

Autumn, 2021
Karangahape Road,
Tāmaki Makaurau
Auckland

Spring, 2021
Berlin
Germany

VICTORIA WYNNE-JONES (AUCKLAND)

It's really starting to feel autumnal now...
in the morning my front steps are wet
with dew. When I walk to work there are
hips on the rosebushes peeking over the
front fences of suburban gardens and the
nights are getting cooler...

RICHARD FRATER (BERLIN)

Spring is phasing in here. The common
nightingales winter in tropical Africa
and I'm often anxious for them to return
around this time. I recorded the first on
Saturday at my house, which coincided
with the popping of a magnolia
sunsation down the road.

The nightingale is a bird I have never
actually seen. It seems somewhat
mythical – my only point of reference
is Oscar Wilde's story “The Nightingale
and the Rose” (1888), which brings with
it very mournful associations.

I wonder which animals I know
exclusively through stories. I bet there
are a few. I rarely see nightingales too,
they are a bird that is more commonly
heard, a little like the ruu or the kōkako
back home. It was often the female
nightingale that sang for the Victorian-
era writers, and what that brings to
mind for me is a contemporary call by
two bioacoustic researchers, Karan
Odom and Lauryn Benedict, to better
document female birdsongs. In a recent
paper they revealed that 64 percent
of the females sang, in their group of
1000 documented species.¹ Birdsong
has traditionally been studied as an
elaborate male trait, even though female
song is widespread in both temperate
and tropical species. They've initiated
The Female Birdsong Project to share
their resources and network with other
community-science groups, and better
target this under-representation. I have
been hearing female redstarts more
since I read that study, which is sort of
an easy example.

I remember you wondering aloud about
what nightingales might sound like in
the far future, which made me think

of Wong Kar-Wai's film *2046*.² In that
film the main character imagines what
he calls a “drowsy future.” He falls in
love with an android who has delayed
reactions and confesses his love, but
she doesn't respond in time... and there
is a sequence where she eventually
whispers her love into a large aperture,
the same way that people might whisper
secrets into a hole, carved into a tree,
upon a mountain... The android pursing
her lips to whisper into the metallic hole
reminds me of the call of a nightingale,
maybe more of a mechanical
nightingale, like the one in Hans
Christian Andersen's tale “The Emperor
and the Nightingale.” A replicant bird,
like the replicant woman.

Wow, I'll get on to reading that one.
A few summers back I stacked up
the weekends with bird watching in
Brandenburg with my friend Gabriel. A
lot of conservation areas we scouted
were decommissioned or in-service
industrial sites, like steelworks that
backed onto ponds or a wetland beside
an airport. One weekend we had
meandered into a quiet lake town for a
drink and started following a metallic
gurgling sound, but we couldn't identify
what was producing it. The confusion
bubbled until it just boiled out of us.
Half an hour passed and eventually cars
rolled down the cobblestone street. At
that time of the year, the fallen pollen
had created a sticky residue over the
street and the rubber tyres tore off
the road like duct tape tearing away
from the roll, or the sound of river
flow cracked apart by river stones. It
suddenly dropped on us that we had
been hearing birds imitating this sound,
and it was after that a band of Eurasian
jays emerged from the roadside
trees, gurgling away. Being mutually
nonplussed, seeing that in each other,
was the only juncture of sense on that
street.

The nightingale song, too, is often
compared to techno music, as if they're
extruded from the same metallurgy. At
night, you can reach club altitude when

1 — Karan J. Odom and
Lauryn Benedict, “A Call
to Document Female Bird
Songs: Applications for
Diverse Fields,” *The Auk:
Ornithological Advances*
135, no. 2 (April 2018):
314–325, [https://doi.
org/10.1642/AUK-17-183.1](https://doi.org/10.1642/AUK-17-183.1)

2 — *2046*, directed by
Wong Kar-Wai (Hong
Kong: Jet Tone Films,
2004).

you hear them masking out the urban noise with a spray of blips and clicks. It reminds me that when I revisited Wilde's story I wondered what on earth this bird was, because it had none of the traits I associated with nightingales. Conversely, nor did I know many of the traits the female nightingale possessed. I guess it is not always immediately clear what is generating surprise in us, and that's something to be cautious of. Biases have a tendency to stack up on top of biases. One of the traits that I would like to understand better is the nightingale's heightened capacity to discern imitation and mimicry in song. She can identify who is leading and who is imitating between two males in a competitive duet, and proceeds from this distinction to discern where the song-building is being optimised. It suggests that the derivative can take on a higher meaning for her when the imitator has outperformed the leader. If you love karaoke, and you're tone deaf, you'll know that working the timing is what clocks the bot. I can't superimpose 2046 over Wilde's love story, it doesn't seem to work, but I like the possibility, whether it is real or not, that the songs are already recorded for the nightingale, internalised, and that she has moved on to anticipating how they will be mastered.³ I wonder how prominent sensing machines and simulated environments will become for the conservation of the nightingales and their song. It sounds like a nightmare, but that would assume they are not already living in a nightmare. Simulation machines, and organism- and environmental-sensors, are certainly a prominent part of the lives of endangered species today.

