

The Art and Craftivism of Exhibiting Species and Habitat Loss in Natural History Museums

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Abstract

In recent years the presentation of anthropogenic extinction narratives in natural history museums has occurred through temporary exhibitions, curatorial and artistic interventions in permanent collections displays and public engagement events. Such work has enabled institutions to reorientate historical collections and permanent galleries towards this pressing contemporary issue. This article examines a subset of this wider field of curatorial activity by considering how contemporary handicrafts including knitting and crochet have been displayed to engage visitors with species and habitat loss in natural history museums, situating this work within craftivist practices and the longer history of craft being mobilized for political and ethical ends. While the habitat diorama alerted audiences to disappearing species and threatened ecosystems in the twentieth century through a combination of art, science and craft, I reveal how recent exhibitions and events have reconfigured a similar interdisciplinary mix to raise awareness of species and habitat loss in the twenty-first century.

Key words: Extinction, Curating, Exhibitions, Craftivism, Natural History Museums

Introduction

As the Sixth Mass Extinction unfolds, artists and curators are using a range of strategies to engage wide-ranging publics with species and habitat loss in museums and exhibitions. This article identifies a specific strand of this field of practice, in which handicrafts such as knitting and crochet have been used to address issues including extinction, habitat destruction and ocean pollution in the context of natural history museums. It demonstrates how craft-orientated approaches to exhibiting these subjects have offered institutions opportunities to reinvigorate displays by reorientating historical collections and permanent galleries towards these pressing contemporary issues, and provided possibilities for engaging visitors with wildlife conservation concerns in playful, participatory ways. I reflect on the opportunities and limits of these practices through three case studies that focus on artistic interventions amongst permanent collection displays, participatory community craft projects and public engagement events respectively. This text thereby contributes to a developing area of museum and curatorial studies focused on ecological exhibition-making and work already undertaken in other disciplines to examine extinction in natural history display, as well as the expanding field of extinction studies.¹ My approach to the subject is one of an art historian, examining these case studies historically, conceptually, visually and through their materiality, rather than through analysis of visitor feedback and evaluations.

The projects discussed demonstrate the ways that craft has been creatively mobilized to engage visitors with various anthropogenic threats facing wildlife through an interdisciplinary approach to display and programming. While the habitat diorama, as a prominent exhibitionary trope in the history of natural history museums, alerted audiences to disappearing species and habitats in the twentieth century through a combination of art, science and craft (Wonders 1993: 294), I reveal how recent exhibitions and events reconfigure a similar interdisciplinary

mix to raise awareness of species and habitat loss in natural history museums today. The textile artist Ruth Marshall's knitted pelts of extinct species are discussed in the context of their display in an exhibition at the Grant Museum of Zoology, London, examining how interventions of contemporary art can provide ways of reinterpreting historical natural history collections to address anthropogenic extinction narratives. The ecological possibilities of Christine and Margaret Wertheim's international participatory community craft project the Crochet Coral Reef are considered in relation to its presentation at the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History. Finally, the craftivist collective Stitch London's 'Stitch-A-Squid' activity, which formed part of the public engagement programme for the exhibition *The Deep Sea* (2010) at the Natural History Museum, London, is explored as a playful way to engage visitors in serious subjects by using a humorous and light-hearted approach.² I conclude by reflecting on the limits of these projects.

Natural history museums are well placed to address the current ecological crisis, providing high-profile platforms to engage audiences with environmental issues through visual and material culture in events and exhibitions (Chicone and Kissel 2016: 23). In January 2020, the Natural History Museum, London, publicly recognized this by declaring a Planetary Emergency and setting out its strategy to respond to the ecological issues of the time, including extinction and biodiversity loss.³ The announcement came in the wake of Tate's declaration of a Climate Crisis in the summer of 2019⁴ and the Horniman Museum and Gardens' declaration of an ecological and climate emergency.⁵ This followed a year of high-profile protests by the activist environmental group Extinction Rebellion and recognition of wider public awareness and anxiety about climate breakdown (Corner *et al.* 2020). As such, this declaration demonstrated a sense of ecological solidarity with these other London-based institutions, recognized the wider public's heightened interest in the current environmental state of play and also marked an ongoing commitment to addressing ecological issues both now and in the future. Indeed many natural history museums have recognized the importance of addressing the anthropogenic threats facing wildlife in their ongoing work.

Ecological Exhibitions

The topic of extinction has long been a part of the narratives presented in natural history museum exhibits, evidenced through their ever-popular dinosaur displays. However, there has been a recent paradigm shift in museums towards presenting anthropogenic extinction narratives, exemplified by the high profile 2017 replacement of 'Dippy' the diplodocus with 'Hope' the blue whale at the Natural History Museum, London. Here, a cast of a prehistoric dinosaur skeleton was taken off display and sent on tour around various UK sites in a testament to this mascot's popularity and was replaced with a blue whale skeleton dramatically suspended from the ceiling. 'Hope' offered an optimistic rallying cry and symbolized the ability of humans to intervene and change the course of a species' plight, since the blue whale was saved from extinction via an international whaling moratorium (Lowe *et al.* 2020; Syperek 2020). This significant redisplay was both preceded and proceeded by other anthropogenic extinction-focused exhibitions in UK museums, representing a broader trend in exhibition-making unfolding in these institutions in which human impact on the survival of species is addressed directly through display.

