

Pigeon-Human Negotiations through Practice

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ABSTRACT

This is an exploration of the (un)common worlds of the pigeon and the human in London, through the lens of *anthrodecentric art* and the installation of a pigeon loft. To engage with this encounter is look, see, and be with another. Human-pigeon ties of relation are long-standing, as from 10,000 years ago the pigeon has lived cooperatively with the human species. More recently, the pigeon was the starting point of contemporary mail systems and messenger pigeons were active serving members of the armed forces in World War II, able to carry out missions when humans were unfit and incapable. Given developments in mechanical and digital technologies, the pigeon has been deprived of its use-value as technology. The project Pigeon-Human Negotiations presents a diagrammatic model that affords the pigeon a use-value in contemporary London – their scavenging behaviours are recognised for their utility as a *bio-recycling* system. Here I present this arts practice-led research project under three lenses of analysis: *the space of function*, *the space of re-presentation*, and *the sphere of translation*. Herein lies the intersection of pigeon/art/human, within the *bio-recycling* capacities of the pigeon, the functions of art as re-purposer and subsequently assigner of value, the human can consume this art work predicated on the active presence of the non-human, and their agency through the artwork, which allows the rubbish produced by the human to be *bio-recycled* into the realm of value.

KEYWORDS: pigeon; art; re-presentation; non-human agency; non-human utility

1 Introduction

The pigeon, we are all aware of this nuisance creature, this flying poo dispenser, builder of filth-fortified nests, the rubbish-consuming-scavenger – the once valiant messenger, missile guidance system of the past – the *bio-recycling* techné flying, walking, living, and being all around us. In 2017, I first installed a *building of home*, onto a University College London rooftop. This pigeon loft remains installed, excepting its transformation into a gallery exhibition *The Feathered: an exploration of nonhuman labour* in May of 2017. Here I present this arts practice-led research project under three lenses of analysis: *the space of function*, *the space of re-presentation*, and *the sphere of translation*. The impetus for this research is personal observation, watching humans kick at and wave away pigeons, watching them walk down the streets and sidewalks, and persistently picking up the rubbish left behind by humans. How could this relationship be re-conceptualised? To bring the pigeon back into a utilitarian grace with the human co-habitant? Drawing from a diverse range of theoretical perspectives, including the anthropology of art, military history, historical naturalism, art criticism, material thinking, history of science, anthropology of science, and Greek philosophy; through the “double articulation” of practice-led research (a reciprocal formation of theory and practice), this project aims to visit the histories, presences, and futures of pigeon-human social and cultural negotiations (Bolt 2007, 29). In presenting this encounter with the pigeon, I will introduce *anthrodecentric art* as methodology, present the language of the arts-encounter, demonstrate the complex histories of pigeon and human relations through symbolic and use values, then examine the pigeon loft, *the building of homes*, through three spaces of articulation. Through the re-presentation of what-is, a *building of homes* seeks to modify the viewers’ perspective to recognise a new cultural utility of the pigeon, as *bio-recycler*.

2 Anthrodecentric Art – A Methodology

A building of home is presented here as a work of *anthrodecentric art*. As a conceptual methodology, *anthrodecentric art* utilises strategies of movement, reciprocity, and slippage to create a generative chaos in the arts-encounter. Embracing the active and passive, an approach to becoming-with the nonhuman is presented to viewers, which moves them beyond the pre-constructed logic of modern representation. As Latour states, “Nothing is more anthropocentric than the inanimism of nature” (Latour 2004, 224). Through *anthrodecentric art*, perhaps we can revisit the animism of our world. In

speaking to the practical research and knowledge proposed in this project, the non-human (specifically pigeon) agencies and knowledges in the world are not to be understood as separate from the human experience or as resources to support humans; instead, they can be understood as a research into the potentialities and possibilities of our relationships to nonhumans.

Although *anthrodecentric art* is a term proposed by the author, it is related to developments in contemporary arts practice. In *The Multispecies Salon* several artists produced works related to the question “Which beings flourish, and which fail, when natural and cultural worlds intermingle and collide?” (Kirksey 2014, 1). This exhibition centres on the use of multispecies ethnography, examining the “lives and deaths of critters who abide with us in a multi species world” (Kirksey 2014, 4). Exploring the multidirectional influences of the many, the artist ethnographers questioned, “Who benefits, *cui bono*, when species meet?” – this question is a fundamental premise of *anthrodecentric art*, the exploration of reciprocity (Kirksey 2014, 2). These questions are invoked through the included works, such as *Paranoia Bugs*, by Marnia Johnston. Beginning from a notion of “contagion” (a notion commonly spread to the pigeon), *Paranoia Bugs* utilises fears and exposure as tactics to provide the basis for an encounter which generates questions instead of answering them (Johnston 2005). While this example demonstrates a connection to the objectives of *anthrodecentric art*, other contemporary practices engage with the animal form from differing perspectives. What narrative is constructed when the animal becomes an aesthetic object? To approach this question, I will turn to two artworks, both utilising the body of the pigeon. First, *some pigeons are more equal than others*, performed by two artists, Julian Charrière and Julius Von Bismarck. This performance was conducted in Copenhagen, Venice, and Berlin in 2012. The two artists spray-painted pigeons, in an attempt to make the birds more tolerable for the humans in these urban spaces. Second, *The Others*, a collection of 2,000 taxidermied pigeons presented by Maurizio Cattelan in the 2011 Venice Biennale. The stuffed birds overlook visitors of the Biennale from the front of the Palace of Exhibitions, as well as from the rafters and ledges in the building’s interior. The primary form of these two artworks is the body of the pigeon. The animate rendered inanimate, either through death and stuffing, or through transformation into an aesthetic object. If one were to view the pigeon as a “minded” thing, following the thinking of Spinoza, what of the mindedness or the agency of the animal is lost or gained through this transition (Spinoza 2000, 55). The pigeon has been taken as one’s own, through the taking of the body. In the case of the pigeon having gone through the easy bake oven of spray-paint, through the control of human approved aesthetics, the object of pigeon can now

be accepted into the historically shared urban spaces. In the case of the taxidermied pigeon, it is through death, the loss of autonomy, the bird has been neutered of its obscenity and becomes an accepted figure of worth through the assignment to the category of art. While there is conceptual movement in each of these instances, these “lines of flight” return to a human-dominated hierarchy, denying the pigeon agency and restricting it to a fixed relation of vermin to only be accepted through human control, divorcing the animal from an animate past, present, or future.