Strange the way Wilde's rosebushes identify themselves through the remote traits of other creatures and forces they are not, traits taken from faraway, exotic ecosystems. What do you make of these rose-less bushes, and the red rosebush in particular?

The rose-less bushes... perhaps this is what a rosehip is. Not many people let their roses develop hips, they tend to prune them after they've flowered, in the hopes they'll do so again soon... only roses that are neglected are able to develop their hips, or those that are tended by the kinds of people who appreciate hips... the hard orange-red fruits... perhaps those who appreciate hips are more imaginative souls... those who appreciate the less obvious.

What do I make of Wilde's red rosebush? It's kind of excessive, isn't it? Like there is too much at stake, too much to bear, too much has been sacrificed for it. Is anything worth the sacrifice of the dear, brave, hopeful little nightingale in Wilde's story? My mother's garden has always been filled with roses, so they feel very maternal and familiar to me. I think it's a strong part of my settler identity; Antipodean roses, as you say, are life forms from exotic ecosystems, ones grown very far from their native climes. I guess contradictions are often at the heart of settler identity; roses feel homely, but I also feel guilt because they are part of a broader system of botanical and scientific invasion and occupation. Yet there is something dreamy and magical about the rose, I think that's why for the Elizabethans it occupied a prize position in the chain of being, like the oak. But now the rose has a kind of ambiguity and ambivalence.

The guilty pleasure of the exotic rose makes me think of the museum-parks in your *Invitation Dilemma* series. I love an art gallery, and what is better than one situated in beautiful grounds and a park?⁴ Yet the intersection of garden and gallery is not a happy one, right?

Our family had to climb up a wall of roses to get to my nana's front door. She was a keeper of the roses, too. Thank you for the reflections on your settler identity. There is a lot of imbalance in my approach to whakapapa and settler identity that I am confident will not leave all my ancestors satisfied. In 2019 I drove down to Fortrose from Rotorua to visit where my tipuna wahine rests. It was on my heart for years to visit her and I look forward to the next visit. However, I can't ignore that I lived in Glasgow for nine months and did not roll up to my clan of distant Scottish rellies located a bus ride outside of the city. With ancestors, one does not simply pop in for a healing kawakawa kombucha.

Regarding the intersection, no, the garden-gallery is not always a happy one and it's where my contribution to the exhibition *Im Volksgarten* at Kunsthhaus Glarus began. I was to respond to the wildlife that interacts with the physical shell of the building. The umbrella title *Invitation Dilemma* is a phrase ornithologists pass around when referring to the existential threat of glazing: birds are lured toward an attractive habitat that appears to be on the other side of windows, which then draws them to fatal collisions. In

3 — In deep history, the majority of female songbirds had the capacity to sing. It is an ancestral trait. Given that female song is more common in tropical songbirds, recent scepticism has formed around the problem of geographical biases, noting that there is more acoustic data available on temperate songbirds of Europe and North America. In the cases where the female has lost the capacity to sing, it is likely due to migratory pressures that push the male and female into a waltz of stricter roles observed today. The acoustic dominance of the male is likely to have created a research bias that overlooks traits that the female possesses, including acoustic traits, simply because they have not been screaming for attention. See Odom and Benedict's paper for further reading.

4 — As part of the group exhibition *Im Volksgarten* at Kunsthhaus Glarus, Switzerland, September 5 – November 29, 2020.



Richard Frater
*Invitation dilemma (wood pigeon,
Akademie der Künste, Hansaviertel)*
2020
silver gelatin print from 35mm
640 x 440mm
Edition of 1 + AP

Glarus, there were complex agendas to work around at the time. For example, a formal objection from the Glarner Natur- und Vogelschutzverein, the local bird society, was issued against the renovations of the Kunsthaus Glarus, which were completed in 2019. The objection documented bird fatalities onsite and called for bird-safe infrastructure to be installed wherever glazing featured prominently. What was strange about the objection was that it was led by an artist/bird enthusiast who had shown in the programme the same year. In an inflammatory article in the local newspaper, the artist branded the museum as a 'Vogelmordanlage,' a bird-murdering facility. I was admittedly dazzled by how politicised the renovations had become, but in the bigger picture they felt like a distraction. I did not, for example, agree with the artist's choice of words, nor his plea to rally up the arts community and generate creative window-collision deterrents onsite.

