



Simulated Realities of Isolation

**Bronté McDonald
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Simulated Realities of Isolation

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Preface

Lockdown has been a challenging period for many people across the globe. The global pandemic was a huge adjustment for me, as I was left without my family and friends, forcing me to find new ways of maintaining my support system. It was through my difficulties adjusting to my new circumstances, as well as dealing with the feeling of being displaced that my work came into being.

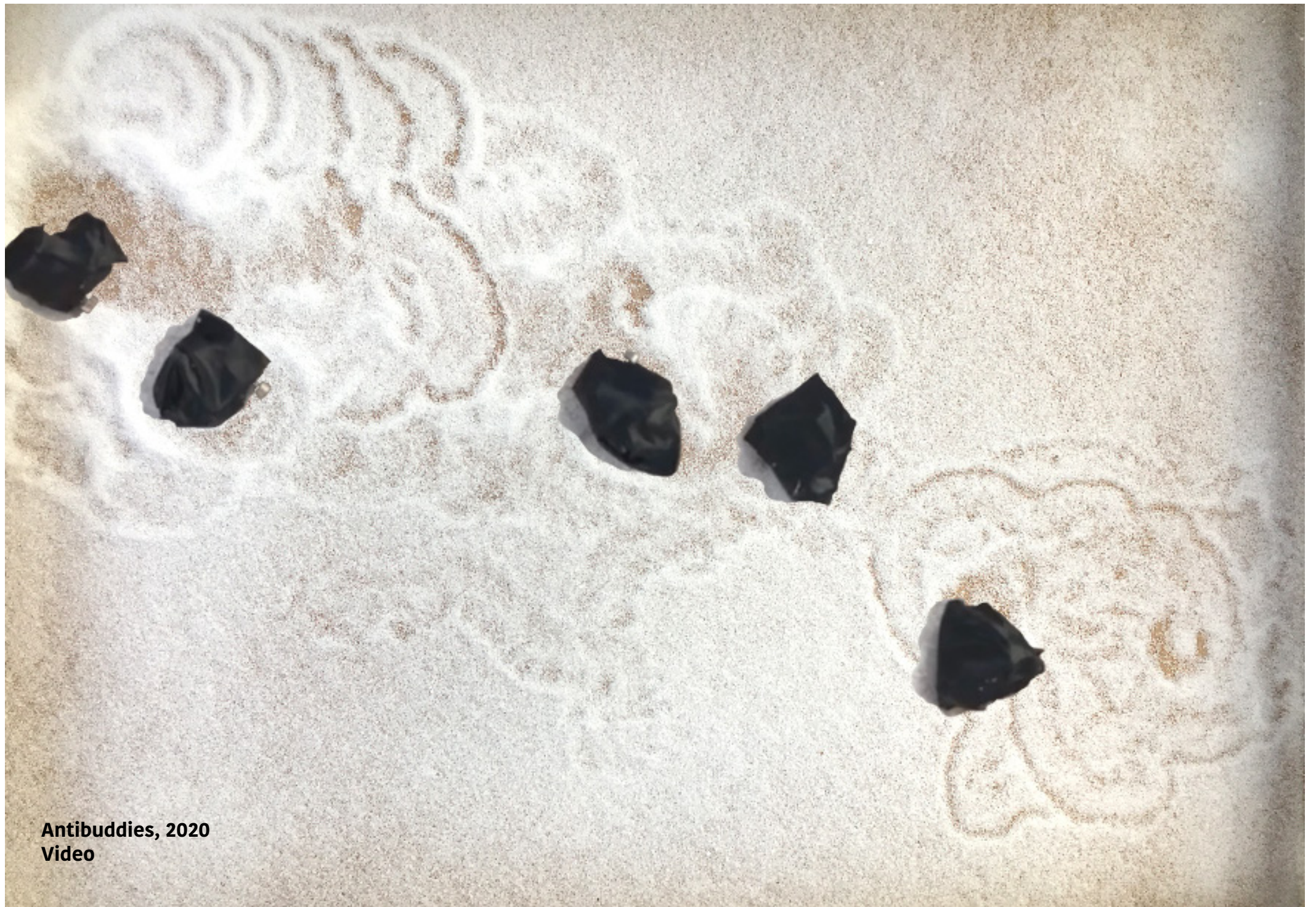
Human's connectedness with nature plays a huge role, not only in our mental wellbeing, but in our understanding of natural systems and biological entities. Yet this connection to nature is not as widely understood as it should be. During the current global pandemic where we have been, and may again, be forced to remain in our homes for the safety of others, not even being allowed to exercise or walk our dogs outside, South Africans, and people across the world, were forced to appreciate the freedom that was ordinarily taken for granted. One was made to engage with those surrounding us, as well as immerse oneself in one's surrounding environment. For some, it allowed for families to rekindle their connections and spend quality time together, as well as give the natural environment a period to rekindle without as much human interference.