Here, I propose *anthrodecentric art* to give viewers the opportunity to see, recognise, and acknowledge the existence of nonhuman agencies and existing interconnections, to be unrestricted by cultural paradigms.

3 The Language of Encounter

Accounting for the interventions of prior humans through selective breeding and domestication of the pigeon resulting in the creation of the current feral-urban pigeon, this is an investigation into the reciprocal effects of these modifications through re-presentation. Attempting to shift viewers’ perspectives, from revolt of the “rat with wings” to recognition of the pigeon, towards a space of mutual beneficence in the urban-ecological space (Jerolmack 2007, 78). A genuine “picture” of human-pigeon relations relies upon representation. Barbara Bolt succinctly explains the pervasive view of humans as outside of nature, reified through modernist systems of representation allowing for nonhumans to be positioned for human consumption and mastery: “Representationalism orders the world and predetermines what can be thought” (Bolt 2004, 9). As representation has allowed for and supported the spread of this view, I propose it is time now to use alternate or emergent modes of representation that are no longer complicit. Bolt continues to explain the danger of representationalism: “What is at issue is not so much representation in itself, but rather how, in the modern world, representation has come to be understood as the structure that enables representationalism to dominate our contemporary way of thinking. Representationalism is a system of thought that fixes the world as an object and resource for human subjects” (Bolt 2004, 12). Art that operates outside of this prevalent mode allows for the revealing of relations beyond the scope of the human, opening up to more complex relations revealing nonhuman agencies and affects.

The term nonhuman agency is central to understanding *the building of home*. Latour defines actor (or agent), “a term from semiotics covering both humans and non-humans; an actor is an entity that modifies another entity in a trial; of actors it can

only be said that they act; their competence is deduced from their performance; the action, in turn, is always recorded in the course of a trial and by an experimental protocol, elementary or not.” (Latour 2004, 237). “In a very broad sense, agency is virtually everywhere. [...] It is possible to identify agents and agency, and patients and patiency, virtually everywhere” (Schlosser 2015). The notion of the “patient” is expanded by Alfred Gell: “The concept of agency I employ here is exclusively relational: for any agent, there is a patient, and conversely for a patient, there is an agent” (Gell 1998, 22). There is always a relationship between the active and the passive. I am using the term “agency” with a particular meaning, defining an actor or actant as a thing with the capacity to act upon another. The agency of a thing in the social sphere is evidence of the evolution of relationships, it is history in the present, it is the entanglement of two or more things with each shaping the other. Donna Haraway succinctly points out that humans are relationally situated, stating that “[t]his [human exceptionalism] is the premise that humanity alone is not a spatial and temporal web of interspecies dependencies” (Haraway 2008, 11). Humans and nonhumans alike are continuously contaminating one another through presence and jointly shaping the futures of one another. “Never purely themselves, things are compound; they are made up of combinations of other things coordinated to magnify power, to make something happen, to engage the world, to risk fleshy acts of interpretation,” Haraway writes, explicating an important aspect of agency in the practice of *anthrodecentric art* (Haraway 2008, 250). The human, the nonhuman, and the work of art are never solely themselves; instead, they act with one another, engaging and magnifying what-is present.

As *anthrodecentric art* is proposed to give viewers the opportunity to see, recognise, and acknowledge the existence of nonhuman agencies, I will now examine the notions of “to see,” “to recognise,” and “to acknowledge” through pre-modernist art criticism alongside a contemporary alternative creating a *nonmodern* space within the field. In 1905, Georg Simmel wrote in his text *Rembrandt*, a precursor to modernist art criticism, that “much of what we believe we ‘see’ directly is in fact not seen at all, but rather, as one says, is ‘deduced’” (Simmel 2005, 17). Simmel expands this notion of what is “deduced” through assembling a “unity of the object” which “can fill itself with other selves just as it can with its own” (Simmel 2005, 17). Simmel’s analysis of seeing in regard to this painter, Rembrandt, reflects a *nonmodern* perspective. From this perspective, there is not a divisive separation between elements, one which allows for a unity and complexity of interaction and engagement between subjects. Moving forward, the contemporary criticism of Barbara Bolt furthers the argument of the necessity of the nonhuman, the artwork, as a subject: “The unfolding of the work in the open region

of the world is the realm of performativity where the logic of practice, not rationality, operates. In this realm not-knowing-of-the other contrasts with representationalist knowing of *subjectum*. An object is no longer set before a *subjectum*" (Bolt 2004, 26).

4 Why the Pigeon?

"No animal has developed as unique and continuous a relationship with humans as the common pigeon. [...] The fanatical hatred of the pigeons is actually a relatively new phenomena," writes Mike Dash (2002). The history of social relations and negotiations between the human and pigeon is long, complex and built around a sense of utility.

When did the subject pigeon become the object (of hate) pigeon? The pigeon has a rich symbolic history (perhaps named as the dove, a denotative and taxonomic subset of "pigeon"). Pigeons are monogamous, usually remaining with one partner after mated, a trait leading to a tendency to anthropomorphise the animal (Jerolmack 2007, 80). As an animal representation of this moral trait, rituals and celebrations heralding the pigeon as the bird of love proliferated from Mesopotamian to current times (Jerolmack 2007, 80). The differentiation between "pigeon" and "dove" originates from a folk tradition, leading to radically differing public perceptions today – the dove as a positive symbolic character, and the pigeon as a "rat with wings" (Jerolmack 2007, 83). Both of these categories are symbolic representations of an absentee object, the pigeon from the days of co-habitations and the battlefield warrior are void. The un-coupling of the pigeon from sites of production, or sites of labour, has allowed for the proliferation of a negative public persona and negative urban interactions with humans.

