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Like a Bird

Art, affect and interspecies encounters

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Abstract

This thesis investigates the ways in which art's radical, imaginative and affective potential may be used to envisage alternative models of living with and caring for birds through the works of contemporary artists Greta Alfaro, Kader Attia and Marcus Coates.

Birds are everywhere in our cities but we cannot hear them because they have become white noise to our ears. The reduction of our daily experiencing of and with nature is a first symptom of the ongoing facture between humans and their environment, which reveals the loss of affects, sensibility, curiosity and empathy towards living matter. By identifying the ecological crisis as a crisis in our relations to both human and non-human beings, we can pinpoint affects – a non-cognitive form of perceiving and communicating – as a hinge between bodies and their surroundings that enables us to *feel* and experience the world. Art produces the framework and content for the transmission of affective resonances with viewers and it is through art's emotional, sensible, challenging and subversive qualities that works can steer us towards finding new forms of interspecies social interplay, where our inextricable ties with living matter are emphasized through forms of vulnerability, responsibility and care. Art thus appears essential in the shift towards a more ecological life in that they can generate creative proposals for the elaboration of alternative social and political hybrid spaces between human and bird cultures.

The artists presented in this thesis explore notions of mimicry, becoming-animal, third space and common-ground in order to formulate new, enriched affective ties with birds and to offer new ways of living together.

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All drawings and photographs are by Anna Dupont-Crabtree.

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I would like to dedicate this thesis to the jackdaws that have come to my balcony every single day for a year, because they have made me a more patient, curious and compassionate being.

To my parents for their continuous support and affection,

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Introduction

1.1. How did we get here?

Despite their diminutive size, sparrows are extremely resilient creatures that have come to prosper on every continent (except for Antarctica, they're not *that* resilient) thanks to their exceptional adaptive qualities which have enabled them to adjust to various urban and rural settings. However, the relentless changes made by humans in their shared environments have strongly hindered the birds' thriving, and today the population of sparrows is in decline all around the world. Air pollution, skyscrapers, monocultures and the decrease in insects are some of the contributing factors. But one major historical event in relation to sparrows marked the real discrepancy regarding the ambiguous relationship between humans and these little birds.

In 1958, in China, Mao Tse-tung launched the "Four Pests Campaign" in order to exterminate rats, flies, mosquitoes and sparrows, that he believed were a hindrance to the country's economy – which at the time was undergoing a drastic shift from being mostly agrarian towards being more industrial. Birds, for Mao, were the "house pets of Capitalism", because they would steal grain and rice from the fields while they were not contributing to its production.[1] It was this irrational reasoning – the anthropomorphic analogy between sparrows and the nation's ideological enemy was specifically destined to anger the peasants for whom Mao was a firm leader – that established the grounds for a barbaric campaign of extermination that resulted in killing 90% of the sparrow population all over the country. Flocks (no pun intended) of people got involved to destroy nests, shoot the birds, crush their eggs, determined to release the country from this supposed avian woe-making; the main technique used was the very cruel and gruesome "noisemaking method", which consisted in continuously banging pots, pans and drums to scare the sparrows and prevent them from landing, until they dropped dead from exhaustion.[2]

This morbid operation did undoubtedly not take place without consequences: the ecological repercussions on the ecosystems of the fields were almost immediate, since in 1960, 60% of the crops were damaged by an invasion of bugs that were able

[1] Nowak 2002, p. 54.
[2] [https://www.ozy.com/true-and-stories/the-enemy-chairman-mao-could-not-defeat/95332/], accessed 1 May 2021.

to proliferate happily in the absence of sparrows. In response, Mao stopped the campaign, but it was too late to prevent the unfolding of one of the largest famines in history, partly due to the failed crops that followed the sparrow massacre.
What this episode demonstrated was a crisis in the relation between people and the birds, both in their mental conception – the sparrows had become an enemy to the nation – and in their affective viewpoint – which allowed them to participate in such a ruthless campaign. It also demonstrated an example of unsuccessful environmental authoritarianism, and the risks that this entails, if conducted by an anthropocentric, irrational and insensitive government. Finally, it engendered a process of "eco-fragmentation" of the fields, which means that the entire ecosystem that relies on the synergetic interaction of soil, fungi, worms, bees, bugs, sparrows and many other agents, was disrupted due to the absence of birds in the food chain.[3] This is one of the major causes of the extinction of biodiversity at the heart of the ongoing ecological crisis.

1.2. Decolonizing nature

The fragmentation of eco-habitats reminds us of a phenomenon that generally occurs within a colonial context, in which the settlers will attempt to "civilize" the environment by controlling, channelling and killing the living beings present on site, in total disregard of the effects that these actions will have on the wider ecosystem.[4] However, rather than solely focusing on the environmental *consequences* of the ecological crisis, the French-Caribbean philosopher Malcom Ferdinand situates the breach in our relationship with nature precisely in the *relations* that have both fostered and been drawn out of these destructions, both on an ecological and a colonial level.[5] Indeed, he understands the ecological crisis as a crisis in our relations, both with other human beings – through colonialism – and with non-human beings – through extractivist and destructive policies. According to Ferdinand, the fracture in contemporary society that prevents us from striving towards a de-colonial, cosmopolitan and ecological life resides in the historical separation of these relations

[3] Ferdinand 2019, p. 28.
[4] Ferdinand 2019, p. 30.
[5] Ferdinand 2019, p. 71.

as if they were not inherently related to one another: indeed, most ecological movements continue to disregard the role that colonization and slavery has borne in the environmental crisis.[6] In order to recognize the plurality of experiences and imageries of both human and non-human existences that have developed outside of the predominant frameworks surrounding the "Anthropocene", and this, since the beginning of European colonialism – in 1492 with the invasion of America and the slave trade – the social and political composition of these pluralities must be analysed to understand the different affective relations that are formed, deformed and transformed continuously between living beings.[7] Grasping that there is an infinite multitude of existences therefore prompts us to think about universalizing terms such as "humans", "animals", "nature"; their use in this thesis acknowledges that they do not and cannot include the diversity of things and beings evoked by these terms. Moreover, we must also recognize that not everyone is responsible in the same way for the ecological crisis, and only a small percentage of the world population – the same that led the imperialist and colonial expeditions – can veritably be blamed for precipitating these ongoing changes. It is also this specific part of the world that cultivated the opposition of nature and culture, both by applying human exceptionalism over any other living beings, and by stating that the natural world was solely to be perceived as a décor to the socio-political actions of humans of the minority world.[8]

1.3. The crisis of sensibility

According to the French philosopher Baptiste Morizot, removing non-human beings from the sphere of the political is what sparked what he refers to as the "crisis of sensibility": like Ferdinand he highlights the relational aspect of the environmental crisis by also accentuating the increasing lack of attention given to other beings that has led to an impoverishment in our affects, perceptions, sensitive practices and

[6] Ferdinand 2019, p. 19.
[7] Ferdinand 2019, p. 40.
[8] The term minority world here refers to the countries that hold 4/5th of the income in the world, but that are demographically in minority. The majority world refers to the countries that hold a third of the world's population but only 1/5th of its income. These terms were coined by the Bangladeshi teacher and social activist Shahidul Alam, to emphasize the unequal global dynamics, rather than wrong geo-localizations ("West", global "South"). These terms will be used throughout this thesis.

ecological knowledge.[9] In some cases, this reduction of our senses has made us oblivious to the yet *essential* emotional connections and significations that can be woven and constructed in interrelation with non-human beings, and has instead ruptured the ontological consistency of nature.[10] Therefore, the ecological crisis is also a crisis in our affects.

1.4. Art and affect

Since the 1990s, scholars working on Affect Theory have attempted to challenge dominant knowledge practices that consist of opposing affect to cognition, supposedly because bodily perceptions cannot be considered a rational or intelligent process of interpreting the world and thus cannot be associated with any conscious forms of decision-making.[11] Affect is indeed a pre-personal and non-conscious experience which takes shape as a set of responses – body language, facial expressions, sounds – that stem from the body, in reaction to a specific situation: an encounter with another body, or a confrontation with an environment.[12] It is through these affective displays – the philosopher Brian Massumi defines them as experiences of "intensity", which highlights the power of affect to impact and overwhelm another – that thoughts, as well as emotions and feelings, can then materialize and stimulate the body into action.[13] If affect is crucial in determining the dynamic relationship between one body to its surroundings, and is a common facet to all human and non-human beings – with varying degrees and forms of manifestation – it is also the starting point for communication between beings: the latter solely come into existence as a *consequence* of affect. Investigating affect as an alternative way of interpreting and relating to our environments and other living counterparts might also enable us to redefine the concept of the social and the political, in a non-anthropocentric way, with the intention of creating new models for the collective that could include the more-than-human.

[9] Morizot 2020, p. 17.
[10] Morizot 2020, p. 18.
[11] Brennan 2004, p. 4.
[12] Shouse 2005, accessed 23 March 2021.
[13] Massumi in Deleuze and Guattari 1987, p. xvi.

This impetus to de-construct in order to re-construct must certainly be received in acknowledgement of the many indigenous communities and countries of the majority world who are currently fighting to maintain their affective and ecological knowledge, beliefs, practices and cosmogonies. Therefore, the development of new forms of interspecies collaborative living for inhabitants of the minority world should be done in solidarity with those existing in the majority world, whilst also allowing them to exist altogether in sovereignty.[14]

In response to the crisis of sensibility, the turn to affect offers a way to transform our field of attention towards what matters: learning to co-habit in a world full of rich significations, connections and relations that await our interpretation.[15] In this instance, art appears as the chief tool to provide us with new aesthetic and sensible representations by enhancing our imagination and receptiveness towards nature through the use of specific mediums. Art's creative, sensitive, and radical qualities create similar affective resonances with the viewers which can impact them in contrasting ways. The artists Greta Alfaro, Kader Attia and Marcus Coates, presented in this thesis use art as a way of translating and conveying their significant encounters with birds, as they seek to constitute a meaningful and inspiring depiction of interspecies cooperation.

1.5. Methodology

Analysing the artworks nested within this thesis requires us to map the creative and situational entanglements that have given rise to them. Situational analysis would appear to be the most pertinent methodology for understanding works in relation to the artists' processes of exterior influence, such as how the creative medium and composition of the work and the latter's presence within wider spatiotemporal contexts can result in producing a particular effect on the viewer.[16] By drawing attention to the work's inherent situatedness within culture and history, this method of researching and writing about contemporary art will enable us to interpret the pieces within the context of the crisis of sensibility. Moreover, the focus on the

[14] Morton 2017, p. 12.
[15] Morizot 2020, p. 20.
[16] Verhoeff, Merx, Dolphijn 2020, "Situational Analysis: A Brief"

specific qualities of the medium used – here, the pieces are all in video format – affords insight into how the works convey meaning to the viewers. Finally, this methodology emphasizes the power of artworks to impact the viewer's senses. This is specifically relevant as regards affect, and we will therefore consider how particular mediums and contexts participate in shaping the way in which the information is emotionally received by spectators.

1.6. Questions and theoretical background

The central research question that will allow us to redefine our relation to birds within the context of the crisis of sensibility through art and affect is: how can artworks enable us to re-think our affective relationships with birds to explore new forms of interspecies interplay, in the context of the ecological crisis? This will lead us to then ask: how does affect shape interspecies encounters and the relationship to territory? How can mimesis, as an affective practice, help us to forge new bonds with birds? How can the process of becoming-animal enable us to merge even more with a bird's identity? Finally, how can we learn to co-exist in alternative spaces where all living beings learn to live in commonality?

I intend to contribute to the academic discourse not only by furthering previous research on affect and mimesis within art, biology and postcolonial studies – here understood in relation to ecology – but also by developing the former as hinges between nature and culture, and by investigating how art can transform our field of attention and offer forms of reconciliation with non-human beings.

Part one will introduce three contemporary artworks using situational analysis to map the relation between the choice of medium, the space in which the works were shown and the effect produced on the viewer. Although the artists do not necessarily refer to the ecological crisis in their work, their concern for the way the showcased birds should be held in regard by viewers reveals an empathetic and attentive approach, which is crucial for the redefining of our interspecies relationships. This first part will also introduce the different kinds of affect involved in the interactions between birds and humans enhanced in the artworks.