Such environmentally-orientated natural history displays have an important historical precedent in the habitat dioramas of the twentieth century. These theatrical exhibits posed taxidermy specimens against painted backdrops, foliage and other visual and material indications of a species' habitat to present an artistic-scientific vision of these creatures in the wild. Dioramas worked to evoke an environmental sensibility amongst museum visitors and activate a sense of stewardship towards wildlife, at a time when the impact of human activities on species and habitats was being widely recognized (Haraway 1984; Wonders 1993). Yet, the aging and faded qualities of many of these natural history displays today, plus the fact that many specimens were paradoxically 'collected' by being killed and taken from the wild to make an ecological point, can result in these exhibits seeming out of date from the perspective of today's viewers, relegating these collections to the past (Knutson *et al.* 2016: 339). This, coupled with the historical taxidermy on display in these institutions, which

in some cases shows visible signs of wear and tear, has resulted in natural history collections being viewed by some museum visitors as dusty mausoleums, their shelves and cabinets presenting lifeless specimens that continually deteriorate despite originating from attempts to arrest nonhuman animal bodies in time (Robins 2013: 165; Dorfman 2018: 1). However, the move to present explicitly environmental exhibitions on topics like extinction has enabled natural history museums to use their historical collections to communicate contemporary concerns, thereby remaining relevant and fresh to audiences today by tapping into popular interests and debates. In 2008, the museum studies scholar and museum professional Sam Alberti had already observed that wildlife and habitat conservation 'provided a powerful rhetorical bridge between past and present museum practice' as well as 'between museums and their audiences', imbuing these collections with a renewed relevance to visitors that has been continually explored in these institutions ever since (Alberti 2008: 79).

Nevertheless, large-scale masterplan projects like the 2017 redevelopment at the Natural History Museum, London, are likely to be once in a generation projects, with permanent museum displays having lifespans upwards of 25 years. This, combined with the financial and practical considerations involved in upgrading entire gallery suites, as well as the significant cultural loss that replacing historical displays of natural history would occasion, has resulted in the surfacing of an approach that has been widely adopted in recent years, whereby institutions address contemporary anthropogenic extinction narratives through temporary exhibitions, artistic or curatorial interventions amongst the permanent collections and through public engagement events. For instance, *Extinction Voices* (2019) at Bristol Museum and Art Gallery is often cited as a curatorial intervention whereby historical taxidermy specimens of extinct and endangered wildlife were shrouded in black mourning veils to engage visitors with species loss (Gladstone *et al.* 2022, this issue). An earlier instance of this sort of curatorial intervention was in action in *Your Last Chance to See?* (2014) at the Powell-Cotton Museum in Birchington, Kent. Here, ribbons, colour-coded to correspond to the species' status on The IUCN (International Union for Conservation of Nature) Red List of Threatened Species, were wrapped around the muzzles of the taxidermy trophies on display that had been hunted by the collection's founder, Percy Powell-Cotton. Over the years, the Musée Océanographique de Monaco has opted to present species-specific temporary exhibitions amongst the permanent collections focusing on threatened wildlife including sharks, turtles and coral. For example, the museum's shark exhibition programme, which ran between 2013-15, aimed to raise awareness of the threats facing sharks by juxtaposing artworks, new multimedia exhibits, interactive displays and historical specimens in and amongst the permanent collections (Wade 2020). The Museum für Naturkunde, Berlin, has also adopted the approach of presenting temporary exhibitions that highlight the anthropogenic threats facing specific species. This was the case in *ARA* (2017), which examined the plights of macaws. However, the museum has also addressed the human exploitation of wildlife through artistic interventions in the historical collections as part of the *Kunst/Natur* contemporary art programme (2014-18), including *BERLINWAL* (2018) by the British artist Elizabeth Price, which was commissioned by curator Bergit Arends and examined the industrial exploitation of cetaceans as well as the history of whale specimens at this museum (Hermannstädter 2019).

Despite the transience of these exhibitions and interventions, they have afforded the respective museums the flexibility and agility to respond more swiftly than would be possible when redeveloping permanent displays and galleries, offering opportunities to reinvigorate historical collections, address current issues and, as a result, actively engage visitors in contemporary concerns relating to species and habitat loss. It is within this broader context that contemporary craft has featured in curatorial interventions, temporary exhibitions and public engagement events at natural history museums as a way to engage audiences with these issues and even invite participation in the topic. Of course, craft has always figured in natural history collections to facilitate the representation of wildlife in the guise of dioramas, taxidermy, articulated skeletons and scientific models (Lange-Berndt 2014: 272). However, the appropriation of contemporary knitting and crochet in such contexts is more overt in its visibly handmade aesthetic and is part of a wider trend.

Since 2000, handicrafts such as knitting and crochet have experienced renewed popularity. They have been used to address social and political issues through a combination

of craft and activism known as 'craftivism', in which tactics such as knitted graffiti and 'stitch-ins' (as opposed to sit-ins) are used to protest, raise awareness and provoke action in response to a range of issues (Greer 2014: 8).⁶ The political possibilities of handicraft have been long established, demonstrable since the nineteenth century through the embroidered banners of the suffragettes, the quilts made by the slave abolitionists and much later in the 1980s through the AIDS Memorial Quilt, an international craft project initiated in 1987 to raise awareness of this health crisis through a familial form of craft (Newmeyer 2008: 442; Bryan-Wilson 2017; Wolters 2021). More recently, craft has been used for causes that are anti-war, anti-consumerist and also environmental (McGovern 2019: 27).

