Listen to the Birds

Using Intuitive Interspecies Communication to Work with African Grey Parrot Voices in an Art Project

Ute Hörner and Vanessa Wijngaarden

> W: I don't know what to make of this picture, but he [Wild One][1] is showing me a long line of people, walking in a line, traipsing along a road into the wilderness. A long journey that people are taking. He's showing me the animals and the birds moving with them, above them. To me, it feels like there's been a long journey of humans and animals together. He's showing me that, at the endpoint is a merge, an emergence. He was, at first, showing me the separation. The journey – it (initially) looked like separate paths: the humans and then the birds flying above the humans and the animals walking. As it goes further and further into the distance, they merge as one. It's all merging into one. One spirit, one soul, one heart, I suppose. From the human perspective, we're all so separate, but ultimately, we are all connected and one. It's about that feeling, not just saying the words, but actually feeling it.[2]

Introduction

The exact age of *Psittacus Erithacus* (African grey parrot, *Kasuku mkia mwekundu* in Swahili) as a distinct species is not precisely known, but they and other modern parrots as well as their societies probably evolved around five million years ago – long before homo sapiens entered the world stage. Perhaps it was they who made the first contact, playing with us by imitating our human sounds. This paper discusses a multispecies project in which we use different ways of communication with these birds to gain an insight into how they relate with each other and the world. It is part of a larger project and exhibition titled *Parrot Terristories*, carried out by the artist duo Ute Hörner and Mathias Antlfinger,

1 W: "He was calling himself Wild One. The Wild One kept on going through my head. The first thing I got from him: 'I see you, I see all. We are one, Clara and me. We are one'" (excerpt from interview 19 May 2023).

2 The excerpts set in italics included in this text are transcripts from IICs conducted in May 2023 for the benefit of the research project, during which animal communicators W and M 'translated' the parrot's expressions by employing IIC.

that revolves around the various habitats and territories in which African grey parrots and humans meet and have met historically. This includes such different time zones and spaces as natural history museums, private homes and the birds' natural habitats.

Ute Hörner and Vanessa Wijngaarden first met on a Human-Animal Studies Conference in Turku in 2018. We were both working with intuitive interspecies communication (IIC) (Barrett et al. 2021; Wijngaarden 2023) – Ute as an artist using IIC in her artistic work and living together with her animal companions; Vanessa as a social anthropologist in academic research, gaining insight into what IIC practitioners do and how their approaches and knowledge can be brought into conversation with post-human and Indigenous theory building (Wijngaarden and Hurn under review). In 2022, we started thinking about a collaborative project that would integrate the voices and perspectives of African grey parrots in the exhibition project mentioned previously, employing IIC to add a new layer.

Intuitive interspecies communication is a detailed, two-way, nonverbal form of communication with non-human beings that relies on a diversity of intuitive capacities. It is experienced as the mutual, direct

> exchange of visceral feelings, emotions, mental impressions and thoughts, embodied sensations of touch, smell, taste, sound, as well as visuals in the mind's eye. While these can occur while in direct physical proximity to the animal, they can also occur over great distances [as they do not rely on] visual, auditory, olfactory, voice or other cues that humans normally associate with direct interactive communication (Barrett et al. 2021: 151).

Although not always recognized formally in the Global North because it does not easily fit the dominant Northern ontology, this kind of intersubjective communication is a quite common experience to many people worldwide, and generally associated with intuition. It is practiced commonly in a variety of southern and Indigenous societies, being integrated in and supported by local ontologies (Callicott 2013; Deloria 2006; Guttorm 2021; Kohn 2007, 2013; Marshall 1957; Michell 2005; Watts 2013).

Even if anthropological and other studies that include intuitive communications often continue to approach IIC exclusively as part of the culture of the Indigenous or southern 'other' (Blenkinsop and Piersol 2013), a lot of intuition-based exchange takes place outside Indigenous contexts. Scholars of science and technology studies and anthropologists have found that Euro-Americans actually do not hold to the dominant, supposedly characteristic Cartesian ontology as fervently as academic debates suggest (Candea and Alcayna-Stevens 2012; Ingold 1994 [1988]).

An important example of this is a group of professionally working consultants who are often referred to as animal communicators. They use IIC to communicate with domesticated and non-domesticated animals in the wild or captivity, often successfully assisting in resolving conflicts between animals and humans, understanding problems with animals' behaviours and health, and tracking lost animals (Barrett et al. 2021). On the rise since the 1970s, they can now be found mostly in North America, Europe and South Africa, but are also present in Australia, Asia and South America. A recent survey of about 400 animal communicators' websites and 136 non-fiction books by animal commu-

nicators shows they come from a wide range of educational backgrounds, up to doctorate levels, in fields from business and fine arts, psychology and education to homeopathy and veterinary technology (Barrett et al. 2023) and there is a steady rise in the number of IIC courses being offered, including an increase in professional certification programmes and training institutions, with several official associations and codes of ethics being developed.[3]

A variety of scholars have become interested in the phenomenon, and the latest multispecies methods symposium dedicated to IIC brought together about 700 IIC practitioners from both professional and Indigenous backgrounds, researchers and artists from different corners of the world. Vanessa's research explores IIC as a vehicle towards the development of novel, more dialogic multispecies methods. She previously completed a collaborative study with animal communicators in Europe and Africa, publishing on interviews with felines, in which animal communicators functioned as interpreters (Wijngaarden 2023). We used part of the approaches applied with felines and consulted two animal communicators (W and M) to engage with grey parrots for our current project.

