

in the
Air

In the Air

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In the air.
An expression with many meanings.

Above us in the air: sky, space, atmosphere.
Something is in the air: palpable, mood, tension.
Something hangs in the air: uncertain, unresolved, impending.
Something is torn apart in the air: connections, present, safety.
Something flies in the air—wings flutter.

in the Air is the title of a group exhibition at the Heidelberger Kunstverein, bringing together ten artistic positions. The show delineates the multifaceted interpretations of the winged creature as a motif. It does not address the bird as an animal species per se, but rather presents it as a projection surface, an echo, and a cognitive model, opening up inferences about contemporary societal conditions. It is a symbolic space of resonance between the observation of nature and social analysis, raising questions of power, care, violence, and coexistence.

The animal surpasses humanity in its evolutionary capabilities—a state that has long inspired desires and driven scientific endeavour. Technology is enlisted to push the boundaries of comprehension and imitation.

Thus, during videographically documented nocturnal forays, the artist Joshua Bonnetta explores the denizens of the forest in *Arc of Night*. As a figure of fear and imagination, the nocturnal bird appears here as a bearer of narratives and inner images. Through digital birdsong synthesis, Sasha Iliashenko probes animal communication in *Chirp, Chirp, Trill, Warble*.

Although artists and scientists alike successfully approach the animal, the inescapable realisation remains that, despite technological aids, the animal subject will ultimately remain uncomprehended and autonomous.

Conversely, in human custody, the animal frequently loses the autonomy of its existence. Domestication goes far beyond affectionate care; it entails externally directed actions and extensive control over the animal's life. In her video work *SSRC*, Yalda

Afsah sheds light on a highly specific case of animal husbandry: the pigeon breeding of the so-called Pigeon Rolling Clubs, wherein these winged creatures are carefully bred and trained by individuals to partake in competitions.

The history of the corporeal appropriation of animals stretches far back: Leonie Kellein's transmedial installation *A Wing Beat! A Wing Beat!* recounts the history of pigeon photography, its enduring utilisation to this day, and its role as a model for military purposes—flight as a channel of communication, surveillance, and technological appropriation.

Appropriation, as a conceptual subterfuge, invariably necessitates a form of hierarchising division between the familiar and the foreign. In Clara Spillaert's sculptures *Nest* and *Wedding Dove*, the artist negotiates the segregation of pigeons in everyday urban life and their forced integration into human traditions.

The desire for mastery is mirrored in TaeHwan Jeon's video work *Death Star* beneath the guise of preserving an aesthetic ideal: the work presents glimpses of the craft of taxidermy, the preservation of animal remains. Mario Urlaß's sculptures *Hybrid* discuss—particularly through their materiality of dried chicken feet—the industrialisation of animal bodies.

Driven by a protective intent, human intervention in avian life is depicted in the photographs taken during walks by Hendl Helen Mirra—birdboxes in the forest.

With further fragments of the green environment, the categories of inside and outside, of culture and nature, are tentatively dissolved within the exhibition space of the Heidelberger Kunstverein. Instead, the presence of an intra-institutional ecological system is simulated. Particularly instrumental in this regard are Henrik Håkansson's works *A Painting for a Bird*: large-scale canvases affixed with a branch to serve as a landing perch for birds, dispersed throughout both the interior space and the garden of the Kunstverein.

The group exhibition's semblance of an aviary is reinforced by the continuously resounding bird calls from Louise Lawler's sound installation, *Birdcalls*. In the spirit of feminist Institutional Critique, Lawler questions the categorisations, divisions, and hierarchies of the art world.

The exhibition unites various generations of contemporary art. Through diverse media—film, sculpture, installation, painting, and photography—they approach the discourse of their present day. They propose a departure from notions of hierarchy and standardisation, offering alternative perspectives and the possibility of an egalitarian coexistence of living beings. In this context, what unites them within the selection of the exhibition is the use of the winged creature as a central vocabulary in their artistic language. They address something *in the Air*—a present: unpredictable, highly charged, indeterminate.

Fabienne Finkbeiner

Yalda Afsah
SSRC, 2022

Looking towards the sky, men shade their eyes from the glaring light with hands, caps or sunglasses. The camera initially focuses on individuals, then couples, until finally a whole group of men and boys comes into view. The gaze is directed steeply upwards—a solitary pigeon circles against the blue horizon. A second one briefly grazes the edge of the picture. Another cut, a whole flock is in flight. The birds' plumage is a colourful mix: from deep black and pure white to brown or grey speckled patterns. After a few flight curves, individual birds suddenly seem to falter. They drop out of their flight path, but recover after a brief tumble. The group of men follows the action with concentration, visibly moved by the events in the air.

One of the men provides information over the phone. He informs his counterpart that they are currently at 107. He is apparently talking about the pigeons' flight formations, which are evaluated according to a points system. The camera points upwards again towards the flock of pigeons. An animal suddenly plummets into the depths. Its fall is not linear; instead, the body twists and circles around its own axis. With widely spread wings the pigeon finally catches itself and continues on its way in a controlled manner. Shortly afterwards, several birds perform this manoeuvre parallel to each other in exactly the same manner.

