



**Tell Me Something:
unlearning common noisy wild urban birds through
listening, voice and language**

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
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Declaration

I certify that except where due acknowledgement has been made, the work is that of the author alone; the work has not been submitted previously, in whole or in part, to qualify for any other academic award; the content of the thesis/project is the result of work which has been carried out since the official commencement date of the approved research program; any editorial work, paid or unpaid, carried out by a third party is acknowledged; and, ethics procedures and guidelines have been followed.

Catherine Clover

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Summary

Tell Me Something: unlearning common noisy wild urban birds through listening, voice and language

Pigeons, seagulls and corvids (crows and ravens) live in great numbers in most cities around the world. Their presence is universal as well as local. They are gregarious, loud and social and their various calls are common and heard frequently. Increasingly these birds are considered pests and nuisances although they are also loved and respected. Man's shifting attitude to wildlife dictates which species are considered valuable and which are not at any one time. Any animal that has an ambiguous reputation, as pigeons, seagulls and corvids do, is vulnerable and many common birds are now in decline, with specific reasons hard to identify. This project draws upon the ambiguous reputations of these birds to explore ways through aural and visual media to provide not only new ways of considering them but also to bring attention to them as potentially vulnerable yet vital co-inhabitants of our urban world. Through audiovisual installation practices using field recording, digital/analogue imaging and the spoken/written word, this project investigates our ambiguous relationship with these birds through a framework of everyday experience.

My project builds upon specific works by multidisciplinary artists Natalie Jeremijenko, Marcus Coates, Snaebjornsdottir/Wilson and Mark Dion. Sound artist Salomé Voegelin provides a conceptual context through both her practice and her philosophical writing. Her use of written text as a means of recording sound has provided a framework for my explorations using phonetic words to render birdsong in text form. Conceptual writers Georges Perec and Simon Morris provide ways of engaging language and the written word as an expanded means of working with sound. Bill Fontana and Susan Philipsz's site-specific sound works provide a stylistic context with which to explore the role of site in the project, and how exhibiting the work outside the gallery system in the public domain has contributed to the research.

Postmodern thought that addresses the animal in contemporary art has been a key philosophical context for this project. *The Postmodern Animal* (2000) by Steve Baker and the more recent *Art and Animals* (2012) by Giovanni Aloi are significant texts for the project. Salomé Voegelin's philosophical embrace of contingency – something that is possible but not predictable, something that has potential if certain circumstances occur – as a means of understanding the wider role of sound echoes Baker and Aloi's postmodern uncertainty and has provided the project with a clear underpinning in its sonic orientation. Humour, also a postmodern characteristic, has played an important role in the realisation of many of the

artworks, particularly during collaboration, when a playful frame of mind generates speculative practices that begin by asking “what if...”.

Gilles Deleuze’s considerations of the wider possibilities of language pre-empt Giorgio Agamben’s and Rene ten Bos’ reflections on the significance of animal voice, two of the few philosophers to do so. Adriana Cavarero draws our attention to the significance of voice in relation to language and how voice is commonly overlooked as a means of communication while Roland Barthes and Michel de Certeau draw correlations between language and the city, which provide the project with ways of drawing together language potential between species prompted by an urban proximity.

The relevance of my project is demonstrated by the very active worldwide scientific research into animal behaviour including cognitive biology, comparative psychology and animal cognition. The project references ecological/philosophical approaches as expounded by Val Plumwood and Kate Rigby. These writers challenge ways of thinking that position the natural world as separate from ourselves and thus objectified. Environmental philosopher Arnold Berleant’s focus on aesthetic experience as a means of understanding the interconnectedness of all things provides a context as does anthropologist Tim Ingold’s explorative and wide ranging approach to human behaviour.

The practice led research employed in this project involves a cyclical process of fieldwork (gathering raw material in the field, or rather, outside on city streets), studio work (taking this material to the studio to create artwork), and exhibition (exhibiting the finished artwork in the public domain). Listening plays a key role in the fieldwork. Heuristic and action-research methods are studio-oriented activities, but listening is the method with which I gather material in the field - along city streets, under bridges, in parks and cemeteries. The curiosity that propels the research begins with listening, and listening informs the creative process.

The chapters of the exegesis follow the chronological trajectory of the exhibiting process. Exhibiting the artworks has been a significant component in the development of the research project and structuring the exegesis around the exhibitions/installations places a focus on them. I have focused on selected elements of each installation that keenly articulate the trajectory of the research.

By considering the birds through the installations that make up this research project, a different understanding of them as mutual city inhabitants can be developed. With a focus on communication and understanding through voice and language, this research has an application that stretches between human cultures as well as across species. This research project explores the possibility of creating potential for communication across species, specifically between birds and people in the urban environment. Its aim is to set something in motion, to release a

possibility, an openendedness, something to grow into (Ingold, T, 2011, p.183). It hazards an improvisation (Deleuze, G, and Guattari, F, cited in Ingold, T, 2011, p.235), the possibility of a shared vocality, a shared language with the birds. The project looks at what connects us rather than what separates us from other species. In this way perhaps we can reconsider these city birds by understanding both their vulnerability as well as their importance as urban co-inhabitants.

Introduction

Pigeons, seagulls and corvids (crows and ravens) live in great numbers in most cities around the world. Their presence is universal as well as local. They are gregarious, loud and social and their various calls are common and heard frequently. Increasingly these birds are considered pests and nuisances although they are also loved and respected. We have an ancient connection to birds that crosses all cultures and in general we find birds inspiring because of their flight, symbolic of freedom, and their songs, which are often exquisite complex sounds. Yet the reputation of specific bird species varies dramatically.

Man's shifting attitude to wildlife dictates which species are considered valuable and which are not at any one time. Any animal that has an ambiguous reputation, as pigeons, seagulls and corvids do, is vulnerable and many common birds are now in decline, with specific reasons hard to identify. Pigeons, seagulls and corvids do not get much positive attention even though their ability to adapt and thrive in the urban world indicates their intelligence, strength and tenacity. This project draws upon the ambiguous reputations of these birds to explore ways through aural and visual media to provide not only new ways of considering them but also to bring attention to them as potentially vulnerable yet vital co-inhabitants of our world. Through audiovisual installation practices using field recording, digital/analogue imaging and the spoken/written word, this project investigates our ambiguous relationship with these birds through a framework of everyday experience. With a focus on the birds as living creatures that exist side by side with us in a distinctly urban context, the project uses listening as a means of exploring what we have in common as

opposed to what sets us apart. Through voice and language, exchange and reciprocity the project investigates how we might find an open-ended place for communication and understanding.

We tend to position ourselves as superior to all other living creatures because of our complex language use as Kari Weil identifies in *A Report on the Animal Turn*, where “a long tradition in Western philosophy that has declared the capacity for rational thought and its manifestation in language as that which distinguishes human from nonhuman animals” (Weil 2010, p.2). Yet with increasingly sophisticated technology scientists are discovering that both the biological and the cognitive capacity for complex language use exists in many animals, including birds, and in particular in crows and ravens (Clayton cited in Williams 2009; Margoliash 2011). According to Rene ten Bos while there is extensive philosophical research into the human voice, there is little significant attention paid to animal voice (Bos 2009). Bos cites Giorgio Agamben as just one contemporary philosopher who considers the significance of animal voice (Bos 2009). In his article *Silence, Voice and language: Agamben and the power of the inarticulate* Bos writes

animals have voice but not yet language...how might it be possible that animal voice becomes language? ... Agamben proposes to make a distinction between voice as mere sound and Voice (with a capital V) as something which is no longer mere sound but not yet meaning. Language, he argues, starts to take place somewhere in the limit zone between mere sound and meaning (Bos 2009).

My focus on listening, sound and vocalization, including the calls and songs of my bird subjects, and the combining of both aural and visual media builds upon and separates my project from other artistic projects in a similar field. In terms of subject matter, my project builds upon specific works by multidisciplinary artists Natalie Jeremijenko, Marcus Coates,

Snaebjornsdottir/Wilson and Mark Dion through participatory practices, performance, research and the questioning of established modes of relating to the natural world and our animal others. Jeremijenko and Snaebjornsdottir/Wilson in particular address our relationship with urban animals including birds. In the visual arts there are an increasing number of artists who encourage us to question how we relate to other animals but few are focusing on common wild urban birds with reputations as pests, the focus of this project. Equally, few sound artists focus on the sound of urban animals because of the difficulty of making high quality field recordings in the city. Sound artist Salomé Voegelin provides a conceptual context through both her practice and her philosophical writing. Her use of written text as a means of recording sound has provided a framework for my explorations using phonetic words to render birdsong in text form. Conceptual writers Georges Perec, Simon Morris and Kenneth Goldsmith provide ways of engaging language and the written word as an expanded means of working with sound. Bill Fontana and Susan Philipsz's site-specific sound works provide a stylistic context with which to explore the role of site in the project, and how exhibiting the work outside the gallery system in the public domain has contributed to the research.

Postmodern thought that addresses the animal in contemporary art has been a key philosophical context for this project. *The Postmodern Animal* (2000) by Steve Baker and the more recent *Art and Animals* (2012) by Giovanni Aloi (that references and builds on aspects of Baker's earlier work), are key texts for the project. As a cultural theory, postmodernism has been firmly established since the mid to late 20th century and while it has its critics with some claiming the theory revels in human subjectivity (Art Laboratory Berlin 2014), I have found its challenge to established structures and ways of thinking to be highly relevant and extremely useful for this project. The

suggestion articulated by Baker (Baker 2000, p.166) that the letting go of rational thinking as one of the ways to initiate a different perception is very useful for a re-thinking, an unlearning of my birds. I choose the term “unlearning” for the title of this project because it encapsulates the questioning of accepted knowledge hierarchies that lie at the basis of this project. It is taken from *Art and Animals* (Aloi 2012, p.xv) yet it is Baker’s use of the qualifiers “un”, “in” or “not”, such as “uncertainty” (Baker 2000, p.32) “undoing” (Baker 2000, p.85), “unmeaning” (Baker 2000, p.79), the “inexpert” (Baker 2000, p.39), “not-knowing” (Baker 2000, p.40), and even “unlikely” (Baker 2000, p.174) that have given this project the tools with which to proceed. Permission to get it wrong, make mistakes, go down the wrong path (Baker 2000, p.189) have been important components of the research process. This incompleteness and indeterminacy (Berleant, N/D) are emergent and highly productive, and have enabled the project to expand its reach by blurring boundaries between the birds and ourselves. This approach is reiterated through Baker’s more recent book *Artist:Animal* (2013), where Berleant’s indeterminacy is encapsulated by what Baker describes as the artist “wavering around the animal [where] hints and hunches” (Baker 2013, p.72) are followed rather than a consciously purposeful path. Salomé Voegelin’s philosophical embrace of contingency – something that is possible but not predictable, something that has potential if certain circumstances occur – as a means of understanding the wider role of sound echoes Baker and Aloi’s postmodern uncertainty and has provided the project with a clear underpinning in its sonic orientation. Humour, also a postmodern characteristic, has played an important role in the realisation of some of the artworks, particularly during collaboration, when a playful frame of mind generates speculative practices that begin by asking “what if...” .

The relevance of my project is demonstrated by the very active worldwide scientific research into animal behaviour including cognitive biology, comparative psychology and animal cognition. From being an area of dubious interest only thirty years ago, the study of animal behaviour and in particular the behaviour of birds is now a vigorous and exciting area of research in biology, psychology and bioacoustics (John Krebs cited in Williams, 2008). This research is revealing just how intelligent many bird species are, and in particular, the intelligence of my selected birds, and science writer Virginia Morell identifies in *Animal Wise: The thoughts and emotions of our fellow creatures* that “The notion of a hierarchy of intellectual abilities (is) passé. There aren’t ‘lower’ or ‘higher’ species” (Morell 2013, p.56). Nicola Clayton’s Comparative Cognition Lab at Cambridge University in the UK focuses research on corvids, Daniel Margoliash’s Margoliash Lab at the University of Chicago uses a neuroethology perspective to study vocal learning in songbirds and humans, and the Department für Kognitionsbiologie at the Universität Wien, headed by Tecumseh Fitch, builds on the legacy of Konrad Lorenz, considered one of the founding fathers of ethology, the “study of animals in their natural settings” (Morell, 2013 p.11).

Ecologically the project references feminist ecological/philosophical approaches as expounded by Val Plumwood and Kate Rigby. These writers challenge ways of thinking that position the natural world as separate from ourselves and thus objectified. They offer a more inclusive approach about where we as humans can fit in a positive and productive way, what we can offer the world rather than what we can use and exploit, how we can relate to the world constructively rather than selfishly at the cost of the living things around us. Environmental philosopher Arnold Berleant’s focus on aesthetic experience as a means of understanding the interconnectedness of

all things provides a context as does anthropologist Tim Ingold's explorative and wide ranging approach to human behaviour.

Dialogue with academics, writers, artists and naturalists has resulted in a number of opportunities for collaboration and exhibition and the cross disciplinary exchange of ideas has been rich and rewarding. I have been in email contact with naturalist Geoff Sample, philosopher René ten Bos and naturalist and author John Bevis. At the *Minding Animals* conference in Newcastle NSW (2009) I first met Steve Baker and Giovanni Alois whose philosophical writing on our relationship with other animals have provided a significant context for this project. I met academics Martin Ullrich and Jessica Ullrich, with Jessica subsequently inviting me to present a paper at the conference *Animals and Aesthetics* Universität der Künste, Berlin Germany 2011. It was through Kate Rigby giving an opening speech at the exhibition *Us and Them: Umwelten* (2012) that I learnt of her insightful ecological writing. Through meeting artist and curator Rosemarie McGoldrick at the symposium *Unruly Creatures* Natural History Museum, London (2011) I collaborated with Swedish artist Johanna Hällsten in 2013 on *Calls from Blethenal Green* London. Discussion with Danni Zuvela and Joel Stern, directors of the Melbourne sound festival Liquid Architecture 2014, led to a collaboration with Salomé Voegelin on a participatory sound project *Melbourne Sound Words* exhibited online and at the Federation Square big screen in 2014.

The practice led research employed in this project involves a cyclical process of fieldwork (gathering raw material in the field, or rather, outside on city streets), studio work (taking this material to the studio to create artwork), and exhibition (exhibiting the finished artwork in the public domain). The research uses both heuristic research methods, where

questions arise based on the experience of producing the work, and action-research methods, which involves a continuous self-reflexive process using the recording and documentation of the process.

Listening plays a key role in the fieldwork. The heuristic and action-research methods are studio-oriented activities, but listening is the method with which I gather material in the field - along city streets, under bridges, in parks and cemeteries. Listening to the urban environment is a distinct kind of listening, a daily attentive listening, one that is not functional listening for information or instruction, nor listening for pleasure, nor listening to language for semantic purposes; it is an attentive listening to the external urban environment and to the everyday sounds within that environment. It is specific, but it is also inclusive. While I listen for the sounds of the gulls, pigeons, ravens and crows, the sonic context in which they live provides information about their lives and behaviour. I listen at a material level, to the phenomenon of the sounds they make as they occur in the urban context. Their urban context indicates the role of the ordinary and the everyday in the project. This project is not exclusive and any city dweller can hear and see these birds. While specific species are localised, these birds are universally present in most cities around the world. They are easily audible and visible in the street trees, along the ledges of buildings, on the pavement, around the cafes, in the parks. They are commonplace and ordinary.

The chapters of the exegesis follow the chronological trajectory of the exhibiting process. Exhibiting the artworks has been a significant component in the development of the research project and structuring the exegesis around the exhibitions/installations places a focus on them. The installations have taken place in a variety of settings. This range of settings highlights components in the project that would not otherwise have

emerged. The works have been shown in conventional gallery spaces, in gallery spaces where the window has been employed as a permeable membrane between the internal (the gallery space) and the external (the city street), in non-gallery buildings, and in fully external public settings such as billboards and railway stations.

I have focused on selected elements of each installation that keenly articulate the trajectory of the research. The curiosity that propels the research begins with listening, and listening informs the creative process. Listening is followed by two forms of recording, the making of field recordings (audio recordings) and written text (the textual documentation of sound in a bird observation diary maintained over the six years of the project). These recordings, both sonic and written, may or may not be actual components of an exhibition or installation, but always form the backbone of the research.

In Chapter 1 *Translating Birds and People* I explore our historical relationship with pigeons through pigeon racing and the pigeon post. Two exhibitions which took place in Melbourne, Australia and Halifax, Canada, *Columba livia* and *coroocoo*, (2009-2010) engage the birds' extraordinary homing abilities through conceptual transcription practices (literally, copying and writing out text) firstly by copying text from a collection of pigeon identification leg rings and secondly by transcribing pigeon song using terminology found in bird identification field guides. These transcriptions lead to an understanding of the frailty of language as a communication medium. This unreliability offers the project creative opportunities. By using language in a non-semantic way and considering its more expansive characteristics such as its visual and sonic properties and its vulnerability to a change of context, it not only represents the ambiguous status of these

urban birds but it also offers both the birds and ourselves potential for a shared voice, a voicing, possibly even a language.

In Chapter 2, *Soundings and Unsoundings: speaking site, writing sound* I address how my curiosity is triggered by active listening in the field. With reference to *billing and cooing* and *Pigeon Post*, two installations which both took place in Melbourne in 2010, this chapter builds upon the transcription practices in Chapter 1 and extends them through an engagement with the site specific. I explore the role of field recording and how its engagement with contextual sound and place/locality lends itself to this project. An expanded approach to field recording places emphasis on communication through listening. The chapter looks at the potential of the mixing of human and bird voices. By embracing a broader way of thinking about, around and through the birds the limits of human knowledge become increasingly clear. The letting go of rational thinking is posited as a way of unlearning habits. Blurring boundaries suggests that a seepage between worlds may be occurring through the sharing of urban space.

Chapter 3 *Langaging the birds, voicing the birds* examines the potential of cross-species communication with the birds. Through improvisation and comparisons with the English vernacular I playfully translate the birds' voices through a text-based animation *Calling the Birds* (2010) that attempts to translate a field recording of seagulls' voices using English phonetic words; an artist's book *Tell Me Something: A Field Guide to the Voices of an Unkindness of Ravens* (2011) that uses the layout of a dramatic script, musical score or libretto; and a collaborative performance where three performers articulate and perform the artist's book as part of the installation *birdbrain* (2011). The instability of language becomes increasingly apparent through this translating and voicing process and this instability provides a rich space

into which the project moves – a space without restrictions, limits or structure, a space full of potential. The act of voicing enabled collaboration and performance to develop as part of the research process. The performers' actions help me to envisage a way that we might engage with the birds.

Chapter 4 *Unfolding the City: speaking the city, walking the city* concentrates on the location of these birds – the urban environment – and our movements through this environment as we encounter them. The city, an amorphous sprawling mix of paradoxes and contradictions, is an ideal context for addressing the gaps in the apparent stability and certainty of the world in which we live. Pigeons, seagulls and corvids embody such contradictions and the urban environment is key to understanding them. They are wildlife choosing to live in close proximity to humans in heavily urbanised surroundings. They nest in buildings and bridges, cemeteries and along streets. They stay awake after dark due to artificial urban light and they navigate urban sprawl using streets, roads and laneways. This chapter addresses the birds' voices through their sonic relationship with their environment. With a focus on the cross-species sharing of urban space by extending the investigation of the site specific from Chapter 2, this chapter addresses the performativity of the audience, as opposed to that of the performers, through their everyday mobility in the city. These installations are located along popular daily routes used by urban inhabitants, sites where the birds are highly audible and visible. The three installations addressed took place in 2012 and are located in Melbourne, Australia: *Us & Them: Umwelten*, *A Filth of Starlings* and *The Auspices*.

Chapter 5 *Listening and unlearning: shared spaces and shared language* addresses the role of proximity and complexity. Returning to the role of lists

and categories once again, I consider the complexity that can be lost through applying classification systems that impose divisions. I use the example of Swedish naturalist Carolus Linnaeus' 1735 *Systema Naturae*, the taxonomic system of classifying the natural world that we still use today. Pre-Linnaean approaches to the natural world were more inclusive and focused on the continuity of life rather than the boundaries between things. These older approaches gave me permission to imagine and speculate on the ordinary and everyday that these birds represent. The concept of the everyday, a thread that runs through the entire project because of the very ordinariness of these common birds, is addressed through the popular activity of feeding the birds in the park. Through spending time with the birds I began to understand the birds in a different way, one that emphasises proximity through sharing and exchange, and illustrates our similarities over our differences. The installations that explore these ideas are *Calls from Blethenal Green*, a residency and collaboration in London with Swedish artist Johanna Hällsten in 2013, *B is for Bird C is for City* (2013) which took place in the Norla Dome at the Mission to Seafarers, Melbourne as part of *Liquid Architecture: Sonic City* curated by Philip Samartzis and Kristen Sharp and *Reading The Birds* where I was invited by Melbourne sound artist Camilla Hannan to participate in *Trainspotters INC*, a site specific response to the Upfield Bike Path in the northern suburbs of Melbourne as part of the MoreArt Public Art Show, 2014.

Chapter 6 *Urban polyphony: overlaying voice, overlaying site* discusses three installations that explore what experimental scores or notation can offer the research project. Textual scores have the potential to be enacted not only by performers but also by the audience. *Midmorning, mild, some clouds* (2014) a large scale paste-up that is text-based but produces a sonic reading of place explores the potential of notation through its public setting on a local high

street in Newport, a western suburb of Melbourne. Not only does this text transcribe a specific site through listening, it also composes, albeit experimentally, by proposing a shared social space through sound. *Perch* (2014) a collaborative performance with Alice Hui-Sheng Chang and Vanessa Tomlinson takes the idea of the experimental score and enacts its flux through an imagined cross-species realisation via voice and percussion. *Shooting the Breeze* (2015) the final exhibition of this research project, will be a three dimensional textual score or libretto based on the potential of casual conversation across species in the urban environment. The title suggests that informal mutual exchange has the potential to be developed between humans and birds. It embodies the contingent nature of the project as one of constant evolution, of possibilities, of open-ended opportunities.

This research project explores the possibility of creating potential for communication across species, specifically between birds and people in the urban environment. Its aim is to set something in motion, to release a possibility, an openendedness, something to grow into (Ingold, T, 2011, p.183). It hazards an improvisation (Deleuze, G, and Guattari, F, cited in Ingold, T, 2011, p.235), the possibility of a shared vocality, a shared language with the birds. The project looks at what connects us rather than what separates us from other species. In this way perhaps we can reconsider these city birds by understanding both their vulnerability as well as their importance as urban co-inhabitants.

Through the postmodern idea of unlearning (Aloi 2012, p.xv) the project attempts to undo conventional approaches to understanding the world around us. Using listening as a key method of research – for both gathering material and making - the project attempts to blur boundaries by using a postmodern deconstruction of accepted knowledge practices. It

offers the opportunity of using a different approach to common noisy wild urban birds so that we can begin to understand how little we know about them, rather than how much we think know about them. Unlearning encapsulates how we can think differently in order to begin this appreciation. Unlearning is active, it is a word in motion. It is a flow, a dynamic, a “continuous correcting” (John Berger cited in Ingold, T, 2011, p.236). Unlearning suggests not only a rethinking but also incorporates a rewinding, a winding back, to a point where we related to the world around us differently, in particular with our relationship with other animals. Previous knowledge that has been ignored or forgotten may assist us in this venture. Val Plumwood identifies that

Attempts at serious communication between humans and other species are almost completely precluded by the arrogance and human-centredness of a culture that is convinced that other species are simpler and lesser, and only grudgingly to be admitted as communicative beings. Methodology based on these assumptions more or less guarantees that communication will not take place... The real communication challenge... is for we humans to learn to communicate with other species on their terms, in their own languages, or in common terms, if there are any (Plumwood 2002, p.189)

A focus on listening is particularly relevant in cities, where we tend to close our ears because of loud ambient soundscapes that are dominated by traffic. The project prompts us to start to listen again in our cities, particularly to the common birds around us, the birds that live with us everyday and share our urban lives. Animals in cities are often considered unnatural or maladaptive because cities are built for humans by humans (Berleant 2010, p.120). Yet animals in cities, and in particular these birds - pigeons, seagulls, ravens and crows – are indicators of change and potential. They are strong and capable because of their very adaptability. Urban analyst Jennifer Wolch articulates

Ecological theory has moved away from holism and equilibrium notions toward a recognition that processes of environmental disturbance, uncertainty, and risk cause ecosystems and populations to continually shift over certain ranges varying with site and scale. This suggests the utility of reconceptualising cities as ecological disturbance regimes rather than ecological sacrifice zones whose integrity has been irrevocably violated (Wolch 1998, p.130)

Animals make up a large part of our cities' populations and many are thriving more successfully than in their original homes in the wild. For many of them those homes may no longer exist. For some city inhabitants they represent their only relationship with animals, certainly wild animals, and so this relationship is an important one for developing a sense of belonging with our animal others. This project taps into a growing realisation of the "wrongness of our approaches" (Aloi 2012, p.xxi) and the extent of this wrongness: that how we relate to the animals around us is connected to how we relate to each other, which ultimately affects the whole planet (Aloi 2012, p.xv).

The approach that has developed with this research project, that of acknowledging and then unravelling our assumptions about the world, identifying the potential for change and not pinning down how that change might evolve but simply enabling it through a broad embrace of the world in which we live, has broad applications in terms of cross-cultural communication. The attempt for different communities (local, national, international) to begin to understand each other where there may be no language or culture in common can be enabled by this fluid approach. By unlearning typical or conventional responses, a space full of potential emerges; a space that is unrestricted and unlimited, a space that reveals, a space that is inclusive, not in a static way but in a mobile way, a space where, through movement and exchange, ways of relating are discovered. This space is a continuum where "things occur" (Ingold 2011, p.179) and where

“people grow into knowledge” (Ingold 2011, p.183). Plumwood identifies that

Communicative models of relationships with nature and animals can improve our receptivity and responsiveness, which clearly need some improvement. They seem likely to offer us a better chance of survival in the difficult times ahead than dominant mechanistic models which promise insensitivity to the others’ agency and denial of our dependency on them (Plumwood 2002, p.191).

Our audible worlds merge in the city, as do our vocal worlds. The city is a rich and complex site full of potential for communication between species and across species. Already we hear each other, we hear the birds and the birds hear us. Already our voices overlap as we listen and as we communicate. Already, therefore, we notice each other and pay attention to each other. Listening and vocalising, people move through the city as the birds do. Our vocal worlds overlap and interchange as we share the city. The conversational orientation of the title of the final exhibition for this project, *Shooting the Breeze* (2015), embodies Michel de Certeau’s articulation of the cooperative nature of exchange where

the rhetoric of ordinary conversation consists of practices which transform ‘speech situations,’ verbal productions in which the interlacing of speaking positions weaves an oral fabric without individual owners, creations of a communication that belongs to no one. Conversation is a provisional and collective effect of competence in the art of manipulating ‘commonplaces’ and the inevitability of events in such a way as to make them ‘habitable’ (de Certeau 1988, p.xxii)

This project proposes that a “habitable” urban space typified by listening practices and “provisional” vocalisations has the potential to re-unite human and animal populations on common ground. As we are currently experiencing what has been described as the Sixth Extinction because of the

extraordinary rate of the deaths of animal and plant species (Morell 2013, p.263), our relationship with those wild animals that can survive the human folly that has caused such devastating loss is of paramount importance.

Chapter 1

Translating Birds and People

It is only relatively recently, in the last fifty years or so, that pigeons have become unpopular with many of us. It is hard to identify particular reasons for this but it is due in part to their increasingly pervasive presence in cities. As scavengers they live well off our wasteful habits particularly in large urban environments. Because their original homes were the sea cliffs, pigeons live happily in man-made structures, both those intended for them, such as dovecotes as well as those built for other purposes, such as city buildings.



Fig 1 Catherine Clover: Hangleton Manor dovecote, East Sussex, UK



Fig 2 Catherine Clover: Patcham dovecote, East Sussex, UK



Fig 3 Catherine Clover: Truleigh Manor Farm dovecote, East Sussex, UK



Fig 4 Catherine Clover: Pigeons roosting under Bell Street, Coburg, Melbourne, Australia



Fig 5 Catherine Clover: Pigeons roosting on a balcony in Tsim Sha Tsui, Hong Kong



Fig 6 Catherine Clover: Pigeons roosting on a sign in Footscray, Melbourne, Australia

Considering how dependent we were on domesticated pigeons in the recent past – for meat, eggs, communication, sport and companionship - our radical change of opinion about pigeons surprised me and piqued my curiosity, and my first explorations into this project addressed two aspects of our historical relationship with domestic pigeons – pigeon racing and the pigeon post¹. Intelligent and inquisitive, pigeons seem more than willing to share their lives with us. I started exploring pigeon racing and homing sites online, and discovered that the identification leg rings that owners place on the birds have value and worth in their own right, and could be swapped or purchased easily online.

¹ Pigeon racing is still a popular activity across many cultures today, and flocks of racing pigeons can be seen circling above the domestic homes of their owners in many cities and towns across the globe, from Melbourne to Hanoi to Beijing to London to New York. Pigeons have been used as postal messengers for thousands of years with the first known in ancient Egypt around 3000 BCE. In contemporary history, pigeons were most recently used as messengers in World War I, with individual pigeons being awarded medals for their significant contribution to the war effort.

Columba livia (2009)

The research that resulted in the exhibition *Columba livia* (2009) began when I collected several hundred bird identification leg rings from online pigeon racing clubs and enthusiasts both in Australia and around the world. Each ring is used to identify racing and homing pigeons during flight and is a specific colour that relates to the year of the race (eg blue for 1995, red for 1996 etc). Each ring has printed text that identifies individual bird, bird club, owner and year.



Fig 7 Catherine Clover: Collection of pigeon identification rings (2009)

The rings are metal and have a quality that suggests jewellery, and they are collected as objects in their own right by some pigeon fanciers. They are by necessity small robust well-made objects, highly functional, and the colours are rich and varied. That a single individual bird was connected

to each ring adds a living presence, a biological weight and dimension, to each ring. The rings place a focus on each bird as an individual and as ethologist Marc Bekoff identifies, we rarely consider animals, other than domestic pets, as individuals (Bekoff 2009). Rather, we consider animals in groups, especially birds like the common pigeon. Any pigeon can represent its species because we regard the birds as objects rather than subjects, where all individuals represent the group and they are fully interchangeable with each other. Yet

It's individuals who count when we consider how we treat other animals. Philosopher James Rachels' important notion of moral individualism ... is based on the following argument "If A is to be treated differently from B, the justification must be in terms of A's individual characteristics and B's individual characteristics. Treating them differently cannot be justified by pointing out that one or the other is a member of some preferred group, not even the 'group' of human beings." According to this view, careful attention must be paid to individual variations in behavior within species (Bekoff, M, 2009)

Considering the issue of whether we treat any animal as truly individual, I spent time handling the leg rings and reading the text on each one. As a means of engaging with the text, I started copying it out, transcribing it. Each ring created one line of text. This act of transcribing, intended as a means of entry to the world of pigeons, became a form of documentation, a recording and an archiving of each bird's existence. Through this process the rings transformed into something like a collection as in a natural history museum, with the absent birds identified and labelled. Disembodying the information in this way echoes our typical treatment of birds (and animals in general) as material at our disposal or as academic Giovanni Aloï identifies where "the animal (can be) perceived as a material to be used in the work of art, like pigments, or a simple found object like any other inanimate object that could become part of any artistic

compositions” (Aloi 2012, p.7). Although my intention was not to consider the birds as merely material for my creative needs, I found the reductive process allowed me to take a step away from the birds, opening up a perspective that enabled me to conceptualise different approaches about how I might interact with them, or consider them differently.



Fig 8 Catherine Clover *Columba livia* (detail)
 Window of 569, Nicholson St. Carlton North, Melbourne, Australia (2009)

orderly, replicable, universal and logical (Arnold, 2009). Our urge to classify the world around us, to make it comprehensible, fuels the inequality at the centre of our relationship with that world and in particular with the animals in it. We do not place ourselves as part of that world, but as outsiders making sense of it for our own needs. Lists can be used as forms of power because of this ordering of knowledge. We “relentlessly produce skewed evidence of human superiority” (Aloi 2012, p.xix) over animals and “hierarchical models of thought tend to privilege the group constructing the hierarchy, and ... animals are thus typically assigned a less or lower significance than humans” (Baker 2000, p.92). We use lists to place the human at the top of any hierarchy, above all other animals. Even when animals clearly have skills that we do not, we seem unable to accept these facts and research is carried out to counter such claims (Tetsura Matsuzawa cited in Morell, 2013 p.232). Thus a list maintains a status quo – our status quo - that places animals at a distinct disadvantage.

Using the format of the list while searching for ways of engaging with animals as equals was a clear contradiction, where style and content seem to be at odds with each other. This created a tension in the research process because the lettering on the rings lent itself so readily to a listing process. Yet I realised that the lists I created for *Columba livia* were not operating in a hierarchical way because there was no obvious top or bottom, start or finish, first or last, and no part of the list was privileged over any other. The lists were, in fact, operating in a postmodern context. In postmodernism, lists can be used as tools for disruption and in particular for disrupting conventional narratives. Peter Greenaway’s fictional mock documentary *The Falls* (1980) is constructed of 92 short vignettes about characters that develop bird-like characteristics. With no narrative arc, no focal character, no plot to speak of and at over three hours long, the film creates one long

list that is a challenge to watch in one sitting. There is no beginning and there is no end to this film. There is no start and there is no finish. The list is not vertically constructed and there is no information that is prioritised over any other. Rather, the list is horizontally oriented, in a truly postmodern sense, where all components are equal (see URL <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kG4ukbx97Vw> #74 Pollie Fallory in Peter Greenaway's *The Falls*). Experimental writer Georges Perec playfully illustrates how lists can challenge hierarchy-thinking in *Species of Spaces and Other Pieces* first published in 1974.

As bad luck would have it, most lists these days are lists of winners: only those who come first exist. For a long time now books, discs, films and television programmes have been seen purely in terms of their success at the box-office (or in the charts). Not long ago, the magazine *Lire* even 'classified thought' by holding a referendum to decide which contemporary intellectuals wielded the greatest influence.

But if we are going to list records, better to go and find them in somewhat more eccentric fields... M. David Maund possesses 6,506 miniature bottles; M. Robert Kaufman 7,495 sorts of cigarette; M. Ronald Rose popped a champagne cork a distance of 31 metres; M. Isao Tsychiya shaved 233 people in one hour; and M. Water Cavanagh possesses 1,003 valid credit cards (Perec, 1997, p.195)



Fig 10 Catherine Clover *Columba livia* (detail)
 Window of 569, Nicholson St. Carlton North, Melbourne, Australia (2009)

Listing reduces content to the minimum number of words possible while still being comprehensible, so it can be said to constrain language. Constraint is commonly understood to be restrictive and limiting, yet constraint can be used as a tool for liberation from typical modes of thinking (or writing or making), even a tool for unlearning perhaps. Separating the text from the bird rings has the effect of obscuring the meaning of the letters and numerals. Even though a pigeon racer would recognise and understand the code, it is not accessible to the general reader. The combination of letters, numerals and colours makes little sense outside the racing pigeon fraternity. I realised that this process illustrates the vulnerability of language and its reliance on context for meaning. I began to understand how flimsy language is, how, rather than a solid and reliable means of communication and understanding, it can be easily disrupted. Language is not the reliable transmitter of meaning that I had assumed. It

struggles to maintain clear meaning with only the minimum of disturbance. Michel de Certeau identifies that “a body of constraints (stimulates) new discoveries, a set of rules with which improvisation plays” (de Certeau 1988, p.xxii). Considering the idea of improvisation opened up a range of creative possibilities for the project. Using language in an expanded way, focusing not on semantics but on its non-semantic role, its formal (sonic or visual) characteristics, and its lack of stability and inherent flux, illustrates its creative and experimental potential (Deleuze 1997, p.109). A single word outside its context can operate like a signal for the imagination. Sound artist Daniela Cascella identifies this potential by citing “those pages in (Proust’s) *Swann’s Way* where the writer imagines places and towns he never visited, just by reading their names” (Cascella 2013, p.84) where “the thin film of writing becomes a movement of strata, a play of spaces” (de Certeau 1988, p.xxi).

Through copying out the words from the bird rings, the process of transcription and translation across media, of taking pre-existing information and placing it in a different context without alteration, the “mutation (that) makes the text habitable” (de Certeau 1988, p.xxi), perhaps, alerted me to the reach of re-locating content; a form of improvisation, or a kind of postmodern appropriation. Conceptual writer Simon Morris asserts the usefulness of copying out pre-existing material in his 2009 project *Getting Inside Jack Kerouac’s Head*, a blog where Morris transcribed one page a day of Kerouac’s novel *On The Road* (1957) (see URL <http://gettinginsidejackkerouacshead.blogspot.com.au/>). He identifies that by using pre-existing material, “selecting it and reframing it” generates new meanings and “disrupt(s) the existing order of things” (Morris 2012). Even a small intervention can affect the meaning of content quite profoundly. Language was beginning to reveal its inherent instability and the

discovery of this flaw was very exciting, both creatively and in terms of how we place value on these urban birds. The strategy of re-framing and re-contextualising became highly applicable to the mutability of the reputation of wild urban pigeons. We structure the world according to our needs, with everything in its place, ordered from top to bottom. These pigeons are labelled pests when they are perceived to be out of place, to be out of the context in which we expect to see or hear them. The wild birds are the same physical creatures, but we perceive them differently according to where we think they should be, where we expect to encounter them, and how. American urban sociologist Colin Jerolmack identifies how animals become pests when they are “experienced out of place” (Jerolmack, C, 2008, p.1)

Animals have agency... Wild or feral animals move about with their own trajectories... When animal and human trajectories collide in the built environment, to the extent that animals cannot be tamed or controlled there is an underlying existential human experience of social disorder... The capacity of flight makes the pigeon a particularly effective transgressor (Jerolmack 2008, p.18)

Signs in many cities around the world illustrate when the collisions that Jerolmack identifies between humans and animals occur.



Fig 11 Catherine Clover: Cockatoo Island, Sydney, Australia (2010)



Fig 12 Catherine Clover: Swanston Street, Melbourne, Australia (2009)



Fig 13 Catherine Clover: Kowloon Park, Hong Kong, China (2009)



Fig 14 Catherine Clover: Kensington Gardens, London, UK (2008)



Fig 15 Catherine Clover: Central Park, New York, US (2010)



Fig 16 Catherine Clover: Harbourside, Halifax, Canada (2010)

Sound artist Bill Fontana uses a similar strategy of re-framing and re-contextualising within his sound practice, where he illustrates how the relocation of everyday sound to a new context can radically alter the meaning of that sound, however ordinary and familiar.

In my sound sculptures of the past ten years, the relocation of ambient sounds to urban public spaces is a radical attempt to redefine the meaning of the acoustical context in which the sound sculpture is experienced. By comparison to musical situations, the use of these public spaces exposes the sound sculpture to many people who would

normally never think about such aesthetic issues. This experimental redefinition of acoustical context is also a way to temporarily transform the concept of noise (Fontana 1990).

By applying Morris' idea of reframing material/relocating content to the sonic, as Fontana does, I started to consider that hearing birds out of place could work both positively as well as negatively, and that replaying the sounds of the birds' voices in a different context could prompt a more positive rethinking of them.

Icelandic/British artist duo Bryndis Snaebjörnsdóttir and Mark Wilson's extensive research project *Uncertainty in the City* (2010) addressed urban animals perceived as out of place in the British city of Lancaster. (See URL <http://snaebjornsdottirwilson.com/category/projects/uncertainty-in-the-city/>). The project comprised of the experiences of officers employed by the Lancaster City Council Pest Control Service and those of the local population from the city of Lancaster. The duo spent time with the Pest Control Service both in the office and out on call. In order to communicate with the general population, they created a temporary mobile radio station called Radio Animal, which invited the general public to discuss how they felt about the urban creatures that lived around them. The comments were streamed live over the internet and the mobile unit toured across a number of locations in the Lancaster area. The final exhibition involved sound, image and text. Sixty loudspeakers along the breadth of a single wall provided the ambient delivery of the individual stories and voices recorded by the radio station. On the opposite wall photographs of the office of the Pest Control Service were hung. Text realised in red fluorescent tube described a detail of one individual's encounter with a wild urban animal. Brief textual excerpts were included from the reports made by pest control officers of individuals calling on the Pest Control Service for help. A video

screen transmitted what appeared to be live footage from a local garden, where noises - scratching and rustling - and movement seemed to be occurring.

By focusing on the range of reactions from the general population as well as those of the Pest Control Service, many of which were paradoxical², the project illustrates the ambiguous relationship we have with urban animals – some of us hate them while others love them. Some of us are okay with them so long as they stay where we think they should. Others feel the animals have no right to be urban dwellers because the city is a human environment. *Uncertainty in the City* addressed how we identify the boundaries with the wild urban animals that we share our cities with. As their project illustrates, these boundaries are in constant flux according to whether we are considering home or work, public parks or back gardens, doorsteps or pavements, the trees in our gardens, street trees or the trees in the park. The project asked some probing questions about where these boundaries are located and at what point we consider the boundary to be broken. Yet we give little thought to breaking the boundaries of their dwellings, whether consciously or not, nor what the impact might be when we do.

In her catalogue essay for *Uncertainty in the City*, critic Rikke Hansen identifies the final installation as an archive that documents a snapshot of a contemporary British city's ambiguous relationship with its wild urban animals. In the installation it is human voices that we hear rather than animal voices (although the squeaks of bats are included), which assert that “what is ‘voiced’ is a human desire to understand not only animals but also ourselves, while maintaining the wonder we experience when relating to our

² “we loved them being there but maybe not actually living in our house as squatters” (Caroline in Snaebjörnsdóttir & Wilson, 2011, p.20); “The Pest Control Service is generally, at least in principle, tolerant of other animal species” (Snaebjörnsdóttir & Wilson, 2011, p.10)

‘others’ ” (Hansen 2011, p.119).

Hansen’s idea of voicing and wonder resonated strongly with my curiosity about the city birds that I encounter and who share my daily environment. While I have focused on the discussion of the textual element of *Columba livia* in this chapter, there was a sonic component to the installation that I discuss in Chapter 2 within the context of my listening practice. Transcribing the lettering from the bird rings into long visual lists in *Columba livia* introduced me to the potential of language for the research project. Using language as material, not as a symbolic medium, or rather, not only as a symbolic medium, but also as a material means with which to address these urban birds was rich with opportunity.

Rather than the human voicing that Hansen identifies in Snaebjörnsdóttir & Wilson’s project, I was being drawn to the idea of a shared voice and language with the birds where, through sound, a comprehension of each other has the potential to resonate and unfold. Copying the information from the bird rings, writing it out, set in motion the possibility of bringing the absent pigeons within audible range, and the mail art component of *coroocoo* explores this further by taking the textual element from *Columba livia* and applying it to the listening process.

coroocoo (2010)

At the same time as collecting the bird rings I began collecting bird identification field guides written by naturalists that cover the wild birdlife in nations, states, geographical areas and cities. While the entries contain limited but functional information, I found the entries on voice intriguing. Each entry uses phonetic words to describe a bird's particular call and/or song. Andrea Cavarero describes the phonetic as "the science that studies the sounds of language in their concrete realisation, independent of their linguistic function" (Cavarero 2005, p.248). According to naturalist Geoff Sample, who has a particular interest in the voices of the birds he studies, there is no internationally agreed method for applying phonetic words to birdsong. The choice of words is individual although, Sample commented, some are more successful than others (Sample 2008). I began to consider how phonetic words operate as sonic material rather than symbolism, and how their inherent audibility conveys a different kind of meaning or understanding, one that is not so easily defined as language per se, nor is it fixed or static in what it conveys, but that "what it communicates first and foremost ... is the acoustic, empirical, material relationality of singular voices" (Cavarero 2005, p.10). With the lack of any singular method in place for applying phonetic words to birdsong, I began to consider the potential for using my own choices of phonetic words for transcribing the bird songs I was listening to.

