

A photograph of a green sign with white text in a garden setting. The sign is mounted on two green posts and is surrounded by lush green foliage and fallen leaves on the ground.

THE CAGED
BIRD DREAMS
OF CLOUDS

The Uncaged Bird

An artist's investigation into the bond
between humans and birds

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Question

How can art in the public space use [written] narrative as a tool for investigating and fostering relationships between humans and birds?

Abstract

The existence of birds has been linked with the lives of *Homo sapiens* since early times and can be seen in centuries of symbolic beliefs, literature, prose, poetry, scientific research, spirituality and descriptions of observed ethnographic ways of life. This Master of Arts (Art in the Public Space) research investigates the affinity between humans and birds. It juxtaposes the real world of birds against human words and ideas, intervening in the contemporary public spaces of urban and suburban Melbourne.

Through this practice of placing bird based narratives into the public sphere, three final text-based artworks attempt to bring forward conscious thought in the passersby about human to bird relationships whilst inverting metaphors into literal statements about birds. The artworks do not seek out viewers but are placed in sites that are already made for use by Melbourne's visitors and residents, and each artwork invites social and personal engagement from the viewer. This practice-led research hopes to foster contemplation and communication in viewers while reinforcing human to non-human connections in an increasingly globalised and digitalised planet.

Section 1: Nesting

Nest (Verb): To settle or place something.

Why Birds?

Since committing myself to Buddhism and its teachings (and consequently becoming vegetarian) I have found myself increasingly concerned about the impact of the human species on the natural world. This concern includes topics of climate change, declining species, pollution, land clearing, urban infrastructure and alterations in the many symbiotic relationships found in nature. Through my studies with Nien Schwarz (PhD) and Donna Franklin (PhD) in the Bachelor of Visual Art at Edith Cowan University I began to learn that art could be used as a tool to bring attention to political and environmental issues that troubled me. The first result of this learning experience was a public installation *The Red List [Extinct]*, an artwork based on mapping links between human settlement and species extinction within Western Australia (including two bird species). This work was shown at not only Gomboc Sculpture Park in 2015 but also Sculpture by the Sea in Cottesloe in 2016.

Following the success of my installation work, and in considering where to go next with my practice, I read of a terrible bushfire season in Western Australia. This brought to my attention the plight of the critically endangered Western Ground Parrot who had lost 90% of its known habitat in one single fire, its habitat already having been greatly reduced in size by human settlements in Western Australia. I visited the now burnt out landscape at Cape Arid National Park near Esperance where the birds had lived, and questioned myself on how humans - many who love birds and certainly parrots for their intelligence, charm and colour - could be unaware of the detrimental impact of urbanisation and climate change on this beautiful rare ground parrot. In the final paragraph of the preface to his book *The Bird* (2008, p. XVI) biologist Colin Tudge writes "Birds enhance our lives enormously if we let them. We, in return, are killing them off". This small bird, and in time all birds, has now become a representation for my research and art practice around the human to non human relationships of the contemporary world.

Class: Aves
Order: Psittaciformes
Family: Psittacidae
Genus: Pezoporus
Species: flaviventris

Common Name: Western Ground Parrot
Conservation Status: Critically Endangered (decreasing)

Identification: 30cm. Medium sized slender parrot. Adults of both sexes are bright green with a red-orange band on forehead. Feature brown-grey bill and pale yellow-brown eyes. Yellow belly, black streaks on head and neck, black blotches and streaks on breast. Black and yellow bars on the back, shoulders, underbody and tail. Legs and feet are cream-pink or brown-grey. Not to be confused with similar eastern ground parrot.

Nesting: Little is known about nesting and breeding habits, other than nests in spring and on ground. Possibly lays 3-4 eggs.

Threats: Mainly threatened by large or frequent wildfire. Climate change factors increase fire occurrence in habitat areas. Usually occur in areas which have not been burnt for 40+ years. Other issues include predation by European foxes, habitat degradation or clearance, and loss of genetic variation. Eggs and chicks may be threatened by imported red fire ant. Estimated only around 100 birds left in the wild.

(EPBC 2016)



WHAT IS MISSING? ASKS US TO LOOK AT A MEMORIAL NOT AS A SINGULAR, STATIC OBJECT, BUT AS A WORK THAT CAN EXIST IN MULTIPLE FORMS AND PLACES AROUND THE WORLD.

What is Missing? debuted in 2009 with a permanent installation, *The Listening Cone* at the California Academy of Sciences in San Francisco.

Maya Lin "What is Missing?" 2009- ongoing



WE CAN'T UNCHOP A TREE.
BUT WE CAN NOT CHOP IT DOWN IN THE FIRST PLACE.
OR WE CAN PLANT A NEW TREE SUSTAINABLY.

REDUCE EMISSIONS.

PROTECT SPECIES.

TOGETHER WE CAN SAVE TWO BIRDS WITH ONE TREE.



Share a memory

Please share a memory about something you, or your parents or grandparents, have personally witnessed diminish or disappear from the natural world. It can also be a story of conservation or recovery.

Your memory

Title of your memory

Location of your memory Year of memory

Enter a location 1900 - 2018

Next >

Eco-Art and Globalisation

In the first stage of this Master of Arts research project, I had seen my practice as a public artist being situated for the most part in the domain of contemporary eco-art, or art with an ecocentric viewpoint. American artist and author Linda Weintraub, who coined the term eco-art, describes four attributes when defining it in relation to ecology: topics, interconnection, dynamism, and ecocentricism with the latter being the alternative to anthropocentrism and "...urging humans into alignment with broader environmental directives" (2012, p. 7). Weintraub also describes eco-art as a melding between the observations and data methods of an ecologist with the creativity and innovation of the artist. There are many artists who have influenced me in this concept-based artistic genre. These include Maya Lin, Perdita Phillips, Mark Dion, Tea Mäkipää, Brandon Ballengée, David Buckland, and Haubitz+Zoché to name a few. Each of these artists tackles their own respective concerns in an individual way, with many artists like Maya Lin and her multi-location *What is Missing?* project (2009 - ongoing) being specific and didactic about environmental problems. Others like David Buckland and his *Ice Texts* (2005 – 2009) leave their work with some level of ambiguity by using poetic language to be deciphered by the viewers themselves. Each artwork I have discussed provides ecologically based content that may (or may not) ignite a spark of interest in subjects which then fosters responses such as internal consideration, dialogical exchange and even physical action within the viewer.

Eco-Art and its portrayal of issues including climate change, extinction rates, pollution, urban sprawl and concerns involved with advancing technologies and global infrastructure comes hand in hand with the era of globalisation. British sociologist Anthony Giddens writes on globalisation and topics of risk, tradition, family, and democracy in his book *Runaway World* (2002), discussing how these matters are being influenced by rapid changes to the contemporary world. Globalisation and capitalism are described by Giddens as being causes of human intervention in almost all locations across the planet, and discussed as a key point in constantly changing cultural, capital and ecological dynamics. With rapid globalisation affecting the symbiosis between the human environment and the natural one, this subject has become a cornerstone in my research. In addition to this, the public space is not only what we can physically sense and touch, but also now includes the cyber world. This new digital way of connecting through websites and social media has also paradoxically become a precursor for disconnecting to reality and natural ecologies. To see a photo or digital version of nature is beginning to be more common for many in the western world than to actually be in nature itself.

Sociology, the Public Sphere, and Socially Engaged Art

Within this contemporary global framework of connecting and disconnecting, and the communicative principles of many contemporary public arts practices, my art and research also considers ecological relationships and circumstance in combination with theories of sociologist and philosopher Jürgen Habermas. Habermasian theories on the public sphere, new social movements, and communicative action form a basis for my interest in using art installation to create opportunities for public dialogical exchange between artist, everyday viewer and the global environment. According to Habermas (1989, p.33) there were various starting points to the public sphere, with the sociologist stating that 18th century European coffee houses were places where "...critical debate ignited by works of literature and art was soon extended to include economic and political disputes." In *The Theory of Communicative Action Vol. 2* Habermas states "In communicative action, beyond the function of achieving understanding, language plays the role of coordinating the goal directed activities of different subjects, as well as the role of a medium in the socialisation of these very subjects" (1987, p.9). In later works Habermas began reforming his ideas on the importance this public sphere held in its position between the system and lifeworld (University of Calgary, n.d.). Sociologist Gemma Edwards, in talking about Habermas and his link to new social movements, comments that "...the agents now crucial for generating a public sphere of debate, for Habermas, are not those asking what we should get but those asking who we are, how we live and who is accountable" (2014, p.113-130).

Communication through visual language and the narratives of public art can be used to contribute to goals of social agency and discussion. It can foster or enhance relational changes in the dynamic between viewer, artist, and the surrounding site or environment. It is my belief that communicative action utilised through art has the ability to access lifeworld values of the community through the public sphere. This dynamism and agency is discussed in writing by activist artist and writer Suzanne Lacy (1994) on the topic of New Genre Public Art. She discusses the role of artists in creating a model for public art in which audience, engagement, social strategy and "expression of activated value systems"(p. 30) is key to the aesthetic language of the artwork. Artist Maya Lin is seen to achieve these topics discussed by Lacy in the internet based portion of her ongoing *What is Missing?* project. She does this by placing a message box on her website that invites visitors of the page to "Share a memory about something you, or your parents or grand parents, have personally witnessed diminish or disappear from the natural world" (Lin, 2018).

