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The Politics of Co-creating Art with Other Animals

An Interview with G.C. Heemskerk and Jessica Ullrich

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P/A Forum

Interview

The Politics of Co-creating Art with Other Animals

An interview with G.C. Heemskerk and Jessica Ullrich

Eva Meijer

*The **Interviews / Symposia** format acts as a platform for conversations, where participants discuss the original work of an author, practitioner, policy maker, or activist. As such, these entries do not offer an outlet for original research, but instead reflect the personal views of the participants*

Introduction: Nonhuman animals have always been part of artistic practices by humans. Many cave paintings, the earliest known form of human art, depicts other animals. Animals were not just portrayed by humans: their body parts and labor were also used by human artists. In paint and paint brushes, film, and many other disciplines and practices. The history of art is not human, but multispecies, and to a certain extent co-created by more-than-human animal agency. In recent years, actual animals are used more and more in art projects by humans. Sometimes, this follows from concern for their subjectivity, well-being, liberation and/or artistic agency. But there are also instances when animals are used for aesthetic reasons or to promote human well-being, as in many 'multispecies' of 'more-than-human' projects that are mainly concerned with environmental or climate justice, without taking seriously nonhuman animal rights.

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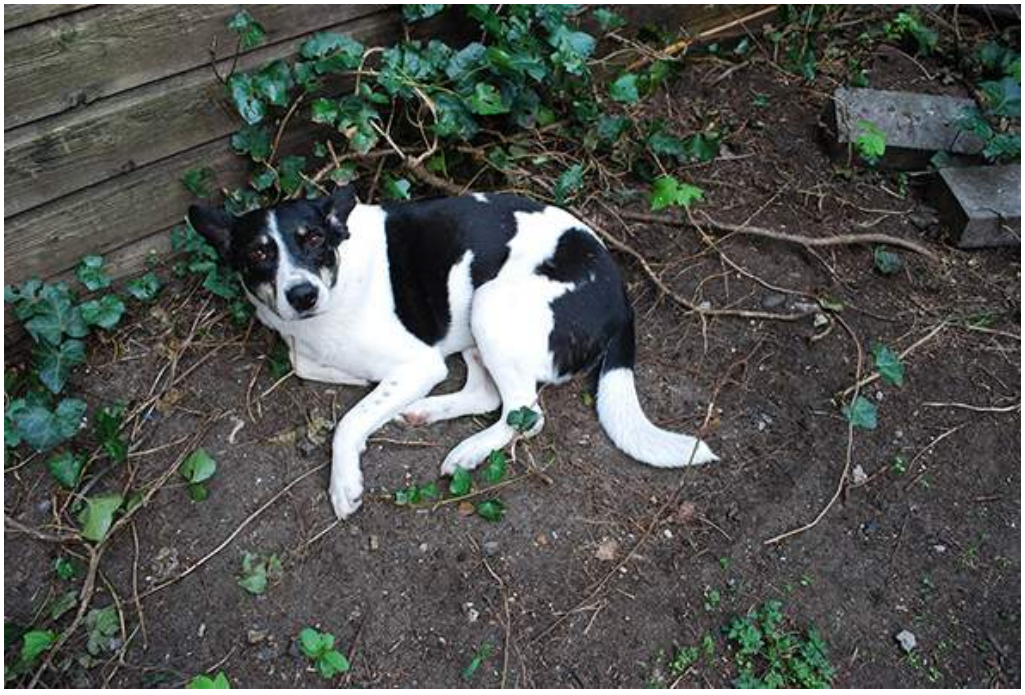

Former street dog Olli Meijer in one of his dens (photo: Eva Meijer 2014).

Humans are not the only artistic beings: other animals create art too, and art – their art, or co-creating art – can help us on working towards more just multispecies forms of living and community. In the basis, art is about creating meaning in and about (shared) life-worlds, and more-than-human animals often express themselves in creative ways. This makes art an important addition to critical thinking about animal rights and animal liberation. We need critique of the status quo, but we also need to imagine just ways forward. Art can help us, understood as a multispecies us, do so. Because animals express themselves in art in their own words, as it were, attending to that can help us overcome prejudice and stereotypical thinking about their capacities. At the same time, art can also reinforce anthropocentric narratives, and has in fact long functioned to do so. There are many ethical questions attached to creating art together with nonhuman beings, regarding privacy, consent, and benefiting from their labor.

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Work made by brown-tail moth caterpillars on Schiermonnikoog (photo: Eva Meijer 2025).