Following Tsing (2005, 2015; Tsing et al. 2020), we set out to open new spaces in the public imagination, where we aim to find different, more decolonized ways of telling stories that bring together different forms of knowledge. Treating wisdom that is labelled as mythical and scientific, and both as knowledge, we aspire to place them in a horizontal dialogue that prevents favouring one onto-epistemology as an unquestioned basis for thinking. Similar to Mairead Nic Craith (this volume) in the keynote of the conference *Narrating the Multispecies World*, we do not approach knowledge as something that is solely human. We do this through the use of IIC as an approach that steps away from human scripted knowledge and human's dominant mode of communication, trying to become conscious of the ways in which we also remain bound by our human perspectives and expressions. In line with other conference participants (e.g. Krebber and Chen in this volume), we do not approach nature and animals as passive but as active, and ask how we can narrate multispecies expressions and recognize and register multispecies voices.

We mainly focus in this paper on our curiosity regarding how what the parrots may share with us through IIC can influence the developing work of Ute's artistic collective. In this, we will, firstly, describe the processes and questions we focused on in our interactions, followed by an introduction to several works of the interspecies artist collective. We will then outline some of the insights obtained through IIC and in what way these changed how we think about and carry out our artistic and research projects. Finally, we look into how research that engages IIC and animal communicators works as opposed to earlier academic methods to research communication with animals, and formulate a conclusion on how intuitive capacities in general, and IIC specifically, are of value in academic and artistic contexts.

3 Some examples across continents include Animaltalk Africa academy in South Africa, The Sedona International School for Animal and Nature Communication, the Ubiquity University graduate degree in IIC in the United States, and the federal association for animal communication (Bundesverband Tierkommunikation) in Germany and Switzerland. The upcoming special issue on IIC for the Journal of Organizational Ethnography will discuss this in more detail.

Asking the Parrots

Attempting to make our research process and choice of questions relevant to our non-human research participants and be open to diversions from the structures and questions posed, we engaged in a collaborative and dynamic research design in which humans and non-humans were invited as full research participants, consenting co-creators, beneficiaries and teachers. As reflexive agents, we were encouraged to adopt new skills, influence processes, and come to new understandings regarding (the value of) our practices and knowledges. This means that we opened ourselves as researchers not only to learn new skills and ideas through the encounters but also be changed by them.

We are cognizant in our approaches of risks of excessive anthropomorphism and the so-called Clever Hans effect (Dinamarca and Escayola 2013; Martinelli 2010), as well as anthropodenial (de Waal 1999) and the effect of distrust and behaviourist experimental treatment that might affect animals as adaptive learners and sensual and attuned agents to alter or stop responses (Despret 2015; McNeill 2022). Instead, we aim for a carefully informed, empathically generated "animalcentric anthropomorphism" that aims to enter animals' perspectives (de Waal 1999). This means that we take into account that animals' contrasting life-worlds, personalities, and sensual, mental and emotional experiences may all influence the content and illegibility of specific responses. When an animal, for example, communicates involving their unique sensory experiences (e.g. orcas' echolocation [Wright et al. 2021], elephants' infrasound [Garstang 2010], dogs' stereoscopic smell [Andrews et al. 2022] and birds' ultraviolet vision [Cuthill et al. 2000; Vasas et al. 2024]), these can be difficult for the animal communicator to fully grasp and express in words and gestures, even if the details provided can sometimes be confirmed through technological measurements (Getten 2002).

We have worked together with animal communicators M and W (names anonymized), from the United States and South Africa for our collaborative project *Listen to the Birds*. Each has over 20 years of professional experience with IIC, and a reputation as a very successful teacher of the technique. The animal communicators communicated with four wild African grey parrots living in Uganda and Ute's grey parrot companion Clara, who is based in Germany. They worked with the parrots individually, but also approached the wild parrots as a flock. They used photographs as a means to connect to the parrots, as is common in (remote) IIC (Hinz and Barrett under review). Each used the same set of questions as a guide and engaged in a video conference with Vanessa and Ute (Clara being briefly present) to convey the answers and facilitate follow-up conversation using IIC.

We will not be able to represent all the answers and insights the animal communicators conveyed in response to our questions, but will provide a selection. The questions we asked included:

- Are wild living and captive grey parrots connected in any way? Do you know about each other? Do you communicate with each other? Do you support each other?
- Do you like to/Would you want to live with human people? Does it bother you/would it bother you to live in a confined area? Is it important for you to be free? What does freedom mean for you?