These movements are trained tricks, the so-called "pigeon rolling"—a behavioural pattern of the animals that remains unexplained to this day. The peculiarity can be traced back to the 16th century. It is suspected that a genetic defect in the "Birmingham Roller" breed triggers the somersaults in flight. However, the theory that the birds perform somersaults and pirouettes for their own amusement is still considered plausible among breeders, as they continue flying undeterred afterwards. A fitting parallel to the filmed individuals, who breed the pigeons for tricks that perhaps lead to their mutual enjoyment.

The video shows the Roller Pigeon Club in Los Angeles County, California. In a suburban everyday life characterised by gang-related crime and high murder rates, the fixed daily routines of shared enthusiasm create spaces in which men experience a self-determined community. An affectionate care and devotion develops between human and animal—forms of interaction to which social reality and their prescribed gender roles barely allow the men access.

In Yalda Afsah's video work, we now see pigeons crowded together on the ground, apparently in a pen. Their plumage shimmers in the typical purple. They crowd around something: a hand offering them food. They eat familiarly and calmly. Then a large hand professionally grabs one of the animals, opens its wings and inspects it. On the audio track of the film, the man's voice begins to talk about his experiences with pigeon breeding, whilst the print on his shirt becomes visible: SSRC.

The club member talks about his passion, inherited from his father, as a valuable occupation that keeps him out of trouble. Since childhood, he has spent several hours a day interacting with his birds. Even as young animals, he accustoms them to his presence and raises them with regular physical proximity. Despite this closeness, the film's flight scenes contain a visualisation of the distance between the animal and human protagonists, which arguably also feeds on a reverence for the fragile, flying body. The animal is free in flight, yet simultaneously subjected to human domestication. Afsah's work repeatedly calls for questioning common opinions.

The demands of the pigeon-rolling competition require regular training, strictly controlled body measurements, and well-kept plumage from the pigeons. Injuries or even fatal accidents during falls or falcon attacks during the vulnerable flight exercises are no exception. To care for injured or sick animals, their owners acquire the necessary knowledge and skills. In the end, the winner is the one whose flock of birds performs the most somersaults synchronously and surpasses the flight of the

opponents in length and quality. Several dozen cars drive from house to house, from pen to pen. The "kits"—as the pigeon teams are called—fly for twenty minutes whilst the men observe them from the private backyards or front gardens of their club mates. A togetherness with others, humans and animals. Afsah does not suggest a return to something past in her work, but rather puts alternatives up for debate. In particular through the subsequent editing of the audio tracks, the amplification or deliberate removal of individual fragments, she creates an alienated—but not judgemental—staging. In its attempt at videographic neutrality, her work is free of didactic specifications, leaving room for ambivalence and disparities.

Vitae

The German-Iranian artist Yalda Afsah was born in Berlin in 1983, where she currently lives and works. She studied at the Berlin University of the Arts, the Burg Giebichenstein University of Art and Design Halle, and the California Institute of the Arts. Since April 2024, she has held a professorship for Time-Based Media at the University of Fine Arts (HFBK) in Hamburg.

Footnote

Amir, Fahim: "ALL EYES ON US. Gladiatoren der Schönheit in South Central, Los Angeles" and Dietrich, Maurin: "Every word was once an animal", in: Ibid. (eds.): Every word was once an animal (catalogue accompanying the exhibition at the Kunstverein München, 15 January—3 April 2022), Berlin: DISTANZ Verlag, 2022.

18 May 2024. A night vision camera captures a gently sloping meadow. The warm body of a figure with a backpack appears in bright white, passing along a narrow path, past a wooden hut towards the towering edge of the forest in the background. A hare crosses the field in long leaps.

Superimposed text passages provide a diary-like insight into the present and digressive thoughts of the wanderer; the Canadian interdisciplinary filmmaker and sound artist Joshua Bonnetta, seen during his nocturnal roaming around the Nantesbuch estate in Upper Bavaria. Commissioned by the Nantesbuch Foundation for Art and Nature, Bonnetta ventured into the summery moors, meadows, and forests surrounding the foundation's second location in Nantesbuch from May to September 2024, and specifically approached non-human life with camera and microphone as well as placed recording devices. In the resulting film work *Arc of Night*, the forest edge now dawns ever further upwards. Along with this is his attempt to escape civilised hustle and bustle and its acoustic signature—consisting of car traffic and military flight exercises. The apparent fulfilment of his retreat is reflected in the evening hours in a colourful aurora borealis. An event brought about by the largest solar storm in decades—predicted long in advance in the artist's media-rich everyday life.

A time-lapse recording spanning hours shows how the hues flow into and around each other in the sky from blue to purple to pink and green, how the stars migrate, fall, and burn up, whilst delicate clouds pass by. Romantic impressions for which Bonnetta chose an isolated colour shot in his black-and-white work—a dream state that becomes a tangible truth or perhaps an eclipsing illusion?

Peripheral vision taught Bonnetta an anecdotally interwoven childhood encounter with an astronaut—a first reference to the cognitive potential of the visual periphery.

Precisely there, outside the central line of sight, twilight flying creatures such as bats reside. In this context, Bonnetta brings up the biologist Lazzaro Spallanzani and his animal experiments from 1793. Spallanzani dedicated his research to the question of how bats orient themselves in open space in the dark. To fathom this, he used gruesomely violent methods, first depriving them of their sight and, in the second series of experiments, their hearing. He discovered that they only “went blind” through deafness. He could not confirm his assumption of a still unknown sensory power for spatial orientation before his death in 1799.

Over a century later, “Spallanzani's Bat Problem” was solved with the discovery of echolocation. Donald Griffin, a student at Harvard University, detected frequencies outside of human hearing in captured bats: ultrasound.

