OF FAUNA AND MANUFACTURED DERIVATIVES: BILL BURNS AND THE LUCRATIVE DIDACTICS OF ENVIRONMENTAL STEWARDSHIP

BY GENTIANE BÉLANGER

It appears that our encounters with nature are most often mediated, at least to a certain extent, by objects and representations. In my particular case, a moulded plastic goose lamp—along with other objects of affection such as stuffed mallards, Canada geese and loons—have long played a predominant role in my growing sense of kinship with the *Anatidae* family (water birds). Fortuitously, I came across the same lamp in Bill Burns' guide to urban fauna, under the taxonomic category of "city birds." This is no great surprise, since the goose lamp is one of Donald Featherstone's popular designs and a well-known ambassador of American tackiness, second only to now vintage pink flamingos. A ubiquitous urban species, we might find it worthy of being classified in the *Urban Fauna Information Station* (Toronto: Mercer Union, 2002) on an equal footing with tin alligators, ceramic dogs and tigers, and elk-patterned scarves from Jasper, Alberta. *The Urban Fauna Information Station* is the brainchild of Bill Burns, Trevor Gould and Mark Vatnsdal, and it surveys biodiversity in the city environment by means of its manifold representations of fauna in visual and material culture.

Derivatives of nature abound throughout Burns' corpus, which comprises a children's choir based on the sounds of dogs and boats and airplanes, a toll-free telephone service, guides to the needs of animals, museum furniture, field photographs, dioramas and promotional brochures that support the intriguingly absurd—albeit charmingly meticulous—production of safety gear for small animals, among other things. The fact that Burns consistently refers to endangered creatures using representational or technological surrogates strongly suggests that his work is less about animals per se than it is concerned with an intricately layered relationship to fauna inflected by kilometres of epistemological and cultural sedimentation.

NATURE BY PROXY

In an essay on postmodern animal representation, Steve Baker identifies two postures in contemporary art. What he terms "animal-endorsing" art concentrates on animal life itself, without regard to the cultural constructions of animal life. "Animal-sceptical" art questions those very constructions that influence our understanding of fauna and that work to make animals significant in cultural terms.[1]

Bill Burns' approach hovers between these two polarities, demonstrating genuine empathy towards animals while exposing the anthropocentric drives and codified representations on which animal advocacy systematically relies. Burns' work can be said to nurture a prolific tension by stimulating multiple readings and degrees of interpretation—a tension that voluntarily maintains an unresolved position in the face of postmodern art's main struggle with the animal, which, according to Baker, "is all about distance."[2]

This tendency to address objects of inquiry through their representation is indebted to the critical turn instigated by postmodern cultural theory. In response to the ecological imperative to preserve pre-discursive nature from waste and pollution, Kate Soper argues that postmodern theorists tend to emphasize nature's conceptual instability and discursive construction, to the point of questioning its existence outside of "the chain of the signifier."[3] Cultural theorists' calls for self-reflexivity in ecological thought have set a standard for art historical scholarship on ecology and contemporary art. Essays on the subject—and, by the same token, artworks—are now often double-edged; their sense of urgency about environmental depletion is underwritten with a critical awareness of the cultural bias underlying most (if not all) palliative endeavours. Hence, critical attention has shifted from nature as such to what could be designated as epistemologies of nature. As Baker further contends, "To emphasize questions of representation is not therefore to deny any particular animal's 'reality,' in the sense of that animal's actual experience or circumstances. Instead, the point is to emphasize that representations have a bearing on shaping that 'reality,' and that the 'reality' can be addressed only through the representations."[4] Burns' *Safety Gear for Small Animals Inc.* (1994–2008)[5] is a persuasive example of this post-structuralist criticality in the artist's assessment of ecological problems, most notably in his predilection for institutional mimicry as an effective vector for "framing the frame" of nature.

