

Site Fidelity: Rock Pigeons and Refugees

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Via a case study of a recent artwork, this essay presents diverse responses around the human desire to locate ourselves spatially and emotionally within meaningful and adaptive environs. Three key words in this discussion include lament, longing, and belonging. A *lament* can be described as a moving and demonstrable expression of sorrow, mourning or regret for something lost. *Longing* can be defined as a powerful and persistent yearning or desire—one that cannot be fulfilled or attained and that focuses on something remote or immaterial. *Belonging* is the human instinct to affiliate with other people, communities, places, structures and objects that hold emotional or spiritual significance. Belonging also signifies a connection and relationship between an individual and their habitat. The consequences of belonging or not belonging can be evidenced through feelings, decisions and actions and might also reflect social status amongst a group or in a community.

Human and Animal

The wild rock pigeons' cohabitation with humans 10 000 years ago triggered a unique and mutually beneficial association, allowing safe shelter for bird and—a curious turn here for our predatory species—unprecedented carrier utility for human. In his book *Why look at Animals?* John Berger writes:

to suppose that animals first entered the human imagination as meat or leather or horn is to project a nineteenth-century attitude backwards across the millennia. Animals first entered the imagination as messengers and promises . . . the choice of a given species as magical, tameable and alimentary was originally determined by the habits, proximity and 'invitation' of the animal in question. (4)

The enduring relationship between bird and human has evolved in response to the pigeon's homing instinct, evidencing an empathetic bond driven by an urge to continually re-establish contact. Homing is an innate instinct to return to known territory via new and unknown environments. The contemporary bird / fancier relationship reveals layers of belonging, between animal, human, and place. It more abstractly reflects a desire to be local, to belong within an emotional and spatial system, confronting and navigating tenuous places and experiences.

Homing and Home

My Grandfather lived in Normanhurst, a northern Sydney suburb, on a half-acre block. His home was modest yet was surrounded by a market garden, remarkable in scale and fertility, producing vegetables as well as eggs from various poultry species. The garden's function was food, and it fed the extended family. Mr McLeod lived next door, also on a half-acre block and in an equally modest home, from which he had built loft structures that extended out to fill the garden space. At different times of the day he would release hundreds of pigeons from these lofts. From a young age the schedule of release became mnemonically embedded in me, so that I would pre-empt the liberation to ensure I was in my grandfather's garden to watch the birds spiral up into the suburban sky. I sensed that my grandfather was bemused yet respectful of his neighbour's intense occupation with his birds, which unlike his own bent on cultivation excellence, was founded on a unique relationship between human, bird, space, and time.

Pigeon fanciers typically inhabit suburban environments, establishing the birds' lofts amongst the conglomerate nest of human habitation, such as sheds, carports, BBQ areas and clotheslines. From this domestic grotto, fanciers may travel impressive distances to reach so-called wilder places, to undertake mass 'liberations' albeit temporary, releasing their birds to find their way back home. Each bird's instinct of site fidelity sits counter to the fancier's instinct to reconnect to wild environs. It is a symbiotic relationship drawn from divergent urges of belonging and freedom.

Site and Belonging

First, a word from Ursula Heise's work *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet: The Environmental Imagination of the Global*:

The idea of the "cultural construction" of place similarly revolves around the assumption that places are not simply given in advance of human understanding, but its emphasis lies more on the cultural practices of particular communities in creating them than on the mechanisms of capitalist economies. Both the characters of particular places and the modes of belonging to them are defined by human intervention and cultural history more than by natural processes, cultural constructionists argue; local citizenship, far from coming naturally, is painstakingly established and safeguarded through a multiplicity of political, social, and cultural practices and procedures. (46)

Intrigued by Heise's potential for established and itinerant communities to invest shared locations with symbols and rituals of 'belonging', in 2011 I developed a series of artworks that explored an individual and collective desire to locate habitat, examining a longing to reconnect to some sense of 'home', including the absorption of public space within multiple layers of ownership, and unstable environments / conditions that provoke longing and systems of nostalgia for a habitat lost. These works reveal bespoke ecosystems and act as a visualising agency of humans (at times via the capability of homing birds) within a locational / emotional feedback loop. In part, the theoretical basis of the works springs from Thierry de Duve's observation that 'Sculpture in the last twenty years is an attempt to reconstruct the notion of site from the standpoint of having acknowledged its disappearance'. (*Ex Situ* 25)