Listening in the field is the first step I took in the gathering of creative raw material for the project *coroocoo*. I listen to the birds on a regular basis, and as I listen I hear the calls and songs not as pleasant musical sounds, nor even as the sound of a species, but as distinct communication between individuals living their lives in close proximity to mine. Through listening

therefore, I am aware of sharing space with the wild birds and how our lives and voices intertwine. In bird field guides naturalists generally only use one or two words to signify the sound of each bird's song, an inadequate representation of sound to say the least, yet in keeping with my growing interest in the creative potential of constrained language this was very appealing. The words have an inherent playfulness in their sonic connotations, and humour can be an effective tool for disrupting typical ways of thinking. I developed phonetic words to approximate the birds' sounds - *coroocoo*, *rackitty-coo*, *oom* and *bucket-a-coo*, *dru-oo-u* and *cooo* and applied them to lengths of birdsong that I had recorded in the field. Pigeons appear to sing in groups in and out of sync with each other that sound like a chorus, and the song is repetitive. The sounds have a low pitch and are relatively slow, like a gentle murmuring. I developed two sets of text, each with three of the words repeated and had them printed as postcards to echo the voices of the pigeons. Like a sonic loop, the ends of each line roll into the next, suggesting the surround-sound immersive experience of listening to pigeons live. When sounded out, the words are a remarkably convincing representation of pigeons singing in their roosts.

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y-coo rackitty-coo rackitty-coo rackitty-coo rackitty-
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Fig 17 Catherine Clover: Postcard series from *coroocoo* (2010)

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Fig 18 Catherine Clover: Postcard series from *coroocoo* (2010)

On the back of each postcard I wrote, by hand, the scientific names for the diseases that pigeons suffer from, some of which can be transferred to humans and of which many of us are fearful, hence the derogatory term for pigeons “rats with wings” (Jerolmack 2008, p.1). Many of the diseases are respiratory infections so at a biological level, through the breath and the lungs, the apparently meaningless yet poetic song words on the front of the postcards contrasted yet connected with the scientific names on the back. Diseases common to pigeon owners such as histoplasmosis and chlamydophila were included, as well as hypersensitivity pneumonitis which is so common that it is also known as pigeon-breeders' disease or bird fancier's lung. The process combined an aspect we love about birds (song) with an aspect that we hate (disease).



Fig 19 Catherine Clover *coroocoo* (detail) Anna Leonowens Gallery
NSCAD University, Halifax, Canada (2010)

Artist Marcus Coates' exploration of shamanism, a tradition that claims to interact with the animal spirit world through a trance state that has healing properties, provided a context for the contradictions of song and disease in these postcards. Singing is often associated with the shamanic state, particularly the imitation of natural sounds using onomatopoeia. Coates' *Journey to the Lower World* (2004) (See URL <http://www.contemporaryartsociety.org/list-of-works/journey-to-the-lower-world-2004-marcus-coates/>) was a performance that took place in a south London high rise housing estate earmarked for demolition. The tenants of the housing estate were distressed about the council's decision to demolish their homes, and Coates' performance offered them the chance to communicate with local animal spirits to see if the process might offer them ways to challenge the council's decision. Imaginative and whimsical, Coates played the role of traditional healer in a performance that took place in one of the tenant's homes. The audience could hardly control their mirth as they watched Coates, with the antlers of a deer on his head, squirm and writhe as he imitated the voices of the animal spirits he was hearing. The scepticism of the audience was, however, tempered by their difficult circumstances. Coates' performance gave voice to the animal spirits, real or imagined, and by offering the tenants another way of considering their circumstances, Coates symbolically gave them voice. His affirmative performance offered an alternative space, an imaginative space full of possibility in which the tenants' misgivings were, at the very least, heard and acknowledged.

Perhaps my series of postcards could offer a chance for the represented pigeons to symbolically sing to each recipient, to woo each addressee while countering the diseases they carry, potentially offering an alternative viewpoint from their typical reputation as urban pests. As the exhibition was at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design (NSCAD) University in Halifax, Canada, I sent the postcards through the international

postal system to reach the gallery in time for the exhibition, emulating how the pigeon post once functioned.



Fig 20 Catherine Clover *coroocoo* (detail) Anna Leonowens Gallery NSCAD University, Halifax, Canada (2010)



Fig 21 Catherine Clover *coroocoo* (detail) Anna Leonowens Gallery NSCAD University, Halifax, Canada (2010)

I sent the cards to a number of people including Barbara Louder, coordinator of Foundation Studies at NSCAD University and Tonia di Risio, director of the Anna Leonowens Gallery, the NSCAD University gallery. Phonetic words are irresistible to sound out and both Barbara and Tonia hummed along to the pigeon chorus as they read each postcard. Barbara even attempted to sing the postcard on one outreach each morning like a yogic or meditative breathing practice. The security staff at the gallery were also particularly responsive in this way, humming pigeon sounds each time they walked through the installation.



Fig 22 Catherine Clover *corooco* (detail) Anna Leonowens Gallery
NSCAD University, Halifax, Canada (2010)



Fig 23 Catherine Clover *coroocoo* (detail) Anna Leonowens Gallery
NSCAD University, Halifax, Canada (2010)

These reactions were unexpected yet rewarding and prompted me to consider the role of sounding/voicing the phonetic words and what this could creatively offer the project. Compared to Coates' performance, this singing was both private and spontaneous (and rich because of it). Adriana Cavarero notes that "According to Onians... thought derives from speech, and speech is found first of all in the organs of phonation – and also ... in the organs of alimentation – which have their source in the gaseous chemistry of the lungs" (Cavarero 2005, p.63). This instinctive voicing, therefore, could be considered to be a kind of sonic comprehension, an understanding through sounding, through the lungs rather than through the mind. Jean-Luc Nancy observes that

Speaking... is the echo of the text in which the text is made and written, opens up to its own sense as to the plurality of its possible senses. It is not, and in any case not only, what one can call in a superficial way the musicality of a text: it is more profoundly the music

in it ... where it listens to itself ... by listening to itself finds itself... and by finding itself deviates... from itself in order to resound further away, listening to itself before hearing/understanding itself, and thus actually becoming its “subject”, which is neither the same as nor other than the individual subject who writes the text (Nancy 2007, p.35)

While no instructions or contextual information accompanied the postcards, readers responded as if to a musical score or libretto – a written set of instructions for music or voice. The inherently sonic aspect of the words was irresistible and their responses to the sound in the words were instinctive and abandoned. This prompted me to think closely about how sound could be realised in different ways in the project. Coupled with Coates’ performative approach, it also signalled the potential of performance for the project.

Chapter 2

Soundings and Unsoundings: speaking site, writing sound

Sense, if there is any, when there is any, is never a neutral, colourless, or aphonic sense: even when written, it has a voice
(Nancy 2002, p.34)

My interest in sound emerges from a field recording practice. Consisting of many diverse forms, field recording has its origins in wildlife sound (Lane, C, and Carlyle, A, 2013 p.9) and this original concept – a site-specific recording of wild animals in place - threads through many contemporary sound art practices, including my own. Appropriate for a consideration of these wild, urban, birds, field recordings are typically made externally, but not always. Field recording is the recording of ambient sound rather than, or as well as, a specific sound or sounds. The practice records sounds in context. Citing field recording as a form that has great potential for sonic journalism, sound artist Peter Cusack's description incorporates many of the characteristics that I have experienced, in particular the more ambiguous factors such as a sense of atmosphere and an understanding that gives an impression of 'being there'. He writes

What do field recordings offer ...? Most obviously they give basic information about places and events by virtue of the sounds, and their sources, that we identify... field recordings convey far more than basic facts. Spectacular or not, they also transmit a powerful sense of spatiality, atmosphere and timing. This applies even when the technical quality is poor. These factors are key to our perception of place and movement and so add substantially to our understanding of events and issues. They give a compelling impression of what it might actually be like to be there. Sound is our prime sense of all-around spatiality and listening gives us a point of ear. It enables us to judge how far we are from the events and to ask how we might feel and react in the circumstances. Certainly, with recordings and broadcasts we know we are not there, but even at this reduced level there is a subjective

engagement and intuitive understanding that, in my view, are field recordings' special strength (Cusack 2013, p.26)

I use a basic field recording set up, portable and lightweight, that consists of a standard digital recorder with built-in microphones. I also use a tripod and separate location oriented microphone. For the most part I just use the recorder because it can be easily hidden and this is useful when making recordings in public places where surveillance issues can impact on the gathering of recorded material. I record on the run, as it were, without much pre-planning or preparation. I find that recording birds requires this approach because they vocalise when it suits them, not when it suits me, so I try to be on the look out most of the time for recording potential. Like the recording set up, I keep editing to a minimum. I make compositional decisions as I record – decisions such as where I record, when and for how long – rather than in post-production. I prefer to keep the field recordings raw and unprocessed because I find this retains the integrity of the experience. The imperfect messy recording can convey much more about place and experience than a highly edited or polished version. I also retain the sounds of my own presence in the works if they occur. Unedited recordings retain an ambivalence that allows a space for the listener to occupy. The multiple sonic components of such a recording reveal rather than conceal, and what is revealed is the complex structure of the ambient environment in which these birds live, the urban environment. Such recordings are open and inclusive, and are highly appropriate for a consideration of the multilayered sounds of cities. Highly edited recordings are generally focused on a specific action or sound, and therefore conceal the wider sonic context. The intention of the recordist in these circumstances is specific and the wider sonic environment is filtered out. While my sound work is focused, in that I make recordings of pigeons, seagulls and corvids in the urban environment, I do not conceal the sonic

complexity in which the birds live because it is this complexity that fuels my proposition for a shared sonic urban space. The undoctored, unfiltered sonic experience of the urban environment is dynamic and full of potential. Its myriad components keep it open to interpretation and suggest that many meanings are possible.

My field recording interests overlap with some of the concerns of acoustic ecology in that they incorporate the study of living beings and their sonic relationship with their environment. In the late 1960s, Canadian composer and founder of the World Soundscape Project R Murray Shafer coined the term acoustic ecology to describe a new field that united social, artistic, and scientific concerns in the acoustic environment. This was among the World Soundscape Project's first contributions to establishing a new kind of ecological awareness (Leonardson 2014). An ecological awareness is certainly a concern in this project but I am approaching it from an alternative perspective, one that focuses on birds that are survivors rather than birds under threat or close to extinction: the project addresses birds that are robust and increasing in numbers, birds that are so healthy and numerous that they are frequently labeled pests.



Fig 24 Catherine Clover: Recording the Herring Gulls on Folkestone Harbour, UK (2008)



Fig 25 Catherine Clover: Recording in Potts Point, Sydney, Australia (2009)



Fig 26 Catherine Clover: Recording on the Great Wall of China (2007)



Audio I Catherine Clover: Recording the Herring Gulls on Folkestone Harbour, UK (2008)
Excerpt duration 22” (URL back up <http://ciclover.com/exegesis%20audio01.html>)

When I record in the field and stand by the recorder I am listening to the environment around me, but I am also concentrating on what is being recorded. This results in an intensity of listening, a heightened listening that is a kind of double or layered listening experience. I actually hear much more clearly during these recording sessions, as if my listening capacity is extended beyond its usual physical boundaries. According to Salomé Voegelin listening requires an immersion “in (the sound’s) auditory object, which is not its source but sound as sound itself” (Voegelin 2010, p.xii). She proposes a core principle of “sharing time and space with the object or

event under consideration” (Voegelin 2010, p.xii) and positions listening “as an activity, an interactivity, that produces, invents and demands of the listener a complicity and commitment.” She ultimately proposes listening as “the beginning of communication” (Voegelin 2010, p.xv). By attempting to make space for the listener in the field recordings through retaining the intricacy of the soundscape in which the birds live, my intention is to suggest the possibility of communication between species that share urban spaces together.



Fig 27 Catherine Clover: Recording American crows in Halifax, Canada (2009)



Fig 28 Catherine Clover: The crows in Halifax, Canada (2009)

The field recording included in the exhibitions outlined in Chapter 1, *Columba livia* and *coroocoo*, was not an external recording in the field, but an internal recording from the abandoned Sacred Heart building at the Abbotsford Convent¹, inner Melbourne. Still in the process of being developed as a community space for the arts, some of the convent buildings are empty and are inhabited by wild pigeons. I spent some hours in the spaces here observing, listening to and recording the sounds of the pigeons. The presence of the birds in what was once a human environment creates a curious, slightly eerie atmosphere with their non-

¹ Founded in 1863, Abbotsford Convent was a nunnery that cared for women for over 100 years. The site now functions as a community space for arts, culture and learning.

human sounds and movements such as their constant chorus of cooing and ooming as well as scratching, rubbing, scraping, flapping and fluttering. Animals frequently move in when humans abandon living or working spaces, especially in the urban environment. Nests are constructed in washbasins and on wooden tables, perches are made out of door lintels and stair bannisters. Reversing the experience of the audience contributors in Snaebjörnsdóttir and Wilson's *Uncertainty in the City* (see Chapter 1), it was I who felt out of place in a place that had been built by and for humans. This was even quite uncomfortable as I began to realise that I was the intruder in what was now their world. Finnish photographer Kai Fagerström² declares that “Deserted buildings are so full of contradictions ... I am fascinated by the way nature reclaims spaces that were, essentially, only ever on loan to humans” (Natural History Museum, 2012). My experience in the building echoed Fagerström's idea that places are on loan to humans or, at the very least, spaces shared with other animals. I was uncertain and unsure. I didn't feel unwelcome but I didn't feel overly welcome either. Normally, we don't tend to witness the more intimate lives of wild birds, so while I felt privileged to have this proximity (rarely was anyone allowed access to this building), I also felt confronted by the overpowering smell of bird excrement. The sunlight filtered orange and red through the stained glass at the top of the windows that, with the richly coloured walls, evoked a gold tinged sense of a human past mixing with a pigeon present.



Audio II Catherine Clover: Recording the pigeons in the Sacred Heart building Abbotsford Convent Melbourne (2010) Excerpt duration 28”
(URL backup <http://ciclover.com/exegesis%20audio02.html>)

² Kai Fagerström won the Urban Wildlife category of the Wildlife Photographer of the Year annual award at the Natural History Museum, London in 2012.



Fig 29 Catherine Clover: Recording in the Sacred Heart building
Abbotsford Convent, Melbourne (2010)



Fig 30 Catherine Clover: Recording in the Sacred Heart building
Abbotsford Convent, Melbourne (2010)



Fig 31 Catherine Clover: Recording in the Sacred Heart building
Abbotsford Convent, Melbourne (2010)

The pigeons living in this disused building represent a microcosm of wild birds' lives in the wider urban environment, where they inhabit available nooks and crannies in the urban infrastructure. Witnessing the pigeons in such close proximity made me to consider what the implications might be if I reversed this process, by taking my artworks out of a human context and adapting them to their world. I developed this idea during the realisation of two installations *billing and cooing* and *Pigeon Post*, both from 2010 and both in inner Melbourne settings. These installations benefited from not only a more inclusive public setting than an art gallery, but one that resonated with the birds themselves, out in the urban environment.

billing and cooing (2010)

billing and cooing (2010) was a large vinyl banner that was installed on an external billboard site run by the artist run initiative Trocadero in Melbourne's west. To develop my ideas for this site, I spent time at the site, listening from the windows of the gallery as well as observing on the pavement of the busy intersection close to Footscray Market. At this location there is constant traffic and crowds of pedestrians and it is particularly busy on market days. Standing on the corner, I watched - but in particular listened - to the activities of the human population: the movements of crowds, voices, conversations and exchanges, calls and shouts, the pulse of busy then quiet periods; and also the bird population, predominantly pigeons: the flapping, fluttering and settling and re-settling as they observed and watched the activity below. In particular, I noted the mix of our urban worlds, both visually and sonically and as Ros Bandt writes

Listening requires a sharing of temporal space; it is a communal experience very much defined by the sense of place. Every site is an acoustic space, a place to listen. Acoustic space is where time and space merge as they are articulated by sound (Bandt R, 2001).

It was not feasible or practical to include audio technology at the billboard site: there was no access to electricity and the site was exposed to the weather, so finding different ways of approaching the sonic occupied a large part of the conceptual development of the work. I continued to develop the idea of the sonic inherent in phonetic words, words with an implied sonic component, and through the development of this installation I learned that the lack of a sonic component does not abandon sound as part of the artwork, but rather, opens up the listening potential of the work. Listening can be promoted through a lack of physical sound, and through listening a connection to shared place, even noisy urban places, emerges.

The audience may imagine sounds or voice sounds, as well as appreciate the external field of pre-existing everyday sound around them. Rather than listening to a specific sound work, the audience is encouraged to listen in a broader and more inclusive way. Salomé Voegelin identifies this as an expanded approach to field recording which

mark(s) out a post-humanist sensibility where we do not seek to own the sounds of this world, to know and to have them, but understand ourselves to be part of its soundscape, not at its centre but simultaneous with it, sounding with and through it a reality that is plural and passing. Maybe we should stop recording altogether and simply listen... I believe the future of field recording lies in the tension created by transforming the heard through participation, collaboration, expansion and play, through which we can try a humbler humanity of shared spaces, and renegotiate what is real (Voegelin 2014)

For *billing and cooing* I again focused on the voices of the birds and returned to the pigeon songs I had transcribed on the postcards in *coroocoo*. I took from them the most common English word for pigeon song, ‘oom’³. Using phonetic words to transcribe sound (the birds’ voices) has a formal name, that of homophonic translation, a type of translation where sound is the priority and meaning is secondary or even non-existent. This approach, of prioritising sound and the sonic by reducing the importance of conventional meaning was particularly useful as a means for unlearning ways of doing things (Baker 2000; Aloï 2012).

³ Footscray has one of the largest communities of Vietnamese speakers in Melbourne, and I realised that in Vietnamese pigeons may not ‘oom’ or ‘coo’, but may ‘guru guru’ (German), or ‘gru uu’ (Greek), ‘burukk’ (Hungarian), ‘hu hu’ (Italian) or ‘cucurrocu’ (Spanish). See Abbott, D. 2004. *Animal Sounds*. University of Adelaide.



Fig 32 Catherine Clover *billing and cooing* Billboard Trocadero Art Space Melbourne (2010)

By breaking the word ‘oom’ into components including ‘oo’ and ‘mm’ *billing and cooing* illustrates a pigeon’s song that falters. These components are similar to the phonetic words that we use readily in the English vernacular to express interest or surprise (‘oo’, ‘ooh’) and acknowledgement or agreement (‘oh’, ‘mm’, ‘mm-hmm’ ‘hmm’). Even the sonic Sanskrit word of mystical Hindu origin ‘om’ emerged in this process. I recognised that these sounds seem to amount to phonemes, or the units of sound that are used in all languages to create words. The resulting text is a tentative and imaginative mixing of human and bird languages, forming a kind of pidgin language⁴ where, potentially bird and human voices could develop a modified form of vocal communication. Jean-Luc Nancy observes that

⁴ Pidgin languages are simplified versions of two existing languages that enable communication among individuals who do not have a language in common. There are no rules in pidgin and as long as participants find ways of understanding each other, anything goes. There is some suggestion in the etymology of the word ‘pidgin’ that this kind of improvised and experimental language relates to pigeons’ ancient role as carriers of messages (Princeton University, n/d), and this serendipity was both affirming and exciting.

Every sensory register ... bears with it both its simple nature and its tense, attentive or anxious state: seeing and looking, smelling and sniffing or scenting, tasting and savouring, touching and feeling or palpating, hearing and listening ... This last pair ... the auditive pair has a special relationship with *sense* in the intellectual or intelligible acceptance of the word (with *perceived meaning* ... if you like, as opposed to *perceiving sense*... Entendre 'to hear' also means comprendre, 'to understand', as if 'hearing' were above all 'hearing say' rather than 'hearing sound' (Nancy, J-L, 2002, p6).

Visually, the banner uses strips of colours based on the bird identification rings from *Columba livia*. The text is printed in a light grey, a neutral colour that appears to alter with each different background colour. Like an exercise in colour theory, the colours affect the visibility of the letters. The colours increase spaces (or pauses) between the words as the grey fades in and out of focus, like an optical illusion, or “an ephemeral dance” created as the reader “leaps over written spaces” (de Certeau 1988, p.xxi). The grey remains the same colour throughout, as if alluding to the pigeons, who remain the same birds in the various different urban settings in which we encounter them, fading in and out of visibility.



Fig 33, 34, 35 Catherine Clover *billing and cooing*
Billboard Trocadero Art Space, Melbourne (2010)

Pigeon Post (2010)

Pigeon Post (2010) in the small gallery space Mailbox 141 in central Melbourne develops the mail art project from *corooco*. As the gallery space is a group of defunct internal mailboxes for the businesses in the Flinders Lane building, it was highly appropriate to extend the mail art project in this way, this time by sending more postcards through the postal system to the directors of the gallery, Martina Copley and Shanley McBurney. A key component of this exhibition that significantly extended the research was based, not on the pigeonholes themselves, but on the stairwell window. An unexpected bonus, I was invited to extend the exhibition by working in the stairwell. This was an exciting step as the building at 141 Flinders Lane has a windowed stairwell that looks out onto the street, so the external was visible as you ascended or descended the stairs. The window consists of uninterrupted square glass panels from level one to level six. I explored the window as an interface between the stairwell and the street by placing the word 'oom' vertically at each level using vinyl lettering. As the letters in 'oom' are symmetrical the word was readable both inside and out.

Using the window has the potential to engage audiences both internally and externally, and these audiences were potentially both people and pigeons. The positions of the letters engage with the various flight levels of the pigeons; many urban birds use streets to navigate cities, so the words were likely to be in their line of sight/line of flight. Pigeons frequently follow roads and motorways across country, not just in cities. Once they know a journey, following a road by eye seems to be preferable to using their inbuilt sense of direction (Utton, T, no date). This discovery challenges the old idiom 'as the crow flies'. If birds are using roads to navigate then the

shortest route between two points is probably the road the crow follows. Professor of Zoology Tim Guilford of the Oxford Navigation Group, UK, says that unless the route is long distance or a new one "pigeons appear to ignore their in-built directional instincts and follow the road system" (Tim Guilford cited in Utton, T, n/d). Through my own observations of urban birds in Melbourne, pigeons, seagulls, crows and ravens all use roads to find their way through both the city and the suburbs. With this in mind, the letters on the windows would be easily visible to the pigeons, especially as pigeons' visual ability is excellent, at least as good as humans', as is their auditive capacity (Watanabe, Sakamoto & Wakita 1995, p.165).

This installation took place at the same time as *billing and cooing* at Trocadero in Footscray and exhibiting both exhibitions at the same time extended the implied sonic component by imagining the pigeons chorusing across the city, their resonant voices carrying from one site to the other and back, like a singing in the round mixing with the city sounds, coming in and out of audible, imaginative focus.



Figs 39, 40, 41 Catherine Clover *Pigeon Post*
Mailbox 141, Melbourne (2010)

In Footscray, not far from the billboard and at the same height, I noticed that the three-dimensional block letters of the sign TROCADERO provided the pigeons with convenient perches. This phenomenological relationship between the physicality of the wild bird and the blockiness of the symbol was exciting to encounter and witnessing this prompted me to speculate in a more expansive way. Rather than only thinking *about* the birds, I started to think through the birds, around the birds, to waver around them (Baker 2013, p.73) to use Baker's open-ended and highly enabling term. I started to wonder whether the birds are my audience, whether they are my readers, whether they are participants or my collaborators. The perching of the pigeons gave the letters a practical role in the physical world of the birds, in their world, as a ledge, a sill, a shelf. This voluntary engagement between pigeon and letter extended the potential of the words into the birds' world. American environmental academic Aaron Moe identifies that we tend to doubt animals have agency because "the misplaced notion that animals only respond, by a mindless instinct, to their surroundings has become ... pervasive and entrenched" (Moe 2012).

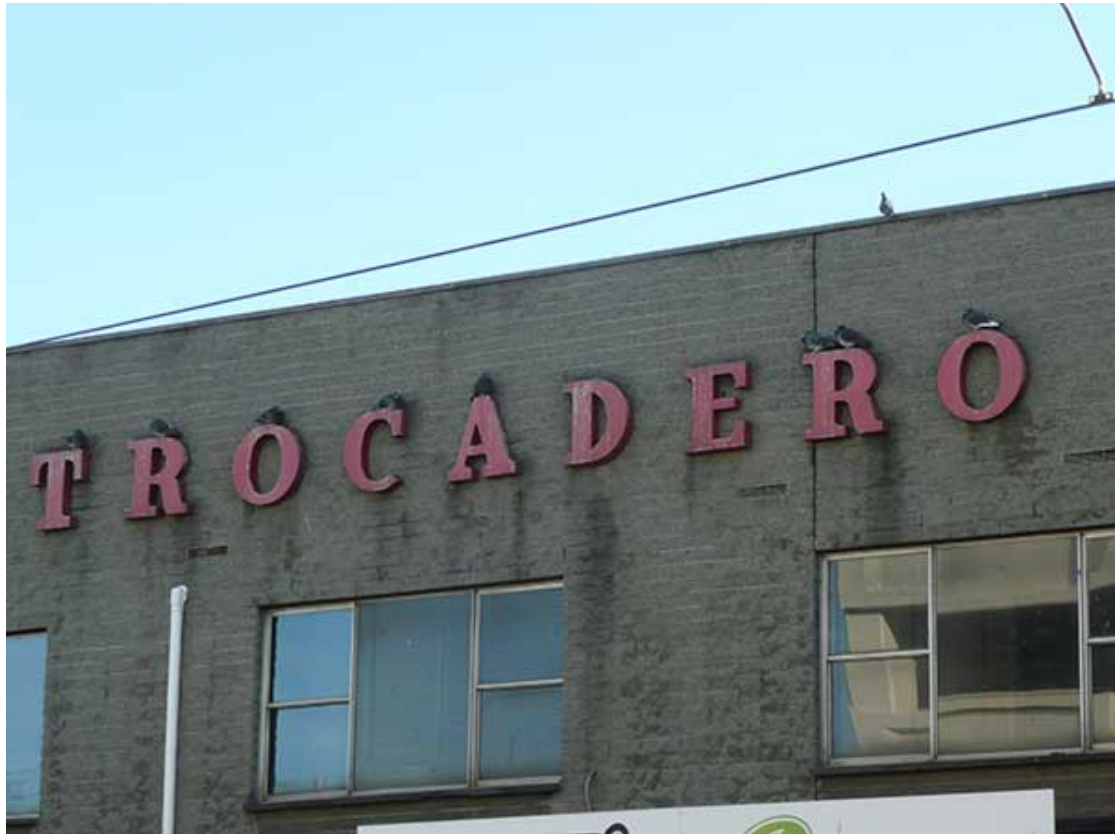


Fig 42 Catherine Clover: TROCADERO sign Footscray Melbourne (2010)



Fig 43 Catherine Clover: TROCADERO sign Footscray Melbourne (2010)

Mark Dion's *The Library for the Birds of Antwerp* (1993) (see URL <http://www.art21.org/images/mark-dion/the-library-for-the-birds-of-antwerp-1993>) engages "the conceit that the birds are readers" (Bryson 1997, p.96). Reconceived several times in different gallery spaces, the installation consisted of a dead tree with paraphernalia associated with birds, including bird cages, postcards, ornaments and bird books, hanging off boughs, lodged in lower limbs, pinned to the trunk and branches. Eighteen African finches flew and sang and perched on the tree. The contrast of the static forms of human knowledge about birds with the reality of the living birds illustrated that, according to Norman Bryson, "rather than the advance of human knowledge, the birds marked the latter's limit or closure" (Bryson 1997, p.97). While wondering if the birds can read is imaginative, I realised it was also prescriptive and preceptive because it judges the birds using human parameters and expectations, requiring too simplistic an answer. Steve Baker clarifies by identifying that it is the letting go of rational thinking that can be one of the ways to initiate a different perception of animals, where "The postmodern animal ... does not so much set itself against meaning as operate independently of it" (Baker 2000, p.82).

Australian/American artist Natalie Jeremijenko's project *Whitney Biennial for the Birds* (2006) illustrates the kind of broad and inclusive thinking that sets a useful framework for this project for addressing urban birds as participants or collaborators (see URL <http://www.nyu.edu/projects/xdesign/ooz/exhibitions.html>). The work consisted of perches placed on the external walls of the Whitney Museum, New York, that, when landed on, triggered audio that voiced issues (in English) that affected the birds such as health, sourcing food, urban pest control etc. Jeremijenko asserts that the work was "not a pretence that animals are human," (Jeremijenko cited in Berger 2006) but rather

it's an understanding that we're solving similar problems, that we can learn from each other, that we have similar conceptual resources, that our brains are just not that radically different from other brains that exist (Jeremijenko cited in Berger 2006)

The openness that Jeremijenko embraces is echoed by British academic Matthew Fuller who identifies “a drift of reciprocal relays” (Fuller 2007) across species where “signs given for one purpose are used for another” (Fuller 2007). The use of the letters of TROCADERO as perches by the pigeons and as the name of a building for people are not as unconnected as I had at first thought. A kind of seepage through the sharing of space is not so unlikely and provides a rich setting for Fuller’s “drift” where

a process might be imagined to occur in the liver of one being, be sensed as creepy sizzle by the automatic fight or flight responses of another, stimulate pheromone exchange between two members of different species, determine the use of grammatical tense in an essay by a specimen of another, but exist as much more than these (Fuller 2007).

In terms of voice and language this osmosis seems highly likely to be taking place much of the time, particularly in the urban environment. Recent linguistic research has discovered that ‘huh?’ is a universal word amongst ten contemporary languages (Dingemans, Torreira, & Enfield 2013) and this suggests that language is grounded in social interaction. The word ‘huh?’ has the same meaning as the English words ‘what?’ or ‘pardon?’ and asks for a repetition of what was said. The listener hears a voice but does not hear the content or the meaning carried by the voice. It may be that the listener

mishears or the speaker mumbles. It may be that the listener is not listening attentively or that the speaker mispronounces words and phrases. This syllable, so similar to the phonetic words I have chosen as a way of exploring the voices of these urban birds, is highly appropriate for an imaginative blurring of boundaries between human and bird communication. If we hear the birds and the birds hear us, is it possible that a blending of languages is taking place?

Chapter 3

Languageing the birds, voicing the birds

... to think about communication outside of the boundary of a species sets up a number of possibilities (Fuller 2007)

At the conclusion of Chapter 2, I ask whether a blending of bird and human language could be taking place in the urban environment. In this chapter I explore some “possibilities” as Matthew Fuller suggests, and insodoing consider the potential for cross-species communication with the birds. When I listen to the birds I hear them as users of language. I hear their sounds and I do not understand them, yet I understand that intelligent exchange is taking place. I recognise the birds as speaking beings (Bos 2009) where “one experiences more than just sounds – in this sense, this is an experience of language – but one is not able to make sense of it: one does not know what is being signified by what one hears” (Bos 2009). I do not try to translate their sounds scientifically, as a bioacoustician¹ might, but rather to poetically speculate on the exchanges that are taking place. The focus of this research is communication between species and how that communication might manifest itself. It is about the potential of cross-species social interaction in the urban environment.

Through improvisation and comparisons with the English vernacular I playfully translate the birds’ voices in three artworks. *Calling the Birds* (2010) and *Tell Me Something: A Field Guide to the Voices of an Unkindness of Ravens* (2011) involve a transcription of voice while *birdbrain* (2011) involves a voicing of text. The instability of language becomes increasingly apparent through these processes and this instability provides a rich space into which the project moves – an expansive space without restrictions, limits or

¹ Bioacoustics is the study of sound production in animals.

structure, a space full of potential. The act of voicing enables collaboration and performance to develop as part of the research process and the performers' actions help me to envisage new ways that we might engage with the birds.

Calling the Birds (2010)

I developed the artwork *Calling the Birds* (2010) from an interaction I had with a group of silver gulls² on Port Melbourne beach. The artwork is a four minute animation that combines a field recording with animated text, where the mixing of languages takes place through a direct exchange with the birds.

Using common phonetic gull words, again from field guides, for the text such as 'kaar' and 'keow' and referencing Geoff Sample's comment that there is no formal system for applying phonetic words to birdsong (see Chapter 1), I improvised, using words that I thought approximated the gulls' sounds as closely as possible. I listened very carefully to the birds in order to get as close a transcription as I could of the complex sounds. In a similar approach to the faltering pigeon's song in *billing and cooing* (see Chapter 2) where I broke the word 'oom' into smaller components, I found approximating the gull sounds produced many similar phonetic words that we use in the English vernacular such as 'oh', 'ah', 'ow', 'yow', 'hup'. Again, this suggests a blurring of the boundaries between two forms of communication, two languages, and the gull and human voices become less distinct and less separate from each other through this process. Academic Wendy Wheeler identifies that

² Silver gulls are native to Australia and are also the most common gull on the continent.

Improvisation is the key to both natural and cultural creative evolution... culture is emergent in nature, and mind is emergent in body/environment. The patterns which are emergently evolved and established in the one, are rearticulated, worked over, remodelled, repurposed, recombined and emergently evolved in the other (Wheeler 2011, p. 273)

By approximating the gulls' voices in written text, I was improvising as much as transcribing, and articulating and rearticulating, as Wheeler suggests. Steve Baker identifies that improvisation is the role of art where "one launches forth, hazards an improvisation" (Deleuze and Guattari cited in Baker 2013, p.229). Listening to the field recording at the same time as reading the words becomes a paradoxical experience because the words are familiar and they sonically approximate the gulls' sounds but they do not translate. Putting the two components together – the soundtrack and the animation – suggests there is common ground between the birds and ourselves, but this ground is not clearly described, it is merely suggested or implied, a place of potential. As with *billing and cooing*, this is an example of a homophonic translation, where the sonic – the sounds of the gulls' voices - is prioritised over the conventionally semantic and viewers are not given the clear instructions that typical translations offer. The experience of watching the animation and listening to the soundtrack does, however, suggest there is a link that has been established between species, at least from the human point of view, even though what is heard does not equate, as Canadian musician Michael Vincent (cited in Lane 2008, p.11) observes when listening to foreign languages.

By not being able to understand some of the words, I was forced to encounter them as sounds alone, and to use the same kind of perceptual listening I used when listening to music. I began listening all

over the city to the musical aesthetics of speech ... (Vincent cited in Lane 2008, p.11)

By rearticulating, remodelling and repurposing, as Wheeler suggests, Vincent was able to appreciate language in a different way, for its formal components, its sonic and musical characteristics. Improvisation in this way is a step to unlearning.



Fig 44 Catherine Clover *Calling the Birds* (still from animation)
Trocadero Art Space, Melbourne (2010)

My animation illustrates, literally, what Mark Dion calls “speak(ing) to ourselves through” the birds (Dion 1997, p.128). I began to realise that an imaginative exploration into the crossing over of our voices might affect how we relate to them. How we speak to, about or through the birds reflects our changing relationship with them and potentially the broader natural world (Dion 1997, p.128). According to Lewis Mayo from Melbourne University “birds ... are the one form of living being that you can find with every human community. There are areas in which humans have minimal relationships with mammals or fish, but there are always birds”

(Lewis Mayo cited in Prior 2008). Silver gulls are increasingly a part of our lives in most parts of urban Australia and as most Australian cities are on the coastal rim of the continent, the move from the ocean to the beach to the city is a ready pathway for the gulls to take.



Fig 45 Catherine Clover *Calling the Birds* (still from animation)
Trocadero Art Space, Melbourne (2010)

In the animation the birds appear to ‘speak’ shared words and a transformation seems to take place where we are able to, potentially, understand them, or, to put it another way, we seem able to talk to the animals, to the birds (Yong 2012). The experience is not unlike watching a film with subtitles, where the visual text leads us to believe we can understand the words we hear, as if we can speak a foreign language that we have never learnt (Pinker 1995, p.159). Opening an imaginative space full of potential exchange between the gulls and ourselves like a form of Karaoke³, the words give the viewers a chance to share in the gulls’ vocal world. Some viewers are tempted to join in and sound the words out loud as they watch, and this is a good example of one of the principles of postmodern

³ where the text of a song replaces the professional singer’s voice so that amateur singers can ‘have a go’.

knowledge, which according to Jean-François Lyotard (cited in Baker 2000, p.41) “is not the expert’s homology, but the inventor’s paralogy”.



Fig 46 Catherine Clover *Calling the Birds* (still from animation)
Trocadero Art Space, Melbourne (2010)

Calling the Birds started to unfold a playfulness in the project, emerging from the absurdity or the apparent impossibility of communicating with the birds or as Matthew Fuller puts it, “the whimsy or self-trivialising nature of the work” and “how demented and dreamy the possibility of talking to the animals really is” (Fuller 2007). ‘Whimsical’, ‘dreamy’ and even ‘demented’ are useful words because they enable the breadth of thinking we need to unlearn conventional ways of considering our animal others. Yet even the more rational and empirical orientation of neurobiological research has identified that certain “motor and perceptual abilities” (Kluender 2010) essential for language in humans, also exist in birds. American cognitive scientists Eliot Brenowitz, David Perkel and Lee Osterhout assert “we believe that the time is ripe for a thoughtful consideration of possible links between birdsong and language” (Brenowitz, Perkel, & Osterhoot 2010, p.2). A key component is vocal learning, which is

where species that are not born with innate communication or language skills learn how to communicate vocally.

Humans are not born knowing the sounds that are relevant to the language they will speak. Vocal learning is ... a rarity in the natural world, but it is not unique. The short list of known vocal learners among animals includes parrots, some hummingbirds, bats, elephants, marine mammals such as dolphins and whales, and humans. But by far the most numerous vocal learning species (at about 4000) are the oscine songbirds. From an ontogenetic perspective, the acquisition of speech and birdsong have compelling parallels (Brenowitz, Perkel, & Osterhoot 2010, p.1)

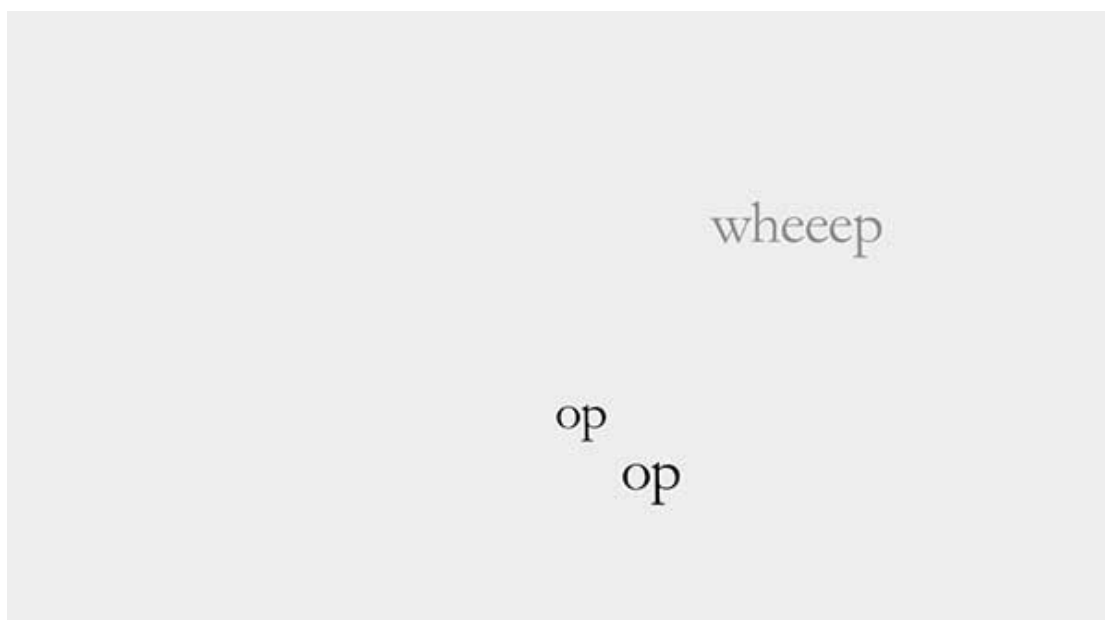


Fig 47 Catherine Clover *Calling the Birds* Trocadero Art Space, Melbourne (2010)

Seagulls and pigeons are not songbirds, but crows and ravens are. In the spirit of this project and its imaginative reach where potential knowledge is the focus rather than current knowledge, there is no reason to think that an improvisational approach to voicing cannot lend itself to other birds (and other animals) not scientifically identified as having the biological or cognitive capacity to alter or extend their vocality. Indeed, chimps were thought to have innate language and were therefore not vocal learners, but

recent scientific research has proved that chimps do indeed learn new calls (Morell 2015). Some bird species such as parrots are not classified as songbirds, yet are vocal learners and proficient mimics of all kinds of sounds including mimicking human speech (Cornell Lab of Ornithology 2007). Not only are they confirmed mimics, but Karl Berg, an ornithologist at the University of California, is trying to find out “if parrots really do talk ... Most people say, “Well, all those calls are just noise,” or “they’re just mimicking each other.” I think they’re doing much more than that. I think they’re having conversations’ ” (Berg cited in Morell 2013, p.95).

URL link <http://ciclover.com/exegesis%20mov01.html>
Moving Image I Catherine Clover *Calling the Birds* (animation excerpt 1’10”)
Trocadero Art Space, Melbourne (2010)

Tell Me Something: A Field Guide to the Voices of an Unkindness of Ravens (2011)

Through an allusion to filmmaking, the subtitling in the animation suggests that the gulls could be considered as actors or performers, and I develop this aspect further with the artist's book *Tell Me Something: A Field Guide to the Voices of an Unkindness of Ravens*, initiated through the keeping of a written diary throughout the research project. Using empirical observation, the diary documents the birds and their voices, along with some contextual information such as date, weather and location. This daily aspect of the research - the regularity, the repetition, the constant attention – is also associated with the ordinary and the quotidian which these birds epitomise.



Fig 48 Catherine Clover: Six years of bird diaries (2014)

Huge blustery wind full of an-
 dentless storm. Cold, but not
 cold enough for snow. -1°C - loud
 thumps as wind buffets buildings
 + 2 in seeps in everywhere. No
 birds, no birdsong.

Sat 27th Feb
 10.30am Halifax Common
 Crows, grazing on grass,
 followed by seagulls. Low
 cloud, breeze, moist mist, cool
 to cold; crows harass 2
 seagulls as they arrive. 6 or 7
 crows. A number of photos.
 "Ak-ak-ak-ak-ak-ak-ak-ak"
 warning call of crows? Higher
 in pitch than regular call.
 "rarr rarr rarr" - the rolling
 'r's of the American crow.
 Outside C&G's the starlings
 chase together - huge variety
 of lovely whistles + trills, notes +
~~are~~ high + light, multiple sounds
 quite soft, lovely. They like these
 trees ~~which~~ I don't know the type -
 elms says Corry.

Fig 49 Catherine Clover: Bird diary entry (2009)

Some loud...
 breeze at times...
 lots of flapping, some
 to throwing of bread. One
 soft white feather on its head -
 all (a male could do it) - gung?
 cute. Magpies also distinctly
 + visible - pica pica seem
 unattractive name I think now
 wood pica...

magpies do n
 blackbirds vi
 today. The
 fearless -
 birds -
 black he
 at Rio
 all.
 "akak
 r.