The mobilization of handicraft to address environmental issues specifically has ranged from craftivist tactics of direct action to caring forms of disaster response. This combination of craft, activism and environmentalism can be charted back to the 1990s, when a practice called 'yarning' was used to interfere with the logging of forests during the so-called Albion Uprising, resulting in chainsaws getting tangled in threads and ultimately slowing down the destruction of these habitats ('Top 10 Ecofeminist Actions to Take This Summer' [1996], cited in Adams and Gruen 2014). This activity resonates in more recent protests such as the 2012 'knit-in' staged by the craftivist collective the Knitting Nannas of Toolangi to campaign against the logging of forests at Mount St. Leonard in Victoria, Australia, which is home to the endangered Leadbeaters' possum.⁷ In 2013-14, knitted trophy heads on shields were presented as part of the French artist duo Art Orienté Objet's exhibition at the Musée de la Chasse et de la Nature, Paris, encouraging debate about wildlife conservation concerns in the context of a hunting museum (Wade 2021). Furthermore, in 2020, the spate of Australian bushfires resulted in wildlife organizations calling on members of the public to craft wraps and mittens to protect burned and orphaned wildlife, with some eventually withdrawing this request after becoming overwhelmed by the response.⁸

It is the political use of handicraft through history, as well as the contemporary craftivist movement, that many practitioners draw from and participate in to create work that comments on issues such as pollution, poaching, habitat loss and wildlife conservation. The quiet, inoffensive, and familiar quality of these handicrafts makes them approachable methods through which to tackle difficult subjects (Turney 2009: 206; Wade 2021: 181) and also works to soften any acts of civil disobedience as a result of craft's disarming domesticity. Craft can be a manifestation of both care and repair, filling it with potential as a means of exploring the environmental crisis and activating a sense of 'response-ability' towards others in ecologically troubled times (Haraway and Kenney 2015: 257).

Creative practitioners including Ruth Marshall, Christine and Margaret Wertheim and Lauren O'Farrell of Stitch London have developed long-term practices that harness these characteristics of craft. At the same time, many natural history museums have recognized the potential that this contemporary craftwork presents for engaging visitors with species and habitat loss in generative, playful and participatory ways through art exhibitions, community projects and public engagement events. As such, it is the combination of art, science and craft that was central to the development of the wildlife conservation orientated habitat dioramas of the twentieth century (Wonders 1993: 294), that has been harnessed afresh in natural history collections in recent years to alert museum visitors to species and habitat loss through knitting and crochet. However, today this same combination is being used in very different ways, displacing the historically dominant mode of visual spectatorship in natural history museums and replacing this with a form of engagement that encourages a more active mode of participation instead.

Crafting Interventions of Contemporary Art: Ruth Marshall's Knitted Pelts

The textile artist Ruth Marshall knits the skins of extinct and endangered animals from observations of pelt specimens in natural history museums and zoo collections. Through her work Marshall aims to raise awareness about species and habitat loss as a result of poaching, deforestation and the illegal wildlife trade (Tapper 2011: 31). Her choice of subject matter and the mode of display she adopts are a key part of this. Marshall crafts wildlife that highlights human impact on the survival of creatures including tigers, thylacines and the Leadbeater's

possum. The vulnerability of the wildlife represented through Marshall's pelts is embodied through the precarious knitted fabric they comprise, since knitting results in an unstable material evoking the fragility of these species in the wild. The knitted pelts are displayed stretched out in frames made from sticks crudely lashed together, recalling the traditional method of drying and preparing their animal skin counterparts after the hunt. Marshall claimed that she got the idea of displaying the pelts in this way from an image she saw in the zoologist Alan Rabinowitz's book *Jaguar: One Man's Struggle to Establish the World's First Jaguar Preserve* (1986), which contains an image of a live jaguar that Rabinowitz was studying, and another of the same animal's skin stretched out and drying, having been killed by poachers (Marshall 2012a). Indeed, one of the artist's first big cat pelts was a knitted representation of a jaguar skin. In this way, Marshall expresses her care and concern for extinct and endangered species by knitting ethical stand-ins for animal skins to raise awareness of the anthropogenic threats facing wildlife in the past, present and future; she also uses craft to raise money for wildlife conservation organizations. The artist has observed the inherent duality of her work, whereby viewers often experience disgust upon the immediate encounter with her knitted pelts, which turns to fascination once the method of their construction is revealed on closer inspection (Marshall 2012b). These works have the capacity to capture the attention of exhibition visitors thanks to their affective allure.

Marshall's *Tasmanian Tiger No. 3* (2015) was presented as part of the exhibition *Strange Creatures: The Art of Unknown Animals* (2015) at the Grant Museum of Zoology, London. The exhibition was part of the Travellers' Tails project in which Royal Museums Greenwich and four partner museums collaborated on a series of exhibitions to tour two George Stubbs paintings around the UK, *The Konguoro from New Holland (1772)* and *Portrait of a Large Dog (1772)*, which had recently been acquired for the national collection. These works were significant for being the first painted depictions of these creatures in western art. Notably, Stubbs did not paint these creatures from life, but in the case of the kangaroo instead informed his representation from a combination of written descriptions, pencil sketches made by the illustrator Sydney Parkinson and observations of a pelt specimen that was likely stuffed.⁹ The Grant Museum of Zoology, London, founded in 1828 by the anatomist and zoologist Robert Edmond Grant as a teaching collection and a university museum at University College London (UCL), was one of the institutions to host these works by Stubbs as they travelled around the UK. The museum staged an exhibition in which ten researchers from across different departments at UCL, including myself, were invited as co-curators to select and interpret artworks and images of nonhuman animals that had been created by individuals who, like George Stubbs, had never seen the animal in the flesh. I selected Ruth Marshall's knitted thylacine skin for inclusion in the displays, since like Stubbs's kangaroo it was produced from the artist's observation of pelt specimens, rather than from life. Yet, the display of this work also provided the opportunity to address an anthropogenic extinction narrative in the context of this museum.