Part two will delve deeper into the role of affect in interspecies encounters through the theories of Sara Ahmed and Teresa Brennan, as well as focus on the

way affect shapes bird song and territory, as shown by the philosophers Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari and Vinciane Despret.

Part three will examine how mimesis as an affective practice can highlight our relationality with birds, and can be used as a process of active resistance, as suggested by the theorist Homi Bhabha. We will then look at the idea of becoming-animal, theorized by Deleuze and Guattari, as a way of generating forms of interplay that draw on affective, caring and empathetic connections with birds.

Finally, part four will investigate how the three artworks provide a rereading of the different forms of affects that constitute our interactions with birds in order to conceive an alternative way of co-living with non-human beings on political and geographical levels. This is seen in the acknowledgement of the differences that enable the construction of political spaces – theorized by Timothy Morton and Brian Massumi – and in the elaboration of alternative spaces for interspecies hybridity such as third space – conceptualized by Homi Bhabha and the geographer Edward Soja – and for living in common – as suggested by Malcom Ferdinand and by the philosopher Edouard Glissant.

Each chapter will draw on the works by Alfaro, Attia and Coates to illustrate how art can play an important part in rethinking our relationships to birds.

Rather than focusing first and foremost on the different kinds of species – humans, sparrows, cuckoos, vultures, lyrebird – and their inherent capacities, the leading thread in the re-consideration of our relationships with birds is the role of affect as a middle ground and starting point, from which connection, communication, conflict and cooperation depart and assemble all beings in an interweaving process.

PART 1: One lyrebird, a dozen vultures and a dawn chorus

1.1. First shell cracks

Cuckoos have a cunning nesting habit that consists in laying their eggs in the nests of other birds (Fig. 1), who raise and feed the chicks as their own. Although the cuckoos can become twice as big as their adoptive parents and siblings, they will be fed until they are ready to leave the nest. As soon as the eggshells reveal their first cracks, the warm and comforting cocoon made out of sticks, grass, leaves, and mud suddenly becomes an arena for the chicks' first ever interspecies encounter. Will the bright yellow eyes of the cuckoos confuse the brown-eyed warbler chicks and fool them into thinking that they are of the same kind?

Determined to accommodate the nest to their own self-indulgent needs and wanting to draw their adoptive parents' attention, the cuckoo chicks will sometimes go as far as pushing the other eggs or chicks out of the nest. But it is for the nest's cosmopolitan qualities rather than for the cuckoo's capacity to perform cold-blooded acts that I have introduced this narrative. Indeed, within this thesis are nested three different artworks, that reflect contrasting bird and human relationships. In the same way as the chicks will undergo the pipping process to be released from their egg, this first chapter will take apart the first layers of shells around the artworks, in an attempt to map the elements, both similar and dissimilar that contribute to their making.

We will highlight the different forms of affect that are captured in the different birds and human relationships, which in turn, help us understand the concepts and issues raised through the artworks: Alfaro's piece reflects common rituals between birds and humans, Attia's work suggests new forms of territoriality and Coates explores becoming-animal.

1.2. Common rituals: Greta Alfaro, *In Ictu Oculi*, 2009

Throughout history, in both spiritual and secular myths and rites, animals have been charged with diverse cultural meaning and representation, and have served as vehicles to enact human ways of behaving in society in symbolic fashion. For instance, animals in medieval Christian bestiaries were attributed both evil and good roles to illustrate the successes and failures of human life in an attempt to instruct

audiences in the moral mandates and beliefs of the time.[17] A bird such as the vulture, which has prospered in many different parts of the world (Africa, South East Asia, Europe and America), has therefore been associated with a variety of narratives which have contributed to shaping our contemporary understanding of and interactions with this bird. Thus, from a cultural point of view, vultures are particularly interesting as regards the commensurability of societies around the world – there seems to have been a recurrent pattern in the myths about these birds which are rarely endowed with positive status or influence. Nevertheless, in ancient Egypt, the deity Nekhbet was portrayed as a vulture-headed woman associated with purity, motherhood and the eternal cycle of death and rebirth.[18] Later, in Christian bestiaries, it was said that female vultures were able to conceive and give birth without sexual intercourse, meaning that the bird had become a symbol of the Virgin Mary.[19] But it is rather the negative connotations of death, danger and decay that have persisted through time and resulted in establishing vultures as "unclean" birds and bad omens. These associations originate from the bird's proximity with death as it has a habit of scavenging food from carcasses and will be often found following animals about to die. Today, vultures from both the 'Old' (Eurasia and Africa) and 'New' (America) World are currently an endangered species due to threatening activities by humans such as pesticide and lead poisoning use, poaching and destruction of habitats.[20] The critical nature of this situation calls for an urgent need to rethink our affective narratives regarding these birds, starting with a revision of the myths that portray the vulture as a sinister and impure bird, with a view to developing a more sustainable and caring relationship.[21]

The work *In Ictu Oculi* by the Spanish artist Greta Alfaro (b. 1977) is anchored at the intersection of many narratives and diverse influences, interweaving art history, food rituals and a questioning of the opposition of humans to nature. Although the artist does not explicitly advocate for the protection of vultures, we will examine how the situatedness and composition of this work enables viewers to challenge our

[17] Brown 1999, p. 54.
[18] [http://www.rigelatin.net/vulture/], accessed 5 March 2021.
[19] Ibid, accessed 5 March 2021.
[20] Ibid, accessed 5 March 2021.
[21] Van Dooren 2011, p. 11.

anthropocentric dogmas about culture and rituals. The piece is a 10-minute long colour video accompanied by a series of photographic stills which represent a group of vultures slowly descending on a neatly dressed dinner table, supposedly set up in the middle of a field for absent human guests (Figs. 2 and 3). The photographs immortalize the before and after of the birds' actions: collapsed chairs, shattered glass, broken plates and a muddy tablecloth (Fig. 4); only the film can resolve the suspense and tension that resides between each of the stills. Traditionally, Spanish social gatherings involve a very ritualized process where food plays a central part: the meal will usually last from noon until night-time, dishes and drinks constantly re-filled, and the dinner table becomes a converging point for uninhibited talk, gossip and jokes. Just like a cuckoo's nest, the dinner table is an arena where different identities intermingle, socialize and sometimes clash. Whereas this type of social encounter often takes place within a limited circle of friends and family, here, the table has been taken out of its confined sphere – the house – and into the open field. There is nothing preventing a third type of encounter – unrelated to friends and family – one that is unpredictable and beyond human control: both the meteorological conditions and the unconscious participation of non-human actors are automatically given significant importance once the table is taken outdoors. The title, which means "In the blink of an eye", therefore also highlights the immediacy of non-human activity displayed in the video. In this context, the binary opposition of the public and private is blurred into a porous state that facilitates the potential appearance of third factors and players that will cause inevitable repercussions on the film. In an interview, Alfaro reminisces on the difficulty of alluring the birds to the table when she was present behind the camera.[22] Thus the presence of the vultures required the absence of any human participants, which meant that the camera was the sole witness to the scene, conferring on it an almost voyeuristic turn, certainly reiterated in the viewing of the film by the visitors of the exhibition. Indeed, this voyeuristic feeling is emphasized in the sense of discomfort which is inherent to the exhibition: the viewers are deliberately misled by seeing the end point of the vultures' performance in the photographs, and forced to wonder who might have caused such disarray. The

[22] [https://www.futilitycloset.com/2016/06/04/vulture-picnic/], accessed 5 March 2021.

empty chairs tucked under the table, the full glasses waiting to be lifted for the toast and the conspicuous roast pig that must be getting cold are all elements which contribute to the latency of the scene on the verge of chaos and destruction and accentuate the obvious absence of human guests. Thus, any sense of chronological narrative is completely neutralized within the exhibition. This was furthermore enhanced in one of the premises where the work was shown, at the Carpe Diem Art and Research Centre in Lisbon, Portugal, in 2009. This not-for-profit centre for contemporary art is based in a 16th century building, the Pombal Palace, the interior of which was renovated in a Rococo manner during the 18th century. Many of the exhibition rooms have been kept in a derelict state, the paint peeling off the walls, the woodwork broken, and even the structure of the building left apparent in some cases (Fig. 5). The fading character of the building contributes to the feeling of chronological uncertainty generated by Alfaro's works and increases the doubt as to whether the disordered state of the photographs has been extended to the room purposefully, leaving the viewers to contemplate whether the vultures have also invaded the exhibition space.

Another element of the video's composition which highlights the discrepancy of the meal and its guests is the soundtrack. The sounds at the beginning and end are surprisingly low and thus seem to reflect the lingering feeling and initial lack of movement in the visuals: only the faint wind flickering the tablecloth is mirrored in the overcast shadows of the flapping wings as the birds start to slowly hover above the feast. The climax of the video is asserted both as the sound increases – the flutter of the wings gets louder and there are some vocal altercations between some of the birds – and as the agglutinated presence of the birds on and around the table eventually fill the whole screen (Fig. 6). While there are clinking sounds of cutlery and plates as well as gustatory noises, the absence of human voices furthermore emphasizes the diverging cultural and ritualistic function of the dinner table. However, this feeling does not last long; the presence of the birds rather becomes captivating as they take over the table, disregarding the objects designed for comfort and convenience – chairs, plates, glasses – and devouring the feast to their own individual fancy. The viewer is confronted with an uncanny encounter: instead of being depicted in its usual surroundings or alluded to with the negative connotations

mentioned earlier, here the vulture is the exceptional guest at an elegant feast. But this feast is relegated as décor once the birds enter the scene, and all of the human codified gestures, objects and rituals usually associated with food here are rejected by the active presence of the birds and their unsubmissive, interactive and autonomous stance within the video. The anthropocentric gaze of the viewer undoubtedly shifts with the birds' appropriation and deconstruction of human space and cultural rituals: the work provides a space of latency where humans are displaced from their privileged position to the background, as passive spectators, thus encouraging the viewers to think differently about the specificity of cultural formalities as a solely human practice. The work instead offers insight into the act of eating as a common affective ritual that all human and non-human beings indulge in. Finally, the slight awkwardness of the birds due to the incongruous presence of objects on the table gives the overall work an endearing feeling, and calls for an empathetic response from the viewer.

1.3. New territoriality: Kader Attia, *Mimesis as Resistance*, 2013.

The French philosopher Pierre-Joseph Proudhon claimed in 1840 that "Property is Theft", implying that when one acquires a territory or a thing, one commits not only the act of depriving other individuals but also the collective, since property fosters exclusivity.[23] For Proudhon, property only functions in a binary structure: it is both the right to occupy and the right to exclude.[24] This proposition was formulated in the context of the Industrial Revolution, whence capitalist economy was increasingly engendering alarming levels of dispossession of ecological resources and exploitation of humans through the slave trade. In addition to this, capitalism encourages the appropriation of the collective right to property in order to foster private property and favours production rather than exchange and credit.[25] Proudhon thus suggests that in order to resist the logic of capitalism, we must restore the occupation of territories as collective spaces and re-establish the position of

[23] Ardenne 2019, p. 214.
[24] Jourdain 2014, p. 177.
[25] Jourdain 2014, p. 179.

exchange of resources between individuals. The recent recourse to the notion of "the commons" to describe the practice of coordinating shared resources within communities as an alternative and resilient way of resisting capitalism would appear to concord with Proudhon's perception. However, Proudhon omitted to refer to the many Indigenous communities that have applied this logic of the commons through significant collaborative social practices and deep-rooted knowledge of nature. The term "re-appropriation" was therefore coined by Proudhon to describe the action of re-thinking the nature of property as a socio-political realm that can flourish through collaborative practices and exchange.

