

Trust your gut: fleshing out an embodied encounter with Nicola Grobler's *The Visitor Centre*

Jenni Lauwrens

University of Pretoria, South Africa

jenni.lauwrens@up.ac.za

Abstract

In various disciplines concerned with the perception of images the embodied nature of image encounters is increasingly receiving attention. A common premise in such investigations is that people's embodied responses to images ought to be critically investigated owing to their previous neglect in academic discourses. The under-theorised and developing field of ecological art is uniquely suited to analysis from this perspective. By way of a body-centred interpretative paradigm, this article analyses Nicola Grobler's *The Visitor Centre* (2015) in order to show how this ecological artwork works on viewers at a somatic level. This approach reveals how the video awakens awareness of human interventions in nature leading viewers to recognise their ethical responsibility to the environment by appealing to their "gut feelings".

Keywords: ecological art, embodiment, empathic projection, *The Visitor Centre*, body-centred, phenomenology

The trouble is all in the knob at the top of our bodies. I'm not against the body or the head either: only the neck, which creates the illusion that they are separate.
Margaret Atwood (1979 [1972]: 70)

Introduction

Depleting water resources, escalating pollution of the air, oceans, rivers and lakes, deforestation and desertification: these are but a few examples of the worlds' current ecological crises. Concerned with raising awareness of these catastrophes, and using art to bring about environmental remediation, ecological artists interrogate and

expose long-held assumptions about the relationship between human and non-human forms of nature. In South Africa, apart from the ecofeminist consciousness that emerged in the 1970s, ecological art is still in its infancy (Ross 2008: 186). The situation is changing, however, and a growing number of artists are either dabbling in this topic or have made it central to their practice.

Despite both the increasing number of artists working in this terrain and general public awareness about ecological disasters, there is still a relative absence of academic theorisation of these kinds of works, evidently not only in South Africa (for an exception see Stern 2016) but also worldwide (Wallen 2012: 235). This article addresses this gap by analysing a video by South African artist, Nicola Grobler, titled *The Visitor Centre* (2015). By applying recent developments in body-centred approaches to image analysis, I investigate how the material dimension of the work stages an unsettling experience that awakens a viewer's awareness of human interventions in nature. Such awareness is produced by appealing to a viewer's "gut feeling" – a component of the somatosensory system, specifically at the level of the viscera. And it is precisely through this somatic activation that Grobler's work redefines the relationship not only between viewer/artwork but also between the hierarchical dualisms inherent in anthropocentric conceptions of natural/artificial, human/non-human, subject/object and living/dead. Most importantly, the work questions the relationship between these dualisms by appealing directly to a spectator's body. This article pays close attention to the visual and material qualities of the artwork on the one hand, and to the nature of a viewer's embodied and multidimensional experience of the work on the other, in order to show how environmental consciousness is raised from this corporeal material encounter.

The approach pursued here is inherently difficult. Both the ontological character of art – which primarily *shows* rather than *says* – and bodily experiences – which operate intuitively and mostly unconsciously – exceed linguistic articulation. Yet, despite the inadequacy of a descriptive vocabulary, theorists are increasingly exploring, or perhaps re-exploring, multisensorial and embodied encounters with images in general and with art in particular (see Bacci and Melcher 2011; Di Bello and Koureas 2010; Esrock 2010; Freedberg and Gallese 2007). The limitations of

language have evidently not impeded investigations into the material and experiential dimensions of art.

Informed by this developing literature, I begin by fleshing out what is meant by the so-called embodied dimension of the art experience. More precisely, exactly what does 'embodiment' mean in the context of the analysis of images? What approaches are useful in advancing understandings of the embodied perception of images? What kinds of knowledge do approaches that analyse images through the prism of embodied perception make visible about the images under investigation? And what kinds of knowledge do they render "invisible"? After taking a critical approach to body-centred approaches to image analysis, I propose a body-centred interpretive paradigm that addresses some of the limitations discussed.

