

Erratic and still mimesis: Dancing multispecies relations in gallery space

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In this multispecies ethnographic study, underpinned by posthumanism and process philosophy, I explore dance as an art educational method for relating to the more-than-human in the contemporary art exhibition *The Cosmopolitan Chicken Project* by the Belgian artist Koen Vanmechelen. The six workshops took place at *Kunsthall 3,14*, a non-commercial art institution in Bergen, Norway. Third and seventh graders from local schools explored human-animal relations by dancing with and inspired by the movements of twelve chickens in the gallery space. Following Erin Manning's theory of dance, as well as Donna Haraway's writings on how to respectfully respond to the more-than-human, I argue that dance helped create a space to look back reciprocally in the workshops. The virtual potential of dance was actualized through mimesis – both through erratic and still movements – in an assemblage of material-discursive forces. This study contests the child-centred paradigm in gallery and museum education, contributing instead to a posthumanist understanding in which children are conceptualized as one important part of reciprocal relations in the gallery space. The research project is situated in the cross-section of human-animal studies, dance studies, contemporary art, and museum and gallery education.

KEYWORDS: human-animal studies; dance; multispecies ethnography; *The Cosmopolitan Chicken Project*; Koen Vanmechelen; posthumanism; process philosophy, mimesis, preacceleration

Introduction

“Must dance involve humans? Are the dances of birds and bees merely metaphorical?” These questions were asked by the choreographer, teacher, and author Kent De Spain (2000, 6) in the beginning of the new millennium. In history, he argues, dance has been seen as the most human-centred art form given that the human body itself is its most important medium. Questioning this conceptualization of dance and wondering about the agency of more-than-human actors, De Spain proposed a posthumanist paradigm for the art form which could expand the definition of dance – or who is dancing – beyond the autonomous human-subject. In the fall of 2024, I explored similar questions in art educational workshops with third and seventh graders, as well as live chickens, at Kunsthall 3,14, a non-commercial art institution in Bergen, Norway. The workshops took place in a contemporary art exhibition by the Belgian artist Koen Vanmechelen.

For more than 25 years, Vanmechelen has been crossbreeding chicken populations around the world in *The Cosmopolitan Chicken Project* to contribute to their biodiversity, encouraging the public to take a closer look at the animal that is often taken as given in society. The project sparks debates about animal welfare, humans’ interference in nature, globalization, genetic manipulation, and more (Kunsthall 3,14 2024; Luyckx 2021; Vuegen 2021). In the art educational workshops with twelve Cosmopolitan Chickens at Kunsthall 3,14, our goal was to get to know the animal better – by closely studying the body language of chickens, and dancing with and inspired by the animals’ movements. Each of the six workshops with seventh and third grades, part of a multispecies ethnography research project led by me, began with the same question: Can chickens dance?

“No, chickens cannot dance,” a seventh grader answers with a determined tone in one of the workshops. We are sitting on the marble stairs at the entrance hall of Kunsthall 3,14. “They can move, but they cannot dance. To be able to dance, you must *know* that you are dancing.” Next to him, two girls begin to move their elongated arms, making slow waves as if carefully moving their wings. A child next to them sets his hands in his armpits and flaps his short chicken wings enthusiastically. Someone raises their hand: “I don’t agree with that... You can think without being aware that you think. You can think without a thought! You can turn on music, and you begin to dance without even thinking about it...”

I propose that the children’s answers might not only reflect their personal opinions, but also some common conceptions of both animals and dance in the Western

world. First, dance is seen solely as a human activity, because only humans can both dance and be conscious of it – chickens (and animals in general) are understood to not have consciousness, and therefore cannot dance. This is in line with popular understandings of the art form, in which the autonomous human-dancer expresses the inner life and soul of the independent subject (Bergen 2022, 14, 61). The understanding that animals, like pre-programmed automata, do not have consciousness – or a soul or a mind – springs from, among others, the Enlightenment philosophies of René Descartes and Immanuel Kant, both of which have greatly shaped the contemporary understanding of animals (Aloi 2012; Oliver 2009).

The second verbal answer – while perhaps also assuming that animals do not have consciousness – sees dance as an embodied activity that does not require awareness. Here, another popular conception of dance might take place: “[...] an idealized form of dancing: just not knowing and letting the body dance you around” (Forsythe 2003, 23). The body “does its thing” separate from cognitive states. Both conceptions, privileging either the mind or the body, might reflect the Cartesian mind-body dualism still dominant today in Western discourse (Manning 2012).

