Kate Foster in conversation

with Bryndís Snæbjörnsdóttir and Mark Wilson

Bryndís Snæbjörnsdóttir and Mark Wilson: One of the reasons we were keen to interview you is our own interest in the relationship between art and activism. You have said; ‘my art is about how I live’ – can you tell us more about this and how life decisions are functionally manifest in your art?

Kate Foster: Art and activism? There are so many ways artists choose to resist, and different priorities. If I try to separate out ‘life’ from ‘art’ from ‘activism’ it gets too tangled and abstract. Art is a part of my life where I most actively puzzle about relationships with the non-human world. I see myself as one of a destructive species, social carnivores, supreme predators—only partially able to understand the impacts of what we do collectively. Ethical practice concerns the kind of relationships you strike, not just with other people of course. The puzzle is about shifting from anthropocentrism and also reformulating frames of power and authority.

I’ve recently been able to work alongside farmers busy with lambing. It’s an intense time, often a family affair, where the ewes are coaxed into nurturing their lambs. Death and life all in a heap. It is a window to how each of us is a mammal, but predator and prey brought together with uneasy alliances. So where do I place myself, where am I placed?

I now live in a remote rural community and settling here has at times made me feel ignorant and inept, de-skilled. However, I question much of the land use around me. It was circumstantial that I came to live here, but I decided to allow this setting to shift my Glasgow-based art practice. At first, I concentrated on becoming self-sufficient in vegetables on what was a sheep-fold in an upland hill-farm, and am now setting up dialogues. I’m focusing on agriculture through a Scottish Borders visual arts award—a kind of ethnography, being an observer as well as a participant, asking various people in this locality to explain their viewpoint to me. I’m privileged to be meeting astute, caring folk. In one particular setting, I have moved from being described as ‘artist in residence’ to ‘owl person’ (when I sat in the loft above a lambing shed, sleepily drawing). Bacon butties were relished at breakfast over chat about my strangeness, as a vegetarian. After I had brought a trugful of organic greens from my polytunnel I was hailed as ‘the salad lady’. I was gratified by stories of emptied plates. So different activities help build up reciprocal relationships based on mutual respect. Working this way has let me shift viewpoints—at first sight this stock-farming area seems a rural idyll to many, but through closer involvement it can seem a place of absence, loss and death. I really do not wish to live within a nostalgic viewpoint, and am seeking out instances where people are transforming relationships between themselves, animals, land, in the light of environmental changes.
But there is more to it than hitting the right note with other people. I am working in spaces of human and non-human animal encounters. You are concerned yourselves with uses of human power on animal lives, and how we think.¹ You have explained that your work is about staying with complexity – following Donna Haraway, you want to develop the capacity to think and learn in situations of shared pain and mortality.² I share this intention. Through my artwork, I’m seeing more overlaps between being human and ‘animal’. Ecosystemic thinking does not leave it there, a material world needs to be taken into account. In particular, I want to develop an eye for what a ‘good’ carbon landscape is like, referring to the work of geochemists such as Susan Waldron.³ I am learning about largely invisible processes happening over time. This is prompting a markedly different reading of my surroundings. Since I am active as anyone else in this, I think of it as carbon-scaping - growing greens in a polytunnel is one version of this.

So - I use art to puzzle at some everyday circumstances, decisions people make where our own worlds intersect with non-human ones. I want to ground this with awareness of how things cycle between animate and inanimate. This is prompted by concern and care, with measures of wonder and grief.

BS/MW: For you, how does activism manifest itself in your artwork? Is there a difference between the artist as an activist and activist art?

KF: What I do is rather quiet, seeking reflection and space for complexity. In developing my own version of rigour, I’ve questioned external markers of success, where to place my work, how to decide when it is working. This has meant learning to be resourceful – being opportunistic, using what you find locally – and dealing with the requirements of adopting a ‘slow’ lifestyle. Deciding to localize my practice has meant not pursuing some other options, and negotiating degrees of ‘slowness’.

One concern is finding a relationship with academic research. I did a PhD in social policy before going to art school, and moving from that mode of working meant surrendering a position of expertise. As an artist, I work from a point of not knowing, uncertainty. But I still value academically produced knowledge and take it into account, working collaboratively with geographers and to some extent zoologists. Much of academic research is quite constrained in what it can address, it is compartmentalized and increasingly privatized. Artists play a part in activating different kinds of awareness, contributing possibilities of playful irreverent creativity.

My work in the zoological collections was about understanding more about extinction, death, animal existences. The effects of loss of biodiversity on ecosystems can be articulated through careful science. But what affect does it have? Developing an eye for interconnectedness has expanded and deepened what I care about.