Patterns applied to windows go through extensive certification procedures, which are geared toward a general effectiveness to deter as many species as possible. There is a demand for discreet applications but it is no surprise that increasing the visual noise through combinations of patterns enhances the deterrent threshold by making the boundary more visible. In one bird-safe infrastructure brochure, I read that orange-red graffiti is an extremely effective collision deterrent, along with the qualifier, "even if it does not comply with the designer's original intentions." This might be an indicator that bird cognition has started to feel, to some ornithologists, like a branch of civil engineering as the imports of standardisation sterilise the design catalogue. Other than that, I haven't caught ornithologists foraging deep into the dark forests of irony. But for museum staff and architects alike, any pattern is a hard pill for them to swallow, particularly when the renovation brief is to return the building to the architect's original intentions. I found myself reacting by constructing a basic proposition: there must be effective window-collision deterrents that are invisible to humans and visible to birds. In fact there are, and these would be appealing to clients for whom glass transparency is arguably necessary; architects are aware of these products but they are rarely conceived of as a viable choice due to the cost. Loosening patents on the technology and lobbying

for government subsidy initiatives are among the actions that could be taken to expand the application of these products.

You mentioned bird cognition, how do birds see differently from humans?

Beginning with a material possession that a bird typically possesses and a human doesn't is one way to explore bird cognition. I'll follow with an example. Many families of birds possess a fourth colour cone cell in their eyes that conveys colour information at the violet and ultraviolet end of the light spectrum, whereas humans typically possess only three colour channels (tetrachromats vs trichromats). The purpose of UV-sensitivity in birds was not well understood before 1980 but the building blocks to this discovery were established earlier. From 1980 onwards, photo-sensitive imaging technology (infrared and spectrometers) up-ended longstanding postulations about how birds see and how they make decisions. Artists that know a little about the earliest forms of analogue photography will appreciate that orthochromatic film was exclusively sensitive to green and blue wavelengths of light, so that the yellows to reds appeared entirely black on the plate. The development of the photo could proceed in red light, whereas when the commercial viability of panchromatic chemistry increased in the early 20th century, the development room got darker and darker. We're still in black and white photos but there is a lot more tonal information flowing onto the plate and being captured. For many birds, red is also considered to be the colour that resides in the place of most contrast to their general sensitivity. Think of orange fire engines—

Or red stop signs...

These too. The shifts in chemical invariables that identify one photographic process from another might be analogous to how birds see differently from other birds. For example, UV-sensitivity is not consistently expressed across bird families, nor between individual species within a family. UV-sensitivity can be imagined simply as intensifications of colours, tones and tints that humans have partial access to. The harder question is whether the intensification is the part that is afforded the key signal for birds and their decision-making processes or whether it's just noise that the bird is acclimatized to

cognitively cropping out. Some birds might allow UV light into the eye only to discard it with pigment blockers in the retina, others might categorically separate the information out when forming an image in the brain (i.e. these colours are all roughly green). This is similar enough to the way artists have learnt to categorize certain styles of printing (silver gelatin print) and certain themes of photography (gender politics) in their research habits. With songbirds, for example, up until recently it was believed that males and females are typically identical (sexually monochromatic) because this is what human observers continue to see with their eyes, whereas recent studies have shown the majority of male songbirds possess UV markings that are likely to correspond with the preferences and selections of females. UV-sensitivities are ecologically important because they affect the abilities of birds to accurately assess potential mates, find food and minimize visibility of social signals to predators. Songbirds are preyed upon by raptors, only some of who utilize the UV-sensitive capacity too. However, in many cases with raptors the capacity has been honed to a different intensity, like the urine trails of rodents viewed from a great distance. The UV-sensitivity traits are transactional across the compositions of organisms when the cost of perceiving a wider range of colour must be weighed against the cost of becoming more visible to certain predators. If it is too costly, something has to give: the UV marking may vanish or the species might vanish.

It sounds a little like Claude Monet searching for the objective colour of water-lilies in his Giverny garden. The handling of painted colour starts to feel severely limited if it ignores the circumstances that might make it vital to life or to the survival of a creature.

That's an ironic example given how vital colour was to Monet's livelihood. I think I've fallen for the Monet-Lilies full-immersion experience before. But how does the story go again?

He faced difficulties painting due to visual impairment, which sort of inspired all these rigorous systems like naming his paint tubes. Monet reworked his water-lily paintings in the last years after a cataract was removed from one of his eyes. His tonal sensitivity had shifted periodically, but the operation caused a dramatic shift.

Yes! One minute all the lilies are tinted brown, the next minute they all appear slightly blue. Monet was transitioning from unperceived brunescence to a case of severe cyanopsia. That's helpful because they are both genuine responses to perceived colours but one is caused by an objective yellowing of the natural eye lens that limits the amount of blue light hitting the retina, while the other is a subjective state caused by a sudden excess of blue light through the artificial contact of an intraocular element.

If I remember correctly, Monet destroyed a lot of the lily paintings that were tinted brown.

And the survivors are too blue right? Sometimes a discovery or an operation is made and the objectivity of an entire record seems to pop like a dream, but with a bit of patience the discovery settles back on what humans and their scrutinisers experience in common. Birds and humans both share a vision bias, which is quite different from comparisons with other animals.

It's quite hard to fathom how anybody would capture Monet's pursuit of objective colour through the style of Impressionism, isn't it?

