

VISUALIZED BIRD SONGS, *Disappearing*

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*Into the same rivers we step and do not
step, we are and are not.*
-Heraclitus

Sound in nature is transitory. As it happens, it cannot happen again the same way. To capture sound, as animal, as environment, as ecology, allows the memory of sound to remain.

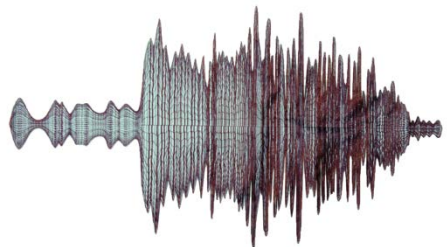
Throughout history birds have been represented in the visual and literary arts. They have lived as allegory, as story, as representations of nature, and continue to illuminate the imagination of contemporary artists.

Using the dense audio resources found at the Macaulay Library at the Cornell

Lab of Ornithology, the voices of birds are cataloged, collected, and charted becoming mechanical drawings representing the voices of top ten most endangered birds.

To capture, and make a permanent mark, on the fleeting nature of sound highlights the importance of what is disappearing. To provide a visible analogue to the invisible qualities of sound allows reflection on what our actions must become.

The pure visualizations of data possess a poetic quality, allowing the birds to become more than just numbers - instead an encounter with a frozen instant of time. Sound while present is represented.



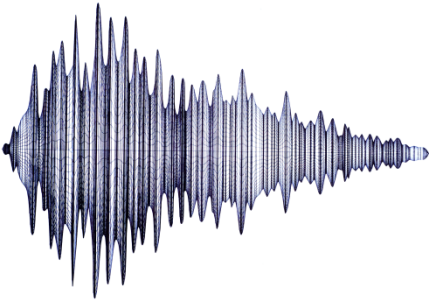
1. *Giant Ibis*



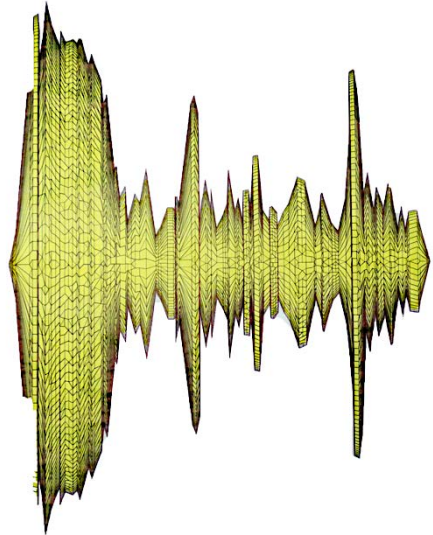
2. NO SOUND,
New Caledonian
Nightjar
Owlet