Thylacines, or Tasmanian tigers, were voraciously hunted and trapped throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries because of their reputation for preying on livestock, even having a bounty placed on their heads by the Tasmanian government to incentivize and reward hunters. As a result, numbers gradually declined in the wild. While attempts were made to re-establish thylacine numbers once the diminishing population had been recognized, these efforts came too late and the last thylacine died in captivity in 1936, with the species finally declared extinct in 1986. The only remaining visual traces of these creatures now exist as natural history illustrations, a finite selection of films and photographs of captive thylacines and 756 known museum specimens around the world in the form of taxidermy, skeletal remains, pelt specimens and wet preparations.¹⁰ Ruth Marshall's work is a comment on the contributory part played by humans in rendering the thylacine extinct. *Tasmanian Tiger No. 3* was presented in a cabinet at the Grant Museum of Zoology alongside various thylacine specimens and an image of a hunter with a recent kill, to draw attention to the human role in this extinction story (figure 1). The accompanying text and the insertion of Marshall's pelt in the museum display case reorientated the historical natural history specimens towards an anthropogenic extinction narrative and recognized a cultural history linked to this species that was otherwise not on display elsewhere in the gallery.¹¹

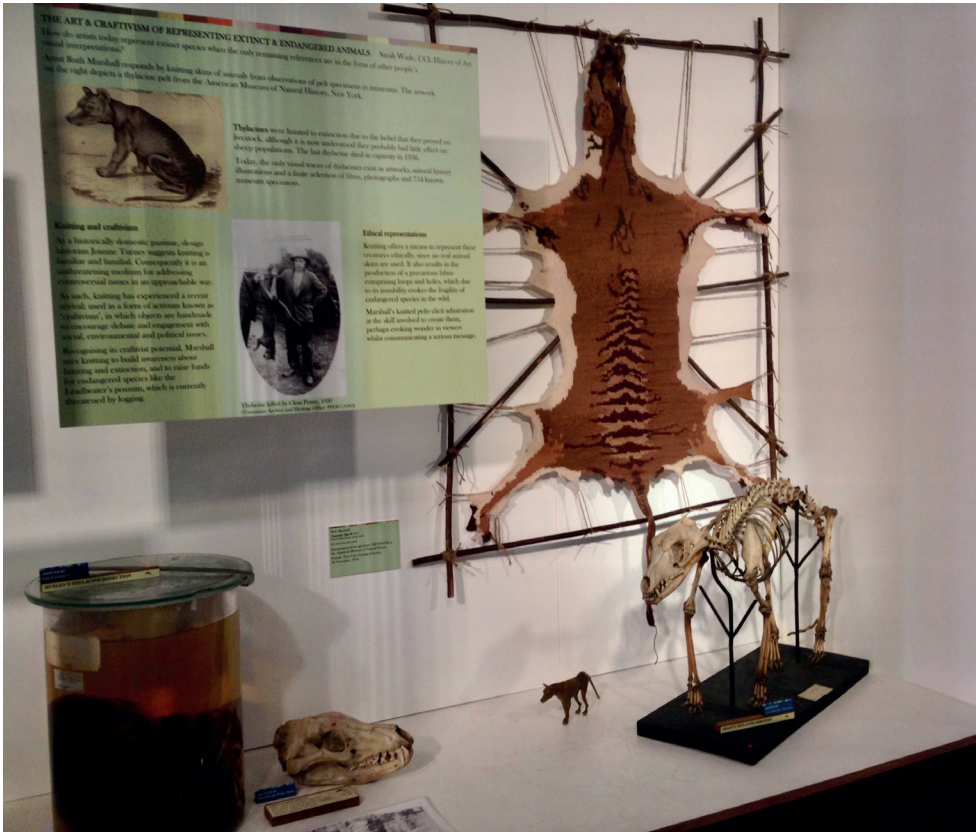


Figure 1. Ruth Marshall, *Tasmanian Tiger No. 3* (2015). Installed at the Grant Museum of Zoology, London, during *Strange Creatures: The Art of Unknown Animals* (2015). Image: Sarah Wade.'

