



Fig. 1
Bill Hammond
*Semaphore Cave, Cave
Painting II* 2008
acrylic on canvas
1600 x 2100 mm
Private collection

Fig. 2
Bill Hammond
Giant Eagle 2006
acrylic on canvas
1200 x 1800 mm
Auckland Art Gallery
Toi o Tāmaki,
purchased 2007



Signal Eight Times: Nature, Catastrophic Extinction Events and Contemporary Art

Susan Ballard

In the histories of Western thought, nature has been defined through a set of visual, social and aesthetic codes that to the popular imaginary remain continuous and at a safe distance from the impacts of humanity and technology. Amidst the escalating crisis known as anthropogenic climate change, nature is understood as a human construction that more than ever needs our protection. Despite its pleasures, this understanding is flawed because it relies on an illusionary stable power structure in which humans find themselves at the apex of a great chain of being. A number of contemporary artists are challenging this order of things by addressing nature as a complex of environmental and interspecies relationships. Nowhere is this entanglement more acute than in New Zealand where in the past 750 years over 50 percent of the native land species have vanished. This essay focuses on some contemporary artworks that directly engage this devastation and along the way examines a number of broad contexts (both historical and geographical) in which the defence of nature is challenged.

In the inaugural Sir Paul Reeves Memorial Lecture in 2012 Anne Salmond contributed a key reassessment of the defence of nature.¹ Salmond described a split in Western Renaissance thought between the Cartesian “order of things” and what she described as a vitalist “order of relations.” She argued that Descartes’ model of a “static tiered universe... has put our future at risk” because it results in binary oppositions that lead to concepts of conservation and defence such as “environmental services” and “resource management”: ideas that assume people control the planet via the economic tools they themselves have invented. In the order of things nature is something that humans control and defend.

Salmond contrasts the Cartesian binary model with “the order of relations” as understood by the vitalist thinkers such as Erasmus Darwin in England and Denis Diderot in France. She explains how in the vitalist view oppositions

do exist but the focus and understanding is in the “fertile middle ground.” Salmond outlines how both frameworks travelled to New Zealand in the baggage of the European colonialists.² On the one hand, the order of things contributed a desire for classification and measurement of nature, and on the other, the order of relations found recognition in the knowledge of Indigenous peoples well versed in integrated and dynamic ecosystems.³

Salmond’s careful analysis of the division between things and relations is particularly useful for thinking about species extinction. The order of things leads us towards a distressed conservation ethics, where powerlessness and grief are countered by a determination to “do something.” In this, the order of things also contributes hope; it suggests that by participating in nature, if only in a very small way, we can defend nature against greater harm. The Kakapo Recovery programme in New Zealand is one example of this approach. The programme is fronted by the world’s first “spokesbird” – Sirocco – who was rescued from Whenua Hou (Codfish Island) as a small chick, and despite efforts to return him back to the wild, chose to stay with his adopted human family. With fewer than 130 Kakapo alive today, it was opportune that Sirocco was appointed a recovery ambassador (the result of a partnership between the government Department of Conservation, the advocacy group Forest and Bird, and corporate sponsor NZ Aluminum Smelters). A flightless celebrity with his own Facebook page, Sirocco travels around New Zealand via aeroplane, and tickets to meet him sell out within hours. It sounds like a reasonable activity; one that draws on the progressive conservation ideals of the turn of the twentieth century. As Charles Babcock proclaimed in 1894: “to know a bird is to love him.”⁴ Babcock, one of the originators of Bird Day in the United States, advocated for a combination of moral passion with scientific objectivity, and Sirocco continues this tradition; wherever Sirocco travels he is accompanied by public education programmes. There is a problem though. Sirocco is known and understood in a human rather than a bird sense: to know the bird is to be able to protect the bird from predators human and otherwise. To know the bird is to defend nature. At its core the defence of the Kakapo is a mode of power; a method adopted by humans who believe nature is something over which they can assert both moral and physical control. (In his Facebook updates Sirocco repeatedly stresses that he is not kept in “captivity”).

Sirocco’s success cannot be denied (recently the Oscar winning film *Birdman* drew on the iconography of Sirocco’s celebrity encounter with Stephen Fry).⁵ Yet, in the current climate we clearly need an alternative to this model of defence. By turning to the order of relations, I think we can start to understand the implications of the human animal in the complexes of capital that have been labelled “nature”. Rather than concentrating on saving individual members of individual species a vitalist approach investigates the environment as a system that includes the organism (both human and non-human) as part of an integrated whole. This notion was first suggested by Jakob von Uexküll in

his studies of the “umwelt” or how living organisms perceive and interpret their environment, and was then extended in popular culture by American systems thinker Gregory Bateson, who argued that the basic “unit of survival” was the organism plus its environment. At first it would seem that an approach to species extinction that engages a vitalist perspective is found within the ecosanctuary movement. For example, Zealandia in Wellington, New Zealand considers itself a vital “lifeboat” where numerous species interrelate inside a protective environment. However, its aim to “restore our sanctuary valley to its pre-human state” suggests a desire to return to the order of things (the removal of the human organism). A vitalist understanding of ecologies does not separate the (human) organism from the environmental; instead the environmental is part and parcel of any organism that may occupy it.⁶ Engaging with the uncertainty of our own impacts on the “umwelt” of other organisms means we adopt a way of thinking and doing in line with the order of relations and implies we risk losing control of our abilities to defend, restore, remove, and protect.