Shifting slightly from the ideas in *Ex Situ*, *Iteration: Again* aimed to transform the experience of place for a moment in time. A series of 13 public art commissions by Contemporary Art Tasmania involving twenty-two Australian and international artists took place across Tasmania between September and October 2011. Each commission performed temporary interventions or responses to public sites, environments and buildings, re-working the artwork over a period of time.

For *Iteration: Again* I produced *Homing*, a series of temporary mediations of public space exploring the multiple experiences of instinct, desire, and longing to be local, to belong, and how humans frame a sense of place in relation to a sense of home. *Homing* occupied and activated Mathers Lane, an intimate laneway in the Hobart CBD that could be considered a non-space, functioning as a thoroughfare, rather than being a site of destination. It does not reflect placelessness, however, as the lane maintains an authentic connection to the locality, with arterial links between diverse community organisations, clubs, shops and cafes.

Mathers Lane is loaded with visual textures, evoking a sense of theatricality and triggering associations with urban stage sets and film environments with banners and posters advertising *West Side Story*, *Sweet Charity*, *Romeo & Juliet*. Drawing on these contextual qualities, the artwork served as a fluctuating proposition of ownership in the site. In the months preceding the installation, I became affiliated with the Moonah Homing Pigeon Association, situated in a northern suburb of Hobart, as well working with a pigeon fancier in Devonport, in the North of Tasmania. I attended Wednesday-night club meetings, accompanied club members on remote mass liberation exercises, and visited their pigeons' lofts. These diverse engagements enabled me to research the layers of care, attention, organisation, and recording involved in the maintenance of the birds. It also provided insight into the layers of meaning and sentiment embedded in the processes of raising birds and encouraging their propensity for site fidelity. The term 'site fidelity' is typically used to describe those migratory birds that return to the

same breeding ground each year. It is commonly used amongst fanciers to illustrate their birds' homing instinct back to the loft, and it is a term that I use poetically to frame observations of site, attachment to place, loss and desire within my work.



Fig. 1 Pigeon Camera. Lucy Bleach 2011

Homing – Iteration: Again

Before dawn on Sunday, 18th September a purple neon sign of a pigeon in flight erected in the Mathers Lane way is switched on. At 6.15 a.m. a HIAB crane truck performs a 24-point turn in an attempt to back into the laneway. It is cold and growing lighter as people assemble to watch a dawn service: the delivery of set pre-cast concrete steps, lowered into the centre of the lane. For a brief time the still dawn is interrupted by the crane's hydraulic noises that echo in the throat of the laneway.



Fig. 2 *Homing, iteration 1 – monument, step delivery.* Lucy Bleach 2011

Once the steps are placed and the truck departed, the laneway falls silent and the steps reveal themselves as a new entity in the space.

Constructed from grey concrete with four risers up to a modest landing, they simulate the entrance to an imaginary interior place, describing a threshold between public and private space. Throughout histories and within diverse cultures steps have been utilised by individuals, groups and communities as communal meeting spaces, places of protest and public address . . . they imply repeated congregation, and as such they become spaces owned by the public (the tenement steps in *Sesame Street* come to mind). They describe a monument to home, a physical testament to belonging via individual and community activation. The steps equally reference the public pedestal, installed to support a heroic sculpture, placed strategically to be observed, commemorated, and notoriously defecated on by populations of local pigeons. Like pigeons, humans gather on steps, and as such the steps operate as a surrogate and temporary nest.

A second HIAB truck backs into the entrance to deliver a St Vincent De Paul clothing bin, viewers deposit unwanted clothing, an action that is continued throughout the week, by anonymous members of the public. The steps / pedestal become a point of deposition / collection, in a way ‘feathering’ the temporary nest. They also become an intimate public landmark, a site to return to, the act of donation operating as a mnemonic device, to return, to linger, to inhabit.