Conversely, as a result of being locked in our homes without the freedom of being able to interact with friends and extended family, we were forced to rely on technology to maintain our connections with one another. As a result we were forced into a world drifting between a 'natural life' and an 'artificial life' on social media platforms. My exhibition, **Simulated Realities of Isolation**, explores some of the tensions between reality and fantasy, the natural and the artificial. Through the use of electronics I have created moving 'creatures' and objects which blur the boundaries between real and artificial, natural and man-made. I explore the common experiences of lockdown, such as a sense of disconnection, the interconnectedness of society, how we as organisms relate to our environment, as well as our frustrations during such an uncertain period in history. Through my work I aim to examine the interconnectedness of people, nature and technology by analysing the hybridity of each 'creature' or object created, as well as the common experiences of lockdown.

The Title

My exhibition explores the common experiences of lockdown across the world, using electronics to mimic various aspects of nature and people, and thus exemplify the interconnectedness of each of these entities.

Simulating realities of Isolation therefore refers to these common experiences of the global pandemic, which most people can relate to, and how I have used technology to mimic or replicate similar behaviours or expressions that one might have demonstrated whilst being isolated in one's home.



Antibuddies, 2020
Video

Antibuddies

We have been told for decades that everything can be categorised, and that each of these entities, namely humanity, nature and technology, can remain separate. However, as Mike Micael explains, “humans and technological non-humans are thoroughly interwoven” (Micael, 2012:25). Micael (2012:25) uses the term ‘hybrid’ to explain how our daily activities are so interwoven with new technologies and designs, that we would not be able to function in our roles without these technologies. He thus reasons that humans can be considered hybrids, saying “Imbroglions of humans and non-humans are becoming increasingly part of our everyday life” (Micael, 2012:25). Moreover, I argue that the ‘creatures’ and objects created in this exhibition can be considered hybrids through the interlinking connections between people, nature and technology. Without one or the other, the ‘creatures’ and objects cannot operate.

As Micael (2012:25) explains above, nature and technology have chiefly been seen as separate entities. However, through the analysis of **Antibodies**, a video installation containing small vibrating motors covered in insulation tape which move aimlessly across the screen, the hybridity of nature and technology become apparent. Through the use of electronics, these creature-like mechanisms begin to mimic the behaviour of ants, leaving behind traces of their movements.

My experience of lockdown gave me the time to begin to notice the smaller creatures surrounding us, such as ants. Through observation of ants’ interaction with one another, one notices how many times each ant interacts with every other ant it comes into contact with. As Deborah Gordon (2014) explains in her Ted Talk What ants teach us about the brain, cancer and the internet, ants work through networks. The rate at which ants meet other ants from their colony is what impacts the behaviour of the colony (Gordon, 2014). And it is through these interactions that this incredible networks of interactions is produced, almost like brain signals.