An understanding of our entanglement within nature still does not present a solution for how we might understand extinction – that moment when the organism has already gone, and the environment has been irrevocably transformed. Any discussion of extinction needs to be layered upon understandings of evolution. In *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*, Bateson transforms and extends Darwin’s contingent histories that documented the formation of species and questioned the “teleology of nature” (the order of things).⁷ Bateson argues that we must “correct the Darwinian unit of survival to include the environment and the interaction between organism and Environment.”⁸ This is not to say that Darwin didn’t consider the environment a key effect in the processes of evolution, he was certainly a subscriber to the order of relations, but Bateson takes it one step further; by considering the organism and environment together, he suggests, “a very strange and surprising identity emerges: the unit of evolutionary survival turns out to be identical with the unit of mind.”⁹ An evolutionary unit formed from organism and environment means that it is not possible to separate nature from culture. The distinction between Bateson’s notion of ecology and Darwin’s model of adaption through natural selection points us towards an understanding of the order of relations and how we might approach extinction. Darwin argued that the “unit of survival was either the family line or the species or subspecies,” Bateson writes that the “unit of survival is organism plus environment.” He continues: “We are learning by bitter experience that the organism which destroys its environment destroys itself.”¹⁰

To reconsider the position of the human within extinction, it is necessary then to think of vitalist challenges to the defensive modes offered above. To think of the order of relations (when all relations are unevenly distributed events of power and control between human, nonhuman and more-than-human) means that if we are not to defend nature, we need instead to articulate our place as witnesses, activators, and recorders of the species extinction events that

are ever increasing in frequency. Instead of maintaining discrete boundaries between culture and nature, it is necessary to address the “impossible fact that humans are both ‘in’ and ‘of’ nature, both are and are not the outside.”¹¹ That this integrated relationship raises problems for the notion of “being in”, “representing” or “defending” nature is the point, for in the logic of relations we are already a part of nature.

Buller’s Birds

My sense is that we should turn towards home to articulate how we might understand our place amidst the histories and geographies of species extinction. Contemporary Australian and New Zealand artists have looked to New Zealand’s catastrophic bird extinctions as evidence and tragic reminder of the price paid by a country that maintains the order of things through a clean green image. In this instance, engaging with extinction events is not about doing something before it is too late (in some cases defence is no longer even possible) instead it is about revisiting the ‘unit of survival’ and perhaps learning something new about human entanglements in the order of relations.

Bill Hammond’s bird paintings resulted from a trip in 1991 to the drowning land of the Auckland Islands. Three hundred and twenty kilometres south yet still within New Zealand waters, Hammond began the process of documenting the histories of a bird-land filled with sentient beings. He has now produced well in excess of 50 bird paintings, and they are often discussed in metaphorical tones (Figs 1–3). I wonder what happens when we read them as documentation of an extinction event. In *Semaphore Cave, Cave Painting II* (2008, Fig. 1) the birdpeople inhabit a cave from which they gaze across a blinding horizon. Waiting and watching for the tall boats already foretold in their history they prepare for interspecies communication. In the far distance, on a windswept land, one birdperson shakes hands with another in an imitation of previous moments of first contact (General Hobson and Tamati Wāka Nene, Mr Robinson and Timmy). In the foreground a young birdperson walks towards a fire holding a dripping heart, while another reads aloud. Others are undertaking callisthenic exercises, as if in preparation for a long journey. Hammond’s birds have no need for shoes; instead they tattoo themselves with fashionable embroidered Victorian gowns. On the wall someone has scrawled “If you make a mistake signal eight times.” The actions of the birdpeople who live in this cave do not resonate as the final actions of a dying race. Alert and aloof they signal a new stage in the ecological process. The direction of emergence here is important, as it supports the notion that the first colonisers of New Zealand were winged. They signal but are not drowning. Hammond suggests that our first step is to write the histories anew.

The species extinctions in New Zealand are the result of dramatic environmental changes. Aotearoa New Zealand is a country formed from multiple “species, including landscapes, animals, plants, microorganisms, people and technologies” (to relocate Donna Haraway’s motley crowd).¹²

Unlike its closest neighbour with 60,000 years of continuous living human culture, New Zealand “was the last large habitable land mass to be colonised by humans.”¹³ The colonisation of New Zealand by invasive land mammals is marked by two major periods of arrival. Around 1250–1300 the Pacific rat ‘kiore’ and its friend Kuri (the dog) hitched a ride with Polynesian explorers, and in the early eighteenth-century European colonialists and their companion animals began to arrive in droves. In a period of about 750 years New Zealand’s native animal population was halved. What makes the New Zealand extinction event particularly interesting and unusual is the way that:

small species died out at the same time as the megafauna (large birds in this case). Now most of the large species are gone, and small birds continue to be threatened and lost. Indeed, the New Zealand extinctions have aspects of both the continental extinctions (involving mainly large species), and of island extinctions (where small species were the main casualties).¹⁴

There was not much time for a defence of nature, although some valiant efforts were made. For example, lawyer and naturalist Walter Lawry Buller was alert to the decline and, with astonishing determination, shot, ate and stuffed thousands of bird carcasses between 1852 and 1903.¹⁵ Although just a portion of the huge trade in New Zealand birds, Buller’s work resulted in a global distribution of New Zealand bird specimens: 310 were purchased by the then Colonial Museum in 1871 (of which only about 70 remain in Te Papa Tongarewa today).¹⁶ The American Museum of Natural History and Carnegie Museum of Natural History each hold intact collections of over 500 of Buller’s birds each.¹⁷ In the enlarged edition of Buller’s *A History of the Birds of New Zealand* (1880) John G. Keulemans’ drawings offer stunning documentation of these individual species isolated from their habitat. Rather than quantify numbers, they make Bateson’s unit of survival visible. Isolated on a clean non-polluted white page a pair of birds cling to a small selection of foliage; a sample of the organism plus a sample of the environment inside a gaping abyss.¹⁸ Buller and Keulemans were resigned to an unutterable truth and their desire for documentation overruled the consideration of individual deaths. Like any sincere colonialist Buller believed that he was witnessing the last days of not just New Zealand’s native flora and fauna, but also its people. He saw a direct connection between the deaths of birds and Maori, and in 1884 in his opening Presidential address for the Wellington Philosophical Society he quotes Isaac Featherston: “the Maoris are dying out and nothing can save them. Our plain duty as good and compassionate colonists, is to smooth down their dying pillow.”¹⁹

As well as being intimately tied to the colonial enterprise, Buller’s project was also a domestic arrangement where his mother skinned and stuffed birds at their kitchen table.²⁰ The birds themselves could offer little resistance. Hammond, ever alert to the fate of the birdpeople, presents this as a post-apocalyptic scene of horror in *Buller’s Table Cloth* (1994, Fig. 3). Hammond’s work is much more

