

## FLYWAY: Field Guide

### **Background** *is not the foreground*

The earth, or nature, often gets thought of as a background, as surroundings, as an environment, as ground, as what was always there, before we built our cities on top of it, meddling and interfering. There is an implicit hierarchy in the culture / nature binary: nature is the fuzzy thing in the background.

### **Birds** *familiars? Or strangers?*

Birds are as much in our imagination as they are in our environment. They are symbols for us, they seem familiar. We like to imagine them flying free, “out there”, as emblems of peace and freedom. But birds are not only eagles and doves. They are also dodos, pigeons and gulls.

### **Boundaries** *where “over there” begins*

Where does nature begin? If what humans do to the planet (tracking, emitting carbon) comes back to haunt our supposedly separate and protected enclaves, how can we speak of the wilderness as being “outside” of the urban? Where does this place end and that begin?

### **City** *here*

Do you fence off an area, decide the city is within it, and ordered, whereas everything outside it is wild?

### **Ecomysticism** *saying one thing but meaning your mother*

Can we take seriously the idea of mother nature, of a meaning that emanates from the earth? Is there a place of perfect harmony waiting for us, if we only get in tune with it? Does the earth radiate a sense of belonging? Or is this just a story we tell?

### **End, the** *is it already too late?*

Imagine being nostalgic towards our present way of life, because its destruction is already ensured. We know that all this is going to be destroyed. The planet is heating up. Sea levels are rising. Look around: all that you see (cars turning corners, people crossing at the lights, the activities of a sublimely complex metropolis) will soon be the past.

### **Flight** *measuring as the swallow flies*

Boundaries are open to birds. They do not acknowledge fences, borders, doors, edges. They are moved by a different sort of authority. What might this be?

### **Flock** *birds of a feather...*

What would it be like to be part of a flock of migrating birds? What cues would you perceive to help you stay with the group? Does the group have a common goal? Does it know what it is searching for?

### **Flyway** *a migratory path for birds*

A flyway is a flight path taken by birds. Flyways span across continents and across oceans. The East Asian-Australasian Flyway, one of nine major migratory bird flyways around the globe, extends from within the Arctic Circle in Russia and Alaska, southwards through East and Southeast Asia, to Australia and New Zealand, encompassing 22 countries. Migratory waterbirds share this flyway with 45% of the world's human population.

### **Focus** *what you do with binoculars*

Focus is what allows us to select what is in the background, and what is in the foreground.

### **Foreground** *is not the background*

If there were no background or foreground, there would be a tension between multiple planes, none of which would have priority. No stable hierarchy. No clear point of focus. No privileged layer.

### **Glitter** *a layer of magic*

How many ways are there of putting glitter on things, of giving them magic? The answer to this question need not be literal. A myth, a story, a narrative about the earth: these are also ways of layering the world with glitter and sparkle. (But isn't glitter often lurid, cheap and tacky?)

### **Journey** *the forces that push us forward*

What makes us think we are on a journey? What provides us with goals and motivation, what leads us on?

### **Magic** *happens*

Sometimes it is easier to believe in magical explanations of natural phenomena than it is to grasp the mind-boggling complexity of the universe.

### **Mediation** *the evolution will not be televised*

Perhaps we like to imagine the possibility of direct contact with nature, the experience of an authentic encounter. Joining together as part of an organic whole, unmediated by frames and screens, without the artificial, processed things of culture that we are usually surrounded by.

### **Mystery** *can we imagine that which we know?*

Geolocators reveal to us that single birds cross entire continents without stopping. Scientific methods demonstrate the existence of these epic journeys to us. Yet the traversal of vast spaces by these tiny bodies remains somehow incomprehensible. What do we imagine happens to the birds when they are not with us? How do we imagine their movements through the sky?

### **Myth** *a story which grants the world meaning*

To explain the disappearance of swallows in the Winter, the ancient Greeks once hypothesised that the birds hibernated underwater during the cold months. The idea of yearly, long-distance migrations, which we now know birds to undertake, was unfathomable. We have outgrown this particular myth, but have we outgrown the drive to myth-making?

