

Ursidae Interventions: Empathic Gestures towards Performing Bears

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Ursidae Interventions: Empathic Gestures towards Performing Bears

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Botanical gardens and museums are considered sites for producing and legitimizing knowledge. However, they can also be seen as urban sites of multispecies trauma originating from colonial imagination and fantasy. Through performance art and moving image, we explore the traditions associated with exhibiting bears for entertainment and education. Acknowledging the troubled histories of bear performances and coming to terms with the past allows us to imagine alternative futures for the human-bear relationship.

Keywords: bear pit; taxidermy; performance art; moving image; decolonization; Goldilocks; posture; movement; architecture; gender

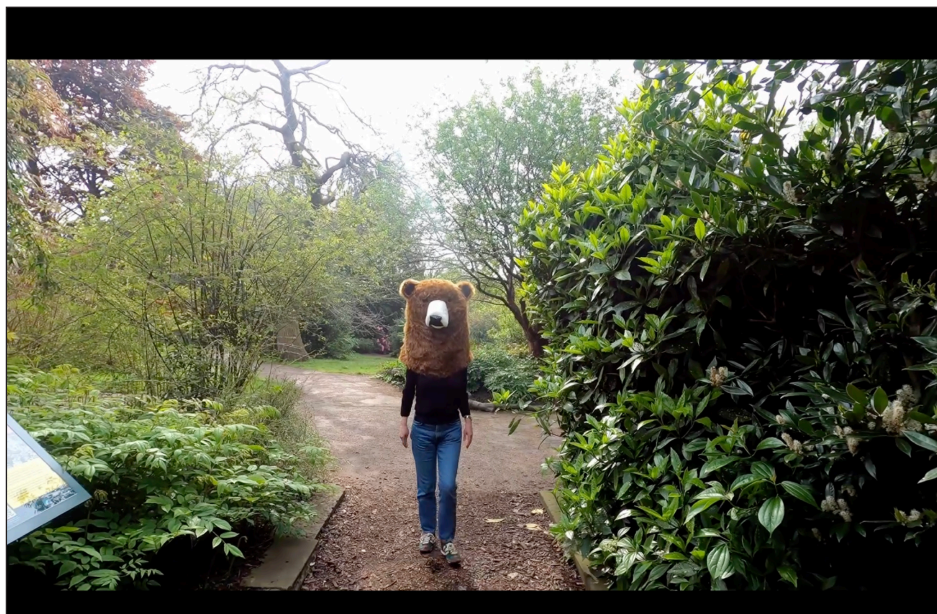


VIDEO ARTICLE

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[00:13]

URSIDAE INTERVENTIONS

Empathic Gestures towards Performing Bears

Kaisu Koski and Penny McCarthy

Abstract

Botanical gardens and museums are considered sites for producing and legitimizing knowledge. However, they can also be seen as urban sites of multispecies trauma originating from colonial imagination and fantasy. Through performance art and moving image, we explore the traditions associated with exhibiting bears for entertainment and education. Acknowledging the troubled histories of bear performances and coming to terms with the past allows us to imagine alternative futures for the human–bear relationship.

[0:39]

The bear costume

Realistic grizzly bear fur suit costume. Mascot, costume.

Our method involves the utilization of a bear costume as a means to explore the dynamics between posture, gender, and architecture as manifested in bear exhibits and cultural fantasies. In distinct scenes in various contexts of entertainment and education, we seek to offer performative gestures as alternative ways of narrating the histories and opening up channels of empathy across time.

Package content: head, body, shoes, hand covers.

Our practice-based research focuses on:

1. The body movements and postures of bear exhibits

2. Architecture and gaze in directing these
3. Gendered narratives associated with human–bear relationships.

That's not the head we ordered. Oh shit.

Application: Business. Party. Sports games. Special occasion.

This is a non-linear journey with real and imaginary bears through captivity and wilderness, from past to present-day bears, inquiring into the millennia-long interconnectedness between humans and the Ursidae.

It's not supposed to be white. The white muzzle?