Man first domesticated the pigeon as long as 10,000 years ago (Crossland 2007). These domesticated pigeons were prized as high-minded "speechless creature[s]" (Levi 1996: 13). They are suspected to have cohabited amongst the caves and the cliffs, numbering in the thousands in "pigeon colonies" and contributing their guano as fertiliser (Jerolmack 2007, 79). The first forms of direct labour emerged as early as 500 A.D. in China, Egypt, Greece, Rome, and Japan; the pigeons were used by leaders such as Alexander the Great and Hannibal as a means of communication, carrying messages of war efforts or lovers' notes (Jerolmack 2007, 82). It is supposed that Western Europeans first encountered the "homing pigeon" in Baghdad during commercial trading activities (Glover & Beaumont 2004, 9). As pigeons were more structurally organised in their services, Genghis Khan used a pigeon-based communication service in the 13th century (McCafferty 2002). This organised usage of the homing pigeon was brought into the service of Christian commanders during the Crusades (Lincoln 1927, 66).

These practices continue through history by the likes of Reuters news agency and the Pigeon-Gram services in New Zealand. In the United Kingdom the pigeons served as messengers from the front lines of WWI. The last of such pigeon-based services was ended in 2006 (PCRC 2009).

The rise of the Industrial Revolution and the spread of “state-of-the-art communication tools” arose simultaneously (Jerolmack 2007, 83). This particular tool, as an animate being, required sustenance and care, and sites of interconnection. In England, the pigeon was viewed as a bird that was “reclaimed from a state of nature, and taught to live in a state of dependence” (Girton 1790, 13). These “reclaimed” birds required housing. Manuals were written, as by John Moore in 1735, articulating the proper methods of construction:

A Pigeon Loft ought to be built to the South or South-West, the Sun lying warmest on the from those Quarters; but if you have not that Convenience, you may make a Hole in the Roof of your House, and there lay your Plat-form, smaller or larger as you think proper: A Carpenter that is used to such Work will put you in a Method, always remembering to erect proper Works to keep of those Tormentors of the gentlemen of the Fancy, the Cats; for in one Night’s Time they will make a very great Havock, and are generally observed to destroy those Pigeons which you most value; fo that ’tis better to be at fome Charge at first, to prevent the Incur-sions of such dangerous and fatal Invaders, who seldom or never give any Quarters. (Moore 1735, 3)

Amongst the concern for care and protection, Moore continues in his writing to provide instructions for breeding in protective quarters and care for eggs, constructing appropriate entrances and exits, care guidelines allowing for healthy stock, feeding strategies and useful structures, and also mentions the unparalleled usefulness of pigeon guano to agriculture (Moore 1735, 23). These guidelines bear a striking resemblance to the categories of concern outlined in the *Animal Welfare Act of 2006* (which will be further outlined under the heading “A Pigeon Loft in Three Sites”).

Pigeons attained an elevated status within the field of behaviourism. At The Pigeon Lab of Harvard University, B. F. Skinner worked a myriad of experiments on operant conditioning with pigeon subjects (Zuriff 2002, 368). His research supported the United States Military’s “Project Pigeon” (Jerolmack 2007, 84). This research included pigeon-guided missile systems, in which the pigeon’s pecking would guide the missile to its target, but this suicide mission was aborted following the discovery of radar (Jerolmack 2007, 84). It is our relationships and interactions with the pigeon which shape our con-

ception of the pigeon, moving beyond the “essential” meaning. As Colin Jerlomack notes, “[the pigeon] is given a meaning and has action taken towards it by human beings based partially on contextual features of culture, individual biographies, and practical interests. Pigeons’ depictions as both sacred and profane, symbols of love and winged rats, reveals this” (Jerolmack 2007, 89). The space and time of any interaction can and will determine the perspective of the humans’ interaction with a nonhuman. The realms of interactions between the human and the pigeon extend between the functional (actual pigeon use) and the symbolic representation (the modernist absentee object).

The life of the pigeon persists in today’s urban ecologies in spite of the elaborate and intentional efforts of their human cohabitants to eradicate their presence. Attempts of erasing the pigeon from our “human” ecologies are easy to find, and a quick Google search will provide one with multiple options of capture and disposal via lethal means. There are currently two fronts in the use of pigeon lofts as population control mechanisms, led by Daniel Haag-Wackernagel and Guy Merchant. In 1988, Haag-Wackernagel began a study which became the Basel Pigeon Action, with the lofts acting as roosts for the pigeons and their eggs being collected and destroyed (Mooallem 2006). Merchant, director of PiCAS, claims to have independently begun the deployment of pigeon lofts as a measure of non-lethal population control through the collection and destruction of eggs (Mooallem 2006). PiCAS’s website presents multiple case studies of the success of the loft system (PiCAS n.d.). The role of residents feeding the birds is the crux of the controversy between their methodologies. Merchant stated that “[a]t the end of the day, pigeons are there because we’re filthy, dirty creatures” (Mooallem 2006), placing blame on the human side of the equation for the proliferation of pigeon populations. While Haag-Wackernagel places the blame on humans providing food, his understanding of the source issue differs. He states that the point of the installation of the lofts was not a functional aspect but was a decoy – enabling a public re-education campaign, ostracising the “crazies” (Mooallem 2006). In response to the campaign, people in Basel would report “feeders,” once even leading to a physical attack on a chronic offender, an elderly man who had begun to lure to pigeons into his flat (Mooallem 2006). “Most of the pigeon feeders are in some way crazy,” Haag-Wackernagel claims, lacking in interpersonal connections with other humans, supplying the pigeon an opportunity to use “black magic whereby [the pigeons] transform them [humans] into senseless disciples” (Mooallem 2006). While the two progenitors of population control differ on the precise relationship of human/pigeon/food, they are both cleaning up after the remnants of historical human intervention.

Looking to the histories of human-pigeon relations, pigeons have been extremely

useful labourers, lending their selves and bodies to their human collaborators. A brief summary of this interconnected history: first, there was a state of cohabitation, then of labour in communications, warfare, and scientific developments; exile after technological and mechanical developments, and relegation to the position of vermin deserving extermination. The feral-urban-pigeon, not wild and not domesticated, remains in a complex network of social relations with the urban-human. This urban pigeon is a “hybrid” creature, formed socially and genetically (Latour 1993). As historical narratives and relations with the pigeon have been predicated on its usefulness, it is here that I would like to place an addendum – that the pigeon is still a productive member in the ecologies it shares with humans – as scavengers, as rubbish-consumers, and as active and animate *bio-recycling* systems. They are cleaning up after the consuming and rubbish-producing humans.