As part of Burns' more recent production, *Bird Radio* (2002–08) maintains a comparable line of thought. The project revolves around a hanging display of jury-rigged birdcalls to be activated by visitors, connected to a radio transmitter that broadcasts the bird sounds on a set frequency. Adding to the elaborate nature of the project, precision drawings of the whistles adorn the walls, while a video of children demonstrating the use of bird-calls can be watched through a peephole. Visitors are left imagining flocks of starlings, sparrows and jays from their simulated calls, thanks to handmade gear and technical know-how. In line with previous works, *Bird Radio* enacts a typically modern connection to nature, highly rationalized through procedures—"Hold the whistle part without covering the hole and calmly jiggle the end of the rubber. Tap. Repeat."[6]—and heavily dependent on artifactual mediation.

Multiple location-specific variations of the same project have been made since 2002. The latest version, *Bird Radio for Afghanistan* (2010), displaces the subject of avian diversity to war-torn Afghanistan, hence evoking Canada's entanglement in murky foreign conflicts. As Burns contends, birds become a locus for his intellectual engagement with current hubs of intensities—geopolitical, military and biological. In fact, the avian population of Afghanistan comprises exceptional species, like the large-billed

1

2

3a

3b

14

12

4

13

11

10

5

9

6

8

7

power
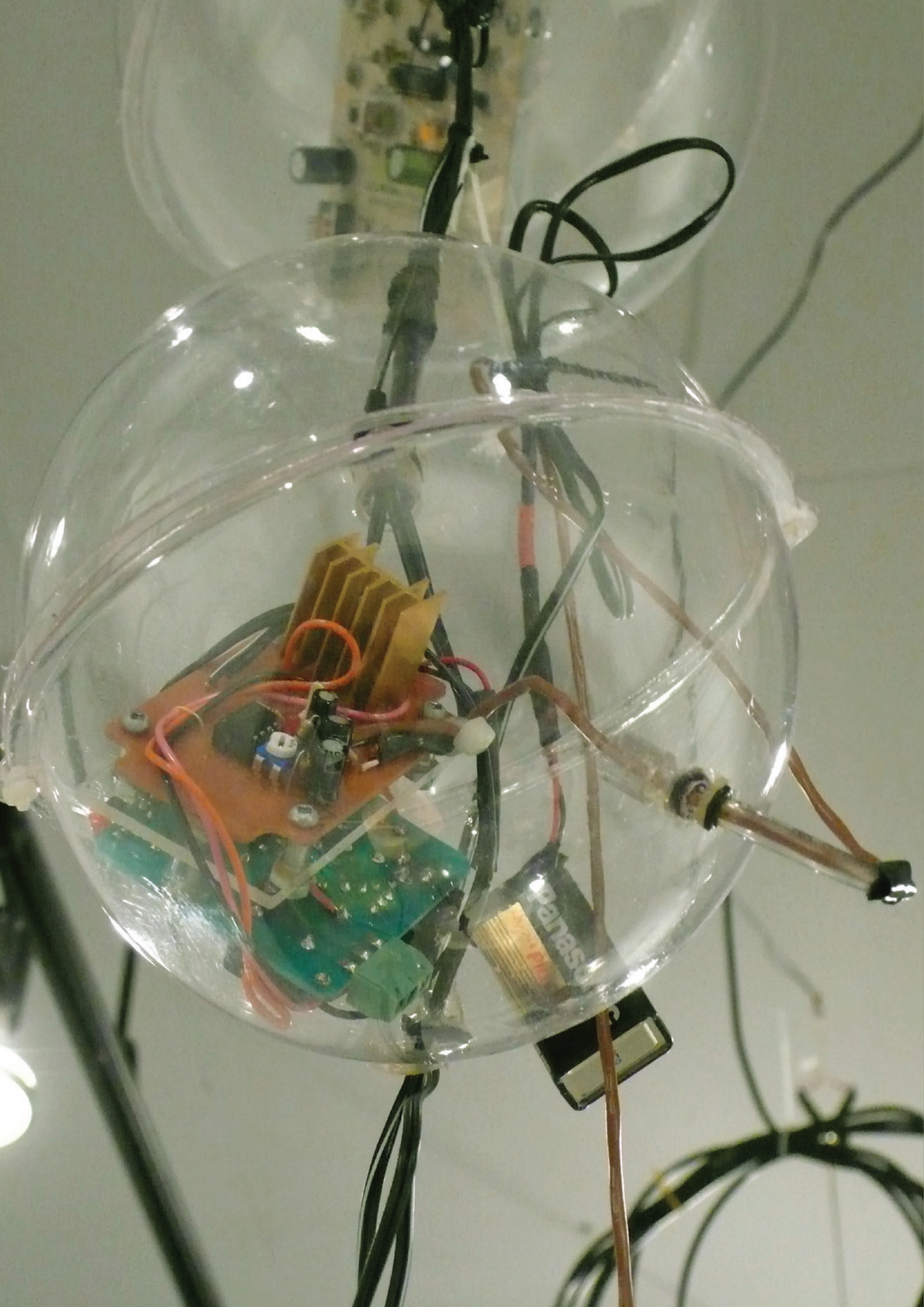
Bird Radio for Afghanistan
with Eames Chair Lounge
and Barcode of Life for
sturnus vulgaris. Please see
legend on inside back cover.

