contemporary Art, we tried to test further this interspecific encounter work. In a site-specific response, we decided to invite seagulls for dinner (Fig. 4). The area where the work was to take place is notorious for seagulls 'pestering' al fresco diners at local restaurants. We designed a table and installed it close to the edge on the flat roof of the Biennial building, Roda Sten. The long table meant there was space at each end, allowing seagulls to partake either separately or 'with' a seated human performer. Local fishermen we consulted gave us advice regarding the seagulls' favourite foods, some pieces of which were then placed in the specially hollowed-out bowl at one end of the table. The performer, using a stove and utensils, fried the same food at the opposite end. In the weeks preceding the performance, because seagulls had not previously frequented that location, some food had regularly been put out there, as a familiarising strategy.

By cooking on site, we hoped that the smell might attract the seabirds. What is important to note is that it was never the objective of this work to sensationalise an encounter between human and non-human animals. To counteract any such notion,

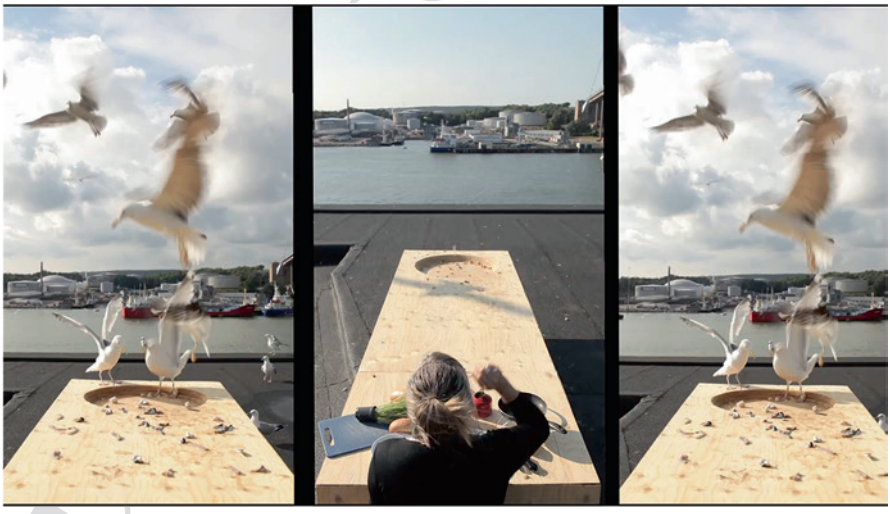

Fig. 4 Snæbjörnsdóttir and Wilson. *Vanishing Point*, still from three-channel video work, commissioned for *Pandemonium*, 2011. (Gothenburg International Biennial of Contemporary Art; © Snæbjörnsdóttir and Wilson)

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we placed the cameras carefully in positions that, should a close encounter occur in which the animal made contact with the performer, this would not itself become the subject of the documentation.

On the day of the performance and the filming, the weather was spectacularly clear and sunny. To our surprise the seagulls were reluctant fully to accept or indulge our invitation. We had had previous experience of them catching food in the air so we threw some out over the table into the bowl but even when they came in a flock, there was no intrusion—whilst the human diner sat at one end, they kept their distance, at and around the other.

We can speculate over the reasons why it is that when we want quietly to eat, the seagulls are unafraid to drop down at our tables and steal food from our plates, before our eyes—but when invited, and a situation is created for them by which they might freely eat, the desire for such proximity is reduced. In this light, we, or others might one day conduct other, extended analyses, wherein issues of unfamiliarity, shyness, politeness, suspicion, respect, fear, mischief (and the lack of sandwiches) might be explored…

Nevertheless, recordings of human and animal encounters on social media offer an abundance of sensational imagery in which animals are active participants in human-made realities. Contemporary natural history documentaries for the BBC not only show us intimate images of animal lives (and deaths) in close-up, but in these productions, a special epilogue is added—another layer of 'transparency' incorporating the exposition of human endurance and tenacity (the camera crew in pursuit of the elusive animal) in order to draw us into an interspecific worlding, highlighting the intersection of behaviours, animalities and temporalities at variance.