- What significance do your ancestors have for your life? Do you mourn your dead? Does it matter to you what human people do with the bodies of grey parrots (e.g. in natural history collections)?
- Many human people fear that your species – due to illegal trade and habitat loss – will become extinct in the wild. What do you think about extinction? How does it perhaps affect you already? Do you feel it is good if human people guard grey parrots? Do you feel it is good if human people keep grey parrots in confined places to protect your species' survival? How do you see yourself in the world? What makes your kind so special?

Each animal communicator worked independently, not knowing about the information the other had received through IIC. The interviews may be regarded as human-initiated or even -driven, because the ones who pose the questions are humans. However, as in some human-to-human interviews, there was no fixed hierarchy between the interviewer and interviewee, both influencing the trajectory of the conversation. The question regarding how far the responses obtained through IIC come from the animals and are filtered or spurred by the animal communicator needs further research, and several research projects zooming in on validity are in progress.

Existing studies have found that answers obtained through IIC often exhibit high detail and accuracy, as deemed by veterinarians when diagnosing and treating animals (Erickson et al. 2016: Wijngaarden and Hurn under review) and by guardians of the animals (Erickson 2014; Erickson et al. 2016). Researchers have further observed the effectiveness and usability of IIC to achieve behaviour changes in animals, and increase the empathy and cooperation between humans and other animals (Ballé et al. 2022; Hafen 2013; Kuppenbender and Barrett 2024). Personally, we found that the answers provided independently by the two animal communicators provided valuable insights and sometimes even converged, some of the details surprising us as well as the animal communicators involved. Perhaps even more importantly, IIC facilitated our process towards less anthropocentric ways of thinking about, communicating with and understanding another species, affecting our insights and practices. By no means assuming that work with animal communicators can overcome the limitations of humans' thinking of animals outside the human-animal relationship, we found that the perspectives we encountered through the animal communicators' use of IIC provided us with unexpected insights and perspectives, which sometimes even contradicted our existing points of view. Combining scholarly and artistic ways of thinking and working, we hope to cross-fertilize these new ideas regarding how we can engage with animal perspectives in our respective personal and professional realms.

Interspecies Artist Collective

Ute and Mathias are an artist couple who have been living with African parrots for 24 years. This may seem long or short, depending on which standpoint is taken: It is only a moment in evolutionary time scales. Birds are dinosaurs, and to get used to each other can be a real challenge for both – humans and birds. However, it *is* a long time when we

think about how deeply this encounter has transformed the members of the collectives' lives.

At the beginning of their journey, Ute and Mathias had a curiosity and interest in these parrots' ability to 'speak', learning human languages. They had learned about Irene Pepperberg's research with Alex (2004, 2009a) and the cognitive abilities of African grey parrots in the lab.[4] Alex could use about 100 human words not only to build categories (colours, shapes, material) but also to express his wishes (want a nut) or feelings (being bored). Living together with their companions, Ute and Mathias soon realized that this kind of 'speaking' was not that interesting for them. Grey parrots communicate very elaborately with their own sounds, calls and noises that they make with their beaks and, very clearly, with their body language. Why should they learn human language? They also discovered that grey parrots are great sculptors, their beaks are very sensitive 'tools' with which they explore and shape their world, each in their own way. In 2014, they decided to share both – art and life – and together with the African grey parrots Clara and Karl, they founded the interspecies artist collective CMUK.[5]

(Fig. 1:) Clara and Karl immersed in their work. Photograph by the artists.

The Encounter with Karl

Karl had come to Ute and Mathias from an animal shelter near Berlin where Clara had chosen him as her companion. It took almost a year for Clara and Karl to find each other in the mating station that was specially set up for grey parrots, as grey parrots are very

4 Other projects that were highly successful from a language research point of view have taken place with African grey parrots, such as N'kisi, with a recorded vocabulary of over 700 words and over 7000 original sentences; see Sheldrake and Morgana 2003.

5 CMUK is an acronym made up of the forenames of the founding members – Clara, Mathias, Ute and Karl; in Serbo-Croatian this means something like a little kiss.

picky when it comes to partners. Karl was a bird that was highly sought after in the group of female grey parrots. Most of the birds at the station were hand-reared; they were animals that had been imprinted to live with humans from the very beginning. Karl was a wild-caught and the animal keeper suspected that his behaviour was more in line with the natural behaviour of a parrot, which helped him to communicate more clearly with his female conspecifics. Ute and Mathias were told that Clara won his affection by protecting him from other male birds. When the call came that they could take them both home, they were overjoyed.

At first, they thought Karl would be as hand-tame as Clara, but immediately after he had settled in with them, they realized that this was not the case. Karl did not want to be stroked. He did not want to be touched at all, at least not with hands (perhaps he had had bad experiences). Unlike their other companions, who preferred to roam freely in the apartment, he felt safest in his cage. It took quite a while to convince him that it was safe elsewhere in the house as well. What he surprisingly liked were trips to the park, where he would sit on his transport box in the sun and just look. They did not have to put him on a lead because he could not fly. Decades of being kept in a cage had atrophied his muscles to such an extent that he could no longer learn to do so.