reed warbler, which attracts international attention and has been dubbed by the conservation organization Birdlife International as "the world's least-known bird species."[7] The slight whiffs of otherness that can be detected in Burns' *Bird Radio for Afghanistan* are thus far from extrapolated. With their complex agency, the children appearing in the video play a somewhat similar role as that of the birds: "Like dogs, wild animals and foreigners, children often stand in for the unknown, the *other*."[8] Having them demonstrate the birdcalls, however, puts them in a liminal or ambivalent position. They come to act as a portal to the alien world of birds while simultaneously representing the young generation making its entry into a mainstream culture, reaching to nature through consumption. Occupying floor space right below the dangling birdcalls are three modern chairs reminiscent of the "form follows function" ethos of transparency and openness. Combined with the radio medium, which emerged in about the same era, the furniture in the *Bird Radio* series further emphasizes the modernist values brought forth in the work's subtle blend of sound, transparency and functionalism. By framing modernism in parergetic relationship with the preservationist discourse, *Bird Radio for Afghanistan* somehow discloses the sometimes convoluted connection between conservation (of nature) and progressivism (in the exportation of Western values like democracy and ecology to foreign countries).

ANIMALS AT WAR

Bird Radio for Afghanistan can be seen to constitute, along with two other recent projects, a trilogy on animals and war, in which Burns resorts to fauna and habitat destruction as ciphers to investigate deeper questions about human social structures. *The Flora and Fauna Information Service 0.800.0FAUNA0FLORA* (2008) proposes, by means of a toll-free telephone line, a myriad of options for encouraging the rehabilitation of animals suffering from habitat degradation due to war and other abusive contexts, namely by sponsoring the production of safety gear. Other options foster the protection of plants endemic to Afghanistan and the Middle East—*Allium jesdianum*, *Allium karataviense* and *Allium lenkoranicum*. Information regarding heritage destruction in war-torn regions is also tucked into the touch-tone network of stewardship possibilities, like the bombing of the national seed farm at Abu Ghraib and the destruction by the Taliban force of

monuments to Buddha in the Bamiyan province, for example. In addition to these eco-responsible opportunities are more entertaining options, such as hearing sounds of the Kalahari Desert, the Amazon or killer whales.[9] As with most things imbued with an air of otherness, these exotic and somewhat mysterious excerpts of nature are subject to a benevolent form of condescension and spectacle through their staging as imperiled entities.

The third project involved in this trilogy of animals and war, *Two Boiler Suits and a Playlist* (Toronto: YYZ, 2010), reflects on the condition of human existence at Guantanamo Bay through a close examination of the material paraphernalia allotted to incoming prisoners, as well as through an enumerative list of the songs played over and over in the camps to disrupt the internees' mental stability. The artist book's subtitle, *A Guide for Primates*, suggests a theriomorphic treatment of human identity. Whereas fables tend to explore and reinforce human morality by means of anthropomorphized animal characters, Burns' project inversely suggests a lack of humanity, an amoral essence and hence a dystopian alterity at the heart of human identity through recourse to zoomorphism.