This work adopts Lacy's New Genre Public Art model by using the opportunity not only to inform public viewers of the issues, ideas and changes in the contemporary world, but also to engage them and invite a response. In addition to this, socially and community engaged public art can be utilised to rebuild trust, relationships and enhance hope in the viewer. On this director of philanthropy and social entrepreneur Risë Wilson writes:

Hope is one of the fundamental outcomes that artistic work can engender: an alternative set of possibilities, new frames, new lenses and new senses of being and belonging. The belief that change is possible is anchored in hope. And the very processes required to bring about change often require artists to step out of their own comfort zones, to stretch their own boundaries, to allow their transformation and growth to be witnessed by the town square. (Wilson, 2015, pg. 26)



Top: Mark Dion "Library for the Birds of New York" Aviary, books, tree, furniture, live birds. Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, 2016.
Bottom: Mark Dion. "Library for the Birds of London" Detail of live Zebra Finch. Whitechapel Gallery, 2018.
Right: Mark Dion "Gull Appreciation Unit" Mixed media sculpture. Folkestone Triennale, 2008.

Section 2: Hatching

Hatch (Verb): To bring forth or produce; devise; create; contrive; concoct.

Narratives and Storytelling

The previous writing by Wilson, and of others discussed below, led me away from the artistic methods of much of the eco-art I had been previously focussed on. Whilst still invested in the ideas discussed above, I began re-considering not how disconnected humans are to the natural environment, but how intimately connected we have always been with it. The movement of eco-art in itself shows a resurgence of this connection between humans and nature, which perhaps was becoming muffled by the industrial age and the speed of globalisation. This revelation was a step for me towards investigate a more ambiguous use of the environment, and birds, in my practice through literary sources and narratives (mentioned in depth in following pages).

Director of the Center for Narrative Leadership, Geoff Mead, references Habermas in stating that storytelling (or narratives) place value on the lifeworld over the system world (2011, p.3). After commenting on the fact that many humans act as though the planet supplies infinite resources for our consumption, he writes "... [Storytelling] speaks a language that the soul understands; it helps us remember where we have come from, sheds light on what is happening right now, and invites us to live in ways that take care of the future". This theory of storytelling has long been used by various cultures to take care of the land, inform cultural and societal decisions, and to communicate histories and spirituality. It is not restricted to one area but spread globally.

In relation to storytelling and narrative connections Chirgwin, Sinclair and Tidemann write in the introduction to the book *Ethno-ornithology* that "What indigenous people know about the world, and the place of people in it, forms a broad understanding of existence that is intertwined with spirituality, language and the environment" (2010, p. 3). In an Australian specific context Tidemann and Whiteside's essay in this same book (p. 153-179) discusses the depth and specificity of indigenous dreamtime stories and the ability these spiritual narratives have in identifying specific bird species, describing in detail their behaviour, calls, habitats and relationships. It is important to note here that the writers comment on the use of the term 'story', emphasising that it is the word used by the traditional owners of the spiritual based stories, and as such "not tales of fictions or fantasy" (p.154) as the term may imply in a different context.

The Language of the Birds

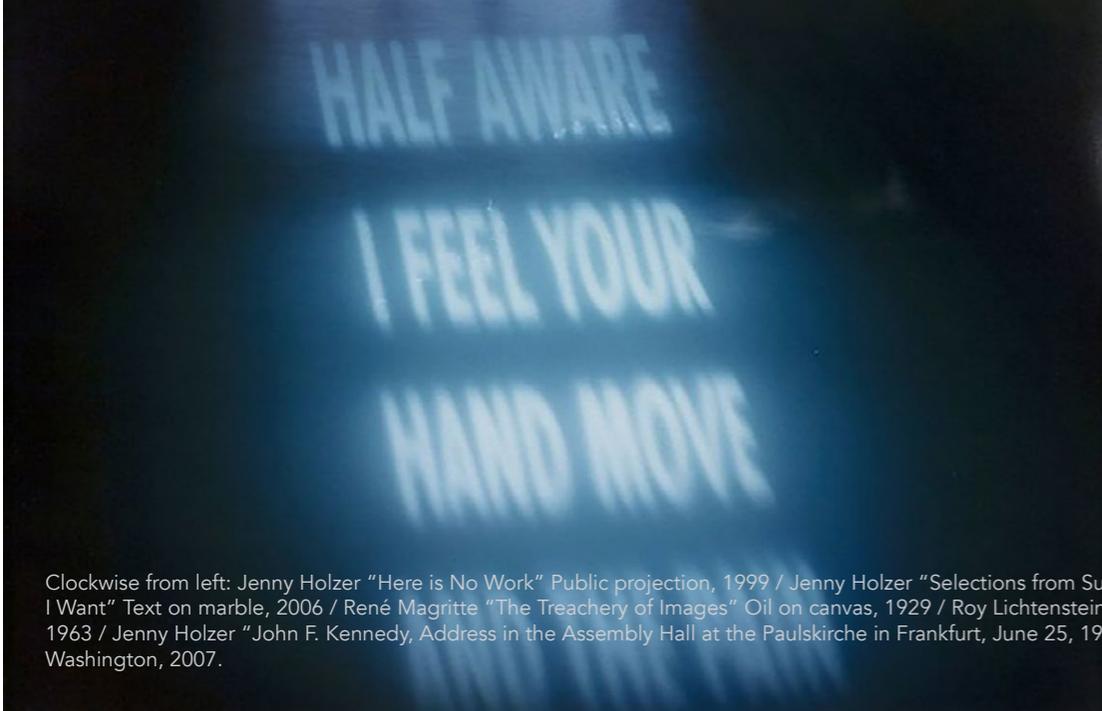
The move away from eco-art towards a more narrative based practice was also due to in part by my discovery of something described as *The Language of the Birds* which actually has very little to do with the sounds birds make in a literal manner and much more to do with ancient and mystical beliefs. Journalist and author Philip Coppens calls it "...an intriguing system of codes" (n.d.) and explains its use as a spiritual language of symbols. He also references Egyptian hieroglyphics, alchemy, Christianity, shamanism and Gregorian chanting in discussing this topic.

Unable to find any further peer reviewed or journal articles on such a mystically-based subject, I am forced to reference Wikipedia (if only for a little clarity) that states "In mythology, medieval literature and occultism, the language of the birds is postulated as a mystical, perfect divine language, green language, Enochian, angelic language or a mythical or magical language used by birds to communicate with the initiated" (2017). This Wikipedia article then goes on to discuss the role of birds and communication in Norse mythology, Greek mythology, Afro-asiatic and European folklore, alchemy, and other literature and culture. These two articles, plus Adele Nozedar's book *The Secret Language of Birds* (2006) and discussion with RMIT tutor Ceri Hann (PhD), gave me the inspiration to further research the ways birds have been an integral part of much of human history in the form of language, folklore, mythology, spirituality, literature, and general inspiration. The symbolic nature of the bird has been intertwined with the human race for hundreds, if not thousands, of years and this is what I wanted to research and explore in my arts practice.

Text and Art

The use of the bird in so much human text and language steered me towards more conceptual art forms, and the idea of using written word as the main driver for my Master of Arts research. Text has been used as a communication tool in artwork for many years, some examples being Magritte's famous painting *Treachery of Images*, the comic strip artworks of Roy Lichtenstein, the various text based artworks of Jenny Holzer, and as mentioned earlier in my writing artist David Buckland's *Ice Texts* (2005 - 2009). In analysing the decision making process for the artworks of Holzer, Jones (2012) states "...there are aesthetic and conceptual decisions about how and where [the artworks] appear, but it's the text and the way the audience encounters it that drives these [decisions]." Here the audience is an important aspect of the artwork. For Buckland, the projections themselves are not encountered by the audience, but the same decision making processes apply. By intervening in public spaces with projected text on unexpected backdrops, these artworks engage and communicate with viewers on both a social and political level.

In researching the use of text and poetry in visual art, I came across the work *Uncontested Space: Guerilla Poetry* (2013). For this work Poet Kenneth Goldsmith performed readings of poetry alongside artworks in MOMA and invited other writers and poets to do the same. In surveying randomised visitors to the museum who experienced this poetry, MOMA found that the poetic words helped viewers to see art in new ways and understand the works of art better (Armstrong, 2013). Whilst this text was not visual as in my artworks and those discussed above, I still find it relevant by the way in which poetic language can enhance the connection between viewer and artwork, and perhaps foster further thought processes on what the artwork might mean.