Furthermore, ants use an algorithm similar to that used for the internet (Gordon, 2014). As Gordon describes, “The internet uses algorithms to regulate the flow of data, which is very similar to that of the harvester ants who regulate the flow of foragers” (Gordon, 2014). This exemplifies the interconnectedness of nature and technology through the similar uses of the algorithm, and demonstrates a sense of hybridity, as the electronic mechanisms now become life-like through their movements.

Similarly, in **Antibuddies** these ‘creatures’ moving aimlessly become signifiers for people during lockdown, and how we were forced into a period where, for the most part, we felt as though we were aimlessly going about our ‘new’ daily lives.

These daily activities included us being disconnected from one another, not only through having to wear masks in public spaces, but having to remain distanced from those around you, both physically when out in public, and electronically, only being able to engage with people through devices. This disconnection many people experienced is echoed in the title **Antibuddies**. Antibuddies is a play on words. Our bodies contain antibodies which are used by our immune systems to counteract viruses and bacteria such as the novel Coronavirus. However, as a result of the Coronavirus, we have been expected to keep our distance from everyone including our friends and family.

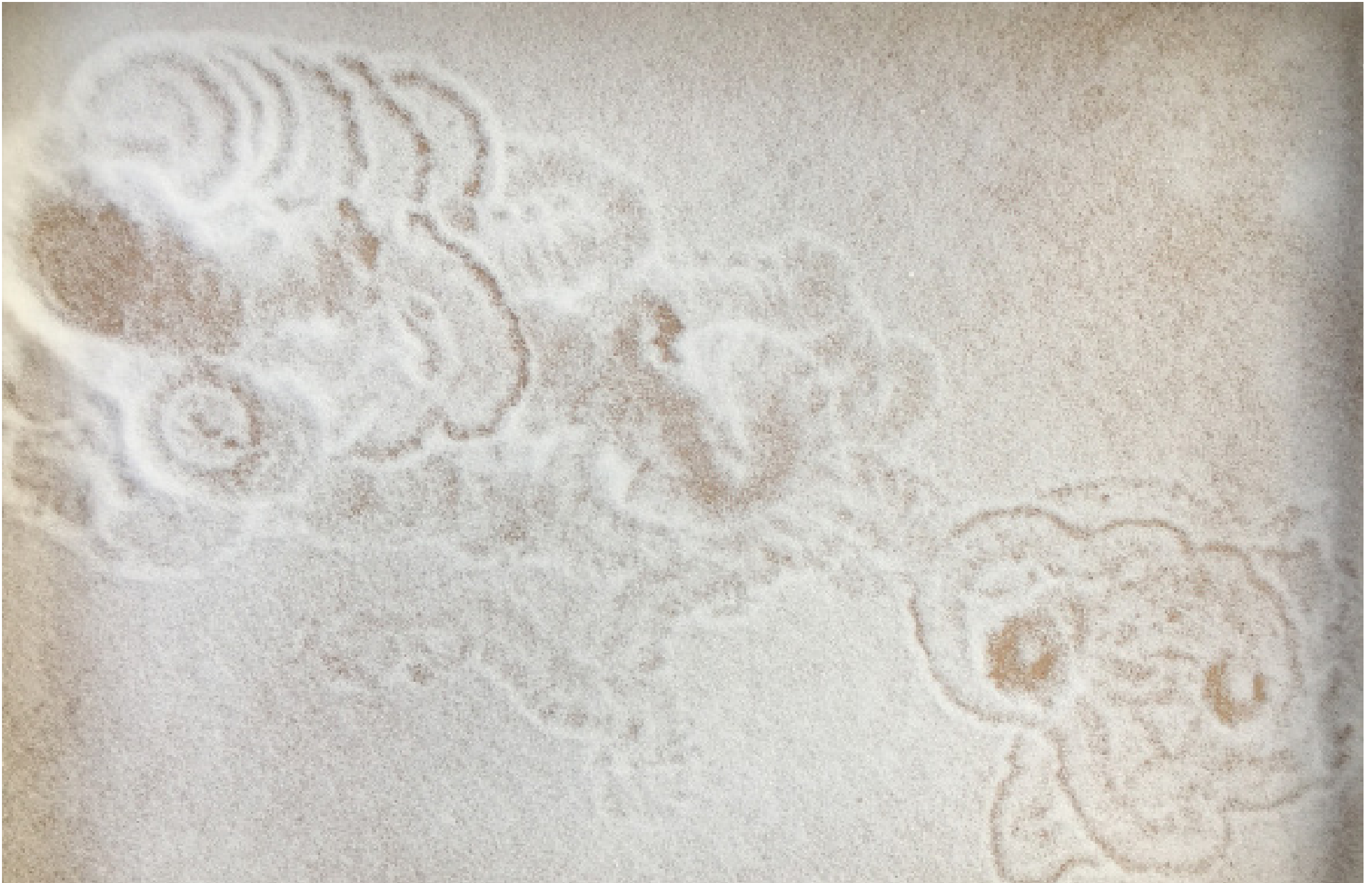
The conception of this piece was first explored with the vibrating motors exposed to the surrounding matter. However, despite the interesting patterns the motors were able to make, the vibrating motors became easily impacted by the maize meal, seen in the photo to the right. When uncovered, the motors stopped working much faster than when they were covered in insulation tape. I thus chose to reshape the wiring and placement of the batteries that powered the vibrating motors, in order to cover them in insulation tape for protection.