In his work, the Franco-Algerian artist Kader Attia (b. 1970) investigates the idea of "re-appropriation" and new territoriality in relation to contemporary anti-colonial struggles and to the impact of Western cultural hegemony on the question of the frontier opposing nature to culture. In the work *Mimesis as Resistance*, 2013, he is interested in the way mimicry is used by a bird as a way of registering, resisting, and ultimately recovering from the changes taking place in its environment. The installation is a 2.18-minute video which is an excerpt from a David Attenborough documentary on the Australian Lyrebird, a bird with exceptional mimetic capacities which enable it to reproduce many sounds, from the songs of other birds, to the sounds of mammals and even human and technological noises. In the short video, the lyrebird is parading and reproducing the songs of birds in the vicinity, as well as the sound of a camera shutter and a chainsaw (Figs. 7 and 8). The work was first shown as part of a Kader Attia exhibition entitled "Repair", at the KW Institute for Contemporary Art in Berlin, Germany, which explored different cultural approaches to the idea of injury and healing. The act of repairing is fundamentally human, in that, for the artist, "*One of the main aspects of modernity makes us believe that humans invent to evolve, when in fact they only repair. They repair to resist (…)*".[26] Repair is thus ultimately linked to re-appropriation since both are attempts to resist or to provoke change, and both unfold through deconstruction and reconstruction.[27] In this context, Attia investigates the lyrebird's re-appropriation of its environment through

[26] Attia 2013, accessed 18 January 2021.
[27] Attia 2013, accessed 18 January 2021.

sound as a process of repair. In the long term, this species of bird, like the vulture, is also endangered, particularly by uncontrolled bushfires which often occur in Australia because the government has halted the indigenous practice of starting bushfires to burn off easily inflammable vegetation that increases the risk of fires spreading. This is another example of a community practice of managing collective space, both for the protection of human and non-human beings, that has been eschewed by the Institutional system and the State. However, the extinction of the lyrebird is only displayed in a latent way in the video: there are no obvious indications that the featured bird is actually held captive in a zoo and that the human sounds it is imitating are noises coming from the adjacent panda enclosure under construction. The overarching feeling of confinement and the dramatic apprehension about the bird's extinction is furthermore emphasized by the fact that the video is played in a loop, which puts the emphasis on the bird's movements and sounds. The liminal space between capture and freedom was particularly well reflected in the display of the work at the Sharjah Biennial 13 in the Emirates in 2017. The walls of the room were covered with soundproof foam, which re-created the oppressive atmosphere of confinement and exclusion (Fig. 9). The TV on which the film was shown was relatively small and placed at the far end of the room. The sound was disseminated through large speakers, which indicates the decision to accentuate the importance of the soundtrack in this work. For viewers who are not familiar with lyrebirds, the accuracy of the reproduced sounds is unsettling, and one might be led to think the sounds have been added to the bird parading in silence. The notion of appropriation in this work is actually double, since Attia is also re-appropriating an excerpt from the Attenborough's documentary, which, once isolated from the rest of the film, sheds light on the reality of the bird's condition. The awareness of the bird's caged status also refers back to the idea of territory mentioned earlier: the invention of the fence symbolizes the first attempt to delineate a space, and mark it as a private territory, for the sole purpose of exploiting the resources from that land. The fencing of a territory also functions as a binary, since it always implies the negation of another space, the latter existing as a whole, or as a collective area. Fences, like borders, are breaches in the land which carry heavy social, political and economic significance, and like scars, often bear the imprint of a trauma. Birds are often perceived as a metaphor for

resisting the constriction of horizontal territories, delimited by fences or enclosures: indeed, the act of flying suggests freedom and unlimited movement. The caging of the lyrebird – even for its protection – thus appears highly ambiguous as regards avian behaviour. Viewers of the exhibition therefore have to negotiate the relation between the visual absence of humans in the video and its subliminal and reconstructed presence in the sounds produced by the lyrebird. Although the latter is imitating the tools and machines that are contributing to its extinction, the work nevertheless seems to hold a message of hope and resilience: mimicry as an instinctive and biological capacity here is used by the lyrebird as a tactic for survival – by singing and emulating sounds from its adjacent environment, the lyrebird is actively resisting change by trying to achieve equilibrium through song.

1.4. Becoming-bird: Marcus Coates, *Dawn Chorus*, 2007.

Throughout Western history, language has been considered as the point of demarcation between humans and animals, and as an archetype to nature's dualism.[28] Thus, human language was assigned a central socio-political function in the construction of Western society, whereas animal speech has often been dismissed as background noise to our actions. As Morizot indicates, nowadays, people travel to the countryside in order to take some time off from the noisy brouhaha of the city, its cars, machines, crowds and constant flux: the countryside, on the other hand, is characterized as "calm, silent".[29] However, relegating nature and its diverse inhabitants to a muted décor, and denying their existence as autonomous entities by solely perceiving them in opposition to the city and to human activity, furthermore increases the breach between nature and culture. When human beings visit the countryside, or any natural place, they are in fact *in minority*: grasping this concept allows us to perceive all of the non-human interspecies forms of communication and affect – from territory negotiations, to serenades, games and messages – which exist and proliferate with or without the presence of humans within these spaces, and which are extraordinarily loud once we start listening to them.[30]

[28] Aloi 2011, p. 7.
[29] Morizot 2020, p. 19.
[30] Morizot 2020, p. 20.

Paying close attention to the modulations within birdsong actually reveals strong similitudes with the intonations, rhythms and musicality present within most forms of human language. This space of commonality, whereby both species can relate to each other on an affective level, is furthermore palpable in the biological development of speech and song: the anthropologist Tim Ingold demonstrates that language is not an aptitude that "pre-exists" for humans, but that languages have gradually evolved throughout time in manifold ways, just as we individually learn how to master them as a "skill".[31] Similarly, birds acquire their song through mimetic appropriation of other bird songs and through their capacity to improvise and add new and unique elements to their song which suggests that birds learning to sing is no more instinctive than humans learning to speak. Both speech and song are cultural skills, outlined by Ingold as "properties of the whole system of relations", which reveals the fundamental need for relationality within bird and human societies.[32]

The work *Dawn Chorus*, 2007, by British artist and ornithologist Marcus Coates (b. 1968), highlights the analogies between birdsong and human language, both on sound and visual levels. In 2005, Coates travelled to a woodland in North Cumberland with a sound engineer specializing in bird recordings, Geoff Sample. For two weeks, they slept in a campervan and woke up every morning just before dawn to record a chorus of birds using a 24-track digital recorder which allowed them to register simultaneously the sound of 40 birds, each one of them saved on an individual track. This was a highly complex enterprise because the birds were obviously mobile and changed singing spots every day, whereas the recordings required distinctive, uninterrupted song in each microphone.[33] Of course, the birds were not cooperative in this mission, which meant that the recordists had to constantly adapt to the birds' behaviour and moving patterns, and be very careful in order to insert themselves – or rather, the microphones – into an environment where they were indeed, in the minority. For instance, the choice of using a campervan was specifically made in relation to the fact that the birds from this site were accustomed

[31] Ingold 2000, p. 392.
[32] Ingold 2000, p. 401.
[33] Sample 2007, p. 21.

to the occasional presence of vehicles which meant that they would not be troubled by it.[34] The careful consideration of the birds' social habits and demeanour within this operation shows the work's predilection towards encouraging the viewers to respond in an empathetic and attentive manner, and to become aware of the distinctive characteristics of each bird song.

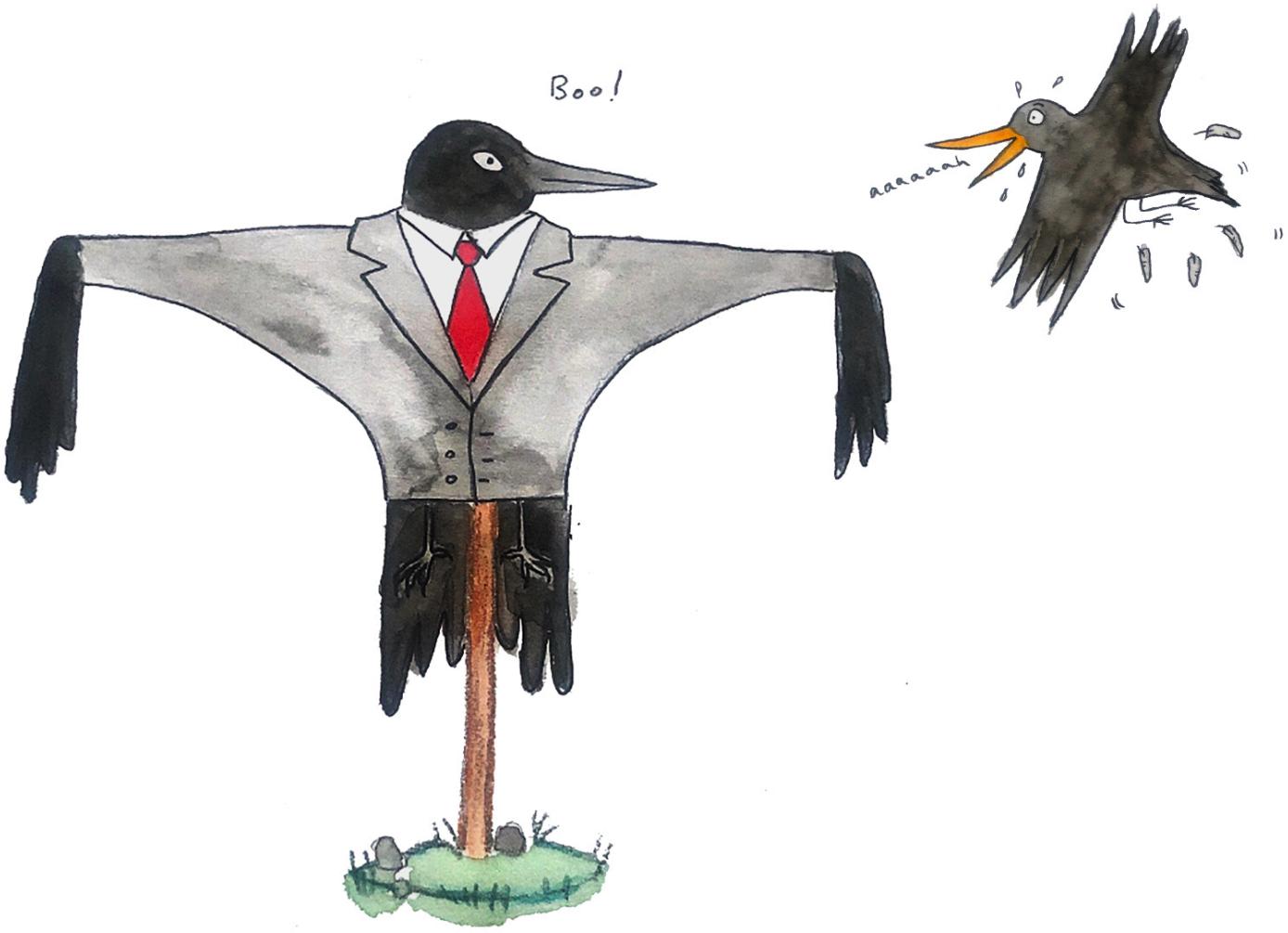
Once gathered, the recordings were then slowed down 20 times, which enabled each individual note present within the songs to be revealed – up to 40 for some birds, whereas, at normal speed, the human ear can only distinguish a maximum of 5 notes.[35] In 2007, Coates contacted the members of a Bristol choir to perform the slowed-down bird songs with their human voice: each singer had to be specifically picked so that their tone corresponded with that of the bird: "*For a robin, we had to choose a young person that was able to go very high and very low. The robin really takes big breaths and does not breathe for a long while so the person singing its song has to do the same*".[36] The human recordings of birdsong were just as tedious and intricate as the field recordings: each participant had to sing for almost 2 hours, while simultaneously listening to and following the swift, sporadic and spontaneous flow of notes produced by their bird counterpart. They were also filmed while performing in a space where they tended to spend a lot of time, such as a bed, bathtub, office, couch, or car: all of these confined spaces thus contrasted with the open-air territories of the birds, which are constantly being negotiated between species and contingent to meteorological uncertainties (Figs. 10 and 11). The apparent dichotomy between nature and the closed, indoor locations of the singers nevertheless retains a lot of similitudes: both can be perceived as social arenas where the private meets the public through the occurrence of affective encounters between different beings, and thus these chosen spaces shed insight into the geopolitical and cultural mores of both birds and humans as regards their "territory".