As a philosopher and artist, I see the promises of collaborating with other animals in creating art. I am part of a multispecies art collective to explore animal art, and work towards animal liberation by using art. But I also see many problems in the way that animals are currently used. While there are guidelines for using animals in art (for example, the Minding Animals Curatorial Guidelines for Animals and Art Exhibitions,[1] and the Manifesto for the Multispecies Museum that G.C and I created together with the Multispecies Collective[2]), many human artists still follow anthropocentric logics. To further explore this, and to clarify the importance of art for those political philosophers and theorists who conceptualize just futures, I invited two humans who specialize in animal agency in art to share their views on the topic: G.C. Heemskerk, a philosopher and artist who collaborates with nonhuman animals (and human animals like me), and art historian Jessica Ullrich, who thought extensively about animal agency in art.

[1] https://www.mindinganimals.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/Minding-Animals-Curatorial-Guidelines-for-Exhibitions-27-Sept-2017.docx.pdf.
[2] https://themultispeciescollective.cargo.site.

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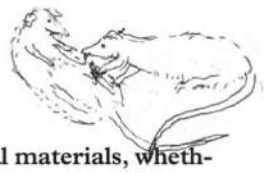
Manifesto for the Multispecies Museum

Museums, galleries, and other art spaces are often presented as places for and by humans, but they are also multispecies spaces. The building influences the lives of non-human beings such as birds, trees, bats, and insects, who have just as much right to the city and the land as humans do. Museums use animals and plants and profit from them. Much art depicts non-human beings, shaping how humans think about them, and/or is made from or with animal or plant materials. In most museum cafes, animals or animal products are consumed.[†] Sometimes, furniture or lamps are made from their skin. This violence against animals and plants in museums is invisible and normalized, similar to how this works in larger society. We call on museums and other art spaces as part of the cultural vanguard to take responsibility for their impact on the lives of animals, plants and other nonhuman beings, and work towards just and sustainable multispecies relationships.



Steps towards multispecies justice

THE COLLECTION

Research what percentage of the collection is made from or with animal materials, whether reparations need to be made, and what those reparations could entail. Do not make new acquisitions for which nonhuman animals have died, and assess the material and symbolic impact of prospective acquisitions on the lives of animals and plants.

THE BUILDING AS ECOLOGICAL SPACE

Consult with biologists and urban ethologists to map the impact of the building and the garden on insects, birds, bats, and other critters, and to investigate ways of improving life for them. Consider transportation, parking, and other influences on infrastructure too, as well as indirect effects such as pollution in the form of light, sound, and waste. Consider becoming a zoöp (https://zoop.earth/).

CATERING AND INTERIOR DECORATION

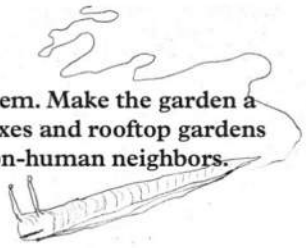
Do not serve corpses or animal products in cafes and restaurants.
Opt for vegan and second-hand furniture and materials in (re)design.

SPEAKING ABOUT NON-HUMANS

Avoid speciesist language in exhibition texts and other expressions. Ensure that educational programs also address non-humans. Organize a symposium on this subject.

ACCESSIBILITY

Open the museum to companion animals such as dogs or rats, consider organizing exhibitions and events for and with them.



NON-HUMAN NEIGHBORS

Treat ants, mice, and other small guests with care and do not kill them. Make the garden a refuge for hedgehogs, bees, and other non-human neighbors. Nest boxes and rooftop gardens can also contribute to an improvement in the quality of life for non-human neighbors.

The Multispecies Collective

[†] Animals die for human consumption, plants not necessarily. No diet is entirely nonviolent, but a plant-based diet is the most just and sustainable choice for all beings, including humans.

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P/A **Jessica and G.C., thank you for joining me in this conversation. How did you become interested in animal agency in art?**

GH In my final year at university (2018), I had to write a thesis. After attending a lecture by you, Eva (on animal languages), and reading Donna Haraway's Companion Species Manifesto, it clicked, I experienced an ontological shift. Suddenly I saw that the human/animal dichotomy is untenable and violent. Among other things, this changing worldview caused me to now understand that what non-human animals make and do can just as well be art. It is ridiculous to exclude all non-human animals a priori. And this I then tried to explain in my thesis *The Companion Species as Artist*. In retrospect, I may have been working on this for a long time, but I couldn't always find the words, nor was I fully aware of it. For example, when I was 18, I did a performance walk with my dog Spike, where we walked from the art school in Amsterdam (called the Gerrit Rietveld Academie) to our then home in Rijnsburg (40km). Next to that, together we developed a performance where we tried to prepare for a period where Spike would no longer be alive and I would. In the end it looked like this: I would throw a ball (which Spike was incredibly fond of) and he would then neither chase it nor bring it back. I don't know if it was a very good art work, but it was important for us to work on together.