I don't know if I can view the re-painted lilies as reliable correctives but there does seem to be something reliable in the volume of 'errors.' A kind of mapping of possibilities that forms a shared set of values, which in this case is Impressionism. I think a shared set of values is like a blunt instrument that is not thrown away because it gets the job done. In a different interview, there will be someone asking how did the gardeners divert animal paths and control the pests that enjoyed eating the early foliage of lilies each year? And a conservationist and a conservator would make easy work of this query simply by analysing what information is stored in the variability of strokes, stray hairs, and pairing it with recovered brushes and so on. It's not a more objective approach, it too views the materiality of the painted field but the medial has moved. The concern of pest control was probably imperative to Monet too but I would find myself in an ecological crisis searching for clues to garden management in front of his paintings.

I have often thought that the idea that animals and objects withdraw into

is nonsensical, even though it is surprisingly pervasive in the politics and aesthetics of social life. If you have ever used the word non-human—I certainly have—you’ve probably signed up to view of non-humans that privileges material culture over living creatures. I would never describe a human, for example, as a non-kea, even though my experience of Arthur’s Pass National Park is crowded with stories and encounters with kea and the stuff they interact with. In less than two decades between 1920 and 1938, the government subsidized the deaths of around 29,000 kea because they were considered a nuisance to highland farmers. But most of the killings occurred in country where the bird would have never seen a sheep. What that suggests to me is that kea have been given more opportunities to learn about how humans socially organize themselves than what they have learnt of sheep. I am not sure if this notion that an animal withdraws into itself is more purposterously defended than in the American philosopher Thomas Nagel’s famous “what is it like to be” an organism, which he introduced in 1974 in his paper “What Is It Like to Be a Bat?”⁵ As the thought experiment progresses, it becomes harder and harder to follow Nagel’s pursuit to “know what it is like for a bat to be a bat.” His query is logged with the nature of consciousness. As he puts it, “it is not possible to know this, it is only possible to imagine what it would be like for me to behave as a bat behaves,” so that even if he could gradually morph into a bat, and obtain the characteristics of this mammal (echolocation and so forth) he would not be able to access its mindset. This is something the creature is born with and grows up with, Nagel argues. When I squint my mindset a little, I can see that “conscious mental states,” “subjective character of experience,” “conscious experience” and “imagination” are part of a lexical armour that form circularities in the very vocabulary with which he is attempting to illuminate.

Almost half a century later, the philosophical thought-experiments of the 1970s seem very quaint.

A different approach, one I have encountered through musicologist Gary Tomlinson’s work, requires working with and from the interactive base of the biosphere on which all organisms overlay their information-sharing-to-sign-making capacities.⁶ In the field of semiotics, hierarchies of sign-making can help to distinguish animal sociality from examples of culture arising in animals,

even though examples of the latter are extremely rare. The use of icon-signs by birds functions in a negative way during the act of not making a distinction (a moth is not distinguished from bark on a tree) and in a positive way when a bird chooses a berry based on the remembered likeness of what it eats (a colour is a sign of nutrition). Icon-making advances to forms of indexicality when a bird shuffles into the cover of leaves as a response to a moving shadow that has the likeness of a predator. Even if the hawk is not there, nor the hawk’s shadow, it is re-marked upon with a defensive shadow-play. This example doesn’t make the pigeon a cultural animal. A more patient study would reveal that its interactions with its environment occur mostly without signs: in foraging, for example, where the bird contributes to a general shifting of information around the biosphere such as fertilizing seeds of a tree that require the digestive tracts and pooping of a bird. In rare instances, semiosis has been elaborated to culture in some nonhuman species. One example that I love is the pod of humpback whales. Their highly structured calls are specific to a group, and they are altered and developed annually when the pod gathers in warmer waters to mate. These examples, when they occur, are like ‘dialects’ attached to local resident or migratory groups and are distinguishable from the species, they move along their own path and they are an expression of their unique itineraries. The ‘dialect’ analogy can just as readily be applied to material procedures. For instance, a monkey might wash a potato in a new way before eating it, which a younger monkey observes, repeats and passes on to successive generations and this is not a face-to-face interaction or learnt from a parent.⁷ For me, personally, I can share that my life often feels inadequate without kea, that the kea are a part of my social life and that sometimes all I have in my brain is a circus of kea and what I have shared with them. I can enrol animals in experiments of perception, semiotics and symbols but these have always felt like partitions to me between the social life of an animal and my social life, they don’t add up to my encounters with animals.

It feels like high autumn now. The leaves on the persimmon trees are turning red, the citrus trees are heaving with fruit and there are blackbirds everywhere.

5 — Thomas Nagel, “What Is It Like to Be a Bat?” *The Philosophical Review* 83, no.4 (1974): 435-450.

6 — Gary Tomlinson, “Chapter 4: Hominin culture from the bottom up.” In *Culture and the Course of Human Evolution*, 66-80. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2018).

7 — See Tomlinson, 79-80.