The resulting “seeing through sounds” simultaneously poses the question of the human capacity to comprehend the consciousness of animals, such as bats—as explored by Thomas Nagel in his essay “What Is It Like To Be A Bat?”, among others.

In this context Bonnetta reflects on his own position and perception of non-human beings. Do they appear to him as a “what” or a “who”? To what extent is it sensible (to harbour the desire) to enter their world? The encounters with unpredictable weather changes, even when using state-of-the-art technologies, as well as the animals of the forest—in particular an owl defending its nest—evoke in him an awareness of the potential dangers to his physical well-being. The poetic description of a group of trees brings to light his unexpected, repeated encounter with a resident tawny owl. An event that was always announced by the appearance of an owl—associations with prophetic signs suggest themselves. Whilst Bonnetta builds an increasingly clear relationship with the animals—they become accustomed to him, his presence and return—his perception as well as his language simultaneously shift: from an initially scientific-theoretical one to an increasingly spiritual one. Therein could lie the attempt to regain that complex beauty of the initial aurora borealis, despite the sometimes disturbing insights into animal-human relationships. In this sense and the premise of the

need to penetrate the consciousness of the animal, the viewer finally adopts the role of the tawny owl looking down on Bonnetta from the branches.

17 September 2024.

Now far away from the forest, Bonnetta points a stationary camera at the full moon and the animals during a trip home. Roe deer and red deer, not visible, only audible, then shots in the distance. The animals break into a hasty flight. An underlying brutality and persistent danger now becomes clear again, originating from humans and their ideas of hierarchy and domination for the sake of standardisation.

Finally, the forest dwellers emerge in multitude in superimposed image sections: grazing, trotting, grunting, sniffing. Accompanied by a commenting, childlike voice curiously questioning what is seen, and the chance for a new perspective.

Vitae

The sound artist and filmmaker Joshua Bonnetta, born in Canada in 1979, completed his studies at Ryerson University and earned his Master of Fine Arts at Concordia University in Montreal. He works as an Associate Professor at the Department of Cinema and Photography at Ithaca College in the USA. In accordance with his teaching activities, he currently lives and works in Ithaca, New York.

Henrik Håkansson
A Painting for a Bird, 2026

The exhibition presents three works by the Swedish artist Henrik Håkansson, all bearing the same title: *A Painting for a Bird*. Judging by the name, one might expect three variations of a bird portrait. In fact, whilst the works differ in their material composition, the depicted motif does not; the bird itself, however, is sought in vain.

The stretcher frames are covered with different, unprimed raw textiles: the work near the entrance is covered with flax, the piece on the opposite wall at the end of the large hall with cotton, whilst the specimen placed outdoors is made of more durable jute. There is neither drawing nor painting on the stretched textile surface; instead, a wooden branch protrudes centrally from each picture carrier. As shape and size vary, the character of the materials as a pure natural product is emphasised.

Three large-format stretcher frames covered with organic fabrics, with branches reaching far into the room, form potential resting places for a bird, which would only become part of the image structure as a living motif upon its settling. It is a (still) unknown protagonist, which is nevertheless already anticipated. The work lingers in incompleteness until it experiences its completion through the physical presence—akin to an actual portraiture—of the subject. Even if the works suggest that they are intended to be installative or sculptural, Håkansson always uses the term “painting” in the title as well as in his statements. On the one hand, it is reasonable to assume this simply refers to the use of a stretcher frame; on the other hand, the categorisation as a painting emphasises the classical idea of a portrait. The hanging brings the interpretation of the work into a similar contradiction: Outdoors, the exhibit does not necessarily evoke the association of a conceptual artwork, but could simply have arisen from a sense of care towards the resident birds there. Attention is drawn to the presence of the birds outdoors. Only when viewed as a trio, and thus clearly recognisable as a further artwork, does the direct dialogue between art and animal come to light. The

placement in the exhibition hall, in turn—following the traditional art-institutional basic principle of the “White Cube”—allows the object to become an artwork and inevitably evokes the question of its immanent message. However, the exhibits in the room also blend art and nature, through their installation high up. They give the partly glass, high walls of the Heidelberger Kunstverein the characteristics of an aviary; one almost expects to hear the fluttering of wings overhead in the next moment. Constantly inspired anew by the location and surroundings, Håkansson strives to decipher, reflect upon, and artistically articulate ecological patterns. He shifts fragments of seemingly scientific nature studies into a cultural context. The boundary between the traditional exhibition space and the natural environment is abolished; rather, it is understood as a structure composed of the causal elements of reference and result.

With his deliberate hanging and the use of natural, largely unprocessed materials, Håkansson reconstructs fragile ecological systems. If such a system is elevated to an artistic medium, one makes use of a machinery that requires constant renewal within this artificial framework in order to keep it alive. Håkansson thus utilises the placement inside and outside the exhibition spaces in conjunction with an organic choice of materials and their synthesis into a cycle that appears close to nature.

In doing so, his paintings are not intended to form a moral signpost, but rather a clarification of nature cultures. An artistic reflection in which the human footprint—including that of the artist—remains visible, but is not automatically judged. Because ultimately, humans are part of this construct; they do not stand in an elevated position above it. A symbiotic relationship that Håkansson recognises as such and wishes to bring into awareness. Relationships can take on different forms; instead of systemic self-destruction, the possibility of coexistence remains.