In this paper, I research how posthumanist and process philosophical understandings of dance can be used in art educational workshops in a contemporary art exhibition with live chickens. Posthumanist conceptions of dance challenge human-centrism by expanding the notion of agency beyond the individual human body – dance happens in a complex network of material–discursive relations between human and more-than-human actants (Bergen 2022). Studies in recent decades have focused on, for example, the entanglements of technology and human bodies in dance (e.g., Bergen 2022; De Spain 2000; Gündüz 2012) and dance as a way of relating to human and more-than-human world inspired by Karen Barad’s agential realism (Flønes 2025; Heil 2020). Erin Manning (2012), theorizing dance and movement with the process philosophies of Gilles Deleuze, Henry Bergson and Alfred Whitehead, explores how the virtual potential of relational bodies in becoming creates novelty and difference. Movement does not take place in bodies separate from the world, but the world moves through always interconnected bodies.

In the situation described above – in addition to the verbal answers – the students showed with subtle and enthusiastic, mimetic, and intuitive movements how chickens might dance. How can dance be used as a method to relate to the more-than-human, and to explore human-animal relations in a gallery space? How can dance help the children – and myself as an art educator – see differently, from the point of view of another species?

To dance in an art gallery space is not unheard of in museums and other art institutions today, even if *dancing with chickens* is surely less common. Since at least the 1960s in the Western context, dance has been used to mediate, activate, and relate to visual art in a gallery space (Bishop 2014). The present research project is situated in the cross-section of museum education, human-animal studies, contemporary art, and dance studies, underpinned by posthumanist and process philosophies. The posthumanist theory-practice I develop in this article contributes to the field of post-approaches in museum and gallery education (e.g., Berard 2024; Feinberg and Lemaire 2021; Hackett et al. 2018; Hacklin 2022; Kukkonen 2023, 2024; MacRae et al. 2017; Skregelid 2024). Post-approaches emphasize the performative assemblages of human and more-than-human bodies in learning (Hackett et al. 2018). The present paper also provides fresh insights into the small but growing body of research that concerns art education and artistic learning with more-than-human animals (e.g., Bastian et al. 2017; Dimke, 2020; Hagström 2018; Fredriksen 2020; Nordbø and Fredriksen 2023).

Multispecies ethnography at Kunsthall 3,14

I work as the Head of Communication and Education at Kunsthall 3,14, where my main responsibility is to develop and carry out the art educational program with guided tours and workshops for local comprehensive and high schools. Kunsthall 3,14 has, in the past years, invested in research projects in the field of museum and gallery education, which focus on children's experiences and developing art educational methods to mediate contemporary art (Kunsthall 3,14 2025b). This study is part of a multispecies ethnography project initiated and led by me¹ and carried out in connection with *The Cosmopolitan Chicken Project* at Kunsthall 3,14.² Multispecies ethnography is a hybrid research method developed to observe and analyse the relations of different species, always recognizing the agency of the more-than-human world (Ameli 2022). To develop the educational offers for Vanmechelen's exhibition, I immersed myself in life with chickens, both inside and outside Kunsthall 3,14 (Kukkonen forthcoming). The exhibition is presented in the next section.

1 The project received external funding from Arts and Culture Norway.

2 In addition to the school program and research project, I took active part in the planning and carrying out the exhibition at Kunsthall 3,14. I visited the artist's studio and park with an open-air exhibition, LABIOMISTA in Genk, Belgium, and wrote the exhibition text (Kunsthall 3,14, 2024) according to the curator Malin Barth's wishes.

Although I do not have a professional background in dancing, the art form has always mattered in my life, both as a practitioner and audience. As several years had passed since I had danced on a regular basis, I attuned to dancing with my bodymind again through art-based inquiry (Leavy 2018), in order to imagine ways to mediate the exhibition with dancing as an art educational method. By dancing both alone and with human and more-than-human others, I explored the communicative and artistic powers of dance and body language. I could read about the body language of chickens and humans (Pease and Pease 2017; Hunsbedt 2019), but at the end of the day, there was no other way to learn how to dance with chickens than by actually doing it. Art-based research makes it possible to access knowledge otherwise unreachable for more traditional methods, by thinking and making differently (Leavy 2018). To tap into the embodied knowledge, dance and movement became an important place of inquiry (Snowber 2018). In addition, three experts in the field of dance pedagogy and art education contributed to developing the workshops with practical and theoretical knowledge in the process: performing arts scholar Anette Therese Pettersen, dance pedagogue Eeva Latto, and assistant professor with a doctorate degree in dance pedagogy, Mari Flønes.