Interventions of contemporary art in natural history collections forms a subset of the wider curatorial practice of displaying artworks in non-art museums, which gained momentum in the 1990s.¹² This work has taken place as dedicated on-going programmes, including the aforementioned *Kunst/Natur* initiative at the Museum für Naturkunde and the contemporary art programme that ran at the Natural History Museum, London, between 2005-2013 (Wade 2022). This curatorial activity has offered opportunities to broaden the appeal of science-based collections and engage diverse audiences, with artworks being presented to aid communication and interpretation, facilitate learning and provoke debate (Rossi-Linnemann and de Martini 2020: 13). This exhibition strategy has additionally presented possibilities for entangling natural history collections and cultural histories (Arends 2009), inserting the sort of narratives that have frequently been absent from exhibits in this context. The display of contemporary artworks amongst natural history museums thereby expands the interpretative possibilities of the collections these institutions contain. Nevertheless, one of the critiques charged against the presentation of contemporary art in the context of non-art museums is that it risks being opaque, inaccessible and even missed by museum visitors (Redler Hawes 2020: 81, 82, 87). To counter this, at the Grant Museum of Zoology, there was a large interpretation text panel supporting the display, but attempts were also made to actively engage visitors with Marshall's work through the public engagement programming accompanying the exhibition, which included a 12-Hour 'Knit-A-Thon'.¹³ Reminiscent of a craftivist stitch-in, the event was facilitated by the craft collective Prick Your Finger, who were on hand to support novices and experts alike in the creation of knitted and crocheted animal pelts. Attendees spent the evening

crafting critters while considering the topic of extinction following a talk I gave on Marshall's work. Not only did visitors stay late into the evening reflecting on the issue of extinction in informal ways as they crafted into the night, but they engaged with this subject in on-going ways by returning to the museum after the event to photograph their knitted wildlife alongside the museum specimens.

Community Craft Projects as 'Ecological Collectivities': The Crochet Coral Reef

Using craft to invite active participation in wildlife and habitat conservation concerns is a central premise of the Crochet Coral Reef, which was started by the twin sisters Christine and Margaret Wertheim at The Institute For Figuring in Los Angeles in 2005. After reading an article on coral bleaching, the pair thought they could crochet a reef as a tribute to these disappearing marine habitats. The project recognizes that coral reefs, as important biologically diverse ecosystems, are under threat from overfishing, tourism, global warming, ocean acidification and pollution. Touted as 'a woolly celebration of the intersection of higher geometry and feminine handicraft, and a testimony to the disappearing wonders of the marine world',¹⁴ the project began life in the sisters' living room. It has since expanded into a community art project fusing art, science, craft and wildlife conservation in various projects and exhibitions around the world, encouraging reflection on environmental issues through the act of making.¹⁵ With a staggering 15,000 participants from across the world as of 2020, the scale of the project is huge and its international appeal undeniable.¹⁶

In recognition of the anthropogenic threats facing marine wildlife, such as the circling masses of rubbish in the sea like the Great Pacific Garbage Patch, the core collection of coral reefs produced by The Institute For Figuring includes a 'Toxic Reef' made from plastic trash to allude to the damaging effect of this ocean rubbish on sea life and marine ecosystems. The Institute For Figuring has also produced a 'bleached reef', and a 'bleached bone reef'. These are made from neutrally coloured materials to mimic the appearance of these lifeless habitats in the wild, prompting viewers to contemplate the bleaching events that occur due to rising sea temperatures brought about by global heating and ocean acidification, resulting in the death of corals and the subsequent dwindling of biodiverse reef ecosystems. The project has the capacity to raise awareness about the threats facing the oceans and ocean life, mobilizing a community of makers to address a common cause in a way that recalls the collective, caring craft that resulted in the AIDS Memorial Quilt (East 2015: 219).¹⁷ The woolly materials used to represent these corals reflect the environmental orientation of the project: no coral was harmed in the creation of this work. As the feminist philosopher Donna Haraway has observed, the Crochet Coral Reef permits crafters to 'stitch "intimacy without proximity"' and achieve 'caring without the neediness of touching by camera or hand' (Haraway 2016: 79), offering ethical stand-ins for wildlife that have been crafted through crochet.

As a project that traverses art and science, the Crochet Coral Reef has been displayed in wide-ranging contexts from art galleries to science museums, providing an opportunity to raise awareness about environmental crises like coral bleaching amongst broad audiences through a participatory craft activity, in which contributors think about the issues through the act of making. Between 2010-2011 the project was presented at the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History in the Sant Ocean Hall (figure 2). Like many marine invertebrates, corals, as small, far-from-human species that inhabit the ocean floor can be difficult for museum visitors to relate to. In addition, their neutral hues when presented as specimens in natural history collections fail to evoke the lively and colourful coral reef habitats that are threatened by human activities, and aquaria of reefs are expensive and complex to care for (Endt-Jones 2020: 185, 189; Lowe *et al.* 2020). The colourful crochet corals can therefore provide an alluring and engaging way to counter the challenges surrounding the presentation of corals in natural history museums. These crochet corals additionally become cute through their woolly domesticity in a way that can harness the effects of cuddly charisma to induce a desire to care (Lorimer 2007: 918; Lorimer 2015: 46).