5 A Pigeon Loft in Three Sites

In “Flying Rats,” Andrew Blechman begins with two chronic feeders, two of Haag-Wackernagel’s “crazies”, dumping bags of bird feed around New York City. However, he ends the day with Bob, from B.O.B. (Bird Operations Busted). Bob from B.O.B. abruptly ends the interview (“We have a problem, and it’s very dangerous...”), departing to address a feeder feeding pigeons with white bread (bad for the pigeon and creates concrete-like excrement). As Bob says, “It’s people like him ruining the birds’ reputation.” (Blechman 2013, 242.)

The present work is an active support of the resilient pigeon and of its *bio-recycling* labour-agency, with an objective to re-purpose the waste of this *bio-recycling* agent into the realm of value via art and materiality (via pigment). This transition of value moves from the real estate/capital value – to an ecological value of co-habitation – to an arts-assigned value as the guano is used as a pigment in nonmodern takes on the modernist drip painting. This research aims to support the pigeon and the reputation of the pigeon from human-inflicted harms.

The pigeon loft, *a building of home*, was first installed onto the rooftop of the Slade School of Fine Art on 10 May 2017. This loft has been built to meet the standards of the *Animal Welfare Act of 2006*. This act and the design of the loft account for the welfare of potential pigeon inhabitants, or site-users, through consideration of the suitability of the environment and provided diet, the allowance for normal behavioural patterns, availability of communal housing, and protection from pain, injury, suffering, and disease. These guidelines have been met through the construction of a social housing

unit that can allow for up to twenty-four visiting pigeons. The pen space is open-access and any visiting birds have complete freedom of entry and departure. The solid floor allows for foraging behaviours and the walls are lined with perches for comfortable resting sites. The pigeons are offered a high-quality bird seed fulfilling their dietary requirements, and the birds are free to forage. As the pigeons are visitors-at-will there are no restriction on their normal behaviours and the birds retain free will to utilise the structure for protection and shelter. This loft, installed for the use of the pigeons, was not physically accessible to viewers during its use, but the loft was then re-located into the gallery space with the residue of pigeon-use for close-viewing as a re-presentation.

6 Realms of Influence

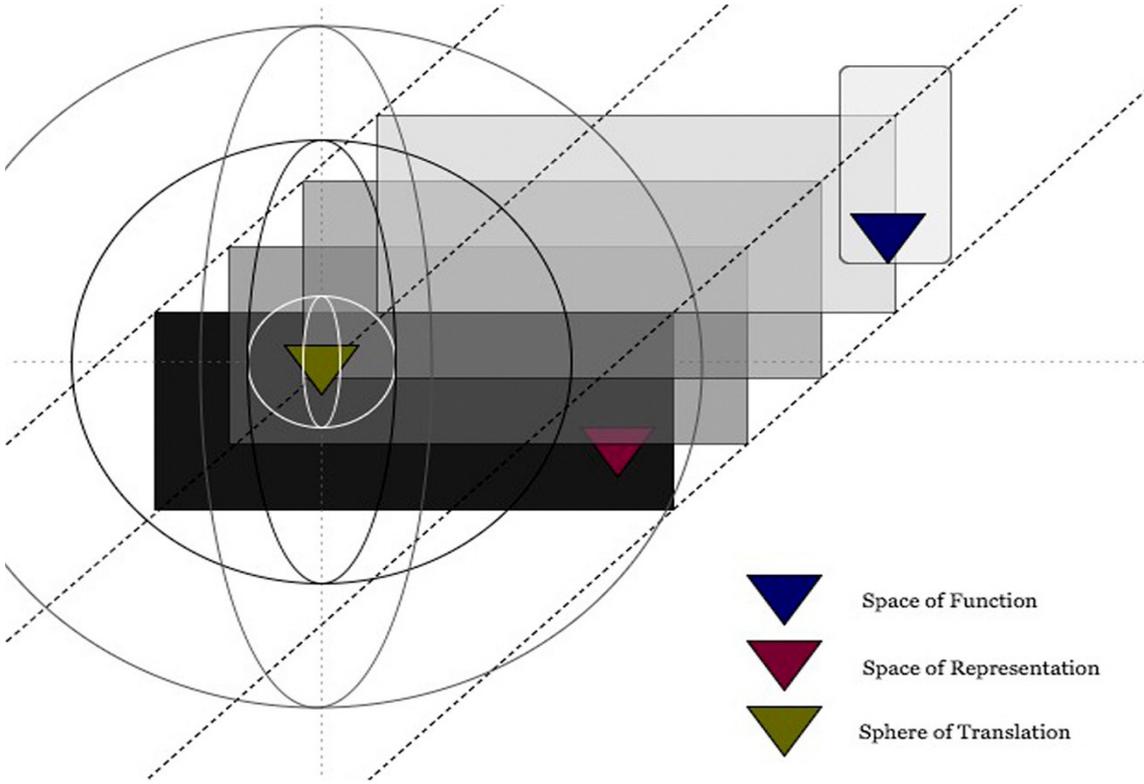


Figure 1: Realms of Influence (D. Gaietto, 2018). The progressive grey spaces articulate the architectural floors of the exhibition space which the viewer may inhabit.