What is it then, that we as artists do when staging human and animal encounters in which the conventional role of the camera as an interspecific medium is challenged? Is it indeed possible to displace the notion of hunting, so embedded in the practice and terminology of photography (to capture, to shoot, to take)—and consequently in the resulting image—as trophy?

4 Ecologies of Being and Meaning

In the chapter, *Place and World: The Photographs of Bryndís Snæbjörnsdóttir and Mark Wilson as Environmental Photography* written by Fröydi Laszlo for *You Must Carry Me Now: The Cultural Lives of Endangered Species* (2015) she says:

> The time of the historical, when the human would bend towards nature and read its secrets, is over. Instead, we must acknowledge that our image culture has come to dominate our idea of the real, and that where traditionally the image was likened to a mirror of what exists, the technical image is now a projection onto the world. It will make no difference if this projection is made by photons on a light sensitive surface or constructed by a computer programme like Photoshop or CAD. The indexical relation of an 'outside' existence, to its visual reproduction is destabilised. Instead of the finger pointing from reality towards us through our use of media we point, through our image culture, towards the outside. We can no longer read or make sense of our world without these projections; they are our real source of meaning. (140–141)

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In essence, with specific reference to 'image' this reprises once again, our obfuscating dependency on simulacra—and so, the paradoxical question for many artists remains—as proponents and general purveyors of image, how can this dependency be deconstructed and reassembled—and our images aligned to more revolutionary and disruptive effect?

One of the methods that has been important in our work ever since the *nanoq* project has been to deploy ways of destabilising the dominance and credibility of generic representation and so to connect directly with the individuality of *particular animal beings*. This strategy, we believe, carries with it the possibility of opening up an empathetic space within the human imagination, by which we seek to make our artwork have the greatest possible meaning and affect. Practically, on more than one occasion we have done this by combining texts with photography or video, in works that relate a particular history to the subject of an image or to otherwise extend, inflect or confound the meaning of that image. (The image and the de-stabiliser, or troubler of image)

In *You Must Carry Me Now*, both a photographic and a video work including images of 14 frozen condor bodies, carefully laid out on black cloth, the photographs are juxtaposed with written texts that describe aspects of their individual lives and behaviours as revisited in the recollections of their human stewards (Fig. 5). When alive, these condors had been part of a conservation project in and around the Grand Canyon, Arizona. Initially, back in 1987, all 22 remaining condors had been removed from the wild as part of a capture-and-release programme in order