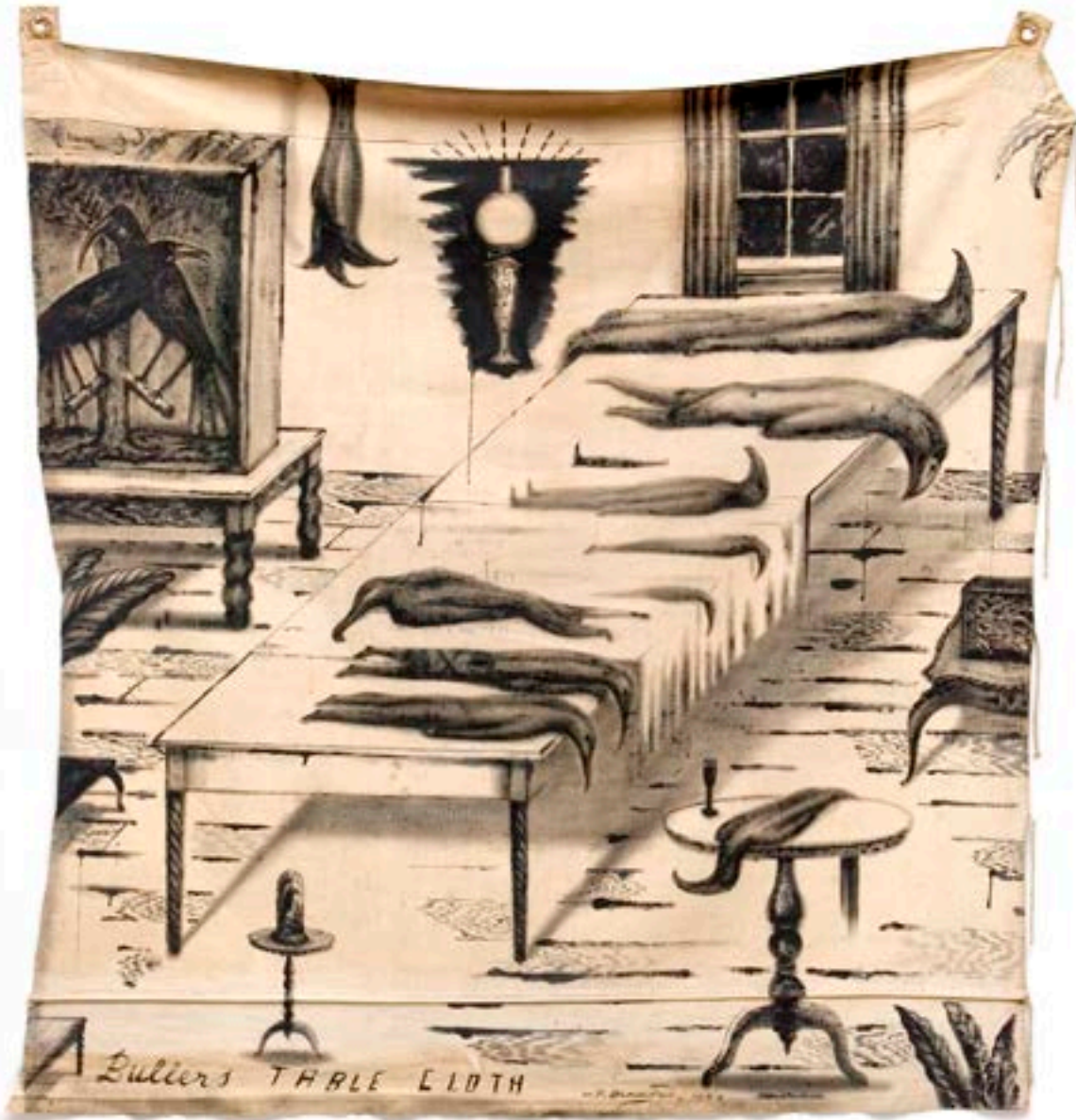


Fig. 3
 Bill Hammond
Buller's Table Cloth 1994
 acrylic on canvas
 1682 x 1675 mm
 Auckland Art Gallery Toi
 o Tāmaki, gift of the
 Patrons of the Auckland
 Art Gallery, 1997

than an illustration of the trauma. On a loose canvas, itself both a skin and shroud, Hammond presents a colonial interior littered with carcasses. From our perch high on the wall we witness Buller's kitchen laboratory. On the left is a completed reliquary housing a pair of Huia, and spread on the bench are numerous large bound and flayed specimens. The human activity has been momentarily interrupted and a glass of wine rests on a side table alongside yet another skin; mimicking a shawl that has been hastily thrown from someone's shoulders. If transformed with colour, the feathered grisaille floorboards would be dripping red. Hammond's work is a picture of interspecies domestic violence that anticipates future atrocities. Unable to prevent the destruction of an earlier time, Hammond documents a colonial mortuary that is at once a new home location for one species and a site of death for the other.

Part of the difficulty of understanding Bateson's unit of survival is the way in which Darwin's laws of evolution encouraged people to think about extinction events in isolation from their location. In particular the trade in New Zealand birds played a significant part in the late nineteenth-century debates surrounding the definitions of extinction that presented ongoing fuel for Darwin's own explorations in other parts of the world. The bird carcasses were organisms at a double remove from their environments yet they enabled extraordinary understandings of environmental ecology to develop. Debates raged about how and why these extinction events occurred, and most importantly, when. As Holdaway says, "New Zealand was one of the first places where debate over extinction was part of public and scientific life."²¹ Much of the discussion was staged along the lines of colonial authority; the bird extinctions were tangled with late nineteenth-century social and cultural ecologies of power, resources and access. In London Richard Owen examined a single thigh bone sent from New Zealand and in declaring it to be "dinornis" introduced the British public to both the Moa and the reality of recent extinction events.²² Questions over whether human or environmental transformation were to blame for the disappearance of the Moa and its smaller companions seemed for the moment unanswerable and appropriate strategies for the defence of nature were not easy to grasp. Researchers on the ground such as Julius von Haast and James Hector, despite their own differences, battled for recognition with the scientific powerhouses in London.²³ Everyone was involved.²⁴

British settler Samuel Butler arrived in New Zealand in 1860 with a copy of Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* (1859) packed in his bags, and found himself in the middle of a verdant and hazardous southern island that would inspire *Erewhon* (1872) his dystopian vision of machinic evolution that formed only part of his own futile and extended argument with Darwin.²⁵ Butler was convinced that there were unconscious knowledges (such as memory) within the individual that could not be accounted for by evolution. Gregory Bateson comments that the battle between Darwin and Butler was "really about 'vitalism'. It was a question of how much *life* and what order of life could be

assigned to organisms.”²⁶ Butler lost, and Darwin’s law that maintained that evolutionary facts could be read within the bodies of individual specimens continued to dominate scientific understandings.

