

This catalogue was printed in conjunction with the exhibition

Saturday 21st February 8am Elizabeth Street Coburg

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

wah wah wah

Mezzo forte secco

wah wah wah

wa-wa wah wah

wah wah wah

wah wah wah waaahhh

Soft wail, decreasing in pitch

birdbrain
Catherine Clover
9 -26 November 2011
Screen Space

Opening performance

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

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

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

Writers: Giovanni Aloj, Steve Baker, Geraldine Barlow, Rene ten Bos,
Michele Faguet, Clare Halstead, Cathy Lane, Jane O'Neill, Robin Tassie,
Jessica Ullrich and Andrew Whitehouse.

Sound Engineer: The Fantastic Laura B.

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SCREEN SPACE

birdbrain

Catherine Clover

eeeeeeep

hup

ah

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Jane O’Neill
October 2011

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

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

ⁱⁱⁱ In conversation with the artist, August 2011.

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

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