**Antibuddies Process
Video**



Traces of Rona Process



Traces of Rona Process

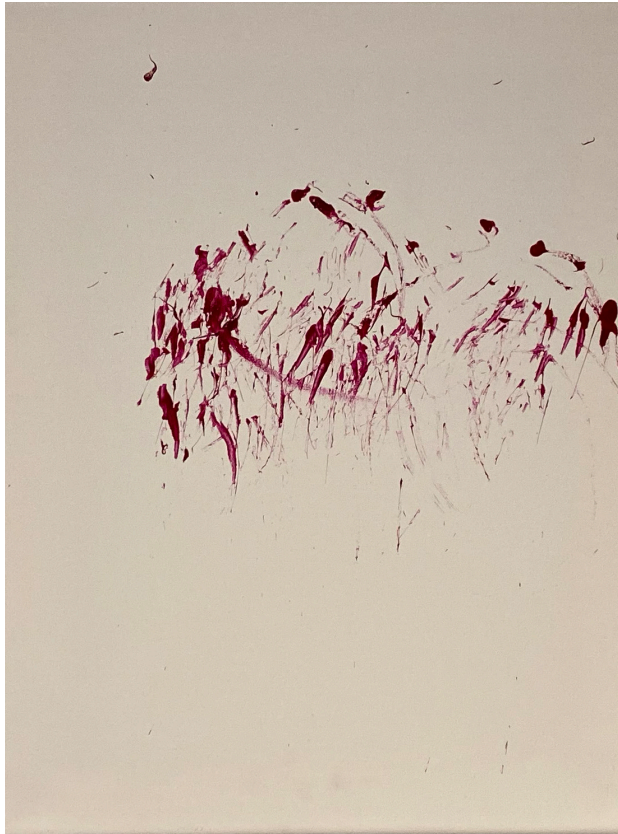
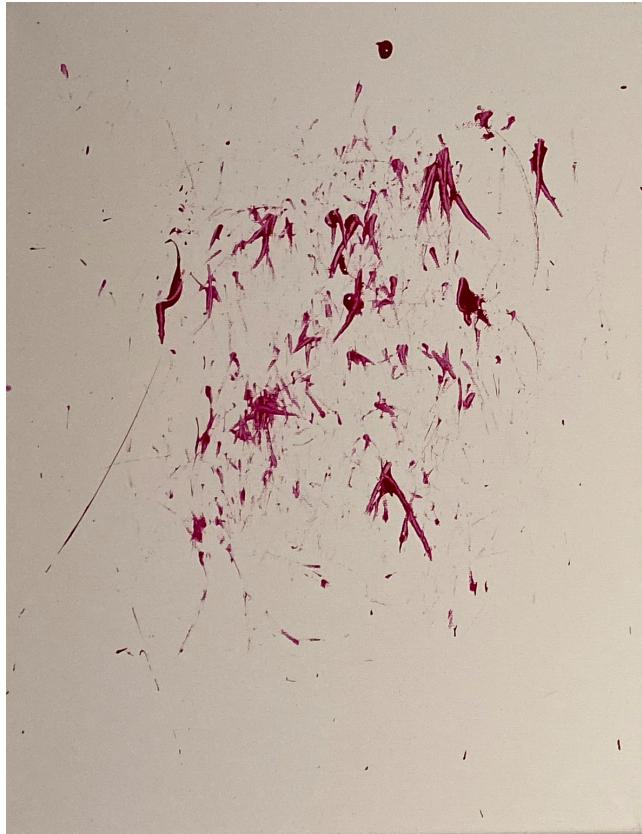
Traces of Rona