The recordings were then speeded up to the original tempo of birdsong, which meant that the two hours were suddenly condensed into 8 minutes. The work was first presented in an exhibition entitled "Dawn Chorus" at the BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Art in Gateshead, UK, in 2007. The installation was comprised of the

[34] Sample 2007, p. 23.
[35] Cull 2021, p. 199.
[36] Aloi 2007, p. 20.

14 different videos of the individual choir members singing their bird song in a loop. In a vast, darkened room the large screens were suspended at different heights to mimic the different singing spots from the North Cumberland woodland where the recordings had been taken (Fig. 12). All the songs were played at the same time to produce the impression of an actual bird chorus, which accurately reproduced the dawn chorus Coates and Sample attended. The monumental space of the exhibition – the building had been a mill up until 1981 – seemed to be furthermore amplified by the singing which resonated in echo as it bounced off the walls, creating an immersive atmosphere into a body of powerful sounds and visuals. The fact that the industrial building harmonized so well with the cacophony of birdsong raises an important predicament: how come these sounds are so oblivious to our ears when they are heard in their natural environment? The exhibition must have been an overwhelming experience for the visitors, whilst also slightly confusing: is this actual birdsong taped onto an accelerated video? The answer seems to reside in the space between sound and visuals, in which the singers have come to inhabit their environment “like a bird”, by moving, reacting, singing and even dancing for and as part of it: their relationship to their claimed territory is materialized in *Dawn Chorus* through the performance of powerful affects common to humans and birds: music and song.

PART 2: Affective encounters



2.1. Not-so-scared, crows

With its arms stretched out as wide as possible, an uncanny look on its stitched face or pumpkin head, its frock flapping in the wind with sharp bits of straw piercing through its chest, and its single leg firmly driven into the soil: the scarecrow is a rather common contraption in countryside folklore. But, unfortunately, its presence in fields is declining. Yet, the scarecrow's function is timeless: to produce a visual fright to ward birds off the fields to prevent them from picking at the harvests. However, the visual encounter can only last if the attempt to provoke a shock-effect on the bird has failed, since birds grow accustomed to these carnivalesque-looking mannequins and end up using them as perches, to peer over the bountiful crops.[37] Thus, by resisting the scarecrows' original function and diverting it towards one that serves them, the birds, in their uninhibited fashion, provide even more contrast with the life-size but lifeless effigy of the human form, all of its elements of realness – garments, accessories and sewn-on face – objectified and condensed at once into a rather primary representation of our bodily selves.[38]

On the other hand, if the objective of scaring is attained, the encounter is then cut short, but is of a manifestly *affective* nature: the visual fright produced by the almost-human-scarecrow generates an effect on the bird, which will lead it to move its body into action, and flee from the field, leaving the crops untouched. Today, many auditory scaring devices such as gas guns that make loud explosion noises have replaced the humble scarecrow and its power of the visual. Nevertheless, the relationship between birds and scarecrows provides an effective example for what constitutes an affective encounter between an inanimate and animate being.

2.2. Encounters

"*Species of all kinds, living and not, are consequent on a subject- and object-shaping dance of encounters.*"

Donna Haraway, 2008.[39]

[37] Lorimer 2013, p. 181.
[38] Lorimer 2013, p. 180.
[39] Haraway 2008, p. 4.

So, what defines an encounter and what are the inherent qualities of its affective nature? According to the scholar Sara Ahmed, an encounter is a face-to-face meeting between two subjects involving visual recognition or touch from a least one of the parts.[40] Encounters are necessarily mediated, both by the presence of other subjects and by the spatio-temporal context in which the meeting takes place. The mediation of the encounter by external factors also has an impact on the formation of each individual's identity, constituted and re-constituted in a continuously shifting process. Ahmed expands the definition of the encounter as "a coming together of two elements", suggesting that a meeting does not always require the presence of two human beings, but finds its value on more inclusive grounds, and encompasses non-human animals or objects, which also actively participate in shaping one's identity as a consequence of affect.[41]

In Alfaro's artwork, the absence of humans is particularly gripping, as the group of loud vultures takes over the entire frame of the video: at what point does the encounter begin in this context and who does it involve? We have seen in part one that the elements on display – the food, wine, crockery – symbolically evoke the presence of humans, in the same way as the scarecrow performs the human body. Therefore, the inanimate items on the table both create the reason for this encounter – the vultures, attracted by the food, descend to feed – and participate in it in a metonymical way, on behalf of the missing human guests.

Another type of encounter taking place simultaneously occurs between the vultures and the camera, which operates in a voyeuristic mode, as an invisible participant in the scene, recording each movement, sound and interaction of the birds.

It is also the camera that enables a final encounter with the vultures, one that is highly mediated and forever changing: each viewer of the video, whether in the exhibition or online, will have a unique affective experience of the encounter, depending on the influence of diverse socio-cultural factors and other (un)conscious elements.

[40] Ahmed 2000, p. 7.
[41] Ahmed 2000, p. 7.

All three artworks introduced in part one highlight a fundamental element of the nature of encounters: spontaneity. Indeed, for Ahmed, one can never predict the outcome of a meeting between two entities, because it always involves surprise – in the sense of a lack of familiarity and absence of knowledge of one another.[42] Indeed, in the making of Coates' work, the process of recording the dawn chorus was tedious because it relied so much on the participation of the birds, whose independent and therefore uncontrollable character made it necessary for the artist and the sound engineer to adapt to the birds. Alfaro's work was also highly dependent on the cooperation of the vultures, and the natural setting in which the table was placed meant that the work could have also taken an unexpected turn, such as through the contingent presence of other animals or with changing meteorological conditions. Finally, in Attia's work, the documentary nature of the video furthermore stresses the unpredictable and erratic character of the encounter with the lyrebird.
Spontaneity and surprise are important components of a meeting because they reflect the affective dispositions of the action and behaviour of the living beings in their encounter with another living or non-living element: indeed, affect operates as a set of responses independent of consciousness and of the mind's control.[43] Thus, the spontaneous power of affect which enables bodies to move and behave in reaction to a situation that involves other participants ultimately also impacts the latter in different ways. In her description of interspecies encounters, the philosopher Donna Haraway emphasizes the sense of responsibility that arises after an encounter: "Propelled by the tasty but risky obligation of curiosity among companion species, once we know, we cannot not know [and] once we have met, we can never be the same again."[44] Responsibility here emerges in the acknowledgement of the other, which materializes, in Haraway's words, as "regard": thus, if the encounter is visual, one "sees, looks back, holds in regard" the other, and it is this regard that knots the two elements together into a co-established relationality.[45]

The essence of surprise which ensues from an encounter furthermore suggests that one is always attempting to "read" and "recognize" the other – whether

[42] Ahmed 2000, p. 8.
[43] Leys 2011, p. 443.
[44] Haraway 2008, p. 287.
[45] Haraway 2008, p. 164.

it is the body of a different species or whether a territory that might provide food and protection – but this also implies that one may not always be able successfully to acknowledge the other.[46] What are alternative ways of achieving recognition if our visual senses fail us?

2.3. Imaginary encounters

Because of its crooked beak, plucked neck and large wings, I can distinguish the vulture from other birds even though I have never seen a vulture in real life – so why am I able to so confidently claim, "I know this bird"?

My ability to recognize the vultures in Alfaro's video originates from the life-long process common to all human beings which consists of creating visual representations of people, things, times and places in our imagination, especially when stimulated by aesthetic and sensitive disciplines such as art, music, literature and cinema. In an interview with Marcus Coates, he exemplified how most non-humans actually exist in our imagination: "*Physical proximity to animals is actually very limited, unless you have a pet. But for example, with foxes, I've only seen them in books or films, so they exist in my imagination and the ways in which I am creating them in my mind (…). It all stems from that, from where nature lives in our minds. I suppose I am seeing nature and the animal as a state of mind.*"[47] In this light, art thus appears as a major tool to create these images in our minds, through the formulation of new symbols, representations and imageries that all contribute to enriching, refining, and rooting our sensibility and relationship to the living world. My mental representation of vultures therefore resides in a zone of indiscernibility – between reality and imagination – which enables me altogether to relate to Alfaro's work whilst also gaining new insight into the birds' behavioural tendencies and their interactions with one another.

So, to design works that resonate with and enhance people's imaginary conceptions, artists often draw from experience of living that is inherently shared by most humans. Art thus creates affect: artworks address and grip the spectator in

[46] Ahmed 2000, p. 8.
[47] Coates 2020, personal interview.

diverse multisensory ways, generating a moment of "intensity" of unformed and unstructured potential to feel and grasp the world differently.[48] Art produces both the framework and content for these aesthetic and sensitive experiences which are often abstract and difficult to translate into words because they reside outside of one's consciousness. Therefore, the power of art lies in its capacity to both trigger affective moments and enhance the imagination of viewers; these conditions thus appear as the ideal structure for learning to recognize and acknowledge the other in interspecies encounters. In all three works by Alfaro, Coates and Attia, the encounter is not two-fold, since only the viewers of the works can acknowledge the birds' mediated presence in the videos played on loop. In their visual and sound depiction of the birds, the works provide the affective device for the viewers to *imagine* what it would be like to have these birds before them, and how one might relate to or instead disassociate from them. So, what happens when art communicates affect to its viewers?

2.4. The transmission of affect

If art can emanate affects and integrate them in the lived experiences of the viewers, then art actually re-creates the conditions for the transmission of affect.[49] The variety of affects that a body cultivates throughout a lifetime shows that they are not static but rather operate in a fluctuating manner, that can either decrease or increase in intensity according to the nature of the forms of stimulation: threatening or comforting bodies, harmful or serene surroundings.[50] These stimulating forces are necessarily exterior to the body reacting to them, therefore, it appears that the origin of affect finds its roots in a social context, but that the process is biological and physical in effect.[51] The philosopher Teresa Brennan calls into question the dominant knowledge practices that depict individual cognition as a social and cultural construct, in opposition to affect considered as a set of subjective and instinctive responses.[52] She demonstrates that the transmission of affect from a social and environmental context

[48] Leys 2011, p. 442.
[49] Grosz 2008, p. 45.
[50] Cull 2012, p. 192.
[51] Brennan 2004, p. 3.
[52] Brennan 2004, p. 2.

to a body capable of reacting and moving in accordance with these external forces thus sheds light on the fact that living beings are actually far from being "self-contained" as regards their energies.[53] Affects circulate from one body to another, in a bio-neurological process of "contagion"; the etymology of the word means to touch-with, which epitomizes the bodily and sensitive impact of affect.[54] So before being a radical discipline that has transformative powers to change society, art is first and foremost highly impactful on the human body and its senses.

2.5. Rhythmic conversations

Although the exchange of affect between bodies is spontaneous in nature and flows constantly, this is not to say that the relationships between bodies and their environment are entirely chaotic, since they actually follow a certain organization which enables the biological to become attuned with the social. Indeed, the physical responses of affect that materialize through facial expressions, noises, body language – all of which are non-verbal forms of communication – follow specific expressions of rhythm in movement and sound.[55] Although language is considered the dominant form of communication between human beings – mostly as the result of Eurocentric thinking and the dualism between nature and culture – verbal conversations actually emulate the same rhythms that constitute non-verbal speech and behaviour, and in fact, words cannot always supersede the nuances of affective perception.[56] If body and facial gestures often accompany speech as an added form of intensity, their meaning varies according to cultures and times: affects are common to all living beings but their interpretation and taxonomy are not universal.[57]

The fact that affect persists alongside and actively shapes language pinpoints the need to enhance our receptivity to types of perception that are not solely expressed in words, but through affective bodies.[58] Opening up to these other forms of relating to the living world is the groundwork for acknowledging and adapting to

[53] Brennan 2004, p. 2.
[54] Gibbs 2009, p. 191.
[55] Gibbs 2009, p. 198.
[56] Gibbs 2009, p. 199.
[57] Gunew 2009, p. 19.
[58] Gibbs 2009, p. 199.

non-human forms of communication and consciousness. Whilst a philosopher himself, the scholar Matthew Calarco argues against human rational thinking as the main form of knowledge and communication: "*There are multiple emotions, affects and other extra-rational modes through which our thinking and interactions with animals might be called into question and transformed; and to suggest that philosophical argumentation plays the only or even the primary role here is a contentious claim*."[59]

The use of video and sound in all three artworks thus exemplifies alternative modes of depicting the living world in encouraging within the viewer a careful awareness of the birds' own ways of relating affectively to space. Indeed, in the extract selected by Attia from Attenborough's documentary, the lyrebird is actively shaping its territory through song, that has come to include machine sounds that correspond to the ever-changing state of its environment, and thus to the omnipresence of humans responsible for such changes. The fluctuation between regular birdsong and the sudden triggering noise of a car alarm emerging from the bird's delicate throat creates a rather harrowing effect on the viewers, faced with the reality of the lyrebird's oppressive environment. Thus, how can birdsong teach us about territory and ways of relating to it aesthetically?