Somewhat different in form, Burns' latest work, *Ivan the Terrible: Part One* (Copenhagen: Space Poetry, forthcoming in 2011) functions on a fairly similar register. Taking Sergei Eisenstein's 1944 film *Ivan the Terrible* as a template, Burns recounts in a series of prints the biographical milestones of Tsar Ivan IV as the founder and very first ruler of Russia. But the characters and filmic compositions that have made Eisenstein's oeuvre a perennial classic are replaced in Burns' prints by dogs, boats and airplanes—"ciphers of modernism: pedigree, global capital, movement and travel."[10] Knowing that Eisenstein's depiction of Tsar Ivan served to portray the Stalinist reign by proxy, and because the cinematographer was inspired by Walt Disney's depiction of animals, Burns' translation of Ivan's totalitarian rule in the form of dogs, boats and airplanes can be considered to critically emulate a Disneyesque style in order to assess humanity. Eisenstein himself had claimed, reflecting on Disney's case: "It's interesting that the ... 'flight' into animal skin and the humanization of animals is apparently characteristic for many ages, and is especially sharply expressed as a lack of humaneness in systems of social government and philosophy."[11] This artwork follows on another one, titled *Dogs and Boats and Airplanes* (2009–10),

which began as a series of photographs published in postcard format and a collection of salt and pepper shakers in the form of the aforementioned topical triad. This project keeps unfolding, with the intention of creating a children's choir based exclusively on the sounds of dogs, boats and airplanes. There already exists a link to power—even if elusive—in this earlier and ongoing project, as when Burns casually observes, for example, that the police and military forces use dogs, boats and airplanes regularly for maintaining civil order and state efficacy. Burns' recent production thus depicts the animal realm as deeply entangled with issues of power, control and alterity, without putting aside his concerns about the economic and bureaucratic rationalization of nature.

BOLD ENTREPRENEURSHIP FOR ANXIOUS TIMES

Through conceptual strategies of his own particular making, Bill Burns manages to guide us along the meanderings of our own culturally biased, economically framed and morally charged understanding of nature, under the guise of his step-by-step guidance to turn us into purportedly better environmental stewards. By means of a polymorphous institutional mimicry—from museal fictions to pseudo info-lines and telesales—Burns draws particular attention to technique, procedural thinking and material culture when attending to the realm of animals. Productive interventions with fauna are rendered possible thanks to cutting-edge gear and to the guiding principles of carefully designed and tested protocols. His guidebooks and professional testimonies are saturated with technical details and "do's & don'ts," as when he describes with deadpan seriousness the process of designing safety gear for small animals:

> Anyone who has ever attempted to fabricate apparel for an animal knows enough to pay attention to detail. The work is exceedingly precise and requires keen observation. If you exaggerate any unusual characteristics of the client animal's morphology, it will lead to grotesque errors and ill-fitting gear. Here are a few rules of thumb to help keep fabricators from straying: all animals, especially mammals, are more or less the same; follow your nose and your eyes to produce an accurate fit; use your head; avoid the pitfalls of the heart.[12]

Furthermore, the fictional corporate

directors and pharmaceutical researchers that populate Burns' practice become the locus for an emulated entrepreneurial discourse. While tapping into such economic rhetoric, Burns humorously exacerbates a widespread paradox. He proposes to alleviate a critical situation borne from the excessive exploitation and consumption of resources by further merchandising products and services. Turning environmental stewardship into a prosperous business in times of ecological urgency—and calling animals "hosts" or "clients"—Burns feeds on the popular belief that crisis opens up possibilities for growth and emancipation through ingenious problem solving in a service-based economy. Hence, beginning in 1994 through 2008, he developed an ambitiously complex and conceptually dense endeavour widely known and acclaimed as *Safety Gear for Small Animals Inc.*, whose multifarious structure comprises "several divisions, including safety gear prototype production units, conservation and relocation departments, a multimedia program, a prosthetics program, a publishing house and a travelling museum."[13] By means of a caricatured emphasis on technological, economic and epistemological mediation in the protection and rehabilitation of endangered animals, *Safety Gear for Small Animals Inc.* critiques the often seen conflation of environmental ethics, profitmaking and gear fetishism.