For Darwin species were not eternal essences, instead it was the shifting and ever-evolving individuals understood through random mutation, natural selection and hereditary difference that gave him his greatest insights. The dead New Zealand birds that could only be studied within the cultural ecologies of the museum lent substance to the possibilities first of species and then of their extinction. For Owen though, the cataclysmic disappearance of the bird was direct evidence of the damage left in the wake of human dispersal.

... all hitherto observed causes of extirpation point either to continuous slowly operating geological changes, or to no greater sudden cause than the, so to speak, spectral appearance of mankind on a limited tract of land not before inhabited.²⁷

Life-lines

Owen was aware that New Zealand was a unique environment, and clearly suspicious that the human had completely transformed that environment. But he was challenged by the need to read individual fragments as markers of broader species extinctions. Without setting foot on the land, he was unable to gather the resources to link the signs of the organism (or body) with its life events, and vital environment. In this context Bateson’s unit of survival continues to resonate (even if we feel the need to add into the environment nonorganic and nonliving things). Yet, in the same way we have had to rethink systems discourse in order to embrace the network, since the 1960s global extinction has exponentially accelerated. Is it still possible to even think in ‘units’? Contemporary understandings of species extinction remain caught in this tension between the individual and the collective. The last of a species to die is not just about an individual death but highlights that individual as a representative of a unit of survival. Understanding extinction is about addressing the implications of life as understood outside of the bounded individual, yet remains strangely dependent on the individual survival of the organism as discrete entity. Gilles Deleuze suggests that it is art that can help us think through this tension between life and organism. He writes, “It’s organisms that die, not life. Any work of art points a way through for life, finds a way through the cracks.”²⁸

The extinction of the Huia presents a particular case study, as all individual units of survival have gone and the fact of species death cannot be separated from the action of humans. The potential extinction of the Huia was recognised in the 1880s when Māori chiefs in the Manawatu and Wairarapa placed a tapu on the Huia prohibiting the killing of the birds. Yet, on a royal visit in 1901, the Prince of York was presented with a Huia tail feather on his arrival at

Fig. 4
Hayden Fowler
Call of the Wild i 2007
mounted chromogenic
photograph
dimensions variable
performance
documentation: Auckland
Festival, March 2007
Courtesy of the artist
Photo: Sarah
Smuts-Kennedy



Tama-te-Kapua.²⁹ The Prince placed the feather in his hatband, setting off a devastating fashion trend back in England. By 1907 the Huia were extinct.

There was no debate; human fashion and ritual had irrevocably transformed the Huia’s living environment. Darwin connected the human desire to use adornment for beautification to the activities of the bower bird and the bird-of-paradise; his observation of the bird’s apparently compulsive behaviour led to his formulation of the second maxim of evolution: sexual selection.³⁰ Sexual selection too dominated the social ecologies of a repressed Victorian society. Social and inherited authority gave way to fashion and presented us with an early example of the integrated and vital ecologies of what Felix Guattari would later call Integrated World Capitalism.³¹

In 2007 New Zealand born Australian artist Hayden Fowler staged the installation and performance event *Call of the Wild* (2007, Fig. 4). In an aestheticised street-front boutique, and under the gaze of the passing public, Fowler had a pair of Huia on straggly branches tattooed on his back.

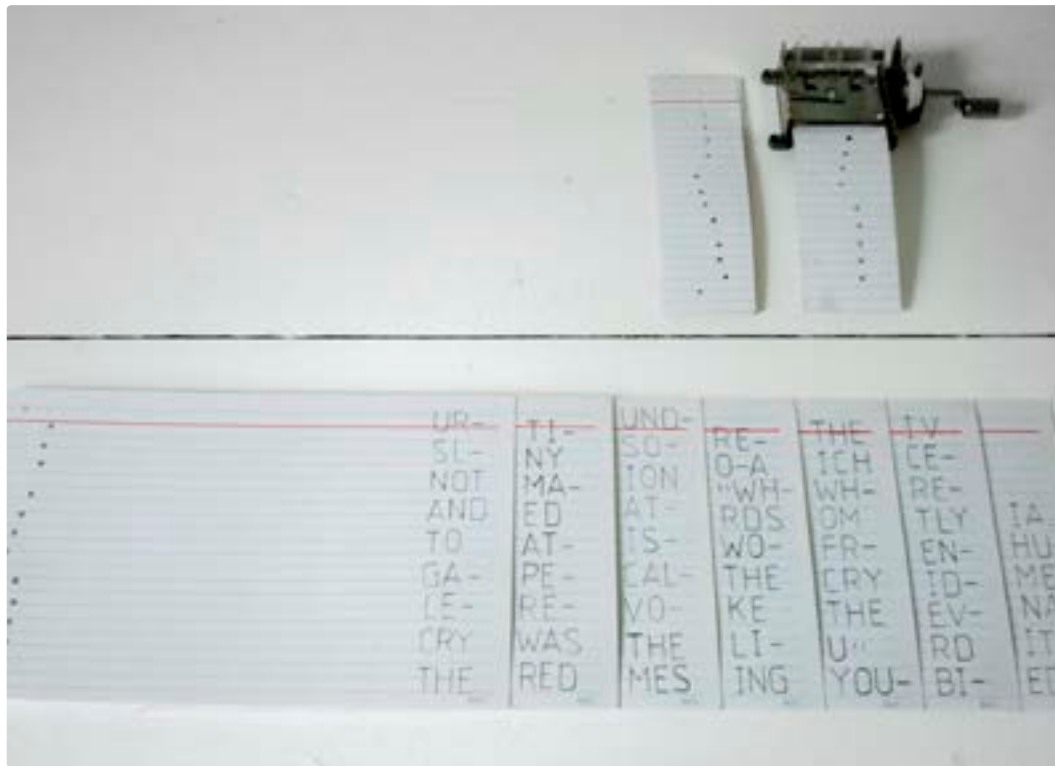


Fig. 5
Sally Ann McIntyre
Huia Transcriptions
2012–13
index cards, music
boxes, installation
dimensions variable
Courtesy of the artist