Gleaned from the developing literature on the embodied perception of images, the focus here is on *empathic projection* as understood by Ellen Esrock (2010). Drawing from the philosophy of perception, cognitive psychology and neuroscience, and in some ways similar to Richard Shusterman's (1999) notion of somaesthetics, this concept is underpinned by the premise that the encounter with images is somatically rather than cognitively grounded.¹ In order to examine both the strengths and limitations of *empathic projection* as analytical framework for art, the concept is set to work in a close analysis of *The Visitor Centre*. This analysis demonstrates that the encounter with ecological art – whether site-specific, or presented in a more conventional gallery space as a video – is fundamentally multisensorial and embodied, since these kinds of works often appeal to a viewer's gut feelings. But surely what can be said about one's embodied engagement with a video is limited in comparison to what might be said about artworks that more obviously invite audience interaction. For instance, attention has recently been given to how viewers somatically interact with installations and participatory and interactive art (see Bishop 2005).² It has also been argued that such contemporary art practices require analytical approaches that take into account how they appeal directly to a viewer-participant's body and engage senses other than sight (see Duncum 2012: 183). I argue that *The Visitor Centre* offers a provocative case study to make the argument that even if we do not physically interact with an artwork – by moving around it, or touching it, for instance – it nevertheless engages us in a deeply embodied and

affective encounter. Driven by the material dimension of the video, this embodied encounter shapes the way in which the work moves one to act in response.

The turn to the body in visual studies

A rhetoric of *embodiment* features prominently in recent research dealing with the somatic perception of images. However, precisely what is meant by embodiment – and, in particular, its meaning/s when applied to analyses of art – is not always clear or consistent. One of the main arguments encountered in the literature that focusses on embodiment, is that art history and image studies have neglected – or perhaps deliberately avoided – the involvement of the body in understanding image encounters. For some theorists, art history and visual studies have neglected the bodily senses (other than sight) (see Bacci and Melcher 2011; Duncum 2012; Dumbadze 2010; Halsall 2004).³ Alongside this so-called “sensory turn”, various other “turns” have highlighted experiential forms of knowledge production. These include the “affective turn” (see Massumi 1995), the “ontological turn” (see Hemmings 2005) and the “corporeal turn” (see Sheets-Johnstone 2009). Emerging at the same time, the ‘iconic turn’ (see Moxey 2008) and the ‘material turn’ (see Bolt 2013: 2) – the latter in many ways intertwined with recent discourses on ecological reform – emphasise the agential nature of images.

In this developing literature a distinction is often made between “body” and “embodiment”. For instance, the anthropologist, Thomas Csordas (1993: 135) argues that while the body ‘is a biological, material entity’, embodiment should ‘be understood as an indeterminate methodological field defined by perceptual experiences and the mode of presence and engagement in the world.’ On the other hand, the philosopher, Arnold Berleant (2003) finds the notion of a “pure” body ‘as much a philosophical fiction as pure mind or simple sensation.’ It is thus unhelpful to separate a concept of a physical body from perceptual experience and participation in the world. Furthermore, to avoid reinstating a hierarchical paradigm of body-mind, which would simply invert the previous Cartesian and rationalist privilege of mind over body, “body” should rather be considered as at once ‘embodiment’ (ibid.) The separation of body and mind – sensory experience and cognition – is merely an

illusion (apparently visually reinforced by the neck, according to Margaret Atwood at least).

Embodiment also includes one's embodied orientation in space – physically, psychically and intellectually. For both Csordas (1994: 269) and Berleant (2003) actions, moods and perceptions as well as cultural context and personal experiences are included in this spatial dimension of embodiment. Furthermore, in the realm of the cognitive sciences, the notion that intelligence relies on sensorimotor interaction with the world underlies 'embodied cognition' (Krois 2011: 224). Enactivism – a combination of sensing and motor activity – is indispensable in our making sense of the environment; cognition emerges through a continuous process of actions performed in the world. Thinking emerges from, and is intricately intertwined with, bodily immersion in the world.