Spike Heemskerk

Kim David Bots, 2008

So, I have a background in visual art. I make installations, videos, performances, drawings, and also write texts. My work is always narrative in nature and I also always try to convey a message. Or to tell something that is not told otherwise. In my work, collaboration is very important. Actually, I believe that there is no such thing as an autonomous artist, in my opinion we always work

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together. I try to show that as much as possible and give recognition to the relevant partners.

JU I always loved animals and I always loved art. For a long time, I could not decide if I should study art, art history or veterinary medicine. So, I tried everything. The way animals were treated by some of the professors in veterinary school was one of the reasons why I decided not to go forward with this. And I quickly felt I was not talented enough to be an artist myself. But I was pretty successful as an art historian and it felt natural to combine my interests and look at animals in art and art history. Animal-human relationships and animal aesthetics became my main field of research more than 20 years ago. I wrote about animals in artworks, taught it at university, curated exhibitions and organized conferences about the topic at a time when animals were not accepted research subjects for art history at all. But I have never let myself be put off and sticked to the topic even though I got a lot of ridicule and obstacles from academia. Even though I was a vegetarian since childhood (I only became vegan as an adult) and involved in animal rights activism as a teenager and young adult, I did not make the connection in the beginning of my studies. But when I finally started to include ethical questions as well, my research was even taken less seriously. Luckily, the situation has changed a lot in the last decade, probably because of the rise of academic animal studies and a new sensitivity for social justice. Now, scholars for example start to question the freedom of art when it involves animal cruelty, something that was hardly possible when I started to work in the field.

I have to also say that my constant inspiration for thinking about animal art have always been my incredibly creative companion dogs the late Nikita and Laika and now Kitty and Alea. Nothing would have been possible without them.

P/A **Jessica: what is your impression of the current situation with regard to animal agency in art? Can you give some examples of artworks that reinforce the status quo, and artworks that challenge it?**

JU There is a general turn towards questions of non-human agency in the current art scene and a deliberate decentering of human agency as an artistic strategy. Artists include all kinds of living or non-living entities in their artworks and refer to them as collaborators or co-actors: plants, fungi, bacteria, chemicals, AIs. It is therefore no wonder that animals are also regarded as beings with agency in contemporary art. I find this rather new development exciting, but unfortunately, the inclusion of animals does not always go hand in hand with an ethical attitude towards these animals. Many philosophically interesting and aesthetically convincing works still instrumentalize and manipulate animals in a problematic way even when they call them ‘collaborators’. A well-known example is ‘I like America and America likes’ me by Joseph Beuys, in which he interacted with a coyote called Little John in a New York gallery. It is an influential and also extremely important work for animal-involving art which is repeatedly cited as an example of a respectful approach to animals in art. Compared to other performances of the time, in which animals were tortured and killed, it is. Nevertheless, Little John was taken out of his habitat, a wildlife park, and placed together with an unknown person in an almost empty room

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where he clearly did not feel comfortable. Even though his agency was fundamental for the success of the work, he was forced into a situation he had not chosen. No consideration was given to his interests and needs. This is an iconic historical work that was performed in a time when questions of animal ethics did not yet play a big role in society, but unfortunately some artists in the 21th century still work in a similar way.

For example, British artist Douglas Gordon rented the elephant Minnie from a circus and had her transported to a gallery in New York along with her handler so that she would perform a command for him to film. Minnie had to lie down which is a rather sensational image because elephants usually don't or very seldomly lie down. The resulting video 'Play Dead Real Time' is visually appealing and also multi-layered in terms of content. It could even be interpreted as a critique of the treatment of animals. However, this does not change the fact that here again an animal is instrumentalized for an artistic idea without any consideration to her wishes. Minnie did not consent to her appropriation. Such works reinforce the idea that animals are always available as objects for display and that the value of animals lies solely in their usefulness to humans.

But there are many positive examples of artists who work with animals, your own work in the Multispecies Collective being a prime example. Another work I really like is Julie Andreyev's modest and playful collaboration with a free-living crow in whose territory her own house and garden is located.