Richard Frater
Invitation dilemma (hawfinch,
Akademie der Künste, Hansaviertel)
2020
silver gelatin print from 35mm
540 x 375mm
Edition of 1 + AP

Recently I've been reflecting on my earliest experiences of museum architecture, specifically the monumental, bluestone-clad building Roy Grounds designed for the National Gallery of Victoria in Melbourne. Then I realised that I couldn't really think about the building without recalling the raucous seagulls who populate its gardens. Similarly, when I think of the Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki I think of the audacious sparrows who frequent its café. What is it about art galleries and birds?

Catherine Ingraham, an architectural scholar, has a lot of bandwidth for these observations. As she has pointed out, birds are so heavily burdened symbolically that if you were to remove them from a discussion of architecture and animation, it would profoundly limit that discussion.⁸ It would be like removing all of the birds from Le Corbusier's drawings and models. Where would you start? With the birds-eye-view photos, the fly-through orientation of 3D models, and then proceed to pluck out the birdlike silhouettes from the remaining drawings?

Funny how hard it is to think of architecture without birds! You mentioned earlier the negative impacts that glazing has on its external environment and how there is something destructive and deathly about the buildings we both admire. Such buildings may be stunning examples of the International Style of architecture but they are also terribly captivating for non-human admirers like birds. The framing of a view of the surrounding environment can in fact harm the biodiversity present there. I remember you musing that although a brutalist-style bunker may appear alien and totally unintegrated into a park-like setting, it would actually be a much safer building for birds to encounter and inhabit.

At the time I began studying the exteriors of museums and art galleries, I had also been following the fate of the Thompson House back in Kohimarama, which was a renovation project that unfolded in parallel to the Kunsthau Glarus. Although they bore no relationship to each other, the Thompson House has such a distinctive exterior that I found myself looking through it at other buildings and their environments. The house was designed by the late architect Rewi Michael Robert Thompson (Ngāti Porou and Ngāti Raukawa), and it was where he lived up until the time of his passing in 2016.⁹ Thompson conceived

the house as an affront: "they have to get used to it or burn it down." 'They' were his neighbors, of course. In 2020, Samuel Hartnett kindly facilitated a site visit for me to photograph the exterior. I was surprised to learn that it had already undergone significant renovations in the hands of its new owners and was initially shocked by the changes. For instance, prior to the renovations the ply exterior was so weathered that it was often confused with concrete – I suppose the visible effects of ageing reinforced the iconic form. Maybe that is where the brutalist reference came from. However, despite the ageing of the materials, the Māori poutama tukutuku pattern was still wholly animated and some of the more inchoate onsite building approaches remained structurally intact.¹⁰ When I pause and reflect on what were the critical parts of Thompson's design mandate, they included the temporality of the landscape and a shorter life expectancy attached to buildings. Not much that I have come to appreciate about the building has been lost due to renovations. Architects Ross Jenner and Patrick Clifford have noted, in their memory of his work and life, that the most banal attributes of Anglo-Saxon urban planning and design weren't a creative or historical barrier for Thompson's indigenous methodologies. One example is the purimu shells that are visible in the faded blue concrete garden wall below the street-side entrance. These were collected from Kohimarama Beach with his family, when the house was being constructed.¹¹ I found these anecdotes and situations quite helpful when considering the biological life of the Kunsthau Glarus building, which included birds, bees, humans and a rooftop of fallen, dried pinecones.

The aspect of the Thompson House that was most relevant to me was the absence of windows in the façade. I am not sure where the brutalist reference came from. A couple of years ago I visited the beached bunkers near Royan, France. A lot of WWII structures are immovable. There seemed to be an attitude amongst brutalist-inspired architects whereby one way to effectively remove defence architecture was to incorporate it into the reconstruction of cities. In the case of Guillaume Gillet's Église Notre-Dame de Royan (1955–1958), the bunker is thus conceived as a house of worship, a newly fortified bride of Christ. Of course the Thompson House produces a different exemplary attitude that, whether or not Rewi intended it to be so, is effectively

8 — Catherine Ingraham, *Architecture, Animal, Human: The Asymmetrical Condition* (Oxon: Routledge, 2006), 154.

9 — Between 2016 and 2019, The Thompson House was at risk of demolition for property development but, fortunately, over three years and with a lot of support from the architecture community, it dodged this fate and was sold to buyers prepared to carry out critical renovations.

10 — Deidre Brown, "Obituary: Rewi Thompson," *Architecture AU*, January 18, 2017, <https://architectureau.com/articles/obituary-rewi-thompson-1953-2016/>

11 — Special thanks to Lucy Thompson, Jeremy Hansen, Karamia Müller and Michael Lett for their insights into and experiences of the Thompson House.

bird-safe architecture too and this was what I was missing from existing museum designs that reinforce an anthropocentric 'view' of their environment. The strong sense in which modernist architecture can be compatible with bird life, without that needing to be any where near the top of the hierarchy of design considerations. I imagine the Thompson House is turned, as if the back is facing the street, like a retaining wall. Thompson did not want any windows, and by following through with that on the street-facing side he dismissed the pervading sea-view bias of the neighbourhood's urban plan. He was emphatic that the building should reconcile the blood spilt over successive occupations that began with "Maori vs Maori and later Maori vs colonists" with a contemporary fight for a view of the water.¹² It is not for me to comment on whether he was successful in his pursuit but I am looking forward to further reflections on his work by Mana Whenua and the international architecture community he contributed to.