Fig 50 Catherine Clover: Bird diary entry (2011)

from window. Sun is rising soft mag
 yellow big navy-white puppy cl
^{curved on wings}
 looking East. Then the muffled
 enclosing of hotel car hear ^{one} Roel
 calling - but lovely slightly morn
 low whistle, echo amongst ^{high} build
 whee - whee
 whee - whee
 whee - whee
 → →
 whee - whee "
 → →
 This rise behind buildings - navy
 cloud edged. Cirrus behind. No
 much movement in streets yet. 7

Fig 51 Catherine Clover: Bird diary entry (2012)

The diary entries are the result of the careful listening process that informs the project and certain occurrences prompt me to make an entry. For example, the ravens that live around my home in the northern suburbs of Melbourne close to Coburg cemetery have large group meetings on the electricity pylons where Bell Street crosses the Merri Creek or on the wires along Elizabeth Street, where I live. These meetings are highly audible and the birds easily visible. They come and go in twos and threes, arriving and departing in flurries before settling on one of the two uppermost cables; a single bird calls and there are murmurings and mutterings punctuated by

loud interjections from single individuals followed by what sound like, to me, group discussion, rumination, disagreement and agreement. These meetings prompt the use of many of the sonically oriented collective nouns for ravens and crows that I use in the later exhibition *A Filth of Starlings* (2012) (see Chapter 4), in particular *a parliament of ravens* where the ravens' exchanges sound extraordinarily similar to the sonic rise and fall of debate in parliamentary sittings that use the Westminster democratic system.



Fig 52 Catherine Clover: Little Raven on a Merri Creek pylon Coburg Melbourne (2012)



Fig 53 Catherine Clover: Little Ravens Coburg Melbourne (2012)



Fig 54 Catherine Clover: Little Ravens Coburg Melbourne (2012)



Fig 55 Catherine Clover: Little Ravens Coburg Melbourne (2012)

The diary entries provide the context for transcribing the birds' voices in the artist's book that became *Tell Me Something: A Field Guide to the Voices of an Unkindness of Ravens*. While inspired by bird identification field guides, the book functions like a script or score of the ravens' exchanges. The transcription of bird song is nothing new and before recording technologies were readily available, experiments in notating bird song caught the imagination of many, including zoologist Walter Garstang (1868-1949), nineteenth century poet John Clare (Bevis 2010, pp. 30-31) and twentieth century composer Olivier Messiaen (Bevis 2010, p.125).

the subject) and emphasising the verb (the action, the doing) through sound and her listening practice.

Writing words from the obscure materiality of sound I try to bring its mobility to the surface of language not for it to become signification but to become significant. With my blog I try to write this invitation working with language that eschews naming that challenges the noun and its centrality in our perception and instead seek to explore the predicate, the doing, and the action of what is being done, established not in outcomes but in processes, sonic processes, linguistic processes, material unfolding refolding offering not object nor subject but a glimpse of the audible as an alternative state of affairs (Voegelin 2013).

Voegelin's grammatical challenge is a writerly constraint that liberates. Her approach to language ensures that it loosens its grip on semantics through overturning the conventional function of subject and object. With reference to our relationship with animals in general, Tim Ingold identifies an approach compatible with Voegelin's, one that redirects language to undermine conventional meaning and emphasise activity, a doing, and a currency, that raises the profile of animals from a place of inferiority to one of equality. He calls it *linguaging* and explains

In a linguaging language – one not semantically locked into a categorical frame but creating itself endlessly in the inventive telling of its speakers – animals do not exist, either as subjects or objects; rather they *occur*. The name of an animal as it is uttered, the animal's story as it is told, and the creature itself in its life activity are all forms of this occurrence. Animals happen, they carry on, they *are* their stories, and their names – to repeat – are not nouns but verbs (Ingold 2011, p.175).

The voices of the ravens in *Tell Me Something: A Field Guide to the Voices of an Unkindness of Ravens* are present and are located in the present tense. That they are active and they are voicing - Ingold's linguaging perhaps - is clear. Like the animation *Calling the Birds*, the transcription does not assist

with translating the birds' communications but rather, as René ten Bos identifies, that "one can experience the event of language even though one does not understand the meaning of what is being uttered by this language" (Bos 2009, p.10) and indeed "it is this meaningless experience which brings us as close as we can get to the being of language" (Bos 2009, p.11).

Extending the focus on action and doing, Bos refers to Giorgio Agamben as one of the few contemporary philosophers to address animal voice who

has repeatedly referred to himself as (one) who ponders the meaning of the verb 'can', that is, a philosopher who ponders the meaning of potentiality – is in fact the same as the one which haunted Aristotle when he wondered what it is in the animal voice that allows it to become language. What kind of potentiality does the animal voice allow to be replaced by language? How is the passage between *phōnē* (voice) and *logos* (language) possible? (Bos 2009, p.8)

French philosopher Michel Foucault identifies that, while we constantly impose restrictions (list, classify, categorise) on what is a "continuum" (Berleant 2010, p.78), it is enormously difficult.

Establishing discontinuities is not an easy task even for history in general. And it is certainly even less so for the history of thought. We may wish to draw a dividing-line; but any limit we set may perhaps be no more than an arbitrary division made in a constantly mobile whole. We may wish to mark off a period; but have we the right to establish symmetrical breaks at two points in time in order to give an appearance of continuity and unity to the system we place between them? (Foucault 1970, p.50)

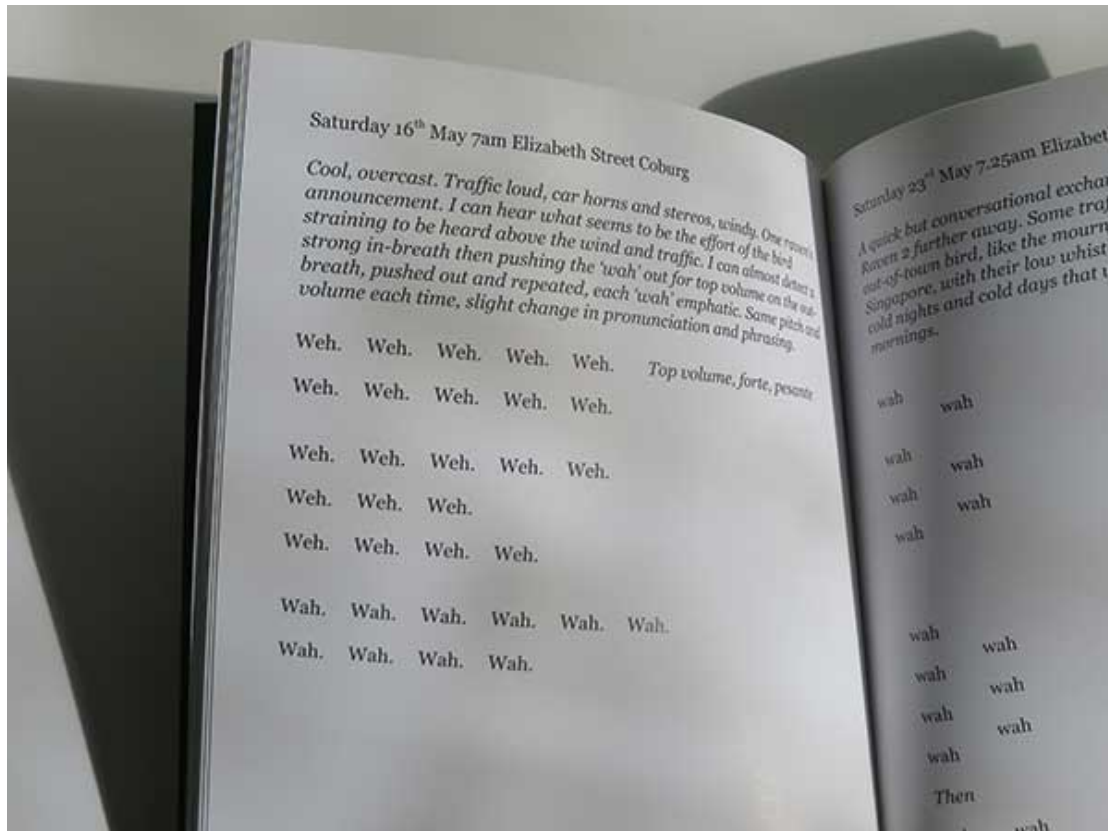


Fig 62 Catherine Clover *Tell Me Something: A Field Guide to the Voices of an Unkindness of Ravens* (2011)

I began to realise that transcription is always an act of translation. Even the most conventional approach can never provide an exact translation because a direct copy is not possible (Goldsmith 2007). As I had discovered with *Columba livia* (see Chapter 1), even when text is copied out word for word, a separate work is produced, not an identical copy of the original (Morris 2009). Meaning is not fixed in language. Interpretation and adaptation use the gaps, cracks and fissures revealed by transcription to dislodge the semantic priority of language and open up a space for what is found in translation rather than what is lost. Conceptual poet Kenneth Goldsmith elaborates

language works on several levels, endlessly flipping back and forth between the meaningful and the material: we can choose to weigh it and we can choose to read it. There's nothing stable about it: even in their most abstracted form, letters are embedded with semantic,

semiotic, historical, cultural, and associative meanings (Goldsmith 2011, p.34).

Applying the phonetic words to the ravens' exchanges meant that the birds' voices were flattened and stretched, morphing into a different form. The process involved speculation and imagination. That I don't understand the communication enables me to experiment with ways of experiencing it. Such an approach to writing is closely related to Georges Perec's experiments with writerly constraints, in particular those associated with the Oulipo Group⁴, where "by imposing multiple restrictions on the processes of writing, this group of French writers seek to find what literature might be, rather than what it is" (Gallix 2013).

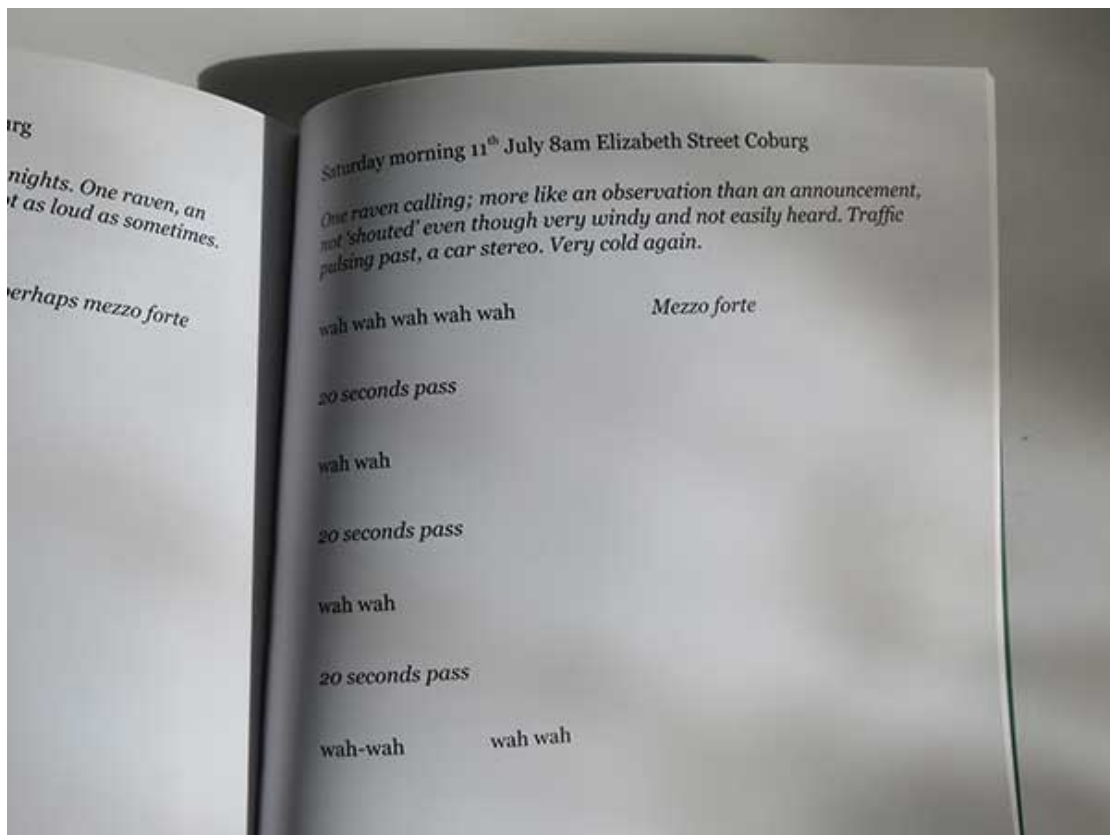


Fig 63 Catherine Clover *Tell Me Something: A Field Guide to the Voices of an Unkindness of Ravens* (2011)

⁴ Georges Perec was a member of the Oulipo Group founded in 1960 in Paris. The members experiment with writerly possibilities through the imposition of strict rules and regulations. Examples include palindromes (a word or phrase that reads the same way backwards and forwards) and lipograms (a text where one or more letters are deliberately avoided).

With writing, each word is visibly separate, but with speech, words are not distinct (Pinker 1995, p.159). The spaces between written words hardly exist in speech. If we transcribe how we actually sound, our physical vocality, there are few gaps between words. With the calls of the ravens, the spaces between the sounds seem apparent, and the birds tend to speak more slowly than we do, or so it seems. The rate of speech in English is about 100 to 120 words per minute (Ferrington 2012) although this varies between geographical location and accent, between reading and speech, as well as between men and women. I am making the assumption that I can hear every sound the ravens make but I am aware that this is unlikely. Human hearing has a limited range (of between 20 and 20,000 Hz) compared to most other animals including birds, and I would not be surprised if a lot more vocal activity is taking place than I can hear. Thus I may well not be hearing as much of the ravens' calls as I think, so my listening is "on the edge of meaning, or in an edgy meaning of extremity..." (Nancy 2007, p.7). I guess, I imagine and I interpret. This edgy place is not restrictive but, rather, it is expansive and my possible lack of hearing could be a productive mishearing where "Listening... is full of slippages... that incorporate all the subtle gradations, challenges, and misapprehensions of relating" (LaBelle 2010, p.180).

The act of transcribing reveals structures in the birds' calls such as the use of repetition, silence, changes of tempo and phrasing. Initially I thought of the texts as poetic rather than prosaic because of their oral origin as well as the evidence of distinct patterns of lineation, meter, rhythm and rhyme. The ravens never mumble or cough or sneeze or burp or mishear (as far as I know) although there are distinct pauses, with pitch and volume variations. Their exchanges are highly structured and full of clarity, even the rather

amazing low pitched ‘creaking’ sound that these particular ravens (*Corvus mellori*) make. Listening closely I can hear complex exchanges taking place. So,

What is it in the human voice that articulates the passage from the animal voice to the *logos*, from nature to *polis*? Aristotle’s response is well known: the voice articulates *grammata*, letters. The ancient grammarians began their argument with this opposition of the confused voice (*phōnē synkechyméne*) of animals and the human voice, which is instead *énarthros*, articulated. But if we ask in what this ‘articulation’ of the human voice consists, we see that for them *phōnē énarthros* simply means *phone engrmmatos, vox quae scribe potest*, the voice that can be written – in short, always pre-existing as written (Agamben 1993, p.9)

Reading *Tell Me Something: A Field Guide to the Voices of an Unkindness of Ravens* is similar to reading a foreign language: it seems that little can be deduced from the experience. But reading the words out loud - in effect, mimicking the birds - gives the reader a perceptual understanding that is absent from reading in silence. French poet Francis Ponge identifies that

not only any poem at all, but any text at all – whatever it is – carries (in the full sense of the word), carries, I say, its speaking [*diction*]. For my part – if I examine myself writing – I never come to write the slightest phrase without my writing being accompanied by a mental speaking and listening, and even, rather, without it being *preceded* by those things (although indeed just barely) (Ponge cited in Nancy 2007, p.35).

Speaking therefore, “is the echo of the text in which the text is made and written, opens up to its own sense as to the plurality of its possible senses” (Nancy 2007, p.35). The solitary act of silent reading is a relatively recent phenomenon, and only became a widespread activity from the 10th century in the West. In AD 384, Saint Augustine observed Saint Ambrose reading silently and

When he read ... his eyes scanned the page and his heart sought out the meaning, but his voice was silent and his tongue was still... when we came to visit him, we found him reading like this in silence, for he never read aloud (St Augustine cited in Manguel 1996)

It is through voicing, rather than thinking, that the reader gets a sense of the birds' worlds via the sounds they make. As Italian academic Adriana Cavarero reminds us

...before the advent of metaphysics, it was more natural to believe that thought was a product of the lungs... In the Homeric poems, for example, 'thinking' tends to get defined as a 'speaking' whose seat is in the corporeal organs that extend from the area of the breast to the mouth (Cavarero 2005, p.63)

Reading the book aloud, using voice and breath, provides a vocal bridge between the bird and the human condition. *Tell Me Something: A Field Guide to the Voices of an Unkindness of Ravens*, steeped in the ordinary and the everyday, "signal(s) aspects of nature that exist beyond our perception and knowledge of it" (Boetzkes 2010, p.20) yet "the textualisation of art must ... be understood ... as a strategy to cultivate receptivity, so that the artwork ... unlimits the senses" (Boetzkes 2010, p.195).

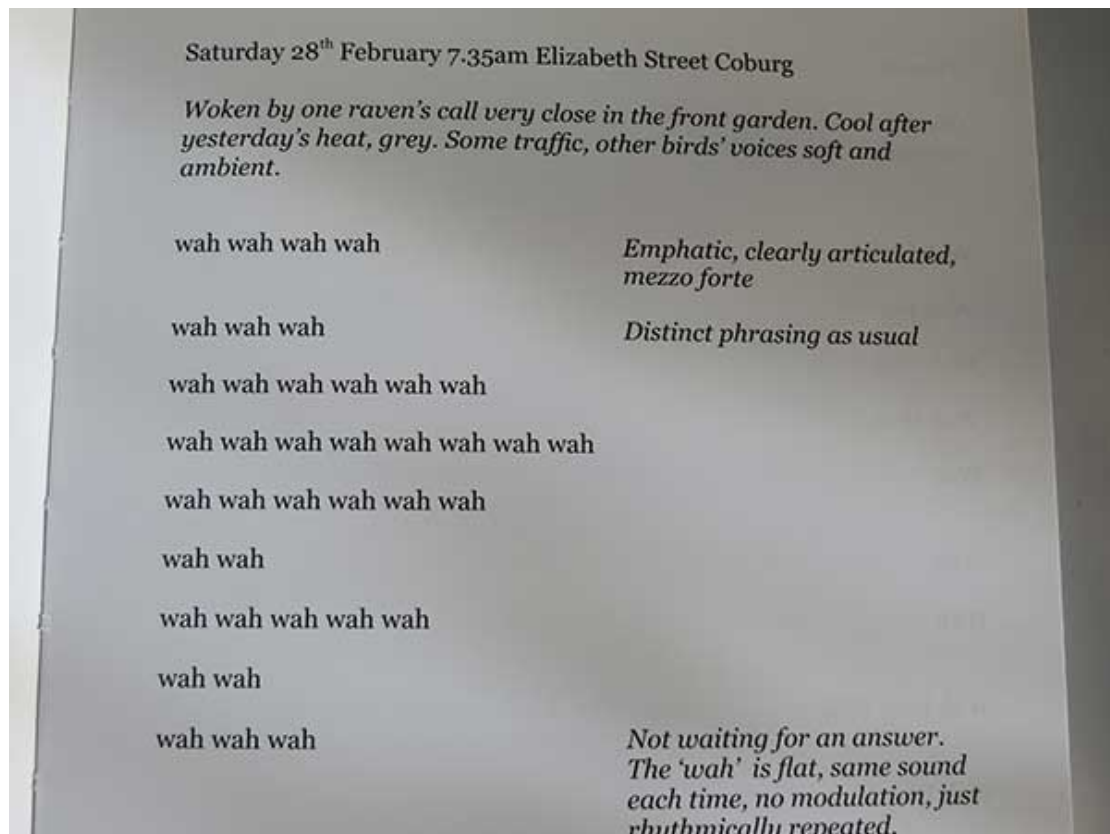


Fig 64 Catherine Clover *Tell Me Something: A Field Guide to the Voices of an Unkindness of Ravens* (2011)

The philosophical linguistic turn – the focus on language by Western philosophy in the latter half of the 20th century - argues that our experience of the world is dependent on and affected by language, or as Kari Weil writes “a field of signification that precedes us” (Weil 2010, p.6). We are bound and enclosed by the language we use. Language, then, limits us. Yet, as I had started to discover in *Columba livia* and *coroocoo* from Chapter 1, language is far from being the reliable form of communication we assume. Gilles Deleuze addresses the uncertainties inherent in language, revealing that it is a fluid system open to myriad interpretations. Perhaps it is this unreliability that can release us from language’s restrictions. In his short essay *He Stuttered* (1997) Deleuze cites several 20th century authors including James Joyce, Samuel Beckett and Franz Kafka as writers who pull and push language in a way that creates what he calls “a language within a language”

(Deleuze 1997, p.107). In *Finnegans Wake*, first published in 1939, Joyce writes

The fall
(bababadalgharaghtakamminarronkonnbronntonneronntuonnthunnt
rovarrhounawnskawntooohooordenenthrunuk!) of a once wallstrait
oldparr is retailed early in bed... (Joyce 2012, p.3)

and

Soft morning, city! Lsp! I am leafy speafing. Lpf! Folyt and folty all the
nights have falled on to long my hair. Not a sound, falling. Lispn! No
wind no word (Joyce 2012, p.619)

The polyphony of these sentences call out for vocalization - they demand to be read out loud, to be voiced! In combination with the sonic, their inherent rhythm and metre renders them almost impossible to read silently. Georges Perec identifies that “there are texts that should only be murmured or whispered, others that we ought to be able to shout or beat time to” (Perec 1997, pp.177-178) Reading these words out loud enables a material understanding that does not accompany a silent reading. When critics found *Finnegans Wake* unreadable, Samuel Beckett replied "It is not to be read – or rather it is not only to be read. It is to be looked at and listened to. His writing is not about something; it is that something itself" (Samuel Beckett cited in Gallix 2013). Deleuze writes that such authors

... make the language take flight, they send it racing along a witch's line, ceaselessly placing it in a state of disequilibrium, making it bifurcate and vary in each of its terms, following an incessant modulation... He makes the language itself scream, stutter, stammer, or murmur... this is not English (Deleuze 1997, p.109-110)

I began to realise that the entries in *Tell Me Something: A Field Guide to the Voices of an Unkindness of Ravens* need to be read out loud. The sonic in the phonetic words seems to insist on a sounding, a voicing. Rather than Deleuze's language within a language, this voicing suggests potential for the combination of languages, both bird and human. Perhaps the artworks were beginning to generate and occupy a

space where significations germinate 'from within language and in its very materiality'; it forms a signifying play having nothing to do with communication, representation (of feelings), expression; it is that apex (or that depth) of production where the melody really works at the language – not at what it says, but the voluptuousness of its sound-signifiers, of its letters – where melody explores how the language works and identifies with that work (Barthes 1977, p.182).

As *Tell Me Something: A Field Guide to the Voices of an Unkindness of Ravens* was structured around the idea of a script or score, I was prompted with some trepidation to explore this further through collaborating with performers, without experience of either collaboration or performance. As dialogue, exchange and conversation with artists, writers, academics and naturalists has been a natural and dynamic component of the research process, this step was not entirely unexpected.

birdbrain (2011)

I invited three Melbourne-based performers - Kate Hunter, Penny Baron⁵ and Vanessa Chapple - to collaborate. They work professionally together and have a comfortable performing relationship that is based on physical theatre⁶ and improvisation. I was not interested in working with

⁵ Performer Kate Kantor took over Penny Baron's role when required

⁶ Storytelling through physical performance

professional singers because their well-developed voices – their virtuosity - might distance the audience too much, and I wanted the audience to feel included in the performances. Initially trained in classical music, Salomé Voegelin identifies how virtuosity excludes people by teaching a right way and a wrong way to interpret and critique music, which she says is too limiting for an expansive listening practice (Voegelin & Cascella 2013). My intention was for the audience to feel relaxed enough to consider trying mimicry themselves, hoping the mimicry the performers enact might prove irresistible to listeners who may be tempted to join in.

It was the richness and rawness of Scottish sound artist Susan Philipsz' untrained voice that initially inspired my choice of performers over singers as the vocalists in this project. For the inaugural Folkestone Triennial of 2008 Philipsz produced a site specific work *Pathetic Fallacy* that could be heard above the coastal town in a small brick shelter on the sea cliffs (see URL <http://www.folkestonetriennial.org.uk/artist/susan-philipsz/>). With a view across the channel, Philipsz was heard singing *Dolphins* a folk song originally written by musician Fred Neil in the 1960s. A multi channel sound work, Philipsz' vocal recordings sing in the round as the listener ponders the vast sea view, a hauntingly evocative experience not dissimilar to her rendering of the 16th century Scottish lament *Lowlands Away* about the drowning of a sweetheart installed under the bridge that crosses the River Clyde in Glasgow (2010). Her soft untrained voice suggests an intimacy as well as an appealing uncertainty that professional singers inevitably lose, and this proximity provides me with a way of considering the vocal space that we might share with the birds. Her voicing of specific sites also offers a way of thinking about the sonic realisation of place. Philipsz chose the viewing hut for her work because the song is full of longing for the past, symbolised by imagined dolphins and rendered distant by the immensity of the sea

stretching to the horizon. For the many asylum seekers who live in contemporary Folkestone, the sea “must be a constant reminder of how far from home they are” (Philipsz 2008, p.88).



Fig 65 Catherine Clover *birdbrain* (still from rehearsal with Vanessa Chapple and Kate Hunter l to r) Screenspace Melbourne Australia / Soundfjord London UK / Emerson Berlin Germany (2011)

Initially I worked with the performers in a studio setting where I played field recordings of raven calls, and the performers practised approximating the sounds they heard. Kate commented that during the rehearsal process

I consider physical questions – the shape of my mouth; the use of breath; the way I use my body, and how that affects the sound. What does it sound like if I close off my glottis more quickly? How do I stay with an open, back-palate sound? Yet I also hold an image in my mind of the raven as I produce the sound. Do I? I'm not sure. If I do, I think it is retained as a kind of disconnected image; that is, as if I'm observing a raven, rather than I *am* the raven. Writing this now, I am surprised that I don't imagine myself *as* a raven. Perhaps this is

something to do with a sense that my breath and sound and voice is not connected to my body, my self. Yet I do not believe that
(Kate Hunter, email dated 22 November 2011)

The three performers concentrate on the physical struggle to sound like the birds and have said they are not trying to ‘be’ the birds, as Kate notes. Rather than using mimicry as a means of deceiving the birds, the performers function as conduits for interpreting the birds’ vocal worlds for a human audience. The performers have no exclusive access to the birds’ worlds, yet they create pathways for transforming the birds’ actions into a kind of relatable human experience. In some ways the performers play the role of the ‘not-bird’ as translators for the birds. Their concentration on trying to get their voices to sound bird-like echoes Deleuze and Guattari’s complex concept, or rather process, of “becoming-animal” where a kind of temporary affiliation with an animal is experienced and perhaps a connection is made. Certainly humanness is reduced in this process and this is very useful because it provides me with a bridge between the bird and the human condition. Like Voegelin’s focus on the verb, Ingold’s languaging and Agamben’s potential, “becoming” is

not to attain a form (identification, imitation, Mimesis) but to find the zone of proximity, indiscernibility, or indifferenciation, where one can no longer be distinguished from a woman, an animal, or a molecule – neither imprecise nor general, but unforeseen and nonpreexistent, singularised out of a population rather than determined in a form
(Deleuze 1997, p.1)



Fig 66 Catherine Clover *birdbrain* (still from rehearsal with Vanessa Chapple, Kate Hunter and Kate Kantor l to r) Screenspace Melbourne Australia / Soundfjord London UK / Emerson Berlin Germany (2011)

We worked towards a live performance which took place on the Melbourne leg of *birdbrain*. Through this enactment the performers took the text back to a sonic and bodily realm, but it was not the same realm as the one from which it originated. Rather, this was an emergent voiced space within which the boundaries between the birds' world and our world could overlap, merge and blend. Hearing the text vocalised and observing the performers during this process provided me with insights into the birds through human imitation. British poet Neil Mills (cited in Goldsmith 2011, p.20) comments that

the meaning which emerged in the reading of poetry lay primarily in intonation and rhythm, and only secondarily in semantic content ie that what was important was how something was read, rather than what was said – the human voice functioning as musical instrument (Goldsmith, K, 2011, p.20)

The performers did not look like birds or act like birds, but they were nevertheless bird-like; they captured an essence through their voices that indicated a bird-like presence. They dressed as if for a virtuoso vocal performance that might take place in the formal surroundings of a recital centre, a wry comment on the reputation of these urban birds as dirty and disease-ridden. Matthew Fuller observes that

Mimicry is a means to set up ruses, initiatives that skirt the edge of multi-directional fraud in which the everyday and ideas of the wild, the primitive and capacities of sensual perception that overlap between species can be mobilised. Here mimicry unfolds both as play and as learning; in bird calls with their worlds of call and refrain, or their re-mobilisation of surrounding sounds; and in contemporary art and its constant reversioning of appropriation, pastiche, copy, plagiarism, found materials, how to deal with and configure what exists, what repeats, in relation to the creation of the new (Fuller 2007)

Deleuze and Guattari insist that becoming is not mimicry, yet I was discovering that mimicry could be a very useful step in the process of relating to the birds. It may be a step on the path to becoming or a step that is an end in itself. Mimicry is imitation, a form of copying, and is an important part of learning for most species. There was no reason, I was discovering, that mimicry could not be a very useful means for unlearning as well.



Fig 67 Catherine Clover *birdbrain* (still from rehearsal with Vanessa Chapple, Kate Hunter and Kate Kantor l to r) Screenspace Melbourne Australia / Soundfjord London UK / Emerson Berlin Germany (2011)

Through using *Tell Me Something: A Field Guide to the Voices of an Unkindness of Ravens* as a text for live performance, the performers appeared to mimic the birds. But the performers were focused on vocalising the written sounds rather than imitating the birds per se. Their material was text and they interpreted it and improvised. The performers embodied the words on the page rather than the physicality of the birds, but by reducing the gap between the birds and the words the performative act opened up a space for unlearning.

URL link <http://ciclover.com/exegesis%20mov02.html>
 Moving Image II Catherine Clover *birdbrain* (performance excerpt 1' with Vanessa Chapple, Kate Hunter and Kate Kantor l to r) (recording credit Matthew Berka) Screenspace Melbourne Australia / Soundfjord London UK / Emerson Berlin Germany (2011)

Chapter 4

Unfolding the City: speaking the city, walking the city

The city is a discourse and this discourse is truly a language: the city speaks to its inhabitants, we speak our city, the city where we are, simply by living in it, by wandering through it, by looking at it (Barthes 1967, p.167)

Drawn to using language and text as a creative resource for this project because of the vocality of my selected birds, the semiotic correlation that Roland Barthes draws between the urban environment and language offers a very useful concept on which this project could build. The identification of the city with language offers a compelling idea for both its human inhabitants but also for its animal others, in particular seagulls, pigeons, crows and ravens. Understanding the city as a context to be *read*, Barthes affirms that the city “is a poem which unfolds the signifier and it is this unfolding that ultimately the semiology of the city should try to grasp and make sing” (Barthes 1997, p.172). Although he does not address the animal others that choose to live in cities with us, he does emphasise the “sociality” (Barthes p.171) at the heart of the city where “The city, essentially and semantically, is the place of our meeting with the *other*, and it is for this reason that the centre is the gathering place in every city ... Better still, the city centre is always felt as the space where subversive forces, forces of rupture, ludic forces act and meet” (Barthes 1997, p.171).

Barthes’ forces of rupture and subversion mixed with a playfulness are powerful concepts for considering the urban setting and they correlate strongly with this project’s focus on unlearning, re-thinking, uncertainty, playfulness, contingency, the incomplete and the indeterminate as a means of considering humans as part of the animal kingdom, as we always have

been. Arnold Berleant also emphasises the significance of social interaction as a key characteristic of the urban when he declares that

Aristotle claimed that society is the place where people become fully human. We now understand better than ever what environment is and what it means. That understanding recognizes the human presence as an active participant, inseparable from the other factors that constitute environment (Berleant N/D)

To become fully human in the city is to interact with other people and this project takes this idea and argues that through interaction and socialisation we may become more than human and recognise our animal selves and by extension our animal others. Again according to Berleant “... while the city is a distinctively human environment, it is nevertheless an integral part of the geography of its region, the larger context within which its boundaries are usually indistinct ... with which it has numerous and complex reciprocal relationships” (Berleant N/D). Some of those complex reciprocal relationships are with animals, particularly those animals that may have originally lived in the region in which the city is now located, and that have adapted to living there.

A Filth of Starlings (2012)

A choir, a chorus, a rant, a squabble, a quarrel, a chattering, a screech, a bellowing, a lowing, a mewling, a drumming, a guffaw, a murmuration. These words are just a few of the collective nouns we use in English for the grouping of birds by the sounds of their voices. Some of these nouns can be traced back to 15th century Britain, to the *Book of St Albans* of 1486 by Dame Juliana Barnes, prioress of the nunnery of Sopwell near St Albans. Little is known about the prioress, but the book, one of the earliest to be printed, became hugely popular for many years (Watson 1974, p.689). Today, we are

more familiar with some of these collective nouns than others, for example a ‘murder of crows’ is fairly common, but a ‘murmuration of starlings’ less so. An aviary, a flight, a flock or a menagerie of birds makes sense, but a crossing, a raft, a pull or a bench of birds does not seem to. Some of the nouns have an obvious basis in animal behaviour but many do not. Language evolves and mutates, and words and meanings change or are forgotten over time.



Fig 68 Catherine Clover *A Filth of Starlings* (detail)
Platform Public Contemporary Art Spaces, Melbourne (2012)

For the installation *A Filth of Starlings* I used the writerly constraint of the list once again, engaging its contradictory properties as a hierarchical means of ordering as well as a postmodern disruptive force. I printed lists of selected collective nouns to be easily read at walking pace in a highly visible

part of the city commuter route in Melbourne's CBD¹. The birds in these lists (pigeons, seagulls, ravens and crows amongst others) are common noisy urban birds and are likely to be seen by passengers as they exit Flinders Street station through the subway on their daily round or commute. In total there were 80 collective nouns listed in groups of five.

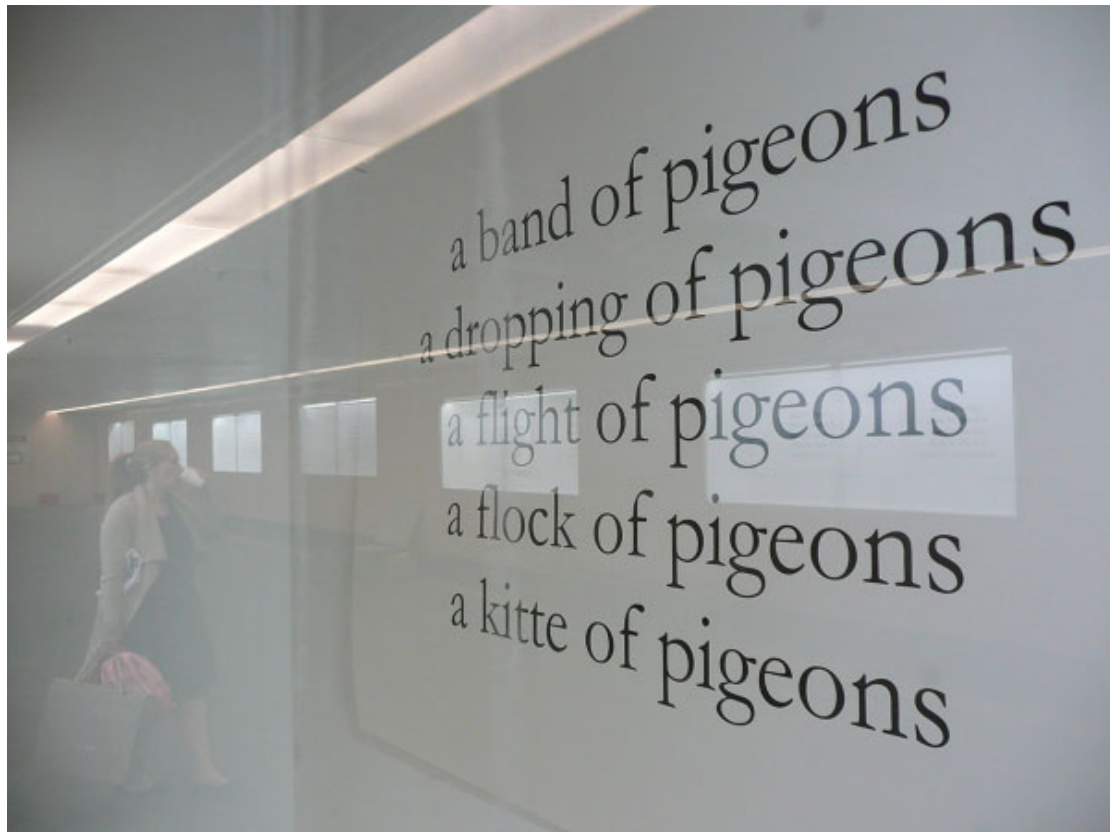


Fig 69 Catherine Clover *A Filth of Starlings* (detail)
Platform Public Contemporary Art Spaces, Melbourne (2012)

My intention was that passers-by could read these works without slowing their pace as they passed through the internal space that connected the underground with the world outside. The glass cases, thirteen in all, embedded in the walls on either side of the subway, each contained two lists on A1 sheets of cartridge paper in a landscape layout. The repetition and rhythm of these easily legible lists, grouped alphabetically, not only appeal to our early childhood memories of listening to stories but also to the natural

¹ The Degraives Street subway links the city with Flinders Street Station in central Melbourne.

movement of walking, one foot following the other. Sound artist Brandon LaBelle identifies that

by interlocking private lives and public organisation (the mediating space of the sidewalk) delivers an acoustical thrust found in a soundscape that might be heard as a superimposition of all that comes flooding from *without* and all that surfaces from *within*. From street noise that washes over the sidewalk to shouts that break from windows, the sidewalk soundscape is a medley mixing together these two conditions. By extension, inside and outside feature also as fictitious or narrative zones whereby the emotional and psychological experiences of city life intersperse amidst the social and systematic operations of the metropolis (LaBelle 2010, p.124)

It's hard to read these collective nouns silently because of their rhythmic and repetitive qualities - a colony of seagulls, a flock of seagulls, a flotilla of seagulls. a pack of seagulls, a parliament of ravens, a rant of ravens, a storytelling of ravens, a tower of ravens, an unkindness of ravens. The rhythm of the lists is echoed, underlined, emphasised by the motion of the pedestrians, the passengers, the viewers walking through the subway. The sounds of the birds in the mind's ear may mix with the sounds of footsteps and encourage a blurring of Labelle's private (a rhythmic reading of the lists) with the public (the motion of footsteps). As pedestrians walk, the enclosed subway contains the sound waves and reflects them back, creating a rich and multilayered sonic experience. Sociologist Fran Tonkiss expands on Barthes' connection between language and the city by drawing on our vocal learning abilities

Walking the city, people invent their own urban idioms, a local language written in the streets and read as if out loud...walking, we compose spatial sentences that begin to make sense, come to master the intricate grammar of the streets; slowly, we learn to make the spaces of the city speak... (Tonkiss 2003, p.305)

A Filth of Starlings may have contributed to Tonkiss' grammar of the streets, to the audience's experience of the city, because

The act of walking is to the urban system what the speech act is to language or to the statements uttered. At the most elementary level, it has a triple 'enunciative' function: it is a process of *appropriation* of the topographical system on the part of the pedestrian (just as the speaker appropriates and takes on the language); it is a spatial acting-out of the place (just as the speech act is an acoustic acting-out of language); and it implies *relations* among differentiated positions, that is, among pragmatic 'contacts' in the form of movements (just as verbal enunciation tracts between interlocutors into action). It thus seems possible to give a preliminary definition of walking as a space of enunciation (de Certeau 1988, pp. 97-98).

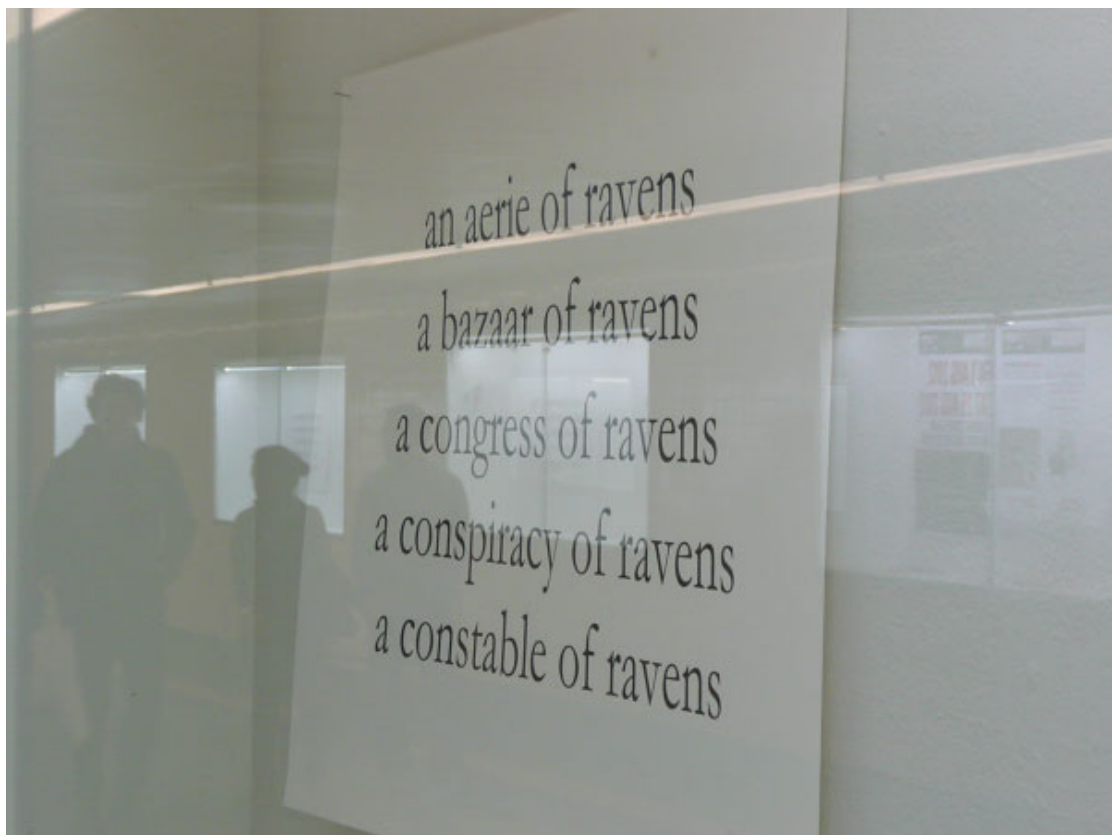


Fig 70 Catherine Clover *A Filth of Starlings* (detail)
Platform Public Contemporary Art Spaces, Melbourne (2012)

The aim of *A Filth of Starlings* was to engage with Michel de Certeau's proposition of urban enunciation by using the rhythm of the text to connect the movement of the body through space with the articulation of the words, like a kind of dance to a song through the sounds that surface within as much as the sounds heard externally. Arnold Berleant notes that "Cities encourage sensory engagement, and sensitivity to unplanned, gratuitous features and presences can be part of a comprehensive aesthetic presence" (Berleant, 2010, p.133). Most pedestrians who looked at the work read the words silently as they continued walking, but if they had company they tended to sound the words out to each other and often stopped to read more closely. Parents read the 'poems' out to their children who recognised the names of the birds and responded readily to the rhythm. Canadian sound artist Janet Cardiff has observed, with reference to her soundwalks, that there is an intrinsic sense of narrative associated with walking, and that walking and thinking go hand in hand (Cardiff 2012). In musical terminology 'andante' is the specific term used for the tempo of walking pace (73-77 beats per minute), which is within the rate of a healthy heartbeat (between 60 and 80 bpm). We tend to think, speak and walk the streets in a less than mechanical rhythm, stopping and starting at pedestrian crossings, walking faster alone than in company, running late or wandering, yet about two words per heartbeat per footfall has an appealing correlation that connects the biological with the cognitive, and provides a helpful substructure for the reach of the imaginative. The sounds of viewers' footsteps may mix with the sounds of these words in their minds as they pass. The voices of the birds may be remembered and misremembered, guessed, imagined, invented and improvised. In this way the viewers are encouraged to listen carefully even though no sonic component appears to exist. Like the billboard *billing and cooing* (see Chapter 2), the sonic component of the texts is implied rather than actual, and potentially comes

from the viewers themselves. The viewers are able to create the sonic aspect of the texts in their minds, because with

Listening we do not observe but generate, and we are always part of the soundscape we are listening to. We take part in the production of invisible maps that create a temporal geography that does not show and tell ... but generates a plurality of sonic timespace environments that include memory, anxiety, and sentiment. Sound invites (us) to walk and produce uncertain paths that build a contingent geography between the self and the world in which we live, without insisting on a central or determining authority, neither divine nor scientific. Thus, we remain embodied in the obscurity of what we cannot see rather than positioned on a certain path (Voegelin 2014, p.25).