In the diagram (Fig. 1) three key realms are situated within the architectural space of the Slade School of Fine Art. This diagram works to demonstrate the ever-expanding concentric circles of influence that may follow a viewer engaging with an artistic intervention – in this case a viewer who has actively engaged with the pigeon loft as part of my participation in the 2017 Slade Degree Show. The Slade, as an architectural space, is shown through four progressively lighter shades of grey, depicting the basement through the second floor, and then the roof access point. The three key realms of theoretical concern within this exploration are: *the space of function*, *the space of re-presentation*, and *the sphere of translation*. In the simplest of terms, *the space of function* is the pigeon loft on the roof accessible to pigeons, serving as a site of protection and sustenance. *The space of re-presentation* is the placement of the previously used pigeon loft during the exhibition open to viewer access (as the loft retains the residue and traces of its rooftop pigeon-use). Lastly, *the sphere of translation* is the ever-expanding reverberation following the potentially modified perspective of viewers after engagement. This ever-expanding sphere moves with the viewer – and can affect their perspective of non-art encounters. As Bolt discusses, the fixity of representation has been disrupted through the engagement with the theoretical object and through our concrete dealings with the world:

[...] representation, or representationalism is a relationship where, whatever is, is figured as an object for man-as-subject. It is this objectification of what is by man-as-subject (subjectum) that constitutes the central focus of the critique of representation [...] through practice, the perspective of handling or 'handlability' can disrupt the fixity of representationalism. Handlability involves our concrete dealings with things in the world, rather than our abstract thinking about the world. It is concerned with the logic of practice. (Bolt 2004, 82)

The logic of this practice, a logic of subverting the readily available hierarchy, displaces humans as better than and above the pigeon, extending to challenge the trope that pigeons are vermin as well as the erasure of past human activities which created the common feral pigeon.

The space of function is predicated upon the usefulness of the loft to pigeons. Although not dictated in the above diagram, this is also a function of spherical influence – assumed positive influence on a regional pigeon population. This population is brought into contact with this single site of care and protection, then this sculptural object is moved into *the space of re-presentation* within the gallery. Within *the space of*

re-presentation, multiple viewers may engage both physically and conceptually with the loft. If a viewer moves from this site and continues to act as a *sphere of translation*, she brings this sense of care into the world she inhabits – a circle may be created. If her new attitude towards pigeons leads to a change in behaviour, becoming an actor of caring, then we may have a reciprocal act between two single beings.

The diagram, *realms of influence* (Fig. 1) works to elucidate some patterns from a chaotic layering of places, spaces, physical objects, nonhuman users, and human viewers. The diagram offers a conceptual reading of the potential of the work or attempts to decode the assemblage and map out a time of potentiality that extends in all directions from the actants in the scenario. This assemblage holds countless possibilities and the ultimate objective of the work of *anthrodecentric art* is to “engender new fields of the possible”, but all the potentialities cannot and will not be accounted for – the possible inversions will play themselves out through each encounter with each viewer and then move out through the world in translated perceptions completely outside of my authorial intention (Guattari 1995, 53). “Through its movements, speeds and actions, the assemblage brutally inverts the strata, bifurcates and engenders new fields of the possible” (Bolt 2004, 43). It is these strata and registers and the chaotic movement between, which Bolt attributes to the generative space. At best, this diagram accounts for a potential, yet chaotic distribution of the encounter.

The diagram also presents a triangulation of objectives – to work with nonhumans and humans, to create a state of chaos, and to generate new perceptions for the human viewer. The sense of chaos allows what-is present in our peripheral vision, yet remaining elusive, to move into the foreground and allow the viewer to look, to see, and to be with nonhumans. “It is easy to lie horizontally or stand vertically, but very much harder to orientate yourself diagonally. Attempt this and you will fall! In the schema of the grid of organisation, creation is the mutant line, the diagonal” (Bolt 2004, 48). As Bolt explains here, the act of looking, seeing, and being are states of relation – this relational state is achieved through the diagonal or mutant line, or perhaps a productive confusion, which creates space in a viewer’s mind for the recognition of differing perspectives (Deleuze & Guattari 2005, 296). As not all potentialities can be predicted, the art encounter happening repeatedly happens anew with each visit, it will never become exhausted. Bolt expands this notion of the artist/viewer/art relationship:

In the process of making art, it is art in itself that is set on its way. Through this dynamic and productive relation, art emerges as a revealing. According to this conception, then, each event or occasioning, involves a unique encounter of inexhaustible complexity that can neither be known in

advance nor predicted. Art figured in this way is neither representation-
alist, nor is it mastery. (Bolt 2004, 53)

From the inexhaustible diagonal, a continuous stream of chaotic movement rejects the exhaustion or completion of this work. The work remains in a continuous state of discovery and generative confusion, disallowing a using up, abusing, and taking as one's own.

There are two immediately available positions for evaluating the potentials of the pigeon loft. The first is concerned with the pigeon experience. I cannot begin to extrapolate or imagine the experience of the pigeon. The second position is that of the human viewer. This is the position of primary concern within the methodology of *anthrodecentric art*. When the artwork has become a functional space in shifting perceptions of a human viewer, from the animal as subjected to the animal as an agency-capable, the site of function of *anthrodecentric art* has begun.

7 The Space of Function

The pigeon loft (see Fig. 2) engages with multiple ecologies, including the University College London and local pest control, that of the gallery, of representation, of human and nonhuman relations, and the imaginary. Within the UCL, not only does the loft offer a sphere of beneficence, but also functions as constructive institutional critique. This constructive critique functions by subverting the removal policies and providing a site of sustenance and care. This may be read as an (un)intentional artistic practice – unintentional as the primary objective is the care of pigeons, and intentional given its eventual translation into a gallery space. Presences, histories, and futures collide in these encounters and unleash multiple potentialities. As Donna Haraway states, “Once again we are in a knot of species coshaping one another in layers of reciprocating complexity all the way down. Response and respect are possible only in those knots, with actual animals and people looking back at each other, sticky with all their muddled histories” (Haraway 2008, 42). While the encounter with the pigeon loft does not include the pigeon looking back to the viewer in the gallery, the viewer will not have to wait long before coming face-to-face with the pigeon outside. This encounter is re-engaging in being-with and enacting new-encountering in relation to the pigeon of London.

To engage with this type of artistic encounter is to engage with reciprocal looking, seeing and being. There is ample opportunity to read the work, the space, the people around oneself – it is not only humans who engage in such a practice. The opportunity for the animal to read the human is omnipresent, which is arguably why most



Figure 2: *The pigeon loft installed (D. Gaietto, 2017–19). This site of the installed pigeon loft is the space of function.*

animals are present, yet elusive – or perhaps remain in our peripheral vision. The ethics of *anthrodecentric art* do not depend on forcefully placing the animal in the visual sphere of the human, this would only reify the sense of human mastery. The task of *anthrodecentric art* is to aid the viewer in recognising what they have not yet seen. John Berger positions our realms of sight: “We never look at just one thing; we are always looking at the relation between things and ourselves. Our vision is continually active, continually moving, continually holding things in a circle around itself, constituting what is present to us as we are” (Berger 1972, 9). *Anthrodecentric art* through enacting

reciprocity expands our presence and allows us to re-encounter others, to understand the potentials of nonhuman agency.