A sense of disconnection is not the only issue many people have dealt with, and still are dealing with. Lockdown also caused a sense of displacement, as many people were forced to move in with relatives or friends, so as not to be alone for the period of lockdown, or for financial reasons. This had a huge impact on my experience of lockdown as my family and friends were all living in their respective provinces or countries. Therefore, **Traces of Rona** is a series of drawings, which are transfers of the movements left behind by the mechanisms in **Antibuddies**, which exemplify how aimlessly I went about my daily activities during lockdown. At the peak of lockdown I would take directionless drives around the area I lived, merely to get out of the house. Later, as travel restrictions were lowered, I would travel back to my family home for a different environment. Again, aimlessly trying to create some form of diversity in my life, once more.

Each drawing uses dirt from various areas that I either physically or electronically moved between, from my partners home, to my own empty family home, to the electronic home of my parents I experienced through video calls with them. Thus, the dirt from the first video, containing five motors, is from the garden where I spent most of my time during lockdown, with my partner's immediate and extended family.

Here we were surrounded by numerous people. I also occasionally travelled back to my family home in Cape Town, when the travel restrictions were lowered. My home felt empty and unwelcoming as my family were no longer there. We had someone looking after the animals, hence the use of three motors, representing myself, the pet sitter and my animals. This is where the second variation of dirt was collected. Lastly, I have used dirt from my parents' garden. I often felt immersed in my mother's stories of the foxes she saw in their garden during lockdown, yet I was not actually there. Hence the use of only one isolated motor.

The progression and development of this piece is crucial in the understanding of the work. I began by using flour, then maize meal, then salt, as the background material. I experimented with these materials mainly for the texture of each material, as any material more coarse would prohibit the vibrating motors from moving around. However, it was only once I experimented with the use of dirt that the piece came together conceptually.



Coronacoma II, 2020
Acrylic Paint

Coronacoma



Coronacoma , 2020
Installation

The isolation and disconnectedness felt by many, has created uncertainty and frustration as we do not know when we will be able to return to our normal operations of life, if at all. Coronacoma, an installation and video piece, depicts a creature-like

mechanism which appears to be hitting a canvas and leaving behind traces of red paint. It is through the movements of the arm-like structures that the mechanism is given life, making it appear as though it could be a living creature. This duality of the ‘creature’, being both creature-like, yet being made from technology, enhances the blurred lines between real and artificial. Thus the divide between

nature, technology and people becomes more difficult to sustain (Micael, 2012:1). It is the movements of the ‘creature’ that mimic that of someone who might be frustrated, informing my frustrations during the period of lockdown. I created this piece through my own resentment towards not being in a stimulating and creative environment, making it hugely challenging for me to create meaningful artworks. The ‘creature’ can be seen leaving behind traces of red paint, which is widely known as a colour of passion, representing sacrifice, danger and anger/frustration, to name a few. The virus has created a sense of anger and frustration as a result of the danger of loss of life which the virus brings with it. The ‘creature’ could therefore be seen as off loading all its fears and frustrations during a period that felt as though it would never end. Hence the title, Coronacoma , which references this feeling of an incessant period of being locked inside one’s home. Coronacoma is a slang expression coined during lockdown to describe what felt like a ceaseless period of lockdown. The title therefore reinforces my experience and feelings towards lockdown.