Voegelin's possible geographies manifested through sound provide an irresistible concept for the navigation of the urban where the "urban environment offers probably the fullest range of aesthetic value, from the sublime to the sordid" (Berleant 2010, p.133). This range of urban experience that Berleant identifies draws a correlation with Voegelin's "contingent geography" where, if we accept that we are a part of the environment – and not outside it or separate from it - we can begin to take responsibility for our experience within that environment. *A Filth of Starlings* engages directly with the viewers' movement through the city: the works can be appreciated and read without stopping. Berleant asserts that "In the final analysis there is no incompatibility between the aesthetic and the ecological" (Berleant 2010, p.133). This research project, then, with its focus on the common noisy birds of the city, draws on this link between the aesthetic and the ecological that Berleant identifies.



Fig 71, 72, 73, 74, 75 Catherine Clover *A Filth of Starlings*
 Platform Public Contemporary Art Spaces, Melbourne (2012)

A Storytelling of Ravens (2012)

During 2012 I co-curated a group exhibition with Canadian/Australian artist Jen Rae at Project Space, RMIT University, entitled *Us & Them Ummelten*². The exhibition was a response to Estonian ethologist Jacob von Uexküll's (1864-1944) theory of *Ummelten* where “*Ummelten* conveyed the idea of the vast range of creatures occupying worlds whose meaning could be understood from their specific point of perspective. Within myriad *umwelten* then, diverse creatures experience their *umwelt* differently” (von Uexküll cited in Williams 2012). While we may be living in the same space as numerous other species, each species perceives that space in relation to their own needs.

My contribution to this exhibition, *A Storytelling of Ravens*, builds on my earlier attempt to connect the external street (the world of the birds) with an internal space (the human world) initiated in *Pigeon Post* in Chapter 2. The German word *umwelt* means, literally, environment or surroundings. Von Uexküll's concept of *umwelten* describes the perceptual worlds that each animal, including the human animal, inhabits in any given environment. While different species inhabit the same physical space, each species understands that environment with reference to their own needs and requirements. According to Giorgio Agamben in *The Open: Man and Animal* first published in 2002, von Uexküll's “investigations... express the unreserved abandonment of every anthropocentric perspective in the life sciences and the radical dehumanisation of the image of nature” (Agamben

² The exhibiting artists were Steve Baker, Debbie Symons, Yifang Lu, Fleur Summers, Jasmine Targett, Rebecca Mayo, Jen Rae and myself. Associate Professor Linda Williams wrote the catalogue essay.

A Storytelling of Ravens is a site specific response that looks at how our human umwelt, or perceptual world, exists alongside the umwelt of a group of ravens that live along Cardigan Street, Carlton in Melbourne where the gallery is situated. The installation engages a potential blurring of the perceptual worlds of human and bird where “not just at the borders of perception but even in daily life the boundaries of things may be ambiguous...where are the edges of a rippling brook?” (Berleant 2010, pp.74-75). By existing side by side on a regular daily basis and sharing the same physical environment, the installation works on the assumption that borders, edges and boundaries are semi-permeable and always in a state of flux, so a seepage between human and bird worlds is highly likely to be taking place, or, at least, has the potential to take place; and that this seepage or convergence has the potential to manifest through a shared vocality and possibly language. Ecocritic Christopher Manes observes that in animistic cultures “human language takes its place alongside, and in communication with, `the language of birds, the wind, earthworms, wolves, and waterfalls – a world of autonomous speakers whose interests ... one ignores at one’s peril” (Christopher Manes cited in Rigby 2002, p.165). Kate Rigby extends this point by asserting that “our capacity to speak, write and create culture (is) predicated upon the vastly more ancient and complex signifying systems of non-human nature” (Rigby 2002, p.165). Perhaps remnants of this knowledge sit deeply within all of us, and if a set of circumstances are put in place our ancient connection to nature can be triggered, even an ecologically disturbed nature (Wolch 1998, p.130) deeply bound up with the contemporary urban world.

is an empty space ...' (Agamben 1993, p.9-10). Yet perhaps *A Storytelling of Ravens* imaginatively and tentatively articulates what Agamben identifies as an empty space, a moat, between voice and language by playfully finding common ground between English phonetic words and the sounds of the ravens' voices. The contradiction of this is that while I transcribe the birds' voices using non-semantic phonetic 'meaningless' words, the process of transcribing involves an interpretation of the sounds as semantic language, as meaning, albeit language that we are unable to understand.

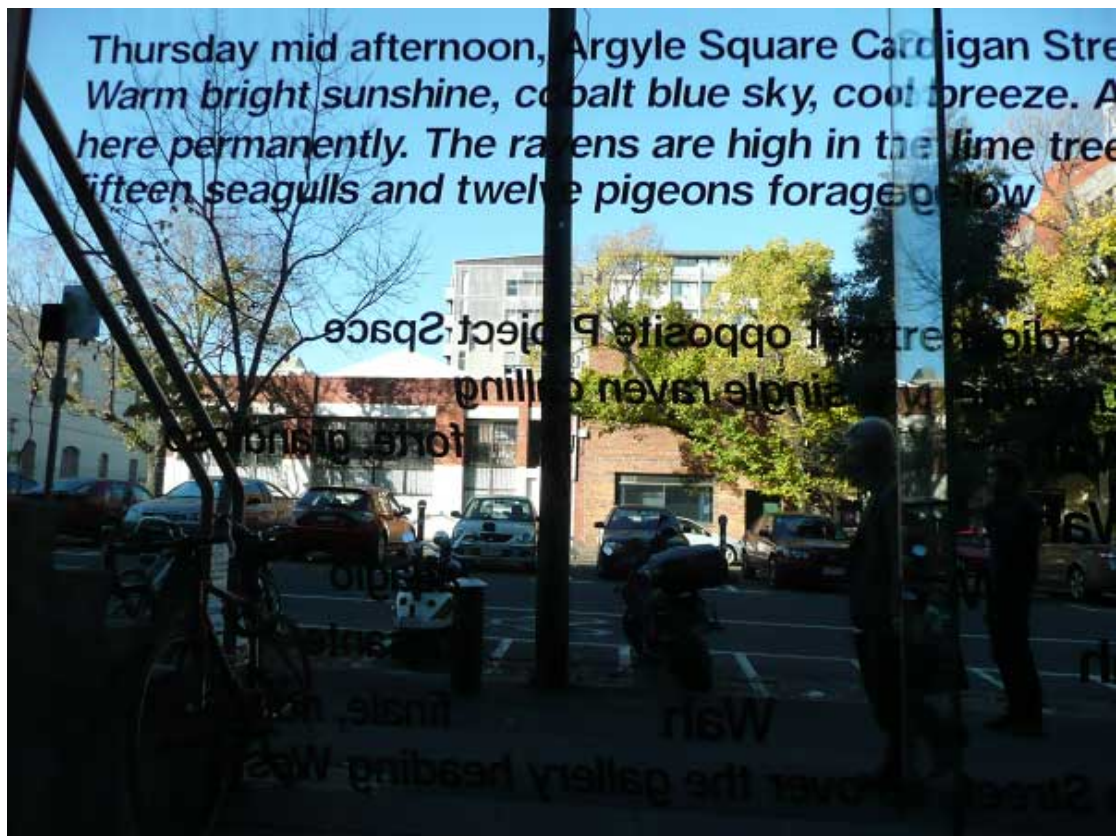


Fig 78 Catherine Clover *A Storytelling of Ravens* as part of the group show *Us and Them: Umwelten*, Project Space RMIT University, Melbourne (2012)

The exchanges were realised as vinyl lettering on the large floor-to-ceiling window of the gallery, which looked out onto Cardigan Street. The lettering was placed so that some sections were legible inside and some were legible outside. You did not need to enter the gallery to engage with the

work, and the ravens are considered as much a part of a potentially reading, voicing audience as people. “Language goes two ways,” ecologist Gary Snyder tells us (Gary Snyder cited in Rigby 2002, p.165). Kate Rigby expands “The particular languages that we use to communicate in speech and writing themselves bear the trace of the natural environments in which they evolved” (Rigby 2002, p.165). Language is shaped by environment and “Many uses of language ... manifest a two-way movement between world and word” (Rigby 2002, p.166). With these linguistic exchanges in mind, a cross-species reading may have as much potential as a cross-species voicing, based on and nurtured by the sharing of the urban context. The text that was reversed on the gallery window and semantically unreadable offered a way of considering the formal, visual properties of the lettering.



Fig 79 Catherine Clover *A Storytelling of Ravens* as part of the group show *Us and Them: Umwelten*, Project Space RMIT University, Melbourne (2012)

During the installation of the lettering, which took place outside on the street, the ravens were present on the pavement, in the elm trees, foraging and calling to each other. Larrikin students could not resist calling out the ‘raven words’ to each other as they passed by, producing some surprisingly convincing mimicry at times. A field recording of the ravens’ voices interspersed with performers mimicking their calls was set up in the gallery using a transducer. This device used the glass window as the speaker so the sounds were heard both inside the gallery and outside on the street. As with the lettering, it was not necessary to enter the gallery to hear the audio. The transducer translated the audio into a nondirectional sonic experience and at times it was hard to identify where the sounds were coming from. The physical sound quality was diminished to a flat but carrying and penetrating sound, and this reduction added a quality to the perceptual experience that conjured a sense of distance, both spatially and temporally. The audio looped day and night. Experienced bird watcher Le Robbins affirms that mimicking birds in order to draw them closer is no longer acceptable practice in bird watching communities (Le Robbins, email dated 6 March 2011). Yet these recordings and mimicry were not intended to deceive the birds but rather to try and find some common ground between us, a point of communication where our umwelten may overlap.



Audio III Catherine Clover *A Storytelling of Ravens* as part of the group show *Us and Them: Umwelten*, Project Space RMIT University, Melbourne (2012)
Excerpt duration 1’ 16”
(URL backup <http://ciclover.com/exegesis%20audio03.html>)



Fig 80 Catherine Clover *A Storytelling of Ravens* as part of the group show *Us and Them: Umwelten*, Project Space RMIT University, Melbourne (2012)

In sound recordings, urban birds often have their voices drowned out by constant background urban sound. The birds' voices are always part of a complex urban soundscape that is difficult to define because it comprises so many sources of sound. Salomé Voegelin writes that the definition of noise is such that it “does not have to be loud, but it has to be exclusive: excluding other sounds, creating in sound a bubble against sounds, destroying sonic signifiers and divorcing listening from sense material external to its noise” (Voegelin 2010, p.43). Some urban birds compensate for this exclusivity by singing less complex songs than other members of their species that live in quieter environments (Crawford 2010; Ben-Achour 2011). They also sing more loudly. Bird accents and dialects vary from place to place, just like human voices, and there is a growing distinction between urban and rural

birdsong. Perhaps urban and rural birds of the same species will be unable to communicate with each other in the future, ultimately becoming separate species, and as British musician/composer David Toop writes

What is typical in modern cities...is a homogenisation of sound. The volume of motor traffic blocks out a certain frequency range and prevents anything close to silence...Add the sound of aircraft passing overhead, loud music, police, fire and ambulance sirens, and a proliferation of machines for construction and destruction, and the more personal or unusual sounds are drowned (Toop 2007, p.61)

Little ravens have a vocal pitch that competes with the frequency range that Toop describes. It's very common to witness single individuals calling from streetlights at busy intersections in central Melbourne during the rush hour. Pedestrians, cars, trucks, buses and trams fill these intersections and the ambient soundscape is loud and pervasive. Yet a single raven's calls can clearly penetrate this sonic blanket, the bird seemingly undisturbed by the commotion below, and possibly even stimulated by it. The birds continue these calls for periods of up to 20 to 30 minutes.



Fig 81 Catherine Clover *A Storytelling of Ravens* as part of the group show *Us and Them: Umwelten*, Project Space RMIT University, Melbourne (2012)

Composer and acoustic ecologist Barry Truax promotes careful listening of the urban environment, and advocates listening to it rather than shutting it out with “surrogate aural environments” such as ipods (Truax 2012). He suggests observing how a sound functions rather than judging it. He asks us to consider whether a sound binds a community together or alienates it, because this is not always obvious. Fran Tonkiss extends this idea.

Not listening in the city makes spaces smaller, tamer, more predictable. The pretence that you do not hear – a common conspiracy of silence - in this way is a response, passing as a lack of response, to the modern city as a place of strangers (Tonkiss 2003, p.305).

Because we are willing to shut out many sounds of the city we tend to miss out on those less obvious sounds that make the city an intriguing and

stimulating place to live. Identifying cities as places of ecological disturbance rather than places of ecological sacrifice (Wolch 1998, p.130) is a constructive approach with which this project is aligned. Considering these noisy urban birds in this way offers both them and us an understanding that is connected to site; a point of contact, and ultimately a possibility for exchange, through our mutual inhabitation of the urban environment.



Fig 82 Catherine Clover *A Storytelling of Ravens* as part of the group show *Us and Them: Umwelten*, Project Space RMIT University, Melbourne (2012)

The Auspices (2012)

Both *A Filth of Starlings* and *A Storytelling of Ravens* could be engaged with in the public domain, in the subway or city street. Viewers – both human and animal – did not need to slow their walking pace in order to interact with the works, even at a minimal level. Engaging the mobility of the audience was a significant consideration in both installations and I explored it further with the next work *The Auspices*. As part of the Moreland City Council Public Artshow in 2012, this installation was located in a disused customer service booth on the city bound platform of Anstey Station in Brunswick, a northern suburb of Melbourne. In this setting, the potential audience were passengers catching trains to central Melbourne. The booth is located at the entry point to the platform, where shelter from the weather and benches are provided, and passengers are in a kind of limbo as they wait for their trains.



Fig 83 Catherine Clover *The Auspices*
Moreland City Council Public Art Show, Melbourne (2012)

The installation was placed inside the customer service booth, but the only access point for viewers was through the small booth window. Through the window the viewer could see a hotch potch world packed with items concerning our relationship with birds: bird field guides, bird identification leg rings, birds' nests, binoculars, bird whistles (used in hunting), kitsch domestic ornaments, bird shaped badges. The sonic component consisted of field recordings of ravens and seagulls. As with the field guides and the bird leg identification rings, I had collected these objects associated with both domesticated and wild birds throughout the research project. Ambiently lit, the space becomes a curiosity that is small, busy and cosy, even homely. Like a private space visible in a public setting, it suggests a kind of voyeurism by those who peer in, while at the same time providing a glimpse onto our relationship with the external natural world.



Fig 84 Catherine Clover *The Auspices*
Moreland City Council Public Art Show, Melbourne (2012)

Intrigued by how the objects related to each other, I constructed the installation so that it might draw correlations with seventeenth century cabinets of curiosity or wunderkammer³. Like the original wunderkammer, one thing leads to another in a continuity linked by inquisitiveness and there is no other link between the objects than the curiosity of the collector. This emphasis on curiosity draws connections with research in general, and with this research project in particular.

³ Cabinets of curiosity or Wunderkammer were eclectic collections made by aristocratic travellers during the 17th century. Without boundary or classification, the collections were built, literally, on each individual's whim, and included a broad sweep of cultural artefacts, artistic production, scientific experiments, examples of natural history and so on. Many of these collections subsequently became the first museums, for example the British Museum in London and the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford.



Fig 85 Catherine Clover *The Auspices*
 Moreland City Council Public Art Show, Melbourne (2012)

Exhibiting these objects in an urban train station again engaged Simon Morris' concept of re-locating and re-framing pre-existing material (see Chapter 1), but it was the audio that interrogated this concept most directly. I included field recordings of seagulls and ravens that were regularly heard in the vicinity of the railway station. As a counterpoint to re-contextualising sound where the observer hears sounds out of place, this installation explores the potential of re-playing a field recording in its place of origin. In an email exchange with members of the online group Phonography⁴, Marcus Leadley comments that “the experience of hearing location recording playback while still in the same location (encourages) an awareness of coincidence, synchronicity, (and) promote(s) uncanny sensations and incidents of disorientation” (Leadley 2013, 24 January). This

⁴ An online group dedicated to the discussion of phonography - sound hunting or the art of field recording. Phonography has its origins in acoustic ecology.

was certainly the case with *The Auspices*. In the same discussion, Peter Cusack observes “that the soundscape never ever repeats itself but ... some aspects of it are very consistent” (Cusack 2013, 25 January). Michael Huijsman mentions soundwalks as an example of this disorientation with reference to Ina Bolten’s *Sound-Track-City: the urban soundwalk*

Taking a soundwalk with headphones exposes us to two parallel worlds: the actual surroundings we’re walking through and the world evoked by the sound composition we hear through the headphones. We are constantly required to switch between different temporal/spatial experiences and must try to bridge the gap between these two worlds in one way or another
(Ina Bolten cited by Huijsman 2013, 26 January)

With *The Auspices* the subtle overlapping of recorded sound with live sound blurred the boundaries between the recording and the aural environment. The effect was disorientating, yet it was not the difference but, rather, the similarity of the recordings to the ambient sonic environment that was confusing. The sounds were easily familiar yet didn’t quite fit, the same but not quite, like an experience of déjà vu ‘already seen’, but in this instance it was déjà entendu ‘already heard’. The site of the railway platform, the very ordinariness of the place and its humdrum, everyday existence contributed to this sense of disorientation.



Audio IV Catherine Clover *The Auspices* Moreland City Council Public Art Show Melbourne (2012) Excerpt duration 32” (URL backup <http://ciclover.com/exegesis%20audio04.html>)

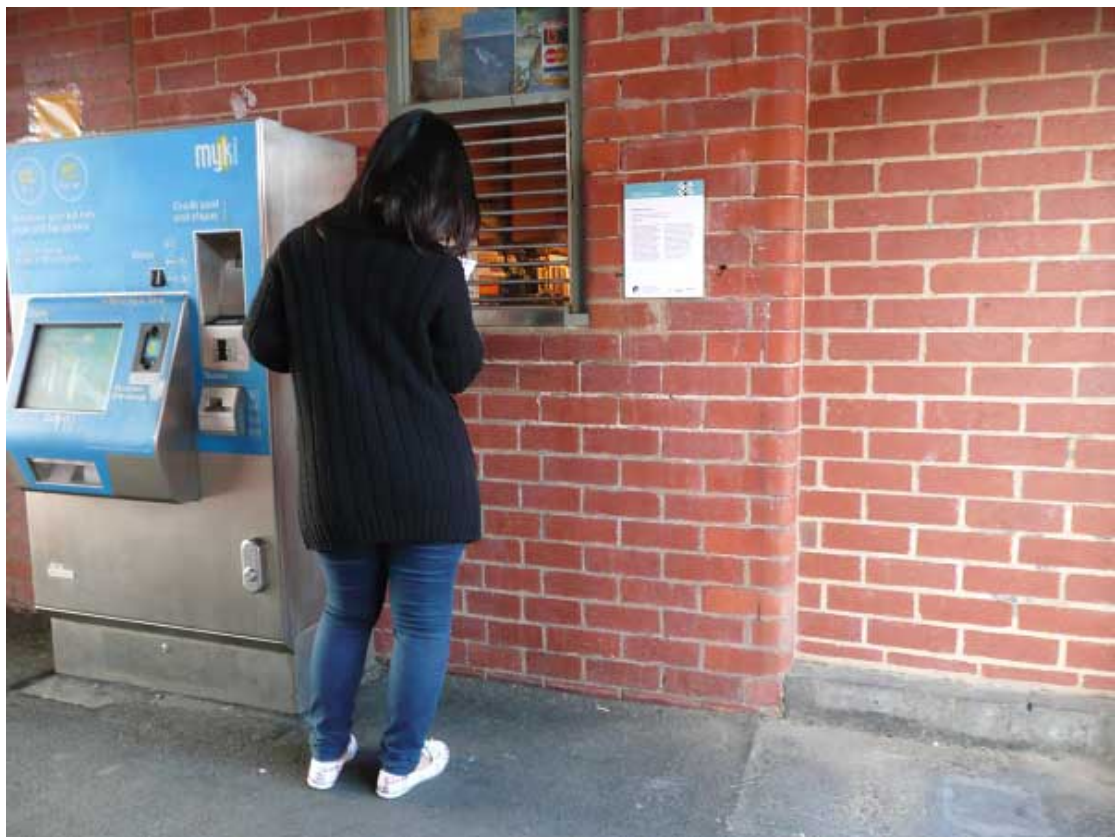


Fig 86, 87 Catherine Clover *The Auspices*
Moreland City Council Public Art Show, Melbourne (2012)

Such a disorientation can assist with the process of unlearning because it initiates an uncertainty, a not-knowing, that can make us pause and think, make us pay attention. Its subtle reach cannot be underestimated and draws some correlations with Bill Fontana's permanent installation *Pigeon Soundings* at the Diözesanmuseum in Cologne Germany. This installation evokes the sounds of thousands of pigeons that used to live in the ruin of the church of St Kolumba, now the site of the Diözesanmuseum. Fontana made 8 channel recordings of the movements and voices of these birds prior to the renovation of the site. He writes that

This ruin being taken over by pigeons may at first give the impression of decay and death. It is certainly nature's way of reclaiming what had gone out of human control. In this 50 year span of pigeons sounding in the ruin, many timeless generations of pigeons came and went. In this passage of nameless birds, the space was returned to a pure state of timelessness, where all of its soundings were supposed to be unheard. These pigeon soundings became the space dreaming to itself, returning to a primal state that lay in the realm of new beginnings (Fontana, n/d)

Fontana carefully evokes the layering of experience that listening to field recordings in their place of origin has. The listening experience becomes blurred and, while remaining a transcription of place, it gains imaginative perspectives that extend its reach into other possible worlds. While Fontana's installation used sounds from the recent past rather than the present, it evokes the currency of the site as well as its potential future manifestation. Salomé Voegelin's experience of this work traces the extent of Fontana's sonic insights.

As I walk through Cologne I take the concrete sound of Fontana's invisible pigeons with me and expand it here and there with a bark and a whistle, a chatter and a hum, the laughter and screaming of the city until I finally arrive at the Dome of Cologne where I merge those

unseen birds I might not have heard but imagined to hear, with those I hear and see aplenty here. Listening implodes the actual geography and distance between Kolumba and the Dome, a good few streets away. Through my affective geographical practice they come together, joining in a work that might not even have been there in the first place, to sound through flapping and cooing in the vicinity of the mutual provenance (Voegelin 2014, p.50)

As with Fontana's installation, the recordings in *The Auspices* did not have the intentionality of the sound walk nor the isolation that headphones (commonly used on sound walks) can impose, nor was any commitment required by the audience to pay attention or respond. The work operated inclusively in a public space that anyone could access from early morning until late at night. If passengers had time to listen long enough or if the journey was part of a daily routine, they may have been able to differentiate between the field recordings of the birds and their live calls.



Fig 88 Catherine Clover *The Auspices*
Moreland City Council Public Art Show, Melbourne (2012)

British anthropologist Tim Ingold identifies the role of movement (both conceptual and physical) in learning, and how, whether we are learning language or any other form of knowledge, it is the process we experience rather than any final destination that is where learning most fruitfully occurs. By walking through the subway, past the gallery window or boarding a train to the city people are, literally, following pathways, and the presence of the artworks that temporarily accompany these routes offer local urban stories which the viewers are encouraged to see, to read and to hear.

... stories do not, as a rule, come with their meanings already attached, nor do they mean the same for different people. What they mean is rather something that listeners have to discover for themselves, by placing them in the context of their own life histories. Indeed it may not be until long after a story has been told that its meaning is revealed, when you find yourself retracing the very same path that the story relates. Then, and only then, does the story offer guidance on how to proceed. Evidently, as Vološinov said of language, people do not acquire their knowledge ready-made, but rather *grow into it*, through a process of what might best be called 'guided rediscovery'. The process is rather like that of following trails through a landscape: each story will take you so far, until you come across another that will take you further. This trail-following is what I call *wayfaring* ... And my thesis, in a nutshell, is that it is through wayfaring, not transmission, that knowledge is carried on (Ingold 2011, p162)

Through an urban wayfaring, then, perhaps we can begin to see how our human umwelt overlaps with the urban birds' umwelt, and that, as people and songbirds are both lifelong vocal learners constantly adopting and adapting linguistic strategies, we can potentially *grow into* a new shared sonic knowledge that is mutual and mutually beneficial.



Fig 89 Catherine Clover *The Auspices*
Moreland City Council Public Art Show, Melbourne (2012)

Chapter 5

Listening and unlearning: shared spaces and shared language

If we are to reposition ourselves as allies rather than conquerors of nature in the production of a newly 'habitable earth', we need to supplement the sciences with a different type of knowledge, premised not on objectification, but on recognition: a carnal kind of knowing, whereby we come to understand the other, if never fully, on the basis of a relationality that is given in and through our shared physical existence. In this way, the discovery of other-than-human nature is necessarily conjoined with the recovery of our own naturalness. And that is where aesthetics comes in (Rigby 2011, p.141)

As I outlined in Chapter 1, I began the research project by using lists and categories to enable some perspective and distance in order to understand where my research about common noisy wild urban birds might head and how I might approach it. Both *Columba livia* and *coroocoo*, the two exhibitions discussed in Chapter 1, used these techniques. Subsequent research led to this penultimate stage, where I began to consider what the role of full immersion with the physicality of the birds, without mediation, could offer. All three installations discussed in this chapter – *Calls from Blethenal Green* (2013), *B is for Bird C is for City* (2014) and *Reading The Birds* (2014) - address what a proximity to the birds, a close range experience and direct contact, can offer. Kate Rigby, quoted above, carefully identifies what this proximity suggests through reciprocal exchange and the sharing of lives. Through propinquity, then, I began to recognise a complexity in our relationship with the birds that is overlooked because of how we structure the world in order to understand it through our endless need to list, to classify and to categorise. Structuring the world through listing and classifying simplifies, reduces complexity and results in loss.

In the long dusk of the modern and postmodern day, we begin to rediscover what the world of mythic premodernity knew long before: that not only humans, but all nature, ‘speaks’. The ‘linguistic turn’ and the ‘postmodern’ focus on signs (via Saussurean semiology) were not entirely wrong except that they stopped, anthropocentrically, at the human word and world alone (Wheeler 2011, p.279)

In this passage, Wendy Wheeler highlights what it is we have lost in our relationship with other animals. Our relationship with other animals was more complex in the past so perhaps if we re-acquainted ourselves with that lost knowledge today it could offer some guidance – a reminder perhaps – of how we embraced our animal others, and of the relevance, currency and validity of re-considering these older ways of relating to them. Our relationship with other animals today is limited (Wheeler 2011, p.279) by our anthropocentric approach to the living world and by our need to divide the world into categories and classifications, or what Michel Foucault calls “discontinuities” (Foucault 1970, p.50). Such discontinuities are extremely difficult to establish because the world is a “constantly mobile whole” (Foucault 1970, p.50). Nevertheless we attempt to classify, categorise and list because, as Georges Perec explains, it is

So very tempting to want to distribute the entire world in terms of a single code. A universal law would then regulate phenomena as a whole: two hemispheres, five continents, masculine and feminine, animal and vegetable, singular plural, right left, four seasons, five senses, six vowels, seven days, twelve months, twenty six letters. Unfortunately, this doesn’t work, has never even begun to work, will never work. Which won’t stop us continuing for a long time to come to categorise this animal or that according to whether it has an odd number of toes or hollow horns (Perec, 1997, p.190).

Perec highlights the absurdity of our attempts to reduce the complexity of the world to static lists and categories. A good example is the taxonomic means of interpreting the natural world that we still use today, based on

Swedish naturalist Carolus Linnaeus' 1735 *Systema Naturae*. Linnaeus wrote that "all of nature can be accommodated within a taxonomy" (Foucault 1970, p.126), but Foucault identifies that what actually takes place with Linnaeus' taxonomy is a reduction of the natural world to "the nomination of the visible" (Foucault 1970, p.132), which "excludes all uncertainty" (Foucault 1970, p.134). What is lost with this system is the

‘intermediate productions’, such as the polyp between the animal and the vegetable, the flying squirrel between the bird and the quadruped, the monkey between the quadruped and man. Consequently, our divisions into species and classes ‘are purely nominal’; they represent no more than ‘means relative to our needs and to the limitations of our knowledge’ (Foucault 1970, p.147).

Foucault expands on what these intermediary productions comprised of in an age prior to Ulisse Aldrovandi¹ where

to write the history of a plant or an animal was as much a matter of describing its elements or organs as of describing the resemblances that could be found in it, the virtues that it was thought to possess, the legends and stories with which it had been involved, its place in heraldry, the medicaments that were concocted from its substance, the foods it provided, what the ancients recorded of it, and what travellers might have said about it. The history of the living being was that being itself, within the whole semantic network that connected it to the world. The division, so evident to us, between what we see, what others have observed and handed down, and what others imagine or naively believe, the great tripartition, apparently so simple and so immediated, into *Observation*, *Document* and *Fable*, did not exist (Foucault 1970, p.129).

One approach that counters this tendency to reductionism is biosemiotics which Wendy Wheeler defines as "all life... characterised by communication, or semiosis. This insight ... places humans back in nature as part of a richly communicative global web teeming with meanings and purposes, and ...

¹ Bologna, 1522-1605. Aldrovandi is considered the founder of modern Natural History.

makes human culture ... evolutionary and natural” (Wheeler 2011, p.270). Jakob von Uexkull’s theory of Umwelt is an example of biosemiotics (see *A Storytelling of Ravens* Chapter 4) where all creatures live in their signifying environments or Umwelten equally and side by side. What a creature, including ourselves, recognises in its Umwelt are the signs for its survival (Wheeler 2011, p.272). Wheeler advocates a recognition of this complex communication that teems around us, and of how we as humans connect and fit into this world and are not separate from it “for it is through a complicated series of bodes that nature has arrived at the huge diversity of life as we know it. Tangled intricacy is the mother of nature’s invention” (Noble cited in Wheeler 2011, p.275). Steve Baker suggests that with biosemiotics “the classic dualism of human and animal is not so much erased as rendered uninteresting as a way of thinking about being in the world” (Baker 2000 p.17) and, reiterating Foucault’s observation, that “the animal is a reminder of the limits of human understanding and influence (and) of the value of working *at those limits*” (Baker 2000 p.16). This project operates at those limits where human understanding is necessarily sketchy and vague, unsure and unresolved – and therefore full of potential.

Calls from Blethenal Green (2013)

In 2012 I was invited by St John's Church, Bethnal Green, London E2 to spend five weeks developing a site specific response to the church and the local area, culminating in an onsite exhibition. I invited Swedish artist Johanna Hällsten to collaborate with me. Johanna and I had met at the symposium *The Animal Gaze Returned* organised by Rosemarie McGoldrick at the London Metropolitan University in 2011 and found we had a large amount in common in our research interests. Our aim for our collaboration at St John's was to explore the interactions between the different human and animal communities present in the Bethnal Green area. Location is pivotal in the understanding of human and animal behavior; the identification of place and home are key elements in this process, so the project responded site specifically to the church building and interacted directly with the church and wider Bethnal Green community. We investigated these relations through voice, language and song, translation and dialogue. With communication at the centre of our project, we developed a theme of call and response.

The church was designed by British architect Sir John Soane in 1826, and as part of our research we worked with the Soane Museum in Lincoln's Inn Fields.



Fig 90 Catherine Clover: St John's Church Bethnal Green London (2013)

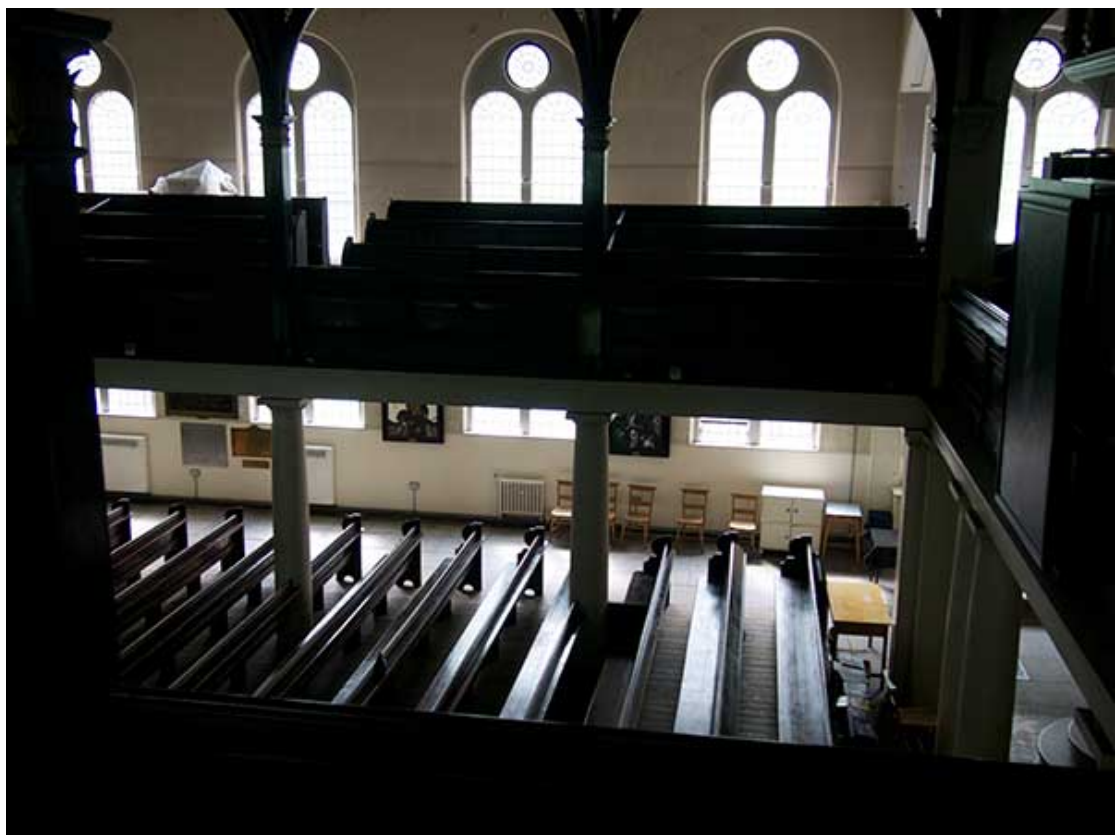


Fig 91 Catherine Clover: St John's Church Bethnal Green London (2013)

With research librarian Stephanie Coane's help we were able to access some of Soane's collection of books on natural history and in particular birds, in order to draw correlations between the church and the natural world. As the Linnaean system of classification (1735) was a relatively recent development during Soane's lifetime (1753-1837), we were hoping to find natural history books that referenced older, more speculative and imaginative approaches to the classification of the natural world, and wild birds in particular, classifications that might blur the boundaries that Foucault identifies, between what is seen, what is taught and what is imagined. Specifically, we were interested in classifications that “‘tested reason’ and attested to the marvellous” (Mark Dion cited in Baker 2000, p.12), classifications that expanded, rather than reduced, how we might consider the natural world.

With Mark Dion's assertion that the “objective of the best art and science is not to strip nature of wonder but to enhance it. Knowledge and poetry are not in conflict” (Mark Dion cited in Aloï 2012, p.141) in mind, we looked at Soane's copy of Richard Brookes' *Natural History of Birds* of 1763. We found classifications such as “Of rapacious Birds with Wings shorter than the Tail” (Brookes 1763, p.27) and “Of Birds with a Straiter Bill, that are not able to fly, on account of the great Bulkiness of their Bodies, and Shortness of their Wings” (Brookes 1763, p.77), so richly descriptive and speculative that the birds referred to were not easy to identify scientifically, yet were easy to imagine and wonder about. These classifications stimulated our imaginations in a way that no conventional field guide from today could, because contemporary field guides illustrate “what is *missing* ...” (Foucault 1970, p.129) where

The whole of animal semantics has disappeared, like a dead and useless limb. The words that had been interwoven in the very being of the

beast have been unravelled and removed: and the living being, in its anatomy, its form, its habits, its birth and death, appears as though stripped naked (Foucault 1970, p.129)

Brookes' approach to the natural world inspired us to imagine the possibilities rather than accepted facts, the potential rather than the known and understood. It liberated us from what Arnold Berleant calls "the multitude of cognitive habits and prejudices we unknowingly adopt ... so-called common sense" (Berleant 2010, p.20), common sense being "the sense of men asleep, which they express by snoring" (Henry David Thoreau cited in Berleant 2010, p.20). From the past, therefore, we found a more inclusive way of considering the natural world where we could potentially

(find) new perspectives from which to understand life (which) may radically change who we are, where we are going and who we are going there with, for global warming, environmental decay and mass extinction are all clear indices of the wrongness of our approaches (Aloi 2012, p.xxi)

This older attempt at comprehending the natural world seems to dilute the intensity of the "assumptions, values and associations of human society" (Mark Dion cited in Aloi 2012, p.141) that contemporary taxonomy imposes. Its inclusivity seems to deterritorialise (Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari cited in Aloi 2012, p.55) the stability of such vertically integrated hierarchies (Ingold 2011, p.168), and offer a space for re-thinking, a place to unlearn.

With voice uppermost in our minds we found in the classification 'Of Birds of the Pie kind' the observation

A Magpie is one of those birds that will learn to talk, and many of them will pronounce words very distinctly, insomuch that if you did not see them you would think a man was speaking (Brookes 1763, p.92)



Fig 92 Catherine Clover and Johanna Hällsten *Calls from Blethenal Green* (detail)
St John's Church Bethnal Green London (2013)

There were even references to Linnaeus' new taxonomy in "Of Birds of the Crow Kind" (Brookes 1763, p.86) where, despite the *Systema Naturae's* focus on "sight with an almost exclusive privilege, being the sense by which we perceive extent and establish proof" (Foucault 1970, p.133), even Linnaeus

observes that the Swedes look upon Ravens as sacred birds, and no one ever attempts to kill them. In the south part of Sweden they fly to a great height, when the sky is serene; at which time they have a very singular cry that may be heard a great way off (Brookes 1763, p.88)



Fig 93 Catherine Clover and Johanna Hällsten *Calls from Blethenal Green* (detail)
St John's Church Bethnal Green London (2013)

One of the ways that we engaged with the bird and human communities of St John's of Bethnal Green that is particularly relevant to this research project was through the idea of language acquisition. The multilayered descriptions of common birds in Soane's natural history books prompted us to seek out the wild birds that lived around the church. We spent time in the park next to the church² where we listened to the birds and fed the birds.

² St John's is built on public land known as Green and Poor's Land which incorporates the church, Museum Park and the Victoria and Albert Museum of Childhood.



Fig 94 Catherine Clover: Museum Park Bethnal Green
London (2013)

Through researching the local area we learnt that the buying and selling of birds, both legal and illegal, has a long history in Bethnal Green and on Sundays in the late 1880s Sclater Street, not far from the church, was full of bird trade – birdcages, bird fanciers, trappers and poachers. Birdcalls and bird patter (the voices of dealers) filled the air and titling our collaboration *Calls from Blethenal Green* uses the original name for Bethnal Green - Blethenal - which is associated with the word blether – to continuously chatter/speak.



Fig 95 Johanna Hällsten: The pigeons in Museum Park Bethnal Green London (2013)

As we listened and fed the birds, we also read to them from field guides, both contemporary guides as well as transcriptions we took from Richard Brookes' 1763 *Natural History of Birds*. We sounded out each entry that accorded with the species of birds that were around us. Just like us, many park visitors also fed the birds on a daily basis. Natalie Jeremijenko identifies that the sharing of experience is the best way we can improve our awareness of the environment, and that this shared experience should be cross-species (Ashlock 2006, p.186). She says that the sharing of food is a particularly useful way of doing this and her multidisciplinary activities in the Cross Species Adventure Club (Jeremijenko 2010) are a good example³. The sharing of food is an important event in most human cultures and is a “mutually beneficial interaction” (Ashlock 2006, p.186). During sunny summer afternoons, we read to the birds as we fed them, sharing both our

³ I attended one of Jeremijenko's series of Cross Species Adventure Clubs in Melbourne in December 2010 with Dutch philosopher René ten Bos.

knowledge of them as well as our lunches with them. Reading our interpretations of their worlds might offer the birds a chance, perhaps, to consider what they heard. Embracing a ready absurdity, this act of reading moves towards what Matthew Fuller identifies as the “setting up (of) actual, multi-scalar and imaginal relations with animals that involve a testing of shared and distinct capacities of perception” (Fuller 2007) During this act of feeding and reading, reading and feeding, our voices mixed with the birds’ voices. While we could not be certain, this experience suggested what seemed to be the beginning of inter-species communication, at least from our point of view.



Audio V Catherine Clover and Johanna Hällsten *Calls from Blethenal Green* St John’s Church Bethnal Green London (2013) Excerpt duration 1’ 30”
(URL backup <http://ciclover.com/exegesis%20audio05.html>)



Fig 96 Catherine Clover and Johanna Hällsten *Calls from Blethenal Green* (detail)
St John's Church Bethnal Green London (2013)

At the same time as interacting with the birds in the park, we also worked with a group of English language students who were studying in the community classes that took place in the crypt of the church. The words we gave the students to sound out were a list of the names of the local birds that we encountered in the park, such as magpie, jackdaw, rook, carrion crow, starling, bullfinch, feral pigeon, wood pigeon and so on.



Audio VI Catherine Clover and Johanna Hällsten *Calls from Blethenal Green* St John's Church Bethnal Green London (2013) Excerpt duration 38"
(URL backup <http://ciclover.com/exegesis%20audio06.html>)



Fig 97 Catherine Clover: Johanna practising the list of birds
St John's Church Bethnal Green London (2013)

In this way we set up a kind of asynchronous call and response between the groups of birds – who may have been listening to our descriptions of them - and the groups of people – who were practising and learning the English words for these birds. Johanna and myself acted as the conduits between the listening and the voicing, the birds and the people, the internal and the external.