Clockwise from left: Jenny Holzer "Here is No Work" Public projection, 1999 / Jenny Holzer "Selections from Survival: Protect me from What I Want" Text on marble, 2006 / René Magritte "The Treachery of Images" Oil on canvas, 1929 / Roy Lichtenstein "Hopeless" Oil on canvas, 1963 / Jenny Holzer "John F. Kennedy, Address in the Assembly Hall at the Paulskirche in Frankfurt, June 25, 1963" Public projection, Washington, 2007.

A large, textured glacier wall, possibly a moraine wall, is shown in a dark, blue-tinted environment. The wall has a rough, uneven surface with many cracks and crevasses. In the center of the wall, the text "WILL YOU LOOK YOUR GRANDCHILDREN IN THE EYES AND TELL THEM YOU DIDN'T KNOW ?" is projected in a bright, yellowish-green color. The text is arranged in five lines, centered horizontally. The background is a dark, overcast sky, and the foreground shows a dark, rocky surface, likely the base of the glacier.

WILL YOU LOOK YOUR
GRANDCHILDREN IN
THE EYES AND TELL
THEM YOU DIDN'T
KNOW ?



Section 3: Feeding

Feed (verb): To supply with nourishment.

In order to fully understand how human to bird relationships in a Victorian urban and suburban context can be developed into final outcomes in my community of practice, my methodology follows many branches. I always begin any artwork with reading and research on the subjects and surrounding contexts (even if it's a simple painting of some wild budgies) and as such end up with personal accrued knowledge which is not seen by the viewer, alongside final artistic outcomes. My practice-led research is a reflexive and cyclic process, as my inquiry and investigation is intertwined with the creation of works and the way in which they evolve over time.

Reading the Science

As part of my interest on the effect of globalisation and urbanisation on bird species I looked for sources specific to the Victoria and Melbourne region, as this is where my current practice is situated. Ecologists Loyn & Menkhorst discuss the birds of Melbourne quite in depth in an extensive article published in the *Victorian Naturalist* (2011) that investigates increases and decreases in the bird fauna of Melbourne since 1900. Benchmarked against a late 19th Century paper by naturalist Arthur Keartland, the article also details many causes that Keartland thought were likely issues for bird species, such as climate events, logging, habitat availability and species competition. Of particular interest to me is the discussion on the clearing of woodland for farmland and then of farmland for housing and the uncontrolled increases in park species such as Rainbow Lorikeets, Cockatoos and Crested pigeons. In contrast to this, Regent Honeyeaters, Swift Parrots, and Orange-bellied Parrots have since become critically endangered. This dynamic between explosions of some native bird populations and immense decline in others, as well as introduction of species, pushed me to consider how the city dweller may or may not see the problems occurring. Do we assume that having an abundance of some species of birds around is good enough for the environment overall?

Other articles I have read as part of my research on urban birds include: "Food resources and urban colonisation by lorikeets and parrots" (Lill, 2009), "Boldness and urban dwelling in little ravens" (Lill and Vines, 2015), "Brains, tools, innovation and biogeography in crows and ravens" (Fabre et al, 2012), and "Surviving urbanisation: Maintaining bird species diversity in urban Melbourne" (Antos et al, 2009). These science-based articles provided me with a wealth of information on not only the way in which certain birds have adapted to survive and reside with growing human populations, but also on bird intelligence levels. I was particularly interested in reading information on *Corvus* species (ravens and crows) due to their abundance in spiritual beliefs and stories across the globe, as well on parrots also due to their intelligence but also the high rates of survival for some and contrasting high rates of endangerment and extinction for others. In addition to these peer-reviewed articles there are currently many new books available such as *The Wonder of Birds* (Robbins, 2017), *Birdmania: A Remarkable Passion for Birds* (Brunner, 2017) and *The Seabirds Cry: The Lives and Loves of Puffins, Gannets and Other Ocean Voyagers* (Nicolson, 2017) that discuss human to bird relationships. These books combine fact, science and history with a narrative style designed not only for scientists and intellectuals but also for anyone with the slightest interest in the abundant birdlife of the earth.

Literary Research and Readings

The next stage of my practice was to enquire into the bird as it has been considered mythologically and spiritually, as well as how birds are used metaphorically and symbolically in both spoken prose and written literature. I began by first considering the proverb, as I had used some of these in my previous artworks, and created a collection sourced from various internet articles as well as the *Dictionary of Proverbs* (Manser, 2007). Following this I also collected poetry, sentences from fictional literature, and song lyrics that mentioned birds. Much of my collection uses birds in a metaphorical sense, though sometimes the poetry of birds does not seem to have an underlying meaning such as in Emily Dickenson's poem *A Bird Came Down the Walk* written in 1891 that uses rhyme to describe a bird on a path. In my research I also came across a parody of Edgar Allan Poe's *The Raven*, titled *The Parrot* and written in 1856. This interests me due to way the two birds are viewed so differently by humans and yet are almost on par when it comes to many attributes such as intelligence. Song lyrics I have collected use metaphors of flying and freedom and include artists such as Coldplay, The Beatles, and Sia. Literary quotes from books in my collection includes writers Sun Tzu ("The rising of birds in their flight is the sign of an ambush" in *The Art of War*, n.d), J.R Tolkein ("A few melancholy birds were pipping and wailing, until the round red sun sank slowly into the western shadows; then an empty silence fell" in *The Fellowship of the Ring*, 1954) and Victor Hugo ("The soul helps the body, and at certain moments raises it. It is the only bird that sustains its cage" in *Les Miserables*, 1862).

My research into mythology, spirituality and the bird has been much more complex and the information so vast that I decided to set myself some conditions. I aimed to only look in depth at stories that are relevant to my heritage and also only on the subject of crows or ravens, due to these being a highly urbanised contemporary bird. This has reduced the narratives down into the following categories: Norse, Celtic, Christian and Indigenous Australian. Whilst the first three are chosen for my personal family heritage, the latter has been chosen due to the fact that my family has lived in Australia for many generations and were in fact among the original British settlers of Fremantle.

As stated in the beginning of this document there are many dreamtime stories that relate to birds and indigenous Australian life both past and present. Arts Victoria in conjunction with the Victorian Aboriginal Corporation for Languages published a freely available e-book *Nyernila- Listen Continuously: Aboriginal creation stories of Victoria* (2014) which contains various languages and stories from the many different Victorian indigenous communities, including a variety of stories about birds. This book is intended to share these stories as aboriginal cultural property and "...to reclaim our stories and languages and retell those stories in our own way" (Couzens, p. 5). One of these stories is shown below, in both Indigenous language and english translation:

Malayeeto weeyngunditj waa-ngarra poonteen teen Gariwerd. Teelakal moorkapoo pa meeneerr pangteenay waa tyama weeyn ngamar-rang ngootyoong. Koornong leenyoong Yuuloinkeear ngaka ngaka pa wa mayapa meeleer pakan yanta weeynlat kananoong. Kayap weeyn-lat yoonkeen meerreeng pa Yuuloinkeear tampeen yumgart pa meerta keelkateen. Waa warrymang koornong Yuuloinkeear pa noong kar-reeta wawonga meerreng noong yanta weeynlat pa Tarrakuuk kalo. Pa leenyoong Tarrakuuk, wampa mana pa pakap weeynlat mangnoorroo watanoo Yuuloinkeear pa thalap takoort teen Meerreeng watkanan noong. Mangnoorroo watanoo maleeyeeto teena weeyn wanyoo Gunditjmarara.

A long time ago fire belonged to the crows who lived at Gariwerd, the Grampian Mountains. They were greedy crows and knew that fire was of great value. A little bird, Yuuloinkeear, firetail wren, was watching the crows making fun and games with fire-sticks. One fire-stick fell to the ground and Yuuloinkeear picked it up and flew away. The crows chased him and Yuuloinkeear soon grew tired. So he passed the fire-stick to Tarrakuuk. Tarrakuuk, the kestrel hawk, took the fire-stick from Yuuloinkeear and lit all the Country behind him. From that time there has been fire for all the Gunditjmarara. (Translated by Yarran Bundle from a Kee woorroong Gunditjmarara story, in *Nyernila- Listen Continuously*, 2014, p. 64-65)

Other sources of indigenous dreamtime stories that I discovered included the essay "Aboriginal Stories: The Richness and Colour of Australian Birds" (Tide-mann and Whiteside, 2010, p.154-179) as well online images and text by Fire and Rescue NSW, Dreamtime Kullilla-Art, and Japingka Gallery.