Henrik Håkansson is a Swedish contemporary artist who works with the mediums of film, photography, and installation. He studied at the University of Gothenburg (Department of Photography) as well as at Konstfack in Stockholm. In the past, he was active in the academic field, as a guest professor at the State University of Design (HfG) in Karlsruhe. Today he works as a freelance artist and commutes between his residences in Falkenberg (Sweden) and Berlin.

Sasha Iliashenko Chirp, Chirp, Trill, Warble, 2025

With a long-held shot, the three-channel film installation opens onto a wide, flat marsh or river landscape under a cloudy, grey sky. On a gentle, green elevation, a wooden seamark rises on an open stilt substructure. Flat watercourses as well as extensive meadows bordered by fences, blurred detail views. Simple wooden huts that blend into a grassy hill or dune landscape. In the centre, a narrow path leads directly to a wooden door.

With hard fades and cuts, Sasha Iliashenko strings together video recordings of Northern German coastal landscapes in *Chirp, Chirp, Trill, Warble*. Only occasionally do people move along the lonely paths.

Long-held, bright, and slightly tinny frequencies accompany the scenery. The sounds change and overlap in fine nuances, creating an atmospherically calm soundscape. Suddenly image and sound flicker—an electronic trembling begins.

A continuous, long shot shows the open coastal landscape: a protective wall in front of the sea, in front of it a straight road, and towards it a simple, winding path on which individual cyclists glide along. Then the view from a window with wooden shutters. Birds fly low over the water flowing inland, in search of insects living there. Construction vehicles can be made out in the background.

The view multiplies: other windows, other levels populated by birds, detail shots of the animals by the water—pecking, swimming, and flying. The window closes and the focus wanders; it roams again over the fields and meadows, pausing at another point. The sounds become shriller, the excerpts smaller. Black fades. Views framed by wooden windows appear on all channels, ever larger, ever wider. Then rapid sequences of images: details, vast expanses, windows, birds. The acoustic elements become faster and more jumping—like a twittering—whilst underneath vibrating, technical sounds remain. Sound and image changes accelerate visibly, becoming a flicker, frantic jumping, shriller and brighter.

Iliashenko's video installation shows recordings from bird observation posts in Northern Germany and their surroundings. Flora and fauna are approached as if with supportive binoculars. On a tonal level, the artist explores a newly emerging discipline between ornithology and linguistics—the study of bird calls through digital technologies. The communication of birds differs in its physical and structural properties from that of humans. Whilst humans weave words and sentences into meaning using syntax, birds seem to exchange information through fluctuations in intonation.

Using self-programmed software, Iliashenko investigates this by means of digital synthesis. Whereas humans produce sounds with a larynx, the bird's body works with the syrinx as a vocal organ. An organ which, with the trachea, bronchi, membranes, and musculature, produces a polyphonic song. By means of computer language, Iliashenko generates sounds that resemble feathered singing. Yet they continue to reveal their

technical origin through clear digital fragments—a soundscape of computer humming and bird voices floating in the room is created. The analysis of the foreign language is—like observing the birds from wooden houses integrated into nature—a minimally invasive form of human knowledge acquisition. An endeavour that attempts to comprehend the life and communication of other bodies. Just as computer language is no match for the bird's voice, humans will never be able to understand the completely different body of a bird from within their own. What remains is the mere observation from the outside and the ongoing attempt to grasp it. *Chirp, Chirp, Trill, Warble* provides no additional information, no clarification. Instead, the urge for answers and the constant, driving human desire to categorise are made clear.

Vitae

Sasha Iliashenko is active in the fields of electroacoustic music, sound installations, and live performances. After studying at the University of Fine Arts Hamburg, Iliashenko primarily lives and works in Hamburg.

Crackling like electric shocks, a dull rumbling like distant thunder. The video work *Death Star* by TaeHwan Jeon unfolds with tonal threads, weaving an enveloping blanket of sound.

First a rustling like the wind, then the gentle patter of falling rain mixes in. The black of the screen is pierced by colourful flickering. Light grazes a hand, making it visible. A second hand draws lines across the palm of the other with a green laser.

Flashes of light. An animal? Slowly, the cool light of a spotlight glides from left to right: a fox clearly appears, frozen in motion, its toothed mouth open, taxidermically preserved. After brief darkness, the screen lights up again. Centrally, a dark pistol appears, the trigger snaps forward, and the shot goes off. This is followed by movement. Water, which seemingly completely surrounds the weapon, swirls up. Placed in the background is a Death Star, pierced by something and captured at the moment of explosion. Increasingly, a faltering breathing sound takes over the audio track. A breath as if it came from a diving mask, short and constrained. It is accompanied by splashing and streaming—the element of water becomes simultaneously audible and visible, in its dynamics as well as in its presence.

Image elements increasingly return as motifs throughout the work. For instance, the pistol captured at the moment of firing, always in combination with other pictorial layers in the background and foreground. In one of these sequences, distorted, organic-fleshy appearing surfaces come into view, above them a hand performing movements, whilst an additional layer reveals the structure of a suspension bridge. Another scene shows the weapon superimposed with small, flying objects; initially kept indistinct, they are later briefly recognisable as butterflies.

As a further leitmotif, acting hands and thus the tactile in the image can be identified.