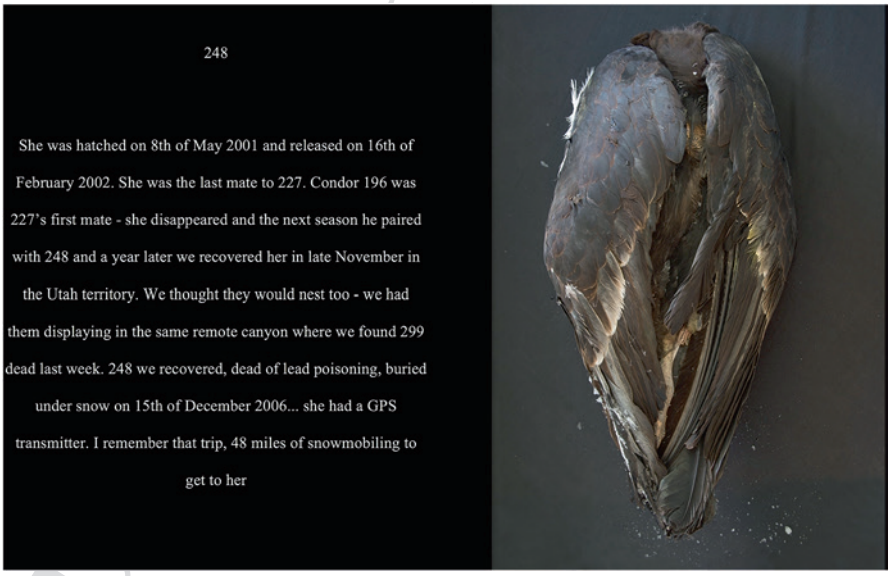

Fig. 5 Snæbjörnsdóttir and Wilson. *Condor #248*, still from single channel video work *You Must Carry Me Now*, 2014. (Collection ASU Museum and Art Gallery, Tempe, Phoenix; © Snæbjörnsdóttir and Wilson)

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to save them from otherwise certain extinction. During captivity, the programme bred the birds through incubation and after 5 years began releasing them back into the wild at Vermillion Cliffs in the Grand Canyon. By the 31st of December 2014 the population had grown to 421 living Californian condors, this number comprising 193 in captivity and 228 out in the wild. Each and every bird carries a pair of number tags, each the size of a hand, on their wings and a GPS transponder in order for the programme to monitor their movements. The contradictory aspect of this rescue/conservation mission is that despite all this investment, effort and care, the birds are still under the same threat from humans as led to their initial endangerment—that as scavengers, they will naturally feed from easy, but fatal pickings, from the discarded gut piles of carcasses left by hunters using lead bullets. As a consequence of this they fall victim to lead-poisoning and if not recalled to the field lab on a regular basis and treated, these birds will die of crop stasis and so, starvation.

Cary Wolfe in *Condors at the End of the World* writes about this work, that

> these bodies before us are part of an *archive*, one enmeshed in a complex landscape of legal, political, and scientific forms of knowledge and force, what […] Derrida calls those "stabilizing apparatuses" that simulate the sure and steady existence of a world in the face of the complexities we have just outlined. […] As Derrida points out, "there are no archives without political power", and indeed, these Condor bodies are in fact *evidence* of a potentially very charged political type, autopsied to reveal (more often than not) poisoning by a hunter's lead bullet. The archive is thus, as Derrida puts it, a kind of *mise en scene* of:two principles in one: the principle according to nature or history, *there* where things *commence*—physical, historical, or ontological principle—but also the principle according to the law, *there* where men and gods *command*, *there* where authority, social order are exercised, *in this place* from which *order* is given. (164–165)

It is in examples like this response and analysis that we acknowledge art's significant place in the extension and development of new thinking as part of a shared and developing interdisciplinary discourse around for instance, the environment and a post-humanist approach. Together we seek to carve out and occupy a space of contemplation and action with *our* enquiry and research methods. Such methods exist within what we identify as an infinite number of possibilities, each kindled by discrete encounters in which 'otherings' are manifest in human and non-human species, systems, events and phenomena.

In one of our publications entitled *Uncertainty in the City*, related to an art project with the same name, Rikke Hansen, whilst considering the project in the light of Nicolas Bourriaud's 1998 signature work, alongside writings from other commentators (including Kester and Morton), points to the participatory nature of the project as constituting a correspondence with the themes of *Relational Aesthetics*, but also suggests the departure that *Uncertainty* provides by "facilitating a radical openness" in its utilisation of "more-than-human hospitality" (112–113) In making further reference to Jacques Derrida she references the effect of the work, in rendering us "'naked', stripped of our usual contours of identity". But, by dwelling on complexity, uncertainty and irresolution within the work, in fact

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we feel more correspondence with Claire Bishop's proposed relational antagonism (Bishop 52–79), itself put forward as a critique of *Relational Aesthetics* on the basis of the lack of specific critique attributed to or embedded in the work of some of Bourriaud's key artist-exemplars. Disruption-towards-reconsideration as a principle, is paramount here as a useful objective of art. Two further points are significant in Hansen's essay. One is the insight that like *nanoq*, the project seeks to privilege the individual encounter and indeed, individual *being*, as an antidote to cultural and generic presumptions. The other is the intrinsic 'ecological' nature of the work. She quotes Timothy Morton:

> [Ecological thinking] isn't just to do with the sciences of ecology. Ecological thinking is to do with art, philosophy, literature, music and culture […]. Ecology includes all the ways we imagine how to live together. Ecology is profoundly about coexistence. Existence is always coexistence. No man is an island. Human beings need each other as much as they need an environment. Human beings are each others' environment. Thinking ecologically isn't simply about nonhuman things. Ecology has to do with you and me. (Hansen 115–116)

Put differently and even more inclusively, the 'model' for an alternative form of relational aesthetics offered by our project *Uncertainty in the City* is profoundly ecological because it investigates the complex and a-rational interconnectedness of living organisms, entities and systems, whether human-to-human or human-to-animal, human-to-plant, plant-to-mineral, animal-to-plant-to-weather system, and so on.

In our most recently completed project, *Beyond Plant Blindness* (2017), possibly our most challenging to date, this collaborative project has seen us functioning as artists within a research context involving botanists and plant 'collecting' (Fig. 6).

Fig. 6 Snæbjörnsdóttir and Wilson. *Searching for Stipa*, archival photograph (dimensions 1.5 × 14 m), from the project *Beyond Plant Blindness*, 2017. (Installation in Stolpboden building, Botaniska, Gothenburg, Sweden; © Snæbjörnsdóttir and Wilson)

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Deceptively simple at first glance, the project, which was funded by the Swedish Science Council is predicated on the idea that as humans in a western, agrarian, capitalist and ultimately highly anthropocentric society, we (dis)regard plants with such passivity that we can be said to be 'blind' to their world, their ontologies and their behaviours. Instead, they customarily provide simply a backdrop to human (and animal) subjects. This issue of perceptual exclusion is taxing, often because of the reasons it occurs in the first place and for this we can point once again to our historic and incremental withdrawal from the land and the replacement of a subsistence engagement—and this is absolutely linked to ideas of migration and serial 'encounters' with phenomena *in the land*—by an agrarian relationship where demarcation, delimitation, selection, separation and exclusion are the watchwords for a way of life which is both desirous of control but ultimately, in turn just as controlling of our behaviour and experience.

In the project's initial proposal to the Research Council, the small *Beyond Plant Blindness* team, of which we were members, wrote:

> Contemporary humans have become an urban species. Living in megalopolitan cities reduces intimate contact with the natural world, thus placing greater emphasis on 'presented nature' settings, such as zoos, botanic gardens and natural history museums. However, previous research has demonstrated that 'plant blindness' inhibits human perceptions of plants. In view of increasing species' extinction, the world can no longer afford our citizens to see 'nothing' when they look at plants – the basis of most life on earth. The team will examine the hypothesis and sensoric experiences in 'presented nature environments' to investigate whether through the functions of art, a shift in perception might enable a move from 'plant blindness' towards the perceptual centrality of plants in an imagined sustainable world. (*Beyond Plant Blindness*)

The fact that technology allows us now to observe the social behaviour of plants, their observed activities and choice-making gives us real insight into their very different temporality and ontologies. We are customarily drawn to notice mammals because of their similarities to us—in the context of similarity, apparent differences are made distinct and to matter. In plant life, much activity is either hidden (going on below the surface of the earth) or happens so slowly as to be imperceptible to us. The life cycle of plants involving germination, growth, reproduction, death and enriching decay occurs variously over weeks, months and millennia but the changes involved are invariably too slow for the human eye to notice. Perhaps more than anything it is these real but discrete invisibilities that are most constitutive of our general blindness towards plants. Again, what we as humans 'see' or indeed are able to 'see' can be but a disembodied fraction of what plants 'are' and 'do'. When we gather plants together in a botanical garden (for the living) or herbarium (for the dead) we make distinctions to which we may be customarily blind, more evident by singling species out, by re-presenting those, which neither belong here, nor indeed belong together. The decontextualizing and concomitant exoticising of plants in this way parallels just what we do and have done with insects and fauna in natural history collections and zoos. Such collections privilege the spectacle of things but give us very little insight

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into how things behave and relate—and nothing at all of the 'work' they do, out in the world. It denotes and services our tendency to see objects rather than relationships.