To continue my research I acquired two books containing a collection of Norse and Celtic mythology in narrative form as most of the online resources I found were quite fragmented or only described the general contents of the myths or stories. The reason for the use of these is due to having mainly Scottish, Irish, Welsh, English and Swedish ancestry. I included some bible stories in my readings as though I am not currently Christian myself and was brought up sans religion, I was baptised Anglican as a baby for my grandparents sake. I found alot of these narratives to be ominous and strange. The following are some excerpts of this research:

“Two ravens sit on his (Odin’s) shoulders and whisper all the news which they see and hear into his ear; they are called Huginn and Muninn. He sends them out in the morning to fly around the whole world, and by breakfast they are back again. Thus, he finds out many new things and this is why he is called ‘raven-god’. ”(Norse-mythology.org, 2018)

“Bendigeidfran (Bran the Blessed), perhaps the best known of the Celtic gods associated with the raven, was a giant of enormous strength and a fierce warrior whose head continued to speak after he was beheaded. Tradition holds that his head was buried at the White Mount in London, believed to be the site of the White Tower (The Tower of London). His head is a protective charm for Britain. The word “Bran” means raven, and this may be how the story of the Rooks of The Tower originated.” (Avesnoir.com, 2011)

“The Morrigan (also known as the Morrighu) was the shape shifting Celtic Goddess of War, Fate and Death. She also presided over rivers, lakes and fresh water, in addition to being the patroness of revenge, night, magic, prophecy, priestesses and witches.” (Novareinna, 1997)

“The raven, because of his dark plumage, coarse cry, and supposed tastes, sometimes represents the devil; but God seems to have a fondness for them. One was sent to guard the body of St. Vincent Ferrer; and ravens are known to have fed at least three different saints (St. Benedict, St. Anthony the Abbot, and St. Paul the Hermit) while they were in the desert. Because of this, the raven also represents solitude.” (Catholicism.org, 2004)

Bird Observations

Photographing the urban space and birds of inner city Melbourne has informed many ideas I had been developing on relationships between human and bird, as well as between humans and outside environments. It has also informed my arts practice on how pre-existing narratives like mythological and spiritual beliefs are placed so far away from the reality of the city. In addition to photographing the inner city, an important part of my methodology is considering how I relate to birds in a personal sense. In turn this provides me with an opportunity to question myself on how I might enable others to explore their own relationship with the non-human world. This part of my practice often involves quiet observation and contemplation of birdlife and nature that I come across in suburban spaces such as my own backyard. Further to these suburban areas, I also try to observe birds out of the city altogether such as in mountains like to Sherbrooke Forest and the Macedon ranges, in bushland, or even outback North-West Queensland where my mother lives. Many birds in these natural spaces are not seen but only heard, and this brings another level to my contemplation of human to bird relationships.



Rebecca Westlund "Little Raven (*Corvus mellori*)" Melbourne Central, 2017



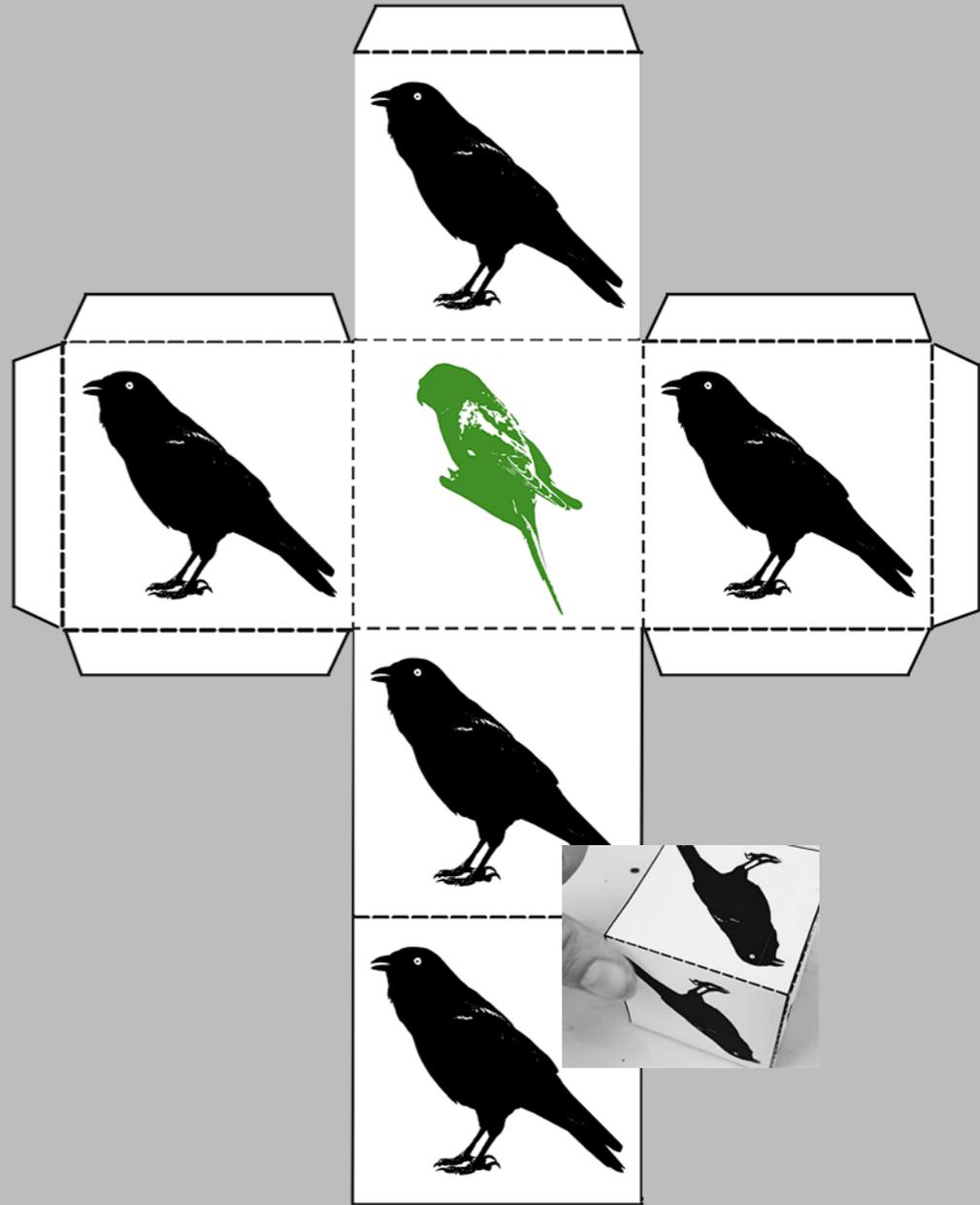
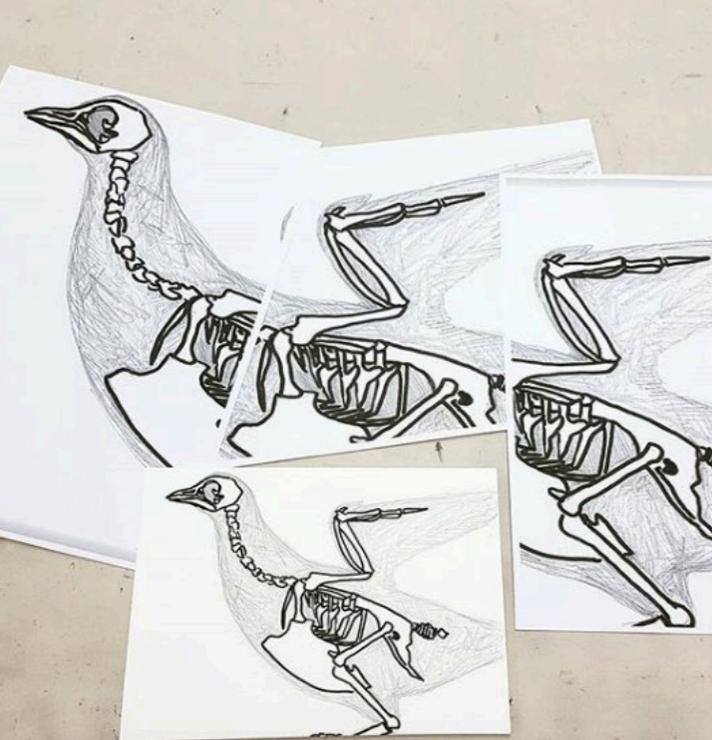
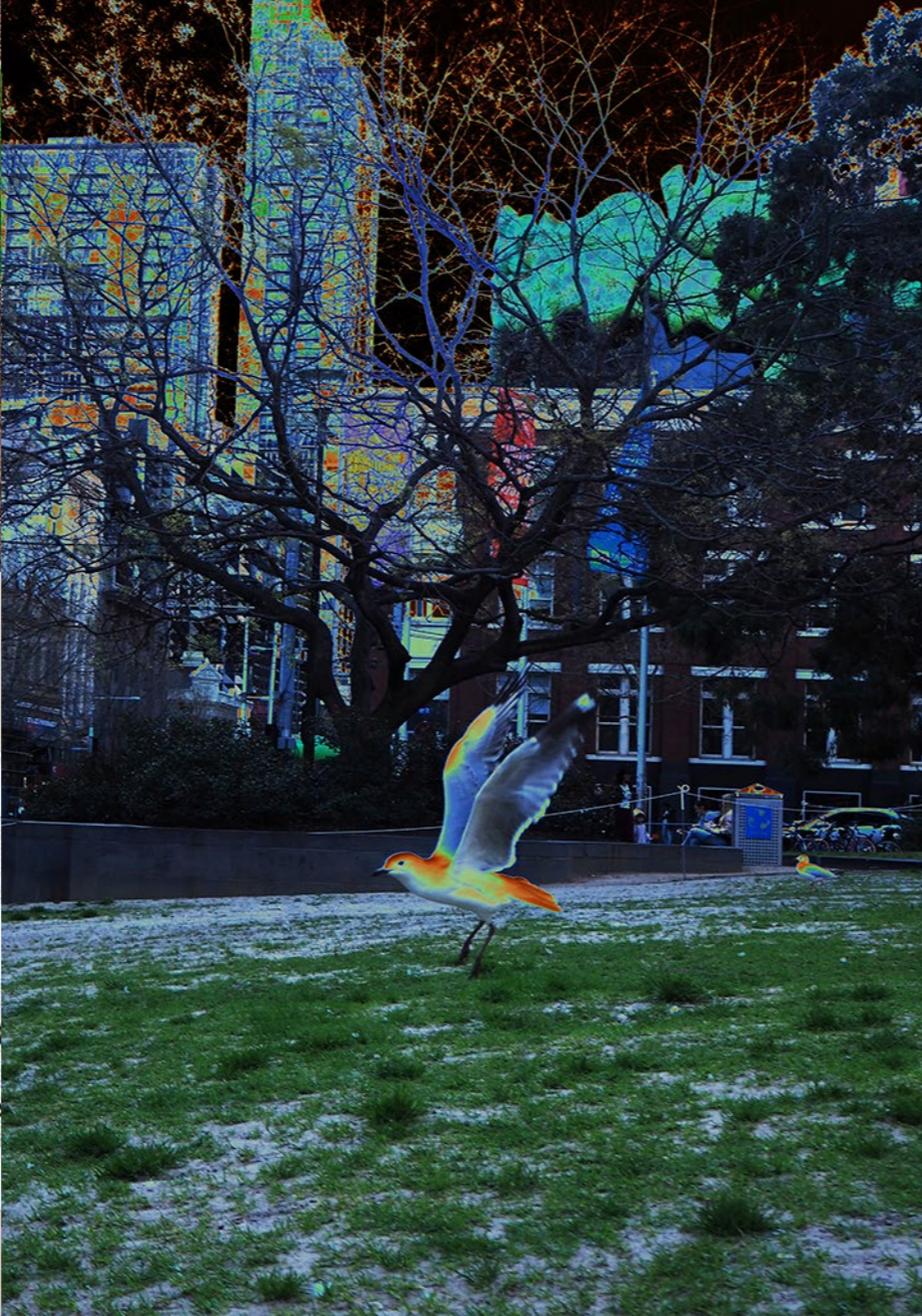