Although it might have been the first time dance was employed as an art educational method with school children at Kunsthall 3,14, embodied and material-discursive pedagogies, underpinned by posthumanist perspectives, are actively put to work in the educational program at Kunsthall 3,14 (Kukkonen 2024). Philosophical and critical conversations are merged with material and sensory explorations in our workshops. During the past years, school classes have tested out different understandings of, for example, diplomacy by creating performance-like paper sculptures in the gallery space and building art works in the form of domino effects to explore the relationality and fragility of ecosystems, and more (see Kukkonen 2023; Kunsthall 3,14 2025a). Children and young people are encouraged to engage both their words and senses, and the exhibition space is actively used in many of the material-discursive explorations.

The educational offers always take their starting point in the current art works on display. Kunsthall 3,14 is known for its daring exhibition program with a focus on international contemporary art touching upon urgent political and societal themes in the global world (Handal 2024), in which *The Cosmopolitan Chicken Project* is no exception. During the past years, we have shown, for example, an exhibition with system critical Russian artists when Russia's war of aggression escalated in Ukraine (Nilsson 2022). When artificial intelligence took the world by storm, 3,14 experimented with an exhibition curated by ChatGPT (Hegg 2023). The most visited exhibition in 2024 was the

Israeli-British artist Sigalit Landau's *Laces*, which invited visitors to take a seat around a diplomatic negotiation table (Handal 2024).

In the gallery space, I observed the art educational situations with school classes and chickens with participatory observation methods (Warming 2007), including my own role as educator and researcher. Six classes with 15–23 children – altogether 107 students and 14 teachers – participated in the study.³ I took written and drawn anonymous notes during and after the workshops. All teachers, students and their parents received an information letter before the visits, and the research project was discussed both at school and the gallery. Before the workshop started, in the marble staircase, we discussed the research aspect of the visit, and the children were asked if they wanted to participate in the study. The chickens could not give their consent the same way – but throughout the workshops, I observed the chickens' body language to make sure they were well, and if any signs of stress occurred, I was able to make changes or stop the workshop (Kukkonen forthcoming).

The Cosmopolitan Chicken Project at Kunsthall 3,14

Koen Vanmechelen's *The Cosmopolitan Chicken Project* creates an unexpected encounter between chickens and humans in a gallery space. At Kunsthall 3,14, the art installation with twelve chickens in two coops with thousands of liters of sand took place in the main hall of the renaissance/new empire-style building that used to host the National Bank of Norway (fig. 1). The installation's both intimate and alienating effect offered an opportunity to contemplate humans' relations to the world's most numerous bird (Kunsthall 3,14 2024; Lawler 2015).⁴

3 The analysis in the present paper focuses on workshops with the seventh graders (three third-grade and three seventh-grade classes participated in the research project).

4 The chickens' wellbeing was ensured throughout the day by the staff and contact with a veterinarian was in place in case we had concerns about the animals' health. At the same time, bringing live animals, although highly domesticated, into gallery space, is never unproblematic. The setting hinders the chickens from practicing some of their species-specific behaviour: the birds did not have access to outdoors during the three-month long exhibition period, and the eggs were hatched by an incubator instead of the hens themselves. An incubator might have better success rate of hatching, given that it can be difficult to predict when (or if) the hens become broody during the exhibition period. After the exhibition ended, some of the chickens continued in the artist's project, and others were adopted to backyards and smallhold farms in Norway, further diversifying the genes of local and global populations. Depending on their new caretakers, the chickens therefore continued their lives – how long, especially in the case of the roosters, is difficult to say – as pets and production animals.



Figure 1. Installation view of *The Cosmopolitan Chicken Project* at Kunsthall 3,14. Photo: Guttorm Glomsaas/Kunsthall 3,14.

The generation #29 was born in the fall of 2024 at Kunsthall 3,14. Norwegian Jærhøns, the only indigenous chicken breed in Norway, was crossed with the previous generation of Cosmopolitan Chicken in the project (fig. 3). The visitors encountered two large cages, built of wood and metal netting – one for Norwegian Jærhøns rooster with two CCP28 hens and another for the new generation – with fine sand, and food and water hanging in metal containers. In the middle of the space, next to an actual incubator with an industrial appearance, was an installation with 6000 eggs under red lights and ventilators, stirring associations to mass production. In a separate room, the visitors could explore the DNA code of one of the Cosmopolitan Chickens presented in a massive *Book of Genomes* and an accompanying film. A neon sign stating “Fertility comes from outside” beamed a red light into the exhibition space.