This thinking-feeling body is affected by, among others, a person's class, sexuality, gender and ethnicity, or, in sum, the entire social dimension. When the concept of embodiment, as it has been discussed above, is brought to bear on the analysis of images, reductive frameworks that consider images only as texts whose meanings can be unlocked via iconographic or semiotic analysis prove limiting.⁴ As the fundamental theory of signs and meanings, semiotics has no doubt been a useful tool for understanding the ideological frameworks that inflect images and texts. However, the Saussurean linguistic turn from which semiotics developed has 'emptied the mind of its body, obliterating the interdependence of physiological functions and thinking' (Barbara Stafford 1997: 5). Rejecting the existence of images beyond their function as signs in a communication system, the image-as-text model of semiology and ideological approaches to image analysis overlook nuances of meaning that emerge when embodied responses to images are taken into account.⁵

Contemporary scholars who investigate not only people's embodied responses to art but also their encounters with photographs (Pink 2011), films (Barker 2009) and landscapes (Tilley 2004) among others have increasingly grounded their arguments in the intertwined relationship between humans and the world. Similarly, a materialist theory of the sonic arts challenges the anthropocentrism of contemporary cultural theory which 'treats human symbolic interaction as a unique and privileged

endowment from which the rest of nature is excluded' (Cox 2011: 147). Instead, this approach explores the materiality of sound; it's non-representational, or agential character.

That perception and cognition are fundamentally embodied stems from a phenomenological understanding of being-in-the-world. In the 1940s Maurice Merleau-Ponty established the connection between mind and body in perception insisting on the corporeal nature of all human experience, knowledge and perception. Developing a theory of visual perception as enmeshed in the world, he radically overturned its Cartesian disembodiment.⁶ For Merleau-Ponty (2002 [1945]: 354), my body is 'inescapably' connected with the phenomena of the world, arguing that:

... the system of experience is not arrayed before me as if I were God, it is lived by me from a certain point of view; I am not the spectator, I am involved, and it is my point of view which makes possible both the finiteness of my perception and its opening out upon the complete world as a horizon of every perception.

According to Merleau-Ponty's non-dualistic position, neither mind and body nor body and outer world are separable. His position on the fundamentally intertwined relationship between a viewer and the world is also central to the notion of *empathic projection* under investigation here. Our empathic relationship in the 'flesh' of the world breaks down any possibility of a separation between subject and object (Merleau-Ponty 1968 [1964]). Owing much to Merleau-Ponty's theories of body and world, Esrock (2010: 239) employs her own observations as well as empirical research drawn from neuroscience to demonstrate how we empathically use our bodies when viewing artworks. As a key concept then, the theoretical origins and uses of empathy are briefly unpacked below.

Einfühlung

Translated from the German *Einfühlung* which literally means "feeling-in", empathy was a concept used in the late nineteenth century in the intersecting fields of philosophical aesthetics, perceptual psychology, art history and architecture with attention given to a spectator's active perceptual experience (Koss 2006: 139). In 1873, the art psychologist, Robert Vischer, used empathy to describe the bodily

ways in which spectators respond to art and architecture resulting in the merging of subject and object. Drawing on psychoanalysis and philosophical approaches to the symbol, he developed a schema that accounted for the ways in which spectators project their emotional and psychological selves onto a work of art (Koss 2006: 139). At the same time, Heinrich Wölfflin (1994 [1886]) and Aby Warburg (see Michaud 2004) respectively, explored the ways in which spectators imitate bodily qualities observed in architecture, and the ways in which spectators actively project their own bodily motion into Renaissance paintings. In short, these theorists argued that images, objects and spatial environments stimulate the entire human body; viewers are actively engaged in aesthetic experience which is simultaneously physical, psychological and emotional.

Throughout much of the twentieth century empathy theory was rejected as subjective, individualistic and entirely unsuitable to the rigorous methods of a positivistic art history (Koss 2006: 139). Most notably, Wilhelm Worringer (1992 [1910]) rejected the concept of empathy owing to its inappropriateness to the newly emerging avant-garde abstract art which, in his opinion, emphasised alienation and opticality, thus, in a sense, disembodied art.⁷ Grounded in post-structuralist discourse, with attention primarily given to the social and ideological nature of art, the rise of “new art history” in the 1970s virtually eradicated emotional and empathetic responses to art in academic writing (Koss 2006: 139).