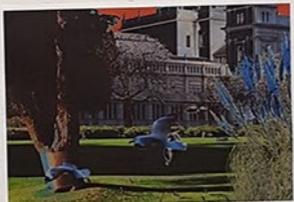
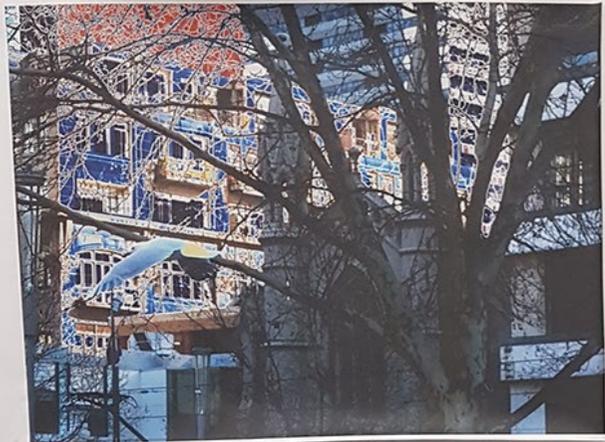
Rebecca Westlund "Yellow Throated Miner (*Manorina flavigula*)" North-West Queensland, 2018

Studio Experimentation

Reflexive and reflective thinking are processes that enable me to transform my readings into artworks and help me to consider where I will go to next in my work. A method which enables me to do this is what I call “thinking through looking”. This usually involves creating collages and maps of prints outs, drawings, and even text, on a blank wall space. Working in this way enables me to move back and simply look and absorb, as one might whilst doing a painting in order to consider where I have been and where this is leading me. In terms of this masters research most of my studio wall space has been used by plastering up my own photographs (some of which are seen/mentioned in the previous pages) along with my layouts for artworks, reference images or artworks I have found online, digitally edited photographs and artworks and lists of bird proverbs/poems/lyrics. This wall space is not static but ever changing and dynamic. New pieces were added as my research and thinking progressed, projects switched around, artworks were altered and things that may have become obsolete were removed. Some of the pieces were not relevant to the current outcomes but simply there to motivate me and remind me where my art practice has come from in past research.

In his book *The Craft of Research*, literary critic Wayne Booth (1995, p. 5) writes on the importance of working with a plan. In terms of arts research I find that trying to plan things out too rigidly may restrict the ability to reach their full potential. By allowing studio time and planning to have an experimental approach, the development of the work becomes free flowing and may lead to a larger variety of outcomes. The planning in the case of this project is a continuing action. Some of my studio experimentation (seen on the next few pages) was a way for me to connect with my bird-art practice and try things in a private setting, though most of the time when I make experimental works in this way I upload them to my Instagram. Therefore they do end up as a form of public art via social media anyway. This can also create a good feedback loop for me with the viewers through any responses or communications.

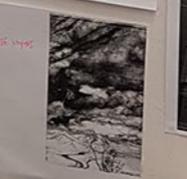
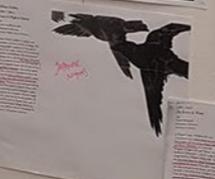
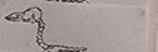




COME FLY WITH ME LET'S FLY AWAY

WE DON'T NEED WINGS CLOSE YOUR EYES AND SEE WE'LL BE BIRDS IN THE TREE WHO LIVE ON IN THE MYSTERY

Blackbird singing in the dead of night Take that winged seraph that scorns to fly 'A little blackbird' say you here while wandering for this moment be artful -The Beatles





Left: Elizabeth Gould "Orange-bellied Parrot (*Euphema aurantia*)" Ornithological illustration, n.d.
Middle: Rebecca Westlund "Orange-bellied Parrot (*Neophema Chrysogaster*)" Watercolour and pen, 2017.
Right: Leila Jeffreys "Blue (Orange-bellied Parrot)" Studio photograph, 2017.



The Bird in Art

An important part of my methodology for my arts practice is to also consider other visual art makers who work with birds as subjects, including studio photographers such as Leila Jeffreys, as well as printmakers, illustrators and painters among others. Many of these I follow on their public Instagram feeds, while others I have found in books, and some may be historically significant such as the work *Birds of Australia* by John Gould (1967) and his wife Elizabeth who illustrated for him (Evans, 2016).

This discovery of other artists who use birds as their subject is an ongoing research and therefore I find it appropriate to discuss this in my methodology section rather than in the previous discussion about the context of my work. However, some of the eco-artists mentioned at the beginning of this research have works that consider birds as some part of their ecological subject matter and as such these works are pictured earlier in this book.

My influence and research on these artists also links into outcomes of my research as it contributes to my bank of knowledge. As my research continues new keywords and avenues present themselves to me and it is in this way that I am pushed towards further research on the field of birds in various arts practices.