As well as presenting reefs made by The Institute For Figuring, the museum also hosted the Smithsonian Community Reef, a 'satellite reef' project that engaged local crafters resulting in an installation created from contributions by over 200 individuals. However, while this project

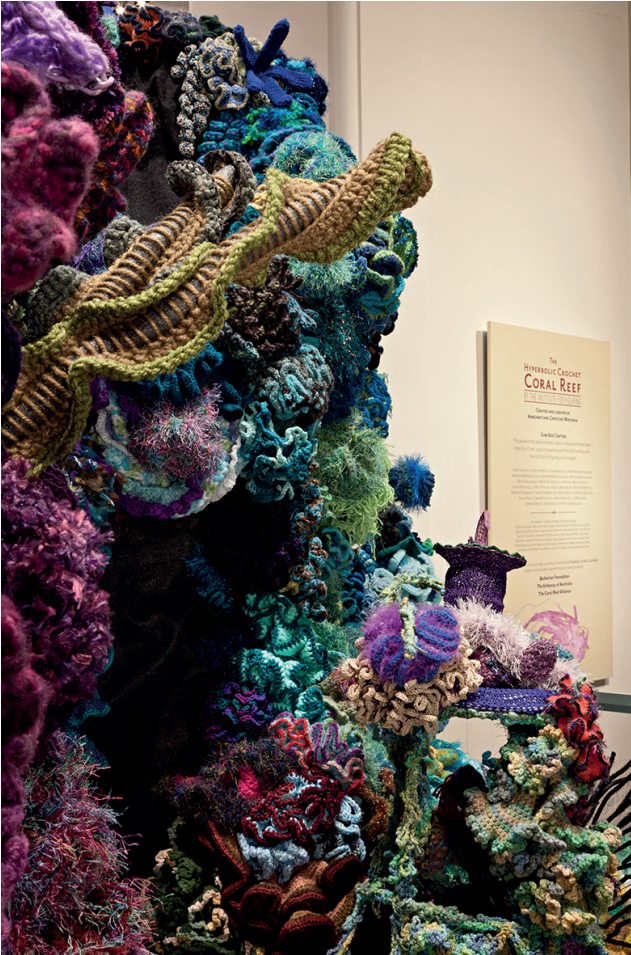


Figure 2. The Smithsonian Community Reef is a satellite of the worldwide Hyperbolic Crochet Coral Reef Project created by Margaret and Christine Wertheim of the Institute For Figuring in Los Angeles. Photo by Don Hurlbert, Smithsonian Institution.

provided an effective way to raise awareness, its restorative impact on ocean ecosystems was obviously more limited. As Margaret Wertheim has prosaically observed of the project, '[o]ur efforts alone can't "save" coral reefs' (Wertheim 2015: 72). However, Wertheim maintained that the resultant reef 'installations may encourage viewers to stop for a moment and think about the power of little things' (Wertheim 2015: 72). As participatory projects, the crochet coral reefs emphasize that big things can be achieved through collaboration, with each participant playing a small but fundamental part in the overall project, producing a single crocheted coral to contribute to the larger reef. These projects promote the idea that if everyone makes just a small change in behaviour towards the environment, the collective results have the capacity to achieve more than the sum of their parts.¹⁸ As a result, the Crochet Coral Reef highlights the cumulative possibilities of the small acts of individuals (Wertheim and Aloï 2019: 180) and the meditative act of crafting provides time and space to reflect on the issues at stake in this work.

The act of collective making in the Smithsonian Community Reef and other satellite reef projects calls

attention to the crafters' connections to others, be it the fellow makers in the participatory project, or the wildlife with whom they share the world (Endt-Jones 2020: 197). In this way the project harnesses the relational possibilities of craft (Black and Burisch 2011: 216-7) to draw attention to the ecological reality of the ways humans and nonhumans are entwined. Indeed, as the curator Heather Davis and the scholar Etienne Turpin have observed, '[t]o think of ourselves as biological organisms first, as one type among the worlds of other critters, allows for more open and curious relations to the other beings with whom we co-compose the world' (Davis and Turpin 2015: 13). This participatory community craft project can be understood as an example of what the ecocritic and theorist Timothy Morton has called *ecological collectivities*, through which reflection and meditation become central to 'enacting or experiencing an intrinsic interconnectedness' and where nonhumans are welcomed 'with tenderness' (Morton 2010: 127-8). Through the interdisciplinary entanglements of art, craft, science and wildlife conservation fundamental to the Crochet Coral Reef, participants might become more vigilant about the ways they are enmeshed with others.

The museum professional and writer Nina Simon has observed that the most effective participation projects in museums should benefit institutions and non-participating audiences as well as the participants themselves (Simon 2010). As such, it is important to note the wider effects of the presentation of this project in this specific context. The Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History was able to address an urgent wildlife and habitat conservation issue in its existing gallery space and was also presented with the possibility of attracting a new audience by combining craft and marine wildlife conservation. Makers had time and space to reflect on coral bleaching as well as their connections to others while crafting. Finally, visitors to the resulting exhibition could become more aware about the threats facing coral and coral reef habitats through an interdisciplinary project that produced a colourful and dynamic public display representing these species and ecosystems.

Humorous Handicraft and High Jinks in the Museum: Lauren O'Farrell and Stitch London