Karl loved to gnaw and they bought him the first cork tubes to keep him busy. He could work for hours on one object, and soon Clara wanted to join in too. His presence changed the atmosphere in their flock – he was an old bird, older than his peers would become in the wild. You could tell he had experienced a lot. Despite his physical limitations, he had enormous charisma. Everyone who came to visit Ute and Mathias wanted to see Karl, wanted his attention. As he could no longer sit on a perch due to his arthrosis, they let him eat from a plate at their table, which Clara soon also demanded. After eating, he would often sit very close to Ute at the edge of the table and start rubbing the halves of his beak together, making a soft comforting sound, similar to the purring of a cat.

When Karl died in 2018 at about the age of 60, Ute and Mathias realized how little they knew about his past. No one could tell them where he had spent the first five decades of his life – the only thing they could tell with certainty was that he had been born in the wild before he was captured and sold. As they could not find out much about him as a person, they became interested in the history of African grey parrots in Europe, which is closely linked to colonial history. They think it was part of their mourning for him.

African grey parrots came to Europe via the same trade routes, on the same ships that companies used to trade sugar and enslaved people. Many of them (people and parrots) did not survive the passage, but a lot more died in their new environment. The trade with Karl's wild conspecifics over the centuries and the ongoing destruction of their habitat has pushed them to the edge of extinction. There are presumably more grey parrots living today as 'pets' or 'zoo animals' worldwide than in their original habitats.[6]

6 Between 1975 and 2013, according to the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species, more than 1.5 million grey parrots were legally exported from African countries. Assuming a mortality rate of 40–60 % between capture and export, about 2.2-2.5 million birds did not survive. These are only the legal numbers not including the illegal trade in grey parrots. African grey parrots were uplifted to Appendix 1 only in 2016, which means any trade in wild-caught individuals of this species is prohibited.

Ute and Mathias' ongoing project *Parrot Terristories* is a multispecies narration about how human and parrot histories, politics and cultures are connected. Based on the methods of multispecies ethnography, which include traces and perspectives of animal life, they use images, texts, videos, sounds and installations to explore the question of what relationships have been possible between parrots and humans, and what it means to care for and coexist with individuals of this species today. To this end, they are working with a network of human and non-human co-creators in their research endeavours, which includes a historian, curators of natural history museum collections, an anthropologist (Vanessa), a young nature guide in Uganda – the parrot companions of Ute and Mathias and the grey parrots they met in the wild.

The various encounters, ideas, sites and materials are organized in three main chapters: the colonial history of grey parrots, grey parrots in their natural habitat (in the so-called wild) and the story of grey parrots living with humans, in their environment – for the latter they chose their own cohabitation as an example. Cooperation with animal communicators who use IIC has become a crucial element in all the project's endeavours, as it inspires and helps the collective to ask and receive input on unanswered questions, tapping into novel perspectives.

Living with Humans

> Ute: "What are the wild things that she (Clara) would like to do? Maybe she can."
> W: "Well, it's flying and observing. Flying and observing the whole forest, she says to me, the whole forest. Do you live near a forest or are you in the city? It feels like her forest has got buildings, lots of buildings in it."

Ute and Mathias, artists living and working in an interspecies collective, are critically aware that there are inherent hierarchies and contradictions in the relationships with their parrot companions. As the philosopher Lori Gruen puts it: "Even the most thoughtful, compassionate domesticated relationships can't erase the fact that companion animals are forced to live by our cultural standards. Companion animals are, in a very real sense, our captives" (2014: 130).

In response to such problematics, Ute, Mathias and their companions have developed a body of works over the last eight years which revolves around the question of how they live together. These involve moments of affection, joy and trust, but also misunderstandings, failures and ideas that need to get revised. One of them is *Dollhouse for Dinosaurs* from 2021. It evolved in the middle of the pandemic when they all were forced to stay at home. In the style of the early cabinets of curiosities, they assembled a variety of objects together and a model of their apartment on a large table.[7] The model was first inspected by their parrot companions and then extensively worked on. On its walls, the aesthetic

7 The materials they used for this piece largely came from within their four walls. From remnants of the parquet floor, which they put aside when they moved in, to photographs from their everyday life and books they 'read' together, as well as substances that came from their bodies, for example, a nest made of hair and feathers of the past year.

of birds, an intrusion to human ideal concepts of living, manifests itself. Traces of the birds' creativity can be found on windows, doors and even walls. Shredded magazines, cork crumbs and wood splinters covering the floor testify to the power of their beaks and their desire to shape what the human members of the flock already believed to be shaped. An audio recording inside the model gives an idea of the power and perseverance with which their companions tackle rectangular spaces; spaces that could also look quite different – more fragile, more permeable and, in the best sense, more insecure, as the artist and architect Gordon Matta Clark once claimed.[8]

(Fig. 2:) Dollhouse for Dinosaurs, 2021. Photograph by the artists.