Looking at how land is used reveals a host of aesthetic decisions, understanding agriculture involves deciphering entwined human, animal, and earth histories. Issues of power run through how land is used - it is highly political, often in a rather disguised way, with shifting geographies of emotional and physical pain. As I said, I really don’t wish to relate to
landscape in an estranged or nostalgic way, but see my setting as something we collectively are shaping. There are huge questions about securing some kind of future, for people, domesticated animals, wildlife and ecosystems alike.

BS/MW: In your own words your ‘drawing is situated in the here and now’ – and as such your drawings depict a frozen moment in a locality. In relation to your ecological concerns what do you hope to capture with your drawings that a camera doesn’t?

KF: I like field drawing because it is direct, I become absorbed in what I can see, feeling being alive. R.F Langley wrote that the process of seeing - the raw material of his journals - ‘lit up his life’ and that rings true for me. I sometimes take photos too, and notice that each starting point and particular medium throws me into different sets of relationships. Drawing is starting to work well for what I want to do just now. I call it ‘drawing in the field’ to distinguish it from scientific field drawing. I like the dynamic of it. You are present in a situation, eyes moving between page and ‘field’, concentrating, and quietly documenting. It’s not about an estrangement, it’s about becoming aware of the entwined ways you are present in that place with non-humans also, and wondering at its specificity.

Drawing can also help dialogues, build relationships. Sure, in part, it is what people expect artists to do, it gives you access to various places. I have found a quiet way of working that is less intrusive than using a camera would be. People are curious at first, but then take what you are doing for granted. Conversations start when people look at the sketchbook and this develops the work. This is akin to the idea of ‘politeness’ in research – I want to avoid constructing information behind the backs of those I am studying. It is to do with giving those you are working with (including animals as well as people) the chance to be ‘interesting’. I mean by this that they can counter my preconceptions, interest me with something I did not expect. The process you are involved is ‘making things public’ which Latour describes.

You ask what I’m hoping to ‘capture’. Perhaps this word does apply, but it is a slippery kind of catch. I use drawing to focus my attention on parallel existences, or the coexistence of how people, animals, land and climate adjust to each other. I started with sheep, wanting to place them in the ‘present tense’, thinking about how human activities underlie their varied presence. On one hand I am gaining an ecological view, but drawing in a setting where people work with livestock opened me to the pain and care of the process.
Drawing helps me see how animals respond to human-made landscapes and activities. It reminds me of shared situations but also enchants me about otherness. The drawing is for me and other people, but I learn about my impact and intentions by drawing animals in their various settings. How we represent animals affirms the relationship we want to have with them. You immediately start mediating what you see, so I reveal myself to myself. Sifting through the drawings later allows me to unsettle received viewpoints.

Another reason to draw is that I prefer to use simple equipment, trying to use less materials. Saying that, I still scan the drawings, print them as multiples, shove them on the energy-hungry internet. Maybe the term ‘annotated drawing’ fits what I do – the textual notes are about what surprises myself, making it into a process, so the drawings work as a series.

**BS/MW:** Many of your drawings are of zoological specimens, dead animal bodies. What are your intentions in drawing these and how is it that you locate them in the ‘here and now’?

**KF:** I’ve drawn zoological specimens, re-connecting them to different times and places, thinking about how they got there and where their co-specifics find themselves now.

Specimens are in part dead animal bodies, bound up as artefacts with other materials. The work was about re-connecting them to different times and places. With the series *Biogeographies*, there were different compulsions. They are uncanny objects that haunt me. There was a desire for reparation - or what Merle Patchett constructed as ‘repair work’\(^8\) - and sadness about untimely endings and human appropriation, the diminishment of life.

Items in the news about impacts of climate change (such as a butterfly species moving north; or threats to Scotland’s only endemic bird) prompted me to ask the curator of the zoology museum for access to specimens. Drawing started me thinking, a way to reach under the skin of the specimen I was presented with, and feel my way towards the processes of how it came to be where it now is. Reading goes hand in hand with drawing. The process allows specific
twists and turns to be added to the news-story, I opened myself up to becoming haunted by particular specimens, led by their uncanny threads.

Figure 2: Studio drawings of grouse specimen, pencil on paper, © Kate Foster, 2003.

Reaching under the skin inevitably led to thinking about taxidermy, with the enjoyable companionship of Merle Patchett’s postgraduate work. The drawing of a grouse came from research for Disposition which explored the unique history of a hen harrier specimen. Hen harriers are killed illegally because they occasionally eat grouse chicks, the story has particular resonance in Scottish history.