Empathic projection

Although the concept of empathy may have been shunned during the twentieth century, it is a relevant mode of embodied spectatorship. According to the theory of *empathic projection*, one can penetrate a picture plane and become absorbed in it by empathically responding to what is in the picture and by projecting oneself into it.⁸ As ‘only one kind of embodied process’ (Esrock 2010: 223), empathic projection might involve all the senses in that a viewer could potentially imaginatively touch, taste, hear and/or smell what is represented in the picture (ibid: 227). Particular representations in an artwork are ‘sensorily evocative’ and may ‘elicit sensorimotor activations’ in a viewer (ibid: 228). If one accepts the artwork’s invitation to experience it in this way, one’s own body may be activated by what is in the picture.

Esrock (2010: 228) describes this occurrence as ‘an imagined enactment of an event.’ When this re-enactment or simulation is of an entire bodily state rather than an action, it occurs owing to ‘the spectator’s interoceptive awareness of his or her own body’ (ibid: 228).

A scientific rather than art historical term, interoception refers to our sensing of the ‘inner bodily state’ (ibid: 228) – the somatosensory system – which may include feelings of ‘pain, temperature, itch, sensual touch, muscular and visceral sensations, vasomotor activity, hunger, thirst and “air hunger”’ (Craig 2003: 500). Like a background mood that influences consciousness, the interoceptive state is an “overall” emotional state, rather than related to a specific part of the body. When looking at an artwork one can become aware that a change has taken place deep within the body at the level of the somatosensory system (Esrock 2010: 229). When becoming conscious of the internal overall bodily state one may even feel themselves in the artwork.

Empirical scientific research has recently elucidated the nature of *empathic projection*. According to Freedberg and Gallese (2007: 199), neuroscientific and empirical data show that the empathic ‘power of images ... ha[s] a precise and definable material basis in the brain’ (Freedberg and Gallese 2007: 199). Drawing on research into the activity of mirror neurons in the premotor and posterior parietal cortices of macaque monkeys, this research has determined that when one watches another living being executing an action, the same neural circuitry is stimulated in the viewer’s brain as in the one performing the action. The functioning of the mirror neuron system underpins the way in which we understand actions, objects, emotions and sensations both in the real world as well as in their representation. Furthermore, when looking at art one engages somatically with the character of the image – the visible traces of an artist’s gestures (such as fast modelling or signs of the movement of their hand in an artwork) or implied actions (Freedberg and Gallese 2007: 202). The particular gestural qualities of a canvas by Fontana or an abstract painting by Jackson Pollock could, therefore, be reconstructed in a viewer’s brain.

In the following section, I draw upon the concepts discussed above in order to “flesh out” my own encounter with Grobler’s video, arguing that others may respond in a

similar way. Analysing the work from the perspective of *empathic projection* entails setting aside the potential meanings of the work, at least for the moment – a limitation of this approach to which I return later. The analysis that follows is speculative, selective and reductionistic; my aim is not to account for every detail, but rather to suggest how the video might mobilise a viewer’s somatosensory, visceral and motor systems – their “gut feelings” – by attending to its formal (material) properties.

The Visitor Centre

Disjointed images, soft focus and extreme close-ups render *The Visitor Centre* a highly evocative artwork. Projected onto a wall of the gallery at a height well below normal eye-level, the video is intriguing from the start, its sensual properties drawing me in.⁹ My initial encounter is one of uncertainty: blurry images slowly coming into focus set the scene. With a roaming gaze I search within the projection for clues to what this unclear, fuzzy image may be. Film theorist, Laura Marks (2008: 410), suggests that indistinct images draw a viewer toward them as one tries to make sense of what one is seeing, producing a close connection between the visual and tactility. Such tactile – or “haptic” – images promote an intersubjective relationship between viewer and image. In this video the haptic relationship is produced through the use of slow camera movements, indistinct images and grainy textures; both the hazy focus and the temporal organisation of the video elicit visceral activations deep within my body (Esrock 2010: 228). It lures me in from the start, compelling my bodily immersion in each rhythmically unfolding scene to which I respond empathically, on Esrock’s terms, by projecting my inner bodily state into the scene.