The savvy combination of museum and business mimicry situates Burns at the convergence of two conceptual sensibilities: in tune with Mark Dion's "epistemology gone wild" in the rethinking of taxonomic, nomenclatural and visual systems of representation, while also following in the footsteps of N.E. Thing Company's absurdist entrepreneurship. Although Burns is more concerned with the aural packaging of fauna and environmental stewardship than with the bagging of landscapes, his practice could just as well be said to appropriate "established and rigidified" conceptions of fauna (and more broadly speaking, of nature) to reinterpret them as "constellations of collapsing and interacting territories, calling attention to the hidden interdependence of corporate, artistic and domestic spheres."[14] This affiliation with N.E. Thing Company's proto-conceptual practice shows the genealogical extent of art's emulation and appropriation of a discursive angle considered by Andrea Fraser to come from the service economy's status as "the 'regnant episteme' of a terciarized late capitalist society."[15] While Fraser's observation undermines modernism's postulate that art is ontologically separate from capitalism by retracing the expanded scope of institutional critique to economic structures, Burns' idiosyncratic use of this critical strategy serves to expose an insidious relationship between environmental activism and mass consumption. *The Flora and Fauna Information Service 0.800.0FAUNA0FLORA* demonstrates this impeccably, its toll-free interactive voicemail system guiding users through a meandering flowchart of sponsorship possibilities by means of touch-tone options, all ultimately leading to PayPal.

Animals oscillate between victims and highly coveted clientele in Burns' work, and in any case, they remain at the respectable distance that their manufactured derivatives call for... or that our credit cards and bank accounts might afford.

Art's main struggle with the animal is all about distance, indeed. ◆

● *Gentiane Bélanger holds a master's degree in art history from Concordia University (2008) and is currently pursuing doctoral studies at UQAM (Université du Québec à Montréal). Her research interests lie in the intersection of art and environmental philosophy. She is a member of the editorial committee of the Montreal-based art magazine ETC and has published in other specialized venues.*