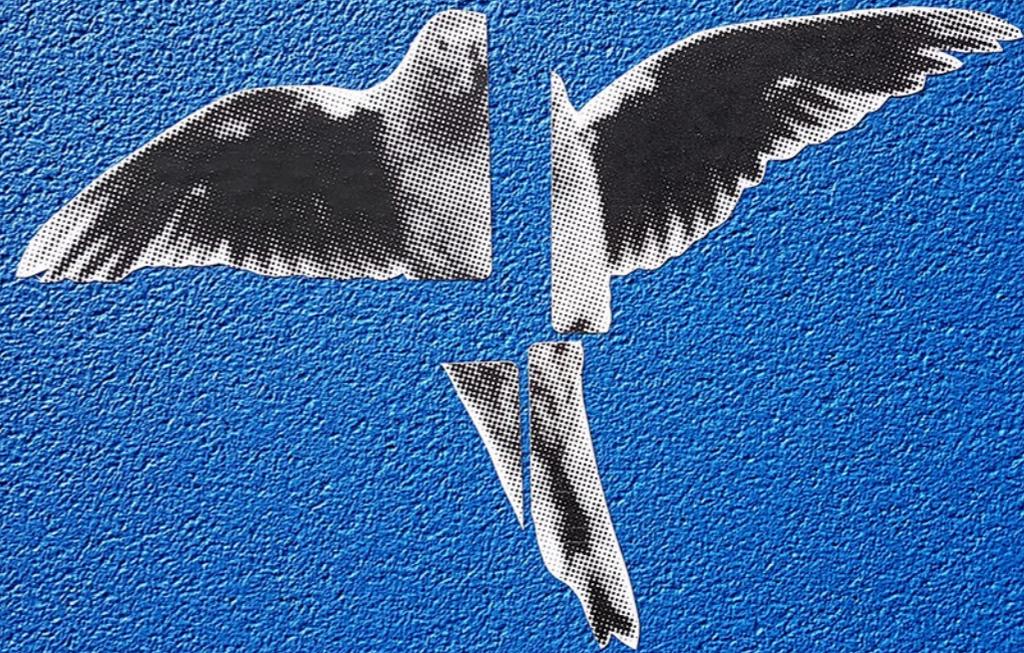
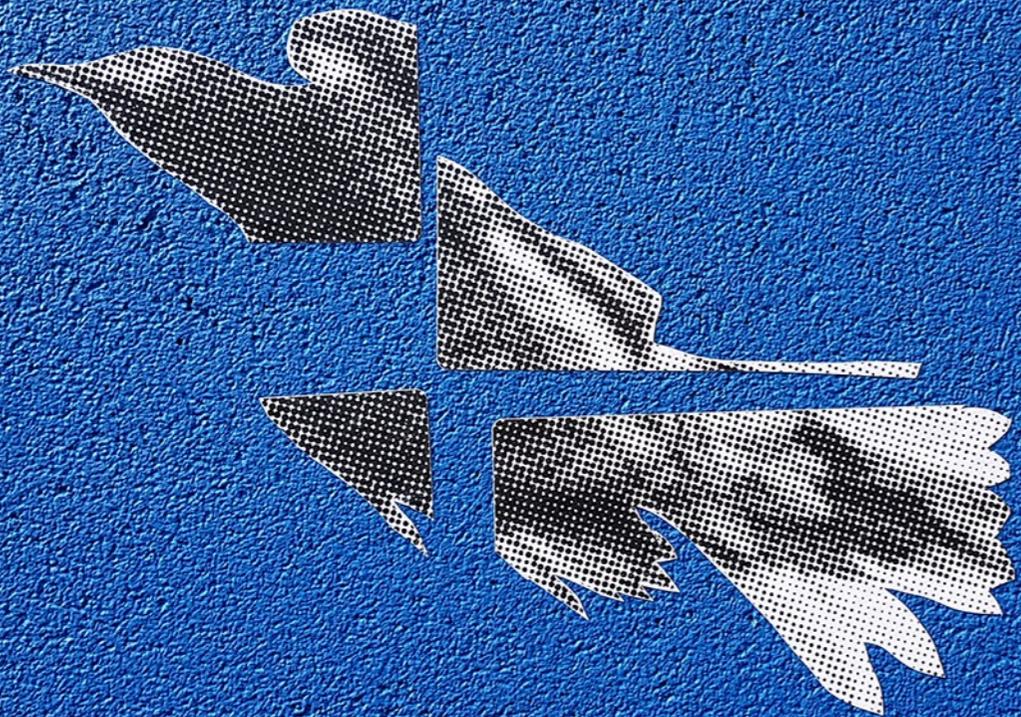
Section 4: Fledging

Fledge (Verb): To bring up until able to fly.

The Blue Wall

In Stage A of this Master of Arts, we were encouraged to find a site and explore possible uses for that site that were developed over a semester. These works were in line with our own interests and working towards discovering and questioning what we wanted to achieve from our research. For this project I chose a blue wall directly outside of the Art in the Public Space studios because of my interest in birds and the way it reminded me of the sky. I titled this artistic exploration *Fragment*, but later found myself referring to it simply as *The Blue Wall*. The verb 'fragment' can be defined as the action of collapsing or breaking, to disintegrate, to disunify (Dictionary.com, 2017). Installed without permission on the side of an RMIT University owned building in Orr Street, Carlton, this work investigated the fragmentation of Australian endemic bird species. It hoped to considered the way in which the colonial settlement and growth of Melbourne has effected species numbers while commenting on factors of digital versus physical in contemporary city society.

Using black and white pixilated images of these birds, the viewer was not able tell what species they are looking at without further investigation. As the viewer moved closer to the birds, details disappeared and the black dots of pixilation became more apparent. By scanning a QR code installed throughout the work the viewer was able to listen to and download a short birdsong soundscape, as well as discover the names of the species and their critically endangered status. In a further play on human effect and interaction with the natural environment, the birds and QR codes were attached to the wall using velcro dots, allowing for rearrangement and movement of the individual pieces by the passersby. To encourage this interactivity I installed extra blank velcro dots in various locations on the wall. Three cut up sticker collages showing eucalyptus flowers and birds created focal points throughout which aimed to lead the viewer back to the concept of the fragmentation of native flora and fauna in an urban context. Over the weeks this artwork was installed I found that the birds were moved many times and sometimes even disappeared. I continuously replaced and added new birds until the end of stage A of my program. There was no way to track the use of this specific QR code which was not an issue for me as tracking was never an aim in creating the code, it was simply placed there for those who knew how to scan one and who were curious enough to see what it held. The artwork remained in place, engaging and interacting with those that walked by, until RMIT University requested that it be removed from their property.







Section 5: Flying

Fly (Verb): To hoist aloft for display; to pass swiftly; to move through the air.

Three final Art in the Public Space outcomes were developed and produced over Stage B and Stage C of this masters research. Each artwork contains written text (taken from proverb, music, or poetry), focuses on the subject of the metaphorical use of birds by humans, and contains an element of interactivity. All three outcomes take entirely different artistic forms with one contained to inner city Melbourne, one being in outer suburban Melbourne, and the third crossing through both. Each artwork was also shared digitally through various social media and internet-based platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, and on my own personal website.



A green rectangular sign with white text is supported by two green posts. The sign is placed in a garden area with a bed of yellow-brown mulch and green plants. In the background, there are lush green trees and a tree trunk on the left.

**A CROW
WILL NEVER
BE A DOVE**

A green rectangular sign with white text is supported by two green posts. The sign is placed in a garden area with a bed of brown mulch and green plants. In the background, there are lush green trees and a building with a blue roof.

**A PEACOCK
HAS FAIR
FEATHERS BUT
A FOUL VOICE**

A green rectangular sign with white text is supported by two green posts. The sign is placed in a garden area with a bed of brown mulch and green plants. In the background, there are lush green trees.

**TWO SPARROWS
ON THE SAME EAR
OF CORN ARE NOT
LONG FRIENDS**

The Proverbial Bird

The Proverbial Bird was created for the Knox Immerse Exhibition (November/December 2017), an endeavour created to showcase emerging artists in various locations across the City of Knox in outer suburban Melbourne. To create my work I was allocated a large garden space situated between the Knox Community Arts Center (a busy theatre) and the Senior Citizen center. This relaxing green space contained many trees and plants as well as grassed area, pathways, picnic tables and garden benches. Whilst I had originally applied with the intention of creating another wall-based work, the curators of this exhibition asked me to create a work in a similar style to the signage/map installation I had exhibited at Sculpture by the Sea and Gomboc Sculpture Park (pictured on page 11 of this book). After much consideration, my work for the exhibition was designed in accordance to this request and consisted of seven bird-based proverbs placed on dark green wooden signs using white vinyl signage text. This installation was developed to reflect the non-intrusive design of Australian national park and botanical garden signage.

By placing these old-time proverbs in a contemporary garden space, I aimed to engage the passer-by in considering not only their meanings at face value but also layered contexts. As proverbs are often spoken, not written, seeing them in bold letters in a garden containing much bird life gave enabled them to be seen as literal statements about birds not just metaphors about humans. As the socially engaging element of this work I include a letterbox made in the same colours and material as the signage. Attached to the letterbox was a small sleeve containing a pad and a pen, and each page of the pad listed the statement "Tell me a story about your favourite bird" along with a small parrot silhouette. I received several interesting and strange statements or stories, some of which can be seen in the images on the next pages of this book. One person even drew a bird and folded it into a paper plane before putting it into the letterbox, which I found quite beautiful. I am yet to decide what further action I may take with these stories or if I shall just keep them for my own self (and those reading this research).

This project evolved for me as a way to consider how past connections and stories no longer seem to fit into the current lives of society and the way cities, urban, and suburban communities interact with the natural environment. The semi-industrial location of the garden space where the work was placed hoped to contribute to discourse on changes that have occurred over time within habitats, ecologies and human/non-human relationships. Though the work was intended to remain installed in the garden for only a month during the time of exhibition, it was in fact in place from November 2017 to March 2018 as the Immerse curators from City of Knox went through bureaucratic processes in trying to acquire the installation to stay in the garden. Unfortunately the Council decided not acquire artworks. I offered to donate the work, as it was created specifically for the site, but was informed this was also not a viable option for the council due to Council restrictions on receiving gifted artworks also.

Listed below are the proverbs used in the work and where they originated. These proverbs were found in various sources such as *The Dictionary of Proverbs* (Manser, 2007) and *The List of World Proverbs* (2018).