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Julie Andreyev: Process images for *Crow Stone Tone Poem*, showing interspecies stone arrangements by Andreyev and a crow, 2015. © Julie Andreyev

When she put a bowl of water for the birds outside on her deck, she noticed that a crow had left a pebble in return. Andreyev interpreted the small stone as a gift and as a gesture of acknowledgement for her kindness towards the crow. She decided to put another pebble on top of the one the crow had left on the deck and waited for a response. This started a long and ongoing spatial and sculptural communication between Andreyev and the bird. Every day the pebbles were arranged in a different way. The exchange might have been triggered by a human's generosity but it really had been initiated by an animal. The collaboration seemed to be meaningful for both human and animal. The crow did not just react but respond to Andreyev's interventions and the other way around. Andreyev even considered the arrangements by the bird more elaborate and beautiful than her own since they were more immediate using a gesture with the beak against the pebble stacks thus taking into account the gravitational forces of the earth. This process work ended up being the project *Crow Stone Tone Poem*, a graphic score for sound performance which

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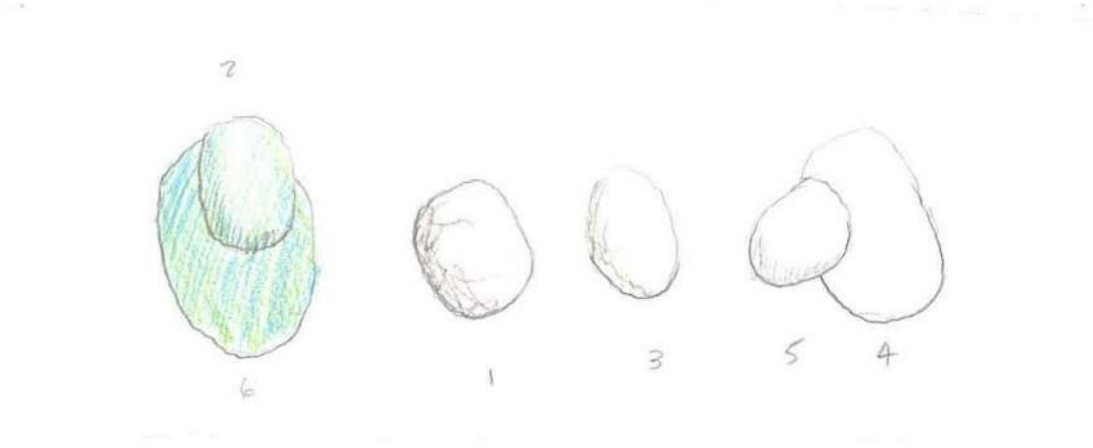
was disseminated to public audiences via performances, exhibitions and publications.[3]



Julie Andreyev: Excerpt from *Crow Stone Tone Poem*, interspecies graphic score, Julie Andreyev and a crow, 2015-22. © Julie Andreyev.

And they are other interesting approaches: Most artists collaborate with the animal companions they share their daily lives with and with species who share a long history of co-evolution with humans. Madeleine Boyd, for example, interacts with her ponies Picasso and Prince, with the purpose of providing space for an equid perspective. The resulting work consists of videos recorded by body cameras attached both to Boyd's own head and to that of Prince, of paintings to which the ponies contribute hoof print structures, and of their performances together, as part of which the pony takes the lead and determines the path to be taken. Boyd attempts to render conceivable a relational aesthetic practice neither situated in the context of equestrian sport or horse breeding nor predetermined by scientific approaches to the behaviour of horses. She renders public her private interspecies everyday life, marked by empathy, playing, and learning together.