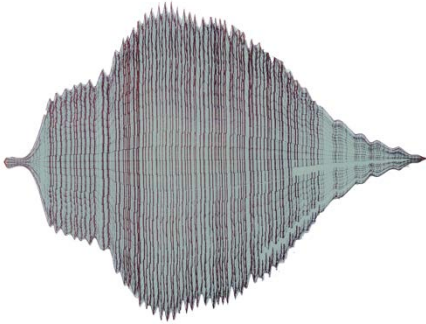
4. Kakapo



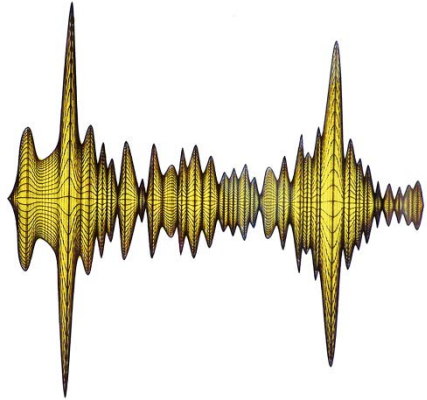
3. California Condor



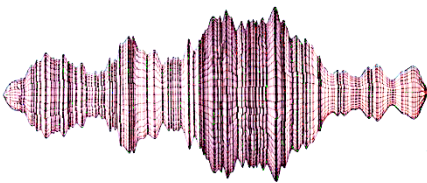
5. Kagu



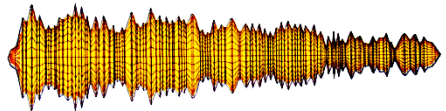
6. Bengal Florican



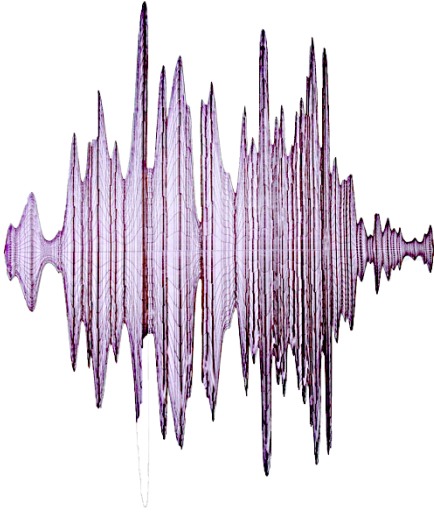
8. Philippine Eagle



7. Forest Owlet



9. Christmas Island Frigatebird



10. Sumatran Ground Cuckoo

All artwork is from the series **Visualized Bird Songs, Variation II (Disappearing)**.

Ten mechanical drawings made with archival markers and ball point pen on vellum. Size: 20 x 22 inches. Date: 2016-2018.

The bird songs are mapped in sound editing software, traced in the software Rhinoceros, and printed using a CNC machine.

Part I: Sound

Sound in nature is transitory. As it happens, it cannot happen again the same way. To capture sound, as animal, as environment, as ecology, allows the memory of sound to remain.

Part II: Bird as Language, Poetry, and Art

Throughout history birds have been represented in the visual and literary arts. They have lived as allegory, as story, as representations of nature, and continue to illuminate the imagination of contemporary artists. In 1177, Persian poet Farid Attar wrote the *Conference of Birds* [1] in which birds assemble in preparation for a spiritual pilgrimage to find a *simurgh* – a mythical bird, which represents ultimate spiritual unity. The title: *Conference of Birds* or *Speech of Birds*, quotes the teaching of the Qu'ran, which indicates speech was given to humans by birds. Within this poem, birds lead by the hoeppe- assemble: the nightingale, the parrot, peacock, and duck, partridge, homa, (a mythical bird), hawk, heron, owl, finch, among other birds. In this conference, birds transcend above other animals and provide guidance to humans.

The song of birds, the language of birds, has long entranced us and we use bird as allegory for our own voice, assigning musicality to their song. It appears, regardless of history or place, birds act as guides to humans, providing council and voice. Moving though time and history, in 1613 England, William Browne wrote *Britannia's Pastorals, Concert of Birds* [2]:

*The mounting lark (day's herald) got on wing,
Bidding each bird choose out his bough*

and sing.
The lofty treble sung the little wren;
Robin the mean, that best of all love's
men;
The nightingale the tenor, and the thrush
The counter-tenor sweetly in a bush,
And that the music might be full in parts,

These birds read music, are lyrical, and have song. Their language reflects the notes on a scale. What other animals are given such amorphyzed qualities of voice?

Athanasius Kircher (1650) [3] noted different melodies for birds, believing all birds in nature sing in musical intervals. Both literary and visual artist have taken bird as emblem to represent a larger ideology – one that exists in “becoming-animal” [4] and transcending human. Becoming animal is not about truly living as animal, instead it is a call to higher perspective, a perspective that allows one to be as self and not as self – a concept investigated by Deleuze and Guattari, [5] as we watch animal, watching us, do we become-animal?