2.6 Birdsong and territory

We saw in Part one that birdsong serves many different functions, from identifying different species in a common territory, to sharing messages and warning signs, marking a territory as a profitable or dangerous space, seducing and courting females, and boasting about the qualities of the song to a competitive audience.[60] These simultaneously poetic and vociferous demonstrations ultimately connect to the intensification of affect, which, translated into emotions, such as fear, anger, joy and triumph, forges the unique experiences of the birds in relation to their territory. Through affect, birdsong delineates the frontiers of an environment, as it is in their vocal presence that birds proclaim their territory in a tangible and interdependent

[59] Calarco 2015, p. 24.
[60] Grosz 2008, p. 37.

way. The affective power of song also fosters physical encounters – conflict, play, reproduction all initially arise from vocal interactions between bird peers – during which affect will be transmitted between bodies, and with it, infinite conceptions of space and identity.

If confronted with the lyrebird, the birds from Coates' dawn chorus would probably be flabbergasted, both because of the bird's impressively adorned tail, and because of its highly complex and manifold song. Although as we have seen, birdsong serves specific purposes linked to the establishment of territory, it can also be attributed other qualities, targeted towards the individual presentation of the bird to its companions. Indeed, birdsong is not solely used in order to attract female birds, but is also (and in some cases mainly) directed at other male birds, as a belligerent demonstration in order to protect a territory, a female, or simply as an act of self-confidence and pride.[61] In this light, birdsong appears as a "matter for expression", as described by Deleuze and Guattari, suggesting that the song functions as a display of appearances, affects and impressions, and with it, there is a certain degree of spectacle.[62] The philosopher Vinciane Despret develops this idea using aggressiveness as an example: by borrowing the codes of aggression, the birdsong is derived from its original motif – conflict in a psychological sense – towards one that is purely about expressivity and style – conflict in an aesthetic or musical sense; then the aggressive nature of the song is turned into simulacrum.[63] Thus, conflict is converted to play, under the expressive modalities of the song. The winner of the contest will be the bird with the most powerful and threatening song that simultaneously deceives the other into thinking there is actually a conflict.[64]

Play is common to most human and non-human animals: it is during this structuring phase in childhood that participants learn to improvise in response to external stimuli, and that these "powers of variation" that are inherent to instinct help individuals develop unique qualities.[65] Animal play is an assemblage of bodies in a zone of indiscernibility between reality and fiction, where the only certitude are the

[61] Despret 2019, p. 60.
[62] Deleuze and Guattari 1987, p. 330; Despret 2019, p. 62.
[63] Despret 2019, p. 62; Deleuze and Guattari 1987, p. 316.
[64] Despret 2019, p. 63.
[65] Massumi 2003, p. 12.

affects transmitted between them, which makes the experience seem so "real".[66] For the philosopher Brian Massumi, improvised action within animal play reveals the creative plasticity present within all living beings (even worms!) and therefore, a certain aesthetic dimension to this spontaneity.[67]

As highlighted in Part one, improvisation is intrinsic to birdsong: from a young age, inspired by the others' calls and sounds, birds will constitute a repertoire of songs, from which they will improvise by consistently adding new elements and rhythms.[68] This once again shows that it is through affective encounters that birds learn to conceive an important part of their identity – their song – and furthermore implies that they possess some sort of aesthetic sensibility to specific sounds that they choose to remember and adapt to their own expressivity and style.[69]

This leads us to enquire as to whether birdsong could also be at times without purpose, and simply be used on aesthetic, affective and sensible terms. Do birds get some sort of pleasure from singing to and for each other? This points to the discrepancy between the original bird chorus and the choir in Coates' work: whereas the birds were singing in a harmonized whole, potentially finding satisfaction and comfort in hearing one another, the human interpreters recorded their song individually, without any awareness of the other songs.

Thus, it is birdsong's capacity to both create and respond to affect and generate pleasure that, according to the philosopher Elizabeth Grosz, highlights its similitudes with the affective power of art: "The song bird accomplishes something new in its oratory, a new art, a new coupling of qualities and milieus that isn't just the production of new musical elements, materials – melodies, rhythms, positive music contents – but the opening up of the world itself to the force of taste, appeal, the bodily, pleasure, desire – the very impulses behind all art."[70]

[66] Massumi 2003, p. 25.
[67] Massumi 2003, p. 14; Bennett 2010, pp. 95-95: Darwin highlighted the role of small agencies such as worms and their cumulated effects in the creation of society.
[68] Lestel 2001, p. 213.
[69] Lestel 2001, p. 210.
[70] Grosz 2008, p. 39.

PART 3: Like a bird

3.1. The polyglot lyrebird

For indigenous Australian peoples, Dreaming stories narrate the creation of the earth and the essential inter-relationships between humans, land, animals, and spirits. Dreaming telling is conducted in a complex ceremony of ritual songs, myths, performances and art that has persisted for thousands of years, handed down between generations, reflecting the rich ecological and cultural knowledge that Aboriginal people continue resiliently to weave with the earth. The Lyrebird Dreaming is specific to the Dharawal people of New South Wales: the story states that all animals used to speak the same language, until a conflict divided them all up against one another. Infuriated by this sudden discord and lack of solidarity between species, a spirit woman took away from all the animals the capacity to understand each other, except the Lyrebird. Because only the latter had attempted to settle peace and sought to find truth in the conflict, it was given the aptitude to understand all animal languages.[71]

In this myth, the representation of the Lyrebird as a mediator capable of communicating with all beings and channelling their energies into a sensitive response reflects the bird's biological capacity for perfectly mimicking the sounds of its environment and of other species and incorporating them into its own song; thus, the Lyrebird Dreaming encourages us to transform external influences into our own, creative and affective modes of thinking and acting.[72]

3.2. Mimicry and mimesis

We have seen in part two that the elaboration of language and birdsong for children and bird chicks in both cases relies on imitation, as well as on a degree of improvisation and innovation. Although mimicry – the act of imitating, the close external resemblance to something in order to reach a deceptive aim (protection, reproduction, disguise) – is a common phenomenon to all animal species, there has been, in dominant knowledge practices of the minority world, a categorization of this

[71] Bodkin [https://dharawalstories.files.wordpress.com/2015/12/yandelora.pdf], accessed 16 May 2021.
[72] [http://www.wildspeak.com/animalenergies/lyrebird.html], accessed 16 May 2021.

capacity as an instinctive and therefore non-cognitive behaviour. Indeed, mimicry has often been contested in the same way as affect: dismissed for being a passive and irrational regime that does not require any form of intelligence, since imitating supposedly translates as "copying".[73]

On the other hand, mimesis has been understood as a more developed form of imitation, that takes place by mimicking the behaviour of a group in order to provoke social change.[74] The term is also used specifically to refer to the symbolic representation of nature by culture and art on a strictly human level – even though, as discussed in part two, non-human animals also pertain to aesthetic sensibility that is transmitted through affective and mimetic behaviour.

The hierarchizing of mimesis as a superior system of perception than mimicry shifted in the 1980s, when scientists and ethologists recognized mimicry as a complex cognitive capacity that actually requires from the imitators a form of self-consciousness that allows them to understand the other's intentions in a specific context in order to reiterate it.[75] Thus, both mimicry and mimesis are important overlapping concepts that comprise the imitation of specific behaviour and actions for different performative, creative and affective purposes, by forging both resemblance and dissemblance between beings and their environment.[76]

3.3. Mimesis and affect

Common to both mimicry and mimesis is the encounter or trajectory during which subject and object are merged into a sharing of form. However, as accurate as the imitation might be, the result of mimetic interplay is that of a *rendering* of the other, rather than an identical representation, as one can never entirely supersede the original.[77] The mimetic operation occurs as an exchange between bodies or with the environment, through the synchronizing of facial expressions, voice, sounds, postures and movements.[78] The apparently heterogeneous bodies thus become

[73] Gibbs 2009, p. 189.
[74] [http://csmt.uchicago.edu/glossary2004/mimesis.htm#_ftn2], accessed 5 February 2021.
[75] Despret 2012, p. 10.
[76] Deumert 2018, p. 10.
[77] Gibbs 2009, p. 193.
[78] Gibbs 2009, p. 186.

entirely caught in a process of contagious reciprocity, whereby they are reconciled in a commensurable order through perceptible similitudes. Whether these resemblances actually enhance the veritable dissemblance between the subjects or instead confuse their identity into an intermingled whole, varies according to the situation and to the intention of the imitator. In both cases, the mimetic connection brings bodies together into a communicative process whereby affective modalities – the non-conscious response to exterior stimuli by bodily affects – play a central part. By understanding its key role in mimetic exchanges, affect can furthermore be acknowledged as an alternative to rational, linguistic and anthropocentric modes of communicating in order to forge new social bonds between species, and to grasp its relational function in the weaving of relationships with our environment. Thus, mimesis appears as a complex form of affective connection that might also be understood as a hinge between nature and culture, between bodies and their environments.[79]

3.4. *Mimesis as resistance*

By selecting an extract from Attenborough's documentary and playing it in a loop, Attia aims to draw the viewer's attention towards the vocal presence of the lyrebird, and more specifically, to what it might reflect about the nature of its relationship with its environment. As we have established, the lyrebird is, with the parrot, the avian species with the most developed form of mimicry, which allows it to register and reproduce sophisticated sounds made by animals or things that are not even present on its grounds. Indeed, chicks will grow up mimicking their parents' songs, assimilating cultural and affective information that they will accommodate into their own repertoire, passing it on resiliently through generations: mimetic agency thus also impacts the genetic evolution of bird song.[80]

But the acute copying of human-made sounds such as camera shutters, car alarms and construction noises does not come without some alteration in its signification. Indeed, as we introduced earlier, mimesis engenders social change in its rendering

[79] Gibbs 2009, p. 190.
[80] Lestel 2001, p. 129.

of the other. This varies in degrees according to the players involved, but regarding Attia's work, we previously raised the disconcerting effects of the lyrebird's mimetic performance on the viewers. Focusing on these consequences reveals that the confusion lies in the gap between the sounds and the visuals: the lyrebird does not correspond to the viewer's mental image of the machines adept at producing these noises. Therefore, the incredible mimetic capacity of the lyrebird delivers a dual set of responses: it conjures up mental images of the objects that actually produce these sounds, whilst in contrast, also highlights the real nature of the bird and the inherent dissemblance between the imitator and imitated. Should the viewers have their eyes closed, the interruption of bird sounds with the other machine sounds might divulge their origin, and with it, the talent of the lyrebird. But rather than simply evoking the original machines that produce the sounds, it is the bird's affective re-appropriation of what constitutes its environment that is highlighted in the mimetic exchange: the sounds are charged with new meanings and connotations so that they do not come to depict a human environment, but one that belongs specifically to the lyrebird.[81]

This process of re-appropriation through mimicry has been developed in post-colonial studies, to analyse the relationships between colonizer and colonized. A colonial encounter can be in part defined as an asymmetrical and unequal exchange during which the colonizer attempts to transform the other: but if the oppressed starts to (un)consciously imitate its oppressors for diverse purposes, a latent form of subversion is initiated in the repeating, and ultimately displacing of the gaze of the oppressors, by the oppressed, back onto the oppressors themselves.[82] The critical theorist Homi Bhabha writes about the dual power of mimicry that produces a rendering of the other that is "almost the same, but not quite": it is this ambivalence that enables the oppressed to appropriate and even assume parts of the power of the colonizer in a re-defined way; "mimicry emerges as the representation of a difference that is itself a process of disavowal."[83] Indeed, the colonizer's actions or behaviour reproduced by the colonized are disassociated from all ethical responsibility or support of the former's intentions, and do so through the latency produced by mimicry. Indeed, the ambivalence in the mimetic encounter appears as a threat to the

[81] Diawara 2014, p. 53.
[82] Ahmed 2000, p. 11; Bhabha 1984, p. 127.
[83] Bhabha 1984, p. 126.

colonizer's power and knowledge in the simultaneous creation of a rupture with the oppressor's discourse, and the shifting of its intentional meaning into uncertainty: it can participate in ensuring the strategic failure of colonial discourse, by "mocking its power to be a model, that power which supposedly makes it imitable".[84]

In Attia's work, it is the ambivalence created for the viewer to experience, between the nature of the sounds – which metaphorically represent the oppressor – and their unexpected copy by the bird – the oppressed – that shifts the signification of the bird's relation to its environment. The sounds not only refer to the ongoing exploitation of the land through extractive politics, but more specifically to the geographic occupation of space by humans that transforms non-human territories into subordinates of that space: the enclosure furthermore emphasizes the affective dependency of the lyrebird on the workers at the zoo.[85] However, if we follow Bhabha's reasoning, by being mimetically reproduced, the sounds are derived then from their oppressive and colonial implications, to instead reveal the lyrebird as a figure of resistance, re-appropriating its environment through its affective modalities and mimetic skills to enhance a process of repair.