I'm interested in the phrase you have used in reference to birds – "imagining what access might be." In a way this is the heart of the problem – birds see the glazing of an art museum, 'imagining' it to be an accessway, when it is in fact an obstacle.

Windows are primed for allegory. I remember trying to imagine the problem by ignoring windows. How a building manipulates wind, draught and other air dynamics around its exterior compared with how a bird controls and reflexes these same dynamics when flying. As soon as windows are reintroduced, however, one is left with this impression of the sheer arrogance of birds. I don't think our empathy for them can stretch out far from this attitude. It is more reasonable to me to view glazing as a structural feat of human condescension. By annexing physical space away from the bird, the museum is annexing cognitive space away from the bird too. It celebrates a shared cognitive vacuum, a place where one view of the environment capitulates to another. I think of this as a double captivation effect, however asymmetrical these incompatible views of the environment are they show up the ignorance of humans as much as they show up the limited cognition of birds.

I tried to simplify my research by exploring two building typologies and how they deal with environmental deception. The first building type is the

museum. I selected museums where the relations between landscape and architectural features exacerbate the problem of bird collisions. For example, fruit- and flower-bearing trees and bushes planted next to floor-to-ceiling glazing encourage birds to interact with building exteriors. The incidences are also exacerbated when, for example, the reflective or non-reflective threshold of glazing is increased. Window-collision deterrents are typically retrofitted to buildings. These treatments are rarely adopted by museums because they are aesthetically noisy. The desired views of parks also disqualify inexpensive deterrents. At the most negligible level of intervention, simply not cleaning the windows can create a sufficiently sketchy reflection of the park to trigger cognitive warnings for birds. However, from my photos you can see the windows would need to be really filthy for dirt accumulation to be a significant deterrent. The International Style advocacy of view-oriented exteriors is perpetuated through, I believe, hylomorphic characterisations of building materials as form-receiving passivities.¹³ That is on the road to a definition of the prized views architects want to offer their clients. In other words, the properties as well as the cultural values of glass are as reliable and unchanging as geometrical forms. Architects have a view of integrating the museum into a unified park, from the sketch through to the highly developed CAD plan. But the exceptional leap occurs when the design is imposed on the park 'out there.' The second building type presents a very different form of recursive learning. It is designed by ornithologists and glass companies that are researching compatibilities between bird cognition and the manufacturing processes of glass. It is a bird flight-tunnel that augments the so-called 'invitation dilemma.' Inside the tunnel, they can test how birds react to different patterns and colours on glass and develop a grading system for collision-deterrent thresholds for potential application to buildings. To me, as a photographer, this flight tunnel looks like a giant pinhole camera. It differs from the museum by characterising building materials as form-taking activities and it also has the capacity to change the ways in which different life forms interact with museums in the future. Thinking through objects rather than thinking about objects becomes the description of cognitive processes and this accepts that bird cognition is spatially tempted. It accepts a critical invariable. Glass is not going

12 — Ross Jenner and Patrick Clifford, "In Memoriam: Rewi Michael Robert Thompson (19 January 1954–2016)," *Interstices* 17 (2016), <https://doi.org/10.24135/ijara.v0i0.503>

13 — Hylomorphism describes the mutability of materials through designated forms and has a tendency to render matter as an inert substance. In contrast, when the materiality is a form-taking activity, the form appears with a history and an itinerary intact. A very simple example is the axe-head that is guided through the grain of the timber, through a history of its growth when it was a living tree. The axe-head is said to follow or surrender to the grain. See Tim Ingold's chapter "The Materials of Life," in *Making: Anthropology, Archaeology, Art and Architecture* (New York: Routledge, 2013) 17–32.



Richard Frater
*Invitation dilemma (wood pigeon,
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2020
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445 x 650mm
Edition of 1 + AP

anywhere – it is here to stay – but it is possible to draw together variables like bioacoustics and in-flight decision-making processes to shape the invariable. Ultimately, I believe, this leads to a larger cognitive grain of the park environment for birds.

The collisions in your *Invitation Dilemma* photographs have also been on my mind. They made me think of a conversation I once had in a German class. We were discussing fairy tales and the teacher was pretty disgusted by the infantilised versions that we all seemed to be familiar with. We spoke of the Frog Prince and the way the princess kissed the frog so that the spell could be broken, and he transformed into the prince. Our teacher quickly enlightened us; “The princess didn’t kiss the frog, she threw it against the wall.” She explained that a mere kiss is not enough for a magical transformation take place, it needed to be something much more immanent and violent.

