

# PERFORMING NATURE UNMATURELY

21 Feb –  
10 Mar 2023  
Vicki Kerr \ Matthew Bannister







**Essay by Cerys  
Dallaway Davidson**

Over the feeble hum of my laptop's whirring fan and the last of the evening traffic at the roundabout a street over, the rhythmic and repetitive echo from an unknown bird in the large tree in my front yard offers a call to my untrained ear. From the backyard its friend calls back, a night-time correspondence I am not privy to, and often likely overlook through the chaos of children's bedtime routine, and the desperate rush to get

the dishes 'done' to allow a moment of childfree peace before the next day. A couple of tauhou | silvereye surprise me as I likely frightened them off their perch atop the Acer shrub in front of my kitchen window when I returned to said not 'done' dishes in the sink the following morning. Across the backyard as I later enjoy a coffee in the window seat, I spot our backyard's regular visitor, a scruffy manu pango |

blackbird who paces through the overgrown back lawn, systematically retrieving worms from the warm soil, oblivious or stoic, despite the missing feathers on the side of its head, no doubt from an encounter with the neighbour's cat.

My multitude of daily encounters with neighbourhood bird life are brought to a heightened presence as I ponder the artistic collaboration Vicki Kerr

Left to right:  
**Penguin hoiho,  
pokotiwaha and kororā**  
2023  
Digital print

**Petrel tāiko, kuaka**  
2023  
Digital print  
**Owl ruru**  
2023  
Digital print

**Fantail piwakawaka**  
2023  
Digital print



and Matthew Bannister have invited me to respond to. This art installation is a multimedia exploration into the overlaps of bird calls with human modes of communication in response to our impact on the environments of these winged neighbours. In turn, the work explores their impact on humanity and the cultural identities we have formed around birdlife. Kerr and Bannister assess the connection between us – the planet’s top geological agent – and birds, asking: “how has the world changed for animals, as they are forced to respond to new environmental conditions?”

The project stemmed from an initial exploration into the calls of seabirds which later expanded, retaining the ōi | grey-faced petrel and kororā | penguin, to also focus on the ruru | morepork and piwakawaka | fantail. Imagery of each species has been selected by Kerr – in response to Bannister’s audio composition – via a fossicking through the internet, books and archives. The images are layered in neat rows, presented like strips of film, or a set of pictorial lines of a story, replacing text with visual stimulation. Our impact on and connection with each species is illustrated in overlays of wide open calls and screams of shouting mouths alongside snippets of human interference. Our intrusions include glimpses of barbed wire, tangled fishing nets, grid-like targets, and bird representations sculpted and painted within historical cultural material.

The artists consider this relationship between birds and humanity in connection to what is known as the “Anthropocene”, the term for the geological epoch we live in, pulling together the two terms ‘anthropo’ (human) and ‘cene’ (a suffix for an epoch of geological time). This name reflects the monstrous impact we have had on the environment, equating to the great forces that volcanoes, glaciers and meteors have on the earth’s crust. As I contemplate this I consider my own

house, unceremoniously erected in the midst of a plot of land from a drained swamp divided up by developers. Small pockets are set aside for recreated ‘natural’ habitats, whilst the majority of our backyards only offer worm laden lawns for our flighty neighbours, with limited treescapes to perch in. I am simply a visitor/intruder to this land, long held by these birds’ ancestors.

My young son has been learning about languages at kindergarten, he confuses languages with accents, along with explorations into whether he can learn languages of other animals, the birds at the playground being his first experiment. He gleefully surmises that his “cheep cheep” and “caw caw” are indeed calling the birds to him. They more likely are enticed by the crumbs from his lunch which encircle us; however it brings to mind the concept this art project addresses that birds are kin. To his unencumbered mind the birds in our backyard are simply distant cousins yet to be deciphered.

In my pre-children years when I was based at Auckland War Memorial Museum as a Collection Manager working across their varied collections, I encountered birds of an entirely different variety. Fat and stuffed, yet silent and glassy eyed. The skin specimens and taxidermed birds which lurked through the natural science storerooms share yet more in the story of human fascination with birds. These specimens offer physical study into our winged counterparts, yet their musical talents are locked away in recordings held in other storerooms, separated from their original sources. Some of their calls have been lost forever. The call of the huia is recorded with Ngā Taonga Sound and Vision as remembered by Māori elder Henare Hāmāna who was part of a 1909 expedition which tried unsuccessfully to find any remaining huia in the North Island bush. Vice-

Cover image:  
**Fantail piwakawaka**  
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Digital print

versa, birds also imitate us, introduced parrot species being the obvious ones, though our native tui is also well known for its mimicry as a result of their double voice box allowing for a staggering range of sounds.

In the audio component of this work, Bannister considers very closely this intertwined connection and regular mimicry between bird and human sound, resulting in an immersive cacophony. Calls of each bird have electroacoustic sampling methods applied to them, responding to each bird’s individual vocalisation which in some cases reveal dark, booming, electric and repetitive tones. If you look closely, you notice Kerr’s visual response is to match this with harsh imagery. Each composition features some of the lyrical melody, but also the harsh cries these birds emit, which with Bannister’s fragmentation of the sounds into mechanical tones, echo the message of human intervention on birdlife. For example, the call of the ōi | grey-faced petrel is turned up, its rendition fragmented off and repeated in quick succession, almost mimicking the sound of gunfire.

Birds are deeply embedded in human culture; we are fascinated with them, and have a general love for them, the music they share and light distraction they offer across our days. Yet we are the biggest threat to them and their environments, and in turn the cultural values and identity that we form around them is also at risk. Through this body of work we are invited to re-imagine our relationship with ngā taonga manu, the artists ask us to think of them as kin and be conscious of the land we share with them.

I am left wondering, are we good neighbours?