[3] https://julieandreyev.com/crow-stone-tone-poem/

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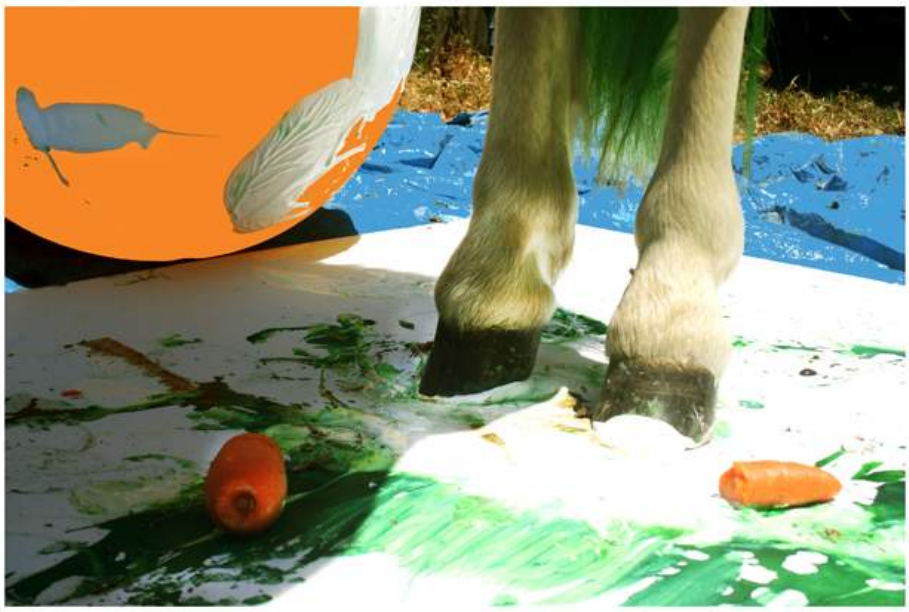

Madeleine Boyd: Painting by Prince the Pony, © Madeleine Boyd.

The artist duo Hörner/Antlfinger also work in a respectful, cooperative manner with their companion parrots Clara and Karl, with whom they formed an artist collective named CMUK. For their project ‘Subtraction 1’, for instance, Hörner/Antlfinger left big chunks of cork to their animal companions for a re-working.

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CMUK: Subtraction One, 2016**,** installation, cork sculptures, table, ceiling with light installation, 180 × 180 × 240cm, installation view “The World we live in”, kjubh kunstverein, Cologne, © Ute Hörner/Mathias Antlinger.

CMUK: Subtraction One, 2016, Detail, © Ute Hörner/Mathias Antlinger.

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The birds bitemarks and scratching produce aesthetically interesting sculptures that resemble landscapes, ancient cities or archaeological findings. The parrots decided if and when they wanted to work with the material and how they wanted to use it. The activity is valued by the birds and they seem to enjoy the gnawing, nibbling and scraping on the object.

And Lee Deigaard collaborates with her canine companion for the photo installation ‘Vixen. Vector’ by letting Tiger dog take the lead on their daily walks and letting her explore the streets of New Orleans on her own terms.

Lee Deigaard: Vixen Vector, 2013-2017, Photographic Series and Installation, © Lee Deigaard.

Tiger dog’s body is her means of expression and Deigaard documents gestures of companionship between herself and Tiger dog. The artwork claims these scenes are worth attentive observation: It is forcing viewers to attune themselves to the dog’s rhythms and to an unspectacular moment in her life doing nothing special.

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Lee Deigaard: Vixen Vector, Detail, © Lee Deigaard.

These artists share their lives with birds, horses or dogs and know about their interests and needs. The collaboration is not dependent on some sort of exceptional human genius but is rather a relational phenomenon and a deeply social activity. And the creative acts of the animal co-authors seem to be playful, purposeless and self-rewarding (and art itself has been described as playful, purposeless and self-rewarding).

Another interesting recent field in the artworld worth mentioning are artworks aimed at animal audiences. There are, for example, films specially developed for chimpanzees by Rachel Mayeri, olfactory sculptures for dogs by Lisa Korpos, performances for pets by Krõõt Juurak and Alex Bailey or concerts for water buffalos by Andreas Greiner. By addressing other animals as aesthetic beings who can enjoy artworks, their very own world view is taken into account as well as their own aesthetic preferences – no matter if humans can relate or not. Such an approach hopefully makes animals less available as projection screens for purely human desires and needs.

Rachel Mayeri: Primate Cinema. Apes as Family, 2011, Video, 16:9, 12 min, © Rachel Mayeri.

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Krõõt Juurak and Alex Bailey: Performances for Pets, Ravensburg Art Museum, February 2017, Photo: Wynrich Zlomke, © Krõõt Juurak and Alex Bailey.

Andreas Greiner / Louis McGuire: Concert for Mammals, performed for water buffalo, (Tobias Gschwendner, tuba and water buffalo), Stiftung für Kunst und Kultur Nantesbuch, October 2023, Photo: Andreas Greiner, © Andreas Greiner, © VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2025.

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Lisa Korpos: Olfactory Landscapes for Dogs, Concept Sketch 2023, © Lisa Korpos.