Anthrodecentric art works towards an order of thinking that addresses the limits of knowledge and an acceptance of the unknown. “Seeing comes before words. The child looks and recognises before it can speak. The relation between what we see and what we know is never settled” (Berger 1972, 6). *Anthrodecentric art* does not work to resolve the relation between what we see and know, but to accept this relation and to engage with the potentialities. As stated above, productive confusion is welcome and a generative force within this methodology. The active objects and things are allowed to slip in between states of knowing and understanding, remaining unfixed. This state of unfixity continually pushes against the notion of stability.

Stability is undesired and allows the art work to become fixed formally and conceptually. By rejecting stability, the work moves the materials towards re-enchantment, this often revolves around both intentional and accidental concepts. The intentional concept is quite clearly what the artist has intended. The accidental concept is less identifiable and often emerges through each individual encounter with the theoretical object, bringing the viewer to a state of full presence. This means that the knowledge generated through the theoretical object is inherently unfixed. Triangulating the knowledge of the artist, the viewer, and the artwork in each engagement, there is continuing slippage between boundaries of knowledge, pushing towards the acceptance of limitations. The practice of *anthrodecentric art* and the resulting works are not centred on the artist, but on new ways of thinking and perceiving. There is a constant slippage in each encounter with each individual theoretical object, and the installation as a whole. Halsall suggests the complexity of this interconnectedness affirms the significance of the encounter: “This idea that it is impossible to relate every element to every other one except by virtue of their interconnectedness suggests that complexity is about the unity of the system as a whole which is of greater conceptual significance than the sum of the parts” (Halsall 2008, 151). The whole of this work is maintained through the slippage of elements and an individual’s capacity to accept the limits their knowledge.

This work is an equal engagement with the institution and with the pigeon. The initial institutional engagement was with UCL Estates. The rationale of the institution is predicated on the concerns of its stakeholders. The stakeholders were most concerned with their ability to maintain zero-contact with the pigeon and then that the property not be damaged. My pigeon loft proposal foregrounded its functional use as a non-lethal population control mechanism that would not invite nor allow for any direct contact between the pigeon and the stakeholder(s). However, the design of the loft

does not allow for this function and negates the premise of the UCL Estates agreement. Yet, I do not see this particular misleading as a negative, since herein lies the notion of positive institutional critique. The institution is in no way damaged by the insertion of the pigeon loft – the pigeon is in no way damaged by the installation and use of the loft. Both interested parties are served. The pigeon receives healthy sustenance and shelter; the institution is unbothered and unfettered by effects, offering a friendly gesture to the nonhuman inhabitant. I fill the feeder and clean up the limited amount of detritus caused by the installation. This is a non-price paid for the acceptance of the common feral nonhuman into the realm of the institutionalised human.

The loft does not actively change the lives of the pigeons, it is a simple insertion of food and shelter. These are things pigeons are quite capable of finding for themselves. So though the success of the loft relies on its usefulness to the pigeon, the pigeon does not rely upon the loft. The loft allows for the potential of a new-encounter, giving the continuously present and invisible pigeon a dedicated space – the pigeon remains present, now visible. The loft as a stand-alone work does not move towards revealing the agency of the pigeon as it is inaccessible to the viewer; however, it does allow space for acknowledging the pigeon. This groundwork is built upon through the subsequent gallery installation. The acknowledgement of the pigeon grows into an argument for the pigeon to be recognised as a legitimate labourer on the streets of London, an active *bio-recycling* system.

8 The Space of Re-presentation

The gallery installation of the loft, *the space of re-presentation*, was within the exhibition *The Feathered: an exploration of nonhuman labour* (Fig. 3). This installation was guided by the diagram *the material labour of pigeons* (Fig. 4). The diagram of modes of exchange between art, humans, and pigeons functions as an introductory image to guide the viewer into the installation. The three primary actors within this diagram and the installation are human, pigeon, and art. Each actant is defined through a primary action in the second layer: “consumer,” “scavenger,” “re-purposer”; and then by a resulting effect in the third layer: “rubbish-producer,” “*bio-recycler*,” and “assigner of value.” The installation comprises nine constellations which correspond to the nine points of intersection. This is not a one-to-one correspondence, but a triangulating correspondence of each constellation to no less than three points of the diagram. This triangulation allows for the installation to create and maintain movement once a viewer has crossed the picture plane. This installation is a diagram in space, it is a (re)assembly of relational being, a traversable image.



Figure 3: *The pigeon loft as installed (The Feathered: an exploration of nonhuman labour, D. Gaietto, 2017). This site of viewing serves as the site of re-presentation of 'what is' to viewers.*