THE COSMOPOLITAN CHICKEN PROJECT (CCP)
 KOEN VANMECHELEN
 1999 — 2024



Figure 2. The 29 crossings in *The Cosmopolitan Chicken Project*. The project has continued in Spain after Norway.



Figure 3. CCP28 hen with Norwegian Jærhøns rooster. Photo: Guttorm Glomsaas/Kunsthall 3,14.



Figures 4-5. Visitors encountering a CCP28 hen. The new generation with nine seven-week-old CCP29 chicks relaxing in the coop. Photos: Heidi Kukkonen.

The project calls into question dogmatic conceptions of chicken, a co-species endlessly entangled and hyperexploited by humans. Vanmechelen seeks to revive the dignity and power of the bird with the project that is not only an artistic statement but also a “practical intervention in contemporary farming practices” (Mengham 2021, 253). As the animal has been bred to answer humans’ needs during the past two centuries, in-breeding in both so-called “pure-breds” and industrial chickens has weakened the gene pools in many populations. More diverse genes can contribute to the chickens’ fertility, survival rate, immunity, and ability to adapt to a changing environment (Stinckens et al. 2015). Since 1999, Vanmechelen has crossbred 30 chicken populations, taking place both inside and outside gallery spaces around the world (fig. 2).

It has been argued that Vanmechelen’s work not only champions for, but also objectifies chickens (Ääri 2018). Whose terms – their own or human – do the chickens exist in the project (Squier 2011)? Some presentations of *The Cosmopolitan Chicken Project* pay less attention to the animal self and emphasize the chicken as a representation for humanity (e.g., Husslein 2021/2006; Doove 2021/2007). Here, it seems like the project is based on human-centric ethos, in which the animal serves most of all human needs. Using animals as symbols in art is typically grounded in anthropomorphic logic (Baker 2000).

Much of Vanmechelen's art is impressive in its scale and magnitude, both when it comes to concrete works, oftentimes operating in local and global contexts, and concepts touching upon the fundamental questions about life itself. *The Cosmopolitan Chicken Project*, as well, is a universal breeding project that has taken place all over the world. Whereas broad concepts such as biocultural diversity, identity and globalism are central in *The Cosmopolitan Chicken Project*, this research project sets its focus more on the intimate, material-discursive encounter created by Vanmechelen in the exhibition space. One work of art can both symbolize and operate with its materiality (Aloi 2018).

In the workshops, agency is understood to lie in the entanglements – as in the relation between the co-species – instead of entities such as the birds or the human. This relation is created, explored and challenged not only by dialogue, but by embodied modes of learning that take the materiality of the artwork seriously. Following the sometimes-surprising materiality of art can deconstruct the subject/object dichotomy (Aloi 2018). Through the workshops' tasks – such as paying close attention to the body language of chickens, trying out their movements, and, for example, figuring out the diverse moods of the chickens that day – the children got familiar with the birds and their different personalities. In the next section, I will further explain how dance functioned as a bridge between species in the workshops.

Dance as a bridge between species

Could dance act as interspecies communication – to relate to the more-than-human engagingly, ethically and artistically? The goal of the art educational workshops was to learn more about chickens by dancing with and inspired by their movements, to “listen to the chickens with our bodies” (Kukkonen forthcoming). As Katharina Ameli (2022) and Vinciane Despret (2004) write, senses and nonverbal forms of communication, like body language, are pivotal when exploring human-animal relationships. Furthermore, artistic approaches, although underrepresented in the field of human-animal studies, can make possible new ways to understand relations between humans and more-than-human world (Ameli 2022; Hamilton and Taylor 2017).

Donna Haraway's writings (2008) on how to respectfully respond to the more-than-human have greatly inspired this study. According to Haraway, to respond is not an easy but a “risky project” (22) in which we ask what the animal is concerned about, what the embodied and visual signs might invite us into, as well as learning what science tells us about the behavior of animals. I do not think that we can ever exactly know or be certain what an animal thinks, feels, or wants, but I do argue that our

ethical responsibility is to try. And here is the risky part – we might need to guess but at the same time be wary of “making the subaltern speak” (Haraway 2008, 20; Spivak 1988). To respond is to become curious towards the other in a relation that recognizes agency in both human-animal and animal, or rather, in the intense relation itself with its hierarchies, which can be contested in the encounter. “To knot companion and species together in encounter, in regard and respect, is to enter the world of becoming with, where who and what are is precisely what is at stake” (Haraway 2008, 19).