In a longer excerpt, luminous gloves now partially illuminate the field of vision, within it an animal body, partly still covered with fur, partly with exposed flesh, being worked on by human

hands. Insights into the work of a taxidermist, the preservation and aesthetic preparation of animal corpses. The results of this craft are repeatedly brought into the staged limelight by Jeon in his video work. This begins and repeats itself with different views of the fox, followed by a barely visible squirrel inserted only briefly.

In a long, calm fade, the work finally concludes with an earnest, delicate small bird with a pointed beak.

Alongside the butterflies, another animal still in command of its own motor skills is cut into the course of the film. A pigeon, cushioning its landing with a flap of its wings, crosses the image area in slow motion in the cone of light. Living creatures and those admired in death for their beauty; bodies that are appropriated as objects of desire and subjected to aesthetic wishes.

Movements themselves can be read as a further leitmotif. The flying animals cross the space; the taxidermied bodies are staged in post-mortal, fictional, endless movements.

Everything is woven around by moving sounds. A dense, synaesthetically operating work that unfolds continuously.

Jeon borrows his compositional stance from free jazz and noise. In doing so, he translates sonic forms into a visual language that weaves together fragments from various sources such as internet videos, documentaries, and video material from data carriers and much more. He places editing and sequencing outside of familiar concepts and thus creates a non-temporality. Jeon deliberately combines seemingly opposing representations, sounds, and artistic techniques. He thus forces things that are close to each other—through the editing form of temporal and spatial separation—into differentiation. Dualistically conceived categorisations are taken up, divided, and wrested from their solidity. A new fluid texture of things germinates: orders that diffuse into one another and operate with one another. In this way, the human perception of the animal body is also relieved of its onedimensionality. TaeHwan Jeon composes

an apocalyptic-hallucinatory investigation of polarities and leads towards an artistic worldbuilding in the porous realm between science and fiction.

Vitae

The South Korean multimedia artist TaeHwan Jeon (born 1995) works in the fields of photography, video and installation. He studied at the Department of Photography within the College of Arts at Chung-Ang University in South Korea. In 2022, he completed his Master's degree in Fine Arts at Zurich University of the Arts (ZHdK). He is the recipient of the ZHdK Master's Scholarship.

Leonie Kellein

A Wing Beat! A Wing Beat!, 2022

A white, freestanding wall encloses a large-format, horizontal screen. In the immediate vicinity are books as well as a sculpture on a transparent pedestal. Segments that can be assigned to *A Wing Beat! A Wing Beat!*, a transmedial work by Leonie Kellein.

On the video image, a black background and a small, dark-feathered head in portrait. Light-rimmed eyes and a beak turn in slow motion and look up. Accompanying this, a loud, engine-like roar recalls a motorway or a jet engine. Underneath, a simple beat with slight deflections; akin to a heartbeat.

Cut. From above, the camera looks down on the doubled and slowed-down wing beat of a pigeon. With two beats, it crosses the image.

Cut. Wingtips on the right and left of the image frame, at the upper edge the beak—the view originating from the pigeon's chest. A not too high flight, past the roof of a hut. Dodging towering wooden poles. Recordings made by a camera attached to the body of a pigeon.

This connection of animal and technology is one of the earliest methods of aerial photography, which emerged in parallel with the burgeoning photographic technology at the end of the 19th century. The pharmacist Julius Neubronner, who used carrier pigeons to deliver his medicines, developed and patented analogue pigeon cameras and thereby achieved great renown. His photographs using pigeons were even represented at the International Photographic Exhibition in Dresden in 1909. The fascination for this technology was likely fed by the human desire to master flight. One photograph of Schlosshotel Kornberg became particularly well-known—less because of the motif itself than because of the creator's wingtips visible in the image and thus the unambiguous visualisation of the aerial journey. A perspective that is reflected in the videographic part of Kellein's *A Wing Beat! A Wing Beat!*.

The gaze follows the moving flight; but not from the autonomous and mobile sense of sight of the bird. Rather, the camera was fixed to its feathered chest—consequently with a frustratingly distorting tilt. For human desire is usually not directed towards flying as an overview from the air, but towards appropriating the direct physical abilities of the flying creature.

It is probably a stroke of luck that so far only a mechanical approximation has been possible, because the areas of application of the resulting technology are characterised by a military trajectory. Even pigeon photography was used for aerial surveillance in both World Wars—today replaced by their fully mechanised successors—drones. Machines whose naming, dimensions, and functioning are mostly borrowed from bird species and whose participation and decision-making in war are part of today's reality.

The barren field that the pigeon crosses in Kellein's work also tells this story. During both World Wars, military exercises were carried out on this land, in the vicinity of Hohenlockstedt.

Cut. The following sequence leads into the dwelling of feathered life, a dovecote lined with straw. Animal cameras, positioned in the nest or on the collar, satisfy the human need for closeness to "nature". The observation of animal routines often tempts one to recognise supposedly human behaviours and to construct an anthropomorphising interpretation. Such a perspective harbours risks, as it replaces specific needs of the animals with human patterns of interpretation and partially ignores them. However, the opportunity can also open up to comprehend the animal—in this case, the pigeon—as an autonomous subject.

Cut. Blurred aerial shots over village architectures. Hectic, shaky footage, superimposed film snippets—recorded by a drone or a pigeon camera, or both? Gradually the flight stabilises, becomes easier to follow and goes beyond the edge of the village, over fields back to the former military training ground. Again and again, wing beats and a beak-armed head push into the image section—an indication that the recording device is being carried by a pigeon. The flight is accompanied by loud rushing, crackling, and rumbling, interspersed with engine noises. The density of the noise seems threatening, almost claustrophobic. At a particularly intense noise, the pigeon seems to change its flight direction abruptly.