The choreography of the event took three days, during which human skin was irreversibly transformed into a new organic form. The performance was not about human or bird suffering, nor was it some kind of Frankensteinian reanimation of the bird (as this would presume some gift of life held by the artist). Instead, by offering his own body as a site for mourning and remembrance Fowler holds out a life-line. The blank white surface of the environment, the sterile white clothing and custom furniture highlight the flesh of the canvas upon which the tattoo artist etched his lines. On live human skin, in a purified white tank, the Huia found a way through the cracks.

Despite the fact that many Huia were enticed to their death by human imitation of their call, no extant recording of a Huia song remains. In *Huia Transcriptions* (2012–13, Fig. 5) Sally Ann McIntyre offers the Huia a line of music. In the first part of *Huia Transcriptions* McIntyre replays a 1960s transcription by Phillips of the Huia song (itself a reworking of early Pākehā settler narratives) as part of the early morning chorus in the forest areas of Kapiti Island (now a significant ecosanctuary off the coast of the North Island). This music box transcription of

western sheet music was attached to the trunks of species of trees Huia would have climbed. The irony here is that the actual voice of the Huia was more likely contained in the mimicry of the other birds singing that morning than in the grossly inadequate human records of the Huia unearthed by McIntyre. In the second part of the work McIntyre transcribes the same call onto cardboard index cards enabling visitors to a gallery space the opportunity to play the call themselves via a small mass-produced music box.³² McIntyre does not mimic but with the archivist's reach reintroduces a bird that has lost its voice. Foolish bird.

There is something profoundly beautiful and nostalgic about McIntyre's reanimated voices that move beyond defence and into an ethics of care. In the human languages of affect "shame" is considered immensely disabling.³³ Yet it is a collective shame that McIntyre addresses and in this she engages much more than melancholy.³⁴ In the same way that Fowler gives the birds new flesh, McIntyre offers the birds back a voice; except it is a replication of their own voice travelling across time. Together bodies are being connected and new habitations are being formed. Shame then is found to be active, an affect that connects one body with another. It is an ethico-aesthetic strategy that suggests we occupy an extended ecology. Through Fowler and McIntyre we gain the sense that it is possible to reanimate the dead by suturing together new living skins and old voices.

S.O.S.

To articulate these responses in terms that engage more than a simple defence of nature means again addressing where exactly our responsibility as human beings lies. In the early twentieth century, once they made the shocking realisation that New Zealand birds were disappearing, the humans redrew the space of nature by establishing ecosanctuaries: microcosmic areas of land surrounded by clear felled dirt and fences that burrow underground as deeply as their barbed wire tops soar into the air. In these small protective zones, accompanied by a longing for a time when they themselves were not present, humans tried to regenerate what had been lost, they tried to put the order of things back. Buller was one early advocate of offshore island sanctuaries, but remained confused as to why birds transported to these new environments did not thrive.³⁵ What appeared to be clean and pristine to the human occupier was definitely not a unit of survival for the animals.

In *New World Order* Hayden Fowler revisits this neocolonial idealism with a hopeful space of regeneration where, very literally, nature has taken on the voice of the machine. *New World Order* (2013, Fig. 6) is a video installation presenting a unit of survival: organism plus environment. Here Fowler shows us a new kind of natureculture that includes technology.³⁶ We witness a dull grey environment inhabited by pedigree mutations (chickens who have been bred by human amateurs as much as for scientific need).³⁷ Fowler has gifted these exotic birds new techno-voices that they use to call to one another.

Fig. 6
Hayden Fowler
New World Order
(production still xiii)
2013
colour pigment print on
cotton rag art paper
540 x 750 mm, unique
edition
Courtesy of the artist



These are seductive birds co-produced by both nature and culture.³⁸ But there is no call and response. Just a call, repeated. Mediated and transformed into technological ring-tones the chickens pierce the environment with their search for a mate. Fowler's constructed environment conjures an immediate response from human viewers; in the constant activity this world is full of hope.

The video is of a new world order layered with social and economic relationships. Inside a desolate universe this corner of a petrified forest is an environment remade by the lost voices of species attempting to communicate across space and time. The humans who established this sanctuary (if it ever was one) have long gone and the bush has taken on the patina of the petrified concrete that used to mark the spectacular skyscrapers of the past. The trees are the twisted and rusting steel of towers that appear no longer fit for human or animal habitation. Fowler highlights how Bateson's "unit of survival" is not fixed in time and space. Fowler's birds evolve together with their environment as a constantly transforming ecosystem, and it is a mistake to always think that this is always a positive thing. As Bateson says in *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*: "There is an ecology of bad ideas, just as there is an ecology of weeds."³⁹ Fowler does not cast judgment on the spaces occupied by the chickens, nor on their ritual behaviours. *New World Order* is a work about survival not death.

Eight Legs and No Wings

Fowler and McIntyre offer some way forward for us living amongst the dead. They show how embodying the tension between shame and nostalgia is one possible site for human response. As well as finding their way to the far southern reaches of the earth, threads of vitalism and relationality also strung themselves into the French philosophical tradition and the ecosophical thought of Felix Guattari. In *The Three Ecologies* Guattari draws our attention to the operations of Integrated World Capitalism (IWC) which form within three related ecological registers that he labels: the environmental, the social and the mental. We must, he says "dare to confront the vertiginous Cosmos so as to make it inhabitable."⁴⁰

... In the future much more than the simple defence of nature will be required... and the adoption of an ecosophical ethics adapted to this terrifying and fascinating situation is equally as urgent as the invention of a politics focused on the destiny of humanity.⁴¹

Although he does not mention extinction at this point, the kind of risky inhabitation he imagines encompasses more than individual locations. It has the potential to include other animal inhabitants who are no longer present.

