Negative Capabilities (Dawn Chorus)
Andy Holden & Peter Holden

13th November – 19th December 2026

Negative Capabilities is an exhibition by Andy Holden centred on a film made in collaboration with his father, the ornithologist Peter Holden. Developed over fifteen years and adapted from a series of live performances first presented at Tate Britain in 2011, the central film of the exhibition, *Lecture on Birdsong* (2011–2026), follows six walks undertaken within a one-mile radius of the Holdens' home, from the end of winter through spring. The film explores the persistent human desire to understand and translate birdsong while acknowledging the limits of that endeavour.

Drawing on tradition of nature writing the film unfolds as a dialogue between father and son while tracing and questioning the process of learning. Peter Holden, one of Britain's most respected ornithologists and educators, teaches Andy to identify birds through sound rather than sight, revisiting knowledge that Andy never fully absorbed as a child. As they move through hedgerows, churchyards, riverbanks and farmland, discussions of territory, ecology, mimicry and evolution unfold alongside Romantic poetry, classical music and the history of ornithology. The work moves from a subjective response to birdsong towards increasingly sophisticated methods of scientific analysis, only to encounter the same impasse: birdsong can be studied, described and reproduced, but never fully translated.

The exhibition also presents a series of screen-prints documenting each public iteration of *Lecture on Birdsong*. Produced over the course of the project, the prints function as records of performances that have gradually evolved into the film. Together they chart the development of the work across fifteen years, from lecture-performance to cinematic form.

Alongside the film and prints, Holden presents *Auguries (Dawn Chorus)*, a group of sculptural works derived from the wave forms of the songs of the birds discussed in the film. Produced as turned wooden forms and displayed on reclaimed railway-sleeper plinths, the sculptures translate acoustic information into physical objects. Neither illustration nor scientific model, the sculptures occupy a space between notation, ornament and artefact. Resembling modernist toys, devotional objects or mechanical components, they give material presence to sounds that are fleeting and many of which are rapidly disappearing.

Lecture on Birdsong provides a framework for considering how our understanding of the world is shaped by both inheritance and experience, while showing how learning is inseparable from the environments in which it takes place. The exhibition considers what remains beyond interpretation and what might be gained by paying closer attention to the non-human voices that surround us and can be understood as an extension to *Natural Selection*, Andy and Peter Holden's major collaborative project commissioned by Artangel in 2017. Presented at eight museums across the United Kingdom and subsequently restaged at Tate St Ives and the Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo, *Natural Selection* established an expansive dialogue between contemporary art, ornithology and family history. Works from that project are now held in the collections of Tate, Bristol Museum & Art Gallery, Leeds Art Gallery and numerous private collections.

We would like to thank Museum Voorlinden for their generous loan of artworks for this exhibition. The exhibition will tour to MK Gallery, Milton Keynes in 2027.