Lisa Korpos: Olfactory Landscapes for Dogs, 2023, installation view “Start Sniffing”, Kunsthalle Exnergasse, Vienna 2024, Photo: Jessica Ullrich.

P/A **G.C., in what ways do you challenge anthropocentrism in your work?**

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GH I challenge anthropocentrism in three ways:

1. By working with non-human beings.

I work primarily with animals that we have coevolved with. Because by living together for thousands of years we are in tune with each other and already have many common language games. This makes it easier to understand each other and take into account each other's needs and boundaries. For example, I work a lot with Doris Meijer, the dog you, Eva, live with, Wiske Heemskerk and Miemel Bots, the dogs I myself live with. I also worked with several feral urban pigeons from Rotterdam South. And with the animals and plants that live on the grounds of the Pompgemaal (an Artist in Residence location of the Mondriaan Fund). The last group are animals that could rather fall into the “wild” category. Although, of course, there is debate as to what extent groups like “wild” and “domestic” are tenable. Making contact and having conversations is more difficult with this group. I don't think you should disturb these animals, especially in an overcrowded Netherlands, where almost all animals are stressed. Instead, I observed what they have already made and tried to map that. I made a map of the grounds of de Pompgemaal, showing, among other things, the rabbit burrows, hare trails and molehills.

Installation made Miemel Bots and G.C. Heemskerk in Den Haag (photo: G.C. Heemskerk 2022).

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Installation by Wiske Heemskerk and G.C. Heemskerk, Amsterdam (photo: G.C. Heemskerk 2018).

Path, found at the Pompgemaal Den Helder (photo: G.C. Heemskerk 2022).

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Maps, Pompgemaal Den Helder (photo: G.C. Heemskerk 2022).

2. By not objectifying non-human creatures, and using them as materials, for example. A useful tool for this are the curatorial guidelines established by Jessica, Carol Gigliotti and Yvette Watt at the 2018 Minding Animals Conference (see footnote 2).

3. By giving something back to non-human worlds. This too can be done in different ways: by influencing others through telling a story, by making art for nonhuman animals, and by helping animals themselves. So with my work outside the collective, I try to act as a propaganda machine. For example, with the short film “The Plantriarchy,” I tried to playfully explain how violent and outdated the concept of “invasive exotic species” is, and how it is linked to the Netherlands' colonial past, agricultural history and anthropocentric worldview. [4] I also once made bread head sculptures consisting of bird food, which, by the way, were eaten not by birds but by slugs, and I actively advocate for urban pigeons by ridding them of painful stringfeet (strings that constrain their feet and toes, gained while searching for food in our human waste). Furthermore I organize fundraisers, where I sell my work for organizations as Sulala Animal Rescue, Cow Sanctuary De Leemweg, and Stichting Stadsduivenhulp.

[4] While we do not explicitly address plants in this piece, many of the same questions and concerns also matter in relation to plants.

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Film stills of breadhead sculptures being eaten by snails, G.C. Heemskerk (2021).