Inherent to destruction – here the latent evocation of colonization – is the notion of repair, which contains the wounds and trauma from the past that cannot be erased.[86] Ironically, since the lyrebird is an endangered species, its presence in the zoo is for its protection: but one must not forget the reason as to why it is there in the first place. Moreover, the potential instances of individual and collective resistance to mistreatment organized by animals in spaces of captivity have often been undermined, presumably because they disrupt dominant cultures' views of animals as passive and incapable of agency and risk damaging the industries which profit from exploiting such animals.[87]

For the poet and philosopher Édouard Glissant, repair is only possible "if we seek out the other and tremble with them": this suggests being vulnerable-with the other, and empathetically feeling-with them.[88] Art can facilitate this caring approach to human and non-human beings in creating a field of emotions and affect that can reach and

[84] Bhabha 1984, p. 128.
[85] Ferdinand 2019, p. 57.
[86] Attia 2018, interview with Gabriele Sassone, accessed 18 January 2021.
[87] Calarco 2015, p. 62; "Fear of the animal planet" evoked by Jason Hribal.
[88] Diawara 2014, p. 61; Glissant 2009, p. 55.

move a large range of people in society. But is there a way then to go beyond mimesis and to merge even more with birds?

3.5. Becoming-animal

We have demonstrated that affect plays a central part in all of our relationships and in the elaboration of one's identity: during our encounters with others, we are unconsciously influenced by their bodily taxonomies and in mimicry, we are (un)consciously imitating the affective form of the other. But can the transmission of affect lead us to shift our identity entirely, and actually become-other? Rather than concentrating on the productive "end result" of such an experience, we will explore the internal workings of the exchange of affects between organisms, as part of a real transformative process of the individual into the other, overcoming the rather fixed state of mimicry.[89] The ongoing focus on birds in this thesis thus draws us towards the practice of "becoming-animal" – there exist a multitude of becomings (women, child, plant, mineral, other) – which originate from a shamanistic ritual performed by many indigenous communities, but one has been more recently theorized by the philosophers Deleuze and Guattari. The becoming-animal differs from mimesis and mimicry in that it is not visible in its finality – to resemble the animal through imitation – but that it materializes in the space in-between, the middle, the "zone of proximity or indiscernibility" which prevents us from determining where the boundary between human and animal lies.[90] Indeed, if the becoming produces "nothing other than itself", then the focus is taken away from the goal-oriented trajectory of mimicry to instead converge in the experience of relationality created in the becoming, during which real affects are exchanged between human and animal.[91] The complexity of this phenomenon resides in the fact that the changes are imperceptible: the human being does not *actually* become an animal in physical terms – humans simply cannot grow feathers and a pointy beak – therefore, the transformation happens on a molecular level – without *actually* being visible in the molecules.[92] The animal is detached from

[89] Cull 2012, p. 195.
[90] Deleuze Guattari 1987, p. 293.
[91] Deleuze Guattari 1987, p. 238.
[92] Deleuze Guattari 1987, p. 238; p. 275.

its “molar entity” – for the bird, this refers to its distinct form, organs and subjectivity which makes it different from a dog, or a human – to instead appear as only constituted of molecular particles, that themselves are shared in the zone of proximity, through affects, transcending the corporal barriers between animals and humans.[93] Thus, the reality of becoming-animal is established – like animal play – in the intertwining of affects, understood here in their most conceptual and intangible form, and in the new meanings and representations of human and animal identity that are consequentially re-constituted indefinitely in the process. Art would appear as an ideal vehicle to project our human selves into an affective state contiguous with that of animals, and to investigate our own humanness.

3.6. Becoming-song, becoming-bird

In Coates’ work, the starting point for the becoming-animal is the vocal embodiment of the dawn chorus by the choir singers, beginning with the first gulp of air taken before delivering the rhythmic and melodic patterns of the slowed-down bird songs.[94] Focusing on the bird’s internal homologies – the molecular particles that constitute their song, which travels through their bodies and out into their environment – emphasizes the distinction between simply trying to resemble the animal from an exterior point of view and attempting to fathom the world from its perspective.[95] This does not mean that we must overlook the obvious dissemblance that remains – the participants still look like humans – but instead try to understand the differences in a way that enables a “correspondence of relations”.[96] Indeed, it is the affective overlap between the birds and the singers, brought together in the shared zone of proximity elaborated by the song that creates the reason for the becoming-animal. But the overlap is only possible because of the recording technology that facilitated the slowing down of the actual bird song into imitable patterns for the human singers: without it, the affective complexity of bird songs and the inability of the human ear to distinguish all the notes at once would have prevented the becoming-animal from

[93] Deleuze Guattari 1987, p. 275.
[94] Aloi 2007, p. 33.
[95] Deleuze Guattari 1987, p. 236.
[96] Deleuze Guattari 1987, p. 236.

ensuing. The role of technology is thus paradoxically at odds with the connotations that supposedly make it a symbol of human progress and adaptability, as in this context, it is not operated for causing alterations to the environment, but to amplify human affects, in order to get as close as possible to the birds' highly sensitive and perceptive world.[97]

In Part two we saw how birds relate to their territory through song, as a matter of expression, and possibly as a way of asserting their individuality amongst others. Deleuze and Guattari look at language and bird song in the process of becoming-animal as deterritorialization, which means the subtraction and displacement of elements from one territory to another social environment.[98] Deterritorialization is often inclined to be followed by re-territorialization, during which the meanings of signs – affects, markings, rituals, habits, postures – that were originally associated with territorialization are attributed new signification, identity and forms of expression.[99] In Coates' artwork, this is materialized in several ways: it begins with the deterritorialization of the dawn chorus by slowing it down to suit human comprehension, to its re-territorialization in the mouths of the choir singers, to be once more deterritorialized as it is accelerated to match actual speed of bird song, and finally re-territorialized in the video, which also reveals the physical features of the human interpreters that distinguish them from birds. Therefore, by undergoing these many shifts in meaning and context through deterritorialization, the song travels from beaks to mouths as a form of pidgin language, acknowledging the remaining differences, but altogether shaping the zone of proximity, in which the participants merge between their human and temporary animal selves.[100] The process of de/re/territorialization suggests infinite possibilities to relate to space and other bodies: becoming-animal enables us to acknowledge these ways of living in their diversity and to attempt to grasp them in empathetic and sensitive ways. Coates' work thus incites viewers to seek ways of exchanging our place with another living being, and assuming its song, growl or bark; its wings, fins or horns, and all of the affects that we share in common.

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[97] Cull 2012, p. 199.
[98] Deleuze and Guattari 1987, p. 303; p. 317.
[99] Deleuze and Guattari 1987, p. 315.
[100] Broglio 2011, p. 105.

3.7. Becoming-with birds

The American term for a birdwatcher, “birder”, illustrates perfectly the metamorphosis of the human into bird, and emphasizes the care-full actions of watching and learning from birds by being in their presence, or more simply, by “becoming-with” them.

Many readers of Deleuze and Guattari have picked up on their particularly metaphysical approach to animals, and the way in which they seem to favour wild animals and deny more “ordinary” species that, once treated as pets, “invite us to regress, draw into narcissistic contemplation.”[101] According to Donna Haraway, this reasoning prevents them from building a concrete relationship with animals founded on principles of care, as well as curiosity, affection and patience.[102] Despret observes that the philosophers’ criticism regarding the treating of pets as family – that Haraway interprets as an offence against all ordinary animals – is actually more about the way people treat these animals as humans rather than attempting to establish an animal connection (through becoming-animal for instance) with them.[103]

But from Haraway’s critique stems her suggestion for a relationship of “becoming-with” animals, since “being one” always implies being “with” others, as we have seen in the interdependent nature of our everyday encounters with living organisms and environments.[104] The proposition “with” that Haraway adds to the notion of becoming is essential because it highlights the connection between the two entities and thus the need to connect affectively to fulfil a post-human transformation. Substituting our imbedded ontology of dominance of nature with one of entanglement, constituted of “knots of relations” between living beings prompts us to shift our perception of the living world and to recognize that acts of caring and nurturing travel on both sides of the spectrum of becoming-with.[105]

Indeed, in Coates’ works, although they are not totally without humour – the videos can seem surprising at first glance – the performances of the choir members are conducted with a great deal of diligence and care: we have seen that the

[101] Deleuze Guattari 1987, p. 240.
[102] Haraway 2008, p. 28.
[103] Despret 2019, pp. 105-106.
[104] Haraway 2008, p. 13.
[105] Haraway 2008, p. 42.

recordings took up to two hours which suggests that endurance and concentration were intense.[106] But the artist could not have predicted how the performers were going to behave, and whether the becoming would happen in the same way for all of them. For the blackbird interpreter, the singing became almost instinctive: "*I imagined myself as a blackbird on a spring morning, very early in a high place, having the freedom not to think but just to let the sound come out. (…) I was cocking my head to look around. I felt really spaced out. When it finished I was miles away."*[107] Although his perspective reveals a very introspective performance, he also shares the physical impact it had on him, his head bobbing from side to side. This was furthermore emphasized in the acceleration of both sound and video in all the works, which strongly altered the visual appearance of the singers, their body language suddenly resembling that of actual birds: chest lifting to the rhythm of fast breathing, eyes hastily moving from side to side, neck twitching and pulsing and the entire body slightly trembling. According to Coates, the physical and affective responses of the participants are what constitute the success of the becoming, and ultimately represent alternative ways of entering into a relation with birds and of relating to their modes of existence.[108]

Judging the success of a becoming according to the affects created from the inherent refusal to enact the subjectivity and dogmas of dominant cultures associated with "being human", to instead attempt to fathom the world from the perspective of the "other", stresses a form of urgency in the becoming – otherwise one would simply remain in the comfort and privilege that the human "position" offers.[109] However, even if the notion of becoming-with highlights the relationality between living beings more than in the becoming-animal, in both cases, we have come to acknowledge the becoming as a one-sided process, whereby the human is able to gain a (partial) insight into the animal's affective relation to the world, and in return, to investigate its own humanness. However, is there a way in which animals might also be empowered to "act at the limit of what they can do", as well as co-exist in a space

[106] Cull 2012, p. 190.
[107] Aloi 2007, p. 20.
[108] Coates 2020, personal interview.
[109] Calarco 2015, p. 58; Massumi 2003, p. 55.

where all living beings learn to live in common, in reciprocity and in careful awareness of one another?[110]

[110] Cull 2012, p. 201.