One of the most cited passages in *The Three Ecologies* involves a disjunction between relationships of habitation and existence. Let's call it "the parable of the octopus". Guattari describes a live television show in which Alain Bombard

(a marine biologist known for his 1952 survivalist crossing of the Atlantic whilst consuming only fish and filtered seawater) removes a perfectly healthy ("almost dancing") octopus from a tank filled with polluted water from the port of Marseille and immerses the octopus in a tank of apparently "normal" sea water. In Guattari's words, "After a few seconds the animal curled up, sank to the bottom and died."⁴² What is most depressing about this event is the realisation that Bombard must already have known that this would happen, and that the octopus did not have a chance of survival. This is paralleled by the equally unpleasant likelihood that Bombard had probably sacrificed other octopi in rehearsal for this staged media event.

I find myself returning to the passage and wondering why Guattari retells this televised execution; apart from its clear power as yet another example of humans disrespecting the other animals with which we co-habit. There must be more to it than this. For Guattari the parable of the octopus offers a way to move smoothly between two of the three ecologies that make up his ecosophical method, and demonstrates an alignment between the "monstrous and mutant algae" that have invaded and "polluted" the water and the "degenerate images and statements" that populate our television screens.⁴³ The connection is vital for his unfolding argument that environmental ecologies cannot be understood as discrete from mental and social ecologies. The octopus was another, unnecessary, victim of social ecology. And it is a neat example of the moment when animals, death, and pollution meet the social and cultural brutality of reality TV.

We could leave it there, but there is another part to the story – the part that Guattari does not fully develop. This is a human animal using another living animal to demonstrate something about habitation and adaption and life. It is a demonstration of the order of things rather than the order of relations. For a brief moment in front of the televisual audience was a perfectly happy dancing octopus in a polluted tank. Except, the pollution was NOT pollution to the octopus, it was home.

Bateson's observation that the unit of survival is the organism plus the environment puts the madness of the octopus stunt into focus. If the octopus was already an ecology of many things, this would mean that the organism cannot be separated from its environmental ecology and that the unit of survival for the octopus was not only its body, but also included its water, and for a brief moment its tank, the television studio, the captivated viewers, and Alan Bombard.⁴⁴ In the case of the octopus, the organism that had the arrogance and power to destroy another's environment destroys itself. To talk of the defence of nature is to ignore Bateson's unit of survival.

Finitude

We consider species to be extinct because they no longer exist at this time, in the present. The problem is that nature is not normative, and the kinds of

interactions necessary to address species extinction are never normal. To apply ecosophical understandings based on the unit of survival to events like the death of the last of the Huia, and the death of one individual octopus, results in a definition of a social ecology where differences rather than similarity bind relationships, and where nature cannot be considered separate to the mental, social and environmental contexts it is defined within. The argument starts to accrue. Perhaps Buller dreamed about an island sanctuary that he could transport effortlessly to London, and perhaps these dreams infected the realities of the specimens he kept as pets. Whatever his intentions the birds died. Perhaps Bombard considered this one octopus a necessary sacrifice in the face of the enormity of future extinctions. Both examples suggest it is necessary to increase our ecosophical notion of the unit of survival and connect the organism not only to environment as space but also to environment as time.

In *Drowning Theory* (2011, Fig. 7) Fiona Hall uses deep time to suggest that the reanimation of nature can occur by returning extinct birds to a geological state from which they may emerge anew. Balanced on four delicate legs a long and narrow museum case holds a glass shelf upon which rest an assortment of geological shapes. They seem to be a new species of crystal, or a collection of landscape forms. The objects break the Linnaean rules of classification: it is not clear whether these are specimens of animal, mineral or vegetable. Viewed from above, the cabinet contains small mountains, all with some aspect of symmetry, yet all discretely different. It is below the shelf that the cabinet reveals itself. Suddenly the shapes are painfully real. Frosted glass icebergs mimic exactly the geological forms above and reveal themselves as bird beaks; the small brass identifying labels are actual material descriptors rather than metonymic devices. There is Whēkau, Kakapo, Huia, the enormous Mōa and the tiny Mātūhi. The cabinet is not one of curiosity but is a coffin marked by a careful attention to death. The upper shapes become otherworldly. All are nature, natural. Yet they remain undefined. They are closed beaks without faces, shut mouths embedded beneath an icy surface.

The Zealandia Drowning Theory was a risky and short-lived hypothesis (first proposed in 2001 and discredited by 2012) from a group of University of Otago scientists that questioned whether New Zealand was a geologically constant landmass. They posited that New Zealand emerged from under the sea only about 23 million years ago, and thus no living organism (the lack of land mammals was a key piece of evidence) native to New Zealand could possibly have inhabited these geologically new and certainly shaky isles.⁴⁵ Rather than a drifting “Moa’s Ark” of small isolated islands with their own unique ecosystem of flora and fauna, the inhabitants of New Zealand were suggested to be recent emigrants from Australia.⁴⁶ Hall does more than illustrate the theory. *Drowning Theory* offers the possibility that perhaps these birds may emerge again. Under the crust of the earth, where they have all the time in the world, the birds wait. It is, in Guattari’s words, an “environment in the process of being reinvented.”⁴⁷



Fig. 7
Fiona Hall
Drowning Theory 2011
polyurethane, vitrine
1800 x 2500 x
400 mm
Edition of 5 + 1 A/P
Courtesy of the artist
and Roslyn Oxley9
Gallery, Sydney

Parallel Landscapes

The sensation begins to emerge that European humans have never been any good at the order of relations. When this species meets other species, it does not always go well. In the contemporary art works discussed so far newly animated organisms are removed from their usual spatial locations and step outside of temporal distinctions. Fowler, McIntyre, Hammond and Hall suggest a next step in our understandings of ecosophy, and offer new material environments within which bird species can potentially live. Fowler and McIntyre supply new animation to the voice and skin of birds, whilst Hall and Hammond encapsulate the birds in a floating geological time. In their hands the environment is no longer bereft, and the unit of survival is transformed.