But I’m also mindful of how in your work you’ve been looking at the differences between bird and human cognition, what you have called the “breach of incomprehension.” The research drawings for your Kunsthhaus Glarus exhibition include diagrams that illustrate the visual fields of the starling, pigeon, tawny owl and Manx shearwater, which seems like a good way to diagram this incomprehension. It makes me think of the 1980 John Berger essay “Why Look at Animals?”¹⁴ He writes: “The eyes of an animal when they consider a man are attentive and wary... The animal scrutinizes him across a narrow abyss of non-comprehension.” In the same essay Berger sketches out an historical relationship between humans and animals, from cattle as oracles and sacrifices, to the use of animals for metaphors in Ancient Greek literature, as well as anthropomorphism that is integral to the man-animal relation and an expression of proximity. Berger recounts how children in the industrialised world are surrounded by animal imagery: toys, cartoons, pictures and decorations. Perhaps this is why our discussion keeps returning to fairy tales. For Berger, by the late twentieth century animals are almost completely physically and culturally marginalised; they are either pets inside our houses or spectacles inside zoos.

I think this ties into the question of birds and art galleries. For Berger, animals are “always the observed,” in a zoo we walk from cage to cage like visitors in

an art gallery walking from painting to painting. A human longing for the natural is a kind of nostalgia that gets projected onto wild animals and birds: “The life of a wild animal becomes an ideal, an ideal internalized as a feeling surrounding a repressed desire. The image of a wild animal becomes the starting-point of a daydream.” Do you think Berger’s argument about animals as either pets or spectacles can be applied to birds?

That’s a good question. I’ll try to speak to a more recent experience. I have a habit of scaling up the zoo analogy to gain some semblance of a political territory, particularly in relation to contemporary conservation efforts. It can be hard to respect territories when your subjects have fixed places they return to but they are not representative of space as a continuum or a topography, rather they stabilise across continents when the scale is large or they stabilise a 2km stretch of alpine river and live their entire life on that river. Recently, I’ve been working on a film about the conservation of the whio, blue mountain duck, in and around the Ruahine Ranges. That has required some zoo-ming out. The conservation of endangered species in Aotearoa is difficult to imagine without commercial realism in the form of partnerships with energy corporations (whio and Genesis Energy), government departments (whio and the Department of Conservation), game and hunting organisations (whio and the New Zealand Deerstalkers Association). The problem with the analogy is that the optics sort of jam up when zoo-ming in for a closeup. The whio has come to epitomise that inhospitable and inaccessible element of ‘wild’ that is projected from our living rooms today, but they are a taonga species to a number of iwi and hapū groups in the Whanganui and Ruahine regions, which cues in a corrective for me if they were regular visitors to lowland murky-watered rivers in the recent past. Poor land management and artificial fertiliser runoff have contributed to their decline. Farming has also contributed to their identity as ‘indicator species’ of clean, flowing rivers, but this politicises their identity. It is not the colour of the water or the presence of mountains, but rather the value of their eggs to the introduced stoat that has pushed them into more inhospitable zones where stoat numbers are lower so their survival is marginally more likely there. Also, there has come to be a peak in the male population because the female is easily overpowered by stoats when she is on watch duty over the eggs and killed.

14 — John Berger, *Why Look at Animals?* (London: Penguin Books, 2009), 13.

This is a combustion engine of anthropogenic pressures that I have to then slip, slop and slap climate tipping dynamics over and the increase of freak storms, which can gush away a season of potential ducklings. For this reason, I view the pictures and moving images that circulate of whio in remote pristine mountain rivers as evidence of a politicized creature of the New Zealand project. When I was doing groundwork earlier this year, I found it was volunteers managed by hapū initiatives, small hiker associations and ‘COVID refugees’ that collaborate with each other to strengthen their resources, and they don’t always have the blessing of the upper ranks, whose resources are also stretched. Whether they’re all holding hands or not, the groundwork is tough and sluggish. Maintaining a stoat trap-line in remote forest territories that are inaccessible to most people can be a four-day affair, depending on the weather and territory. So some volunteers just opt to live in and move between huts, and have kin-volunteers – the ones that have to do food drops. Although these volunteers are privy to direct access to whio, where perhaps a less nostalgic image or encounter resides, it is a more common experience to walk the two-kilometre territory of fast-flowing river that a pair of whio occupies and find yourself doubting whether they ever existed. Traces are hard to spot when a rise in the river washes the traces downstream. Fortunately, the recovery of whio populations is a constructive reality at the moment because there is an unusually robust range of initiatives to help them in the most recent decades. I am not sure I would have believed that if I had not spent a day with two contesting pairs on the Waipakihi River, south of Turangi, a popular trout fishing zone with lots of locals swimming happening too.

You mentioned in an earlier conversation that your cat Oona is deaf and you’ve often wondered what it is like being in her world from her point of view. Is this noticeable day to day and are other senses heightened in cooperation, for you, Oona, or together?