Through slow tracking, tilting, and shallow focus, the camera draws attention to minute details. Eventually one makes out images of dry veld, a distant landscape, a row of marching ants, a diamond-mesh fence, textured walls with paint and peeling plaster, a swallow’s nest wrapped around an electric light bulb and young plants miraculously sprouting from in-between glass shards and concrete. Just as indistinct images absorb the viewer, close-ups encourage immersion. Both techniques are highly affective and ‘sensorially evocative’ as Esrock (2010: 228) would put it. Filmed from a very low angle and in extreme close-up, I can imaginatively feel those heroic

ants filing along the ground on the screen also marching over my own feet. My somatosensory system has empathically merged with these images. Similarly, the glass shards onscreen imaginatively penetrate my own skin. I am moved in this way, because, following Freedberg and Gallese (2007: 201), the glass shards become animated, or vitalised, by the embodied simulation that has taken place in my brain.



Figure 1: Still from *The Visitor Centre* (2015).

Observing the slow tracking and craning of the camera, I imaginatively project my inner bodily state into the ruined building as if actually walking on the broken glass and cracked concrete myself. Affected by the stillness evoked by the slowly unfolding montage combined with environmental sounds – twittering birds, chirping cicadas, the distant drone of a car and the barely distinct beat of music – my inner body reacts to these stimuli. Responding to these muffled sounds and the gentle rhythm of the camera’s movements, I become aware of my breathing slowing down. All these elements lead me into a quasi-hypnotic state as the images work on me. An *empathic projection* – as proposed by Esrock – occurs when I willingly imagine the sensory experiences that would be felt if I were in the scene. This occurs when my own memories – past experiences of the distinctive smell of dry grass and dust, the sun on my skin, the wind on my body – intermingle with the material properties of the artwork in the present. When a woman appears walking around the derelict building her shoes crunch loudly on the dry stony ground. It is not difficult to imagine how she feels, what she smells and what she hears walking around this abandoned

structure. Seeing her walking and hearing these sounds activate the same neural circuitry in my brain as was activated in hers as she moved through the building. Owing to the mirroring processes occurring in my brain, I become absorbed in Grobler's video.

When the camera jerks slightly (most notably during the close-up of the swallows' nest) I feel a sudden instability within my own body. Camera movements produce and heighten affective responses thereby leading to 'a more embodied and multi-sensory relationship to the image' (Marks 2008: 400). Connecting with the filmmaker's gestures and bodily movements my body responds to the oscillation between blurry and clear images, and the contrast between swiftly gliding swallows and earth-bound ants marching over glass and debris; the human and non-human; the animate and inanimate. Activating my somatosensory system, I viscerally relate to the video's calmness, desolation, disrepair, decay, and fragmented images which, all combined, give rise to a deeply unsettling affective response.

A critical stance

Thus far, I have discussed *The Visitor Centre* through the lens of *empathic projection*, exploring the bodily activations that occur when I look at the video. This approach ignores at least two components of the embodied experience of images. Firstly, it disregards variations in viewers' responses to the video and secondly, it discounts the relevance of context and meaning. 'Unapologetically formalist' (Moxey 2008: 139), this approach focusses on compositional description and its affective appeal which seems to render the video's potential culturally contingent meanings "invisible" or unimportant. For example, Freedberg and Gallese (2007: 202) explicitly state that their interest is in 'esthetic responses to the formal aspects' of images.¹⁰ Reminiscent of formalist art criticism, Marks (2002: x) similarly contends that there is 'no need to interpret, only to unfold, to increase the surface area of experience.' At the beginning of the twentieth century, Clive Bell (1958 [1914]: 28) argued that 'in order to appreciate a work of art we need bring with us nothing but a sense of form and colour and a knowledge of three-dimensional space.' Rejecting social and historical context, a formalist approach is apparently only of interest to those who are unable to appreciate art 'properly' (ibid: 29). Indeed, Marks (2002: xxii, x) terms her

‘radical formalism’, a means to ‘search the image for a trace of the originary, physical event’ and, through close and personal descriptions of the ways in which the image affects her, ‘reveal that to [us]’.