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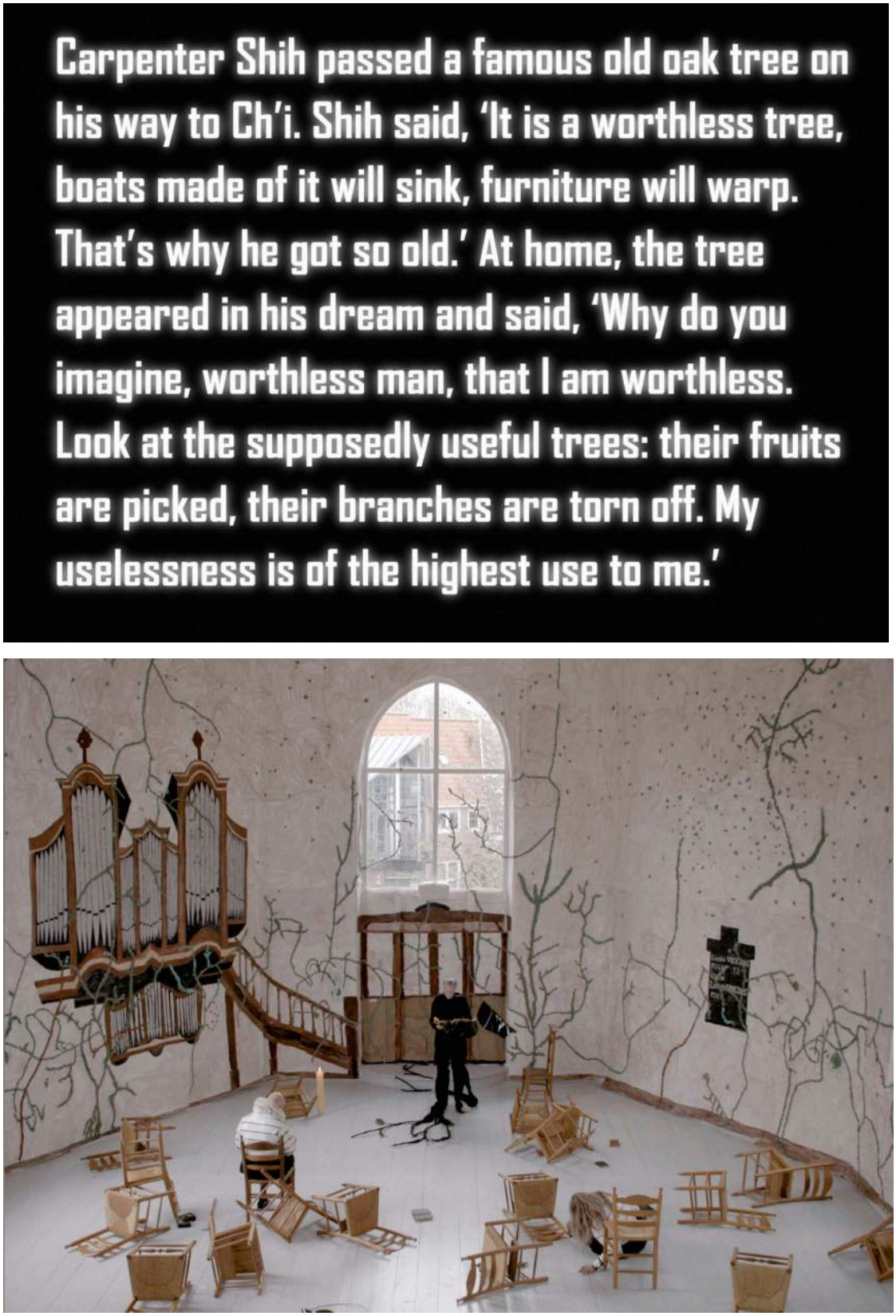

Film stills of *The Plantriarchy*, G.C. Heemskerk and Bernice Nauta (2024).

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G.C. Heemskerk and Shani Leseman destringing two pigeons at Rotterdam Zuid (photo: Norbert Storm 2024).

P/A **Jessica: how can co-creating art with animals help us to work towards just multispecies communities?**

JU Unfortunately, it is hard to avoid the instrumentalization of the animals who are involved in an artwork. They are always at risk of becoming mere extensions of human agency. But I nevertheless believe that co-creating with animals can grow into a political instrument for animal liberation by challenging the idea of human exceptionalism. Such artworks can help human audiences to perceive other animals as feeling, communicating, thinking, social, and even aesthetic individuals. The acknowledgment of nonhuman animals as creators and co-creators of art can help change a reductionist attitude towards other animals and question outdated and detrimental notions of animals as passive objects, exploitable resources, symbols or ornaments. In multispecies art, animals lose their traditional status as consumable objects, even if the imbalance of power between humans and animals stays intact. If animals are no longer perceived as instinct-driven beings but as creative, social beings with whom it is possible to interact, then such a paradigm shift could contribute to their ethical recognition.

By challenging the separation between human and nonhuman lives, such artworks can show pathways to reconnecting with other animals. And this in consequence may nourish transformative political power beyond the artworld.

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P/A **G.C.: how has working with more-than-human animals changed your practice and ideas about art?**