Overall, the series Biogeographies took certain specimens contextually from the scientific collection and re-presented them in a variety of ways. One collaborative work, Blue Antelope, has been the hardest to place in any ‘here and now’. It is currently lodged as a small historical niche-interest in white South Africa. In the late eighteenth century, dwindling numbers of this extinct animal were killed off by European naturalists and collectors operating alongside the colonization of the Cape. Glasgow University holds an incredibly rare skull; our combined efforts revived interest in this and it was reclaimed and redisplayed in a refurbished museum. But it remains displaced from where it has most cultural resonance. This is insoluble as the cultures of the people who lived alongside it for millennia were also annihilated by colonization. As an artwork, this collaboration exists as a reflective Geography of Blue – a joint-text of writing and drawing. It was also a vehicle to scrutinize themes of historical geography. When I get to work on this again, my plan is to revive the animal through genetic back-breeding, and release it into a private game farm, its most likely resurrection in contemporary South Africa. The animal’s existence is inextricably entwined with the narrative of hunting and European projections of African wilderness. Since European contact, South African renosterveld (part of a unique biodiverse plant kingdom on which the animal grazed) became poor-quality wheat-land. If I resume this project, I’d work from the staged but almost naive drawings of an eighteenth century explorer, Robert Jacob Gordon, who witnessed what he was in the vanguard of destroying. Another reference would be rock drawings by Khoisan people which are so appropriated by tourism that referring to these could be problematic.
BS/MW: Your artworks are often combined with textual information that reference and/or reveal the histories and context behind the subject matter. Can you tell us about this relationship and how it functions in the constitution of the artwork?

KF: I consider what particular viewers might need to find ways into the work, to look at something familiar with renewed interest. As it is highly contextual work, newcomers need some help. If artists, scientists, general public see an installation in a museum, they have very different starting points - some want references fully explained, others want to be left to make their own sense of it. I’m aware that most people won’t have had the chance to work around the topic like I have. Accepting that people will respond variously from concrete rejection to poetic enthusiasm, I have tried out several different ways to suggest departure points, provide ‘references’. Moving from the A4 written sheet, I’ve used a file of texts, edited interviews via headphones, and more elaborately an edited book of ‘correspondences’ presented as an artist’s book. Working in a museum, I’ve used particular exhibits in the museum context to supply the references but its mainly artists who pick this up. I have just set up a blog[www.inthepresenttense.net] to make my investigation accessible, which only works for some people. I have not found a formula, but I keep trying to turn a potentially lonely space of a critical viewpoint into a constructive dialogue.

BS/MW: There is a clear research element in your work manifested in the determination that through intensive observation when making a drawing, knowledge will be produced. How do you make this knowledge public? What are your strategies for doing so and how are they manifest in choosing the context of the public outcome? Who is your audience?

KF: Drawing is part of a strategy to get looking and get talking, finding out what different kinds of knowledge there are. I could extend this, saying the main ‘drawing’ I make is to connect up what different people have made of the subject. With the harrier - there were conservation organizations, gamekeepers, lairds, taxidermists, the museum collector, ornithologists, birders, and visitors to a nature reserve given access to CCTV footage of a nest, and so on. So I become part of the network around a particular object that seems to develop a life of its own. I’d say ‘knowledge’ is being made public all the time, from the very start. I learn something and pass it on. Obviously this is with discretion - I’m building up networks based on trust and there are different interests at play. I become a go-between amongst enthusiasts, people for whom the topic lives. I suppose my audience is anyone prepared to share this enthusiasm, prepared to move between viewpoints and explore different meanings.
The whole process is working in public, following leads. A hen harrier specimen took me to meet staff of the Duchess of Westminster’s estate, as well as a highly experienced museum taxidermist. It was very helpful to show them the actual artefact - the skin of a long dead female. She is a demanding old bird, as I find in my attempts to revitalize her. This skin is a kind of transitional object, not just for me perhaps. A transitional vehicle to help move between different kinds of knowing, a creature that can subvert our attention, under the skin. Her talons are still sharp, she is a killer.

The Scottish Arts Council had funded this particular piece, so a public outcome was required. I described it as re-working the idea of museum diorama to show the unique cultural history of a particular specimen in a university zoology museum. The installation also played on the conventions of how biological research is presented - that is, made public. So, if an investigation has to be frozen for an outcome - then it is an editorial effort to find some aspect that will resonate in a particular context for the kind of people who are likely to visit that place.
Drawings on paper are just one product of an iterative and dialogical investigation. As a public artwork, the ‘drawing’ is about creating lines between different kinds of knowledge and making a dense enough mesh to offer a safety-net to encourage people out of their comfort zones, single viewpoints and specialist knowledge. If there is a strategy, it is to give the concern a twist to give it renewed interest, and to layer information to satisfy those with the more concrete approaches. Successive works have been experiments of doing this in different ways.

