

# ON SUSTAINABILITY AND ART

*ART AFRICA* looks at the practice of artist Hannelie Coetzee

Hannelie Coetzee's artwork draws attention to our warped relationship with nature through pragmatic, solution orientated interventions. "We need to re-learn the logic of nature in order to continue mindfully," said Coetzee. As a result, her work materialises quite naturally, the product of extensive research and interdisciplinary partnerships with scientists, city planners and cultural researchers – all experts in their own fields.

"We have a duty to believe that positive change is possible, to imagine that we can transform our world by collaborating to bring together the best of human ingenuity and innovation," said Prof. Caroline Digby from the Wits Centre for Sustainability in Mining and Industry. "The more intuitive approach of artists can provide a window into the complex models, calculations and simulations of the scientific world... Natural world issues require more than just a technical fix. They require systems of thinking and creativity to imagine and illustrate the best possible solutions."

At the beginning of the year Coetzee was invited – amongst five other South African artists – to produce a site-specific installation for an exhibition titled 'Barriers,' co-curated by Elisabeth Millqvist and Matthias Givel at the Wanås Konst centre in Sweden. In the three and a half weeks leading up to the show (which opened on 17 May, 2015), Coetzee produced a work she named *Old sow between trees*. In this piece she uses her position as an African artist to remind the predominantly European audience of our relationship to wild animals and the subsequent disconnection that has occurred over time. Drawn to the reemergence of the wild boar in Sweden – an animal that has been absent from this environment for centuries – Coetzee's work uses the medium of art to channel our attention to issues of ecology and sustainability, begging us to reconsider our attitude toward an animal that, despite its absence, remains contested: "In general the Swedish are not only reluctant to accept these creatures back into their former environment, but also fearful of them," said Johan Myburg in an article for *Vroukeur*. Coetzee constructed *Old sow between trees* from carefully selected logs and indigenous tree branches stacked between two Beech trees. This is where they will remain (long after the exhibition – which finished in November), until nature re-claims its own.

Another notable, ephemeral piece by Coetzee is *Eland and Benko (#FireGrazer)* (2015), produced at the Nirox Sculpture Park in partnership with Sally Archibald. An Associate Professor at the University of the Witwatersrand's (WITS) School of Animal, Planet

and Environmental Sciences, Archibald's research explores the relationship between small, controlled fires and grazing animals. "We want to promote a different suite of grass species which require repeated intense grazing to persist and spread in these tall-grass systems," says Archibald. "Fire is theoretically a way of creating grazing 'hotspots' in a landscape that is otherwise quite uniform... Our experiments test whether this theoretical process plays out in real landscapes."

In order to produce the work, Coetzee required the assistance of the Kirschhoff Surveyors, who painstakingly plotted the outline of a silhouette in the veld by using one thousand GPS markers. Another partner to this project were the Cradle of Humankind's Working on Fire team. By using a Botha box, they then carefully burnt the outline, allowing for a controlled burn that ultimately produced the image. The amount of interdependent input required to pull off such a feat is in itself an achievement, yet to Coetzee the work extends far beyond its aesthetic quality. In an article published in *Country Life*, Graham Wood attests to the reach of Coetzee's work as a transformative tool:

"As the smoke cleared, the image was revealed and the audience broke out into spontaneous applause. The effect of the performance and the image left in the landscape was undeniably powerful, but Coetzee is not interested in beauty for its own sake, or art for communication or critique alone. Rather, she is interested in the ways in which artworks can participate in the social or environmental context they take place in, and contribute to the life around them."

Coetzee's position as an artist amongst environmental researchers was cemented when she was invited to the PECS (Programme on Environmental Change and Society) dialogue and conference on the Anthropocene. Speaking to the artist prior to the conference, Dr. Reinette Biggs of the Stockholm Resilience Institute and the University of Stellenbosch made the observation that "sustainability is not primarily a scientific problem; rather, it requires us as citizens, communities and societies to rethink the way in which we live our personal lives... This requires engaging the hearts, minds and imaginations of a wide set of people across many different spheres of society. Artists have a particularly important role to play in this regard – not only in creating a space that can help bridge and connect between different actors, but in contributing and opening our minds to completely new ways of seeing the world and our place in it."





01 Wits Msc Scientist Felix Skhosana contextualising the research on *Eland and Benko* for the firefighter team. Photograph: Hannelie Coetzee.  
02 Cradle of human kind firefighters burning the 2km outline of *Eland and Benko* with a 'Botha Box'. Photograph: Hannelie Coetzee.  
03 Hannelie Coetzee, *Eland and Benko*, 2015. Image courtesy of Terracam.

I have been astounded by how much easier it is to interest people in the science when it is encompassed in an artwork.

– Sally Archibald, WITS





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01 Hannelie Coetzee, *Ou Sog Tussen Bome*, Wanås Konst Knislinge, Sweden, 2015. Sustainable wood, metal, oil, 700cm x 500cm x 1000cm.  
02 Instagram shot from Reney Warrington of *Ou Sog Tussen Bome* with Daniel Terrblance assisting.  
03 - 04 Hannelie Coetzee, *Ou Sog Tussen Bome*, process shots.