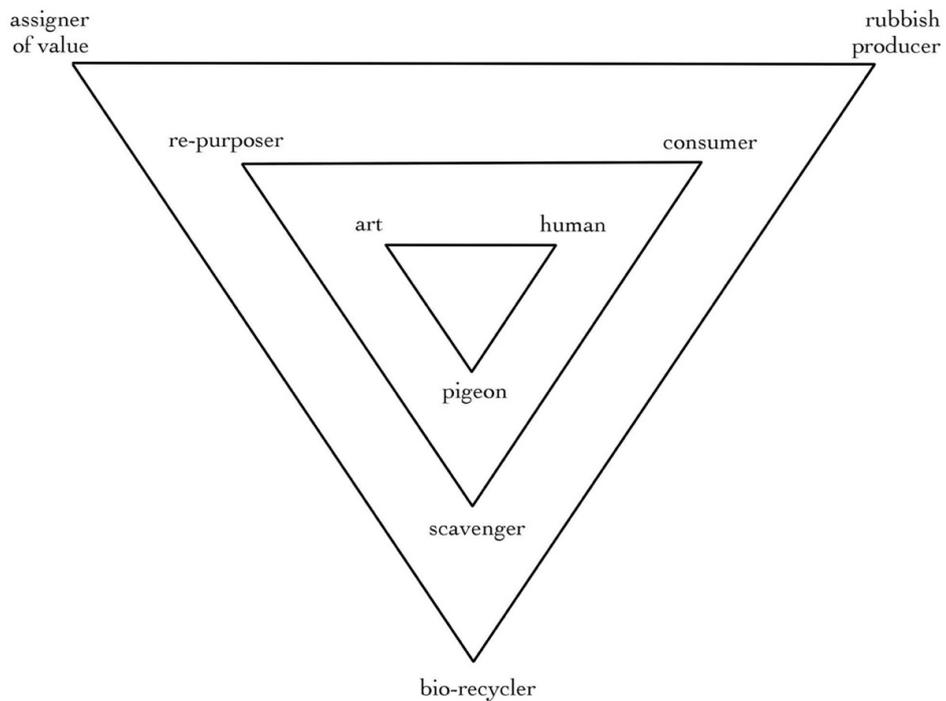


Figure 4: *The Material Labour of Pigeons (D. Gaietto, 2017). A potential mapping of values and re-assignment of value through function and re-presentation.*

Continuing my discussion of “representation,” I present a living female author, Barbara Bolt, discussing Heidegger’s position on more deceased men from the early Greek epoch – a loop of discussion around systems of artistic representation: “In a comparison of early Greek and Modern epochs, Heidegger explains the historical shift in the understanding of what-is. He suggests that in the pre-Socratic Greek world, man is the one who is looked upon by what-is. In the Modern epoch a reversal occurs. Man is the one who does the looking. He becomes the one who looks upon what-is. What-is becomes an object of man’s scrutiny.” (Bolt 2004, 35.) To restate, for the Greeks, what-is was a presence; while for the moderns, what-is is an object of man’s scrutiny. This is a positioning of “man” in power and in the centre of all nonhuman elements by which he is surrounded. This sentiment is echoed in this explanation by Latour once again looped and re-presented:

The “re” of representation suggests that to represent, is to present again. [...] Latour claims that, in western culture there have existed two vastly different regimes of representation. In the first regime – a regime that he relates to early Christian and medieval understandings of representation – the re-presentation is presented anew as if for the first time. It involves presenting again and anew. In the second regime, which he equates with Cartesian understandings of representation, the representation stands in the place of an absent object. (Bolt 2004, 15)

The Cartesian regime of representation as presented here is that of a chasm between the human viewer and the absentee object of the representation. This subject viewing an object relationship is unilateral. This unilateral viewing reinforces the position of “man’s” domination over the “not man”.

The loft in the gallery only attains or relates to a sense of value through the potential or past usage by the pigeon and disallows a unilateral viewing. The relationship to the pigeon, real or imagined, determines the potential worth and success of the loft as a sculptural item. If the loft only speculatively posited a relationship with the pigeon, the work would be incomplete, another imagined space of symbolism in opposition to recognition. The loft recalls a history of co-labour and co-care between the pigeon and the human. The structure brings forth this history into the present. This time-based questioning builds through each installation of a loft, an exponential growth of uncertainty, of un-fixity – translating the temporal into the spatial experience.

Un-fixity, in the language of this research, is the inability to assume the past, present, and future of a thing based upon a singular encounter. This is a comfortable

relationship with the unknown, the unpredictable. This un-fixity also extends to prior knowledge. In this case, a viewer most likely has a prior opinion on pigeons. Even in a talk, “Ask the Birds,” at the Whitechapel Gallery, the three ornithologists on the panel each referred to the pigeon as a “trash bird” (The Curios Society 2018). This relegation of the pigeon to the category of “trash bird” or “vermin” is a common conception, as discussed earlier. One aspiration of the pigeon loft and subsequent exhibition is to question these pre-existing judgements and their foundations. The fixity of this belief would hopefully be challenged in an encounter with the loft, opening a line of questioning of the relations of pigeons and humans. One specific challenge to this question of worth is posited in the form of locating the pigeon as a productive member of society through their *bio-recycling* activities. The un-fixed is closely related to the un-certain, inviting an element of risk into the arts-encounter:

Political ecology does not shift attention from the human pole to the pole of nature; it shifts from certainty about the production of risk-free objects (with their clear separation between things and people) to uncertainty about the relations whose unintended consequences threaten to disrupt all orderings, all plans, all impacts. What it calls back into question with such remarkable effectiveness is precisely the possibility of collecting the hierarchy of actors and values, according to an order fixed once and for all. (Latour 2004, 25)

Much like political ecology, art does not shift attention away from the human pole, but can call into question the fixity of belief. This conceptual movement, or becoming un-fixed, is a key objective in *anthrodecentric art*.

The language of the constellation, in this installation, implies the interrelation of the works within the constellation, as well as the potentiality of the relations between the individuals, and as a whole. Each constellation is composed of multiple parts, and as discussed above can be assigned to correlate with multiple points on the base diagram of the argument of *the material labour of pigeons* (Fig. 4). This works with the relationship between chaos, order, contingency and arbitrariness. Landy discusses the function of such an arrangement:

[...] a constellation is more than simply a collection of stars. It is a set arbitrarily carved out from among the dense cluster on view, deemed to belong with each other and not with the rest; a set, furthermore, on which a shape – perhaps even a meaning of sorts – has been imposed, by a doubly bold act of human intervention into the non-human world.

What before was chaos now comes forth as order; where contingency reigned, now there is a certain internal necessity, as each point of light has to be just where it is for the posited shape to hold. The constellation confers upon each of its members a *raison d'être*, and all by an act of human will. Unlike the theological *kosmos* it replaces, then, a constellation is *an ordering which tacitly admits its own arbitrariness*. (Landy 2009, 116)

The constellations of *the feathered* are a set of human interventions onto a nonhuman world in a physical manner. I am suggesting that the conceptual intervention into the nonhuman world is the *raison d'être* of these constellations. These constellations may suggest any number of meanings, but the underlying suggestion is that the arrangement or ordering is arbitrary in the engagement or reception by the viewer and that the non-linear logic supplies a variety of ways for the viewer to engage in a state of generative chaos while with the works, which can translate to the macrocosm of their engagement with the world external to the gallery.