The six workshops with third and seventh grades, lasting 60–120 minutes, started with a short chat where I poked the children’s understandings and imagination about chickens. What language can chickens speak? What does it mean to use body language? Can chickens dance? Do chickens usually live in an art exhibition?⁵ According to research, chickens have individual personalities, express empathy, and have complex social and emotional lives, and can reason and solve logical problems (Marino 2017). We had a conversation about different “super-powers” chickens have: the birds can, for example, see UV-light (Rana et al. 2024) and a greater variety of colours than humans (Ham and Osorio 2007), and they may hear sounds that human ears cannot detect (Gleich and Langemann 2011). Our aim is to be like the super-powered chickens today: we will be observant with our super eyes and ears and closely follow both chicken and human body language. Given that we are much bigger than the birds, and therefore possibly intimidating, we will take off our shoes, move on the level of chickens, and avoid rapid movements and loud voices in the gallery space.

The tasks, inviting the children to dance with the chickens – with motions possible to conduct in respect to the animals – encouraged the children to observe the chickens’ movements and body position, and test them with their bodies. In small groups (seventh grade) or everyone together (third grade), we detected different rhythms in the chickens’ movements, moved around the exhibition space like chicks, paid close attention to different body parts like legs, wings, tails, combs and wattles, and froze ourselves into the positions taken by the chickens. As part of these tasks, we wondered about the differences between human and chicken body language, and the children composed dances inspired by the chickens’ movements. After closely following the birds, we turned the gaze around and discussed how the chickens might perceive us humans – and our movements – in the space. In the last part of the workshop,

5 The students were introduced to some of these questions before the visit with a preparatory task in the classroom. The 5-minute film depicts four CCP28 hens living in a backyard in Western Norway. The film with questions (in Norwegian) can be accessed here: <https://www.kunsthall314.art/ccp-skoleprogram-forskning>

we also studied the body language of the building and the inanimate exhibition space.⁶

Mimesis – imitation of the chickens' movements – operated as an entrance point to dance with the chickens. But would this approach generate mere representations – as in simple copies of movements instead of creative and artistic explorations? In this study, dance as an art educational method in the gallery space, is inspired by Manning's (2012) theory of dance, which regards dancing not only as simple actualization of movement from A to B in space but emphasizes the virtual potential – called as preacceleration – in dance. Inspired by the process philosophies of Alfred Whitehead, Henry Bergson and Gilles Deleuze, Manning explores how preacceleration creates novelty and pushes the body towards its becoming. This movement is always relational, created by an assemblage of, for example, human bodies, gravitational forces, and the floor under one's feet – or as in the workshops at 3,14, with three grown-up chickens and nine seven-week-old chicks.

I argue that mimesis, too, can produce difference and novelty: when the children mimicked the chickens – for example, stood on one leg with arms attached on their sides like wings, completely frozen in the position – the differences of human and chicken bodies became felt and visible. The children, struggling with their balance as they tried to control the position, looked in wonder about the rooster whose other leg had disappeared under the fluffy feathers, standing totally still for minutes on end. Squatting for longer periods in the workshop, as in moving like chicks, the children soon noticed how exhausting it was to perform the chickens' movements with human bodies. "Repetition is the recomposing of the moving-with that is the relational body. [...] It is always repetition with difference" (Manning 2012, 25). Paradoxically, mimesis might create valuable opportunities to explore human-animal relations, and differences of species, in particular. Here, a posthumanist understanding of mimesis (Lawtoo 2025) informs the practice, deriving its guiding idea from difference, in contrast to more traditional humanist theories of mimesis that are based on sameness.

Dancing multispecies relations at Kunsthall 3,14

Next, I will discuss moments in the workshops when species meet in light of Erin Manning's theory of movement and Donna Haraway's writings on how to respectfully respond to the more-than-human. I depict material-discursive situations in which the virtual potential of movement – preacceleration – actualizes with mimesis as an entrance

⁶ In another research article (Kukkonen forthcoming), I take a closer look at the children's ethical reflections on human–animal relations in the workshops.

point to the dancing. I will also focus on generative moments that made me rethink the theory-practice and develop the method further.

Dance actualizing through stillness

The three grown up chickens are taking careful but curious steps towards a group of seventh graders, who are sitting, one standing, right behind the metal netting. As usual, the two CCP28 hens are approaching the visitors, lifting their feet slowly up, and freezing still for a second before continuing. The Norwegian Jærhøns rooster keeps a more wary distance. With attentive stare, uplifted breasts, and long elongated necks, the hens look at the children, who are in full swing finding a rhythm from the chickens' movements. Two in the group move their heads forward and back, imitating the typical head movements of a chicken. The kids' chatter echo in the open gallery space.