BS/MW: Much of your work over the years has been inspired by and/or executed in the context of the Zoological Collection at the Hunterian Museum in Glasgow. What are the consequences do you think for an artist to embed him/herself within a specific institution over such a long period of time in this way?

KF: The collection was housed within Glasgow University’s new Zoology Department in the 1920s, and still sits in the heart of departmental life, being used as a teaching and social space. It is open to the public. It is a precious resource with a generous curator, who encourages artists wanting to make use of the collections despite a shoestring budget. With each project, I have accumulated more experience of the content of the collections and their care, the production of scientific knowledge. Clearly I’m not a scientist but there is some overlap with the curator’s job, in terms of researching the history of the collections and exhibiting to the public a process she might describe as assisting public engagement with science.

There has been a progression in each museum project. I arrived there as an art student puzzling over lungfish, in frustration at anthropocentrism in fine art practice and in respect for the concerns of environmental and conservation biologists. My first piece presented drawings about how different live animals in the department took breath, using the same presentation style that biology students were also offered in the museum. This turned circle as the most recent exhibition supported students showing their creative response to doing rainforest fieldwork. The department and the museum have hosted a series of my public artworks, from subterranean sound-works to attempts to make specimens soar, with great good humour. The first public artwork was a solo show, this developed into interdisciplinary joint-work, and the curation of an exhibition including other artists and geographers who make use of zoological collections. It has been about building trust and relationships over a decade, mainly through informal reciprocity.

Sure, the setting has shaped how my practice developed and provided opportunities for joint-work, but this would not have worked if I could not roam between different arenas. Though independent funding for interdisciplinary work is scarce, it was worth working for, as I could not have operated in this interstitial way without it. On a prosaic note, the risk of volunteerism is that an organization can take your contribution for granted – it’s a help to have external recognition and for the work to be shown elsewhere.

It’s true I have a mission to subvert ownership of ideas about nature, but this criticality is not directed at individuals or a particular institution. On the contrary, working this way has increased my respect for the people I have found to work with.
BS/MW: Some of your works are collaborations with Hayden Lorimer and Merle Patchett, both human geographers at Glasgow University. Can you talk about the nature of your collaboration?

KF: This developed from work in the Zoology Museum. I was based in the Department of Geographical and Earth Sciences through a Leverhulme Residency in 2005. I had a remit to pursue my own line in combination with others if shared interests could be developed. For me, this was mainly joint-work on Biogeographies and the exchange fed back into individual work as well as collaborative outcomes. This was enjoyable, based on mutual respect, shared values and our obsessive commitment to our respective pursuits. At times, there was the excitement of the chase, particularly with the long-dead and hard-to-find remnants of the extinct blue antelope. We introduced each other to different sets of knowledge and networks, and invented structures to bring people together. Of course, all this helped articulate aims and processes. You cannot depend on other people for a purpose, but you can enjoy companionship.

In general, about interdisciplinary work, there’s more talk than money. Possibly the funding structures invite misplaced concreteness about a weary repertoire of objectives. For art-science collaboration, an unimaginative and stilted scenario would be an academic wanting glamour and an artist seeking gravitas. My preference is to work quietly under the radar and sidestep obstacles, for others this would be too quiet an approach. There is no free lunch - the Research Assessment Exercise [now Research Excellence Framework] makes sure of that. It is fantastic to find people enthused by what they do, socially committed, prepared to play a long-game.

BS/MW: Further to the above can you expand on the different approaches exercised by the sciences on the one hand and your relationship to those disciplines as a contemporary artist on the other?

KF: I use work by environmental scientists as a point of departure - analyses of situations ‘out there’ shape how I see the world. But though I have to take a lot on trust, I do try to make sure of the status of any work I use – assessing how much confidence can be placed in it, taking care not to misrepresent it.

An example of referring to scientific work into non-human affairs, would be feminist directions in primatology that urge respect, politeness towards what is being studied - not to study something behind its back, as I mentioned before. This challenges the dominant frame of analysis that reads all interactions as competitive. From this assumption, you get the answers you expect: animals deprived of food will compete for it. But when you start to think social animals might cooperate, you can find that indeed they do.

As a process, I think that cross-disciplinary work can force a more constructive rephrasing of differences. I try to remain open to being changed by whatever I am working on. I am interested in ways to help us understand ourselves better as animals, in context.