Fig 98 Catherine Clover and Johanna Hällsten *Calls from Blethenal Green* (detail)
St John's Church Bethnal Green London (2013)

British artist Andrew Dodds' artist's book, *I, Sparkie*, reminds us of the phenomenon of the speaking budgerigar Sparkie from 1950s Britain. Collating Sparkie's history and publishing it through Simon Morris' site *Information as Material* (based on the concept of the reworking of pre-existing material, see Chapter 1), Sparkie is re-documented and re-imagined for a contemporary readership. Realising her pet budgie's proficiency with mimicking her words, Mattie Williams wanted to see how much of the English language Sparkie could learn. British commentator John Mullarkey observes that during these teaching sessions a kind of "two-way anthropomorphism" (Mullarkey 2013 p.46) takes place that "is not only plausible, but a wholly feasible model of how other minds interrelate, be they human or non-human" (Mullarkey 2013 p.46-47). This suggests that

when Mattie teaches Sparkie, she becomes less human and more bird as much as Sparkie becomes more human and less bird.

There are senses, then (of hearing and seeing), where Sparkie is Mattie, but also where Mattie is Sparkie. When Sparkie speaks to himself in third person, ‘They call me pretty Sparkie/I’m just a little bird’ – it is, logically, Mattie’s language and thought, at least at first, that we hear. But their performance is a double-act in every sense – not in some averaging out that eradicate both of their identities, but in an expanded experience of an old woman and a ‘little bird’, where ‘I am Mattie’, or ‘I am Sparkie’ are not mere ‘projections’ but genuine discoveries of a wider definition of the human and the non-human (Mullarkey 2013 p.56).

As we engaged with the birds and the English language students through listening, voice and language, we gained insights into the nature of exchange across species. This experience may parallel the kind of expanded experience that Mullarkey identifies between Sparkie and Mattie, a kind of social learning situation.

Darwin called this type of learning ‘imitation’, but researchers today prefer the term *copying*. True imitation, as defined by cognitive scientists, requires the observer to repeat precisely the action that the demonstrator has performed – something that most animals rarely do... Aside from humans, only dolphins, elephants, bats, parrots, seal and crows can do this type of imitating (Morell 2013, p.57).

In the spirit of this research project we were more interested in a social *un*learning situation, where Johanna and I approached the birds with as few assumptions as possible. We were not expecting the birds to imitate us, but in the English class the students certainly did, noting and following our enunciation of the birds’ names carefully. In the park, some birds were more participatory than others, as were the English language students. The pigeons were particularly curious and willing to spend time with and around

us, listening perhaps, foraging and calling to each other. In the English language class, some students had louder voices and a greater command of English than others.

Anthropomorphism is “the unwarranted attribution of a supposedly uniquely human trait to non-human animals” (Taylor 2011, p.5), yet even Darwin wrote subjectively about the animals he studied in *On the Origin of Species*, published 1859. This “reflects his understanding of evolutionary continuity, which includes behavioural and mental continuity between humans and animals” (Eileen Crist cited in Taylor 2012, p.5). Darwin understood that there are no gaps between species, that Foucault’s “intermediate productions” (Foucault 1970, p.147) are key to our understanding of how living things are meshed together, not separated by boundaries. Hollis Taylor draws a correlation between anthropomorphism and anecdote, or fable (Foucault, 1970, p.129), and how much we learn about an animal through the anecdotal non-scientific observations of ordinary people. These observations often anthropomorphise animals, and Natalie Jeremijenko values the role of anthropomorphism as positive (Berger 2006). She says we can only understand the world through our own experience, our subjective relationship with the world. A claim to objectivity renders any experience null and void. “I don’t think there’s a scientist anywhere in the world, in any discipline, that has the kind of power to make as much of a difference as an interested, engaged, diverse community” (Natalie Jeremijenko cited in Berger 2006). The experiences Johanna and I had with the birds and the English language students enabled us to draw correlations between the voices of birds and people, between listening and the learning of language, between voice and reading aloud.

Drawing on Mullarkey's idea of two-way anthropomorphism, when Johanna and I read to the birds we also included some attempts at the imitation of their voices, as a kind of gesture at attempting their language while we spoke to them in ours. Our attempts were not very accomplished or convincing and the birds did not seem to respond any differently than when we read other words from the field guides, yet imitating bird calls has a long history. In Italy the Festival of Osei has been running since 1274 and is one of the oldest bird shows in Europe, boasting a popular songbird imitator section (Bevis 2010, p.126), although it is not documented whether the birds respond to the imitators. Perhaps the person who most adroitly mirrors Sparkie's adept language skills is British ornithologist and accomplished bird imitator Percy Edwards. Imitating birds – and other animals – made Edwards, like Sparkie, the darling of the British public through his regular appearances on radio, and later TV, throughout the mid twentieth century (Bevis 2010, p.126; Gifford 1996). Again, whether the birds responded to Edwards' imitation or not is not documented. However, people also make bird-like sounds for reasons based on communication needs between people. Artists Angelica Mesiti and Alessandro Bosetti have both been drawn to the whistling languages of Turkey, Greece and the Canary Islands. These languages evolved in mountainous regions where the human voice does not carry far. Mesiti's documentary *The Calling* (see URL <http://www.acmi.net.au/exhibitions/past-exhibitions/2014/angelica-mesiti-the-calling/>) and Bosetti's whistled text composition *The Whistling Republic* (see URL <http://www.melgun.net/pieces/the-whistling-republic/>) drew my attention to the vocal potential of human language over the linguistic, and both draw insightful parallels between the sounds that birds make and the vocality of humans (Bosetti 2014, 27 September). If we cannot identify what sound humans make (how the human voice sounds without language) perhaps whistling is one answer. In *Infancy and History: On the destruction of experience*, first published in 1978, Giorgio Agamben asks

Is there a human voice, a voice that is the voice of man as the chirp is the voice of the cricket or the bray is the voice of the donkey? And, if it exists, is this voice language? What is the relationship between voice and language, between *phōnē* and *logos*? And if such a thing as a human voice does not exist, in what sense can man still be defined as the living being which has language? (Agamben 1993, pp.3-4)

Certainly some inhabitants of the Turkish village of Kuşköy (meaning “bird village”) consider the whistling language their “mother tongue” (Christie-Miller, A. 2012) and it is actually known as "kuş dili" or “bird language” (Christie-Miller, A. 2012). Australian art critic Robert Nelson observes

As an expressive graft of an established language ... the whistling eerily reveals how close we are to other creatures who communicate by moans or barks or yaps or shrill trilling registers. It redoubles your wonder about what they share with us, what fabulous intelligence they can convey, as when they navigate thousands of kilometres to identify their point of departure with perfect accuracy (Nelson 2014).



Fig 99 Johanna Hällsten: *Myself reading to the pigeons in Museum Park Bethnal Green London* (2013)

Again, what is not documented is whether the birds respond to these imitative calls or not, nor whether this imitation is convincing enough for birds to acknowledge it. While the influence of the birds' voices is clear in these forms of exchange, the function of the calls does not appear to be cross-species but rather is an adoption of sounds for use exclusively within human communication only. Johanna and I, albeit with our poor attempts at imitation, were approaching the birds directly and inclusively, in the hope that some aspects of our actions might seep into their umwelten, into their experience of the park, and communicate our intent positively to the birds.

B is for Bird C is for City (2013)

B is for Bird C is for City (2013) took place in the Norla Dome at the Mission to Seafarers, Melbourne as part of *Liquid Architecture: Sonic City* curated by Philip Samartzis and Kristen Sharp. The performance was a location specific response, both to the large gull colony that lived outside but in close proximity to the site, the building itself – the Dome – as well as the broader role of the Mission itself. Developing ideas from *Calls from Blethenal Green* the performance explored what the possible points of intersection might be between the internal/human and external/bird worlds of these institutions.



Fig 100 Catherine Clover: The Mission to Seafarers Melbourne (2013)

The Mission is an Anglican enterprise that has provided support for seafarers in Melbourne since 1919. While there are far fewer seafarers today than in the past and they dock for only 24-48 hours (compared to one to two weeks prior to containerization), 95% of Australia's goods are still transported by sea. The role of the Mission is therefore still highly relevant. The site is accessible to the public, but not many people are familiar with it. It is both a heritage site as well as a fully functioning resource for seafarers. The Mission was built in the Arts and Crafts Movement/Spanish Mission Revival architectural style (City of Melbourne 2013) of the early twentieth century. A humble and functional style with little colour or ornament, the thick walls are undecorated plaster – stucco – both inside and out. The Dome itself, a building physically separate from the rest of the Mission, was originally built as a gymnasium for the seafarers. The performance helped to bring attention to an extraordinary architectural and historical space in

central Melbourne, its ongoing role in the support of those who work at sea, as well as the Mission's financial plight in the face of the commercial development of Melbourne's Docklands.



Fig 101 Catherine Clover: Silver Gulls roosting close to the Mission to Seafarers Melbourne (2013)

The focus of the performance was the proximity of the gull colony outside the Mission. The building is located close to the Yarra River in the Docklands area of Melbourne. The gulls' presence creates a dynamic between their contemporary urban lives and our more common and conventional understanding of them as seabirds – literally, seagulls.

Many gulls have been able to adapt to humanised disrupted environments, exploiting our spaces as sites of increased food supply and novel nesting opportunities. Gulls are specialists at non-specialisation, and thus have been able to respond to our altering of their traditional breeding ground and drastically compromising their natural food sources with surprisingly flexible adaptations (Dion 2008, p.2)

In preparation for the performance I spent time in the presence of the large gull colony, listening to them and watching them, observing their lives over a period of weeks in the lead up to the performance. I made numerous field recordings of their voices both outside but also inside the Dome, where the gulls are so numerous and vocal that they are audible inside.



Fig 102 Catherine Clover: Silver Gull close to the Mission to Seafarers Melbourne (2013)

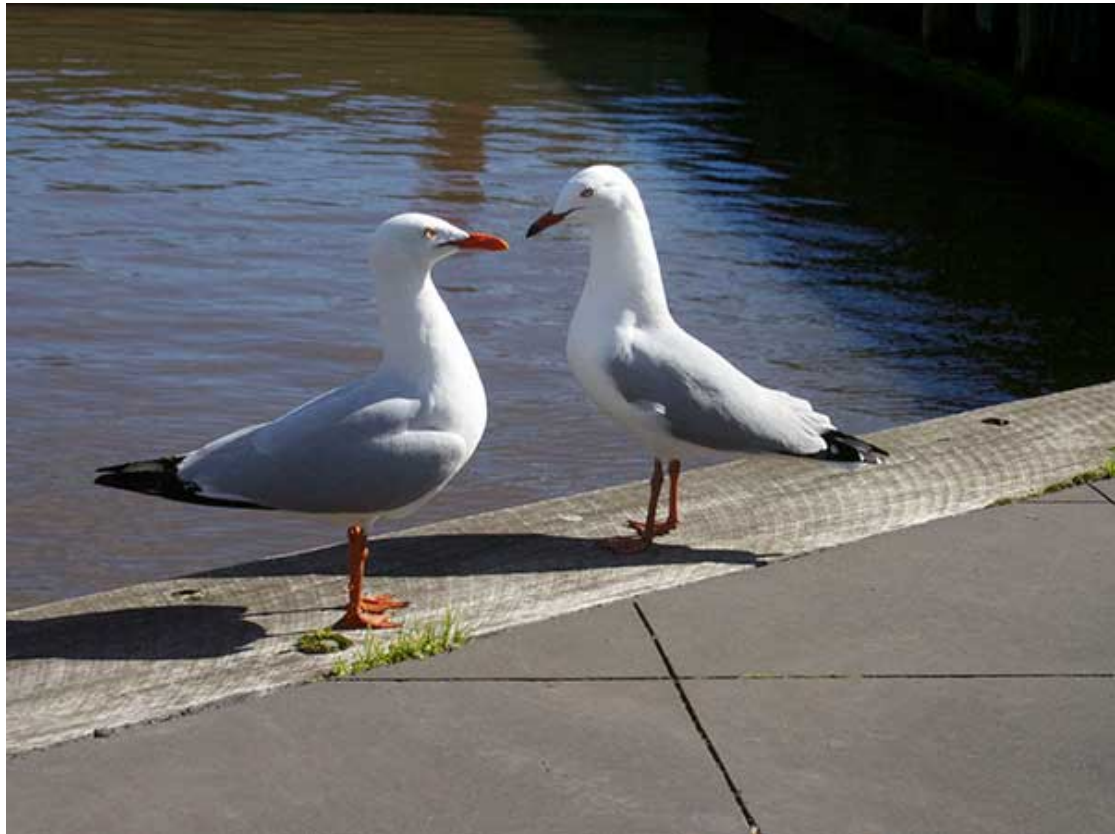


Fig 103 Catherine Clover: Silver Gulls close to the Mission to Seafarers Melbourne (2013)



Fig 104 Catherine Clover: Silver Gulls close to the Mission to Seafarers Melbourne (2013)

My aim with the field recordings in the performance was to echo, reiterate and re-imagine the live sound, again creating that experience of *déjà entendu*, already heard (see *The Auspices* in Chapter 4), or perhaps misheard, or as Voegelin writes “to hear the relationship between space, time and the subject, in the dynamic in which they unfold, refold and overtake that which seems to be already there” (Voegelin 2010, p.123) and where the sounds heard “invite us to listen to hear purposeless connections and playful intersections, where before we stared at functionally fixed architecture” (Voegelin 2010, p.147). The performance used the ordinary sounds of the pre-existing site, the sounds heard everyday – the gulls, the traffic, human voices and footsteps - and added a dynamic to what already existed through the transitory layerings of recorded sound. Added to this flux, the circular shape of the building with its domed ceiling created extraordinary acoustic effects, like whispering galleries in cathedrals. To engage with these acoustics, the field recordings were played in mono, through just one speaker, strategically placed so that the acoustics of the domed roof (rather than audio technology) caused the sound to spread throughout the space, generating an immersive and experiential effect.

These site-specific field recordings that captured the seagulls’ voices contrasted with the voices of three performers. Already familiar with my project, Kate Hunter, Vanessa Chapple and Penny Baron once again collaborated with me on this performance. They read from bird field guides and imitated the gulls’ voices, echoing some of the content in the field recordings, not unlike the process of call and response in *Calls from Blethenal Green*. The performers activated the space by moving through it, inhabiting it, calling to each other, reading to each other, responding to external noise

and audience reaction, and listening. Their movements highlighted the acoustics of the space.



Fig 105 Catherine Clover: rehearsal for *B is for Bird C is for City* with Kate Hunter, Vanessa Chapple and Penny Baron (l to r). The Norla Dome, Mission to Seafarers Melbourne (2013)



Fig 106 Catherine Clover: rehearsal for *B is for Bird C is for City* with Kate Hunter and Vanessa Chapple (l to r). The Norla Dome, Mission to Seafarers Melbourne (2013)



Fig 107 Catherine Clover: rehearsal for *B is for Bird C is for City* with Kate Hunter, Vanessa Chapple and Penny Baron (l to r). The Norla Dome, Mission to Seafarers Melbourne (2013)

Written transcriptions of the gulls' calls and songs were projected onto the lower part of the dome. The transcriptions were taken from the field recordings and again used the phonetic words that naturalists identify in field guides for silver gulls, such as "keow", "kaaar", "yah", "yow" and "whee". The words were projected onto the Dome walls using the analogue technology of an overhead projector. Images of Australian and American urban landscapes from the early and mid twentieth century were projected at ground level using a 35mm slide projector. The slides portrayed a rather bleak vision of the urban environment and no bird appeared in any of the images. The sounds of these technologies were distinct: the overhead projector had a subtle breathy hum, and the slide projector made a triple clacking sound each time a slide changed. The soft Naples yellow glow from the two machines lit parts of the space but also retained dimness and shadow. This was emphasised as the sun set. The performance was timed to begin just after sunset, when birds are very vocally active as they settle for the night. As the performance proceeded, the natural light dimmed and the projectors came into their own as did the muddy orange glow of the city lights seeping through the small circular window at the top of the Dome, where the seagulls often perch. As urban birds, gulls are less affected by the sun setting and continue actively calling well into the night using the abundant artificial light. Some birds are even reported to be more successful at breeding in this light rather than in a more natural setting (Reinberger 2013, p.77). The numbers of urban silver gulls certainly suggests this to be true. The gulls were aurally present during the length of the performance, and were even visible at times as they landed on the circular window.

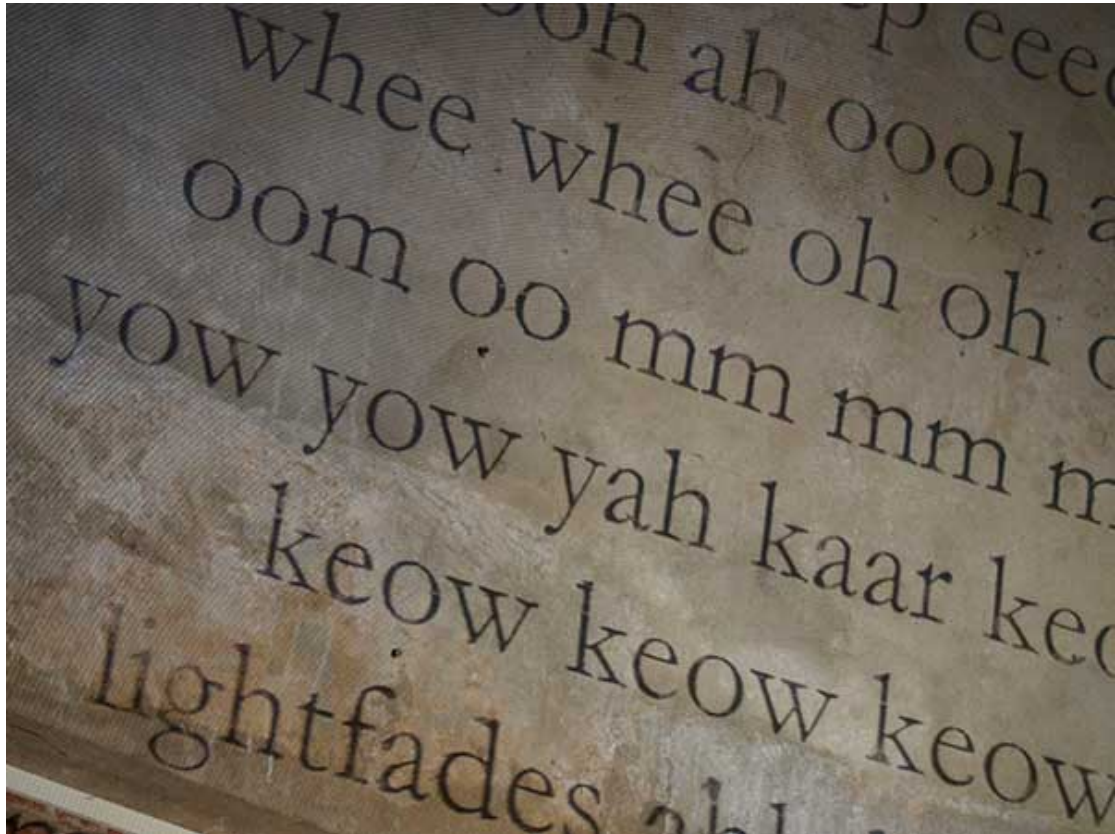


Fig 108 Catherine Clover *B is for Bird C is for City* (detail) The Norla Dome Mission to Seafarers Melbourne (2013)



Audio VII Catherine Clover: rehearsal for *B is for Bird C is for City* with Kate Hunter, Vanessa Chapple and Penny Baron Melbourne (2013) Excerpt duration 50”
(URL backup <http://ciclover.com/exegesis%20audio07.html>)



Fig 109 Catherine Clover *B is for Bird C is for City* (detail) The Norla Dome Mission to Seafarers Melbourne (2013)



Fig 110 Catherine Clover *B is for Bird C is for City* (detail) (photo credit Aksana Anastas) The Norla Dome Mission to Seafarers Melbourne (2013)



Fig 111 Catherine Clover *B is for Bird C is for City* (detail) with Penny Baron, Kate Hunter and Vanessa Chapple (l to r) (photo credit Aksana Anastas) The Norla Dome Mission to Seafarers Melbourne (2013)



Fig 112 Catherine Clover *B is for Bird C is for City* (detail) (photo credit Aksana Anastas)
The Norla Dome Mission to Seafarers Melbourne (2013)

Silence was a consideration during the performance because “In silence I do not hear myself alone, but hear myself in the social context of the soundscape” (Voegelin 2011). Something of a paradox, perhaps, that silence underlines our sociality, yet as we pay attention through being silent, silence connects us – not only to a site or a place, but also to each other, and insodoing to other beings around us, in this case the gulls. As a prerequisite for attentive listening, silence (as in personal silence, the silent self) is not a passive state but an active one. At one stage during the event the three performers stopped to listen at the hooded ventilation shafts. These shafts captured external sounds and directed them into the space, but they were only audible if the internal environment was quiet. The audience watched as the performers stopped for some minutes. Their stillness and silence prompted the audience to follow suit. The sound of the building’s movements became audible, as did external sound filtering in, which was a mixture of the gulls’ voices as well as the sound of muted traffic heading in and out of the city. This extended moment highlighted the environmental

thrust of the performance and the festival as a whole, that of the role of thoughtful listening when considering the urban world around us. Listening is only feasible when we are being silent. Listening is an important sense with which to perceive our surroundings, even in cities dominated by loud pervasive sounds and noises.



Fig 113 Aksana Anastas: Silver Gulls flying over The Norla Dome
Mission to Seafarers Melbourne (2013)

The wild birds' physical presence at this site provided the performance with a compelling layer, an added layer of complexity which meshed with the field recordings and the performers' voices. Not only was the live sound blending and mixing with the recorded sound, but the birds themselves were visible and visibly active. The birds had been present in the vicinity of other performances, but they had never been quite so immediately obvious, so clearly in attendance, as they were at this site. As the audience entered the Dome the gulls' presence was apparent, but mostly overlooked. The birds perched on top of the Dome, calling to each other, flying back and forth from their roosts to the Mission roof, settling here and there, watching and listening. The audience paid them little attention and this clearly demonstrated that

While human societies and gull societies live side by side, the coexistence is far from an equitable one. Very little that gulls do can change our behaviour or affect our existence, yet human actions dramatically impact on gull populations. Our patterns of recreation, development, waste disposal and particularly ocean harvesting have altered gull behaviour, often bringing them into closer contact with civilisation. This proximity has resulted in animosity. Some people frankly fear and despise the birds, viewing them as unsanitary pests akin to the brown rat (Dion 2008, p.52)

On leaving the building after the performance, however, audience members had quite a different reaction. Atuned to the gulls' lives via the performance, becoming aware of their existence and the sharing of the immediate environment, audience members were more sensitive to their presence all around the Mission. Mark Dion notes that

we are far from a complete understanding of gull society and any student of animal behaviour realises that the more we comprehend of the animal mind, the more we are humbled by how little we actually know (Dion 2008, p.3)

It does not take long to realise this when watching these wild birds, however briefly. Spending just five minutes observing the actions of the gulls makes us realise not only how little we know about them, as Dion asserts but, generally, how little we care.

I had informal post-performance discussion with the audience as well as comments/emails in the following days. As if noticing them for the first time, the audience began to understand the gulls as a distinct part of their urban lives, sharing the urban environment. As the audience headed home it was not only the gulls they noticed but all the city birds that they encountered, the birds that they share the city with (Susan Pyke 2013, 7 September). Rather than dominating the urban environment, or seeing it as built by humans for humans, the audience noticed the mix of creatures that share the city with us. Perhaps the performance operated as a communicative act, model, project, virtue and concept of communicability (Plumwood 2002, p.190) and prompted an encounter with “a potentially communicative other” (Plumwood 2002, p.190) rather than our more usual experience of our animal others as “a reflection of self and self’s needs, as a resource or a shadow” (Plumwood 2002, p.190). One visitor commented that the sound of a bird call outside her window the next morning extended and completed the performance experience for her (Annalea Beattie 2013, 6 September). The sound of the call, completely separate from the performance yet directly connected to it in Annalea’s mind, confirmed what the performance had suggested, had prompted, that of “the animal as a going on: not as a living thing of a certain kind but as the manifestation of a process of becoming, of continuous creation, or simply of *being alive*” (Deleuze and Guattari cited in Ingold 2011, p.193).

Reading *The Birds* (2014)

With nine other artists I was invited by Melbourne sound artist Camilla Hannan to participate in *Trainspotters INC*, a site specific response to locations of our choice along the Upfield Bike Path through the northern suburbs of Melbourne. The path also runs alongside the Upfield railway line. This was a live one-off event as part of the MoreArt Public Art Show, 2014.

As part of my collections of objects and books associated with birds, I had acquired a copy of *The Birds* by Daphne du Maurier, published in 1952, at a secondhand bookshop in Halifax, Canada, when I visited with the installation *coroocoo* in 2010. I decided to read this short story as my contribution to *Trainspotters INC*. This is the story on which Alfred Hitchcock based his movie thriller of the same name in 1963. The performance *Reading The Birds* took place on 31 October, Hallowe'en, an appropriate evening for a revenge of nature thriller to be heard. While dated in writing style and tone, the story powerfully retains its nightmarish quality especially as the environmental crisis that the birds' actions symbolize remains highly pertinent today.

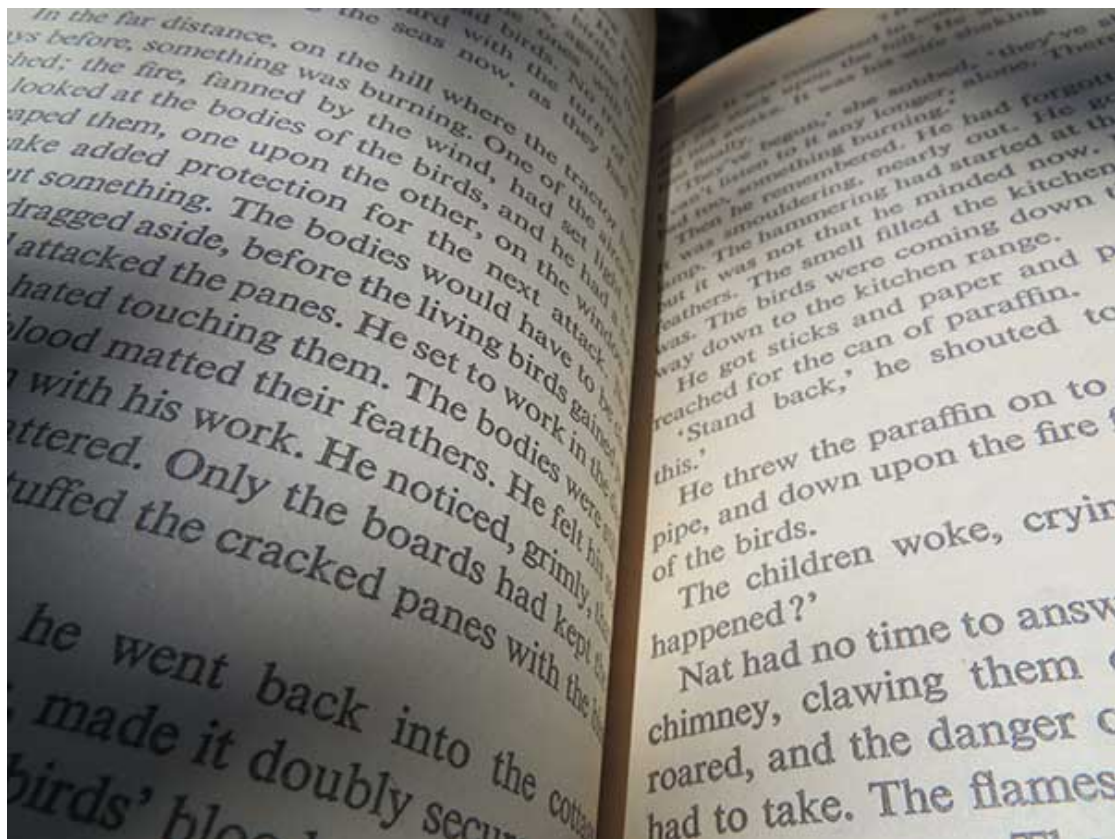


Fig 114 Catherine Clover: excerpt from *The Birds* by Daphne du Maurier (2014)

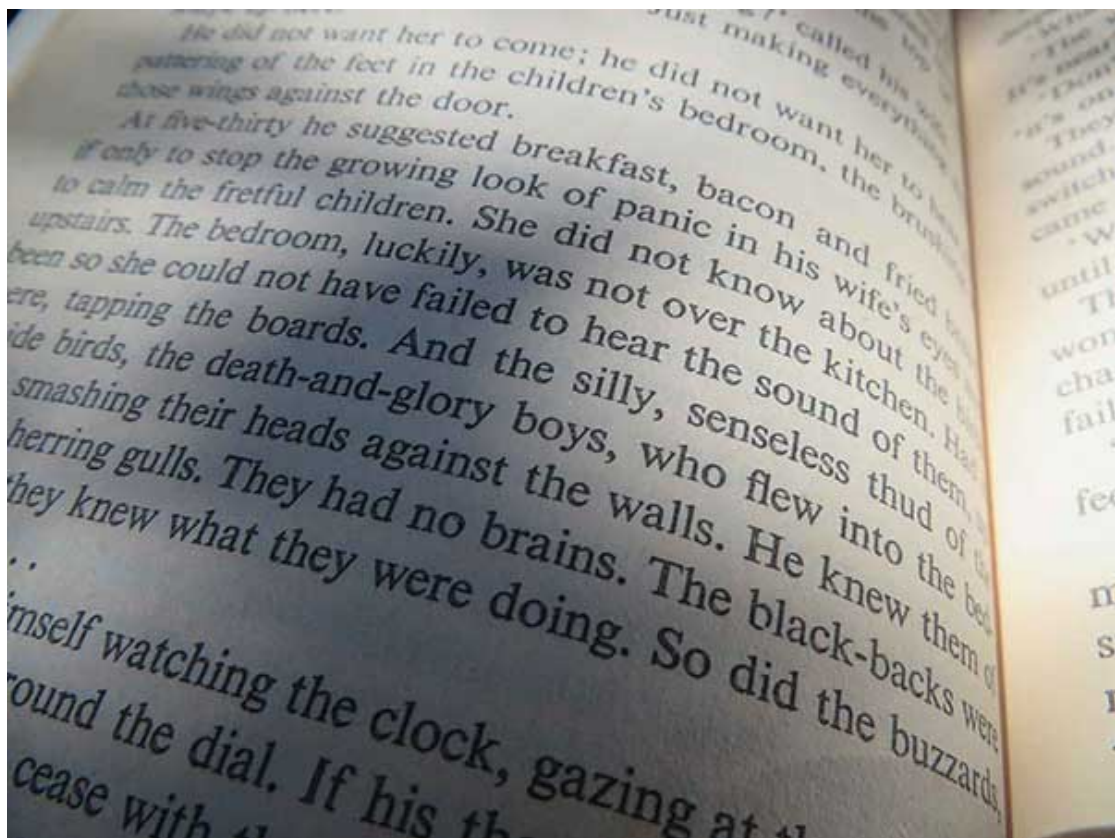


Fig 115 Catherine Clover: excerpt from *The Birds* by Daphne du Maurier (2014)

With the birds in mind, my aim was to include their voices in this performance. There are various trees in the northern suburbs of Melbourne that attract birds for the night, and particularly during spring they settle very noisily in their chosen roosts. Again, I planned to take the work to the birds, to their world, and to combine my world with theirs - vocally at least - and even if momentarily. One such tree is located where Dawson Street crosses the Upfield Bike Path in Brunswick. I chose this spot for the reading, and the time I selected was dusk, just after sunset, when the birds are noisiest. The birds are predominantly common mynas and starlings, but feral pigeons roost in nearby buildings and little ravens and seagulls scavenge along the railway line, contributing their voices to the polyphony. The ravens' presence, in particular, often disturbed the noisy settling process of the mynas and starlings.



Fig 116 Catherine Clover: Little Ravens along the Upfield Bike Path Brunswick Melbourne (2014)

The title of the project has a double meaning; it is, literally, reading the story aloud, of course, but it also refers to the role of the auspice for the ancient Romans. An auspice would “read” the birds’ actions and was “one who looks at birds” (Robertson 1999) in order to predict the future and to foretell events. The auspice’s readings played an important role for the timing and staging of key events in the Roman calendar. The suggestion that du Maurier’s story is, perhaps, a prediction of sorts is not out of the realm of possibility. The revenge of the birds on the human population and the descriptions and extent of the birds’ vicious attacks seem uncomfortably feasible if not highly viable.



Fig 117 Catherine Clover *Reading The Birds* (photo credit Annalea Beattie) Melbourne (2014)



Fig 118 Catherine Clover *Reading The Birds* (photo credit Annalea Beattie)
Melbourne (2014)



Fig 119 Catherine Clover *Reading The Birds* (photo credit Annalea Beattie)
Melbourne (2014)



Fig 120 Catherine Clover *Reading The Birds* (photo credit Annalea Beattie) Melbourne (2014)



Audio VIII Catherine Clover *Reading The Birds* (recording credit Martin Kay)
Melbourne (2014) Excerpt duration 1'46"
(URL backup <http://ciclover.com/exegesis%20audio08.html>)

The audience listened as I voiced the text and the birds settled for the night.

Alphabetic writing, like that of the Greeks, consists substantially in a muting of speech. Substituting the acoustic sphere with a visual map, the written sign translates sound and eliminates it. Reading aloud has, in this sense, the task of restitution (Cavarero 2005 p.82)

By reading the story close to the birds, by sharing the urban space with them, the task of restitution that Cavarero identifies can be applied to the voices of the birds as well as the voicing of the text. My voice is heard in the context of the birds' voices, as well as the loud passing trains, the cyclists and the pedestrians. Sometimes my voice is drowned out and the narrative is temporarily lost. As my voice carried the words up into the branches and the birds' voices rained down on myself and the audience, the performance re-enacted the shared potential of reading aloud and reading together, both bird and human, cross-species. The voicing of the text not only enables but encourages the audience to listen rather than to look. My enunciation of the words adds a subjective layer to their experience of the story in that specific location.

the act of speaking is relational: what it communicates first and foremost, beyond the specific content that the words communicate, is the acoustic, empirical, material relationality of singular voices (Cavarero 2005, p.14).

Heard through my voice, my voicing, I leave a trace on the auditory experience of each listener. A vocal trajectory is traced through the reading, but it is not only my voice, it is also the birds' voices, the subjects of the

story and of the performance. When I began the reading the birds were quiet. They were settling in the tree, but were not making much noise. As the reading proceeded they got louder and louder as more and more birds congregated and called to each other. In the middle of the story it was hard to hear my voice above theirs. Subsequently they quietened again, so that at the end of the reading they were silent. The time it took me to read the story – an hour and a half – echoed the trajectory and volume of the birds’ voices.

Reading is an act and I wish to speak of this and this act alone: of what constitutes it and what surrounds it; not of what it produces (the text, what we read), nor of what precedes it (writing and its choices, publishing and its choices, printing and its choices, distribution and its choices etc). In short, something like an economy of reading seen from an ergological (physiology, muscular effort) and socio-ecological perspective (its spatio-temporal setting) (Perec 1997, p.174).

The public setting for the reading placed an emphasis on what Perec identifies as a socio-ecological perspective, while the physical demand on my voice highlighted the ergological element that he ascribes to the act. Perec aligns reading to “a pigeon pecking at the ground in search of breadcrumbs” (Perec 1997, p.176) because

the eyes do not read the letters one after the other, nor the words one after the other, nor the lines one after the other, but proceed jerkily and by becoming fixed, exploring the whole reading field instantaneously with a stubborn redundancy (Perec 1997, p.176)

One of Simon Morris’ projects reproduces the book which these quotations are from – Georges Perec’s *The Species of Spaces and Other Pieces*, first published in 1974 – but the chapter on reading where the pigeons are mentioned is missing, replaced by photographs that Morris took of pigeons. The pigeons in the photos are pecking the actual pages of a copy of the book. Morris’ book is almost an exact copy of Perec’s, even down to front

cover photo, page numbering, typeset and colour. This project is clearly in keeping with Morris' interest in the recycling of pre-existing material. The title is *Pigeon Reader* and Morris' material application of the avian observation in Perce's meditation on reading prompted the idea of *Reading The Birds*, of reading *The Birds* to the birds, of reading with the birds and under the birds.

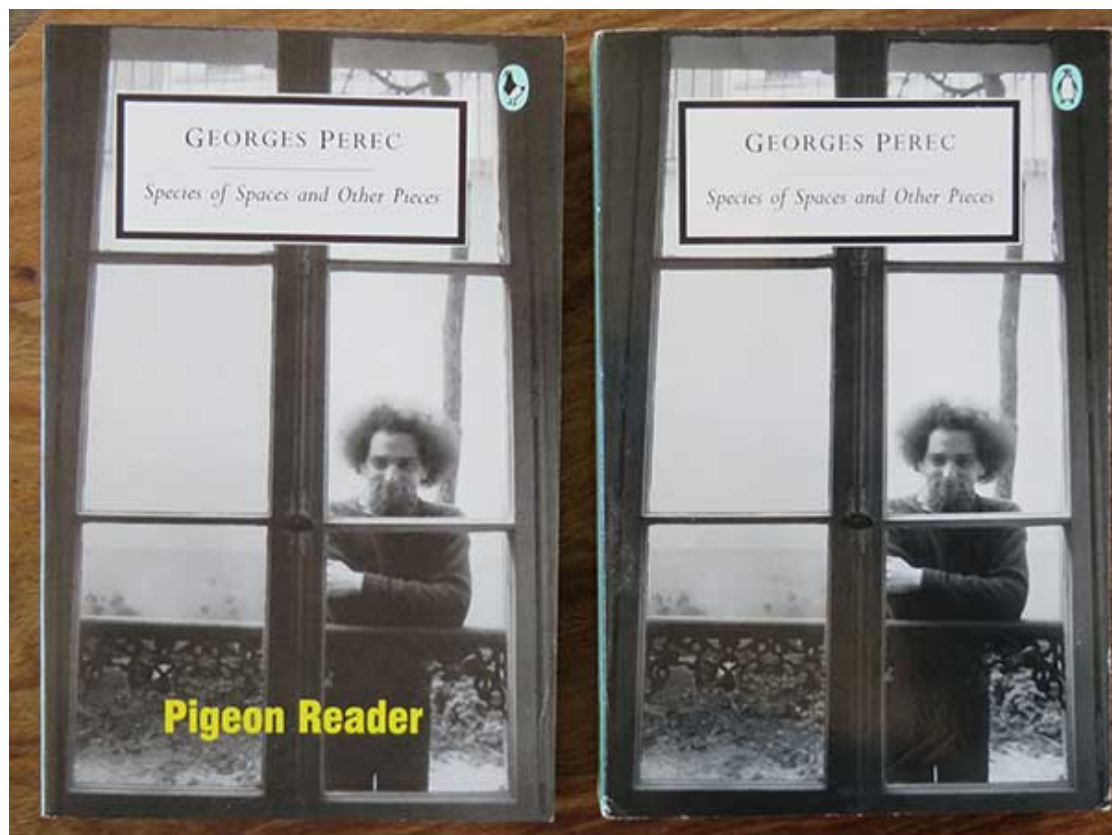


Fig 121 Catherine Clover: Georges Perec's *Species of Spaces and Other Pieces* and Simon Morris' *Pigeon Reader* (2014)

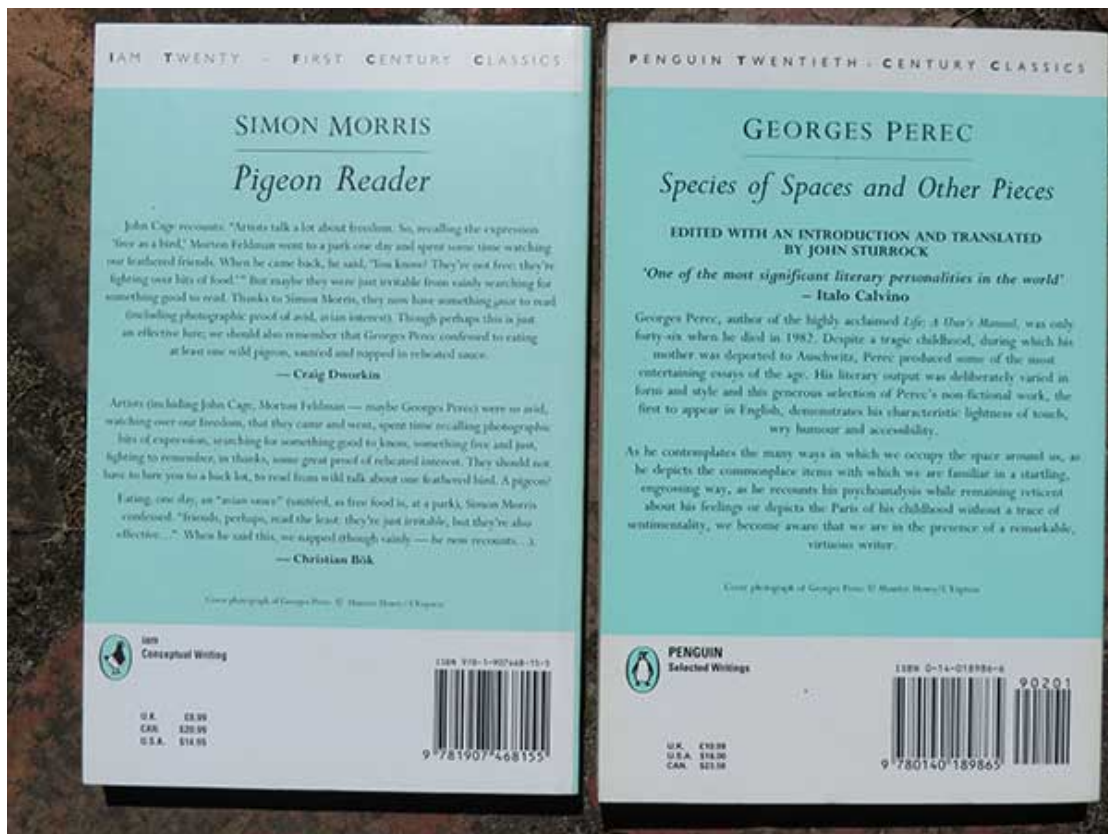


Fig 122 Catherine Clover: Georges Perec's *Species of Spaces and Other Pieces* and Simon Morris' *Pigeon Reader* (2014)

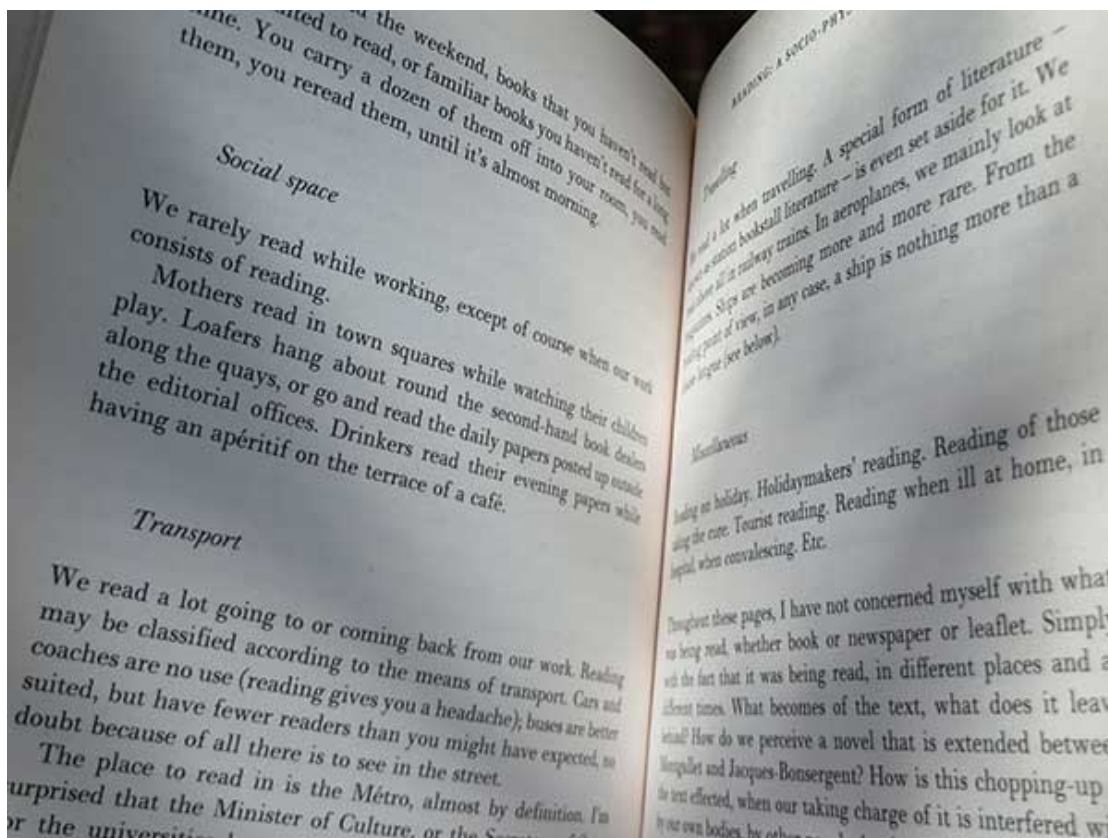


Fig 123 Catherine Clover: Georges Perec's *Species of Spaces and Other Pieces* (detail) (2014)



Fig 124 Catherine Clover: Simon Morris' *Pigeon Reader* (detail) (2014)

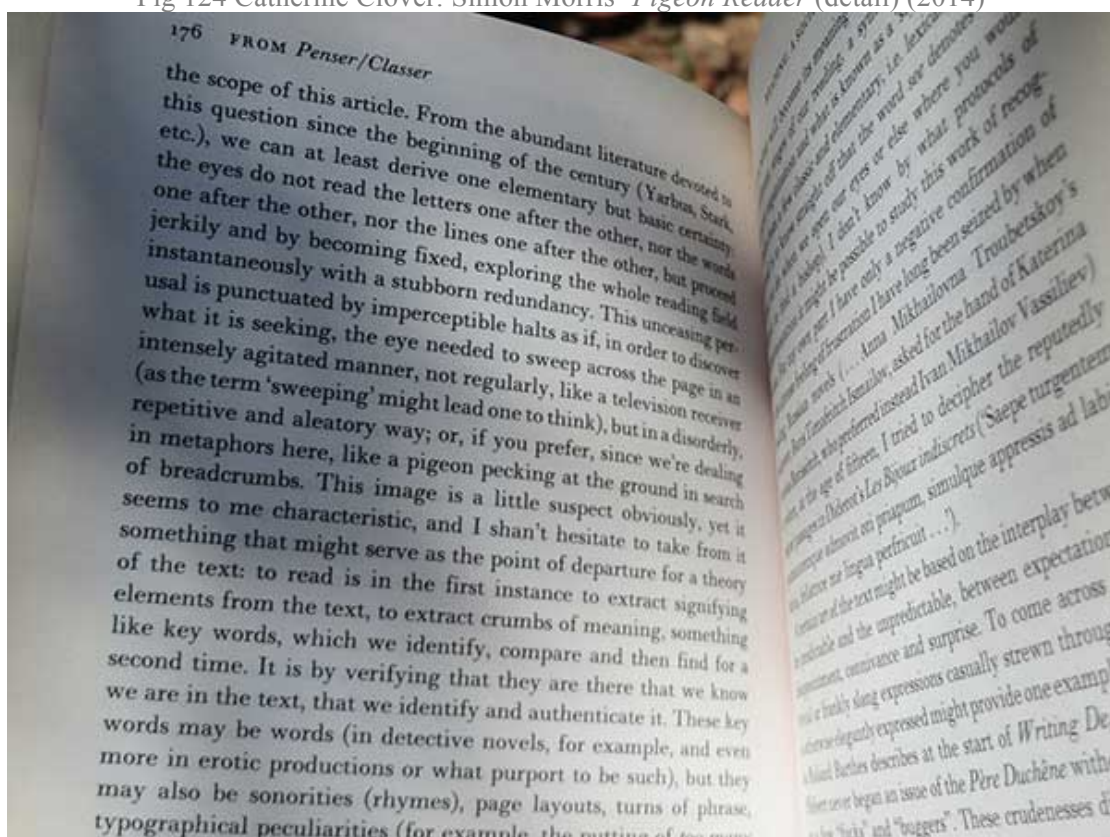


Fig 125 Catherine Clover: Georges Perec's *Species of Spaces and Other Pieces* (detail) (2014)



Fig 126 Catherine Clover: Simon Morris' *Pigeon Reader* (detail), (2014)

By reading the story aloud I make reference to the oral tradition, the pre-literary tradition (albeit through reading a text), which was based on the performative and the public sharing of knowledge. By reading the story within earshot of the birds means that they also hear my voice and share in the event, as with *Calls from Blethenal Green*, and the event thus becomes a cross-species one. By enacting the story in this way the solitary act of silent reading is made public which “bring(s) reading back to what it primarily is: a precise activity of the body” (Perec 1997, p.175). Reading the story in this setting adds chance to the readerly experience through the physicality of the experience. In the behavior of the birds, the behavior of the audience and the vicissitudes of the weather, as well as the durational pressure on my own voice, chance adds uncertainty to the experience of the story for all involved.