The girl standing next to the group leans on the wooden corner of the coop with her arm. Paying less attention to the other students on the floor, she bends her knee, points her toes and lifts her left leg from the ground – moving very slowly and coming almost to a still. She keeps her eyes on the three chickens a meter away from her and repeats the movement with the other leg, following the chickens' movements. Her feet leave traces on the wooden floor, slightly covered with sand dust. The look on her face, frowning, is intensely focused – as if trying to catch a lost channel and waiting for the right signal.

According to Manning (2012), dancing always engages at least two bodies. We might be dancing with another human – but the dancing human bodies are always entangled with more-than-human bodies, too. In the situation above – following Manning's relational ontology – the movement emerges not only from the child, but is shaped by the chickens, other humans in the room, the educational framework, and the space with its exhibition architecture. Gravitational forces pull the girl's feet towards the wooden floor, the corner of the chicken coop stabilizes her body, and the steady murmur of voices give her an opportunity to drift into the movements. Inspired by Umberto Boccioni, Manning calls the environment coproducing the movement as "atmospheric body" (15), which limits and enables the actualization of dance, creating its virtual potential.

"Urgently: let us move the relation. But let us not devise for it a presence that denies its virtuality, the micropolitical potential of its in-betweenness" (Manning 2012, 28). This was one of the biggest challenges when applying dance as a method in the workshops – the difficulty of creating a space for embodied explorations of human-animal relations, that would not, at the same time, challenge the well-being of the

easily-scared chickens. The children followed the instructions given at the beginning well – avoiding rapid movements and moving on the birds' level – which, of course, set limits for the dancing. But like the girl in the situation above, many actualized the potential of slowness or even stillness in the dancing, following the chickens' example.

Manning calls stillness in dance as a “metastable activity”. Stillness requires concentration, as we actively work with or against gravity. In slow movements, we have time to feel every flinch in relation to our human and more-than-human dance partners. Freezing still might demand the stiffening of every muscle: “To stand still you have to move” (43).

This metastability – always on the verge of collapsing and requiring constant focus – might challenge the relation between the children and the chickens, demanding both to pay even closer attention to each other. The girl's search for rhythm when imitating the chickens' cautious steps, was characterized by vigorous concentration. Her legs came to a still between the slightly uncertain motions, as she was waiting for the chickens to take their next move. This movement was not finished and polished, rehearsed, or preestablished, but uncertain and exploratory, actualizing through an intense relation between the child and the chickens. Johanna Heil (2020) writes:

The continuous and conscious exploration of possibilities that have not been previously considered or corporeally executed can thus be framed as posthumanist practice, one in which the subject is not constituted by “[f]aith in the unique, self-regulatory and intrinsically moral powers of human reason” (Braidotti 2013, 13) but is instead entangled with the world [...] (498).

As dance in the gallery space was a new method both for me and the children, I wanted to keep the instructions during the workshop as clear and simple as possible to make it accessible to everyone. For example: “follow the chickens and find a rhythm, fast or slow, heavy or light, or something else – and test it with your body.” However, these tasks, combined with the school context that might be dominated by neoliberalist tendencies with goal-oriented and measurable outcomes, as well as competition (Biesta 2018), were sometimes performed by the children with “box ticking mentality”, finishing the task in couple of minutes or less. On the course of the six workshops, I tried to develop the formulations more towards propositions (Whitehead 1978); invitations to explore with open potential. Similarly, Manning (2012) writes that propositions, with their undetermined creative potential, mobilize concepts into action. I followed up and challenged the children's understandings of, for example, what a “rhythm” can be, encouraging them to experiment further from the more obvious and popular answers.

Chicken dance in a child-centered gallery space

Two girls are dancing a routine while sitting next to the coop with seven-week-old chicks, the new generation of Cosmopolitan Chickens. I watch them from afar and recognize the dance as the “Chicken Dance”, dance routine that got popular in the 1980s in weddings and Oktoberfest celebrations, also familiar from dance-along YouTube content for children. The girls are first imitating cackling chickens with their hands, opening and closing their palms, and then flapping their arms like wings, with hands in their armpits. The dance continues by wiggling their behinds like tail feathers and clapping their hands. Each movement is repeated four times, and the routine is accompanied by quiet but fast-paced singing by the girls: *ditti-ditti-ditti-di, ditti-ditti-ditti-di...*

I come closer and watch as they repeat the routine over and over again, sitting on the floor. Four chicks, who have now tripled their size from birth, lost their baby fluff and grown grey and brown adult feathers (see fig. 5), stand only thirty centimeters away from the girls behind the metal netting. When dancing the routine, the girls are faced towards the chicks, looking at them in the eyes. The singing is almost a whisper, and the clapping hands barely touch each other – they are careful to not scare the chickens. The birds curiously stare at the girls’ movements, moving their heads from side to side, while the rest of their bodies are completely still.