Part III: Bird as Sound Art

Sound art pioneers such as David Tudor and Alvin Lucier conducted *sound experiments*, challenging expectations of creative work with sound as *music*. Cage, Tudor, Lucier, and later Pauline Oliveros were artists trained in classical composition, but explored sound “in-between” music. In reference to the environment, these generative soundscapes ignore traditional notions of musical allegory, and are rooted in recorded nature, distorted nature, and

expressive nature. Oliveros describes her work as creating a “*tapestry of sound*: threads of *sound* that come and go”. [6] David Tudor moved fluidly between experimental sound, visual, and performing arts, and worked collaboratively with artists and engineers. His methodology of capturing sound in-situ, reworking sound in the studio, and then returning the sound as a new form, defined and inspired artists of the 21st century. In *Rainforest I-V (Variations)*, [7] Tudor used electronic signal to mimic the sound of birds and other rainforest animals. Each sound “echoes the diversity of flora and fauna in the natural world, breathing and reverberating in constant commotion—a forest of sound.” [8] The irony of this work, certainly evident in Tudor’s time, is commonplace in the cacophony of synthetic nature sounds populating our world in the form of ring-tones.

Alvin Lucier, *Bird and Person Dying* (1975), Lucier uses a fake bird, a Christmas ornament, to create heterodyning, which is feedback from two separate wavelengths of sound being mixed.

In 1987, Dr. Peter Szok produced the album called *The Unknown Music of Birds*. In this album bird songs are slowed down to reveal sounds that are more human than bird.

From representational birds, to electronic birds, to bioacoustics revealing a hidden language we traverse through expectations and arrive at new

conclusions. What does bird signify and why has it become trapped in our collective psyche? Birds are given a position close to humans in the hierarchy, their singing has provided a place for language to exist, for musical and electronic interpretation.

Part IV: Contemporary Art

In Wolfgang Müller's, *Séance Vocibus Avium*, (2008) [9] Müller enlisted a group of artists to recreate the calls of extinct birds. Each artist is assigned a particular species and then provided with historical documentation to help recreate the call as accurately as possible. This record, not only discusses the concept of becoming-animal, it also lives in a contemporary place of ecological issues. If our birds are disappearing and we can create only recreations through our own voice where does it situate us today?

Part V: Visualized Bird Song

In *Visualized Bird Songs, Disappearing I* use the dense audio resources found at the Macaulay Library at the Cornell Lab of Ornithology. The bird songs are mapped in sound editing software and then traced in 3D modelling software and 3D printed made into mechanical prints.

I began to think about this issue in a global sense – of the voices of the top ten most endangered birds are catalogued, collected, and charted becoming objects representing the voices of these birds. The birdcalls become more than just records - instead an encounter with a frozen instant of time. A visualized model charts the intangible

and elicits reaction on the fleeting nature of what is here now, but may not last. A moment of reflection with individual species from endangered bird species possesses a poetic quality. This work serves as a catalogue of the disappearing, much like an 18th century wonder-cabinet. Thee display serves to rarify the object, contain it and isolate it.

Sound while present is not represented, as the sounds in-between become the "music". Like John Cage in his concert 4'33," [10] I ask is it silence, noise, or ever quiet? How do we categorize sound? What rhizomic qualities can be added to the way we communicate and record the world? Do we have the ability to become-animal and transcend our everyday or are we rooted in the ringtones of recorded memory?

[1] Farid Attar, *The Conference of Birds*, Penguin Classics, 1984.

[2] Poem of William Browne of Tavistock, Vol. I, *Britannia Pastoral*, Internet Archives.

[3] Kircher's Nightingale, *Musurgia universalis* (1650), by the Jesuit polymath Athanasius Kircher (Book I, Chapter XIX).

[4] Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Becoming Animal*. Oxford, UK, 2007.

[5] Ibid.

[6] The Pauline Oliveros Trust, paulineoliveros.us

[7] MoMA Inside/Out, MoMA Collects David Tudor's *Rainforest V (Variation I)*, 2016.

[8] Ibid.

[9] Wolfgang Muller, *Séance Vocibus Avium*, Audio CD, 2008.

[10] John Cage, 4'33" johncage.org