Yeah, it's not white in the image. We could paint it.

We have to. It's huge.

What have we done? How will these synthetic costumes help restore anything?

Our project connects to the lineage of artists working with bear costumes, including Mark Wallinger, Carlee Fernández, and Fevered Sleep.

[1:55]

The Bear Pit

There's a bear pit in Sheffield's Botanical Gardens. Maybe you've been there. As I walked down the path towards it, there was a pile of broken silvered glass against the curb. I was stepping over tiny flowers, the bright red of their petals, vivid against the gravel. I looked around the bear pit inferring the wild animal that had lived in it. I think you can sense him when you stand there. There were traces, only traces from which I formed assumptions about a bear's presence.

I imagined the bear was walking on the gray stones scattered with flowers directly below me. Small, strong, lonely. Why did I think that? Something about the depth of the pit, the resonance of the past. I got out my phone to take a picture of the red flowers that drifted into the bear pit. I'd send it to Kaisu and asked if she knew what they were. But the red carpet didn't show up in the picture. It just looked like nothing. So I picked a handful of the flowers and let them rain down from the edge of the pit.

I looked around at the other visitors, children with their parents who were also trying to conjure traces of a bear in their own way.

[3:36]

The natural habitat

Otso, Mesikämmen, Kuoma, Kontio, Tahmatassu, Ohto, Metsän Kuningas.

The stories about bears in the woods exist in many cultures. I happen to be in Finland. In the Finnish language there exists over 200 words for a bear [1]. There are many theories about why. We love them so much that we honor them with different names, but we also fear them so much that we avoid calling them forth. All of these names avoid using the actual word, bear.

References appear as footnotes: the full reference list is at the end.

Bear naming has a controversial relationship with the actual bear well-being. While giving names can support acknowledging the bear as a person, it can also be a vehicle for property making and exploitation, as we will see later. Most of the Finnish bear names are masculine, but the bear is also a symbol of femininity, as the circumpolar mother of spiritual feminism [2]. Like Kaarina Kailo [2] writes, the bear has a cultural role and historical significance as a powerful symbol in Arctic and northern cultures, particularly in relation to women. For instance, there is a rich history of narratives of a woman marrying a bear where women defy dualistic gender roles and relations and interact with nature in a variety of adaptive or transgressive ways.

[6:20]

The Goldilocks

Goldilocks and the Three Bears was published in 1837 [7]. A year later Bruin the bear was displaced into the Sheffield Botanical Gardens. The story is about breaking into the bears' home. Originally it was an old woman who broke in. Later she morphed into a young girl [7]. The character's gender is important. The humans diverse cultural relationships with bears are often dependent on their gender [8].

The number three is also significant in the story. Three bears. Three bowls. Three chairs. Only one of the three is "just right". This principle has been translated into different fields such as biology and economics [9]. Something is optimal when it is neither too much nor too little. But what is just right? For a bear?

[9:25]

Bruin the Bear

1876

Yeah...

Bears have been exploited for entertainment for centuries, since the Roman times until the early 20th century [10].

Just a... If you stay closer to this edge, so further from the sculpture. Yeah.

Ned of Canterbury, George of Cambridge, Don John, Ben Hunt, Nan Stiles, Beefe of Ipswich, Robin Hood, Blind Robin, Judith of Cambridge, Besse Hill, Kate of Kent, Rose of Bedlam, Nan Talbot, Mall Cut-purse, Nell of Holland, Besse Runner, Tom Dogged, Will Tookey, Mad Besse [11].

That's fine.

That's great, Penny. This one? Yeah, the whole thing.

[11:12]

Literature review

"I love you bear, she said. That night, the bear's heavy thread on the staircase did not disturb her. Let him come. Their eyes met around the chimney. Go sit down, she said, and he did. He sat there, solid as a sofa, domestic, a rug of a bear. She went to kneel beside him. He smelled better than he had before he started swimming, but his essential smell was still there. His fur was so thick she could lose half a hand in it."

[12]

If we, um, if we talk about the Bear Pit, which is a...