Coronacoma Process



Coronacoma Process

The **Coronacoma** 'creature' was initially designed in an old milk container box I had lying around the house. However, the rigid edges of the box distracted from the interesting movements of the arm-like structures. I thus chose to create a more organic casing using insulation tape, similar to **Antibuddies**. Additionally, I had initially experimented with the 'creature' digging in maize meal. However, this did not communicate the frustration I had been feeling during lockdown. Hence my choice to have the 'creature' hitting the canvas, leaving behind red traces of it's movements.



Coronacoma 'creature'

Locked-down

As many of us have experienced, the global pandemic has forced people to remain home. However, this has in fact been an issue for generations. As cities began being built, we started moving indoors and became less intune with the world around us (Serres, 1995:28). Similar to Micael, Serres (1995:28) believes there is a strong link between people and the earth, and it is only once we begin to move outside, or immerse ourselves more fully in our surrounding natural environment that we will begin to understand the importance of nature (Serres, 1995:28). It was as a result of lockdown that I was pulled outdoors to engage with my natural surroundings, and it was through my experiences in the garden that I was able to observe the movements of birds. **Locked-down** depicts two ostrich feathers which appear to flap on either side of a yellow frame. Framed in the centre of the piece is the mechanism which powers the feathers to flap. Symbolically, flying represents a sense of freedom, joy and independence. Yet the object is not able to move or lift up, despite the continued effort by the flapping feathers. However, upon closer inspection one realises the feathers used are that of an ostrich, which is known as the world's largest non-flying bird.

This piece therefore represents the freedom that was taken away from many of us as a result of the global pandemic. Many people attempted to pursue their daily activities, 'flapping their wings' in an attempt to sustain, a once normal, daily routine, yet being left tied down to the confines of one's home. Hence the title, **Locked-down**. This not only refers to the term most used during the pandemic, 'lockdown', but to the physicality of the object being locked in one place, unable to fly away. It is only through the use of technology that one is able to continue with work or school, and communicate with colleagues, friends and family. It is for this reason the use of a frame becomes of importance in the reading of the work. A frame is traditionally used to outline a boundary between what is considered the artwork and the real world, thus focusing the viewer's attention on the artwork (Ke-bing, 2015:2).



Locked-down, 2020
Mixed Media



Locked-down, 2020
Mixed Media

The frame thus focuses the viewer's attention on the mechanism which powers the flapping of the feathers, which in turn becomes the signifier for all technology. Without technology businesses would have had to shut down, schools would not have been able to continue educating their students, and people would not have been able to communicate with friends or family outside of their homes. However, despite the huge benefits and sense of ease new technologies have brought us, technology tends to lead us to remain indoors even more. Michel Serres (1995:27), a French philosopher, uses the French word *temps* to describe how disconnected we have become from nature. Serres (1995:27) explains how the word means both 'the passing of time', as well as 'the weather' and explains how people's daily lives were based on the weather conditions, as they lived in accordance with nature. Nowadays, we live in cities, in buildings, indoors (Serres, 1995:27-28). This has resulted in us being unaware or disconnected from nature. The global pandemic forced most of the world to become even more couped up in one's home, surrounded only by the people one lived with, and if one was lucky enough to have a garden, the small natural environment of the garden.