The presentation of components of the 'natural' world within synthetic settings such as zoos and gardens must therefore culturally be in some ways contributory to our incremental tendency to overlook and our fatal failure to see 'them'—these obfuscating mechanisms, intended once as a means by which to lend focus and offer synthetic order have over time displaced the original complexities of site, local conditions and interspecific symbiosis and relations. Their presented surrogates and simulacra, have served to create distance between the objects of our study and the awareness of our environmental and interspecific ontological entanglements. In this light, it might appear to be utterly paradoxical, if not perverse, that intermittently over two years, we worked on the site of Botaniska (the Botanical Gardens in Göteborg) on our part in the *Beyond Plant Blindness* project. But in many ways, over and above the logistical and political expedience of this requirement, it made the same kind of sense, as was mobilised in our work in *(a)fly* (2006) to be working at the problematic *cultural* site—at which plants from all over the world are relocated—and imagining, from there, back into the world.

It also makes sense that in our work on this project we were interested, no less than in previous human-*animal* inquiries we had conducted, in the idea of encounter—no less, because we could see that the challenge of doing so with plants mirrored absolutely but even more challengingly, the case of our interactions with mammals or birds, molluscs or insects.

When we speak of encounters we must also and always consider the encounter between our production and its audience. The use of non-art spaces in which to exhibit is appealing in that the strategy spreads the effects of art democratically beyond art audiences and environments and this dispersal aligns ideologically with our wider, ecological approach—the processes, media and mechanisms we use have the capacity to draw in unexpected audiences and, in the case of Botaniska, to hijack the attention of some who otherwise had no intention of viewing art at all. For *Beyond Plant Blindness* the work we showed between April and September was placed in three sites across the Gardens—one in the gallery near the visitors' entrance, one at Stolpboden, an ancient wooden store house in the centre of the Gardens, near the restaurant and the third, closely related work, in the building known as the Rain House overlooking the Rock Garden.

We focused on the recent and historical relocation of specific plants within the Garden—how and from where they had been collected and on the difference and behaviour in their domestic setting. Amongst a selection with which we worked, made up of specimens chosen by the horticultural curator Henrik Zetterlund, one plant in particular *Stipa pennata*, a steppe grass was particularly useful to us as an example by which we could explore tensions existing between a variety of human interests and factions. We focused on the specific nature and behaviour of the plant and particularly on its propagation habits.

The feathered *Stipa pennata* awn carries its seed, first on the wind and then into the ground. Once dispersed by wind, with increased humidity during the night, the

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twisted awn becomes erect and in the process, pushes the pointed grain into the soil. During the day, the humidity reduces but the stiff, backward-pointing hairs at the base of the spikelet lock into the soil, preventing the grain from reversing. Through alternating phases of day and night time humidity, the awn's pumping movements drill the spikelet as much as an inch into the soil.

Compelling though this narrative might be, it speaks of a temporality beyond our patience and capacity easily to register, without resorting to the aid of technologies which in turn assert, exoticise and distort rather than allow us to extrapolate imaginatively for ourselves. Our strategy was to slow things down by other means and so on the two sites where *Stipa* featured, respectively, we mobilised the effects of scale and transit.

By piecing together a total of thirty electron microscope scans we generated a one-hundred times enlargement of the seed awn, thus taking it to a size of 14 m × 1.5 m—considerably larger than human scale. This scroll was presented horizontally to fill the interior space of the old wooden Stolpboden building, confronting the audience on entry, but too close to and too large to be accommodated in one view. The level of detail of this image in relation to the eye was overwhelming and so, primed with the story of its dynamic and tenacious environmental behaviour, the viewer could move slowly to the left and to the right and back, to begin to absorb something of its world and nature.