Lauren O'Farrell was a founding member of the craftivist collectives Stitch London and Knit the City. Known by the playful pseudonym Deadly Knitshade, O'Farrell's early work often took the form of knitted graffiti, where public spaces were yarn-bombed to create illicit interventions. However, since 2000 when the craftivist movement gained momentum, craftivist projects have been officially commissioned and hosted by museums in the form of exhibitions and events. For instance, in 2010 the Natural History Museum, London, invited Stitch London to facilitate an event as part of the public engagement programme to accompany the touring exhibition *The Deep Sea* (2010). The collective staged a 'Stitch-A-Squid' activity whereby members of the public could create knitted marine creatures that were then unofficially displayed alongside the museum's collections. The centrepiece to these activities presented in the middle of the museum's central hall was a giant knitted squid, created by Lauren O'Farrell following her observations of the 8.62 metre-long giant squid specimen housed in the Natural History Museum's spirit collections, known affectionately as 'Archie' (figure 3). O'Farrell created her version of the giant squid from 'plarn', a yarn made from cut-up strips of plastic, thereby harnessing the possibilities of this crafted squid's materiality to make an environmental point. The resulting humorously titled *Squidius knittius giganticus plasticus* was created from 162 Sainsbury's supermarket carrier bags and named 'Plarchie' in tribute to the cephalopod counterpart (Deadly Knitshade 2011). Of course, plastic is known to be particularly hazardous to marine wildlife, with plastic bags and other plastic waste being consumed by creatures foraging at sea and on the shoreline, where this rubbish accumulates after being carelessly disposed of. In 2016, several stranded sperm whales were found with large quantities of plastic in their stomachs, with one young sperm whale found dead in 2011 reported to have ingested almost one hundred plastic bags.¹⁹ The giant squid is not extinct or endangered, but such newsworthy occurrences give O'Farrell's squid an ecological potency since deep sea squid are a prominent source of food for sperm whales. O'Farrell's crafted squid can therefore be read in the context of the detrimental impact that human activities can have on wildlife, serving as a consciousness-raising exercise with the possibility of prompting participants and visitors to become more aware of the problems caused by ocean trash, as well as more responsible about their own plastic consumption and disposal. This recalls the 'Toxic Reef', which similarly harnessed the materiality of plastic trash to communicate ecological destruction to participants and audiences alike. These projects both channelled meaning through materials and promoted re-use and recycling via the creative use of plastic waste to facilitate engagement with environmental issues through the act of making.

The humour and high jinks that permeated the event, whereby knitted creatures were surreptitiously placed amongst the museum's collection and photographed, and the knitted giant squid was wrapped around the museum's prominent sculpture of Charles Darwin, contributed to the accessibility of these debates in a light-hearted way. The craftivist tactics of Stitch London presented the possibility that environmentalism can be fun, mobilizing a form of what the environmental humanities scholar Nicole Seymour has called *bad environmentalism*, in which the playful and the pleasurable might be harnessed as ecologically motivating forces (Seymour 2018: 4, 6). This strategy provides an upbeat alternative to the 'doom and gloom' tone that often prevails over exhibitions about wildlife conservation concerns, which, as the literary



Figure 3. Lauren O'Farrell, 'Plarchie' the knitted giant squid (2010). Presented at the Natural History Museum, London. Image: Courtesy of Lauren O'Farrell

studies scholar and ecocritic Ursula K. Heise has observed, risks losing its rhetorical edge by being such a predictable approach (Heise 2016: 53). Not only this, but the literary scholar Louise Economides has suggested that focusing solely on a negative sense of loss can impinge upon an individual's capacity to develop more positive ways of being, reducing the possibility for any environmental action to result from encounters with this work (Economides 2016: 136). While extinction studies scholars such as Thom Van Dooren have convincingly observed that grief and mourning, as more sombre emotional registers, can be transformational forces for change when addressing species loss (Van Dooren 2016: 139), a playful approach can be beneficial in the context of encounters with visual and material culture, providing an accessible and fresh take on environmental issues by adopting a more optimistic tone.

It has been suggested that cinema audiences respond more favourably to ecological issues if they are presented in ways that are positive or fun (Mitman 2009: 213-5), with the art historian Marion Endt-Jones extending this observation to audiences of

contemporary art and exhibitions, observing how this presents institutions with 'the challenge of avoiding pessimism while at the same time driving home the urgency to engage, care and possibly act' (Endt-Jones 2020: 198). By juxtaposing playful temporary events or interventions with permanent displays, curators can strive towards achieving this balancing act by using the multifaceted, multimedia and multi-storied format of the exhibition to tackle issues in various registers and from different perspectives. Furthermore, Plarchie's playfulness captured imaginations to the extent that this crafted giant squid made a fleeting appearance on the recent BBC TV show *Craftivism: Making a Difference* (2021), more than 10 years after the event, and even has a Twitter following, indicating that the project made a lasting and memorable impression. The contemporary and popular interest in craft and its photogenic aesthetic has resulted in these projects transcending the museum's walls to circulate on popular and social media, thereby offering the possibility of engaging new audiences and expanding the reach of the environmental issues at stake in this work. This gives such craft projects mileage when it comes to reaching members of the public that might not ordinarily visit museums.

An Interdisciplinary Practice

Collectively these projects have provided opportunities for exhibiting species and habitat loss in museums and widening participation in these issues through the act of making. Crafted artistic interventions, community craft projects and public engagement events utilizing craft have been used to stimulate awareness about the anthropogenic threats facing wildlife in museums and beyond. Yet, critiques can also be mounted towards this field of practice. For one, while the quiet and meditative acts of knitting and crochet can provide space and time for participants to practice 'slow craft' to reflect on environmental issues, this leisurely pace is somewhat contrary to the urgent response required to address ecological emergency. In addition, the audience for these exhibitions and events presents the possibility of being relatively limited if relying on existing museum visitors and contemporary crafters and craftivists alone, the latter of which have been characterized by a lack of diversity amongst participants (Bryan-Wilson 2017: 26). Furthermore, while this activity can raise awareness and increase engagement in museums, it has its limitations when it comes to tangible ecological action. To echo Margaret Wertheim's remarks, the work of an artist or crafts person alone will not save endangered wildlife or threatened habitats and it follows that neither will museum exhibitions and events on their own. Nevertheless, what museums can do is act as important conduits in the presentation of these issues to the public with the scope to create informative, entertaining and generative spaces that invite participation and open imaginations to current ecological realities and future possibilities.