A certain art of the text might be based on the interplay between the predictable and the unpredictable, between expectation and disappointment, connivance and surprise (Perec 1997, p.177)

The reading of this text certainly had surprise and the unpredictable involved. As the day had been hot, the birds settled later than I expected, and this gave rise to a panic that the birds might not turn up at all. While reading, I stood under the branches of the tree where the birds were most numerous and loudest, and overlooked the physical requirements of any animal just prior to sleep. The birds' droppings added an unexpected sonic element to the performance, as the droppings landed on the ground, on car bonnets, on the pathway, on my shoulders as well as on pages of the book. Audience numbers waxed and waned during the reading, as people came and went, moving between the ten events that were taking place at the same time. Reading for an hour and a half was a test of endurance on my voice. I could not be sure that my voice could be sustained for the whole reading. The unpredictability of the encounter embraces a kind of uncertainty that the auspicious readings of the birds in ancient Rome were trying to control. Yet, returning to Baker's uncertainty (Baker 2000, p.32), it is this lack of knowing combined with an improvisation that adds a rich layer of possibility and potential, a layer that suggests we can begin to postulate a genuine relationship with the birds. With reference to Mark Dion's *Library for the Birds of Antwerp* Baker identifies that "It is the living birds, however, that do the real work of the piece" (Baker 2000, p.16) where "the alliance with the animal sweep(s) the human off into the unfamiliar" (Baker 2000, p.188). This unfamiliar place is full of potential because of its complexity where

the universe I want to draw on is not centered around and constructed from one world only, but is constituted of a plurality of actual, possible, and impossible sonic worlds that we can all inhabit in listening (Voegelin 2014, p.14)

Through spending time with the birds I was developing an understanding of them that was only gained through the experience of sharing space and time with them (Rigby 2011, p.141). The close proximity to numerous birds is an extraordinary experience. Endeavouring to engage “in a dialogical methodology, (where) the other is always encountered as a potentially communicative other” (Plumwood 2002, p.190) I found that a bodily recognition of others present seems to take place, between species and cross-species, between the gulls, the pigeons, the ravens, myself. When reading *The Birds* to the birds I seemed to experience German ecologist Gernot Böhme’s concept of *Lieb*, the intangible body that extends beyond the physical body, which blurs the boundaries with other bodies in close proximity (Rigby 2011, p.142). The sensitivity of an outer spectral skin that expands and contracts according to circumstance can produce a distinct tingling on the physical skin. During the reading the expansion and contraction of this spectral skin seemed connected to the loudness or quietness of the voices of the birds. Stumbling into their world, I was the dilettante (Dion cited in Baker 2000, p.74) entering the birds’ world as the inexpert (Baker 2000, p.188). I felt “freed from rationalist assumptions” (Plumwood 2002, p.192) and entered a complex space where “communicativity can be understood broadly rather than narrowly, allowing for the great variety of expressiveness associated with the great diversity of mindfulness in the world” (Plumwood 2002, p.192).

Through these experiences I understood that the birds, as subjects rather than objects (Wolch 1998, p.121; Plumwood 2002, p.191; Ingold 2011, p.233; Mullarkey 2013, p.55) “construct different worlds through their embodied interactions with it (that is, how their sensory and intellectual capabilities result in their world-views)” (Wolch 1998, p.131) and that such “shared intimations ... must be treated as potentially real sources of knowledge” (Wheeler 2006, p.82).

Chapter 6

Urban polyphony: overlaying voice, overlaying site

Since many of these scores have been informed by notions of indeterminacy, their focus is not necessarily on musical ideas with a high degree of reproducibility, but rather on processes that produce potentially very different results each time they are realised (Lely and Saunders 2012, p.xx)

Building on my experiences of proximity with pigeons, seagulls, ravens and crows I aimed to explore a more overtly inclusive, subjective and capricious approach to my consideration of and exchanges with them. While listening to them, I wrote texts based on my personal observations of them at a particular time of day and in a particular place. My observations were not imaginative per se but neither were they anchored in the rational world of certainty and stability. They were not grand narratives about bird species and behaviour but, rather, examples of what Jean-François Lyotard describes as *petit récit* (Voegelin 2010, p.141), mini-narratives based on everyday life, local and subjective, “local, contingent narrations... that do not seek truth but find legitimation in a practical competence” (Voegelin 2010, p.141). They are not a confusion of fact and fiction (Peter Greenaway cited in Baker 2000, p.33), but are narratives that cannot be verified because the factual content contained in them is “precarious” (Baker 2000, p.32). Embracing Lyotard’s idea of *petit récit*, the three artworks addressed in this chapter *Mid-morning, mild, some clouds* (2014), *Perch* (2014) and *Shooting the Breeze* (2015) draw upon Lely and Saunders’ indeterminacy, Voegelin’s contingency and Baker’s precariousness to explore the possible combinations of bird and human vocality. Predicated upon the experimental musical score that uses the English language as its medium rather than

traditional musical notation¹, the works offer the audience ways of imagining – and possibly enacting - a sonant connection across species.

Mid morning, mild, some clouds (2014)

French writer Georges Perec makes frequent observations about the futility of classification, yet these observations do not hinder his writerly compulsion to arrange and to classify. Inextricably drawn to categorising, Perec’s playful lists reveal the extraordinary in the ordinary. In a quintessentially postmodern twist, Perec employs this hierarchical and reductive tool in a way that should contradict Dion’s “marvellous” (Mark Dion cited in Baker 2000, p.12) yet resonates readily with it.

There is something at once uplifting and terrifying about the idea that nothing in the world is so unique that it can’t be entered on a list. Everything can be listed: the editions of Tasso, the islands on the Atlantic Coast, the ingredients required to make a pear tart, the relics of the major saints, masculine substantives with a feminine plural (amours, délices, orgues), Wimbledon finalists, or alternatively ... the sorrows of Mr Zachary McCaltex... (Perec 1997, p.194)

I developed my interest in *petit récit* with the site specific installation *Mid-morning, mild, some clouds* in the western suburbs of Melbourne in 2014, inspired by Perec’s *An Attempt at Exhausting a Place in Paris*, first published in 1975, a short text that consists of his observations and notes from three days spent watching the local activities in a Parisian square. Following in Perec’s footsteps, I spent time in the local vicinity of Newport high street

¹ Alternative forms of musical notation, such as using the English language instead of traditional stave notation, have been incorporated into experimental music and sound from around the mid twentieth century. Fluxus is a good example of a group of artists who frequently used alternative notation such as word scores, verbal notation, event scores and text scores.

where I looked, but predominantly listened, to daily activities such as pedestrians, voices, traffic, buses, trains, the weather, the season, and of course the birds. I had been invited by the Melbourne art gallery The Substation and local council Hobson's Bay City Council to produce a public artwork. The work took the form of a large 2m x 3m paste-up in the suburb of Newport in Melbourne's west. The work was a site specific sonically oriented written text that was installed on the wall beside the Newport Community Hall and Library complex on Newport high street.

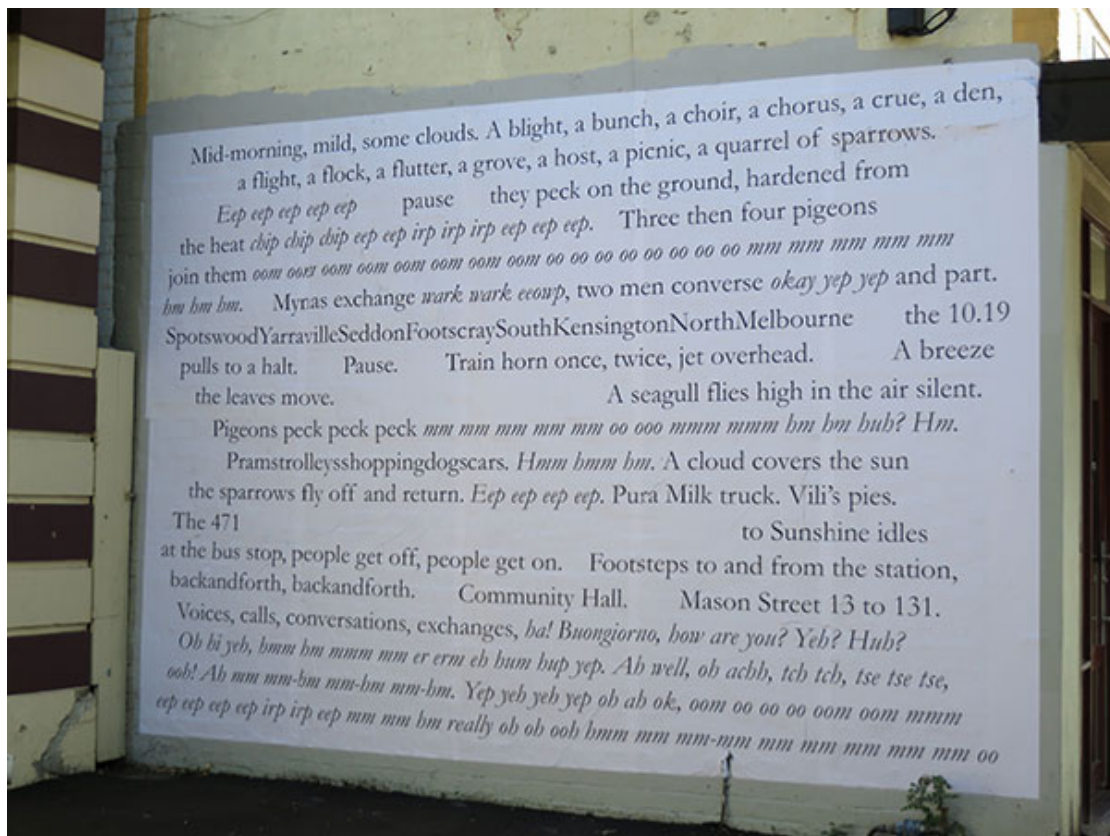


Fig 127 Catherine Clover *Midmorning, mild, some clouds*
Newport High Street, Melbourne (2014)

My intention was for the artwork to reflect the daily life of the local area and draw particular attention to a shared sonic space where the similarities of voice between birds and people are highlighted and extended, blurring the boundaries between species.



Fig 128 Catherine Clover *Midmorning, mild, some clouds*
Newport High Street, Melbourne (2014)

Using phonetic words to once again approximate voice, I noticed that the phonetic words we use when we speak informally on the mobile phone – “yeh”, “yep”, “nope”, “huh”, “oh”, “ooh”, “uh”, “mmm” – are similar to those same phonetic words that naturalists ascribe to bird voices – “oom”, “eep”, “oo”, “ooh”, “hmm”, “uh”, “ow”, “yow”, “wah” - and I used this to draw attention to this mingling of sound and voice along the high street, of a shared vocality and sonic space, and reflect it back to the local community.



Fig 129 Catherine Clover *Midmorning, mild, some clouds* (detail)
Newport High Street, Melbourne (2014)

The ordinary and the everyday occupy large parts of our lives and Percec understood “what is important in the mundane and quotidian—what he calls the ‘infra-ordinary’ or ‘endotic’ (as opposed to the ‘extraordinary’ and ‘exotic’)” (Wilken and McCosker 2012). However “Even though it surrounds us completely and takes up the vast majority of our time, the everyday is extremely difficult to pin down” (Fran Martin cited in Wilken and McCosker 2012). During installation people stopped and read *Mid-morning, mild, some clouds*, recognising that the text was “us here!” One passer-by commented “Ah but I don’t read English I only speak it. I didn’t go to school here”. Her companion explained “She only reads Greek. You’ll have to include Greek words next time”. Passers-by responded readily to the familiarity of the text recognising that it was the place in which they lived or passed through most days. Their responses echoed the reach of the everyday, which focuses on “quotidian phenomena and the power of relatively simple

gestures” (Watkins 1998, p.15) where “emphasis... is placed on the significance of every day, and any day, not on the distance between now and arbitrary past and future dates” (Watkins 1998, p.15).



Fig 130 Catherine Clover *Midmorning, mild, some clouds* (detail)
Newport High Street, Melbourne (2014)

Mid-morning, mild, some clouds was a transcription of place, a description, but it also had prescriptive elements. These were not overt instructions, as in a conventional score or libretto that directs a musical outcome, but were more subtle components of the readerly experience. The very ordinariness of the activities described in the text, such as “A seagull flies high in the air silent” or “Train horn once, twice, jet overhead”, means that they could be taking place on a regular basis throughout any day, at any time, so that as a reader reads it may seem that the text is being enacted as it is read, or even being enacted because it is read. Lely and Saunders identify that descriptive grammars

rather than prescribing usage, they examine and document actual patterns of usage... (they can) include generative grammar (which is concerned with what is possible in a language, rather than what occurs) and emergent grammar (which sees grammar as emerging out of human interaction). (Lely and Saunders 2012, p.4)

Mid-morning, mild, some clouds is certainly concerned with what is possible in language as in a generative grammar, but it is also concerned with what emerges out of social interaction, and not just human social interaction but interaction across species.

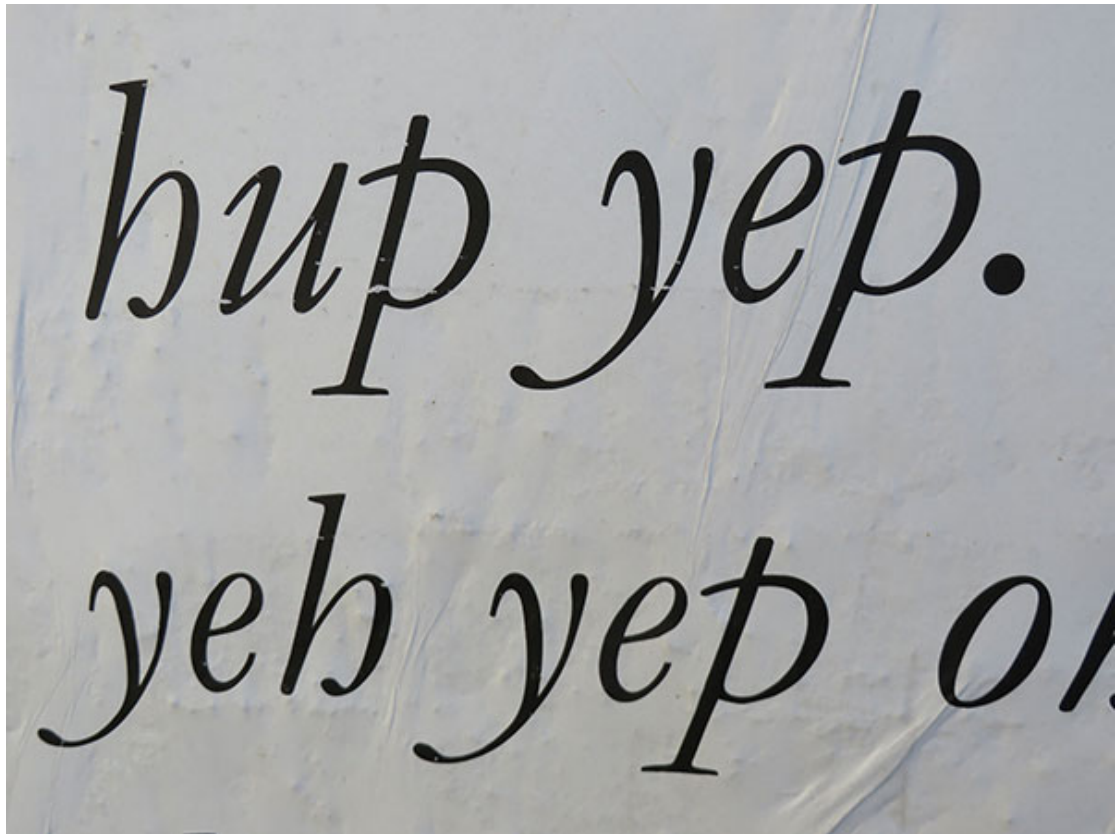


Fig 131 Catherine Clover *Midmorning, mild, some clouds* (detail)
Newport High Street, Melbourne (2014)

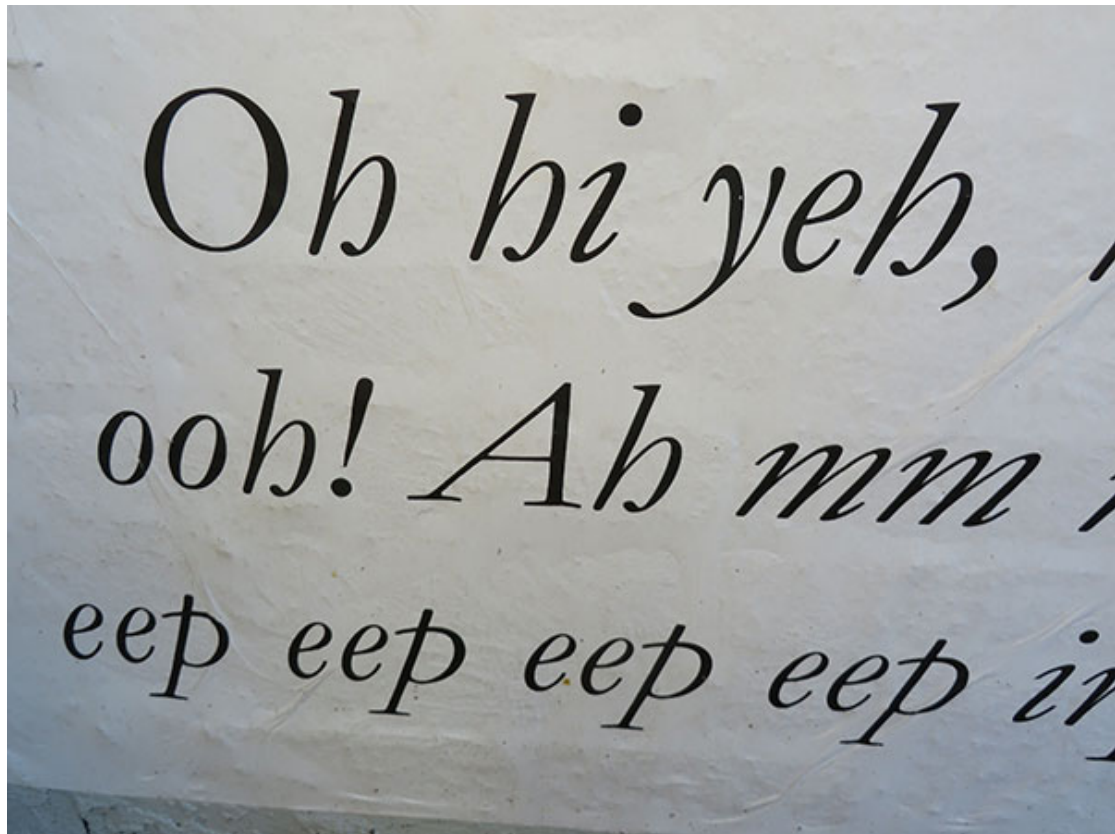


Fig 132 Catherine Clover *Midmorning, mild, some clouds* (detail)
Newport High Street, Melbourne (2014)

In this way I began to understand this text as an emergent grammar, where interaction is its foundation and I realised that the seeds of the text as a word event, verbal notation or text score (Lely and Saunders 2012) had its precedents in the mock field guide *Tell Me Something: A Field Guide to the Voice of an Unkindness of Ravens* (see Chapter 3) and the installation *A Storytelling of Ravens* (see Chapter 4). American experimental musician Mark So's aim for his scores encapsulates the potential of *Mid-morning, mild, some clouds* as verbal notation, as well as its instability and uncertainty. He explains that

Instead of calibrating the form of a hard solid, which, when hurled at the wall, stops dead, I want my score to somehow foster communication, to find an angle of permeability, and to slip and weave through the interaction, even/ever potentially to be lost in it (So cited in Lely and Saunders 2012, p.357)

Like a field recording played back in the place of its origin
Mid-morning, mild, some clouds blends in with its surroundings despite its size. The lettering merges with the lettering of the high street - street names “Mason Street 13 to 131”, delivery trucks “Vili’s pies” and “Pura Milk” and railway announcements “Spotswood Yarraville Seddon Footscray South Kensington North Melbourne” mix with the birds’ voices “oom oom oom oom oo oo oo oo hmm hmm mm mm” and mobile phone conversations “yep yeh yeh yep oh ah ok yeh”. As the words are read, the sounds are heard both synchronously and asynchronously and perhaps the text is voiced. The size of the lettering suggests mark making as much as language, especially when encountered up close. Using the popular graffiti form of the paste-up, its visibility integrates with the wall to which it adheres while its focus on listening, the sound of the place, reflects the site back on to itself like an echo, a re-sounding or re-iteration that folds and re-folds over the site, providing a starting point for interaction, as So suggests.

Perch (2014)

Melbourne artist and curator Andrew Tetzlaff invited me to create a project for the annual Sound Series hosted by Blindside, a central Melbourne artist run initiative. I invited vocalist Alice Hui-Sheng Chang and percussionist Vanessa Tomlinson to work with me. With a background in media, Alice’s voice comprises a rawness and breadth that readily embraces non-linguistic sound making and its potential as a conduit, perhaps, between

human and bird sounds. Based in Brisbane, Vanessa has a background in classical music and composition but practices and teaches as an experimental percussionist with a focus on improvisation. I was interested in working with a musician who uses the percussive potential of ordinary everyday objects and what they might offer the translation process between species. She uses found objects from the performance site to create location specific sound through striking, rolling, rattling, tapping, dropping, scraping, shoving and so on. With this collaboration I wanted to explore what non-linguistic sounds could offer the research project in terms of the bridging of communication between ourselves and pigeons, seagulls, ravens and crows. *Perch* combined installation elements with performance and took place in the artist run initiative Blindside located on the seventh floor of the Nicholas Building on Swanston Street in central Melbourne in July 2014.

While the project took place in the enclosed gallery space separate from the birds and their world, it was nevertheless a site specific response to the location of the gallery in the centre of Melbourne, where these birds are numerous and noisy. This apparent separation from urban site did not detract from a sense of connection with the birds on the street.



Fig 133 Catherine Clover *Perch* (still from performance - Vanessa Tomlinson)
(photo credit Andrew Tetzlaff) Blindside, Melbourne (2014)

The project consisted of both installation and performance components. I made location specific field recordings outside the Nicholas Building on Swanston Street at street level. These recordings included the voices of gulls, pigeons, sparrows, magpie larks and people, as well as the flapping of wings, footsteps, tram squeals on tracks, tram bells, cyclists, truck reversing signals, taxis etc. There were lunchtime conversations, café exchanges, snatches from pedestrian voices passing by. I played the recordings ambiently in the gallery through stereo speakers so that the recorded material merged with live sound. The street is audible even on the seventh floor as sound travels up the sides of the building, but it is not loud. Like the experience of *The Auspices* (Chapter 4) and *B is for Bird C is for City* (Chapter 5), my recording resembles the live street noise. Even though the recording uses local sound, it had the potential to disorient the listener because certain sounds were out of sync with real time. For example it appeared that church bells ring at odd times, tram bells repeat ad infinitum

or are suddenly silent, the sounds of the birds are curiously loud and close yet not visible. I installed transcriptions from the field recordings on the walls of the gallery as printed text on paper using excerpts rather than whole sections, so that the text seemed to make sense but again, not quite.

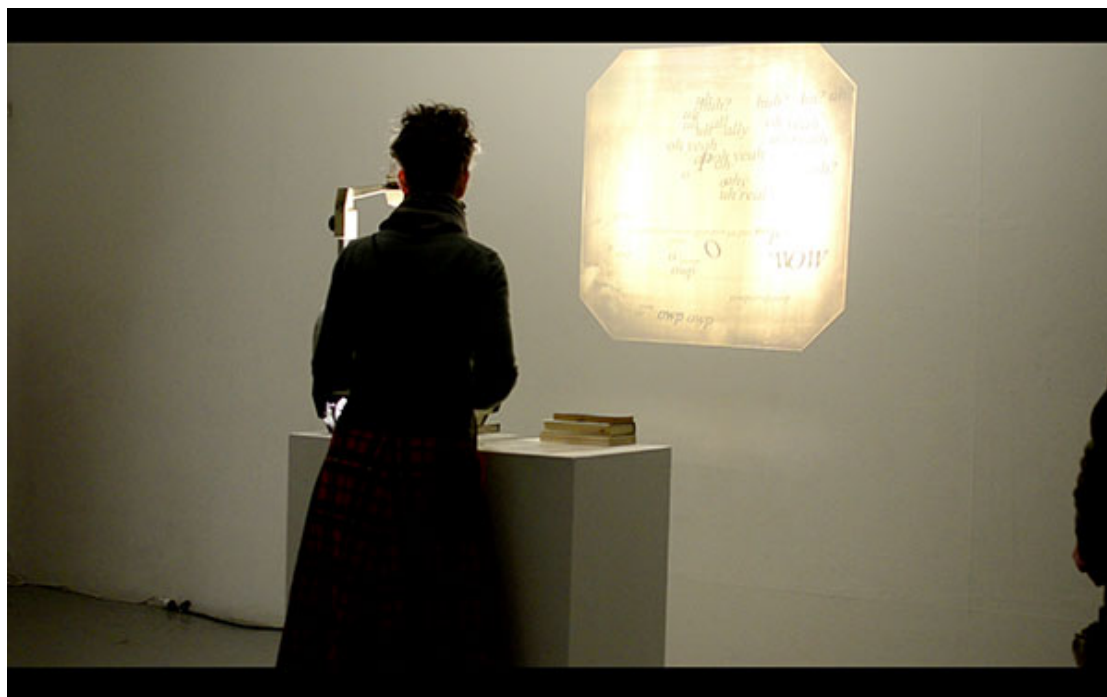


Fig 134 Catherine Clover *Perch* (still from performance)
(photo credit Andrew Tetzlaff) Blindside, Melbourne (2014)

I located piles of dictionaries and bird field guides dating from around the mid 20th century on the floor of the gallery, again to suggest how our knowledge (of language, of the birds) changes over time. While there may be gain or expansion of knowledge there also may be loss as our cultural priorities change. What mattered in the past may not seem so important any more. I installed quotations of bird voice from the field guides on the windows using vinyl lettering. I used an overhead projector and a 35mm projector both for their light emitting and sonic qualities as much as their visual function.



Fig 135 Catherine Clover *Perch* Blindside, Melbourne (2014)

During the performances I used phonetic words from bird field guides printed on acetate sheets and projected them onto the wall using the overhead projector. I broke the words into individual letters that could be moved separately across the projector bed. As I moved the sheets by adding some and taking away others, the letters and words mixed together, sometimes making sense, sometimes too jumbled to read, sometimes dropping out of sight completely, not unlike an experimental word event (Lely and Saunders 2012, p.xxvii).

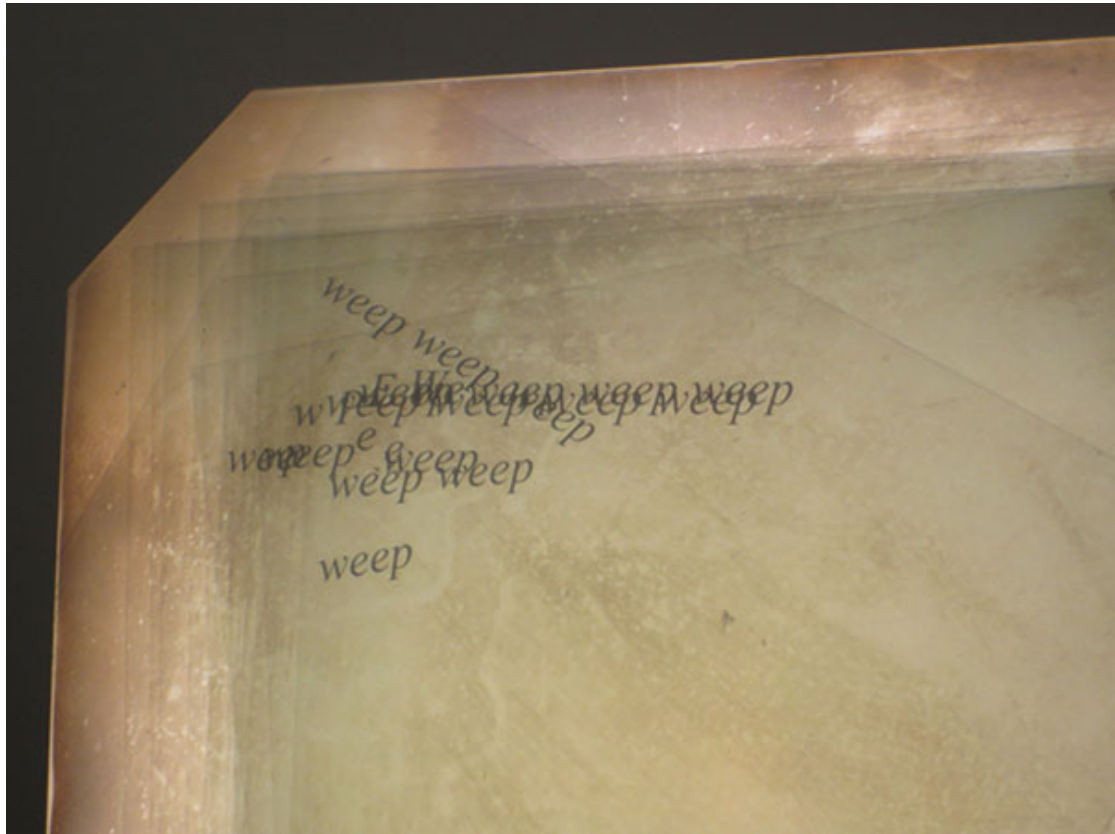


Fig 136 Catherine Clover *Perch* Blindsight, Melbourne (2014)



Fig 137 Catherine Clover *Perch* (still from performance – Alice Hui-Sheng Chang)
(photo credit Andrew Tetzlaff) Blindsight, Melbourne (2014)

Vanessa responded percussively to the movement of the letters, reading the letters as if they were straining to become musical notes and form a score that she could follow, a musical or textual score in flux, but a score that is as descriptive as it is prescriptive (Lely and Saunders 2012, p.4), a score that might even be composed after the event, as Fluxus artist Eric Andersen confirmed with reference to many of the Fluxus scores from the early 1960s (Andersen cited in Lely and Saunders 2012, p.80). Vanessa observed that

Cath's translations of the street into bird language and Melbourne and then projected into a new assemblage of information were also vital jumping off points. At times I would approach her performance literally - playing every sound that she introduced - rrrrr equals a stroke on a guiro for instance, and at other times I would use the projected offering as the starting point for my own song made on found objects repurposed as sonic wonderment for the purposes of this performance. These embellishments were always part information, part play; an investigation of the very notion of communication (Vanessa Tomlinson, email dated 6 January 2015)

As the letters slipped, were re-positioned and slipped again, the percussive sounds started, stopped and re-started, as if coughing hiccupping and losing their place, then starting again, the struggle reflecting what Salomé Voegelin recognizes with language exchange in general, that

possibly we misunderstand each other a lot more often than we think. And really that, instead of presuming that we do understand each other most of the time with occasional misunderstandings, we probably misunderstand each other very often and only sometimes, through luck and reciprocal goodwill, do we experience moments of coincidence where we do understand each other, and no grammatical accuracy and particularity can assure these moments, so we might as well enjoy a more mobile sonic language (Voegelin cited in Wright 2012)

Alice's abstract vocalisations reflected such a mobility by responding to the arhythmic percussion and the viscosity of the slithering lettering.

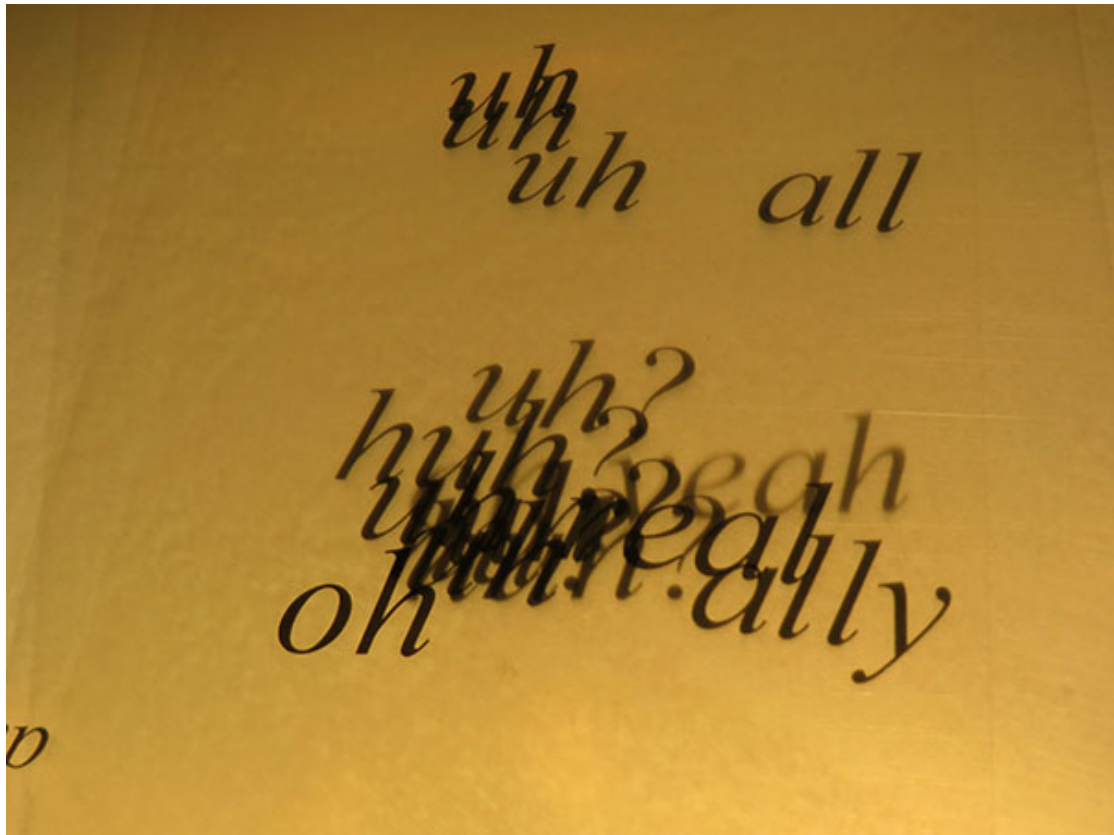


Fig 138 Catherine Clover *Perch* Blindside, Melbourne (2014)

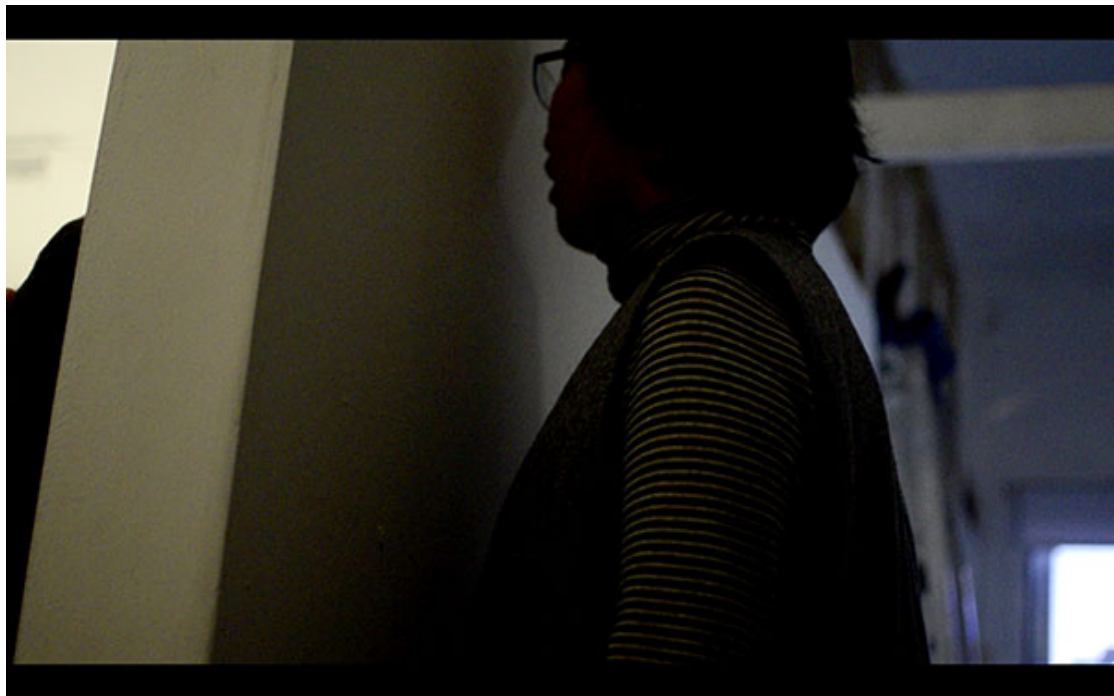


Fig 139 Catherine Clover *Perch* (still from performance – Alice Hui-Sheng Chang)
(photo credit Andrew Tetzlaff) Blindside, Melbourne (2014)

Alice's nonlinguistic sounds show us human voice in all its sonic possibility and range, and demonstrated what may be possible with the lungs and the breath, an example of "a pure vocal, indifferent to the semantic function of language, which takes various forms of sonorous manifestation" (Cavarero 2005, p.20). In this performance the potential of human sound describes a place where human voices might merge with the birds', "a primary place of phonic and musical texture from which language grows" (Cavarero 2005, p.15). As I piled on the acetate sheets, the projection darkened to a murky flat yellow colour full of thick black marks that bore little resemblance to letters, to language, seen through the double vision of vertical projection and horizontal projector bed. This process bore witness to Kenneth Goldsmith's assertion that in French 19th century poet Stéphane Mallarmé's poem *Un coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard* (A throw of the dice will never abolish chance, 1897) "...Words are no longer primarily transparent content carriers; now their material quality must be considered as well" where "The page becomes a canvas... the text becomes active ..." (Goldsmith 2011, p.18).

