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BECOMING BIRD: SOUND, IMAGE, MOVEMENT

By B. Lea Cox

“Becoming Bird: Sound, Image, Movement” explores how birds encounter the world, how humans perceive birds, and ways in which we as humans might take the point of view of birds, and thereby enter a different consciousness of that world we share with these “other” beings who were living on Earth long before we humans arrived. We have never known a world without birds; however, we are now the major cause of one of the major mass extinctions of life forms on this planet, one indicator being the disappearance of bird species. Many of the extinctions and declines are not even noticed because humans are less and less connected with the sounds, smells, sights, and subtle clues of the natural world, as our hearing is increasingly mediated by electronic communication devices. Hearing the sound of birds is one of the ways that humans can still be awakened with wonder and delight to the world outside of human-produced electronic and mechanical sounds. Becoming Bird is a triptych connecting three separate art pieces, in different media and modes of experience, unified by bird song: direct experience in nature, a virtual experience on a website, and an indoor sound art installation and concert. The direct experience is an audio tour of the UCSC Arboretum from a bird’s point of view, where the experience of walking through a scientific botanical garden has been transformed to an encounter between humans, birds, and imagination. Participants are directed to make marks in a field notebook and they are interviewed afterward to see if their perception of birds has changed. The direct outdoor experiences of the participants are transformed into public collaborative art by the creation of a virtual tour of the Arboretum on a website, where the drawings and interviews collected from the participants are displayed. The third experience is an indoor sound art performance where a musical composition made up of birdsong samples is played in a music concert hall; an art installation provides a small room where the music composition is linked to images. My thesis project is a unique opportunity to research both the scientific and the cultural aspects of birds, to reassemble this information into an immersive artistic synthesis of visual and sound art, direct observation, scientific knowledge and new media technology, critically but playfully questioning human-bird relationships.

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