Marks’ and Freedberg and Gallese’s formalism – which focus only on the visual appearance of images and their aesthetic impact on a viewer – do not consider how various spectators might understand and interpret the images under discussion differently from their own. Gillian Rose (2016: 81) worries that in such writing on images, the bodily engagements between the theorist and the image are often described as if their experience becomes ‘*the experience.*’ Perhaps as a means to counter this criticism, Esrock (2010: 239) goes about explaining her theory by means of a ‘fine-grained’ analysis of Adolph Menzel’s *Balcony Room* (1845) without attempting to uncover the invariant or essential structures of consciousness or experience. Unlike traditional phenomenology (of the sort pursued by Edmund Husserl, for instance), she does not assume a universal viewer. Instead Esrock (2010: 239, 233) ‘differentiate[s] viewers in terms of inner bodily awareness’, citing ‘conversations and interviews with friends and colleagues’, concluding only that ‘many individuals experience art in these ways’.

A wide range of studies employing methods ranging from questionnaires regarding body perception (Porges 1993) to brain-scanning technologies (Critchley, Mathias and Dolan 2001) show that the ability to project bodily states – or interoception – onto images varies substantially. Our responses to images are far from uniform or universal. The mode of one’s bodily perception and their multisensory and kinaesthetic orientation determines their experience of immersion in an artwork (Berleant 1991: 73). This mode is furthermore affected by a person’s culture, personal politics, past experiences (of art) and willingness to engage empathically with an image. In other words, experiencing an artwork in this way can only occur if ‘[...] we are but prepared to attempt it’ (ibid: 73, 74). One has to *become* attuned or responsive to an artwork to experience it empathically in the way suggested by Esrock. And even then, no unified or universal responses will be found, as the formalists expect. But even if we concede that embodied perception is personal and individual, varying between individuals, what about interpretation? Are the possible meanings of an artwork utterly inconsequential in a body-centred approach? Can a

body-centred approach account for the meanings that spontaneously arise whilst watching *The Visitor Centre* unfold? In the following section, I propose that a body-centred interpretative paradigm can address both limitations discussed above.

A body-centred interpretative paradigm

From the perspective of hermeneutic phenomenology, Marks' disinterest in interpretation is not only untenable but also impossible. For, to be human is to interpret (Heidegger 1962 [1927]). Understanding is shaped by a particular subject's biases and assumptions that are produced by their biographical, social and historical contexts which cannot be bracketed from experience. In our pre-reflective states, we are already participants in a shared world.¹¹ In this shared world, my responses are not exclusively individual and also not entirely personal for I am not the master and centre of all meaning. Instead, my experience is open to and altered by the experiences, ideas and interactions with others in particular social, economic and political contexts. Although the encounter I described above is personal and unique, it is simultaneously shaped by my intersubjective situatedness in a particular social, cultural and political context, while also not being reducible to that context. Colin Smith (2002: xxii) explains that:

The phenomenological world is not pure being, but the sense which is revealed where the paths of my various experiences intersect, and also where my own and other people's intersect and engage with each other like gears. It is thus inseparable from subjectivity and intersubjectivity, which find their unity when I either take up my past experiences in those of the present, or other people's in my own.

When discussing the embodied perception of images, attention must thus also be brought to the complex cultural context within which we experience. I argue for a body-centred theoretical approach that begins with but also exceeds the formalism encountered in some analyses of the expressive content of images by suggesting that the social and culturally contingent meanings that unfold in the direct embodied encounter with images can also be "fleshed out" through the lens of embodiment.