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To sustain this process of collaborative engagement, *ART AFRICA* invited Coetzee to propose a series of relevant questions to her associates – all of whom she has worked closely with in the production of her art. Here are some of the insights from this exchange:

**Hannelie Coetzee: How does science benefit when artists interpret scientific findings to non-scientific minds?**

Art can be used to communicate the urgency of the different crises that we face on the planet and be turned into regenerative opportunities. – **Claire Mollatt, Ecologist, Informal South**

**How can art and science integrate into a discipline or collaboration that aids transformative understanding?**

Art is the expression of creative ideas that are likely informed by prior knowledge but not restricted by natural, economic or social rules. Science is a knowledge that we have built through methodical enquiry over many generations into how nature, economics and society work. When art is introduced into science, it gives permission to seek different ways of addressing the same problem. It enables one to leapfrog or do a U-turn. As stated in *New Roles for Art Are Clarified* (Carney 2010), Tim Collins declares that, “while replicable fact is the domain of science, human perception and value are the domains of art and the humanities.” – **Philipp Kirsch, University of Queensland**

**How do such partnerships reach wider audiences?**

I have been astounded by how much easier it is to interest people in the science when it is encompassed in an artwork. Before, I was only talking to the small community of people who were already thinking about these issues. People like the art – and they like the idea that the art has some scientific substance behind it. Some, not all of them, want to know more details about our science questions and I am challenged to maintain their interest and expand it. – **Sally Archibald, WITS**

**How can partnerships between artists and scientists contribute to resilient systems and change?**

The data on climate change is indisputable, but how does one develop an emotional appreciation of the potential consequences? I think this must come through experience and art is a fantastic mechanism to develop emotional experiences and consider possibilities. – **Caroline Lehmann, Biogeography, University of Edinburgh**

**How has an artist’s work influenced your work and vice versa?**

Hannelie sometimes brings aspects that I think of as ‘outside’ the system, into the discussion. At its simplest, ecology is the study of the interactions between organisms and their environment and it is refreshing to have a different take on the shape and form of these interactions. – **Sally Archibald**

I started to write a conference paper about the potential to re-imagine mining overburden as a building material. To change the way that the industry framed everything as waste rock, waste dumps, waste piles etc. In researching this, I uncovered the genre of Land Art. These artists have given considerable thought to moving earth to make art. I strongly believe in the potential for artists to create not just new mine closure landscapes, but to also drive improved community relations when working side-by-side with the engineers and financial managers in mine planning and operations. – **Phillip Kirsch**

**On Interdependence:**

“One of the ways in which we become fragmented in our consciousness is through education. We learn to create distinctions, hierarchies and separations and the idea of interdependence is something we recover for ourselves along the way. For me, Coetzee’s work reminds me that to think of an object in the world is to think about balance: where physics, ecology and the aspirations of humans come together. Stones in the wilderness poised to precision remind us of what holds them together, where they came from and that ineffable

equilibrium speaks to us about what we have lost and what we seek. The object frames the wilderness rather than the other way around. As Wallace Stevens wrote in his poem on the jar abandoned: “The wilderness rose up to it / And sprawled around, no longer wild.”

Fragments. Memories of the unseen. These are the substance of history. We remember by putting together what we know and what we imagine: it’s in the space between the unknowable and the unimaginable that we are certain. When we look at a ragged assemblage of mosaic, distance seems to lend clarity. Within the neurons in our brain, an imperative to distinguish patterns makes sense of what are shards. We hold them together in our head. Yet again, what is science, what is art? Hannelie’s works remind us of the complexity of an artistic vision. They remind us too of tired, inherited, and debilitating distinctions between science, art and the space of viewing.

Ancient Hindu texts say that understanding is the recognition: ‘I am That.’ Not distinction, not separation, but the belief that art is a reminder of our belonging in a world.” – **Dilip Menon, Mellon Chair in Indian Studies, WITS**

One of the many themes that Coetzee will tackle over the following year is the issue of water. After years of questioning and researching, she conceptualised artworks that will – when realised – activate all involved to help draw attention to the issue. These specific works will be on show at the 2016 Yorkshire Sculpture Park/Nirox Winter show partnership and at a solo show at Lizamore and Associates in June 2016.

**Hannelie Coetzee (b. 1971) is a South African visual artist, based in Johannesburg. She focuses on leading a site responsive, environmentally focused practice to connect the dots. You can view films of the artworks mentioned in this article by visiting the artist’s website at [www.hanneliecoetzee.com](http://www.hanneliecoetzee.com)**



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01 Hannelie Coetzee, *Hyparrhenia Filipendula Dekgras*, 2015. Watercolour and embossed grass on paper.

02 Hannelie Coetzee, *Themeda triandra 2 Rooigras*, 2015. Watercolour and embossed grass on paper. Embossed grass from Sally Archibald’s research for *Eland and Benko*.