- 1) "Kill two birds with one stone" (English)
- 2) "Two sparrows on the same ear of corn are not long friends" (French)
- 3) "A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush" (English)
- 4) "A crow will never be a dove" (Bulgarian)
- 5) "A peacock has fine feathers but a foul voice" (Chinese)
- 6) "It is not the fault of the parrot, but the one who teaches him to talk" (Guatemalan)
- 7) "The caged bird dreams of clouds" (Japanese)

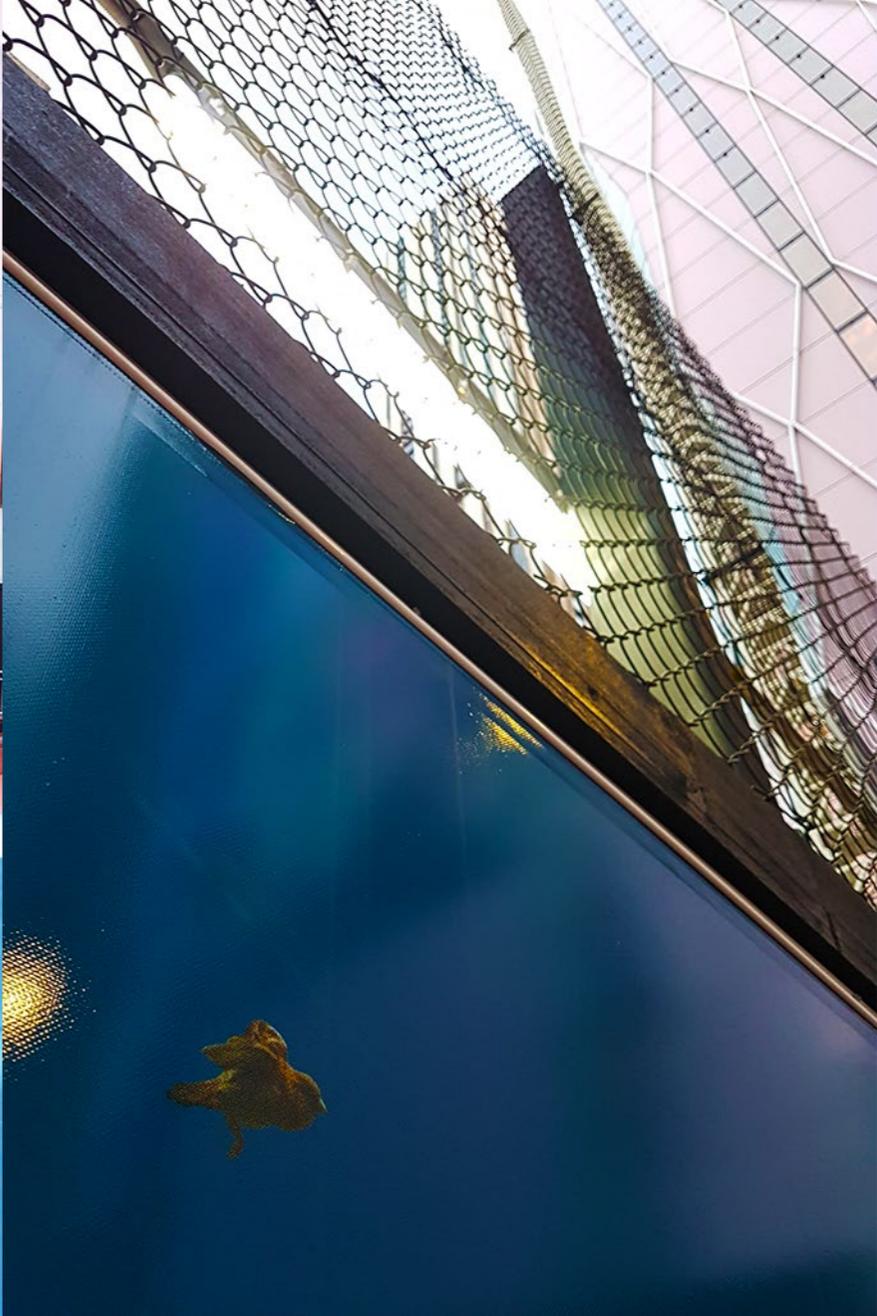
A green rectangular sign with white text is mounted on two green posts. The sign is positioned in a garden area with a large, dense, green, feathery plant behind it and a tree trunk to the left. The ground is covered with brown mulch.

**KILL TWO
BIRDS WITH
ONE STONE**

A green rectangular sign with white text is mounted on two green posts. The sign is positioned in a garden area with tall, green, blade-like plants behind it and a tree trunk to the left. The ground is covered with brown mulch.

**IT IS NOT THE FAULT
OF THE PARROT
BUT OF THE ONE
WHO TEACHES HIM
TO TALK**





Birdsong

Luckily for me an opportunity was offered to the Master of Art in the Public Space students for a collaborative project between Melbourne Metro Rail Authority (MMRA) and RMIT Urban Agency: Living Laboratory. My concept was pitched and then chosen as one of two paid commissioned artworks to be printed on vinyl and installed on 34m of hoarding in A'Beckett Urban Square, Melbourne City.

In creating the concept for this artwork, I considered that the inner city environment of across the globe often lends itself to themes of concrete flooring, glass skyscrapers, metal objects and tight spaces. Melbourne extends on this by blending innovative design and splashes of colour into a mix of historic, artistic and corporate developed urban spaces. Within these spaces, and overlooked or ignored by many, there is a surprisingly strong presence of select birdlife which thrives through long developed symbiotic relationships with the city and its occupants. Seagulls and Pigeons feeding in front of the state library, House Sparrows hopping about in federation square, Australian Magpies warbling in street side eucalypts, Ravens foraging for scraps and flying high above, Magpie-larks wandering, even small yellow Honeyeaters in the scattered flowers and trees of RMIT University.

Titled *Birdsong*, this work engages themes of urban and natural juxtaposition within the city, the bridging of physical and digital spaces, and contemporary humanity's disconnect from nature. Common city birds were photographed in flight, digitally edited and set against my own digital rendering of an expanse of sky. Seen from a distance the images and work aims to appear true-to-life, yet up close it reveals an abstraction of pixelated colours and shapes. The artwork also contains short excerpts of lyrics from popular musicians Coldplay, Sia, and The Beatles. These specific lyrics have been chosen for their metaphorical connection with birds and freedom. On researching the copyright I may encounter on using these lyrics, I found that due to their short word length and generality no copyright exists. However, at the end of each lyric I have placed a QR code which enables passersby to access a music playlist I have created on Spotify containing these songs.

In addition to being able to listen to the music shown on the artwork, a message box next to the playlist invites viewers to submit their own songs with bird references or metaphors for addition to the playlist. At first installation the printing of the artwork rendered the QR codes unusable due to issues of contrast in the blues used and CMYK printing methods. After mention of this to those running the collaboration, the codes were replaced over the vinyl with black and white stickers, though this did not happen until approximately a month post-install. This artwork was installed in mid-March 2018 and is expected to be in location for several months and as yet I have not been told an end date. Located inside the back cover of this book is a 2.8m scaled down fold out of the full artwork.

At the writing of this book I have not had any response through the webpage to add more songs to the playlist, but I have added some extra songs of my own accord. The playlist now contains eight songs instead of three for viewers to listen to if they scan the QR code, or even by coming across my public playlist on Spotify. I may add further songs in the future with or without viewer response. The current song list is listed below:

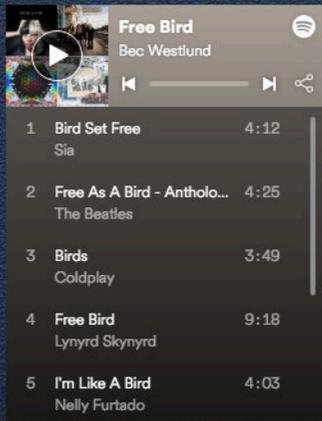
Sia "Bird Set Free"
The Beatles "Free as a Bird"
Coldplay "Birds"
Lynard Skynard "Free Bird"
Nelly Furtado "I'm like a Bird"
The Beatles "Blackbird"
Annie Lennox "Little Bird"
Florence + The Machine "Birdsong"

It is possible to track QR code usage through a paid monthly subscription to a QR generator website however I am not signed up for this. On another note, Spotify playlists can track those listeners who 'follow' playlists but not those who listen without 'following'. At this time, I am satisfied with simply offering the opportunity for engagement from viewers with or without data on that particular level of engagement.

BIRDSONG

Many songs and artists use the metaphor of the bird to talk about being free, flying and other attributes which are then related to human life.

Send me your favourite songs that use birds as a metaphor to add to the playlist.