ENDNOTES

1 Steve Baker, *The Postmodern Animal* (London: Reaktion Books, 2000), 8.
2 *Ibid.*, 189.
3 Kate Soper, "Nature/'nature,'" in *Future Natural*, eds. Robertson, Mash, Tickner, Bird, et al. (London: Routledge, 1996), 22–34.
4 Steve Baker, "Introduction to the Illinois Paperback," in *Picturing the Beast: Animals, Identity and Representation* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2001), xvii.
5 See also *Bird Radio* (Cologne: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther Konig, 2007).
6 Bill Burns, *Bird Radio: An Operator's Manual* (Berlin: KW-ICA, 2007).
7 Antoine Blua, "Little-Known Bird Found Breeding in Afghanistan," in *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty* (January 30, 2010); HYPERLINK www.rferl.org/content/LittleKnown_Bird_Found_Breeding_In_Afghanistan/1944008.html.
8 Bill Burns, interview, July 1, 2010.
9 All the examples mentioned can be traced back to the artist book: Bill Burns, *0.800.0FAUNA0FLORA* (London: ICA, 2008).
10 Bill Burns quoted in Renay Egami, "An Artist for Animals in Peril: A Conversation with Bill Burns," in *Lake Journal* (Vancouver and Kelowna: UBC, Fall 2009), 19.
11 Sergei Eisenstein quoted in Jay Leyda, *Eisenstein on Disney* (London: Methuen, 1988), 49.
12 Bill Burns, "Our Early Days," in *Safety Gear for Small Animals* (Victoria: Art Gallery of Greater Victoria, 2005), 14-15.
13 Annette Hurtig, "Welcome to Safety Gear for Small Animals!" in *Safety Gear for Small Animals*, 21.
14 Nancy Shaw, "Siting the Banal: The Expanded Landscapes of the N.E. Thing Company," in *Beyond Wilderness: The Group of Seven, Canadian Identity, and Contemporary Art*, eds. John O'Brian and Peter White (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2007), 68.
15 Andrea Fraser, "What's Intangible, Transitory, Mediating, Participatory, and Rendered in the Public Sphere?," in *Museum Highlights: The Writings of Andrea Fraser* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2005), 50, 76.
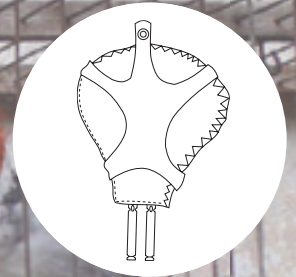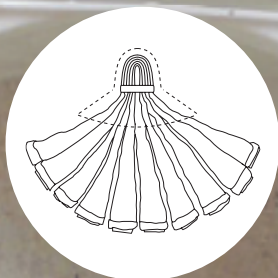
1. Antenna
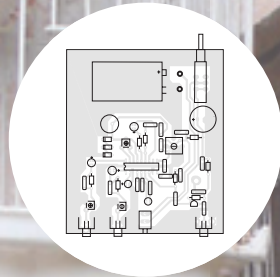
2. Transmitter
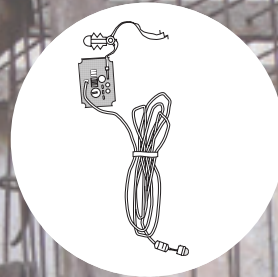
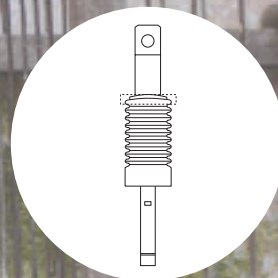**3a. & 3b. Amplifier, Heat sink, Microphone**

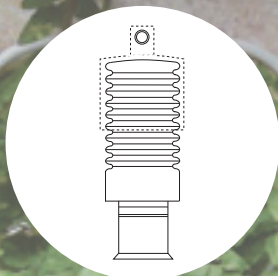**4.** *Gallinago gallinago* **Common Snipe**

5. *Sturnus vulgaris* **Starling**

6. *Coturnix coturnix* **Common Quail**

7. *Tringa totanus* **Redshank**

8. *Parus caeruleus* **Blue Tit**

9. *Gallinula chloropus* **Moorhen**

10. *Scolopax rusticola* **Woodcock**
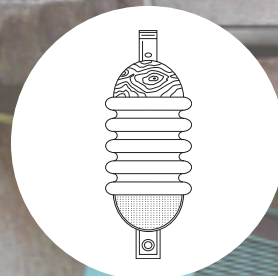
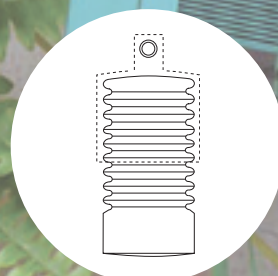**11.** *Turdus philomelos* **Song Thrush**
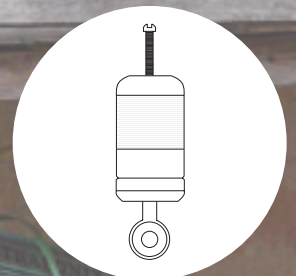
12. *Luscinia megarhynchos* **Nightingale**
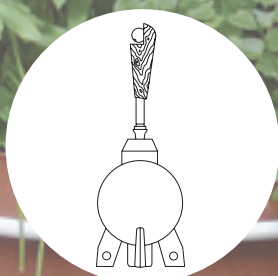
13. *Sitta cashmirensis* **Kashmir Nuthatch**

14. *Passer domesticus* **House Sparrow**

(not in photo)
Turdus merula
Blackbird

(not in photo)
Cuculus canorus
Cuckoo