



Annie Dunning *SAPSUCKER SOUNDS*

NOVEMBER 19 - DECEMBER 19, 2015

DREAM OF FLYING

One might say that the job of an artist is not to show what the world really *is*, but that the world *is becoming*. One function of an artwork might be to highlight not only the pleasures and the limitations, but also the very fact of human sensory perception – to reflect back to us our distinctive habits of seeing, listening, or touching. One could say that we know the world through our bodies, which are of the world. Yet we perceive differently from each other, from other creatures, and we perceive differently from our ancestors. The modern city, for example, has become essentially a visual experience rather than an auditory experience; sight is stimulated incessantly whereas we have become desensitized to our auditory environment. The human sensorium evolves.

Science has recognized that so-called human traits and capacities are found widely throughout the animal world. Elephants mourn. Certain primate species demonstrate self-awareness. Ravens are capable of facial recognition. New studies to this effect appear in the media frequently. Some theorists invoke evolution and argue for a “deep continuity among human beings and animals” in terms of sentience, cognition and subjectivity.¹ Clearly, to assign human perception a place of privilege seems less and less defensible.

If artworks can reveal how we perceive – to name only one thing that artworks can do – they can certainly invite us to consider how other species perceive. In writing about our bodily response to art, Simon O’Sullivan describes art as “...a portal, an access point, to another world (our world experienced differently), a world of impermanence and interpenetration, a molecular world of becoming. ... Art opens us up to the non-human universe that we are part of.”² Annie Dunning’s work provides just such an access point.

Dunning’s sound-sculptures translate physical traces left by a woodpecker, the Yellow Bellied Sapsucker, into forms that are visually and aurally available to humans. A tree trunk dotted with holes from a bird’s search for food was found by Dunning, brought into her studio, and then used as source material – activated by means of electronics and machines to once again produce sound, now for a human audience. Electricity powers her sound-sculptures, but the process is fully analog. More precisely, it is indexical, in other words sound is linked to its source by an actual connection, in the same way that smoke is an index of fire, my footprint in sand is an index of my foot, or exposed photographic film is an index of reflected light. Dunning takes marks made by a woodpecker and “plays back” those marks as if the tree trunk were the perforated paper from an early 20th century player piano. Indexicality here is a guarantee of authenticity.

1 Matthew Calarco, *Thinking Through Animals: Identity, Difference, Indistinction* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015), 6 – 13.

2 Simon O’Sullivan, “The Aesthetics of Affect: Thinking Art Beyond Representation,” *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities* 6, no. 3 (2001): 128.

Hearing the reproduction of woodpecker rat-a-tat-tats in a gallery, the human spectator-listener is asked to think about the gap that exists between the perceptual world of the woodpecker and that of humans. One world is lived largely above ground, contains insect-bearing trees, and doesn’t distinguish between nature and culture; the other contains music boxes and record players, road signs and wilderness parks. Dunning invites us to consider this species gap, to consider a non-human perspective.

As children we imagine and play-act what it is like to really *be* an animal, maybe a bird or a bug. We dream of flight or other non-human powers. We bridge the species gap through imagination. Beatrix Potter stories present a humanized animal world, as does so much literature for young children. Later, as adults, we might only dream of animals – nighttime encounters with creatures harbouring their own intentions – menacing predators or kindly pets. Animals loom large in the unconscious.

Animal daydreams may be abandoned as we become adults, but I believe some big questions remain: Could I gain knowledge of the world by adopting the point of view of the other? What does the world of another look and sound and feel like? What would it mean to run like a cheetah or swim like a whale? What are the limits of my body? Is the mind reducible to physical bodily processes?³

Estonian-born biologist Jakob von Uexküll (1864 – 1944) created the concept of *Umwelt*, which refers to the distinctive perceptual life-world of an organism. In a famous example from his writing, a tick is described as possessing only a few avenues of perception: a general sensitivity to light in the skin, a sense of smell, a sense of temperature, and a sense of touch. Despite being blind and deaf, the tick is able to locate its prey and complete its life cycle. Circumscribed from a human point of view perhaps, its world is nonetheless complete. Uexküll’s concept of *Umwelt* encourages a view of animal sentience that is less restricted, de-centers human perception, and recognizes animal subjectivity.⁴

Dunning’s work summons us to return to thinking about our interactions with animals. She encourages curiosity about the creatures with whom we share this world yet have sensoria so different from ours that we could say that they really do inhabit different worlds. Human-animal relations are changing and often problematic. Dunning’s *Sapsucker Sounds* provides an ethical reminder that we can only begin to fathom the perceptual worlds of others.

Jeffrey Langille, 2015
Dawson City, Yukon

Jeffrey Langille is an artist who lives and teaches in Dawson City.

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3 Thomas Nagel, “What Is It Like to Be a Bat?” *The Philosophical Review* 83, no. 4 (Oct., 1974): 435-450.

4 Jakob von Uexküll, *A Foray Into the Worlds of Animals and Humans; with, A Theory of Meaning*, trans. Joseph D. O’Neil (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2010).



Annie Dunning *Sapsucker Sounds*

November 19 - December 19, 2015

ODD Gallery

In the exhibition *Sapsucker Sounds*, sculptures are based on a found log, filled with holes made by a Yellow Bellied Sapsucker. This is a common type of woodpecker that lives throughout most of Canada. The sculptures are attempts to interpret the mark making left behind by the bird as though it was a recording. Sometimes woodpeckers hammer to find food; other times it is a form of communication. They will also hammer on metal objects we leave in the environment such as road signs, perhaps because they advantageously amplify their drumming. It is clear that we influence the animals we live in proximity with, how in turn are we affected? This installation of sound sculptures offers an opportunity to experience sound generated by a conflation of human and woodpecker activities

-Annie Dunning, 2015

BIOGRAPHY

Annie Dunning maintains a multidisciplinary practice, based in sculpture and installation. Her work also includes mail art, collaboration, book works, video and sound work. She holds a BFA from Mount Allison University, NB and an MFA from the University of Guelph, ON. With support from the Canada Council for the Arts and the Ontario Arts Council she has produced and shown work across Canada and abroad. She lives and works in Guelph ON.

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Images: Annie Dunning, *Magic Lantern* (detail), 2015 (cover), *Record*, wood, brass, electronics, 2014 (back)

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