Here, as in the subsequent scenes, Kellein destabilises not only the orientation of the pigeon, but also that of the observer. Temporal and spatial positioning elude unambiguity. Subject and object reverse from observer to pigeon to drone, and finally detach themselves from any assignment. On the level of medial placement, too, Kellein subverts clear categorisations. The installation understands itself as a transmedial structure comprising a book, cinematic work, as well as sculptural and instal-lative elements.

The freestanding sculptural part *Cher Ami* shows the cast of a pigeon holder made of transparent material. Pigeon holders are devices that are applied to the animal like a corset in order to administer food or medication in a controlled manner or to immobilise the body.

Despite the detachment from artistic and content-related chronology, the work has a supporting rhythm, a pulse in all its manifestations: through cut, wing beat, and tact. A remnant of the unification as experienced by the bodies of pigeons and soldiers in military or social, disciplining and domesticating contexts.

Vitae

Leonie Kellein, born in 1993 in Basel, works in the fields of film, video, and sculpture. The artist studied at Goldsmiths University in London and at the University of Fine Arts in Hamburg. Kellein lives and works in Berlin. She uses moving images, sculpture, and sound to investigate how perception is structured and partially destabilised by technologies. Her works have been shown at international film festivals such as Visions du Réel in Nyon as well as in exhibition contexts.

Footnote

Roguski, Agnieszka (ed.): Leonie Kellein. A Wing Beat! A Wing Beat!, Berlin: DISTANZ Verlag, 2024.

A list of top-tier names is stuck to the wall in two-tone foil lettering. Shrill bird calls fill the room. Beneath it: *A Work by Louise Lawler*.

The work *Birdcalls* by Louise Lawler confronts the viewer with a list of 28 artist personalities. Alongside the textual enumeration, one encounters the first and last names, written in red, on an auditory level. The attentive listener has already recognised the bird sounds as a human voice shaping the words into chirping. Lawler subsumed her artistic authorship beneath the weight of an enumeration enriched with collective art-historical knowledge.

From today's perspective, Louise Lawler, born in New York in 1947, has long been known—as a co-founder of a feminist, institutionally critical contemporary art—primarily for photographic records of the works of others as part of the art canon.

The exhibited work *Birdcalls* originated whilst Lawler was working with other participants on the realisation of an exhibition project at the piers of the Hudson River in 1972. The exhibited works were predominantly by male artists. On their nocturnal journeys home, Lawler and her colleague Martha Kite developed an empowering practice. To ward off unwanted attention, they emitted loud, bird-like calls. This simultaneously playful and defensive gesture provided the initial impulse for *Birdcalls*. Lawler translated the name of the curator (“Willoughby Sharp”) into an onomatopoeic call (“Willoughby! Willoughby!”) and successively created a repertoire based on the names of male figures in the art scene.

At the beginning of the 1980s, the final implementation took place in the form of a sound recording: an approximately seven-minute sequence in which the transformed names—which are additionally present in written form, as in the current exhibition situation—are articulated. In earlier stagings, the material used for the text portion varied from printed cards and wall texts to

matchboxes. The contemporaries she named on them illustrate the homogenised state of the art market at that time through the chosen form of sequencing.

Endowing the work with a name, and this in turn with a person, forms a cornerstone of art-historical reception. Louise Lawler subverts this logic through anti-authorial assertions, as in *Birdcalls*, and destabilises these seemingly rigid structures. The work also marks the beginning of a development in her oeuvre, in which she henceforth repeatedly quotes artworks by other artists, mostly photographically. To this day, she uses this to challenge institutions not to understand art through the glorifying tendencies of art history with an emphasis on proper names and biographies, and thereby points in parallel to the conditions of institutional legitimation as well as the visibility, dissemination, and evaluation of art.

Although *Birdcalls* and its feminist motivation emerge from a historical context, the work remains remarkably current. Other art movements, such as punk, also employ playful strategies of mimicry as equivocal, deconstructive expressions.

When Lawler and Martha Kite laid the starting point for the subsequent audio work in 1972, Linda Nochlin's influential essay “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?” had been published shortly before. The (male, white) artistic genius sought by the art market is a construct that individualises the absence or non-cultural status of the works of women and other marginalised groups and attributes it to them themselves, instead of naming structural and institutional exclusions. It is a catalogue of values that, up to or especially in a present day determined by digital media, abbreviated visual languages, and populist men of power, becomes untenable in its authority of artistic subjectivity through such a feminist practice.

At this point, it is necessary to reflect on the fact that Lawler, the recipients of *Birdcalls*, and not least this text have introduced a biographical layer into the reading. Consequently, one must ask why the motif of the bird, of all things, was or had to be provided with an origin story. A possible argument would be that in its life within human structures, the bird also suffers a loss of autonomy

and, especially in urban areas, is increasingly succumbing to the man-made urge to control nature; whether through the theft of habitat, repellent architectures, or systematised killing such as “population control”. These interventions are not neutral, but are frequently the expression of normative orders based on exclusion, control, and hierarchisation, and structurally connect to those mindsets to which feminist critique of patriarchal systems also gives visibility. A perspective that could be further sharpened and provided with examples such as the rose-ringed parakeet in the Heidelberg area. Justified by a human-defined ideal of nature, these are categorised as “non-native” species, whose spread is counteracted with brutal mechanisms. If one includes these considerations in the interpretation of *Birdcalls* and particularly the biographical anecdote, the threat to which birds, alongside women like Lawler and Kite, are exposed in a patriarchal, hierarchical society comes into focus.