PART 4: Common nests

4.1. Broken plumes and promises

The many resemblances between human and avian ways of living – territory, relationships, affects, aesthetics, song – and the process of becoming-animal have shown us how humans can gain better insight into the affective state of birds, although one cannot transform oneself entirely to mimic the physical capacities of our plumed friends. Notably, birds share features in common with the family of the dinosaurs they evolved from: feathers, pointy beaks, clawed feet, and evidently, the ability to fly. All of these qualities actively participate in shaping the perceptive relationship they maintain with their environment, which is therefore very different to ours. Humans have always sought to push their limits in their attempts to achieve the impossible, and flying has been recurrently attempted throughout the centuries. In Greek Mythology, the story of Icarus illustrates this state of hubris taken to its extreme. From the high tower in which Icarus and his father, the great artificer Daedalus, were imprisoned, the latter started gathering fallen feathers and observing the way birds used their wings to fly. He soon managed to forge two pairs of wings so that he and his son could escape the island of Crete through the sky. But as soon as Icarus started flying – and therefore accomplishing what no man had ever done before – he became so excited that he forgot about his father's recommendations and flew too close to the sun: the heat melted the wax holding the feathers together, and Icarus fell into the sea and drowned. A contemporary interpretation of this myth might highlight the fact that humans from the majority world still continue to "push the world beyond the tipping points of anthropogenic environmental catastrophe" even though the destructive consequences are occurring simultaneously.[111] The myth also contributes to the visualization of the fundamental differences between humans and birds: rather than attempting to transgress these by the repeated production of machines which continues to foster capitalist economy, these divergences should instead be celebrated, in the many ways in which they empower non-humans to contribute to the diversity of the world which itself thrives from the interconnection of all human and non-human species and things.

[111] Demos 2016, p. 23.

4.2. Empowered difference

The final part of this thesis will therefore explore various ways in which spaces – both physical and metaphysical – can celebrate diversity and dissimilarity between species, and offer an alternative to our current systems that exclude non-humans from our social, cultural and political organization. This approach strongly differs from the way "difference" was established as a pretext for the exploitation of nature as a resource for financial purposes, and for the development of the breach between nature and culture. Indeed, this anthropocentric reasoning relies on a certain form of detachment from the processes of Natural Evolution and might be furthermore understood in the theory of correlationism, ingrained in both sciences and the humanities. At the heart of this notion is the idea that things – the correlatees – are only real and "realized" when they are assessed by a correlator – a human being – who analyses the data produced by this thing and "validates" its existence.[112] For instance, bird feathers are composed of a rigid axe, on which are fused a series of barbs, which together form a colourful whole, soft to the touch. But this information is not the feather itself, but rather the way we access the feather when we hold it in our hands. The latency gap between the correlator and correlatee is the supposed difference between humans and everything else.[113] The opposition between nature and culture thus resides in the idea that culture is the correlator that frames nature – the correlatee – as *nature*: a blank and passive canvas on which socially constructed actions by humans can take place.[114] What the philosopher Timothy Morton suggests doing in order to reverse the state of difference created by the gap that constitutes the breach in nature/culture is to allow this gap to exist independently of human control.[115] This means abandoning the idea that human rational thinking – which supposedly analyses the data that gives shape and meaning to the correlatees – as the only way of relating to the world; and instead favouring other modes of correlation, such as affects, that are equally valid means of thinking, perceiving and interpreting.[116] This brings us back to our interest in affect as an alternative – even

[112] Morton 2017, p. 7.
[113] Morton 2017, p. 8.
[114] Morton 2017, p. 10.
[115] Morton 2017, p. 10.
[116] Morton 2017, p. 11.

though it has been put into practice by Indigenous communities for centuries – ontological form of relationality, thus opening the door to a diversity of ways of interconnecting with our world which ultimately require embracing difference. Thus, shifting the place of the human from being the centre of ethical reflection – the correlator, in Morton's terms – and instead focusing on the encounter – the "gap", shaped by rich, differentiated modes of existence – affords insight into the relationship that leads to the creation of two distinct identities and their merging together. Indeed, it is during these meeting points that new differences and new similitudes can emerge, in the continuous elaboration of interspecies groupings.[117]

The acknowledgement of difference is also crucial in order to develop the concept of equality between humans and non-humans. If equality can be expressed on the continuum of sameness, it means that it can only happen in contradistinction to beings ranked as superior or inferior to each other: this entails that they are either hierarchized or that they are all of the same value.[118] However, as we have seen, even though there are clear similitudes between bird and human ways of living, the comparison for instance comes to a standstill when contrasting flying to walking. Moreover, in comparing humans to very distinct entities, such as worms or mountains, the difficulty resides in finding equal moral worth based on the criteria of sameness. It would appear that attempting to value all beings as equal based on sameness inherently necessitates ranking, and a classification in degrees.[119] Instead, the philosopher Val Plumwood suggests evaluating equality on the continuum of difference, which recognizes that beings (or cultures, for instance) are at once commensurable and incommensurable; therefore, when possible, instead of criteria, we should apply "non-ranking".[120] According to Plumwood, this provides more equality and respect than by judging beings through sameness: non-ranking can take place in specific narratives and forms of social arrangements that prioritize non-hegemonic forms of attentiveness, communication and care.[121]

[117] Calarco 2015, p. 56.
[118] Plumwood 2002, p. 172.
[119] Plumwood 2002, p. 173.
[120] Plumwood 2002, p. 173.
[121] Plumwood 2002, p. 174.

4.3. Political spaces

Attention and sensitivity to the living world in order to conceive of new forms of collectivity that include non-human beings might be considered an aesthetic or conservative issue, when in fact it is a highly political issue.[122] This essential point is defended by the philosopher T.J Demos who emphasizes that the ways in which we treat nature carry important implications and ramifications for how we organize society: the living world and all of its agents thus appear indivisible from the way we behave and act as a collective.[123] Indeed, political action always arises from a web of connections, in order to resolve a common problem: here, we stress the crucial need to challenge human supremacy to instead revise the structural organization of our societies to make them more encompassing and diverse.[124] Although this possibly requires the deconstruction of our whole system – especially the structures of power that are responsible for continuously perpetuating violence against humans and animals – we argue that the groundwork for such action resides in re-investing in our affective, caring and sensitive relationships with the living world, and in transforming these as "worthy" of the attention needed for the decisions made in our political sphere.[125] The aim would be to re-think our system using the structure of "non-ranking" in order to preserve the differences between beings, but also allowing for disagreement: "relationality is all there is, but this does not mean a world without conflict nor dissension".[126] Indeed, the philosopher Brian Massumi conceptualizes this in "animal politics", which seek to place humans on a continuum with the animal precisely to displace them from their anthropogenic centre and to enhance the proliferation of differences that participate in the creation of new thoughts, emotions, desires, creativity and subjectivity.[127] The aim is to "collectively inhabit the dynamic in-between of (human and animal) processual interlacing, in order to compose with their difference"; this affective zone of indiscernibility thus enables differences to be understood as vectors for the mutual inclusion of human and non-human beings.[128]

[122] Morizot 2020, p. 56.
[123] Demos 2016, p. 8.
[124] Bennett 2010, p. 101.
[125] Calarco 2015, p. 64; Morizot 2020, p. 27.
[126] Puig de la Bellacasa 2010, p. 204.
[127] Massumi 2003, pp. 51-52.
[128] Massumi 2003, p. 39.

The inclusion of these dynamic differences between beings is opposed to both "mutual exclusion", which suggests a separation between animal species due to generic differences, in this context perceived as negative, and to indifference, an alternative just as violent as distinction.[129] Thus this shows how difference might be used in alternative systems of governance, for creative nurturing such as becoming-animal and other affective and caring practices.

Moreover, animal politics do not rely on the theory of correlationism that seems to regulate current politics, but rather on affect: they are non-cognitive politics of relation that function in particular awareness of modes of thought enacted in nonverbal behaviour, thus using the "enthusiasm" of the body as guidance for political action.[130] Thus, even though they do not address the ecological crisis explicitly, the three artworks by Attia, Alfaro and Coates appear to be inherently political, since they focus so strongly on the affective encounter between birds and humans. The title of the work "Mimesis as Resistance" also solicits a critical response from viewers as they are prompted to question the nature of this process of resistance and its purpose.

For the philosopher Jane Bennett, affects constitute a field of "micropolitics", because it is through these bodily sensations that ethical sensibilities and social relations are formed.[131] It is therefore in the assemblage of diverse elements that the power of affect can be enhanced: Bennett suggests naming these heterogeneous groupings "ecologies", because they are comprised of "an interconnected series of parts, but not fixed, because the order is always being reworked in accordance with a certain "freedom of choice" exercised by its actants".[132] This freedom to act is essential in the realization of the three artworks since they all involve the agency of real birds: the fact that the artists had to negotiate and adapt to the latter epitomizes what Plumwood calls the "greatest range of sensitivity to earth others", which concomitantly leads to maximizing them.[133] The works thus do not exist solely to be consumed by the viewers, since with or without the camera, the birds would have acted in their own, compelling and resolute ways.

[129] Massumi 2003, p. 49.
[130] Massumi 2003, p. 42; p. 45.
[131] Bennett 2010, p. xii.
[132] Bennett 2010, p. 24; p. 97.
[133] Plumwood 2002, pp. 177-178.

Having identified difference as a creative, political and affective source of action, how can we initiate shared spaces that embrace all of these notions?

4.4. Third spaces

We have seen that the collapsing of binaries such as nature/culture or human/non-human is a crucial step in the unlearning of anthropocentric, colonialist and uncaring relationships to the living world. Inspired by the cosmopolitan dynamics of the cuckoo nest, the elaboration of a counter state of being that divorces from, responds to, and brings both polarities together, would be necessary to permeate boundaries. The duality is therefore shifted towards a triad and this results in the complementary creation of what Homi Bhabha calls the "Third Space". He theorizes this concept in relation to post-colonialism, to broaden the sense of culture as not solely attached to nations and territory, but to make it an international, collaborative and therefore ever-fluctuating movement, developing across borders and between people.[134] In this sense, culture is not understood as a fixed, homogeneous and embodied outcome of the past, but rather as something that can be constantly "re-appropriated, translated, re-historicized and read anew", merging together "art and politics, past and present, the public and the present".[135] The liminal and in-between position of the Third Space creates the possibility for individuals to negotiate their incommensurable differences in the transformative encounter and experience of an alternative culture – for instance in the imitation and re-appropriation of colonial behaviour that simultaneously ruptures its oppressive discourse – and to articulate new interpretations of what it means to live alongside each other.[136] Thus, Third Spaces provide the conditions for the composition of *hybrid* singular and collective identities that both reflect and deflect from cultural dichotomies, hence generating new meanings, signs and imageries within ever-changing microcosms.[137]
What I advocate is to extend the definition of the Third Space to include the non-human, and therefore create multi-layered, multi-lateral and multi-sensory cultural

[134] Bhabha 1994, p. 38; p. 223.
[135] Bhabha 1994, p. 37; p. 175.
[136] Bhabha 1994, p. 2; p. 256.
[137] Bhabha 1994, p. 4.

identities, in order to annihilate any oppressive binary systems and to imagine new radical ways of co-existing together. At the crossroad between the realm of aesthetics, political agency and cultural memory, art is an ideal tool to envision these interspecies hybrid and interstitial spaces in society.[138] Indeed, artists draw on multiple sources of reference – historical, cultural, geographical, ecological, linguistic, affective – to produce works that formulate enriched social visions. In Coates' work, the becoming-animal process of the participants singing like birds epitomizes the affective embodiment of the Third Space, as a zone of indiscernibility between bird and human identity. However, in Attia's work, the Third Space resides in the re-appropriation by the lyrebird of the sounds that structure its environment through mimicry, therefore it is also mediated by the bird's specific relation to territory.