A "body-centred interpretive paradigm" takes cognisance of the spatial dimension of embodiment – as I discussed earlier with reference to Csordas (1994: 269) and Berleant (2003). This spatial dimension includes actions, moods and perceptions as

well as cultural context and one's personal history. It explores the meanings that arise as a result of the embodied transactions that take place when an artwork is encountered within a particular context. Reflecting on a work's critical potential is not avoided when a person's sensuous and affective experiences of art are taken seriously. For, meaning-making depends on a somatically engaged person's interaction with an artwork which stages the spectator's experience in a particular manner.

When applied to Grobler's work, a body-centred interpretive paradigm explores what the work might mean (for me) as someone living in an urban environment and for whom ants are a nuisance, peeling paint and plaster signify neglect, wire fences denote the boundaries of ownership and dry veld means hay fever. In suburbia, grass sprouting through paving must be attended to – with toxic substances usually the weapon of choice. The particular rhythm of the slowly moving – even majestic – images and the subdued atmosphere of the derelict building in Grobler's video, force me to contemplate my actions differently. This response is enhanced by the spatial dynamics of the environment in which I encounter the work. Tucked away in the furthest corner of a dark room of the gallery, and exhibited in a relatively narrow space, the work exudes an overpowering stillness – a profound sense of quietude, isolation, alienation. It compels me to lower myself to its level, thus surrendering my elevated position in relation to the unfolding scene. Projected very close to the ground on the wall of the gallery, combined with the camera's low angle, the video emphasises the earth, ground and "groundedness". The wooden parquet floor beneath my feet merges with the ground shown in the video which heightens the intimate connection between the actual space of the gallery and the space the video represents.

Embodiment includes the proprioceptive system which refers to '[...] our sense of being in a body and oriented in space' (Csordas 1994: 5). Movement operates at the base of unified sensory experience (Merleau-Ponty 2002 [1945]: 272). Walking through a gallery, bending and stooping to see something in particular, affects the artwork's meaning for me. Through muscular effort and movement (kinaesthesia) the mobile interaction with the environment in which one encounters the video is a meaningful component of the work and shapes one's interpretation of it.¹² Through

this physically and psychically intimate engagement, the ants, glass shards, swallows' nest and plants pushing up through broken glass and concrete take on a powerful significance and are imbued with a potent meaningfulness. In this expanding and immersive dark space, the power of the images is intensified. They draw attention to one's relationship – and responsibility – to the environment and the creatures that have awakened these reactions. Even though this response may be variable and far from universal, through *empathic projection* an intimate bodily connection to the video is produced compelling a viewer – to a greater or smaller extent – to reflect on their own philosophical and political position on the relationship between nature and culture, nature and technology and between life and decay and their own entanglement in these relationships.

While artistic intentionality is not a *necessary* basis for determining a work's meaning, it is interesting that Grobler (2016) describes the work as follows:

The Visitor Centre (2015) presents an unstable and emerging location where living and non-living entities act upon each other. Like a ship getting ready to sail (out of its moorings) the ruined visitor centre is pirated by opportunistic species. The video as time-based medium captures the unfolding of micro-events at the site, paced at different speeds according to specie preference.

Grobler (2016) employs fragmentation and assemblage specifically to draw attention to 'emergence and entanglement in interspecies relationships.' As the discussion above has shown, these are precisely the meanings that arise through my visceral/somatic engagement with the artwork. Just as my "gut" intuited, this work is about interspecies relationships, environmental degradation, ecological reform and non-human agency, problems of massive concern in our current context. Donna Haraway (2015: 160) puts it aptly: 'right now, the earth is full of refugees, humans and not, without refuge. ... One way to live and die well as mortal critters ... is to join forces to reconstitute refuges, to make possible partial and robust biological-cultural-political-technological recuperation and recomposition, which must include mourning irreversible losses.' Grobler's video contributes to artistic discourses that address the relationship between humans, non-humans and their shared environment. And precisely because these are issues to which we can all relate, viewers may experience this work in corresponding ways. In the context of my own social-cultural

milieu, my response to *The Visitor Centre* is, therefore, not entirely idiosyncratic nor incompatible with that of others.

