

P I N K
S N O W

Green Crow

Richard Frater, Scott Rogers

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Inspired by our mutual love for avifauna, this exhibition focuses on one particularly enigmatic bird. Endemic to the mountainous regions of the south island of Aotearoa New Zealand, kea are the world's only alpine parrot species.

Along the temporary wooden rail of the exhibition space we have placed parts of cars and other synthetic objects—like camera components and food packaging—that have been modified. In one corner rests the remnant of a mudguard torn from behind the wheels of an automobile. We foraged these materials directly from sites where the birds are known to come into contact with humans. Considered to have the highest intelligence of any bird, instinctively curious, and actively collaborative, kea also have a reputation as entertainers and tricksters. Seen as pests for decades, kea are now endangered due to the impacts of settler colonialism (population culls, introduced predators, heavy metal poisoning, habitat loss etc.).

Today, kea are a protected species and considered taonga (treasured, sacred). The birds are also important to the branding of New Zealand as an ecotourism destination. This shifting status comes with its own emergent challenges. Within their habitat, kea will attend to parked vehicles and property, tearing at, for instance, soft rubber window seals, as a form of discovery and play. This tendency for the birds to challenge human conventions strikes us as significant. Keas' playful / destructive interactions simultaneously anthropomorphise and 'other' the bird within human imagination.

A series of collages distributed on the floor draw attention to the bill of the kea. The bird's specialised beak is one of their signature adaptations, allowing them to pick up, turn over, pry open and tear apart objects in their environment. Affectionate creatures, kea are regularly grooming each other, stroking cheeks and interlocking their beaks. During the period when the birds were culled, the beaks were collected to facilitate a transaction: sheep farmers and other sympathetic allies were remunerated by the colonial government for each kea they terminated.

In the second room is a sculpture that doubles as a functional playground for kea. Based on existing structures, kea playgrounds are intended to draw the attention of the birds away from direct human encounters, minimising the potential for them to be killed or injured while interacting with automobiles. The ambiguous nature of these structures as conservation infrastructure and unintended readymades drew us to their possibilities as artworks with functional potential. The objects in this specific playground all derive from the outdoor tourism industry—a contemporary driver of kea-human relations.

The photographic images in the exhibition reinforce the social traits and material traces we want to foreground. A stamp and a photographic diptych capture young kea as they play and investigate the roof of a car. A single historic image—a sheep carcass supposedly killed by kea—rests along the wooden ledge; a call back to human misunderstandings of kea behaviour at the core of their currently threatened status. For us, the exhibition is an encounter with the complex identity and unfolding singularity of the kea—a kind of intimate avian forensics that eludes completion.

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