In the Rain House our emphasis was on the history and the single, unique natural habitat of the plant in Sweden. The wild site, in Västra Götaland, is a patch of less than 200 m^2 in total and yet there is evidence of this predominately Eurasian Steppe grass having grown consistently at and around this site since the Bronze Age. Its status is now close to extinction in Sweden and though various (contested) conservation measures have been taken, its fate there is under review.

From inside the Rain House, the visitor was able to overlook the growing *Stipa pennata* (or European Feathergrass) in the conspicuously managed Rock Garden section of Botaniska, through window/screens carrying large scale images of the single, diminutive, wild site of this extreme (Swedish) rarity. The difference between these two environments is striking, the wild site being a clamour of colour from a riot of competitive plant life. Fenced off now from surrounding livestock, it is believed that *Stipa*'s survival chances are more in jeopardy than ever, because with no seasonal clearing of spaces by hooves or by spades, the relatively weak plant is compromised by the elaborate process and needs of its natural dissemination.

In the final work (shown in the gallery) we placed in close proximity, a photographic image of one seed respectively from a selection of 14 plants, a text extract from the interview with Zetterlund in which he describes the (usually geographically remote) site and conditions of its collection and historical introduction to Botaniska—and a seedling in its pre- and early stages of growth, taken from the very same collection shown in the photographic image.

As with the *Stipa*, these seed images were captured in the electron microscopic scanner—multiplying their size considerably through a high-resolution scan thereby transforming the seed from being a minute speck to the size of a pumpkin.

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In the process of its production, we replaced the grayscale mode with colour, as close a match to the original seed as could be discerned by the human eye, using a standard microscope. In the installation we relied on a method of art making we have used before and which relates to what has been referred to art-historically, as 'three registers of representation'. This method is often associated with the conceptual work of Joseph Kosuth, especially his *One and Three Chairs* (1965). Mary Kelly in her *Post Partum Document* (1973–1979) later challenged this modernist conception of what she referred to as an 'objective' legacy. It is however within Kelly's definition that we see resonance with our own work in that she emphasizes the production of meaning as residing in the medium, in the contexts in which the art is produced and from which it is reviewed, and finally, in the significance she placed on sexuality as an asset of artistic authors and audience alike. Replacing (or perhaps conjoining) the sexuality factor with that of non-human animal relations allowed the construction of our seed installation a conceptual framework within which these plants justifiably assumed and demonstrated multiple traits and resonances of the conditional, of the transitory and of our specific and personal intersections—in this case, of course, within the garden site of Botaniska.

In conclusion therefore, by the deployment of these sometimes various, sometimes closely related methods it should be clear that art may be an instrument by which we bring focus to and privilege *relationships*, from any of which it is possible to extend our understanding. If we seek to distinguish and separate per se for instance, encounters between species on the one hand and encounters between art and its audiences—ecologically speaking, we miss a trick. The opportunities with which we are presented when we think about encounters between humans and other species and indeed of any interspecific meetings and interactions—deserve close consideration, for instance of the processes and natures of diverse perceptual capacities and behaviour. *Encounters* for the artist and for all, concern thresholds where something new, unique and extraordinary becomes possible or evident. To think usefully about encounters in the first instance, is to recognise their potentiality not only for ourselves but for the relational encounter itself. Secondly, we should fight in order to presume nothing. Then, from a position of uncertainty, we should watch for what might happen next—to arrest the torrent of assumed knowledge—to slow down thought…

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Bryndís Snæbjörnsdóttir and Mark Wilson are a collaborative art partnership. Their interdisciplinary art practice is research-based and socially-engaged, exploring issues of history, culture and environment in relation to both humans and non-human species. Working very often in close consultation with experts and amateurs in the field, they use their work to test cultural constructs and tropes, and human behaviour in respect of ecologies, extinction, conservation and the environment. Underpinning much of what they do are issues of psychological and physical displacement or realignment in respect of land and environment and the effect of these positions on cultural perspectives.

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