Conclusion

Increasing awareness of embodied experiences greatly enriches critical scholarship on images of all kinds. Although the approach used here does not only apply to environmental works, this video provides a good example of how one's embodied interaction with an artwork gives shape to the way in which one derives meaning from it. In this case, by drawing attention to such bodily processes, a "thicker" understanding of human relationships with small species, animals, nature and the "refugee crisis" is produced, or at the very least, our awareness of our past and future interactions with the environment is raised. It is precisely through empathic understanding that 'multispecies ecojustice' (Haraway 2015: 161) might be achieved if we are willing to accept the invitation.

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¹ Although Shusterman's (1999) notion of somaesthetics – which stresses the somatic foundation of aesthetic experience – may find some conceptual links with the arguments made in this discussion, his focus on art as a form of self-examination and self-cultivation in order to improve one's experience and somatic performance follows a somewhat different trajectory than the one explored here.

² See Claire Bishop's (2005) critical overview of the emergence of installation art and the kinds of audience participation this contemporary art form solicits. Helen Westgeest (2016) provides a useful examination of audience interaction with video-installations in particular.

³ The abandonment of Alexander Baumgarten's (1750) emphasis on sensory perception in aesthetic experience is often referred to in these arguments. See Shusterman's (1999) discussion of Baumgarten's ideas.

⁴ See Francis Halsall's (2004:112-113) critique of Panofsky's predominantly visual iconographical method. See Sunil Manghani's (2003) critique of a purely semiotic 'reading' of art which merely succeeds in narrating and translating signs into their possible meanings.

⁵ Influenced by English cultural studies, Nicholas Mirzoeff is an example of the approach whose focus is on the political and cultural function of images. See Keith Moxey's (2008: 133) comprehensive overview of two approaches in visual studies, namely, the interpretive paradigm on the one hand – focussed on *representation* – and the approach which pays attention to the *presence* effects of images, on the other, also closely related to recent interest in materiality.

⁶ Whether or not Descartes was the only protagonist in the construction of a disembodied, rationalising and distancing subject, his ideas, combined with Renaissance linear perspective have led Martin Jay (1993) to argue that Cartesian Perspectivalism was, if not the most important, then

certainly the dominant scopic regime of modernity. In *Eye and mind* (1993 [1961]) Merleau-Ponty critically discusses this regime and attempts to develop an alternative theory of sight.

⁷ That art could ever be entirely disembodied is, of course, a fallacy. For even if modern artists and their modernist critics – such as Greenberg (see Jones 2006) – attempted to bracket visual experience by celebrating art's opticality, the work of art can never be separated from the phenomenal world, the embodied viewer or from historical context. See Dumbadze's (2010) illuminating discussion of the sound of Dan Flavin's fluorescent lights which 'disrupt' its visual experience. And even if conceptual artists attempt to subvert art's opticality or materiality the encounter with such works is always embodied. Whilst conceptual artists might insist their work appeals to the mind and not the senses, the particular form in which the artist's idea is articulated or transmitted to an audience – a sound, a smell, a video or photograph of a performance – the performance or event itself is the material with which a viewer engages.

⁸ Esrock (2010) uses empirical research to corroborate Michael Fried's reflections on his own embodied experience of paintings by Adolph Menzel.

⁹ My first encounter with *The Visitor Centre* was at the Van Wouw House, Pretoria, in August 2015. It can now be viewed at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Sh7xAjY0J2U>.

¹⁰ While Freedberg and Gallese (2007: 202) maintain that 'historical and cultural or contextual factors do not contradict' their findings regarding viewer's empathic responses to images, they do not offer any discussion on this topic.

¹¹ A comprehensive review of the differences between phenomenology and hermeneutic phenomenology is beyond the scope of this article. See Susann Loverty's (2003) discussion of their historical and methodological differences.

¹² It is also interesting to note that at a later viewing of the video in a large open-air hall at the Ditsong Meteorite Crater in Soshanguve, it became part of a backdrop to other activities and was far less powerful. This difference in the way in which I appreciated the work might link in some ways with Paul Ziff's (1966) notion that different kinds of artworks – even the way in which they are exhibited – demand different acts of 'aspection'.