Vitae The US conceptual artist Louise Lawler, born in Bronxville (NY) in 1947, completed her studies at Cornell University in 1969 and is associated with the “Pictures Generation”. Her work deals with photographs, material pictures, and installations. Her photographic work on institutional critique was presented in solo exhibitions at the Museum Ludwig (2013) as well as the MoMA (2017) and was part of Documenta 12. Lawler currently lives and works in New York.

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Hendl Helen Mirra
Untitled photographs (D-W), 2008

Two framed photographs, placed opposite each other and showing the exact same motif: a light, only sparsely foliated group of trees against a sky overcast with a bright layer of clouds. In the left foreground extends a tree trunk, half-covered with moss and featuring coarse bark. Attached to this is a wooden birdhouse with a small overhanging roof, its opening turned away from the viewer. The colouration of the nesting place corresponds with the grey-brown trunks. Together with the white-grey sky in the background, the photograph glides almost into a two-tone colour scheme—only broken by occasional green in the moss and foliage or contrasting red-brown in the damper bark. An inconspicuous, functional everydayness is brought into focus and thus into a detailed view. The depicted nesting box—a man-made object crafted for the supposedly necessary protection of nature—questions in its sober modesty the notion of what manifestations critical artistic works can assume.

Hendl Helen Mirra’s discovery of walking or simply strolling as an artistic practice established itself over time as her primary creative process. Thus, the two exhibited photographs *Untitled photographs (B-Y)* from 2008 are not a staged scene, but fragments of a walk through the woods. The works can, consequently, be read as indexical references to the artist’s presence at a specific place at a specific time.

The presentation form of the motif in two prints as a diptych is installed in such a way that only one can be viewed at a time.

This demands of the viewer a comparison of repetition and difference, of apparent distinctions or parallels. A rhythmised way of viewing that inevitably decelerates—the result of Mirra’s interest in conceptual logic. An interest which has most recently expressed itself in her work through lyrical poetics.

In the present photographic work, content-related links to those literary tendencies can already be found, hidden in the location of the shot: the scenery is located in the forest near the Waldau psychiatric clinic in Bern, where the Swiss-German

author and poet Robert Walser lived between 1929 and 1933. A time during which his writing significantly declined, even partly ceasing completely. Walser's writings intensely preoccupied Mirra at the time the photographs were created.

Walser underlined his turnaway from the rise of the fast-paced consumer society with the recurring motif of the walk, as well as the intertwined contemplation of the smallest and most insignificant things. The exhibited diptych is a direct quotation of this, complemented by Mirra's influences from Zen Buddhism, which places the being of things at the centre.

Consequently, the silence and timelessness of walking as a process, as well as the result of an unstaged photograph, bear witness to Mirra's multi-layered conceptual art practice.

Mirra's oeuvre carries these ideals further on a material level as well. In the spirit of eco-minimalism, she pursues a resource-saving approach: she uses natural materials or dispenses with technical processes, such as the digital post-processing of the photographs.

Vitae

Hendl Helen Mirra was born in 1970 in Rochester, New York, USA, and studied at Bennington College in Vermont and at the University of Illinois at Chicago. The artist lives in Northern California and works with diverse media such as weaving, experimental music, sculpture, video, photography, and text.

Clara Spillaert
Nest, 2024
Wedding Dove, 2024

The Belgian-Japanese artist Clara Spilliaert is represented in the exhibition with two ceramic and clay works. Positioned on pedestals of different dimensions and materiality: one made of white wood at a normal viewing height, the other of metal at an airy height of three metres. In this way, the works enter into a vertical dialogue.

Wedding Dove presents a gently curved bird body, the curves of which are accentuated by prominent indentations on the arched torso. The haptics of the matt black surface appear equally velvety and rough.

Opposite it stands a tall stele, at the upper end of which nine narrow metal rods protrude in a radiating arrangement—an object immediately identifiable as an element of pigeon deterrent architecture. Such devices are part of the cityscape; even if the focus is always on the most visually appealing yet effective and long-lasting solution possible—which means that the spikes should be as sharp, high, and dense as possible, weather-resistant, yielding, unobtrusive in colour, and rustproof. Resting unexpectedly on the spikes of the artwork, which largely fulfill these standards, are two fragile, white ceramic eggs, delicate ovals pierced by the rods and held in their position.

The work bearing the title *Nest* was created as a reaction to the realisation, surprising for Spilliaert, that pigeons occasionally build nests in the exact structures designed to keep them away. A humorous comment on the failure of the idea of being able to suppress a reproductive nature. Furthermore, the work questions the extent to which humans assume the right to decide on the reproduction of living beings, and what justifications for this are perceived as sufficient.

Nest is part of a limited edition of 30 pieces—a reproducible format that thus also integrates its own multiplication, akin to reproduction, in its existence as a serial work.