I think about this a lot, she’s definitely very aware of subtle visual changes, like reflections and shadows on walls, whether this be from passing traffic or light bouncing off the surface of an iPhone. She seems to have an acute sense of smell and sometimes sniffs around really audibly like a bloodhound. But I think ultimately she really uses the house as a mechanism

for sensing vibrations, I think it really acts as a prosthetic for her to track her surroundings and she gets really stressed out when she’s taken out of her daily environment. Also she really likes to lean up against people, so that she can sense when they are about to move...

I’m housesitting at the moment and I’ve spent the evening with a cat sleeping stretched out down my legs, so the foreshortening of the historical relationship to domestication is vivid to me right now. I want to believe that the zoo or the pet are not the most destitute places to start with, in terms of human relationships to animals. The statistics around euthanising domesticated animals are truly shocking, but as soon as we orient domestication to, for example, the way ants domesticate aphids, it feels like we are the ones colluding with our own reflections, dressing up domestication in a morbid melancholia. In Rachel Carson’s article “Help your Child to Wonder” (1956), she draws on experiences with her nephew, Roger, who is invited to view the moon with her through the “big picture window.”¹⁵ Carson writes, “I have had people tell me they have never heard the song of the wood-thrush, although I knew the bell-like phrases of this bird had been ringing in their backyards every spring.” It sounds like she is being sardonic but she is not, she is identifying a huge wall of inexperience that stops caregivers from trying to connect the child with the so-called natural world. At the end of the essay, she reminds the reader that it is not necessary to know all of the names of the creatures in the article, but that it would simply be beneficial for children to take more notice of how complex their local environments are.

My dad works in a residential care village where there are lots of cats. A friend recently told me that cats are kept in elderly care homes because the purring actively releases oxytocin and increases the emotional perception of the residents. Examples of the Red Queen hypothesis are frequently at hand and, like the relation between houseflies and humans, companion species do not need mutual approval to be good examples.¹⁶ This also reminds me that grooming is an essential way of relating and communicating amongst primates. Before the development of human language, there was a mutual obligation to release dopamine, serotonin and oxytocin for each other through grooming. Anthropologist Robin Dunbar

15 — Rachel Carson, “Help Your Child to Wonder,” in *Rachel Carson: Silent Spring and Other Writings on the Environment*, ed. Sandra Steingraber (New York: The Library of America, 2018), 354–364.

16 — Leigh Van Valen’s ‘Red Queen hypothesis’ metaphorically refers to Lewis Carroll’s *Through the Looking-Glass, and What Alice Found There* (1871), when, in the story, Alice and the Red Queen lock hands on the giant chessboard and madly spin and spin. When they finally stop spinning to catch their breath, they find they have not changed their positions in the slightest. The term is used to refer to coevolutionary relationships of competition and mutualism. As long as the behaviour or traits of one species imposes selection constraints on another, coevolution will occur.



Richard Frater & Pauline Rhodes
Bluets
(installation view)
2021

offers quite a compelling argument when he asks us to then consider how language helped our ancestors to form larger communities through group-oriented verbal grooming – essentially, early forms of gossip.¹⁷ Last year I visited Zoo Berlin, and admittedly found the experience deeply saddening, but I went there because I had heard a pair of breeding goshawks that I follow were nesting in an enclosure there that year. I couldn't find them, but I was led to a different encounter with a wild grey heron colony in these partially destroyed trees they were nesting in, and it was just bonkers watching them bounce through the branches with their long legs, long necks and long bills. I didn't go there for a lesson in the rewilding of the urban zoo matrix but that is what I got.

Visitors to *Bluets* often asked how you made the decision to have a show with Pauline Rhodes. I'm curious about how you first came across her work – could you tell me more about your experience of her practice? There seems to be a real sympathy between female artists like Rhodes, who for many decades have been making artworks that are deeply sensitive to specific ecologies, and younger artists like yourself practising today. For me this exhibition was a testament to these sympathies – would you agree?

Honestly, the first time I remember seeing Pauline's work in the flesh was her solo exhibition at the gallery, which preceded my first solo exhibition with the gallery in 2019.¹⁸ I was mostly struck by the contrast between our exhibitions. It stabbed me how uptight my version of 'environmental art' was, and I sort of endured that realisation through much of 2019. I returned often to her language of making. It would suffice for me to look at Google images of her work because I had the immediate experience to reconnect with, too. There is this beautiful line in anthropologist Tim Ingold's essay "Bodies on the Run" in which he asks, "for material things to be enrolled in cognitive processes, must they have already been rendered in cultural forms? Why should people think with artefacts alone? Why not also with the air, the ground, mountains and streams, and other living beings?"¹⁹ I think that Pauline Rhodes crossed that understanding very early on in her career and I was looking for an opportunity to encounter this sense of her making again.

17 — Andrew Shryock and Daniel Lord Smail, *Deep History: The Architecture of Past and Present* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 64.

18 — Pauline Rhodes, *Pleasure and Pain*, Michael Lett, Auckland, February 27 – March 30, 2019.

19 — Ingold, 98.

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