Watching the situation, I admired the girls’ enthusiasm. The connection between the children and the birds was intense, looking at each other as the Chicken Dance unfolded itself again and again. Haraway writes: “Response and respect are possible only in those knots, with actual animals and people looking back at each other, sticky with all their muddled histories” (2008, 42). To see the girls’ excitement was mesmerizing in my researcher-art educator eyes.

Yet something in the girls’ dancing bothered me, too. Following Haraway, was the dance routine *a response* – as in *looking back* – at the chickens? Although the children, I am sure, were genuinely fascinated by the chicks and not aware of the cultural background of the dance routine, the Chicken Dance repeats the stereotypical conception of chickens in the Western world, performing “the cackling farmyard bird” (Luyckx 2021, 230) with cute and comical presence. The researcher in neuroscience and animal behavior Lori Marino (2017) writes that chickens are commonly understood to lack intelligence and complex emotions despite research showing otherwise. This is also due to regarding chickens most importantly as food – contrary to many other birds, chickens are seen as a commodity without their own evolutionary history.

The doubt while watching the Chicken Dance – although mixed with admiration for the girls’ dedication – made me ask what I was expecting from the children. Were they “free” to express their own understandings, co-creating experiences in the exhibition space as emphasized by many museums and galleries today? Was I about to “deny the virtuality” (Manning 2012, 28) of the dancing? For the past three decades, child-centered approaches have taken root in museum and gallery education (Piscitelli and Penfold, 2015), which regard children as creative learners full of potential about to be unleashed in encounters with art exhibitions. The children participate in experiences in the museum space, often through creative play and discovery (Jones 2022).

What bothered me in the situation above, was that the dancing was only feebly relating to the actual chickens in the gallery space. The children were not *listening to* the chickens or *responding to* their movements with their bodies – but repeating the already-known human-centered conceptions of chickens, a routine that was rehearsed before the visit. The chickens were more of an audience than an inspiration or someone to *dance with*. Whereas the child-centered approach “puts children front and centre” (Trigg 2023), I wanted the children to be part of a relational assemblage consisting of both human and more-than-human others, to look and find movements by following the birds. The child-centered approach emphasizes a human-centered theoretical framework, where agency is understood as something emerging solely *within* the child (Murriss 2020). Child-centered pedagogies align with neoliberal tendencies in education, sharing the understanding of children as active, individual, and self-regulating learners (Adriany 2017; Rodríguez 2013). Although this conception may appear innocuous, it neglects sociological factors (Adriany 2017) and reinforces ideas of human superiority by overlooking the network of material-discursive forces at play which also constitute human.

By contrast, I wanted to follow posthumanist conceptions of both dance and children, where agency unfolds in reciprocal relations, not autonomous entities. In my theory-practice, I emphasize this not only with art education in contemporary art exhibitions with live animals, but with all kinds of exhibitions – encouraging the children not only to express themselves, but to really listen to the art works, animate or inanimate, the other children and teachers, as well as me as the art educator.

Where mimesis ends and liveliness begins

We have moved on with the workshop, and the seventh graders are composing dances inspired by the chickens’ movements. In small groups, the students are testing out their dances, some sitting on the floor, others standing next to the coop. The nine chicks are actively watching the children, running from one group to the next along the

side of the coop. The three grown-up chickens are taking sand baths in their regular place, the corner of the coop closest to visitors and the reception, kicking sand around and in-between their feathers.

I see the two girls repeating the Chicken Dance once more, and I approach them. The dancing has gotten even more intense – whispering the song and marking the movements now in very fast pace. “Doing the Chicken Dance again?” I ask. “Yes!” one of them says enthusiastically and takes a quick look at me before continuing the singing and dancing. “But what about following the actual movements of the chickens and composing a dance from there? Can you try to pay really close attention to the chickens – how are they moving their bodies right now?” I point at two chicks next to the girls. The birds are looking at them, turning their heads jerkily from side to side. The look on their face, as usual, is sharp with peering, slightly bulging round eyes. “Oh, okay...” one of them says, pensively, as she looks at the chickens.