Where does this leave the humans? Outside of the order of relations it may be that we are the last bastion of nature. Current economic and social structures mean that concerns for biosecurity and the Romantic model of the picturesque tend to frame any attempt to “get back to nature”. In *The Middle Landscape* (2009, Figs 8–11) Stella Brennan presents humans with one last chance to



Figs 8–11
Stella Brennan
The Middle Landscape
2009
Courtesy of the artist

TOP LEFT
installation view:
Starkwhite, Auckland
tents, video, pine bark
dimensions variable

BOTTOM LEFT
installation (detail)
tents, video, pine bark
dimensions variable

TOP RIGHT
installation video still
tents, video, pine bark
dimensions variable

BOTTOM RIGHT
Installation view: *Every
Living Kakapo* (detail)
tents, video, pine bark
dimensions variable

lose themselves within this familiar definition of nature.⁴⁸ In three brightly coloured tents small events take place. In the first, an auger bores into the ground, heaving and shuddering, the earth is displaced and new fences are established. To watch it we lie on our stomachs, sensing the vibrations through the length of our bodies. In the second tent is a list of the names given to every living Kakapo (*Every Living Kakapo*, 2009), girls on one side, boys on the other: Bella, Flossy, Hinemoa, Boomer, Sirocco and their friends are etched into the thin nylon walls.⁴⁹ And in the third, a melancholic video plays. A subtitled narrator guides us through constructed nature as witnessed on a journey across Taranaki. At first it is a travel monologue familiar to anyone who has driven by car through the lush North Island bush. The curve of the lens mimics the arch of the trees and reinforces the circular separation of space into either protected nature or friable land by the surveyors who used the mountain itself as a compass.

Brennan narrates the disappearance of New Zealand's birdlife at the same time as offering humans a protective shell from which they can understand the kinds of sacrifices that are necessary for the continuation of our evolutionary story. Nylon walls do not prevent their contents from leaking. Sounds merge in the open space and images flicker in the half-light. These tents are not sanctuary islands or rafts. The aesthetic of the nature documentary, the hushed voice over and the lingering close up enable Brennan to highlight how the romantic desire to preserve nature via the order of things contributed to a total transformation of the ecology around us. The grainy rescreening of the footage via medical, televisual and video screens distances it, giving a microscopic insect eye view. The way to see all is to become very very small.

At one point our traveller encounters an abandoned geodesic habitation dome. Who or what might gain occupancy is left unresolved, as is the exact purpose of the human-sized structure. The camera seems to hover around a tree creating another kind of eye through which insects and birds can watch us. These are the ruins of a commune, of a space where humans got back to nature. We peer through the perfectly aligned triangles and listen to the bees; the last remaining occupants of this site who have survived in the absence of humans. The video is fragmented, hidden beneath gauze as if viewed through mesh security screens. And then we are in a motel, paying for an evening's temporary habitation. And there is another octopus, being watched.

On another channel
Is a Japanese nature documentary
An octopus hanging mid current
Furls itself up,
While a little porthole of peering faces
Is blue screened into
the corner of the picture,

Their loud amazement at this wonder
Superimposed on a blank bit of ocean
The scene is a composite version of a familiar trope.⁵⁰

This time the octopus is left to go about her business and it is the viewers who are immersed in a green-screened tank. Brennan traces layers of mediation: the Japanese nature documentary; the green-screened audience who model appropriate responses; the television in the corner of a musty motel in central New Zealand; the eye of the camera filming the television. These are all nature (the "umwelt" of the video). Rather than mourn the loss of a pure concept, Brennan documents a world where we are learning to live with multiple and strange creatures whether biological or machinic. It seems brutal, but this is what Samuel Butler warned us of when he invoked the evolutionary powers of machines.

Survival

Brennan's should be the final work in this narrative of cross-species engagements as it offers a non-judgemental statement about the impossibility of getting it right, and the need to keep asking questions of ourselves as active players only temporarily sheltering within our chosen environments. However it is difficult to finish this discussion without returning to the birds. The 5th of July 2014 marked 100 years since the last sighting of a Laughing Owl or Whēkau in the wild. Surviving the first decades of the human invasion, in 1914 the last recorded Whēkau was found dead on the side of a road in Canterbury. In the bird hall of the Canterbury Museum Sally Ann McIntyre commemorated the occasion with a new work: *A Memorial Silence for Sceloglaux Albifacies, on the Centenary of its Extinction* (2014, Fig. 12). Standing in companionship with many other silenced animals, McIntyre recorded the bird as it perched in its final home.⁵¹ Marking the same event from the other side of the world Hayden Fowler staged the new work *Your Death* (2014–15, Fig. 13). In a pure white geodesic dome built into a Berlin street window Fowler had a Whēkau tattooed on his chest.⁵² This Whēkau is in flight, resting against the soft surface of Fowler's body, the bird scans the environment around him. His feet hang relaxed and ready, his head is bowed watching, there is no mouse, no tree, just the image of a living bird.

When Owen began his research on Moa bones, and Buller's global trade in native bodies was in its infancy, nature was a newly redefined concept that seemed to raise logical and oppositional definitions. In these most recent works Fowler and McIntyre offer a new way to engage rather than defend nature. The anniversary of the death of the Whēkau is about much more than a record of romance and nostalgia. McIntyre adds sensory presence to the intangibility of the scientific catalogue. Fowler's body is much more than a canvas for an illustration, as the needle embeds its ink within his skin, he becomes bird, a conjunction of living bodies.⁵³ McIntyre's silence and Fowler's body return us



Fig. 12
Sally Ann McIntyre
*A Memorial Silence
for Sceloglaux
Albifacies, on the
Centenary of its
Extinction 2014*
performance and
recording, 10 mins
Courtesy of the artist

to the ideological power structures behind the processes of museum collections and species extinction. Once again it is the machinations of integrated world capitalism, and human social and metal ecologies that have contribute to the death of species.