9 The Sphere of Translation

In the diagram above (Fig. 1), I am using the term translation to denote the artist's mediating actions in working with raw materials to generate an artwork that allows the nonhuman agency to be visible in the gallery and beyond. Jacques Rancière approaches the image through the notion of dissemblance:

In the first place, the images of art are, as such, dissemblances. Secondly, the image is not exclusive to the visible. There is visibility that does not amount to an image; there are images which consist wholly in words. But the commonest regime of the image is one that presents a relationship between the sayable and the visible, a relationship that plays on both the analogy and the dissemblance between them. (Rancière 2009, 7)

From this perspective, the image or re(-)presentation does not need to be authentic to the idea of a thing, but connotative of relations. So there is a need for the authentic to be ethical, unframed by Cartesian representation, and relational – this will allow the work of *anthrodecentric art* to reveal nonhuman agencies. All things under consideration must be understood as already active agents. This agent is active in one or more current networks in which it is irreplaceable. Thus, the work of *anthrodecentric art* is creating another network or system that exists in relation to the pre-existing systems.

This can potentially change not only the re-presentational system in which it is currently involved, but external and connected systems as well.

The following passage from Bolt (explicating Derrida) presents a dual role of translation that allows for “disorderly” or emergent growth:

différance is not a word nor a concept, but rather an economy. [...] Derived from the Latin *differre*, the verb *différer* has two distinct meanings. In one sense, *différer* refers to the action of putting off until later. Derrida notes that according to this meaning, there is implied ‘an economical calculation, a detour, a delay, a relay, a reserve, a representation’. Used in this sense, *différer* involves a temporal dimension. In its other usage, says Derrida, *différer* means ‘to be not identical, to be other, discernible’. Understood in the dual sense of deferral and difference, Derrida argues that *différance* designates a ‘constitutive, productive and originary causality, the process of scission and division which would produce or constitute different things or differences’. Thought in terms of *différance*, representation begins to bud and grow in a disorderly fashion. It becomes incalculable. (Bolt 2004, 31)

This temporal understanding allows the work of art to continue its representational growth beyond the time of original production. The work is dynamic and fluid as Bolt examines Derrida’s position: “For him, the crux of the mutability of representation turns on the axis of translation; the translation from one state to another, from one form to another and so on. Representation is a sending or a sending on (envoi)” (Bolt 2004, 32). The project of *anthrodecentric art* embraces this temporal extension, the non-Cartesian artwork, in terms of success will yield an authentic re-presentation, formed by translation that is informed and open, and that breaks from the Cartesian mode of representation. This scission is a productive force, one which can affect perception and move with a viewer beyond the gallery encounter.

The entirety of the installation is a re-presentation, yet also is not, as it generates its own distinct space. The cultural agency of this re-presentation is the capacity to recalibrate viewers when they re-enter the macrocosm. What happened the first time they viewed a pigeon upon emerging from the gallery? And the fifth or hundredth time? The historical relationship to the pigeon was peripheral, is it now visible? Is the present relation to the pigeon afforded direct and intentional thought? The agency of the pigeon is not predicated on intention; yet, the response of the human viewer of this work requires a transition from the accidental to the intentional.

10 Presented Again

In a final synopsis of *the building of homes*, I turn to paraphrase Timothy Morton: we don't have to claim "to be ecological" – we are ecological, how we deal with this reality is the point of contention (Morton 2018). *A Building of Homes* works to "present as if anew", or *re-present*, the pigeon through an amended logic – the logic of the pigeon as holding social and cultural utility as *bio-recycler*. This logic works through changing registers of value throughout the engagements. While the negative perceptions of the pigeon may lie in a protectionist perspective, valuing property, the loft works to pull perceptions into a space of ecological value with our urban co-habitants. This ecological space is recursively linked to the assigned value of the arts-sphere, the loft as a sculptural object, and the production of nonmodern modernist drip painting with pigeon guano pigment. This is a traversal of registers and functional spaces to re-purpose the assignment of value. While the goal of *anthrodecentric art* is to allow for the revelation of nonhuman agencies, in the case of *the building of homes*, I have taken a more direct approach in re-positioning the pigeon as a *bio-recycler*. This approach was informed by the long history of pigeon-human relations based upon a shared utility of labour and care. This history was invisible, or perhaps in the peripheral knowledge of the viewer, but not impacting the common conception of the pigeon as vermin. In utilising the narrative of shared human-pigeon labour, I constructed an installation which aimed to position the pigeon as a still vital labour force within the landscape of contemporary-urban London. In this arts-encounter, I endeavoured to engage the pigeon through our shared histories, in a reflection on our social and cultural ecologies through spaces of function, re-presentation, and translation. As the space of re-representation was in a gallery, the viewership was limited to self-selecting gallery-goers. This space and viewership is of limited impact, but is a useful grounds for testing reception to the work, and formulating future works which would be publicly accessible with a broader potential impact. The entangled history of the pigeon and the human is not mapped out through linear time but is demonstrated through the continued and interwoven existences of the pigeon and the human through various forms and processes.

The pervasive view of humans as outside of nature has been reified through Cartesian systems of representation that allow for all nonhumans to be positioned as ready for human consumption and mastery. As representation has provided support for this view and allowed it to spread, I am arguing that it is time (or past time) to use alternate or emergent modes of representation that are no longer complicit in this point of view. Art that operates outside of this prevalent mode allows for the revealing of rela-

tions beyond the scope of the human, opening up to more complex relations, revealing nonhuman agencies and affects. This practice-led research offers lines of enquiry into alternate modes of re-presentation and revealing the what-is. Encountering a work or installation of *anthrodecentric art* is not to be taught a lesson, but to submerge oneself into a pool of the unknown and to experience a relational awareness. *Anthrodecentric art* is a practice of process — a process leading towards unimagined ends, towards speculative futures. This is not a process of seeking new forms, but a process of looking again, seeing anew, and being with what-is.

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