After a moment, the girls get up from the floor. One of them is standing low with her legs bent and back arched, and her face is turned toward the ceiling. She lifts her crooked arms, with fingers in strange angles, next to her head. Her friend gets into the same position with a wild look on her face, eyes wide open, hands pointing at random directions. The girls’ bodies, from legs to neck and fingers, are taken over by jerky, spasm-like movements. The chicks in the coop stare at the two girls.

Watching the new dance, I began to smile, even laugh, in awe and surprise. The cute and controlled dance routine had been replaced with erratic, now somehow ugly, uncannily chicken-like, movements. Yet the dance was not a comical act – as I complimented them, they did not respond, now immersed in a totally different dance, unfolding in complete silence.

Manning (2012) writes: “When the singularity surprises us the interval will come to light: a moment of magic! Total exfoliation: laughter. We feel the interval’s eternity: there will always have been more than one. [...] We feel the movement moving us” (21). Singularity – the originality of the girls’ movement – surprised me, but the dance also revealed something else – eternity, which in Manning’s theory, inspired by Alfred Whitehead (1987), refers to more timeless qualities in the universe, creating structure for the temporary. The girls’ movements, now strangely or even disturbingly familiar to actual chickens, were not only imitations but a deeper immersion: “where mimesis ends and liveliness begins” (Bergen 2022, 78). I argue that the dance managed to capture something complex in the chickens’ presence – a sensory quality defining chickens, difficult to put into words.

Compared to the earlier Chicken Dance, the new dance was like from another

world, perhaps, this time, the chickens' world, never separate from humans but one where the co-species are seen with curiosity and reciprocal interest. The first Chicken Dance, repeated countless times by the girls, actualized representation-based logic and stereotypical conception of chickens, where the birds were regarded more as an audience. The second dance was based on actually listening to the more-than-human with one's body, capturing something more-than-representational in the chickens' presence. This dance was not a one-sided understanding, but a curious response. Like Haraway writes, species meet in moments where we actually notice each other – including our sometimes muddled, strange, and messy qualities.

Conclusions

In this paper, I have argued – through entanglements of practice and philosophy – that dance happened as an assemblage of material-discursive forces in the workshops, inspired by posthumanist conceptions of dance (Bergen 2022; Heil 2020; De Spain 2000) and, most importantly, Erin Manning's (2012) process philosophical theory of movement. In the art educational workshops taking place in Koen Vanmechelen's *The Cosmopolitan Chicken Project* at Kunsthall 3,14, chickens, humans, and the exhibition space, as well as the art educational theory-practice, took part in creating the movement. Posthumanist conceptualizations of dance uncover webs of forces beyond the autonomous human subject (Bergen 2022).

Contributing to knowledge requested in previous research (Ameli 2022; Dimke 2020; Hamilton and Taylor 2017), this study presents and argues for an artistic approach to explore relationships between animals and human-animals, creating possibilities for new ways to understand these complex relations. In the art educational workshops at Kunsthall 3,14, dance helped create a space to relate, respond, and look back reciprocally.

I have further argued how mimesis (Lawtoo 2025), as well as slowness and stillness in movement, were an important part of the virtual potential – preacceleration – actualizing in the workshops. Differences of the species could be explored and felt through dancing. The dancing assemblage with more-than-human, both animals and the “atmospheric body” (Manning 2012) brought into light singularity, as in originality – but also a deeper, more-than-representational understanding of chickens.

The posthumanist theory-practice developed in this research project challenges the human-centered and child-centered paradigms in the field of gallery and museum education: children's place is not in the front and center, but rather as one part of re-

ciprocal relations in the gallery space. At the same time, following posthumanist logic, one should be cautious of idealistic conceptualizations. According to Haraway (2008), cosmopolitics is about responsibility in asymmetrical relations in which living and nurturing, but also killing and dying, might play a part. The girls' erratic and uncannily chicken-like movements did not erase a hierarchy between chickens and humans, but the small moments hold preacceleration for further movement and reflection – movement as reflection – in which human-animal relations can be further explored and challenged. The posthumanist dance reconceptualizes the human-chicken patterns from stable positions towards metastable relation, always uncertain but full of virtual potential.⁷

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⁷ Note on the use of AI: The author has used Generative AI (ChatGPT) to check grammatical details in the text: for example, to find synonyms or check syntax in single sentences.

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