Ute and Mathias took a lot of effort to make their apartment as permeable as possible for their companions; nevertheless, the question of how they as birds may feel in a human-designed environment, whether they feel trapped or isolated from what is meaningful for them, has kept them very busy. We heard in one of the conversations with the animal communicators that Clara is not unhappy being confined, but she feels the need to fly free. Ute and Mathias would really like that, but, at the same time, there is a fear, maybe also the human fear passed over to Clara, of getting lost. Communicator W: "*Not getting lost even, but being away from you, being away from her safe space [...] Clara feels safe with you. It's almost like you're her safe space.*" Very different from Wild One, who seems to feel safe wherever he is. They learned that Clara, although she feels guided by her wilderness inside, does not want to be literally free and wild – "*she can't be wild in her human situation and she's okay with that*". "*She feels like she's a very, very important part of your life, as you are [in] hers.*" However, they are not the only ones of importance. Although Clara was born in captivity, they learned from the animal communicator that she is still connected to her

8 Matta-Clark wanted to show using his artistic interventions in mostly demolition-ready buildings how conventional forms of architecture separate the inhabitants from their environment instead of connecting them to it. His work can also be read as an early proposal for interspecies architecture (Spector 1977).

wild fellows. Clara, for example, sees herself as a disciple of Wild One, she takes her guidance from Wild One and the wild, which sometimes confuses her when it comes to the question of what is possible in a human-designed environment. On another level, this connection might be capable of overcoming the limitations of their human household in a way that Ute and Mathias had never even considered.

Historical Beings

> W: Their ancestral realms are in their present. It doesn't feel like it's something – It happened in our past, in our history, but their energy, the spirit of those beings that were captured and trapped and put on display, they're still very much in the ancestral realms, in the present. The Wild One's showing me that he connects with the ancestors, his ancestors, all the time, and they are part of him.

The second entry point to *Parrot Terristories* lies in the colonial past. For this part, Ute and Mathias are researching at the Africa Museum in Tervuren near Brussels, the former Museum of the Belgian Congo, which was reopened in 2018 after reconception. The natural history collection includes more than 100 grey parrot specimens – from colonial times until the 1980s (including birds that came from zoos and private homes). Tervuren houses a total of 10 million animals – 150,000 of them birds. As Miriti and colleagues point out (2023), the research of the naturalists, their collections and the natural history museums were often funded by colonial interests. The Africa Museum has its origins in the World Expo 1897. "At the instigation of King Leopold II, a 'Colonial Section' was set up in Tervuren to win over investors and the Belgian population and glean support for the colonial project in Congo."[9] Naturalists profited from the colonial project, but also contributed to it: "The first role of naturalists was to map and study places, making them open to future exploration and control […]" (Miriti et al. 2023).

The 113 grey parrot specimens in the scientific collection of Tervuren are located in the Centre d'Accueil pour le Personnel African (CAPA) building, which was built in the close vicinity of the Africa Museum.[10] The specimens, labelled and stored in drawers, have become objects controlled by science. While the knowledge of the local people, on whom the naturalists were dependent, is rarely mentioned, the knowledge of the animals themselves has no meaning at all, only what can be extracted from their bodies counts.

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9 The "Africa Museum traces its origins to the International Exhibition in Brussels in 1897. At the instigation of King Leopold II, a 'Colonial Section' was set up in Tervuren to win over investors and the Belgian population and glean support for the colonial project in Congo. No fewer than […] 267 Congolese were taken by force to Belgium and exhibited to the public, like animals in a zoo. Seven of them lost their lives." The work of the contemporary Congolese artist Freddy Tsimba in the collection of the Africa Museum commemorates these dead (Africa Museum n.d.).

10 During the 1958 Expo *58World's Fair*, 600 Congolese lived in the CAPA building far outside the city centre. One hundred and twenty of them were exhibited during the day in the Tropical Gardens. The 'exhibition' was cancelled prematurely due to massive protests (Africa Museum n.d.).

(Fig. 3:) Drawer with grey parrot specimens in the collection of the Royal Belgian Institute of Natural Science, Brussels. Photograph by the artists.

The separation of nature and culture in modernity has made it possible to deny the agency of non-human living beings, to turn them into objects, which, of course, cannot succeed, because these dead bodies also have agency – it costs an enormous amount of energy to have taken them out of the natural cycle of decay. This part of Ute and Mathias' work can be considered as an examination of this culture of modernity, but also a piece of mourning. The birds in this collection are, in a way, Karl and Clara's ancestors, and how could one talk about grey parrots without including them?

(Fig. 4:) This bird from Bomo is dated November 6, 1945. According to the label, it is a male bird. Royal Museum for Central Africa (RMCA), Tervuren. Photograph by the artists.

They began to approach the animal bodies by taking photographs of the collection. The birds had been arranged in drawers by the scientists according to the regions from

which they had come. Some of the drawers were so full that it was hard to get them closed again once they were opened. Next, they took the fragile bodies out and portrayed the individuals from the side, that is, in profile, to represent their characteristics better.