GH I have become somewhat skeptical of the concept of art because those who currently decide what is or is not art benefit from fencing it and barring non-human art. Something similar has long happened to art made by human minority groups. Art historians, conservators, curators, collectors and critics determine what is or is not recognized and what fits into which art movement, what is or is not preserved. For a long time, for example, women were hardly mentioned, if at all, in art history books. But, of course, this does not mean that women did not make important art. Rather, it has to do with, as art historian Linda Nochlin and others describe, oppressive social structures, limited access to education and institutional barriers. Currently, a change is underway and more and more minority groups are becoming better represented in the arts, which is encouraging. Yet I remain wary, because this apparent acceptance of other kinds of art within the new canon can also be crippling and cause real change to stagnate. As early as 1982, sociologist Sarah Zukin explained how large corporations and right-wing or conservative governments work together to use art as a tool to prevent real activism. Corporations, banks, shareholders and conservative or rightwing governments invest in art through purchases for collections, tax benefits and giving grants to artists. In doing so, they want to ensure that artists express their progressive thoughts in their work and do not really engage. The same is true for consumers of art; that after a museum visit one thinks one has completed one's social tasks for the week. In short, art is a means of maintaining the grand narrative of capitalism. Companies such as Unilever indirectly help decide what is or is not recognized as valuable art. Currently, our economic model leans heavily on the exploitation of animals. It is in the interest of this narrative not to recognize them as persons or as potential artists. I also see many exhibitions around me about the “non-human” but often there is little practical consideration given to non-human animals and they do serve corpses in the canteen or use wool, for example. In my own work, therefore, I find it extra important that concrete actions are taken and there is actually something in return for the non-human individuals being collaborated with.

P/A **And a final question to you both: How do you see the future of multispecies art?**

JU Multispecies art should only be made with individuals who have given their consent and who enjoy working with humans. This would probably reduce the number of animals who will participate in human artmaking at all - companion animals might be the best candidates for collaborations. All animals who are co-creators of artworks should be treated with respect, empathy and politeness.

I want to mention a specific already existing form of post-anthropocentric art that does not even look like art at first sight: Utopian cohabitation projects in which humans and animals share their lives in creative and responsible ways. To name just two examples: Mary Britton Clouse runs a micro-sanctuary called ‘Chicken Run Rescue’ for chickens from the animal industrial complex making sure that they are living their best lives.

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Mary Britton Clouse: Nemo-Portrait/Self Portrait, 2005, © Mary Britton Clouse.

And René Marquez has established a rescue organization for dogs who do not fit in human society called ‘Free to be Dog Haven’ where he works, plays and collaborates with ‘non-socializable” dogs putting their needs above his own.

Both projects are performative artworks that make the world a little better for some individual animals while also serving as examples for multispecies solidarity and conviviality. I believe that collaboration in multispecies art is possible without fully mutual understanding. Some kind of attunement to the nonhuman other might be enough to challenge species hierarchies and to point to the possibility of more empathic way of relating to the world.

But free-living and liminal animals can make art, too, and I hope for the future that animal made-art is appreciated on equal footing with human made-art. If humans look at animal art, the expressed emotions, perceptions, cognition, and aesthetics should be taken seriously while allowing the animals to exist in their significant otherness – without humans hijacking animal-made works by giving them meaning that only makes sense to humans.

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And my last aspiration is that animals receive credit for their works and that they are remunerated in a way that is meaningful for them.

René Marquez: Free to be dog Haven, © René Marquez.

GH I would like to see that humans will learn the following things from more than human animals:

1. More-than-human animals as well as plants and fungi do not need institutions to make what they make. It gives a glimpse into a possible world where institutions as we know them today are no longer needed when it comes to exhibiting and preserving art.

2. The work of more than humans shapes the world in a complementary way. It does not destroy the world through the use of chemicals and plastics. It is often impermanent and degradable by other animals, plants and fungi.

3. Their artworks are often outside a monetary system. Nonhuman animal art is “free” and all around us. It is often said that we can no longer think or fantasize outside the capitalist narrative, but many plants and animals and fungi do. When they make art, they experience no perverse incentive. Problematic behavior such as creating or contributing to a housing market, making health care inaccessible and expansive, or creating a monoculture of plants is not rewarded.

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Film still from *The Plantriarchy* G.C. Heemskerk and Bernice Nauta 2024.

About G.C. Heemskerk

G.C. Heemskerk does not believe in the idea of an autonomous artist. Everything you do, you do together with someone. Heemskerk collaborates with non-human animals, plants, fictitious characters and (living) humans. The work differs from drawing to audio, video and performance. Although it takes different shapes, it is all a form of storytelling. See also: https://cargocollective.com/gijsjeheemskerk.

About Jessica Ullrich

Jessica Ullrich holds a PhD in art history and is Professor of Art and Aesthetics at the University of Fine Arts Münster. She has been Assistant Professor at the University of Arts in Berlin and at the University Nuremberg-Erlangen. She also works as a curator and published exhibition catalogues and collection of essays mainly on modern and contemporary art. Her research interest lies in human-animal relationships in art and aesthetics. She is editor of *Tierstudien,* the German journal on animal studies as well as representative of Minding Animals Germany. See also: https://www.jessicaullrich.net/.

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