Fig. 3 *Homing – iteration 1 monument.* Robert Harrison. 2011

At dawn on the following Saturday, the donated clothes are removed from the bin, the truck returns to remove the bin, leaving the steps in the laneway with the fluttering neon pigeon sign, arousing (as Edward E. Casey suggests) a point or space in laneway site for reminiscence:

Rather than functioning strictly as reminders or as records of the past . . . reminiscencia are objects that act as inducers of reminiscence. What counts here is not the accuracy with which they reproduce or suggest the past (as it would in the very different historical reconstruction): instead it is their special aptitude for arousing a reminiscent state of mind that matters. (110)

On the same day as the clothing bin is removed, tables with sewing machines and sewing equipment are set up inside the window front of the ‘Save the Children’ second hand clothing shop, which fronts the lane and looks straight out onto the steps. The clothes—embedded with the touch and indirect sentiment of their previous owners—are sorted into piles of colour, ready to be transformed.



Fig. 4 *Homing – iteration 2 dislocation.* Lucy Bleach 2011

Throughout the next week I work with a local costume designer to design and fabricate a multi-piece cloak from the clothes collected in the clothing bin. Integral to this process is the participation of members from the ‘Stitch’ group, a program established by Centacare for female refugees. The program is designed to assist women who have endured extreme experiences of dislocation, in the process of relocation, to learn new language skills, along with sewing techniques, cultural customs, and to make connections within a new community / home.

Over the week these garments are cut—fragmented—removed from their form and rearranged by hands metaphorically undergoing a similar process. The garments carry the nostalgia of a previous life / site, and the multiple sentiments of transformation become imbued in their re-stitching and re-fabrication.



Fig. 5 *Homing – iteration 2 dislocation.* Lucy Bleach 2011

The fragments of clothing link to a form of nostalgia that Susan Stewart refers to as existing as bookends of longing to an experience:

Nostalgia is a sadness without an object, a sadness which creates a longing that of necessity is inauthentic because it does not take part in lived experience. Rather, it remains behind and before that experience. Nostalgia, like any form of narrative, is always ideological: the past it seeks has never existed except as narrative, and hence, always absent, that past continually threatens to reproduce itself as a felt lack. (23)

This extended sense of longing, in terms of experience, site and precious object, I have discussed with many of the fanciers in Moonah and in Devonport the process of identifying and naming their birds. Each fancier knows every bird in their loft (and they may have hundreds). They know them by breed, form, markings and behaviour. Each fancier knew a time when they named their best or favourite pigeons. These would be the fastest or most enduring over long distances. Invariably each fancier experienced an occasion when the bird did not return, and from this moment of loss, ceased naming their birds, relying on more detached frameworks of identification.

By the end of the week the cloak, divided into seven coloured fragments, is complete, with each fragment attached to a hanger and hung inside the window front. All residue of the sewing process is removed from the shop, returning it to its usual spatial arrangement. The cloak is waiting to be worn, accumulating a piece each day for seven days, by a performer who will sing laments in the laneway. I wanted to find an incredible singer to perform laments in the laneway, one who would make me feel sorrow, and make the laneway a sorrowful space but in a beautiful way. I wanted to find someone who could vocalise what they might have lost, to feel their grief and know that in a greater sense it sits in relation to belonging. This singer needed to be from another place, not local, to inhabit the laneway for a week then be gone. A scene from the film *Mulholland Drive* (2001) keeps coming to mind. It's where a Latino songstress gives an astounding performance of Roy Orbison's classic *Crying*, in Spanish. I Google the scene, find the singer's name, Rebekah Del Rio, and invite her to travel from LA to sing laments in a laneway in Hobart as part of an artwork, wearing a garment made from fragments of second hand-clothing by recently settled female refugees . . . incredibly, not only does she respond, but accepts (it was the *Stitch* ladies who resonated for her).

6 a.m. on Saturday, 1st October, a growing group assembles around the laneway, observing the steps and neon pigeon sign. From a distance, out of sight, a song can be heard drifting into the lane. It grows louder as the voice gets closer and soon we can see a figure approaching the steps from the end of the laneway.