When they looked at the labels, they noticed that sometimes there was a number on the back, 500 g or 510 g – the weight of a living bird, the same as their companions Clara and Karl – except that these dried bodies weighed almost nothing, which caused an irritating feeling of 'being cheated'. The label was false, so to speak, referring to something that no longer existed. They felt a massive and overwhelming impression of death.

When Ute and Mathias returned one year later, their perspective on the situation had changed. Through both animal communicators, they had heard the African greys describe that they live with their ancestors constantly, communicating with them and feeling the ancestors are part of them. They nevertheless mourn their death, because they can no longer connect with them through the body, and when one of them dies, they engage in ceremony, thanking the body of the deceased. The answer to our question "Does it matter to you what human people do with the bodies of grey parrots?" was answered contrary to our own assumptions, and M. expresses, also very differently from what she was expecting:

> I was asking, for instance, would you like your bodies […] buried? And they're like, 'No'; or like, cremated? They're like, 'No'. Then they're showing me this dried form of the body where you saw the leaves and the feathers and everything. They like it. They say they're revered in a way.

M goes on to explain that the parrots believe some of the Indigenous peoples used to keep their bodies in this way. Even if they point out they are not in the form, they like the representation. However, they do not agree to be killed just for this purpose. Their objective is for the body to be seen by a lot of people so that the bird's form can continue to impact humans after death.

Since Ute and Mathias had heard from the animal communicators that the parrots wanted to be seen, this part of the project now felt less mournful and more like a commission by the birds themselves. They decided to make video portraits of all the 113 grey parrots in the collection. They filmed each bird for a minute to allow future viewers of these videos to spend time with and become present with them. With every bird they recorded, they were more surprised at how different they were from each other, their physiognomy, postures and expressions. Where before, they could only think about the loss and the violence that had happened to them, the ecology of feelings (Despret 2021) changed – they started to feel thankful for their presence and confidence, that they as artists would find the right way to represent them. The grey parrots showed them a direction that was less about guilt than about healing, and that relationships can be carried on beyond physical life.

Wild One and his Fellows

> W: I always get those messages from the animals, that we need to see the joy and focus on the joy in order to balance the pain and the suffering and to expand the joy, because that's what's needed. The expansion of joy. Then the Wild One's saying he celebrates with the sun every morning. He celebrates with the sun. He's showing me being in the sunshine, as the sun rises, he starts waking up. It's interesting, he's showing me a whole flock of parrots with him. I don't know anything about wild African greys. I always know that they're usually solitary as pets or as human companions. He's showing me a whole flock flying and celebrating and flying with the sun.
> Ute: I saw them. It's flocks and sometimes really big flocks in Uganda. It's not the central region [of origin] but where they are, near the national park, they have a very good situation; humans like Nick and also the farmers care about them. It's a growing population, which is a singularity – everywhere else the populations are going down and they're doing a really good job. I saw them celebrate. We saw them in the trees when the sun comes and they really sunbathe first before they go for food.

In June 2022, Ute and Mathias visited a research camp in Uganda, on the edge of Kibale National Park, close to the border with the Democratic Republic of Congo, from where the grey parrots in the natural history collection came. Here, they met Nancy Jacobs, a historian from Brown University working on a book about the global grey parrot, and Nick Byaba, a young nature guide, environmental activist and founder of the Parrot Tree Caretakers Association,[11] who has devoted himself completely to observing, researching and caring for the grey parrots in his area.

(Fig. 5:) Grey parrots in the tips of a tree waiting for the morning sun. Photograph by Nick Byaba.

It was their first encounter with grey parrots in their natural habitat, and it was very impressive and touching for them to see how similar they were to their companions. They

11 Nick, befriended colleagues and local farmers founded this grassroots conservation project in 2020, protecting and planting Indigenous trees for the parrots, protecting them from poachers, and educating school children about African grey parrots, their needs and role in the environment.

watched them for hours every day – they saw how they met and played with each other, fought over food, and suddenly flew away screaming because something had frightened them. But also, their relationships with other birds, such as a grey harrier hawk, who waited patiently until the grey parrots had finished eating to get the nuts they had removed, which he/she could not loosen with his/her beak. And, of course, the parrots observed them and their behaviour towards the parrots very carefully.

From the way Nick spoke about the birds, it became clear that he considered them to be members of his community. He knew many of them individually and followed their stories. Ute, Mathias and Nick spent the whole week together. On the last day of the trip, Ute and Mathias asked Nick if they could return to one of the magnificent tulip trees, which he had shown them before because the birds use their buds to drink water high up in the trees. When they told him that they wanted to leave the ashes of one of their parrot companions under this tree, he was incredibly understanding. Not making a distinction between parrots and people, he uttered that his people would do the same.