Less Pollution, The Bees Solution

An important part of the sustainability of our gardens, and on a much larger scale the earth, are bees. Bees help pollinate plants in order for the plants to grow and develop various forms of fruits and vegetables (Panko, 2016). However, for many years the bee population has begun to decrease quite drastically, and the fundamental reason for this comes from a change in farming practices (Spivak, 2013), as well as an increase in pollution. Marla Spivak (2013) explains in her TED talk **Why bees are disappearing**, that after world war two, farmers began using herbicides and pesticides for the protection of crops from pests (Spivak, 2013). Research shows South Africa is the largest consumer of pesticides in Sub-Saharan Africa, with the Western Cape using the majority of these pesticides (Tran, 2020). The use of pesticides has resulted in bees ingesting small amounts of the pesticides which in turn either kills them, or impacts their ability to operate and continue collecting pollen (Spivak, 2013). Furthermore, with an increase in pollution globally, plants are impacted, to put it simply, by the change in the pH of the soil, as well as through particles covering the leaves, leaving them unable to photosynthesise suitably (Gheorghe & Ion, 2011:241). As Spivak puts it, “Bees are dealing with multiple, interacting causes of death” (Spivak, 2013), not only from their populations own forms of diseases, but the vast flowerless landscapes covered in crops, the ingestion of pesticides as well as the added issue of high carbon emissions.

However, research has shown that through the reduction in travel and human interference with nature, pollution has decreased as a result of a global lockdown, and animals have been given the space to return to areas once populated by people. Bees in particular have suffered from the rise in pollution over the years, and have now increased in numbers since the beginning of lockdown as a result of the reduction of carbon emissions. Small differences such as not being able to mow lawns in both large public gardens as well as smaller private gardens, has allowed for flowers that bloom amongst the grass to blossom, giving bee’s more flowers to pollinate.



Less Pollution, The Bee's Solution explores the impact of a global lockdown on bees. The installation depicts a life size aloe plant, which is indigenous to the Western Cape, made of bees wax and wire. The flowers of the aloe plant are made of a bright orange satin material dipped in beeswax and covered in a sugary solution. The wax emits a distinct scent, which is an attractant for bees. Furthermore, the flowers also have small vibrating motors attached to some of the wire stems, which as a collection mimics the sound of a beehive. The combination of the bright colour of the flowers, the scent of the wax, the taste of the sugar as well as the mimicked sound of a bees hive are all attractants for bees. This piece is therefore a call to the bee's to return now that nature has had an opportunity to recoup.

The use of the electronic vibrating motors in mimicking the sound of a beehive exemplifies the blurred lines between nature and technology in this piece, challenging the boundaries of separate entities remaining separate. The hybridity of the natural looking aloe plant with the technological vibrating motors illustrates the interconnectedness of nature and technology.



Less Pollution, The Bees Solution Process

Yet, there is an irony in the placement of the artwork. The installation of the aloe plant is indoors, trapped behind closed glass windows, away from the path of any bees. While we urgently need to reduce our CO2 emissions, which in turn will have a positive effect on the bee population, a global lockdown is not the solution to climate change. The placement of the installation therefore brings into question how and when we can attract bees back into our surrounding environments when we return to our daily activities, and travel restrictions are no longer in place.

Less Pollution, The Bee's Solution was originally going to be an installation of purple daisies, as these are known as a bee's favourite flower. However, after further research I realised using an indigenous plant would be more applicable, as the issue of the bee population dying came to my attention through my experience in my garden, surrounded by indigenous plants.

Conclusion

It can therefore be concluded that through the analysis of the common experiences of a global lockdown in each of the artworks displayed, a one point becomes blatantly clear - common entities such as humanity, nature and technology are not as easily kept separately categorical. Each of these entities are impacted by the other, exemplifying an interconnectedness. The combination of technological mechanisms mimicking what appears could be natural creatures demonstrates how the natural and technological cannot, in all instances, be kept categorically separate. Similarly, through the use of signifiers, an interconnectedness can be seen between people and nature. Lastly, through understanding the impact humanity's impact is having on the bee population, and in turn on plant life, it becomes clear how interlinked new technologies, like the production of pesticides, are interconnected with people, and how we as people are interconnected with nature.

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