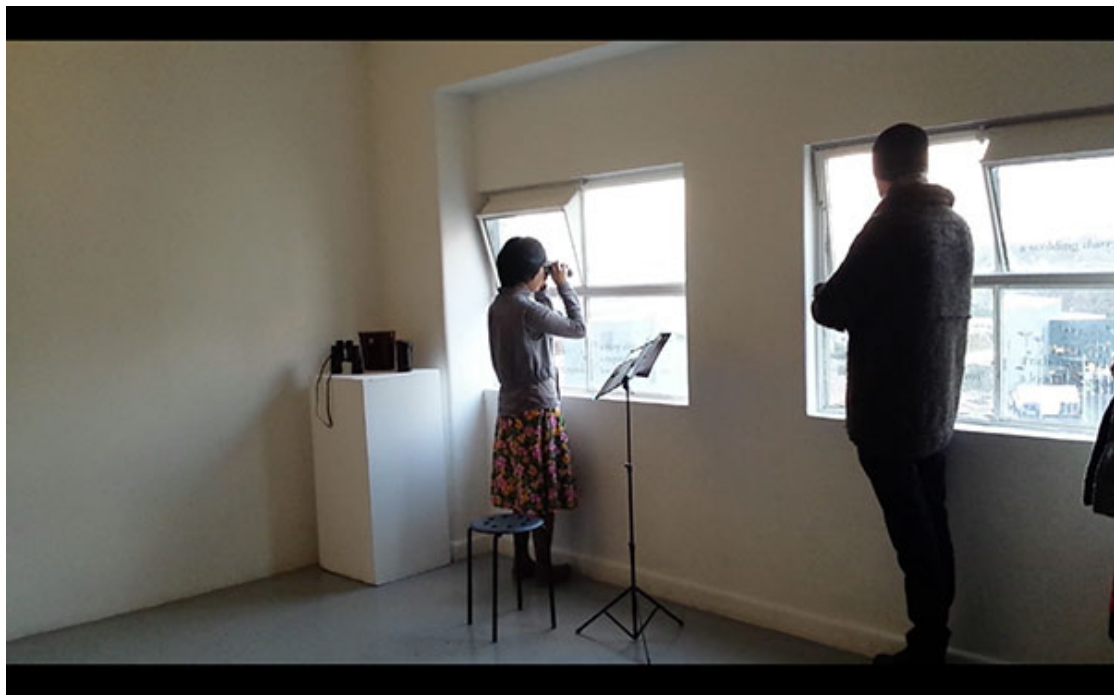


Fig 140 Catherine Clover *Perch* (still from performance – Alice Hui-Sheng Chang)
(photo credit Andrew Tetzlaff) Blindsight Melbourne (2014)

During the performance I read eight pages of entries from a mid 20th century dictionary, each page chosen for the position of individual words that resonated with my aims for the performance - bird, feather, language, perch, sound, swallow, trill, voice. The words that filled each page seem dated, and many are less commonly used these days. They reveal an era from not so very long ago, yet with increasingly different priorities compared with those we have today.



Audio IX Catherine Clover *Perch* (recording credit Nigel Brown)
Blindside Melbourne (2014) Excerpt duration 1'32"
(URL backup <http://ciclover.com/exegesis%20audio09.html>)



Fig 141 Catherine Clover *Perch* (still from performance)
(photo credit Andrew Tetzlaff) Blindside Melbourne (2014)

I adopted a monotonous reading voice and created a kind of metronome, a counting of the passage of time, intimating the date the dictionary was published, forward to today again and beyond. The linguistic and unmodulated orientation of my voice contrasted with Alice's vocal range of sound. Alice and Vanessa acoustically improvised through the gallery space, setting up their own points of reference while working with my installation components and each other. The only amplification in the space was the field recording playing through stereo speakers, which underlined the sounds from the street while concurrently providing a subtle counterpoint to them. Alice did not articulate the phonetic words but vocalized around them and through them, with some of her sounds approximating the whistling languages of Turkey, Greece and the Canary Islands (see Chapter 5). Vanessa used everyday found objects located on site – plates, bowls, bird seed, empty bottles – to sonically enunciate the rhythmic components of the installation.

In the other room the calm recitation of Cath's voice reading from the dictionary was juxtaposed against falling birdseed... birdseed was slowly and continuously dropped onto a set of objects - perhaps birdfeeders - with the pitch of the object revealed from the falling seed. Messy, songlike and seemingly disorganised, this room took on an unsettling sense of order - even with the vocal iterations of Alice coming into the space from other parts of the building. It was like entering into a surreal world - was this like listening from the birds perspective? From what perspective? Things were sonically unpacked in totally new ways. Intentionality and unintentionality were hard to separate. Play or communication? Planned or unplanned? Order or chaos?
(Vanessa Tomlinson, email dated 6 January 2015)

I re-used some of the objects from *The Auspices for Perch*, extending the role of curiosity instigated by that installation. In this instance I invited the performers to explore and interact with the various components, as if the performance took place inside a cabinet of curiosities. Indeed, many

cabinets of curiosities were rooms or even houses and the Soane Museum is a good example (see Chapter 5). However, rather than using numerous objects, I placed a chosen few strategically around the space: bird whistles hung from the ceiling so they could be examined or played and binoculars were set near the windows encouraging viewers to look outside at the urban vista. The view from the window of *Blindside* draws visitors to it and on the glass text in vinyl lettering that described bird voice also encouraged this.



Fig 142 Catherine Clover *Perch* Blindside Melbourne (2014)



Fig 143 Catherine Clover *Perch* Blindsight Melbourne (2014)

Looking out of the window located the installation as one that straddled both an external as well as an internal site. Like many of the works in this project, the installation pecks at this border and loosens it, making it porous and flexible, bringing the external indoors and projecting the internal outside. At the end of the performance, while Vanessa notated an experimental score from the sounds seeping in from the street, Alice called out of the window, to the city, to the birds, to the people below. Vanessa explains that she was

looking out of the window and drawing on music paper the sounds heard out of the open window. The pitch, density, volume and rhythmic characteristics were all taken into account as the external world was mapped on to manuscript paper and then used later in the performance as "the score". Sound into notation into sound.
(Vanessa Tomlinson, email dated 6 January 2015)



Fig 144 Catherine Clover *Perch* (still from performance – Vanessa Tomlinson)
(photo credit Andrew Tetzlaff) Blindside Melbourne (2014)



Fig 145 Catherine Clover *Perch*
(still from performance – Vanessa Tomlinson and Alice Hui-Sheng Chang)
(photo credit Andrew Tetzlaff) Blindside Melbourne (2014)

Pigeons, seagulls and ravens are visible from the window, which is flight height like *Pigeon Post* at Mailbox 141 (see Chapter 2). One of the performances was timed at sunrise and this was particularly dramatic both for audience and performers as the light slowly filled the gallery rather than faded. Timing the performance to coincide with the activities of the birds at dawn with the increase of natural light created an unexpected sense of elation in both audience and performers.

The performance produced a palimpsest of the heard and the read, the read and the heard. Letters, words and sounds were revealed momentarily separate from each other, repeating each other, reiterating each other, recombining then disappearing. They became indistinguishable from each other and blurred into each other, as sound and voice conjured lettering and text evoked the sonic.

Shooting the Breeze (2015)

Shooting the Breeze (2015) is the final exhibition of the research project, taking place in the Stephen McLaughlan Gallery on the 8th floor of the Nicholas Building on Swanston Street, central Melbourne, the same building where *Perch* was performed at Blindside. Using elements from past installations such as recordings that trace external live soundscapes, transcriptions of bird and human voices and collections of field guides and dictionaries, this site specific installation focuses on human and bird voice in the urban environment that surrounds the Nicholas Building. This exhibition, a text-based installation, includes a short performance to take

place at the opening of the exhibition in the form of a voicing of the texts by five performers². Extending some aspects of *Perch*, the installation takes the form of a three dimensional score or libretto that has the potential to be enacted by the audience.

The possibility of informal vocal exchanges across species is posited through the title. The expression ‘shooting the breeze’ refers to idle chitchat, chatter, trivial discussion, gossip and is based on the subtle scope of relaxed and easy-going conversation. Gossip did not originally have the negative connotation it has today and the word emerged from an intimate exchange between a child and her/his godparents as a means of bonding in the Christian tradition (Dunbar 2004, p.100). The bonding of a social species like humans is vital for survival, as Virginia Morell explains in relation to ornithologist Karl Berg’s research into parrot communication.

The complexities of social living – of understanding what your neighbours were doing and possibly plotting – were the key evolutionary pressures in developing complex cognitive abilities... The more demanding the society, the more pressure there would be for intelligence to evolve (Morell 2013, p.114).

In terms of language, then, gossip is understood to have an important role in the development of our social bonding. “Some scientists, such as Robin Dunbar, have proposed that the original purpose of human language was gossip; he imagined protohumans picking lice from each other’s hair while passing on news about the troubled family down the way” (Morell 2013, p.105). Social intelligence, which develops because of the strategizing required for surviving in socially complex societies that are full of uncertainty (Morell p.196) has been scientifically proven in many different

² The performers are Jenny Barnes, Vanessa Chapple, Martina Copley, Viv Corringham and Susan Pyke.

species (Morell 2013 p.198). Gossip is symbolic, therefore, of individuals working out their social strategies. Karl Berg embraces these ideas with reference to the Venezuelan green parrotlets he studies. “ ‘Sometimes I think that’s what most of their calls are about: gossip’ ... Certainly, the parrotlets lived eventful, gossip-worthy lives.” (Karl Berg cited in Morell 2013, p.105). I suggest these ideas could also be applied to very social and intelligent species like seagulls, pigeons, crows and ravens living in the urban environment.

Mark So describes the reach of “idle chatter” as a reason for using the English language over conventional notation in his scores, because

The ‘common’ language I use stands in keen relation to the understated, subtle responsiveness of idle chatter, and to the ebb and flow of normal perception. It seems to formulate a poetics suitably receptive to real complexity in simple circumstances, a kind hand greeting life in the embrace of conversation... the grammar of this formulation perhaps emerging and disappearing along the subtle arc of its utterance, at once remarkable and baffling as a desert spring (So cited in Lely and Saunders 2012, p.357).

So asserts that the seemingly contradictory nature of gossip and chatter as light-hearted banter betrays an inherent intricacy and involution. The attraction of relaxed conversation as a means of plumbing the potential of interspecies exchange provides an inviting context in which *Shooting the Breeze* resides. Through a textual realisation of the sonic the installation proposes a vocal relationality between people and birds triggered by lives lived in proximity to the Nicholas Building, but also more generally within all urban environments. It proposes how we might include our animal others in our everyday urban lives so that we may develop “the emergence of interspecific webs of friendship and concern” (Wolch, J, 1998, p.129), the

evolution of which may affect the “development of human consciousness and identity” (Wolch, J, 1998, p.129). As Val Plumwood attests

One of the most important ... virtues is listening and attentiveness to the other, a stance which can help to counter the deafness and backgrounding which obscures and denies what the non-human other contributes to our lives and collaborative ventures (Plumwood 2002, p.194-5).

Conclusion

Through this creative research project I set out to address our ambiguous relationship with common noisy wild urban birds with whom we share our cities. My aim was to explore ways through aural and visual media to provide not only new ways of considering them but also to bring attention to them as potentially vulnerable yet vital co-inhabitants of our world. Through focusing on the birds as living creatures that exist side by side with us in a distinctly urban context, my aim was to use listening as a means of exploring what we have in common as opposed to what sets us apart. Through voice and language, exchange and reciprocity I investigated how we might find an open-ended place for communication and understanding.

I discovered and used the term ‘unlearning’, coined by Giovanni Aloi in *Art and Animals* (2012), as a means of investigating accepted knowledge hierarchies. ‘Unlearning’ is a means of re-thinking what we think we know and what we accept as general or common knowledge and Steve Baker (Baker 2000, p.166) extends this idea by identifying that a letting go of rational thinking is enormously useful for re-thinking and re-evaluating. Through exploring the limitations of our understanding of our animal others, specifically common wild urban birds, I discovered that they operate independently of how we think of them or what we think we know about them. For example we consider pigeons to be urban pests and carriers of disease but through this research project I re-discovered not only how we valued them more highly in the past (for, amongst other things, their willingness to cohabit with us and their unique homing abilities) but also that current recent scientific research attributes complex aural and visual

skills to them (Watanabe et al, 1995). I worked with these ideas on, in particular, *Columba livia* (2009) and *coroocoo* (2010) in Chapter 1, two artworks that addressed the homing abilities of pigeons, abilities that many of us overlook today. By embracing uncertainty and a not-knowing that accompanies this lack of understanding, I focused on drawing connections between these urban birds and ourselves rather than highlighting differences and I found this approach to be a constructive way of re-thinking our ambiguous attitude towards them. In particular, by employing the phonetic words that naturalists use in bird identification field guides to transcribe bird song I drew correlations and connections with the phonetic words we use in the English vernacular. I started working with this idea early on in the research and one of the first examples is the billboard *billing and cooing* (2010) (see Chapter 2) where a pigeon's song is phonetically transcribed using the word 'oom' but the text decays and breaks into familiar phonetic words we use in the English vernacular such as 'hmm' 'mmm' and so on. My approach was to consider what we have in common as opposed to what sets us apart. Through spending time with the birds, I learned that listening is active, not passive, and that attentive listening is the start of a means of exchange. The act of listening is inclusive and embeds the listener within the sonic world that surrounds her/him. The listener is not an external observer but exists as a part of that world, and by listening, acknowledges that world and her/his place within it.

Through attentive listening I explored the idea of the relocation of content as a means of re-thinking pigeons, seagulls, ravens and crows. Hearing field recordings of the birds' voices in unexpected contexts prompts a reconsideration of them through sounds out of place, but by applying this idea to the *same* site rather than a different one (playing a field recording back in its site of origin) I discovered that a sonic folding and re-

folding of site back onto itself, while subtle, prompted audiences to listen attentively. One of the artworks that explored this idea was *The Auspices* (2012) in Chapter 4 where field recordings made at the site of the railway station were played back at the same site, mingling the same, or very similar, content. The recorded sound overlapping with the live sound, similar to each other but not quite, gave rise to a disorientation that initiated a more engaged listening experience. I discovered that this attentive listening state could also be initiated by having the field recording realised as silent text, where a description of place with words could prompt a kind of double listening experience – hearing the live site while concurrently hearing the site through reading the text. A good example was the billboard *Mid-morning, mild, some clouds* (2014) (see Chapter 6) where the process of reading the text appeared to occur at the same time as, or even just prior to, the event taking place. Something as ordinary and everyday as a seagull flying overhead could initiate this phenomenon.

Through experiments with transcription and translation I discovered that language and the written word could be an expanded means of creatively working with the birds' voices. Initiated through readings of experimental writers Georges Perec, Simon Morris and Kenneth Goldsmith, and ideas taken from Salomé Voegelin's contingency and Gilles Deleuze's language within a language I began to understand language as a form of communication in flux rather than in stasis, as unreliable rather than stable, and this fallibility was highly productive creatively. Resulting artworks included the textual animation *Calling the Birds* (2010) (Chapter 3) and my performance of moving letters and words with the overhead projector in *Perch* (2014) from Chapter 6. I listened to the birds' voices and understood their exchanges to be intelligent communication, albeit communication that I did not understand. Because we cite language as one of the aspects that

separates and elevates us from our animal others, using language to explore a means of connection was particularly apt. Pigeons, seagulls, ravens and crows, like ourselves, are gregarious and social species, and vocality is significant as a form of social interaction. Learning about the instability of language as a means of communication I discovered its vulnerability and its flexibility, and through this its creative potential for exploring a shared form of communication across species. By focusing on the phonetic words that naturalists ascribe to bird voice in field guides, I drew on the complex philosophical relationship between voice (*phōnē*) and language (*logos*) identified by Giorgio Agamben in *Infancy and History: On the destruction of experience* (Agamben 1993, pp.3-4), where a gap supposedly exists that separates voice from language and in particular animal voice from language. Through exploring the potential of transliteration (transcription from one alphabet to another), I drew creative connections between the heard and the read, the voiced and the seen, the spoken and the written. Mirroring my transcriptions of voice into text I collaborated with performers and experimented with a voicing and performing of the written word, of taking texts into the vocal sphere which is occupied by the birds. Specific examples include working with three performers on *birdbrain* (2011) (Chapter 3) where the performers voiced the text from *Tell Me Something: A Field Guide to the Voices of an Unkindness of Ravens* (2011) and *B is for Bird, C is for City* (2013) (see Chapter 5) where the performers read from bird field guides and mimicked the voices of the resident gulls that lived around the Mission to Seafarers domed building where the performance took place. I discovered that the perceptual understanding that accompanies vocality embodies a sonic materiality that a cognitive understanding for the most part does not. That is, a voicing promotes a material understanding of all that language can be, rather than what it is. This sonic materiality provides a bridge that has the potential to connect voice to language and to propose that these urban

birds do indeed use language.

The urban environment was pivotal to the research project in that it was a mutually shared space between ourselves and the birds and a dynamic point of connection to build upon. I discovered that taking the artworks out into the public domain and realising them in close proximity to the world of the birds, in a gesture of potential communication, was significant. I responded in a location specific way to the birds that lived in proximity to the site of each artwork and examples include *A Storytelling of Ravens* (2012) (see Chapter 4) where vinyl lettering was placed on the external gallery window that was easily visible to the local roost of ravens and *Reading The Birds* (2014) (see Chapter 5) where I read Daphne du Maurier's thriller *The Birds*, easily audible for the numerous birds settling for the night in the tree above. By envisaging a seepage that occurs through the sharing of space and by aligning the city with language through social interaction - as a place of enunciation - I discovered a continuity of life that links us with these common noisy intelligent birds, a continuity that places human beings as co-habitants of urban space rather than separate from other urban species and that has potential for exchange through a shared vocal space triggered by proximity in the city.

Rather than seeing ourselves as separate and superior to other animals, this project uses our biological status as animals to merge and blur the boundaries between species. The project builds on our connection to the world around us rather than our isolation from it, and by engaging with a social interaction across species it proposes that familiarity results in understanding followed by tolerance. The focus of this project on similarity over difference in terms of who we share our world with has relevance not only across species but also within our human world, both on a micro level

(home, work, neighbourhood) and a macro level (national and international settings). Rather than focusing on what separates us or seems to drive us apart, understanding what we have in common and what connects us has the potential to create an acceptance of each other that is highly constructive and productive.

The project has a currency which provides potential for further applications across a range of fields of study. The project works across several subject areas from the environment (including climate change and global warming), to the human-animal relationship and the urban context, three broadly connected and topical areas of global contemporary debate across a range of disciplines. The multidisciplinary nature of the creative media used to realise the project - sound, language, visual art, installation, performance, public art as well as the role of collaboration - extends potential applications in these areas.

At the conclusion of his recently published book *Where Song Began: Australia's Birds and how they changed the world* (2014), biologist Tim Low identifies that larger Australian birds are flourishing (Low 2014, p.317) and that the increase in numbers of these birds, which I suggest includes the birds I am addressing - pigeons seagulls crows and ravens - gives people the impression that bird numbers are not in decline, thus casting doubt on scientific warnings about climate change and global warming. Described by Low as 'winners' in his earlier book *The New Nature: Winners and Losers in Wild Australia* (2002), he suggests that these birds need to be just as much a part of the discussion of decline and extinction as the smaller birds that are disappearing or have already disappeared as part of the Sixth Extinction. Extending Low's point that the dynamic presence of these birds does not counter the environmental devastation we are facing, this research project

proposes that rather than dismissing these strong adaptable birds as pests we can engage with them in a constructive manner. The tolerance that is borne of curiosity and engagement would benefit not only all creatures that share our world with us, but also the health of the biosphere that supports life on this planet.

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(photo credit Andrew Tetzlaff) Blindsight Melbourne (2014)
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Audio

Chapter 2 Soundings and Unsoundings: speaking site, writing sound

Audio I Catherine Clover: Recording the Herring Gulls on Folkestone Harbour, UK (2008)
Excerpt duration 22''

Audio II Catherine Clover: Recording the pigeons in the Sacred Heart building Abbotsford
Convent Melbourne (2010) Excerpt duration 28''

Chapter 4 Unfolding the City: speaking the city, walking the city

Audio III Catherine Clover *A Storytelling of Ravens* as part of the group show
Us and Them: Umwelten, Project Space RMIT University, Melbourne (2012)
Excerpt duration 1' 16''

Audio IV Catherine Clover *The Auspices* Moreland City Council Public Art Show Melbourne
(2012) Excerpt duration 32''

Chapter 5 Listening and unlearning: shared spaces and shared language

Audio V Catherine Clover and Johanna Hällsten *Calls from Blethenal Green* St John's
Church Bethnal Green London (2013) Excerpt duration 1' 30''

Audio VI Catherine Clover and Johanna Hällsten *Calls from Blethenal Green* St John's
Church Bethnal Green London (2013) Excerpt duration 38''

Audio VII Catherine Clover: rehearsal for *B is for Bird C is for City* with Kate Hunter,
Vanessa Chapple and Penny Baron Melbourne (2013) Excerpt duration 50''

Audio VIII Catherine Clover *Reading The Birds* (recording credit Martin Kay)
Melbourne (2014) Excerpt duration 1'46''

Chapter 6 Urban polyphony: overlaying voice, overlaying site

Audio IX Catherine Clover *Perch* (recording credit Nigel Brown)
Blindside Melbourne (2014) Excerpt duration 1'32''

Moving Image

Chapter 3 Languaging the birds, voicing the birds

URL link <http://ciclover.com/exegesis%20mov01.html>

Moving Image I Catherine Clover *Calling the Birds* (animation excerpt 1'10'')
Trocadero Art Space, Melbourne (2010)

URL link <http://ciclover.com/exegesis%20mov02.html>

Moving Image II Catherine Clover *birdbrain* (performance excerpt 1' with Vanessa Chapple,
Kate Hunter and Kate Kantor l to r) (recording credit Matthew Berka) Screenspace
Melbourne Australia / Soundfjord London UK / Emerson Berlin Germany (2011)

Appendix 1

List of Works

Columba livia (2009)

Installation

Window of 569, Nicholson Street Carlton North Melbourne Australia

See Chapter 1

corooco (2010)

Installation

Anna Leonowens Gallery NSCAD University Halifax Canada

See Chapter 1

billing and cooing (2010)

Billboard

Trocadero Art Space Melbourne Australia

See Chapter 2

Pigeon Post (2010)

Installation

Mailbox 141 Melbourne Australia

See Chapter 2

Calling the Birds (2010)

Animation

Trocadero Art Space Melbourne Australia

See Chapter 3

Tell Me Something: A Field Guide to the Voices of an Unkindness of Ravens (2011)

Artist's Book

See Chapter 3

birdbrain (2011)

Installation and performance with Vanessa Chapple Kate Hunter Penny Baron and Kate Kantor

Soundfjord London UK

Emerson Berlin Germany

Screenspace Melbourne Australia

See Chapter 3

A Filth of Starlings (2012)

Installation

Platform Public Contemporary Art Spaces Melbourne Australia

See Chapter 4

A Storytelling of Ravens (2012)

Installation as part of the group show *Us and Them: Umwelten*
Project Space RMIT University Melbourne Australia
See Chapter 4

The Auspices (2012)

Installation
Anstey Railway Station Brunswick Melbourne Australia
As part of Moreart Moreland City Council Public Art Show curated by Jane O'Neill and Dan Mitchell
See Chapter 4

Calls from Blethenal Green (2013)

Collaborative residency and installation with Johanna Hällsten
St John's Church Bethnal Green London UK
See Chapter 5

B is for Bird C is for City (2013)

Performance
As part of *Liquid Architecture: Sonic City* curated by Philip Samartzis and Kristen Sharp
The Norla Dome at the Mission to Seafarers Melbourne Australia
See Chapter 5

Reading The Birds (2014)

Performance
As part of Trainspotters INC curated by Camilla Hannan
Moreart Moreland City Council Public Art Show Melbourne Australia
See Chapter 5

Midmorning, mild, some clouds (2014)

External installation
Commissioned by The Substation and Hobson's Bay City Council
Newport High Street Melbourne Australia
See Chapter 6

Perch (2014)

Performance collaboration with Vanessa Tomlinson and Alice Hui-Sheng Chang curated by Andrew Tetzlaff
Blindside Melbourne Australia
See Chapter 6

Shooting the Breeze (2015)

Installation
Stephen McLaughlan Gallery Melbourne Australia
See Chapter 6

Appendix 2

Publications

Exhibitions

- 2015 **Shooting the Breeze** Stephen McLaughlan Gallery Melbourne Australia
On Landscape #2 Matèria Gallery Rome Italy
- 2014 **Reading the Birds** as part of *Trainspotters INC* curated by Camilla Hannan and part of MoreArt 2014 Moreland City Council Public Art Show Melbourne Australia
The Sky in a Room curated by Cristiana Bottigella, Sigrun Sverrisdottir and Tisna Westerhof Deptford X Harts Lane Studios London UK
Artist's Books (reprised) coordinated by Sandra Bridie, Craig Burgess and Alice Mathieu, George Paton Gallery, University of Melbourne, Australia
Melbourne SoundWords collaboration with Salomé Voegelin, curated by Danni Zuvela and Joel Stern as part of *Liquid Architecture: The Ear is a Brain* Melbourne Australia
Perch collaboration with Alice Hui-Sheng Chang and Vanessa Tomlinson, curated by Andrew Tetzlaff, Blindside, Melbourne, Australia
Invisible Places Sounding Cities Symposium Listening Room Viseu Portugal
Mid-morning, mild, some clouds *Art in Public Places* The Substation and Hobsons Bay City Council Newport Melbourne Australia
- 2013 **Melbourne Now** as part of *Now Hear This* curated by Philip Samartzis National Gallery of Victoria Melbourne Australia
Substation Contemporary Art Prize 2013 Melbourne Australia
B is for Bird C is for City collaboration with Kate Hunter, Vanessa Chapple and Penny Baron, curated by Philip Samartzis and Kristen Sharp as part of *Liquid Architecture: Sonic City* Melbourne Australia
Calls from Blethenal Green collaboration with Johanna Hällsten St John's Church Bethnal Green London UK
Soond Gaitherin' #1 collaboration with Johanna Hällsten, curated by James Wyness Jedburgh, Scotland
Lightscape Projects 3 Drawing Out Conference RMIT University Melbourne Australia
Field Notes Collaboration with Clyde McGill Trocadero Art Space Melbourne Australia
- 2012 **Accumulate/Proliferate** curated by Deb Bain King c3 Abbotsford Convent Melbourne Australia
The Auspices curated by Jane O'Neill and Dan Mitchell for MoreArt 2012 Moreland City Council Public Art Show Melbourne Australia
A Filth of Starlings Platform Public Art Space Flinders St Station Melbourne Australia
Us and Them-Umwelten Project Space RMIT University Melbourne Australia
Language of Place: Sound Art & the Environment curated by Helen Frosi PVA MediaLab Dorset UK
- 2011 **Auditory Scenes** Alchemy Film Festival Hawick, Scotland
Billboard Art Projects Pontchartrain Expressway East Bound, New Orleans, US

- Sonic Interactions** Liverpool Hope University UK
To the Field and Yonder Gorey Arts and Film Festival, Ireland
birdbrain Screenspace Melbourne AU / Soundfjord London UK / Emerson Galerie Berlin Germany
Animals, People A Shared Environment AASG Conference Exhibition, Queensland College of Art, Griffith University, Brisbane Australia
sforzando! Electroacoustic Music Studies Conference 2011 New York, US
Lightworks Festival of Film Sound New Media Grimsby UK
Exquisite Corpse Soundfjord London UK
- 2010 **Calling the Birds II** Trocadero Art Space, Melbourne, Australia
Alternating Current: Sound Art Now Dragonfly Festival Sweden
Sounds of my Neighbourhood MusikTriennale Koln Germany
Pigeon Post Mailbox 141 Melbourne Australia
billing and cooing Billboard Trocadero Art Space Melbourne Australia
corocoo Anna Leonowens Gallery NSCAD University Halifax NS Canada
- 2009 **Minding Animals** Conference Exhibition The Lock Up Newcastle NSW Australia
Sound Diaries Conference Exhibition Oxford Brookes University Oxford UK
Columba livia Window of 569, Nicholson St. Carlton North, Melbourne, Australia
- 2008 **New Music Series** curated by Kirsten Lavers, Kettles Yard Cambridge UK
Deafnesses Zeppelin Sound Art Festival 08, Barcelona, Spain
Urban Rhythms Giant Ear_New York Society for Acoustic Ecology, NY, US
Soundscape:Journal of Acoustic Ecology Vol7#1, Santa Fe, California,U

Conference papers

- Clover, C and Pyke, S 2014, **Dreamers, splitters and murderous crows: feminist ramifications in attentively responding to the unexpected avian** Feminist Ecologies Symposium University of Melbourne Australia, online at <http://articulation.arts.unimelb.edu.au/?uom_event=feminist-ecologies-in-australia-symposium>.
- Clover, C 2012, **Confab with the Birds: A chatter, a call, a shout, a whisper, a murmur, a mutter, babble, a drone** Regarding the Earth ASLEC-ANZ biennial conference Monash/RMIT Universities Melbourne Australia, online at <<http://arts.monash.edu.au/ecps/conferences/regarding-the-earth/>>.
- Clover, C 2011, **Brainy Birds: Common Urban Birds via Voice and Language** Animalität und Ästhetik Conference Universität der Künste Berlin Germany, online at <<http://arthist.net/archive/1829>>.

Journal articles

- Clover C, 2013, **Listening in the City** *Antennae: The Journal of Nature in Visual Culture* Issue 27 *Bioacoustics* London UK, online at <<http://www.antennae.org.uk/back-issues-2013/4583481046>>.
- Clover C, 2012, **A Storytelling of Ravens** centre page spread *Tierstudien* 01 *Animalität und Ästhetik* edited by Jessica Ullrich pub Neofelis Verlag Berlin Germany, online at <<https://www.neofelis-verlag.de/zeitschriften/tierstudien/012012-animalitaet-und-aesthetik/>>.

Conference Selection Committee Member

- 2014 **Invisible Places Sounding Cities** Viseu Portugal Selection Committee Member, online at <<http://invisibleplaces.org/>>.

Relevant conferences attended during the research period

- 2011 **The Animal Gaze Returned** Sir John Cass School of Art Media and Design, London Metropolitan University UK, online at <<http://www.animalgaze.org/>>.
- 2011 **Unruly Creatures** Natural History Museum London UK, online at <<http://fass.kingston.ac.uk/activities/item.php?updatenum=1627>>.

Appendix 3

Interviews and Reviews

Interviews

2014 Judkins, R **Animal Sounds** *Clear Spot* Resonance 104.4FM London UK

2014 Hannan, C **Sonic City** Interview and live recordings as part of Liquid Architecture14: Sonic City for *Sounds Like Radio* ABC Radio National Australia

2014 Hannan, C **Trainspotters INC** Interview and recordings as part of MoreArt 2014 Moreland City Council Public Art Show. *Max Headroom* on 3RRR 102.7 FM Melbourne Australia

2012 McKerrow, P **Interview with Catherine Clover** Resonance FM London UK

Reviews

2013 Tsitas, E **When L is for listening: Catherine Clover's B is for Bird, C is for City**
Eco-Critical Connections online at
<https://ecocriticalconnections.wordpress.com/2013/09/15/when-l-is-for-listening-catherine-clovers-b-is-for-bird-c-is-for-city/>

2011 Nott, G **Talking with the Birds** Enfield Independent London UK,
online at
http://www.enfieldindependent.co.uk/leisure/exhibitions/9109744.Talking_with_the_birds_it_s_a_hoot_for_sound_artist_Catherine_Clover/

2010 Kenins, L **Winging It** Arts The Coast Halifax Canada, online at
<http://www.thecoast.ca/halifax/winging-it/Content?oid=1536302>

Appendix 4

Essays

Catalogue Essay by Jane O’Neill (2011) for *birdbrain*

New Perspectives in Environmental Art by Linda Williams (2012) for *Us and Them: Umwelten*

Worth more than Words by Shauna Laurel Jones (2013) for *Calls from Blethenal Green*

Hear Us by Amy Sherlock (2013) for *Calls from Blethenal Green*

Catalogue Essay by Andrew Tetzlaff (2014) for *Perch*

Catalogue Essay by Jane O’Neill (2011)

Essay written for *birdbrain* (2011)

Installation and performance with Vanessa Chapple Kate Hunter Penny Baron and Kate Kantor
Soundfjord London UK

Emerson Berlin Germany

Screenspace Melbourne Australia

Catherine Clover weaves together visual and sonic components which are inspired by animals that proliferate in urban environments. Her practice is built upon the intense observation of animals and translates into installations inspired by concrete poetry and conceptual sound art. In a project in Melbourne in 2007, Clover magnified the wings of cicadas to create a wall frieze which echoed the architectural elements of art deco and responded sympathetically to the cornices in the domestic gallery space.ⁱ The frieze was accompanied by a manipulated version of the mating calls of cicadas. More recently, Clover draws upon the tradition of concrete poetry. For an exhibition in 2010 at Trocaderoⁱⁱ, the artist recorded local bird cries which were then synchronised with the equivalent text on screen. In both instances, we are prompted to re-evaluate our awareness of the sounds of the animals we live with.

This exhibition is devoted to Seagulls and Corvids (the crow family). Clover is drawn to the ubiquity of these animals; she is fascinated by their resilience and the close proximity of their lives to human lives. As an artist “involved in a research cluster that focuses on art and environmental sustainability”ⁱⁱⁱ, Clover is concerned not with the species on the verge of extinction, rather the survivors who thrive on the manmade environment.

In preparation for this exhibition, the artist created a number of text pieces where she transcribed the sounds of birds in various environments. In the book entitled *Tell Me Something: A Field Guide to the Voices of an Unkindness of Ravens*, Clover records the patterns of noises between local birds in much the same way as a playwright composes a play, or a musician composes a song. The artist carefully sets the scene by documenting the interior sounds of her home, for example, “Ambient noise: train horn chord in

middle distance, bubbling from fish tank, Kitty lapping milk in laundry, traffic”^{iv} and combines this experience with the outside calls of birds, particularly ravens. The sounds of the birds are meticulously documented, so that the glossary includes a long list of musical terms; “moderato, staccato, tranquillo” which would more commonly describe an opera. An appreciation for these sounds forms the artist’s desire to amplify these aspects of our everyday sonic experience which are usually overlooked.

Throughout the course of this project, Clover became intrigued by the way these birds elicit such extreme reactions from humans. She commissioned written responses to seagulls and corvids, and used these as material for the current exhibition. Ten writers contributed text, and their stories vary from fear to intrigue. We hear in the texts insistent comparisons between birds and humans; the way seagulls nest in the same place for hundreds of years, the way their “wing bones (are) jointed like a miniature human arm”, and the gaze between human and animal.^v Here, more keenly than ever, the artist uses birds to assault our pre-conceptions about animals which are deemed to be pests.

The immersive experience of the exhibition might be described as a sonic collage - it includes the sounds of birds, the sounds of humans mimicking birds and the sounds of humans reading stories and poems about these birds. The recordings intersect with and bounce off the visual component which is a stark black and white animation of the written sounds, in Clover’s trademark Garamond font. The bird cries are transcribed according to the language of the field guide. Upon reading the sounds of birds in our own language, the viewer is immediately drawn to consider how we interpret language. It is difficult not to read the text without associating them with speech; the “wah wah wah” for example, reminds us of a newborn’s cries. The textual interpretation also deepens the sense of how inadequately we ascribe words to sounds.

Given the current creation of an immersive multi-media experience, we might be surprised to learn that the artist initially started her practice as a landscape painter. Yet, this exhibition might also be defined as a conceptual landscape. Just as Ian Burn prompted new ways of looking at the landscape by overlaying text on traditional landscape paintings, Clover too, incites a new appreciation of an everyday suburban experience.

Throughout the course of her research, the artist has revealed some fascinating observations. In her travels, for example, Clover has observed how blackbirds are much louder in Melbourne than those in Berlin, and she cites the dominant voices of Australian native birds as a reason. We might well ask what makes the artist’s ears so attuned to the sounds of the Australian suburban landscape. In the opening text to the Unkindness of Ravens, we find a clue. When listing the native and migrant animals living in her suburb, Clover, originally from the UK is also listed as a migrant. Perhaps it is this enduring association with the Australian landscape as an outsider, coupled with early experience as a landscape painter that has led to this significant body of work.

Jane O’Neill
October 2011

New perspectives in environmental art by Linda Williams (2012)

Essay written for *Us and Them – Umwelten*

Group exhibition co-curated by Catherine Clover and Jen Rae with Steve Baker, Yifang Lu, Rebecca Mayo, Fleur Summers, Debbie Symons, Jasmine Targett

The concept of *umwelten* is a term derived from the work of the early 20th Century biologist and ethologist Jakob von Uexküll. In the German *umwelt* means 'surrounding world', or 'self-centred world' and for von Uexküll *umwelten* conveyed the idea of the vast range of creatures occupying worlds whose meaning could be understood from their specific point of perspective. Within myriad *umwelten* then, diverse creatures experience their *umwelt* differently, yet von Uexküll's findings led him to conclude that communication, or semiosis, was a process of interaction common to the *umwelten* of all organisms: whether human or non-human. The study of these processes of communication formed the basis of biosemiotics, of which perhaps one of the best-known studies is the 'information dance' of bees.

Performed in order to communicate to others in the hive on how they might find sources of pollen or nectar, each dance has been shown to convey surprisingly precise directions performed by individual bees based on their specific experiences of the *umwelt*¹, yet engaged with shared social codes of communication. They convey quite complex information about the specific distance and direction to pollen, nectar or water referenced through the position of the sun.

This code of shared information can, however, vary according to the experience of others in the hive, as Dorion Sagan² notes in his introduction to von Uexküll's *A Foray into the Worlds of Animals and Humans*³, when the bees return to perform the 'information' dance the intensity of their communication depends considerably on how enthusiastic the others are feeling at that moment to receive the information. Hence the dancing bees are not simply programmed like little machines to 'deliver' information, but rather participate in complex and subtle forms of social communication and contextual meaning. Thus the biosemiotic process for bees is deeply relational, and for von Uexküll this was a process common to all organic life, including the life of creatures we have largely held to be mundane such as the flies, grasshoppers, ticks or even simple sea limpets occupying *umwelten* that von Uexküll brought alive into the anthropocentric limits of human awareness.

In the context of global ecological deterioration, not least in the lives of bees, it is not difficult to see the appeal of von Uexküll's work on the experiential worlds of non-human animals, and the artists in this exhibition have recognised how fruitful a foray into the worlds of nonhuman others can be for the human imagination. The title chosen by the artists: *Us and Them: Umwelten* refers to imagined reality of these other worlds, whilst also acknowledging the inescapable context of the human world, and hence, in other words, to the 'us' in the title, and by implied extension to the anthropogenic causes of detrimental change to the fragile ecological relations between all *umwelten*.

The artworks conveying the complex interactions between such *umwelten* are presented here in a diverse range of media including the photographs of English artist Steve Baker taken from his pushbike in his *Roadside Series* (2011). The view of the road is closer from a bike than a car, and this perspective is evident in the glimpses of the shadow of a bicycle wheel or edge of a pedal in the photos. From Baker's world view, as it were, from the bike, differences in the temporal scale of fast moving cars as against the more lumbering gait of animals is also thrown into relief. The slower cyclical movement of organic motion is also conveyed through the repetitive loop of images that records instances of the violent collision of these adjacent lifeworlds on English country lanes. We view these collisions from Baker's perspective, which unlike the typical exclusion of the human presence in canonical landscape photography, is represented as standing inside human spheres of agency yet is sufficiently detached to bear witness to the impact of the human presence.

Taiwanese artist Yifang Lu presents images of domesticated animals painted on Perspex and mirrors in ways that draw attention to the opacity of paint whilst still allowing the transparency or reflexivity of the ground to call attention to the context of the constructed human world. For domesticated creatures of any kind the human world is transcribed consistently across their experience of *umwelt*, often from the moment of conception to death, yet these are non-human worlds that interconnect with ours on a

daily basis, and in this sense are uniquely well placed to remind us of the interdependencies of the human and non-human worlds.

In *A Storytelling of Ravens* (2012) Catherine Clover (UK/Australia) uses the built environment of the gallery, particularly the large windows facing onto Cardigan Street in Melbourne's inner city, to draw attention to the proximity of the human world and the worlds of wild ravens (*Corvus mellori*) who also live along this street. Clover's work comprises vinyl lettering covering the window and legible both from indoors and the street. The text is based on the artist's numerous encounters with ravens in the months leading up to the exhibition in May 2012. It refers to their vocal calls and bodily movements, and to the weather that shapes their worlds. Clover 'translates' the evocative calls of ravens into text by means of the phonetics used by naturalists which is then combined with audio works that, like the text, may be interpreted indoors and also on the street – and hence, into the *umwelten* of the ravens themselves. As such, this work is highly innovative insofar as it extends its semiotic range beyond the human world.

Debbie Symons, on the other hand, has the human sphere and the anthropogenic causes of ecological degradation clearly in her sights in her video *World Species Market* (2012). Symons co-opts the format of a share market board by replacing financial data with data from the IUCN 'Red List' of endangered species from the years 2000 to 2011. By 2011, the Red List had identified a further 8,524 species since the 2000 list, which represents an increase of a serious threat to 2.1 entire species each day. Symons' unemotional and graphic visual approach is strategic insofar as it emulates the dry presentation of data in global market fluctuations in ways that evoke sense of potential collapse in the barriers between the abstracted world of capital and organic *umwelten*.

Canadian Métis artist Jen Rae extends the artistic adaptation of contemporary technology in a large QR Code installed on the gallery wall in flocking fibres in *Awaken! Flag* (2012). Rae's QR Code can be accessed by a mobile phone and QR reader/scanner in order to read the message behind the flock wallpaper to draw attention to an 'us and them' scenario: those equipped with technological knowhow and those who are not. This in turn refers to the content of the artwork, which draws parallels between artists as translators and Jen Rae's understanding of her Métis cultural heritage and its alternative worldview to mainstream western culture.

Fleur Summers' biomimetic sculptural works *Feelings* (2012) are comprised of common, industrial objects. Inspired by Darwin's studies of the barnacle, these imaginary creatures mimic the biosemiotic processes of tiny biological colonies whose 'antennae' reach out from their *umwelt* to probe the ecological complexities of the wider world. In this case, a wider world inhabited humans whose movements interact with these magnified worlds of invertebrates in ways that draw our attention to the alternative realities of other lifeforms. Jasmine Targett's *Indivisible* (2012) also magnifies fragments from different worlds, in this case through large photographic prints of microscopic images of a single human cell and an animal cell. Working with Dr Judy Callaghan from Monash Micro Imaging, the way Targett's images are juxtaposed acknowledges the parallels between cellular appearance and function in humans and animals whilst also serving as a reminder of the fragility of ecological connections and interdependency where radical change in one *umwelt* has the potential to reverberate across complex systems.