The matt black ceramic work *Wedding Dove*, also a serial production, negotiates, in accordance with its title, the tradition of the wedding dove—one of many rituals in which animals play a symbolic and seemingly irreplaceable role. Such is the case with the release of white doves on the day of marriage. Since these light-feathered creatures mostly live monogamously, they are regarded as a symbol of fidelity and the preservation of the bond. A custom, the practice of which, like many other traditions, is mostly justified by its long existence, yet occurs at the expense of the animals. Usually, some of the “released” doves do not find their way home or are attacked by birds of prey on their return flight to their home loft. Others, in turn, can no longer muster the necessary energy for the long flight, having previously been transported in small containers for an extended period. Particular additional stress is caused by the popular “release” from the hands of the bridal couple. Fingers of strangers press unpractised into the delicate bird bodies—an experience that Spilliaert’s *Wedding Dove* bears on its body as a visible trauma. The indentations on the clay body correspond to those of two large hands grasping it, gripping it, and leaving their mark. The work contrasts the image of people at an event that many traditionalists like to describe as the “happiest day of their lives” with a frightened creature gasping for air and possibly facing its death. For Spilliaert, such a contradiction seemingly also hints at itself behind the concept of marriage itself.

The artist’s oeuvre is consistently dedicated to intimate themes, to which she arrived over a long period primarily through the writing of a very personal diary. Her history is characterised by a move from Japan to Belgium at the age of 16; there, her artistic expression became a new language through which she could communicate in the new country. The theme of reproduction found its way into her work particularly through her sister’s pregnancy and the birth of the new family member. In addition, the inseparable relationship of humans to nature, which is also evident in the physical and body-creating process of birth, remains central. On a material level, clay increasingly makes an appearance, as

in the works exhibited here. A medium which she perceives—like nature and language—as direct and physical, as well as additive, and which she reshapes into symbols and metaphors.

Vitae

Clara Spilliaert is a Belgian-Japanese artist whose work is based on the precise observation of cultural and societal phenomena. Born in Tokyo in 1993, she moved to Ghent at the age of 16. She studied at the LUCA School of Arts in Ghent, where she lives today, and works primarily with ceramics, sculpture, and installation.

Mario Urlaß Hybrid, 2026

The exhibited works by Mario Urlaß appear as two spherical structures, which are composed of a multitude of smaller forms. Through the dense arrangement of these fragments, a relief-like surface structure reminiscent of coral reefs emerges, transforming the individual parts into an abstract whole. Their monochrome materiality, shifting towards beige, evokes an osteological aesthetic and underlines the serial rhythm of the chosen components. The source material consists of densely juxtaposed, dried chicken feet. A tension arises in the work between the biomorphic appearance of the form and its factual organic nature.

The animal origin of the material remains recognisable in its peculiarity as such—on the one hand fascinating, on the other repulsive. Due to this vehement inherent effect, it evades complete appropriation by the overall form.

An extraordinary choice of material. In the Western world, chicken feet are primarily known as dog chews, alongside many other processed animal body parts. This organic matter tells the story of commercialisation and the underlying hierarchisation of living beings. As a by-product of the poultry meat industry, the feet originate from an incomprehensible mass of bred, controlled, supplied, and systematically terminated feathered lives. In preparation for the preserving drying process, the severed body parts are thoroughly cleaned and freed from skin and claws by briefly blanching them. This is followed by several hours of drying in special dehydrators. What remains is a firm, whitish object, deprived of all moisture, intended to keep dogs occupied for a long time and provide them with nutrients.

In many other parts of the world, chicken feet receive greater attention in human food culture. Popular due to their consistency, they are steamed, deep-fried, marinated, grilled, braised, or served cold.

In addition to dog chews, Urlaß's oeuvre encompasses a multitude of unusual substances taken from flora and fauna. Their use and combination always carry something unpleasant, subliminally grotesque within them. On the one hand, the viewer is involuntarily confronted with the—especially in its sheer number—macabre termination of life. On the other hand, the alienation process of actually familiar things, which have been assembled into something new and not clearly discernible, is irritating.

With these painfully real inventories, he enables an exploration of new forms of natural reality. Thus, the two exhibited sculptures from the *Hybride* series also offer access to secrets beyond scientifically established knowledge. These do not see themselves as mere reproductions, but as artistic exploration and encryption of reality. Alongside the findings of the natural sciences, they make a contribution to the unravelling of the world and function as indirect commentaries on themes such as nature, evolution, individuality, and hybridisation.

In the course of this unravelling, questions are raised that perhaps have not yet been asked, the answering of which is only an attempt and simultaneously allows for an ignorance. With

regard to hybridisation, the existing is supplemented by new creations. Things are combined and connected, the known is shaped with the known into something unknown. From this, new questions result, but possibly also new answers. The animal, but often equally plant-based elements bear traces of the living, fragile, and transient within them. Assembled into a new unity, they evoke a laboratory situation, a process of testing and study.

In this way, Urlaß's *Hybrid* works open up a dialogue between art and research, analysis and synthesis, and between reality and fantasy. For the sculptures feature blurring, voids and interstices, thereby managing to hybridise these supposed opposites.

Vitae

Mario Urlaß studied Art, German Studies, and Art History at the University of Education Erfurt and the University of Leipzig. Following his doctorate at the University of Erfurt in 2004, he pursued an academic career. Since 2013, he has been a professor of Art and its Didactics at the University of Education Heidelberg, where he also lives and works

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in the Air

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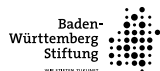
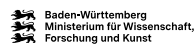
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