Free Bird
Bec Westlund

- 1 Bird Set Free 4:12
Sia
- 2 Free As A Bird - Antholo... 4:25
The Beatles
- 3 Birds 3:49
Coldplay
- 4 Free Bird 9:18
Lynyrd Skynyrd
- 5 I'm Like A Bird 4:03
Nelly Furtado

Email

Message

Send



Postcard Poetry

Inside the cover of this book you will have hopefully found a black and white double-sided postcard. On one side you may have seen a sketch like digital image of a bird and a QR code, and on the other side a poem. During my research in 2016 I came across this poem on the Poetry Foundation website. Written by Maya Angelou in 1983 and titled *The Caged Bird*, this poem is not only a strong example of the use of bird as metaphor but also fits well with themes of habitat or ecological imbalance and human to bird relationships. This particular poem contains so much emotion that it moves me deeply every time I read it, as I imagine it would for anyone who read it with understanding of its original context surrounding African American life. In order to fully understand the original context of such a strong poem, I purchased two books by Angelou: *The Complete Collected Poems of Maya Angelou* (1994) and her first memoir *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969). As is probably particularly obvious now, this poem is also where I have drawn the title of my research. Permission was also gained from the appropriate source, via email, to use this poem publically in my Master of Arts research projects.

The creation of a free postcard artwork has been on my mind since Stage A of my research. I am interested in not only the very personal aspects of sending postcards through the post office (even though postcards are freely readable by all those who encounter them in between), but also in the distribution and marketing aspects of postcards in contemporary times. Akgul and Yuksel (2006, p. 721-722) found in researching postcard effectiveness that they can in fact instigate an emotional response in those viewing them. They also stated their findings that postcards may be able to shift levels of awareness and even prompt action. My research has uncovered many organisations that have used postcards to access emotional response and to share messages on bird conservation. These include Birdlife South Africa (International Vulture Awareness Day), World Migratory Bird Day (who produce a new postcard every year), Zoos Victoria ("When balloons fly, seabirds die" campaign), and Population Speakout (who picture a very graphic photograph by artist Chris Jordan, also found on the book *Art and Ecology Now*, p.156).

At the other end of the spectrum, and on the topic of artists work on postcards, it can also be seen that galleries and museums often use postcards as a souvenir. These serve the purpose of a memento for those who view artworks that move or interest them, but are unable to take this artwork with them. Or perhaps they may be used as intended and sent in the post to become a memento for another. I myself have two postcards from the National Gallery of Victoria on my studio wall featuring bird artworks that I wished to remember and happened to find in the gift store. During my research in Stage B I also happened to find a lino-printed postcard in a book I borrowed from the library, featuring an image on one side with the artists name Patricia Bird and a short blurb on the back. This is also on my studio wall and served as inspiration for this outcome. Along with these is a bird postcard I created to raise funds during my undergraduate degree, and a free card from Australian Galleries featuring the some bird artwork by artist Phillip Davey.

After all this the creation of my actual postcard was fairly easy using a photograph taken in a sanctuary of a Regent Honeyeater desaturated to black and white, a QR code featuring bird sounds (both featured in my *Fragment/Blue Wall* project), and Angelou's poem plus credit in a font mirroring a handwritten style. Printed through Vistaprint on 100% recycled cardstock (especially important as the Regent Honeyeater is endangered mainly by deforestation), I then handed the cards out. Some cards have been left in city locations including the bookshop just inside the State Library of Victoria and the lower ground floor of the building containing RMIT's Carlton Library, others handed out to friends and colleagues at RMIT, some given to people I have had short interactions with and happen to have a postcard on me, and a small pile left at my workplace in Senior Art Supplies to either be taken freely or handed to them by me along with a discussion on its meanings. Others still have been left in other locations for people to come across as they may. One card has also been placed in a pocket inside the front cover of this book.

Though this card contains a QR code, this is only present to add another level of connection between the metaphorical poem and the real bird, and perhaps invite curiosity from any digitally savvy viewers. Many of those who have received cards from me at my workplace (we have a large customer base of retired elderly artists) have no concept of what a QR code even is or what it can do, and have just seen it as an extra design on the card. As an object meant to be given from one person to another, I find the form of the postcard itself to be a model of socially engaged art with or without the digital code.

*A free bird leaps on the back of the wind
and floats downstream till the current ends
and dips his wing in the orange sun rays
and dares to claim the sky.*

*But a bird that stalks down his narrow cage
can seldom see through his bars of rage
his wings are clipped and his feet are tied
so he opens his throat to sing.*

*The caged bird sings with a fearful trill
of things unknown but longed for still
and his tune is heard on the distant hill
for the caged bird sings of freedom.*

*The free bird thinks of another breeze
and the trade winds soft through the sighing trees
and the fat worms waiting on a dawn bright lawn
and he names the sky his own*

*But a caged bird stands on the grave of dreams
his shadow shouts on a nightmare scream
his wings are clipped and his feet are tied
so he opens his throat to sing.*

*The caged bird sings with a fearful trill
of things unknown but longed for still
and his tune is heard on the distant hill
for the caged bird sings of freedom.*

(Caged Bird by Maya Angelou, 1983)



Section 6: Migrating

Migrate (Verb): To shift; as from one system, place, or enterprise to another

Story of the Raven

During my Stage B research I had begun developing a project using the mythological and spiritual aspects of birds. This outcome was originally aiming to consist of an exhibition that combined the gallery space with the public street space. In order to do this I applied for an exhibition in the front gallery of Alternate Current Art Space in Windsor, Victoria. This particular gallery features a large clear glass window that enables viewers on the outside to feel as if they are on the inside. I was also planning to apply a decal onto the window as part of the artwork. In the end I was offered a differently three-walled area at the back of the gallery to exhibit in (8th – 30th of June 2018), and this removed my intended intersection between street and gallery however the subjects still follow the direction of this masters research.

As a 6th generation Australian settler with ancestors from Norse, Celtic and Christian backgrounds my connection to the flora, fauna and landscape of both Australia and the world was not shared or taught to me but rather self learnt through experience, research and intuition. For several years I have expressed this connection through both art in the public space and in fine art practice. For the last year and a half I have called Melbourne home and find that its inhabitants, like those in Perth, have a symbiotic relationship with the raven. This bird is present in many of my ancestor's spiritual stories (as either raven or crow) as I mentioned earlier in this research.

For this exhibition I created 12 artworks of various sizes on coloured mountboard using mixed media including ink, paper, acrylic paint, metallic markers, pigment pens, varnishes and charcoals. These artworks feature not only ravens from my ancestor's stories but also images of contemporary Melbourne, some taken by me as photographs and collaged and others drawn in. I have planned to hang these works "salon style", filling up a large amount of wall space to create an immersive experience for the viewer. Interspersed between these artworks will be excerpts from Celtic, Norse and Christian stories containing the subject of the crow or raven. These words will be made using vinyl cut sticker lettering in white, the same as used in The Proverbial Bird. Due to the fact that the walls of the gallery will also be white these texts will have the look of being almost - but not quite – absorbed into the walls. My aim in this layout is to reflect the consuming nature of not only globalisation but also of storytelling and spirituality.

In order to tell the raven/crow stories of Australia, I invited Tammy Chatfield a Kamilaroi woman born on Boon Wurrung land and living on Wurundjeri land to exhibit on one wall while I exhibit on the other two walls. As a supporter of indigenous arts practice and culture, Tammy is a guest for my exhibition and a teacher of stories to me, and as such I have asked no payment from her and any sales of her artwork will be entirely her own. This exhibition is not aimed at being a money making endeavour but rather a part of my research project, however if I do sell works I will donate 10% of profits to Birdlife Australia for conservation and research as I do with all sales of my bird related crafts and artworks.

The two ravens that sit on Odin's shoulders - Hugin (thought) and Munin (memory) - whisper to him of all that they have seen between dawn and the evening feasting-time as they fly out over the world.

Bran the Blessed asked for his head to be buried under Tower Hill in London. As long as his head remained Britain would be protected from invasion. Bran had the symbol of the raven, and the birds are kept at the tower to this day.

Morrigan (the tri-goddess) sent her spirits in the shape of three night-black ravens to warn Senach and his warriors of the calibre of the warrior who came against them.

So he went and did according unto the word of the Lord: for he went and dwelt by the brook Cherith, that is before Jordan. And the ravens brought him bread and flesh in the morning, and bread and flesh in the evening; and he drank of the brook.



Looking Forward

The end of my Master of Arts (Art in the Public Space) candidacy brings me to question myself on where I will take my practice next. One thing I am interested in doing is continuing to collect personal stories on birds from various people in Australia such as those I encounter when I am gallery sitting at my exhibition, as well as from avid bird watchers in locations such as Kakadu National Park (during their annual bird week), Broome Bird Observatory, or from Melbourne birding groups. I would like to then re-write these stories into poetry, though I am unsure as what I would do with the poems after that. To begin this project I may start with the stories already collected from my letterbox.

I am also sure I would like to further my research to PhD candidacy level in the next few years. I am not ready to do so immediately as I do not know exactly how I would do this. The next step for this would be to read through PhD documents that cover similar topics, such as the thesis of Cath Clover (2015), and discuss ideas with knowledgeable colleagues whom I have encountered during my undergraduate and postgraduate over the past 5 years. In developing the proposal for this PhD I hope to uncover even more rich sources of artworks and information covering human-bird relationships. In this time of ever growing globalisation and urbanisation I believe it is vital for artists and writers to continually engage with their communities, and to use their practices to reconnect to the natural world, and my ongoing research will hopefully be a part of this.

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