Since then, they have stayed in touch. Nick sent them photos of his work almost daily – often the first messages Ute received that day. Photos of parrots, trees, edible flowers and fruits, the farmers and activists planting trees, and signs and sculptures that he erected to promote the protection of the African grey parrots. They started to document the emergence of this caring network including human and non-human actors in the form of an installation which they called SEEDS. Photographs of Wild One and his companions are also there. Ute had selected their portraits from a large number of photographs by Nick, not knowing that they would later give them to animal communicators to make contact with them. In retrospect, it may well have been that they had wanted to be chosen.

(Fig. 6:) SEEDS, 2023. Photograph by the artists.

(Fig. 7:) These are the photographs that were used to make contact with the parrots in the IIC sessions. Wild One is in the middle of the top row, and Clara is at the right end of the lower row.

What became clear through the animal communicators is that the parrots also play an active role in guarding the forest. Both animal communicators mention how the parrots explain how they oversee the forest, spreading seeds and fertilizer, and actively promote the well-being of the vegetation.

> W: His [Wild One's] role, he's saying, he is the overseer. He watches over everything. It feels like he and his family watch over the forest. Guardians of the forest. From their height, because they can see so far and they can see so much and they feel so much. […] He says when the forest is empty of them, of their species, it is not safe […]. [T]he forest is prone to disease. It feels like they play a very, very important part, physically, in the ecosystem there. He's showing me his fertilizer on the ground assisting as well and the fertilizer being very healing to the ground, to the earth.

> M: They tend to the plants. They prune them, and they also do things to facilitate the growth of more plants that they like. They're very responsible for the vegetation of the area… They've taken seeds to different areas, and they've actually looked at the whole area, and they work together to make it what it is […] They're continually planting seeds for the future. It's a part of who they are as far as they'll take seeds from different plants and drop them off in different areas. They will even sometimes get on the ground and bury some seeds as well. They're cultivators. They're growers or farmers, and they will particularly choose different areas of where to plant based as well on the resources there as far as water and things like that, because they know what can be successful.

Details of the intentionality behind these activities can be further researched by, for example, ethnologists, and change our views of conservation towards perceiving it as a multispecies effort.

Intuition and Animal Communicators

The approaches followed in our artistic and research endeavours, contrast strongly with most academic attempts to study communication with animals. Academic approaches have traditionally involved an imposition of human language, focusing on language as a purely syntactic system. Furthermore, they highlight subjects that are seldom of personal importance to animals (Despret 2005, 2016). This was true not only for Alex the grey parrot, but also Kanzi the bonobo and Koko the gorilla. Pepperberg expressed in her memoires that she felt that Alex, who died untimely of apparently natural causes, had been the victim of scientific protocols. The experimental regime that was used, required him to answer the same questions time and again, and in order to assure objectivity, Pepperberg had to keep a social and emotional distance from him (2009b). She felt that instead of scoring highly on (double-blind) tests, he actually longed for interactive communication with her. As other researchers of non-human animal languages have noted in research with their animal participants (e.g. Patterson and Linden 1981), Alex deliberately and consequently provided wrong answers as a result of being dissatisfied with the (social) circumstances and lack of relationship. Thus, the focus on objectively 'testing' language capacities of non-human animals actually obstructed progress in the field of study (Patterson and Linden 1981; Pepperberg 2009b).

By using intuitive capacities, we hope to go beyond an understanding of language solely in terms of verbal expression. We are more interested in relational and affective forms of sharing in our inquiries, including emotions, visions and visuals, and visceral and embodied sensations. In this process, it is our incentive not to take an anthropocentric measure as the starting point to 'test' other animals but, instead, to try to connect and meet the animals with whom we work more on their terms, being open to being changed by the encounter.This means that the outcomes of these engagements are not (just) producing strictly theoretical or verbal knowledge, but also wisdom and insights that are created through the body and physical and emotional interactions, and are often better expressed through artistic installations. For us, employing IIC to have an exchange that addresses the (inter)actions and (inner) lives of both human and non-human agents has produced deeper insight into how we can live, develop and understand these expressive processes.

Tapping into IIC has also helped us to explore intuition as part of a system of information processing humans share with other animals (Epstein 2010). Although intuition has many definitions, because it does not easily fit historically dominant academic frameworks, most describe it as the ability to understand or know something instinctively and immediately, without the need for observation, inference or conscious analysis (Epstein 2010; Oxford English Dictionary 2022). Following Cartesian categorizations, intuition, as an instinctive and immediate knowing, has often been associated with non-human animals and opposed to rational reasoning, which is classically regarded an exclusively

human trait. Such a dichotomization has, however, been refuted because a variety of species also display rational behaviour (Andrews and Monsó 2021; Buckner 2019; Hurley and Nudds 2006) and humans often use intuition to solve problems and make decisions (Fox et al. 2016; Kahneman 2011) in daily life and scientific contexts (Keller 1984). In the analysis of data, for example, hunches are often checked and verified. Some psychologists even argue that intuition tends to underlie or precede rational processes, such as logical argumentation (Haidt 2013). However, the mental activities accompanying verbal language regularly supersede more subtle intuitive cues (Petitmengin-Peugeot 1999) and, therefore, many humans may not be so practiced in or aware of intuitive communication. When they dominantly operate on the more rational plane of verbal knowledge, they may not perceive what is communicated on a more subtle level by non-human beings. By practicing and acknowledging our own intuitive capacities, as well as through help from intuitive experts, such as animal communicators, we can come to novel perspectives, entries and insights, as well as modes of expression, working towards an academic and artistic future that is less anthropocentrically, verbally and ethnocentrically focused.