Craft, as an act of care and repair, seems well suited to addressing ecological distress in this context. Through the webs and threads of knitting and crochet, humans and nonhumans, art and science, craft and conservation are entangled in the interdisciplinary exhibitions and events just discussed. These projects mobilize the combination of art, science and craft to encourage contemplation about species and habitat loss, invite active engagement with these issues through the act of making and furthermore present possibilities for rendering historical collections and permanent galleries pertinent to the urgent issues of today.

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Endnotes

- 1 On ecological exhibitions, see for instance Cameron and Nielson 2015; Newell *et al.* 2017; Jørgensen 2019: 119-44; Syperek and Wade 2020; a special issue of *Museum Management and Curatorship* on museums and climate change edited by Joy Davis in 2020; and Harrison and Sterling 2021. On the wider field of extinction studies, see Rose 2011; Heise 2016; Van Dooren 2016; Jørgensen 2017; Rose, Van Dooren and Chrulew 2017; Jørgensen 2019.
- 2 This article is a development of research undertaken as part of my PhD thesis, see Wade 2018.
- 3 Natural History Museum, 'Natural History Museum Declares "Planetary Emergency" and Reveals Bold New Vision and Strategy to 2031 in Response', 2020. <https://www.nhm.ac.uk/press-office/press-releases/natural-history-museum-declares--planetary-emergency--and-reveal.html>, accessed 23 February 2021.
- 4 Tate, 'Tate Directors Declare Climate Emergency', 2019. <https://www.tate.org.uk/press/press-releases/tate-directors-declare-climate-emergency>, accessed 23 February 2021.
- 5 Horniman Museum and Gardens, 'Horniman Museum and Gardens Declares Climate Emergency', 2019. <https://www.horniman.ac.uk/story/horniman-museum-and-gardens-declares-climate-emergency/>, accessed 23 February 2021.
- 6 These handicrafts have also witnessed a resurgence as part of a broader trend towards making and mending, popularized by online marketplaces such as Etsy.

- ⁷ Farrah Tomazin, 'Knitting 'Nannas' Protest Against Logging at Mount St Leonard', Daily Life, 30 November 2013. <http://www.dailylife.com.au/news-and-views/news-features/knitting-nannas-protest-against-logging-at-mount-st-leonard-20131130-2yj9a.html>, accessed 5 February 2021.
- ⁸ Kari Paul, 'Kangaroo Pouches, Koala Mittens: Knitters Unite to Aid Animals in Australia Fires', The Guardian, 8 January 2020. <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2020/jan/07/australia-wildfires-animals-shelters-knitting>, accessed 1 March 2021.
- ⁹ Royal Museums Greenwich, 'The Kongouro from New Holland'. <https://collections.rmg.co.uk/collections/objects/573621.html>, accessed 1 March 2021.
- ¹⁰ The International Thylacine Specimen Database. http://www.naturalworlds.org/thylacine/mrp/itsd/itsd_1.htm, accessed 5 March 2021.
- ¹¹ Such narratives of exploitation have been more recently addressed in the Grant Museum of Zoology exhibition *Displays of Power* (2019-2021), which highlighted the colonial histories of natural history collections in this museum.
- ¹² For more on this field of activity, see for instance Putnam 2009; Carroll La 2011; Robins 2013; Bencard *et al.* 2019; Arends 2020; Arnold *et al.* 2020; Rossi-Linnemann and de Martini 2020; Wade 2020; and Barrett *et al.* 2021.
- ¹³ Dean W. Veall, 'The Great Grant Knit-a-Thon', UCL Culture Blog, 18 August 2015. <https://blogs.ucl.ac.uk/museums/2015/08/18/the-great-grant-knit-a-thon/>, accessed 5 March 2021.
- ¹⁴ The Institute For Figuring. <https://theiff.org/exhibits/reef.html>, accessed 2 February 2021.
- ¹⁵ For more on the Crochet Coral Reef, see Endt-Jones 2013; Wertheim and Wertheim 2015; Haraway 2016; Endt-Jones 2017; and Endt-Jones 2020.
- ¹⁶ Crochet Coral Reef. www.crochetcoralreef.org/about/index.php, accessed 28 February 2021.
- ¹⁷ In fact, the homepage of Margaret Wertheim's website features a quotation by the critic Lawrence Weschler that states that the Crochet Coral Reef is 'the AIDS quilt of global warming'. See Margaret Wertheim, 'Science+Art Project: *Crochet Coral Reef*'. <https://www.margaretwertheim.com/crochet-coral-reef>, accessed 11 February 2022.
- ¹⁸ Colleen Marzec, 'When Art Meets Science: The Hyperbolic Crochet Coral Reef', Smithsonian Institution, October 2010. <https://ocean.si.edu/ocean-life/invertebrates/when-art-meets-science-hyperbolic-crochet-coral-reef>, accessed 13 March 2020.
- ¹⁹ Philip Hoare, 'Whales are Starving — Their Stomachs Full of Our Plastic Waste', The Guardian, 30 March 2016. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/mar/30/plastic-debris-killing-sperm-whales>, accessed 28 February 2021.

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