So it's a kind of miniature Colosseum, isn't it?

So it's a, within this structure and in this narrative, I find it very...there's nothing sexual about this trauma. So the book made me realize that it's a whole...or me it didn't connect and therefore, therefore, I thought we can't impose some kind of ambiguous sexual layer to this traumatic site.

[13:13]

Taxidermy bears

The literal translation of taxidermy is an arrangement of skin, and it was developed in the 18th century as a preservation method to stuff, mount, and exhibit parts or the whole animal in a lifelike state. So in this project, we ask how to reframe taxidermy objects and practices and what can performance art specifically do to reconsider taxidermy and the colonial gaze within. Reversely, we're also asking what kind of performances are embedded in taxidermy practices.

So I'm situated in a space with various kinds of taxidermy exhibits and displays as representations of animals that might never meet each other in their natural habitat. I'm turning my attention to the closest relative in the room, the polar bear, which is standing in an upright position. I'm simulating the posture that has been arranged and composed by a human animal, moving on to portray different kinds of sitting positions that bears naturally exhibit. But quite quickly, I'm facing the limitations of the costume, which is made of fabric, with a very quirky pattern. It's not flexible like skin, and actually it can't even facilitate the actual bear posture.

I purposefully use the bear costume to challenge my human movement and sensory abilities. Here, the bear rug. I have little to no view. My hearing is muffled. The costume is too large from some places. It's too short from elsewhere. It's too hot. The costume causes me to move in certain cautious and slow manner, in fear of pumping into the glass displays, tripping over the exhibits.

The costume starts to have its own life. It starts moving me around and produce these weird shapes and choreographies. So in this process, the costume is having agency. I am both arranging the skin and the skin is arranging me. This is my skin to skin contact with the bear, and it gets stuck to my skin. The process of taxidermy involves peeling the non-human animal skin and filling it with artificial materials. It also involves an arrangement of the skin in a posture and in case of the bear, often it is arranged in an upright position, perhaps because it's so simulates and reminds us of our own primary stance in the world.

Taxidermy practices can be seen problematic from animal rights point of view. By making the non-human animals as trophies, they still maintain the colonial attitudes of making animals into objects of our gaze or study, but eventually making the animal into property.

[14]

[17:39]

Animal dreams

What is an animal? The question is asked over and over again by Louis Jean-Marie Daubenton [15] in Diderot's Encyclopedia. This is his definition of animals: "They sleep and we are awake." Maybe being awake is associated with reason. In this context, humans have reason, the animal is the equivalent to a machine. Man is defined as "he who does not sleep." Daubenton outlines a scale of plants and animals that he describes as "full of beings, more or less lethargic, more or less half asleep [15]." So he understands the plants and the animals to be alive but asleep.

So his [15] reasoning goes, what happens to a man when he falls asleep or loses consciousness? Does he cease to be a man? Does he become an animal?

Animals are spectators in the world writes Jean-Christophe Bailly [16] in *The Animal Side*, and we are spectators with and alongside them. As I write, a black bear is exploring his patch of forest by lake in California. As I sleep, a small bear is foraging in Boreal forests of Canada. In this same moment, these creatures behold the world of this medium-sized planet, each moving through their own zone, discovering it, surveying it, smelling it, seeing it. I like to think that they inhabit it in their own way. Then halfway through the year, they enter the state that is hibernation curling up to sleep in their dens, to dream under the constellations that carry their names. Wild animals sleep and dream. A state of torpor to survive the winter. Bears do not move around their dens in winter for up to a hundred days. The animals lower their body temperature, slow their breathing rate, their heart rate, and conserve their fat stores for energy. But I wonder when happens when a bear is taken from his natural habitat, does he still long to hibernate through the winter?

We forget our dreams. We forget the wild animals that exist alongside us. We forget the stars above us. Yet dreams exist in us. Stars are above us. We are standing on a medium-sized planet, spinning in an immense galaxy of stars. These things exist independent of our will. We are the ones in state of torpor, the animals are awake and on the alert.

[20:49]

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[20:57]

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