Wearing normal clothes but with a weird kind of hood, the singer climbs the steps to commence another song, *Crying*, in Spanish. For the next seven days the singer sings laments in Mathers Lane, at incrementally later times in the day, the cloak accumulating with each performance (and diminishing from the shop window front), the audience growing each day to hear the laments.



At dusk on the following Saturday, the singer, wearing the full cloak, is followed by a large crowd, as she traverses the various routes that connect to the lane way, singing the diverse laments performed during the week. She finishes the laments with the signature

Crying, which she sings as she walks away from the laneway through a covered arcade, dropping her cloak to the ground at the end of her song and walking off into the distance. At dawn the following morning the truck with the HIAB crane returns to the lane to remove the steps, leaving the neon pigeon to remain.

With the singer, her laments and the steps removed from the site, the lone neon pigeon creates a nest, evocative of Bachelard's sites of nested dreaming, through their resonant and lingering vibration.

A nest-house is a natural habitat of the function of inhabiting. For not only do we come back to it, but we dream of coming back to it, the way a bird comes back to its nest . . . The sign of return marks an infinite number of daydreams, for the reason that human returning takes place in the great rhythm of human life, a rhythm that reaches across the years and through the dream, combats all absence. An intimate component of faithful loyalty reacts upon the related images of nest and house. (*Poetics of Space* 99)

Homing is an innate instinct to return to known territory via new and unknown environments; to experience *dislocation* sets in train the process of finding a new home.

In her book *When Species Meet* (2007) Donna Haraway, a key theorist on the topic of animal / human relations, considers companion species (as opposed to the companion animal), which include a variety of compositions that 'makes life for humans what it is and vice versa'. As part of my association with the pigeon fanciers, I asked them to photograph the environment associated with keeping their birds. Over the course of a month, the fanciers emailed images of lofts, pigeons, trophies, electronic-tracking devices, timing-clocks, leg rings, feed troughs, droppings, carrier baskets, framed photographs on mantle-pieces and miniscule details of the club house . . . everything that describes the activity of homing, the community relationship between fancier and fancier, and the intense relationship between fancier and bird.

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Once the steps have been removed from the Mathers Lane site, black and white photocopies of the fanciers' photos are applied like billposters to the wall (in proximity to the neon sign). The prints accrue each day, accumulating like guano, layering visual clues to the complex relationship of human and bird, including the wilder places where the birds are released during mass liberations. The posters transcend their print form and become a tactile growth on the architecture surface of the space.



Fig. 7 *Homing – iteration 4 release*. Lucy Bleach 2011

At dawn on Sunday, 8th October, the last day of the artwork and the *Iteration: Again* event, a trailer backs into the laneway. The trailer is purpose-built and contains multiple cages filled with pigeons from the Moonah Pigeon association. The trailer is positioned on the spot previously taken by the steps, inhabiting the lane for the course of the day. A microphone is placed in the internal space of the trailer in the centre of the cages, picking up the range of bird cooing, scratching, fluttering and so on. The microphone is connected to a speaker that sits on top of the fire escape stairs, above the laneway, and amplifies these sounds beyond the site, out into the air to be heard some distance away.

The laneway for a short time becomes a vibrating throat, filled with pigeon cooing and human breath, as passers-by pause to absorb the growing throb of anticipated flight. The laneway echoes Derrida's porous zone of animal behavior and instinct:

The divisions between all animals constitute a 'move from "the ends of man," that is, the confines of man, to the "crossing of borders" between man and animal. Crossing borders or the ends of man I come or surrender to the animal—to the animal in itself, to the animal in me and the animal at unease with itself . . .' (*The Animal That Therefore I Am*, 372)

At 4 p.m. that afternoon a crowd gathers at the laneway's entrance watching, listening and anticipating as the trailer's load coos rhythmically.

At 4:15 p.m. the cage doors are opened and the birds spill out, spiraling up into the tight chasm of laneway and office buildings, into the sky to fly home to Moonah, arriving nine minutes later to their lofts and their fanciers.



Fig. 8 *Homing – iteration 4 release.* Lucy Bleach 2011

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