The geographer Edward Soja applies the concept of Third Space to geographical space in order to question our relation to spatiality – meaning the way we inhabit and exist within space – as it has been often dismissed as of a peripheral concern because it was supposedly too perceptive and less critical than the reading of space according to historical and social dimensions.[139] Soja formulates a new triad to encompass three notions inherent to both the representation and transformation of space: the "mapping of space", the "representation of space" – through a mediated process such as art – and finally the "space of representation" – which refers to the way people live and interact within it.[140] Art furthermore appears as an active contributor to describing and deciphering territories by drawing on the ways people relate to spaces affectively and perceptively to produce within the metaphorical space of the artwork a "counter-space", in which idyllic, subversive or marginalized modes of existence can be enhanced.[141]

Indeed, in Coates' work, the boundary between the public and the private is erased, as the participants were asked to be filmed in the spaces where they spend most of their time, revealing themselves in their working clothes at their office desk, or sitting in their underwear on the edge of the bed. The attention is drawn towards the type of activities that take place within these spaces, and towards the kind of

[138] Bhabha 1994, p. 7.
[139] Soja 1996, p. 2.
[140] Soja 1996, p. 67.
[141] Soja 1996, p. 68.

experiences that issue from the former: pleasant or unpleasant, stimulating or unproductive, frenetic or quiet – all of which derive from an affective relation to space. We have seen that birds can relate to their environment in similar ways to us, by attributing diverse functions to their territory, but they also paradoxically use it as a space for the rupture of activity, suggesting that they too, sometimes seek to withdraw from the agitation of collective spaces, and simply hold back and enjoy the comfort of their territory.[142] Human and bird experience of the Third Space in link with spatiality thus reveals similar qualities, as both rely on specific habits that come to characterize a space as "lived". If each time a new territorial space is created and new ways of inhabiting the world arise, how can we find a balance between these different interspecies modes of life?

4.5. Living in common

In this final subsection, we will establish some final reflections regarding difference and hybridity in connection with previous considerations. In order to reconcile the plurality of human and non-human existences into a hybrid flux of experience, encounter and collaboration, Malcom Ferdinand suggests that we shift our understanding of the world from our "home" – which has connotations linked to property and thus to the capitalist economy – to a "matrix" – which derives from the Latin word "mater", which signifies "mother".[143] What this implies is that above all, we have to view the world as something that we have in *common*, rather than something that we share or possess.[144] Glissant furthers this idea by saying that it is the "state of the world" that we have in common, and that each individual existence is a reflection of this in that all living beings are "living the world", hence experiencing "its fragilities, its energies, its intuitions, its power to change, to remain".[145] This ties back to the idea that it is through affect that we manage to communicate with other beings and relate to our environment, and for Glissant, it is precisely in this type of relationality that the existence of "common-grounds" is revealed.[146] These are

[142] Despret 2019, p. 73; Lestel 2001, p. 70.
[143] Ferdinand 2019, p. 41.
[144] Ferdinand 2019, p. 41.
[145] Glissant 2009, p, 73; p. 89.
[146] Glissant 2009, p. 72.

specific sites in which beings meet and new ideas emerge and impact the rest of the world, as they are a "source of creativity and opacity, a fertile ground of inexhaustible energies, where relationships are continually woven".[147] Sharing a common-ground does not necessarily entail being in the space at the same time, but stipulates that it is the emotions and affects that are felt in common between beings within this metaphorical space, which in turn stimulate ideas, identities, and intuitions, that produce an exhilarating feeling of "living in common".[148] Thus, art can provide the radical and imaginative framework for shaping a multitude of common-grounds, since artworks capture affects and emotions and can inspire viewers to question, challenge, debate and dream about the world. Indeed, a common-ground is created in Alfaro's work around the act of eating, in itself instinctive behaviour common to all living beings, which here, takes on an important social meaning. The dressed table symbolizes all of the cultural rituals associated with food that are considered explicitly human – cutlery, manners, politeness, conversations – and which transform the act of eating into a converging point for social interactions. Indeed, for the sociologist Émile Durkheim, eating is a social fact, meaning "*any way of acting, whether fixed or not, capable of exerting over the individual an external constraint*".[149] But if human ways of eating are considered to be an expression of society, birds also have their own ritualized ways of finding and consuming food. Vultures indeed rely on a very specific organization to descend on a carcass: they divide themselves in different groupings according to each species' feeding style – tearers, peckers, pullers, which each eat different parts of the body from flesh to bones – in order to reduce competition and conflict, and in a way, to share "equally".[150] This form of collaboration seems to mirror the interactions that occur around a dinner table, where food is often shared between people in a very hierarchical manner.

In Alfaro's work however, the vultures are consuming the food regardless of the codified gestures and rituals intended by their hosts, and in their absence, these rules suddenly appear futile and absurd: instead, the simple act of eating emerges as

[147] Diawara 2014, p. 53.
[148] Diawara 2014, p. 54.
[149] Durkheim 1895, [https://web.archive.org/web/20121003050946/http://www.faculty.rsu.edu/users/f/felwell/www/TheoryWeb/readings/DurkheimFactForm.html], accessed 15 May 2021.
[150] Van Dooren 2011, p. 40.

something that can be enjoyed, albeit a common necessity to all living beings. It is on this common-ground that Alfaro opens up our world of representation a little more to avian behaviour, and lays the foundation for a possible reconciliation between humans and birds, through the cultural synthesis that is materialized within the act of eating.[151] The common origin of human and animal cultures in natural evolution reveals that nothing justifies calling human culture "special" or treating it as more significant than animal culture.[152]

For Timothy Morton, solidarity – which describes both a feeling and a state of physical and political organization – with non-humans can only happen on a basis of commonality, therefore he highlights the need to imagine a newly composed common world, which maintains difference between beings but erases all forms of anthropocentric and teleological structures.[153] "It's not that you can have solidarity with nonhumans. It's that solidarity implies nonhumans. Solidarity *requires* nonhumans. Solidarity is just solidarity with nonhumans."[154]

Art, as a common-ground, can also become an act of solidarity, in that for the art historian Estelle Zhong-Mengual, there is an increasing need for an "art of reconciliation" that can offer ways of reconstructing our aesthetic and sensitive relations to the living world, and the use of its transformative powers on both individual and collective levels.[155] Living in common means living *with* the world, and art thus appears as the most powerful affective tool to suggest new ways of living together in solidarity and kindness: in their work, Alfaro, Attia and Coates have catalysed the urgent need to welcome birds into our communities, so that together, we can learn to fathom the world and its infinite resources.

[151] Lecomte 2019, accessed 5 December 2020.
[152] Lestel 2001, p. 162.
[153] Morton 2017, p. 13; p. 27.
[154] Morton 2017, p. 189.
[155] Zhong 2018, accessed 7 March 2021.

Conclusion

Anna Dupont, 2020, after a photograph by Marcus Coates, *Goshawk*, 1999.

Art is always the coupling of extracted elements from the cosmological order and their integration into the lived experience and behaviour of organisms".

Elizabeth Grosz, 2008.[156]

The focus of this thesis has been to explore the way art can participate in transforming our relations with living beings, and in particular with birds, which are extremely resilient and creative creatures. The three case studies presented here, while not addressing the ecological crisis explicitly, are actively anchored within this context, and target what has been defined as the breach in our relationship with the natural world. The loss of affects and sensitivity towards nature that has been referred to as the "crisis of sensibility" has led to the negligence and invisibilization of all the intense, intimate and intrinsic significations that are present within the living world and permit the interweaving of human and non-human connections. The drastic progression of the phenomenon of ecological destruction has only recently sparked the global realization that the consequences of these threats on non-human beings and environments also affect humans, and has brought our shared vulnerability and inherent interdependence to the forefront of concern. This shows that above all, the ecological crisis is a crisis in our relations, and more specifically, in our *affective* relationships which constitute the basis for ethical, caring and meaningful connections with the world.

The complexity of affect that makes it a social process in origin, but biological and physical in effect, highlights the role of the body and other-than-cognitive systems of thought common to all human and non-human animals to *feel* the world through different intensities, which altogether shape the universal condition of being alive.[157] Thus, in order to transform these affective experiences with the living world and charge them with enriched meaning, art can be identified as a powerful tool to transmit affect, not only to inform viewers of the critical urgency of the environmental crisis, but to influence and enhance our sensibility on an individual and collective level.

[156] Grosz 2008, p. 45.
[157] Morizot 2020, p. 22.

The three artworks that structure this thesis by Alfaro, Attia and Coates have highlighted different encounters between humans and birds, relayed by the medium of video, which enables the transmission of affect through visual images, sound and movement, which impact in a decisive manner the viewers' senses and imagination. The works of Coates and Attia both focused on the role of birdsong in shaping territory and relating to other birds through affective expression, and revealed the creative and aesthetic potential of birds to reflect their living environments in sensitive ways. Attia furthermore explored the mimetic qualities of the lyrebird which ultimately transformed its song into an active piece of resistance to the changing state of its environment. Coates's work makes it possible to delve deeper into the affective similitudes of humans and birds, in the process of becoming-animal, which allows a de-anthropocentric shift of perspective, towards a more compassionate and attentive envisioning of bird life. Lastly, we have investigated the way art's subversive and imaginative qualities can help us conceptualize alternative political spaces to co-exist with non-human beings. Alfaro and Coates' works exemplify the geographical and metaphysical hybridization of cultures and identity between birds and humans, and highlight the need to rethink the composition of our communities to include the more-than-human. All three works have shown that art offers a space of commonality between artists and viewers to put forward radical, creative and affective proposals to contribute to the revising of the organization of our social spheres, and to recognize the status of the natural world as something that is common to all living and non-living beings. It is through these artistic practices that generate states of compassion, curiosity, humility and tenderness that anthropocentric, hegemonic and oppressive systems of thinking and governing can be actively challenged.

We have thus attempted to demonstrate that alongside the necessary cooperation of militant political, social and ecological movements and the actions of engaged citizens, artists can contribute alternative models to grasp our interrelatedness with nature and to envisage the composition of interspecies communities.

Rather than cultivating our addiction to imagining apocalyptic scenarios that inflate our sense of guilt but do not necessarily lead us to action, art can play a vital role in turning the critical circumstances of the ecological crisis into creative responses.[158]

[158] Demos 2016, p. 246.

These innovative, ingenious and even idyllic proposals enable us to actively engage in the future of both human and non-human existences.
After all, “hope is the thing with feathers.”[159]

[159] Emily Dickinson, poem *Hope is the thing with feathers*, circa 1891.

Appendix of illustrations

Figure 1: A cuckoo egg in another bird's nest (photograph, © googleimages)

Figure 2: Greta Alfaro, screenshot from the film *In Ictu Oculi* (2009, single channel video, HDV, colour, sound, 16:9, 10 minutes loop © Greta Alfaro)
http://gretaalfaro.com/work/inictu/inictu12.html

Figure 3: Greta Alfaro, *In Ictu Oculi* #6 (2009, colour photograph, 40x50 cm, © Greta Alfaro)

Figure 4: Greta Alfaro, *In Ictu Oculi* #2 (2009, colour photograph, 107x130 cm, © Greta Alfaro)

Figure 5: Greta Alfaro, *In Ictu Oculi* (2009, Installation Views at Carpe Diem, Lisbon, © Greta Alfaro)

Figure 6: Greta Alfaro, screenshot from the film *In Ictu Oculi* (2009, single channel video, HDV, colour, sound, 16:9, 10 minutes loop © Greta Alfaro)

Figure 7: Kader Attia, Mimesis as Resistance (2013, Video still, 2.18 minutes loop, © Sharjah Foundation)
https://vimeo.com/69424732

Figure 8: Kader Attia, *Mimesis as Resistance* (2013, Video still, 2.18 minutes loop, © Sharjah Foundation)

Figure 9: Kader Attia, *Mimesis as Resistance* (2013, Installation views, © Sharjah Foundation)

Figure 10: Marcus Coates, screenshot from the film *Dawn Chorus* (2007, 14 channel video installation, 16:9, 18 minutes loop, © Marcus Coates)
https://www.marcuscoates.co.uk/projects/68-dawn-chorus

Figure 11: Marcus Coates, screenshot from the film *Dawn Chorus* (2007, 14 channel video installation, 16:9, 18 minutes loop, © Marcus Coates)

Figure 12: Marcus Coates, *Dawn Chorus* (2007, Installation views, © Marcus Coates © Fabrica)

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