While most of the artists in this exhibition focus on the intersecting worlds of human and animal, Rebecca Mayo extends the notion of 'Us and Them' to plant species, and to the invasive weeds introduced by humans to local ecologies that have evolved over time into complex, finely balanced biological systems. Mayo's *Gorse Gloves* (2012) are pairs of connected gloves stained with the gorse that has invaded the local environments along the Merri Creek. They refer quite literally to the human hand of intervention in the introduction of non-indigenous species, yet also attest to the role of human hands in environmental restoration work.

Like all the works in this exhibition, Mayo's gloves are also a reminder of the hand of the artist in revealing the semiotic connections between *umwelten* - which is to say, between us and the myriad others whose world views are connected to ours, yet in all their wonderful variety are acknowledged for their indelible differences.

Linda Williams
April 2012

Endnotes:

1 This can be seen on <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-7ijL-g4jHg>

2 The son of well-known astronomer Carl Sagan and the gifted biologist Lynn Margulis.

3 First published in the German in 1934.

Worth more than Words by Shauna Laurel Jones (2013)

Essay written for *Calls from Blethenal Green* (2013)

Collaborative residency and installation with Johanna Hällsten

St John's Church Bethnal Green London UK

What distinguished man from animals was the human capacity for symbolic thought, the capacity which was inseparable from the development of language in which words were not mere signals, but signifiers of something other than themselves. Yet the first symbols were animals. What distinguished men from animals was born of their relationship with them.

—John Berger, 'Why Look at Animals?' (1977)

To begin with René Descartes would be a predictable place to begin. In our present-day dealings with nonhuman animals, there is no denying the tremendous influence of that Enlightenment philosopher who asserted so authoritatively that animals are little more than reflex-driven machines, incapable of feelings or conscious thought. Animals' lack of language, Descartes argued, was proof of their lack of reason and therefore their lack of moral consequence. However, I would prefer to begin with a different legacy—one contrary to the Cartesian but equally persistent in its own way—the inheritance of the Ancient Roman auspices: seers who interpreted divine meaning from the flight or calls of birds. Though earlier civilizations were also known to have observed birds as a form of prophecy, the Romans regarded the practice as a veritable science, classifying every sound and motion of avian species from ravens to chickens as possessing a precise meaning. While it could be argued that the auspices had as much of a mechanistic view of their subjects as Descartes did—after all, their birds were not delivering their own messages but rather those of the gods—their practice resonates with the underlying belief that the actions and vocalizations of birds and other animals are relevant and meaningful, and that their meaning is accessible if we humans can only crack the code.

This spirit of the auspices (from whom the word *auspicious* derives) endures today in countless individuals who live, work, or concern themselves with animals. Many of us treat it as common sense that the creatures around us communicate their feelings and desires as plainly as our own kind does; we speak to our pets believing they understand, and we learn to interpret their yaps and yawps, believing *we* understand. Modern science, which has never given animals the benefit of the doubt, has reduced such common sense to anthropomorphism, the (irrational) attribution of human traits and behaviours to nonhuman animals. The position of the mainstream scientific establishment still seems to be that the sophistication of human communication sets us apart and above other animals thanks to the link between language and cognition: language alone enables us to think, to construct identities, to develop and transmit culture, to gain insight into the subjective minds of others.

Increasingly, scientists are catching up with common sense and recognizing the diverse communicative achievements of a growing litany of species, achievements that are indicative of symbolic language. Biologists have demonstrated that the alarm calls of prairie dogs contain descriptive vocabularies with

around one hundred words, such that they can alert others in their colony to the presence of different types and characteristics of predators. Bottlenose dolphins have been shown to identify individuals within their pods with their own signature whistles, the same way we humans identify ourselves with names; recently a similar feat has been recognized in spectacled parrotlets. Even insects such as honeybees possess the gift of language, reporting specific information about food sources through the symbolic movements that comprise their waggle dance.

The more that biologists, ethologists, psychologists, and anthropologists listen to animals on their own terms, the more they (like the average pet owner) are able to decipher. The linguistic difference will inevitably be accepted as one of degree rather than kind. Thus the Enlightenment view of language as a demonstration of human uniqueness and moral superiority over all other living beings—and with that superiority, justification of the exploitation of animals and their natural habitats—will become harder to defend.

And yet, as ethologist Jonathan Balcombe has noted, pioneering studies of animal communication in recent years tend to reveal less about the true nature of animals' intellect than they reveal our own lingering reluctance to acknowledge animals as thoughtful, communicative beings. He writes, 'It is only because our science has recently begun to allow the once heretical notion that animals think that studies like [these] are being done' (Balcombe 2010: 88). For some of us who have known all along that animals think, feel, and talk, there is something dissatisfying in allowing the last word to go to science: science, which has for so long been called upon to pardon the mistreatment of pigs and chickens confined to battery cages, to justify the culling of elephants and wolves, to promote the abuses of rats and chimps within its own laboratories. And though science may unlock the meaning of the songbird's call, it will never measure the inherent value of the songbird's melodies.

For that, we must turn instead to art, which has a unique capacity to posit the animal not as an object of study but as a subject in its own right. From Albrecht Dürer's sensitively painted portrait of a young screech owl (*Little Owl*, 1508) to video artist Bill Viola's slow zoom into the mysterious depths of an owl's eye (*I Do Not Know What It Is I Am Like*, 1986), artists who turn a compassionate gaze towards animals have the power to honour the presence of their innermost experiences. (And to different ends: Dürer's portrait penetrates his owl's soul, while Viola's video reveals his owl's impenetrability. But both works acknowledge the individual, the sentient, the *inherently valuable* underneath the coat of feathers.) Such engagement in cross-species intersubjectivity—the collaborative construction of meaning by two individuals recognizing each other's consciousness—suggests that a shared language is not necessary for an empathetic relationship.

As John Berger proposes in the epigraph above, the 'uniqueness' of human awareness and human language has always relied upon the animal other. Catherine Clover and Johanna Hällsten, who turn to language to celebrate the continuity between species, likewise honour the reliance of the human community of Bethnal Green upon its avian neighbours in the formation of local identity—and vice versa. While pioneering biologists decode the chirps and caws of chaffinches and crows, perhaps there is something equally pioneering in appreciating the *qualities* of animal communication without understanding the content. Clover and Hällsten's engagement with Bethnal Green's birds speaks to the 'caring, attentive regard, [the] "being with"' animals that anthropologist Tim Ingold sees as necessary for the reversal of a contemporary ecological crisis brought about by self-imposed, scientific distancing from other forms of life. Their work also serves as a reminder that we need not look upon other creatures across an abyss of lonely silence: even without words, we can learn to sing each other's song.

Shauna Laurel Jones (2013)

Hear Us by Amy Sherlock (2013)

Essay written for *Calls from Blethenal Green* (2013)

Collaborative residency and installation with Johanna Hällsten

St John's Church Bethnal Green London UK

*Hear us, you who are no more than leaves always falling, you mortals benighted by nature,
You enfeebled and powerless creatures of earth always haunting a world of mere shadows,
Entities without wings, insubstantial as dreams, you ephemeral things, you human beings:
Turn your minds to our words, our ethereal words, for the words of the birds last forever!*
- Aristophanes, *The Birds*, lines 685–8

When we say that someone is in cloud cuckoo land, we mean that they're dreaming, that they have their head in *the* clouds, that they are hoping for or expecting something unattainable or unrealistic. It is a reproach of sorts, applicable equally to the naively idealistic and an altogether more unhinged form of delusion. The phrase comes to English via the translation of an Ancient Greek comedy, *The Birds*, in which two Athenians, tired of the cities of men transform into birds, and build a city in the sky for their species between Olympus and the world of men. Both 'land' and 'cloud': the very name is oxymoronic, faintly absurd. This is a comedy, after all, and he who believes that escaping to a new life could be so straightforward must be playing the jester or the fool. Untethered, floating between worlds like the clouds of its namesake, Cloud Cuckoo Land is a projection of the utopian promise of migration in all its elusive, impossible unreachability.

Birds have a troubled or ambiguous domesticity – particularly the cuckoo, a sly nest thief who brings disarray into the family setting – that mocks the idea of a cloud homeland. As much as the bird in flight is emblematic of a certain unhindered freedom, the caged bird, such as those traded for so long in Bethnal Green, is a particular kind of tragedy. Nobody wants their wings clipped. Migrating birds are never quite 'at home,' given the great periods of time that they must spend on the wing, despite a strong homing tendency that leads them to travel back to the same places year after year, following patterns that pre-exist and extend beyond the lifetime of individual animals. A migrant domesticity is a sense of always being out of place, which is both a freedom and its own limitation.

Bird migration, though still being understood, is a social or communal phenomenon, that, were we discussing humans, we might go so far as to call cultural. Though we don't generally speak in those terms, perhaps because in spite of all that singing, speaking is one of the things that still separates birds from men. And this in spite of all their singing! A quivering complexity of expression to which our own music has long owed a debt of inspiration. Many birds, including the cuckoo itself, are onomatopoeically named (or were, though often the altogether more skittish evolution of human pronunciation has made them a gradually more distant form of mimicry), almost as if we learnt to name the sound first as a distant, disembodied voice, still unable to see the birds through the trees. His distinctive call provides the refrain for one of the oldest known English folk songs, 'Sumer Is Icumen In', thought to date from the 13th century: 'Loudly sing cuc-koo.' Birdsong has always been richly significant or symbolic in human culture: in much of Europe, the cuckoo is still considered the harbinger of Spring, to this day it remains a tradition in the UK to pen a letter to the editor of the Times newspaper to report the first heard cuckoo call of the year (normally in mid to late April), while in Russia there is a popular belief that the number of cuckoo calls one hears represents the number of years left to live. As a form of communication, birdsong has long been appropriated by humans as a way of expressing something about ourselves.

I am told that birds have long been of interest in debates over animal culture, because their songs develop regional differences, dialects. Which might lead one to ask: would they understand one another? If, say, a chaffinch migrating to Britain from Northern Europe for the winter passed through the East End of London, would its calls be registered by native species? Would it be recognised as the same species at all? Voice is inextricably bound up with questions of identity and subjectivity. It is a dual affirmation of place – the assertive 'I am here,' that always contains the trace, more or less faint, of an 'I am from here'. 'This is me.' Speaking myself into being. Forming these thoughts, which are my own; *articulating myself*. Access to one's own voice is important – this is why questions of agency or of recognition are so often phrased in the language of 'giving voice to' or 'being heard'. The Athenians in *The Birds* are helped on their way by the Hoopoe, who in another classical myth was King Tereus, transformed by the Gods as punishment for raping his wife's sister and cutting out her tongue.

Tereus' crime is both the violation and the silencing demanded by it: they are two sides of the same coin, and one completes the other. (In the myth, the sister is turned into a Nightingale, divine reparation restoring her with the most beautiful song of all.)

How strange that something so fleeting and insubstantial, as slight as a quiver of air, should anchor us so deeply in ourselves. The voice, after all, holds on to nothing and cannot be held; passes through us, out and away, in constant motion.

And, of course, one is always speaking to someone. Words may come from within, but they are projected outwards and onwards. They ask for an audience. I speak myself into being only because someone else is there to acknowledge me: 'I am here; hear me.' One cannot sing in a vacuum, after all. The voice reminds us of our vulnerability: in that moment in which we call out and address someone without certainty of response, we expose ourselves absolutely, our own needs and insufficiencies. Too-wit; too-woo. We are social animals, and what we might call society or community is this loud, chattering melody of call and response, call and response, where the words that are being said sometimes do not matter so much as the fact that someone is listening.

Calling from Blethenal Green: by re-occupying this name long passed out of use, lost in the chitter-chatter of the years, Johanna Hällsten and Catherine Clover's project proposes a Cloud Cuckoo Land of sorts, inhabiting St. John on Bethnal Green with the passing immateriality of voices to explore both the utopian potential of dialogue and its fragility and limitations.

Amy Sherlock (2013)

Catalogue Essay by Andrew Tetzlaff (2014)

Essay written for *Perch* (2014)

Performance collaboration with Vanessa Tomlinson and Alice Hui-Sheng Chang curated by Andrew Tetzlaff

Blindside Melbourne Australia

“Over there... maybe”

Clover gestures at a tiny pinprick of grey on a sheet metal roof. It's hard to tell if it is a patch-up roofing job gone wrong, a bit of floating city litter that has settled or indeed the subject of our hunt: a pigeon.

Another speck floats over to join the first and together the two begin a rather recognizable bumbling that confirms her initial speculation.

From the seventh story of Melbourne's Nicholas Building, one has a fantastic view of the city centre—complete with historic buildings, meandering urbanites and literally hundreds of birds. Indeed the view is so good that BLINDSIDE once boarded up the window in silent hopes that its patrons would reflect on the artwork in the gallery with as much esteem as they do the belvedere.

Across the years many projects have referenced this distinctive feature¹, looking outward as a means of inspecting our personal and cultural notions of landscape, of seeing, and

¹ *A day, unsung*, 2013; *Lines of Flight*, 2012; *Interventions in the Present Moment*, 2012; *Objects in Space: Insides Outside*, 2008; *Black Swans, Red Herrings and White Elephants*, 2008; etc.

of our city. In this exhibition, however, BLINDSIDE is more than just a room with a view; it is a perch from which to consider our avian neighbours, their sky-mapped worlds and complex societies.

As it gets later, our conversation grows increasingly lateral. “I’d heard somewhere that birds use highways and even lighthouses to guide their migrations.”

“Well they certainly use the streets to get around Melbourne. You can see them over there, flying along above the cars.” From here I’m lost in thought again, re-imagining Melbourne as an invisible grid of rivers built from wind currents. Cath breaks my reverie by pointing towards the cathedral.

“I’ve some recordings I took from around those benches.”

“Huh?” I crane my neck to see.

“Just down *there*—along Swanston Street. I might use them... Birds, conversations, tram bells...”

Birds and bells... it’s like in that nature documentary where lyrebirds compose their songs from the sounds of their environment—mimicking everything from other birds to camera shutters, car alarms and even chainsaws². All of these recording processes seem remarkably familiar; apparently scientists from the States have found some interesting similarities between how both songbirds and humans learn to speak³.

“Say, do you reckon these bird whistles actually work?” There is a deep sonorous inhale followed by a duck-like “Ggguik, ggggh. ... Ggghuuuick!”

As if in answer a few minutes later, a sparrow beak clacks against the windowpane.

Catherine Clover’s work is an ongoing investigation into birdcalls and behavior. From a skin-deep glance one can see her interests in field recording and soundscapes, of itemizing the sonic environment and translating sounds into onomatopoeic representations. The physical works are a bit slippery; for instance, artworks like the one overleaf exist somewhere in form between authentic sound (as it was expressed), heard phoneme (as it was translated into text), visual representation (as it starkly appears in Garamond), and imagined sound (as it would be re-articulated by a reader). The openness in these works offers us a space for a shift to occur; *bird* is no longer a flat surface—no longer a four-letter word, a caged pet, the main course for dinner or a noisy inner-city pest. Instead it is an opportunity for curiosity. The further we go with Clover on her exploration into the avian *unwelt*, the closer we come to understanding something that is far more human and far more primal—as if the tweets, chirps and squawks can be used to decipher something very telling about the nature of language, listening, learning and communication.

“Did you know that they’ve found out that ‘huh’ is something of a universal word? Apparently almost every language on the planet has something like it... and most of them sound the same. ⁴”

² *The Life of Birds* 1998, Documentary Film, BBC Bristol in association with PBS, UK. directed by Joanna Sarsby

³ Margoliash D and Schmidt MF 2009, ‘Sleep, off-line processing, and vocal learning’, *Brain & Language*, vol 115 (2010), pp. 45-58

⁴ Dingemans M 2013, ‘Is “Huh?” a Universal Word? Conversational Infrastructure and the Convergent Evolution of Linguistic Items’, *PLoS One*, 10 Nov 2013

The thought puts two very different sounds in my head simultaneously: the characteristic lick in Miles Davis' *So What* and a sound performance I once heard that featured guttural pre-language vocalisation. The combination is a bit weird, but there's certainly something to that fine line between instinctive grunt and articulated word.

Clover's artwork is not only interested in and composed of language; the installation is quite literally a text to be read—or perhaps, to be a bit closer to the mark, a conversation to be had. Clover presents us with works that are ready to be activated: stations of sound, text and object filled with discursive potential. There are words to be sounded out, ornithological stories to be translated and sonic thoughts to be imagined. As such, the exhibition is whole but not complete without an active participant, or in this case *two* active participants: extended vocalist Alice Hui-Sheng Chang and percussionist Vanessa Tomlinson.

Alice and Vanessa's practices may be diverse in form, but their chosen instruments are equally direct, immediate and versatile. One can hardly think of anything more primal or base than these two mediums—of taps, thumps, shrieks and groans. Despite this rawness though, both also have an almost limitless capacity and an exquisite delicacy to their tonal range, timbre and sonic texture. Fittingly, these artists will perform a collaborative response to Clover's "artwork score", completing it and creating something that is half playful talkback, half conceptual experiment and half collaborative sandbox.

Across the way, over on the roof, the two pigeons we were surveying earlier punctuate the end of our conversation—together they shuffle to the gutter ledge and haplessly fall over it, catching themselves in flight.

Andrew Tetzlaff, 2014

ⁱ Catherine Clover exhibited at Austral Avenue in Melbourne in 2007.

ⁱⁱ Trocadero is an artist-run-initiative in Footscray, Melbourne.

ⁱⁱⁱ In conversation with the artist, August 2011.

^{iv} Tell me Something: A field guide to the Voices of an Unkindness of Ravens

^v Andrew Whitehouse, Clare Halstead, Jessica Ullrich

Appendix 5

Catalogues

birdbrain (2011)

Us and Them: Umwelten (2012)

Calls from Blethenal Green (2013) (draft)

Perch (2014)

This catalogue was printed in conjunction with the exhibition

Saturday 21st February 8am Elizabeth Street Coburg

Single raven close by. Cool, grey, siren in distance.

wah wah wah

Mezzo forte secco

wah wah wah

wa-wa wah wah

wah wah wah

wah wah wah waaahhh

Soft wail, decreasing in pitch

birdbrain
Catherine Clover
9 -26 November 2011
Screen Space

Opening performance

Penny Baron, Vanessa Chapple, Kate Hunter and Kate Kantor read and mimic from
Tell Me Something: A Field Guide to the Voices of an Unkindness of Ravens
by Catherine Clover, pages 18, 30, 36-37, 40 and 41.

With sincere thanks to the following people
for their generous contributions to this project

Performers and Readers: Melissa Alley, Penny Baron, Vanessa Chapple,
Kate Hunter, Kate Kantor, Yifang Lu and Mateja Simenko.

Writers: Giovanni Aloj, Steve Baker, Geraldine Barlow, Rene ten Bos,
Michele Faguet, Clare Halstead, Cathy Lane, Jane O'Neill, Robin Tassie,
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SCREEN SPACE

birdbrain

Catherine Clover

eeeeeeep

hup

ah

Catherine Clover weaves together visual and sonic components inspired by animals that proliferate in urban environments. Her practice is built upon the intense observation of animals and translates into installations inspired by concrete poetry and conceptual sound art. For a project in Melbourne in 2007, Clover magnified the wings of cicadas to create a wall frieze which echoed the architectural elements of art deco and responded sympathetically to the cornices in the domestic gallery space.ⁱ The frieze was accompanied by a manipulated version of the mating calls of cicadas. More recently, Clover draws upon the tradition of concrete poetry, where the visual placement of text on the screen is a crucial aspect of the work. For an exhibition in 2010 at Trocaderoⁱⁱ, the artist recorded local bird cries and synchronised them with the equivalent text on screen. In both instances, we are prompted to re-evaluate our awareness of the sounds of the animals we live with.

This exhibition is devoted to seagulls and corvids (the crow family). Clover is drawn to the ubiquity of these animals; she is fascinated by their resilience and the close proximity of their lives to human lives. As an artist “involved in a research cluster that focuses on art and environmental sustainability”ⁱⁱⁱ, Clover is concerned not with species on the verge of extinction, but with the survivors who thrive in the man-made environment.

In preparation for this exhibition, the artist created a number of text pieces by transcribing the sounds of birds in various environments. In the book entitled *Tell Me Something: A Field Guide to the Voices of an Unkindness of Ravens*, Clover records the patterns of noises between local birds in much the same way as a playwright composes a play, or a musician composes a song. The artist carefully sets the scene by documenting the interior sounds of her home —for example, “Ambient noise: train horn chord in middle distance, bubbling from fish tank, Kitty lapping milk in laundry, traffic”^{iv}. Clover then combines this experience with the outside calls of birds, particularly ravens. The sounds of the birds are meticulously documented, so that the glossary includes a long list of musical terms (“moderato, staccato, tranquillo”) which would more commonly describe an opera. An appreciation of these sounds reflects the artist’s desire to amplify these aspects of our everyday sonic experience which are usually overlooked.

During the course of this project, Clover became intrigued by the way these birds elicit such extreme reactions from humans. She commissioned written responses to seagulls and corvids, and used these as material for the current exhibition. Ten writers contributed text, and their stories’ themes vary from fear to intrigue. We hear in the texts insistent comparisons between birds and humans; the way seagulls nest in the same place for hundreds of years, the way their “wing bones (are) jointed like a miniature human arm”, and the gaze between human and animal.^v Here, more keenly than ever, the artist uses birds to assault our pre-conceptions about animals which are deemed to be pests.

The immersive experience of the exhibition might be described as a sonic collage - it includes the sounds of birds, the sounds of humans mimicking birds and the sounds of humans reading stories. The recordings intersect with and bounce off the visual component, which is a stark black and white animation of the written sounds, set in Clover’s trademark Garamond font. The bird cries are transcribed according to the language of the field guide. Upon reading the sounds of birds in our own language, the viewer is immediately drawn to consider how we interpret language. It is difficult to read the onomatopoeic transcriptions without associating them with speech; the “wah wah wah”, for example, reminds us of a newborn’s cries. The textual interpretation also deepens the sense of how inadequately we ascribe words to sounds.

Given the current creation of an immersive multi-media experience, we might be surprised to learn that the artist initially started her practice as a landscape painter. Yet, this exhibition might also be defined as a conceptual landscape. Just as Ian Burn prompted new ways of looking at the landscape by overlaying text on traditional landscape paintings, Clover too incites a new appreciation of an everyday suburban experience.

Throughout the course of her research, the artist has revealed some fascinating observations. In her travels, for example, Clover has observed how blackbirds are much louder in Melbourne than those in Berlin, and she cites the dominant voices of Australian native birds as a reason. We might well ask what makes the artist’s ears so attuned to the sounds of the Australian suburban landscape. We find a clue in the opening text of *Tell Me Something*. When listing the native and migrant animals living in her suburb, Clover, originally from the UK, is also listed as a migrant. Perhaps it is this enduring association with the Australian landscape as an outsider, coupled with early experience as a landscape painter that has led to this significant body of work.

Jane O’Neill
October 2011

ⁱ Catherine Clover exhibited at Austral Avenue in Melbourne in 2007.

ⁱⁱ Trocadero is an artist-run-initiative in Footscray, Melbourne.

ⁱⁱⁱ In conversation with the artist, August 2011.

^{iv} Catherine Clover, *Tell Me Something: A Field Guide to the Voices of an Unkindness of Ravens*, p.9

^v Andrew Whitehouse, Clare Halstead, Jessica Ullrich from their contributions to the text employed for this installation.



Cover
Rebecca Mayo
Fieldnotes (Gorse gloves) (detail), 2012
Artist book

Outside Pages, Left to Right
Debbie Symons
World Species Market (still), 2012
Digital video

Catherine Clover
Excerpt from artist's book *Tell Me Something: A Field Guide to the Voices of an Unkindness of Ravens*, 2011
LED digital billboard projection
Pontchartrain Expressway New Orleans USA

Yifang Lu
Untitled, 2011
Oil paint on perspex

Steve Baker
Roadside XIII, 2011
Photograph

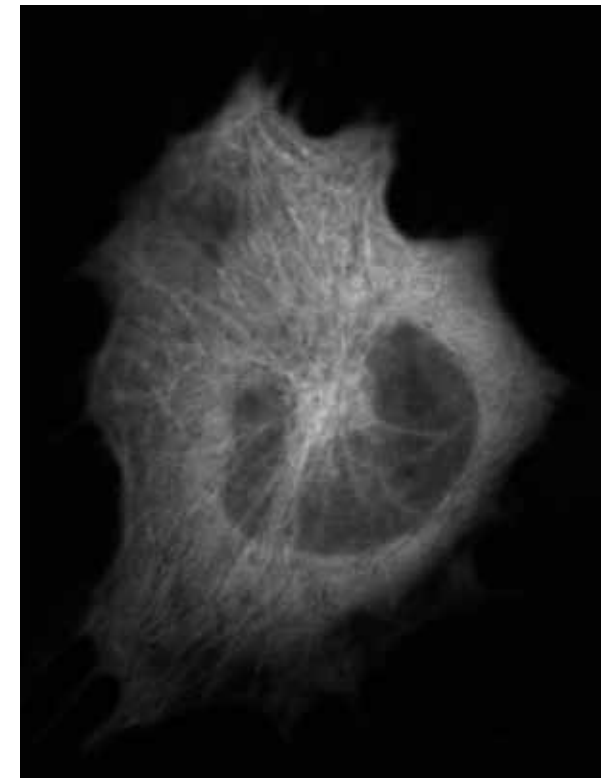
Jasmine Targett
Indivisible: Portrait of Humanity, 2012
Photographic print

<http://usandthem-umwelten.blogspot.com.au/>

 **PROJECT SPACE/SPARE ROOM**
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 **PROJECT SPACE/SPARE ROOM**

Us and Them – Umwelten

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CATHERINE CLOVER [Co-curator]
YIFANG LU
REBECCA MAYO

JEN RAE [Co-curator]
FLEUR SUMMERS
DEBBIE SYMONS
JASMINE TARGETT

Essay by LINDA WILLIAMS
To be opened by LINDA WILLIAMS and KATE RIGBY

FRIDAY 11 MAY TO THURSDAY 7 JUNE 2012
OPENING THURSDAY 10 MAY 5-7PM
FLOOR TALK THURSDAY 24 MAY 1-1.30PM

**New perspectives in environmental art:
Us and Them - Umwelten**

The concept of *umwelten*, is a term derived from the work of the early 20th Century biologist and ethologist Jakob von Uexküll. In the German *umwelt* means 'surrounding world', or 'self-centred world' and for von Uexküll *umwelten* conveyed the idea of the vast range of creatures occupying worlds whose meaning could be understood from their specific point of perspective. Within myriad *umwelten* then, diverse creatures experience their *umwelt* differently, yet von Uexküll's findings led him to conclude that communication, or semiosis, was a process of interaction common to the *umwelten* of all organisms: whether human or non-human. The study of these processes of communication formed the basis of biosemiotics, of which perhaps one of the best-known studies is the 'information dance' of bees.

Performed in order to communicate to others in the hive on how they might find sources of pollen or nectar, each dance has been shown to convey surprisingly precise directions performed by individual bees based on their specific experiences of the *umwelt*¹, yet engaged with shared social codes of communication. They convey quite complex information about the specific distance and direction to pollen nectar or water referenced through the position of the sun.

This code of shared information can, however, vary according to the experience of others in the hive, as Dorion Sagan² notes in his introduction to von Uexküll's *A Foray into the Worlds of Animals and Humans*³, when the bees return to perform the 'information' dance the intensity of their communication depends considerably on how enthusiastic the others are feeling at that moment to receive the information. Hence the dancing bees are not simply programmed like little machines to 'deliver' information, but rather participate in

complex and subtle forms of social communication and contextual meaning. Thus the biosemiotic process for bees is deeply relational, and for von Uexküll this was a process common to all organic life, including the life of creatures we have largely held to be mundane such as the flies, grasshoppers, ticks or even simple sea limpets occupying *umwelten* that von Uexküll brought alive into the anthropocentric limits of human awareness.

In the context of global ecological deterioration, not least in the lives of bees, it is not difficult to see the appeal of von Uexküll's work on the experiential worlds of non-human animals and the artists in this exhibition have recognised how fruitful a foray into the worlds of non-human others can be for the human imagination. The title chosen by the artists: *Us and Them: Umwelten* refers to imagined reality of these other worlds, whilst also acknowledging the inescapable context of the human world, and hence, in other words, to the 'us' in the title, and by implied extension to the anthropogenic causes of detrimental change to the fragile ecological relations between all *umwelten*.

The artworks conveying the complex interactions between such *umwelten* are presented here in a diverse range of media including the photographs of English artist **Steve Baker** taken from his pushbike in his *Roadside Series* (2011). The view of the road is closer from a bike than a car, and this perspective is evident in the glimpses of the shadow of a bicycle wheel or edge of a pedal in the photos. From Baker's world view, as it were, from the bike, differences in the temporal scale of fast moving cars as against the more lumbering gait of animals is also thrown into relief. The slower cyclical movement of organic motion is also conveyed through the repetitive loop of images that records instances of the violent collision of these adjacent life-worlds on English country lanes. We view these collisions from Baker's perspective, which unlike the typical exclusion of the human presence

in canonical landscape photography, is represented as standing inside human spheres of agency yet is sufficiently detached to bear witness to the impact of the human presence.

Taiwanese artist **Yifang Lu** presents images of domesticated animals painted on Perspex, and mirrors ways that draw attention to the opacity of paint whilst still allowing the transparency or reflexivity of the ground to call attention to the context of the constructed human world. For domesticated creatures of any kind, the human world is transcribed consistently across their experience of *umwelt*, often from the moment of conception to death, yet these are non-human worlds that interconnect with ours on a daily basis, and in this sense are uniquely well placed to remind us of the interdependencies of the human and non-human worlds.

In *A Storytelling of Ravens* (2012) **Catherine Clover** (UK/Australia) uses the built environment of the gallery, particularly the large windows facing onto Cardigan Street in Melbourne's inner city, to draw attention to the proximity of the human world and the worlds of wild ravens (*Corvus mellori*) who also live along this street. Clover's work comprises vinyl lettering covering the window and legible both from indoors and the street. The text is based on the artist's numerous encounters with ravens in the months leading up to the exhibition in May 2012. It refers to their vocal calls and bodily movements, and to the weather that shapes their worlds. Clover 'translates' the evocative calls of ravens into text by means of the phonetics used by naturalists which is then combined with audio works that, like the text, may be interpreted indoors and also on the street – and hence, into the *umwelten* of the ravens themselves. As such, this work is highly innovative insofar as it extends its semiotic range beyond the human world.



Above
Jen Rae
Awaken! Flag, 2012
Flocked wall installation

Right
Fleur Summers
Feelings, 2012
Digital photograph

Debbie Symons, on the other hand, has the human sphere and the anthropogenic causes of ecological degradation clearly in her sights in her video *World Species Market* (2012). Symons co-opts the format of a share market board by replacing financial data with data from the IUCN 'Red List' of endangered species from the years 2000 to 2011. By 2011, the Red List had identified a further 8,524 species since the 2000 list, which represents an increase of a serious threat to 2.1 entire species each day. Symons' unemotional and graphic visual approach is strategic insofar as it emulates the dry presentation of data in global market fluctuations in ways that evoke sense of potential collapse in the barriers between the abstracted world of capital and organic *umwelten*.

Canadian Métis artist **Jen Rae** extends the artistic adaptation of contemporary technology in a large QR Code installed on the gallery wall in flocking fibres in *Awaken! Flag* (2012). Rae's QR Code can be accessed by a mobile phone and QR reader/scanner in order to read the message behind the flock wallpaper to draw attention to an 'us and them' scenario: those equipped with technological knowhow and those who are not. This in turn refers to the content of the artwork, which draws parallels between artists as translators and Jen Rae's understanding of her Métis cultural heritage and its alternative world-view to mainstream western culture.

Fleur Summers' biomimetic sculptural works *Feelings* (2012) are comprised of common, industrial objects. Inspired by Darwin's studies of the barnacle, these imaginary creatures mimic the biosemiotic processes of tiny biological colonies whose 'antennae' reach out from their *umwelt* to probe the ecological complexities of the wider world. In this case, a wider world inhabited humans whose movements interact with these magnified worlds of invertebrates in ways that draw our attention to the alternative realities of other lifeforms.

Jasmine Targett's *Indivisible* (2012) also magnifies fragments from different worlds, in this case through large photographic prints of microscopic images of a single human cell and an animal cell. Working with Dr Judy Callaghan from Monash Micro Imaging, the way Targett's images are juxtaposed acknowledges the parallels between cellular appearance and function in humans and animals whilst also serving as a reminder of the fragility of ecological connections and interdependency where radical change in one *umwelt* has the potential to reverberate across complex systems.

While most of the artists in this exhibition focus on the intersecting worlds of human and animal, **Rebecca Mayo** extends the notion of 'Us and Them' to plant species, and to the invasive weeds introduced by humans to local ecologies that have evolved over time into complex, finely balanced biological systems. Mayo's *Gorse Gloves* (2012) are pairs of connected gloves stained with the gorse that has invaded the local environments along the Merri Creek. They refer quite literally to the human hand of intervention in the introduction of non-indigenous species, yet also attest to the role of human hands in environmental restoration work.

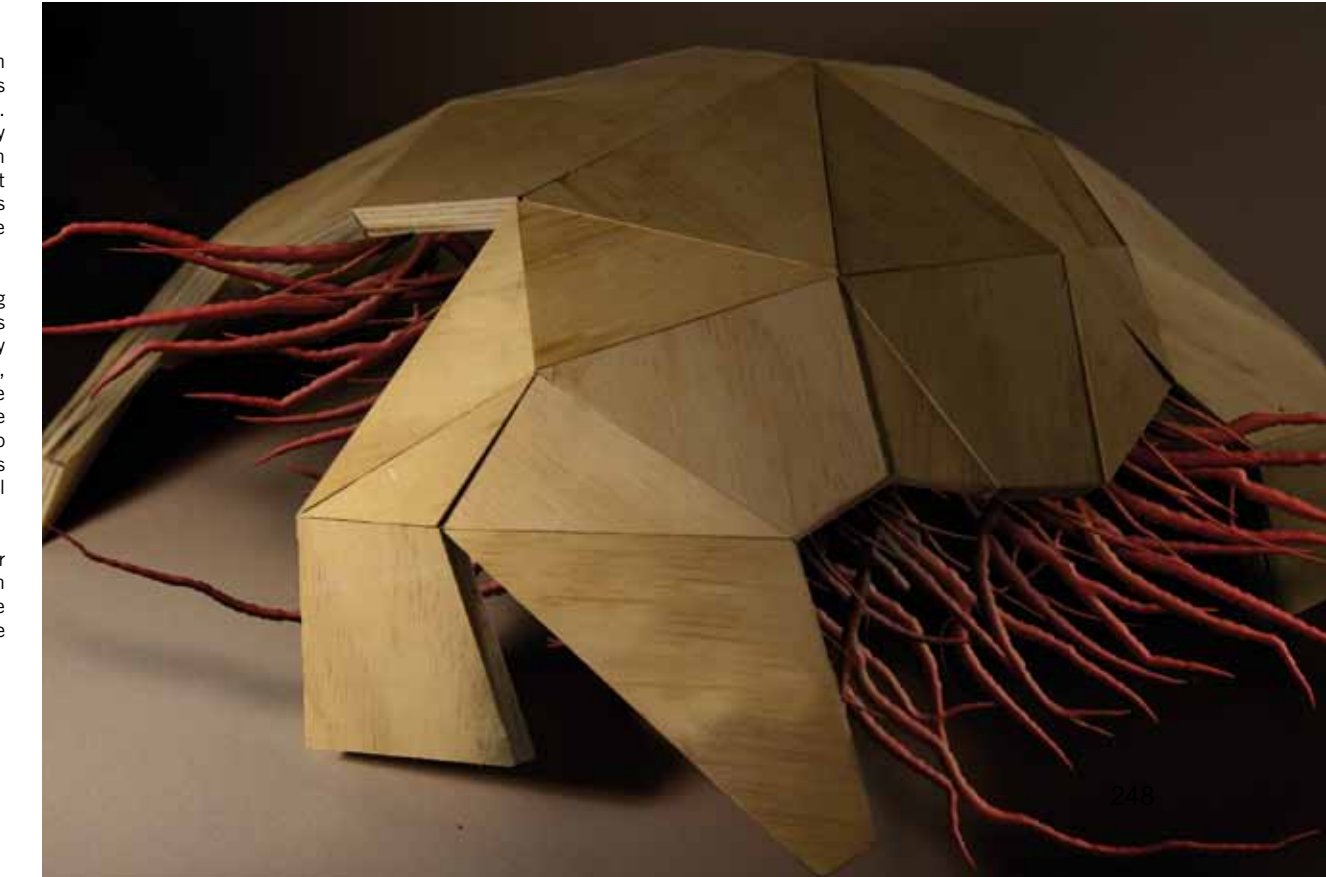
Like all the works in this exhibition, Mayo's gloves are also a reminder of the hand of the artist in revealing the semiotic connections between *umwelten* - which is to say, between us and the myriad others whose world views are connected to ours, yet in all their wonderful variety are acknowledged for their indelible differences.

Linda Williams

¹ This can be seen on <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-7jil-g4jHg>

² The son of well-known astronomer Carl Sagan and the gifted biologist Lynn Margulis.

³ First published in the German in 1934.



Ow ark ow ark. Ow ark ow. Waaark
what next just up the stairs? Nah just
before the stairs right at the bottom.

Next door? Ak ak. Next door but on the
other side. Where are you going? Last
shop on the right I think. Argh argh argh
argh ak. Twennysix bucks last Sunday.

Aargh. Weep eep eeeep ep. Uses real
butter. Hub? Uses real butter. Kaarrrr!
A u-turn ... nup. Kaarrrr! Errrr yeh, yeh
they are. Yeh exactly right. Wheeeep.

What's that? Mexican. Eeowp keeeowp.
Chilli and err sour cream. Shift work ...
yeah, that's why ... ak ak the first two
three hours I'm sorting ... yeah ... yeah
well eeowp ak ak when I ... baha sorry

SOUND SERIES: PERCH

CATHERINE CLOVER

in collaboration with ALICE HUI-SHENG CHANG and VANESSA TOMLINSON

curated by ANDREW TETZLAFF

Opening with occasional performances

Thursday 31 July 6-8pm

Performances

Friday 1 Aug 6.30pm, Saturday 2 August 7.19am (sunrise) and Saturday 2 August 5.33pm (sunset)

Exhibition Dates

Thursday 31 July to Saturday 2 August 2014

“Over there... maybe”

Clover gestures at a tiny pinprick of grey on a sheet metal roof. It's hard to tell if it is a patch-up roofing job gone wrong, a bit of floating city litter that has settled or indeed the subject of our hunt: a pigeon.

Another speck floats over to join the first and together the two begin a rather recognizable bumbling that confirms her initial speculation.

From the 7th story of Melbourne's Nicholas Building, one has a fantastic view of the city centre—complete with historic buildings, meandering urbanites and literally hundreds of birds. Indeed the view is so good that BLINDSIDE once boarded up the window in silent hopes that its patrons would reflect on the artwork in the gallery with as much esteem as they do the belvedere.

Across the years many projects have referenced this distinctive feature¹, looking outward as a means of inspecting our personal and cultural notions of landscape, of seeing, and of our city. In this exhibition, however, BLINDSIDE is more than just a room with a view; it is a perch from which to consider our avian neighbours, their sky-mapped worlds and complex societies.

As it gets later, our conversation grows increasingly lateral. “I'd heard somewhere that birds use highways and even lighthouses to guide their migrations.”

“Well they certainly use the streets to get around Melbourne. You can see them over there, flying along above the cars.” From here I'm lost in thought again, re-imagining Melbourne as an invisible grid of rivers built from wind currents. Cath breaks my reverie by pointing towards the cathedral.

“I've some recordings I took from around those benches.”

“Huh?” I crane my necks to see.

“Just down *there*—along Swanston Street. I might use them... Birds, conversations, tram bells...”

Birds and bells... it's like in that nature documentary

where lyrebirds compose their songs from the sounds of their environment—mimicking everything from other birds to camera shutters, car alarms and even chainsaws². All of these recording processes seem remarkably familiar; apparently scientists from the States have found some interesting similarities between how both songbirds and humans learn to speak³.

“Say, do you reckon these bird whistles actually work?” There is a deep sonorous inhale followed by a duck-like “Ggguik, ggghh. ... Ggghuuuick!”

As if in answer a few minutes later, a sparrow beak clacks against the windowpane.

Catherine Clover's work is an ongoing investigation into birdcalls and behavior. From a skin-deep glance one can see her interests in field recording and soundscapes, of itemizing the sonic environment and translating sounds into onomatopoeic representations. The physical works are a bit slippery; for instance, artworks like the one overleaf exist somewhere in form between authentic sound (as it was expressed), heard phoneme (as it was translated into text), visual representation (as it starkly appears in Garamond), and imagined sound (as it would be re-articulated by a reader). The openness in these works offers us a space for a shift to occur; *bird* is no longer a flat surface—no longer a four-letter word, a caged pet, the main course for dinner or a noisy inner-city pest. Instead it is an opportunity for curiosity. The further we go with Clover on her exploration into the avian *unwelt*, the closer we come to understanding something that is far more human and far more primal—as if the tweets, chirps and squawks can be used to decipher something very telling about the nature of language, listening, learning and communication.

“Did you know that they've found out that 'huh' is something of a universal word? Apparently almost every language on the planet has something like it... and most of them sound the same.”⁴

The thought puts two very different sounds in my head simultaneously: the characteristic lick in Miles Davis' *So What* and a sound performance I once heard that featured guttural pre-language vocalisation. The combination is a bit weird, but there's certainly

something to that fine line between instinctive grunt and articulated word.

Clover's artwork is not only interested in and composed of language; the installation is quite literally a text to be read—or perhaps, to be a bit closer to the mark, a conversation to be had. Clover presents us with works that are ready to be activated: stations of sound, text and object filled with discursive potential. There are words to be sounded out, ornithological stories to be translated and sonic thoughts to be imagined. As such, the exhibition is whole but not complete without an active participant, or in this case two active participants: extended vocalist Alice Hui-Sheng Chang and percussionist Vanessa Tomlinson.

Alice and Vanessa's practices may be diverse in form, but their chosen instruments are equally direct, immediate and versatile. One can hardly think of anything more primal or base than these two mediums—of taps, thumps, shrieks and groans. Despite this rawness though, both also have an almost limitless capacity and an exquisite delicacy to their tonal range, timbre and sonic texture. Fittingly, these artists will perform a collaborative response to Clover's “artwork score”, completing it and creating something that is half playful talkback, half conceptual experiment and half collaborative sandbox.

Across the way, over on the roof, the two pigeons we were surveying earlier punctuate the end of our conversation—together they shuffle to the gutter ledge and haplessly fall over it, catching themselves in flight.

Andrew Tetzlaff 2014

Endnotes

1. *A day, unsung*, 2013; *Lines of Flight*, 2012; *Interventions in the Present Moment*, 2012; *Objects in Space: Insides Outside*, 2008; *Black Swans, Red Herrings and White Elephants*, 2008; etc.

2. *The Life of Birds* 1998, Documentary Film, BBC Bristol in association with PBS, UK. directed by Joanna Sarsby

3. Margoliash D and Schmidt MF 2009, ‘Sleep, off-line processing, and vocal learning’, *Brain & Language*, vol 115 (2010), pp. 45-58

4. Dingemans M 2013, ‘Is “Huh?” a Universal Word? Conversational Infrastructure and the Convergent Evolution of Linguistic Items’, *PLOS One*, 10 Nov 2013

BLINDSIDE

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Front: Catherine Clover, *Huh?*, 2014

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