I am not constrained by what medium and format to use. My texts within artworks are not instrumental for disciplinary knowledge - they are there to amplify possible meanings for a
viewer. They are usually quite factual, but with gaps between the sentences. The idea may be to pair ideas without asserting a linear argument. Geographers or zoologists do not have the same scope: they publish within much more prescribed formats and frameworks, and explicitly demonstrate what contribution is being made to previously published work. I am not so much concerned with abstract new knowledge, but rather making local and specific situations meaningful in new ways.

Maybe this is a separate point, but I think the scientific process is often misrepresented – it is as though people want a concrete and fixed scientific ‘truth’ and are unwilling to accept messiness and uncertainty. Science is fluid and open to revision. It is hard from the outside to decipher what is the most rigorous and trustworthy work. Of course, academic work is subject to fashion.

Obviously, as an artist I have different motives in supplying information – it is a strategy to draw attention to the overlooked and construct alternative meanings. It has to resonate with non-textual work offered. Within cultural geography there is a concern with more-than-representation which is interesting for artists as it takes into account practices and material dimensions of life. Various experimental geographical practices are appearing, and an interdisciplinary practice opens up different possible allegiances. I stick with working as an artist because it is enlivening – finding ways of visual thinking that challenge arenas and formats of interpretation. Compared to academic research, artwork has far more options of who it is for and how it operates.

BS/MW: One of your drawings entitled ‘December 1’ is a small picture of a white and grey bird below it a text work. It reads: “What’s that? too white, too low, too fluid, to be the heron”. Who is the heron? Why is it ‘…the heron’ rather than a heron and what part, if any, do thoughts of the singular and specific as opposed to the plural and generic play in the conception of your work?

KF: I’ll explain how I came to use the pronoun, and think about when I become possessive. I was out drawing and stopped in my tracks. I often go by that spot and see a heron, so it has become the heron. Herons work their patch singly while hunting, moving slowly along the river searching for live food. I’ve learnt not to look at them directly - if you walk by face
down, they will not take flight. But if they see your full face, they will reluctantly pull themselves up into their characteristic heavy flight. Just at that point there was a different kind of movement, another avian hunter at work. A male hen harrier which is ghostly white - unlike the tweedy brown ground-nesting female. A bird in passage, and I had never seen one there before. I stood and stared, writing ‘I think I am making this up.’

This is the first in a series of images annotated with text - I ask do they have black wing tips, checking out to myself that it was not a gull. I watched it for a while, trying to catch chaffinches. I’d gone down to see the chaffinches, which in late autumn were eating hawthorn berries - and seen a harrier.

So that’s how I wrote it at the time - and I posted it online to exclaim to my co-authors about the uncanny experience of seeing a rare male live harrier just as we were reworking the biography of a long-killed female of the same species.

I am part of the process of unearthing that particular specimen’s unique history, which comes from an ambition to amplify the cultural resonances that animal lives have for humans. We find as we rework it, our bird’s unique history resonates with themes of Scottish land ownership, dispossession of people and the killing of animals.

In this scenario, I was able to recognize more about the dead specimen through its live co-specific. The composed item in the museum bag had once had the capacity to instill terror in small birds. I could see it as a solitary hunter, not just as part of a collection of specimens in storage. I willed it to succeed in catching a chaffinch, which it would hungrily have torn into shreds. On that occasion, the chaffinches defied it, moving as a confusing flock - low down, amongst the turnips grown for Rob’s sheep. These were wild birds adapting to ground that people have shaped to cultivate transformed species, crops and stock that we make our ‘own’.

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2 Donna J. Haraway, When Species Meet (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008).
3 Further information about Susan Waldron’s work is available at http://www.ges.gla.ac.uk:443/staff/swaldron
5 As described by V. Despret V, ‘Sheep do have opinions’ in Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel (eds), Making Things Public: Atmospheres of Democracy (Karlsruhe/Massachusetts: ZKM/MIT, 2005), pp. 360-69.
7 The image shown as Figure 1 comes from a series depicting a ewe brought in from the field, tied up on a buggy, together with her premature lamb. The note on left page reads: ‘She tried to leap off the buggy after her lamb had been removed’. The second note reads: ‘it’s been put in the shed with other poorlies, and given milk. The ewe will get another lamb.’
8 M. Patchett and K. Foster, ‘Repair work; surfacing the geographies of dead animals,’ Museum and Society, 6:2 July 2008, pp. 98-122.
10 See appendix 2 in Patchett, Putting Animals on Display.