At the end of *The Three Ecologies* Guattari makes his plea for a future ecology that articulates not only new forms of subjectivity outside those recommended by the mass media, but also a radical reconsideration of what it means to be part of a society. These are his mental and social ecologies. It is the third ecology I have focused on here: the “environment in the process of being reinvented.”⁵⁴ Guattari’s environment is a process always in the middle, one in which the order of relations is infinite and within which anything is still possible. It is clear that in this definition Guattari is drawing on Bateson. And it is also Bateson’s approach that has opened up this narrow study of extinction events, and enabled me to think of their ongoing significance for our understanding of the great risks we face today. In “Pathologies of Epistemology” Bateson writes:

Ecology, in the widest sense, turns out to be the study of the interaction and survival of ideas and programs (i.e., differences, complexes of differences, etc.) in circuits.⁵⁵

The only way we can know another species (in circuits) is to acknowledge and imagine the full range of interrelations possible with that organism and their environment – their differences and our differences. Equally, it is essential we understand that organisms are never singular. Donna Haraway articulates this as a problem of habitation when she opens her book *When Species Meet* with an extended passage thinking about the shifting deaths of the various organisms that form the being that is her body.⁵⁶ It all seems strangely normal. Haraway encourages us to start thinking about the kinds of natural environments these mundane spaces we call bodies need, in order to get on with the business of being, in this world. This is difficult enough, and as continually and partially reforming human bodies it is hard to imagine if we have anything more we can offer to other animals who may be struggling with the contemporary situation they find themselves within.

In New Zealand the risk is that we continue to think of these birds in isolation. I wonder what happens when we further extend the ethico-aesthetics of capital towards a consideration of the colonial environment of local extinction events and directly engage with the temporal disjunction that remains after a species has vanished. Without acknowledgement of shifting and changing environments we continue to subscribe to the order of things. The artists discussed in this essay suggest an alternative: that the birds are already and have always been embedded in environment, even in their death. These works stage small moments of encounter, moments of time and of space, which remind us that the survival of ideas is intimately tied to our experiences of

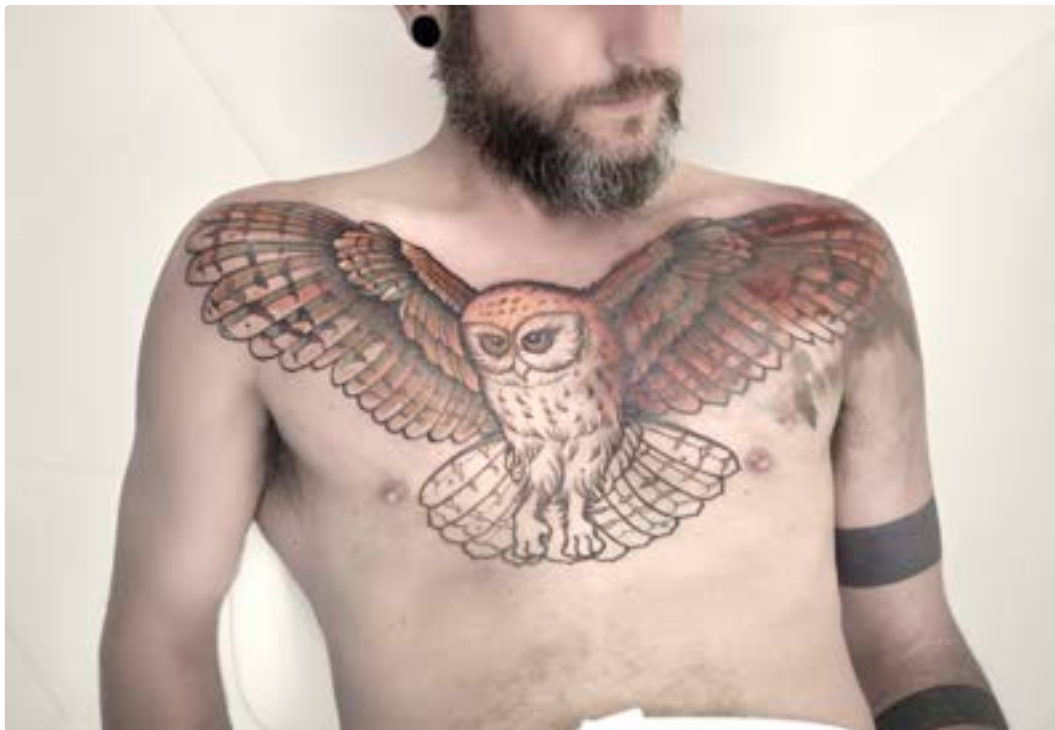


Fig. 13
Hayden Fowler
Your Death 2014
performance
documentation:
Michael Reid Gallery
Berlin, June 2014
Courtesy of the artist

ourselves in relation to the environment, that in turn, makes up our unit of survival. We are presented with spaces where relics are inscribed onto a body or housed within museum cases and times where the scent of an old tent surrenders itself to the spaces around it. In each work extreme and unthinkable events begin to generate new sensations. Together they offer a future ethico-aesthetic; the ephemerality of their actions is risky, yet together they suggest we embrace much more than the order of things.

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- Salmond's essay gives a fantastic articulation of the ways in which European ideas of relations (to which I would add the thought of Deleuze, Spinoza, Bergson) connect to Maori concepts of whakapapa and logics of "negotiation and exchange."
- Her discussion can also be connected to the influential work of Carolyn Merchant who has demonstrated how the order of things (what Merchant calls "the hegemony of mechanistic science") conflated women and nature in order to control both. Carolyn Merchant, *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology and the Scientific Revolution*, (New York: Harper Collins, 1990).
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- See Sirocco's twitter feed: <https://twitter.com/spokesbird/status/569972646932299777>
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- Levi Bryant, *Onto-Cartography: An Ontology of Machines and Media*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 252.
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- Quoted in Felix Guattari, *The Three Ecologies*, (London and New York: Continuum, 2005), note 1, 70.
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- Guattari, *The Three Ecologies*, 66-67.
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- Guattari, *The Three Ecologies*, 42-43 and note 36, 84.
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