Conclusion

> M: The parrots were telling me they said they're the originators of this project. They're the ones that came up with it, and they wanted you […] to really look into this. They're like, "Oh, we don't need an introduction […] we're the ones that generated and created this project."

We have attempted to get into a conversation with our African grey parrot companions and research subjects. In this encounter, we have not set out to 'test' one framework or type of knowledge in the context of another, but intended to create a space of co-creative co-becoming where novel insights are born. Through our explorations, we aim to find out how we can access, integrate and interact with the perspectives and knowledge of non-human animals and find new approaches that allow us to do research and make art *with* animals, rather than producing works about them. Although translations into verbal language often still need to take place in interpretation processes, we have tried to move the burden of the communication effort between humans and other animals more onto the shoulders of the humans who are trying to access animal worlds: the animal communicators and researchers, and artists. Exploring how artistic and academic methods, ways of knowing and representation can be enhanced through IIC, we aim to work towards overcoming biases, anthropocentrism and human exceptionalism in research by bridging human and animal, academic and non-academic world(-view)s.

The answers that we received through IIC, as practiced by expert animal communicators, have provided us with fresh points of view regarding cohabitation, the storing of parrots' bodies, and the relationship between the parrots and the forest. Although aspects such as animals' agency, consciousness, communication capacities, engagement in ceremony and their roles in the ecosystem are increasingly discussed in academic research (de Waal 2017), exploring these more from an animal perspective is exciting as

well as challenging (Taylor and Hamilton 2014). This is not only because Cartesian presuppositions have left their legacy on (academic) reasoning, their binary logic limiting our ability to observe and understand meaningful human-animal exchanges, but also because, as humans, we may be limited in how we can think animals outside the human-animal relation at all. Information obtained through IIC provides us with novel perspectives, challenging us to rethink and more deeply explore animals' inner worlds. It also produces concrete incentives for future research and cooperation with natural science disciplines, in our case, for example, to investigate seed spreading activities by African greys. Finally, it can help us work differently with animals in research and art projects.

Although the animal communicators worked independently, there was a striking overlap and complementarity in the answers they received from the birds. The responses that arose often surprised us as well as the animal communicators themselves, providing new perspectives and contradicting our own views and opinions. Similar overlaps and complementarity of answers, as well as entries into unexpected and novel perspectives, have been observed before when working with multiple animal communicators asking the same animals the same questions (Ballé et al. 2022; Getten 2002; Wijngaarden 2022). Such a way of working may create a tapestry of partially overlapping perspectives on the same issues, producing fuller and more detailed descriptions and understandings, and diminishing the subjectivity of one interpreter (including the researcher) while adding to the voice of the animals. We found that IIC was a valuable contribution towards gaining a deeper understanding of animal subjectivity and agency, and experienced it as a powerful instrument towards changing our perspectives and practices in our professional and personal lives with animals. We hope that the continued cross-fertilization between academic methods and representations, and alternative and artistic ways of acquiring and expressing knowledge will involve more and more listening to voices beyond the human.

Intuitive interspecies communication has helped us to be more confident and outgoing in trying to interpret and express what is meaningful to the African grey parrots in the project and what they may want to share with us (humans). In the conception of the exhibition part of the project, for example, Ute and Mathias are guided by their indications, and the collective is in the process of developing the audio guide based on the outcomes of the IIC conversations. Instead of a curatorial tour, people will *Listen to the Birds*. For Vanessa, spending time with Ute, Mathias, Clara and the other parrot companions personally helped her to connect with other onto-epistemologies, and for Ute and Mathias, meeting the birds in the wild has connected them in a novel way with their own companions. Perhaps the most prominent change as a result of the conversations has been Ute and Mathias' views on the origin of *Parrot Terristories*, as they opened up to the possibility that the project was initiated by the grey parrots themselves, and the human counterparts only needed to show up and follow their lead. The reassurance from Clara and her fellows that their human counterparts and the work they do is important, encourages them to go on.

The offer of Wild One to contact him with any questions concerning the project was happily accepted. Whenever we come to a difficult situation, we can ask him or other fellows of the group for advice, for example, when having difficulties writing this text together, coming from different scholarly and artistic backgrounds, involving different

ways of expression. It is our personal relationship that helps us overcome the different worlds of thinking and working, and this is the same with the birds. As many thinkers of the ontological and species turn increasingly come to consider the worlds of humans and other species as interactive and indivisible, we may face the discomfort and disjunctures involved in encounters across cosmologies (de la Cadena and Blaser 2018) and come to create knowledge that is more inclusive and transformative.

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