### **Nature** *loves to hide*

Where is “nature”? Perhaps it gets thought of as a background, as something stable, as the world which precedes culture and artifice. Chaos and instability are created, then, when nature can no longer be treated as the background, if it becomes an object in the foreground, a thing as changeable as any other. It is disturbing to realise that things we have treated as inert constants (the rhythms of weather, of climate) have been moved and changed by us. But perhaps the idea of a pure, unalterable, natural nature was always just a fantasy.

### **Optics** *bringing what's over there here*

Things come into focus. Things fall out of focus, leaving just patches of colour.

### **Out there** *is there any there there?*

In the city, you often think of the wilderness being “out there”. The city seems to be a regulated, condensed little jewel placed on the large, expansive cushion of the countryside, of nature. But what if we can't talk about nature being “out there”? What if it's here too?

### **Parks** *where urban creatures do their exercise*

Parks aren't nature. They are designed spaces, created to give places of recreation to city dwellers.

### **Perception** *all the better to see you with?*

Binoculars bring things closer. Music in your ears heightens emotion. But they both act as forms of sensory deprivation. Does augmented perception make you more powerful, or just confused?

### **Plane trees** *Platanus × acerifolia*

The trees that line the streets of Melbourne's CBD are London Planes. They were imported from Europe. London Planes line the streets of cities around the world, including Paris, New York, Mannheim, London and Nanjing. They are valued for their pollution-resistance. Their presence is the product of decisions by town planners.

### **Rhiannon** *rings like a bell through the night*

Songs are calls. Music draws you on, making you undergo transformations. You don't remain yourself, yet you don't become completely other. Music creates an in-between state, a state of becoming: becoming-Stevie, becoming-Rhiannon, becoming-bird.

### **Soundtrack** *a layer of noise-magic*

The noises of the city, the unplanned, unordered sounds, can be heard over the soundtrack. Is the soundtrack a civilising force, an ordered coating, through which the wildness of the city bleeds? But wouldn't this mean that the city is something wild?

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## Strange strangers!

Channel your vision and follow the golden wings.

There is no background.

There is no foreground.

The interdependence theorem does not reduce everything to a level of sameness. It raises everything to the level of wonder.

Utterly unmysterious and unspeakingly miraculous.

There are 12 000 kilometres between Australia and Siberia.

Existence is always coexistence.

Intimacy is strangeness.

A song. Rhiannon. Take us to the sky.

*FLYWAY* is a response to the existence of migratory birds and the mystifying, ancient, epic journeys they continue to make each year. Flying thousands of kilometres non-stop, their places to rest and feed are being consumed. Moving from place to place, between worlds, they are invisible to many. But, there are the committed few who illuminate their plight, protect their sites and hospitably welcome them as they make their way between homes at two ends of the earth.

Investigating the social and ecological mesh we form, *FLYWAY* is framed by the humans, birds and inspiring forces engaged in this phenomenal act of moving onwards together. Artist Elizabeth Dunn mapped a path along Australia's east coast, researching birds, birders and their shared spaces. She was guided by generous individuals sharing their birding passion, knowledge and often their homes.

A live, cinematic migratory walk through the city, *FLYWAY* uses video, sound, binoculars and performance to point to our mediated relationship with “nature”. Drawing on ecological philosophy and personal and collective mythologies, it navigates urban spaces with altered perception.

Cousins! In the midst of our strife there are signs of hope.

Alone and together.

We face tomorrow...

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In association with APHIDS

In partnership with Birdlife Australia

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This work was developed through Next Wave Kickstart  
This project has received financial assistance from the Queensland Government through Arts Queensland.  
Thanks to Greg Barber MLC State Member of Parliament for Northern Metropolitan Region - Leader of Victorian Greens, Birdlife Australia, Lok Lok Dumpling House, Mercat Cross Hotel, Nomads Backpackers, Biryani House, Flagstaff Convenience Store, Middy's Data & Electrical, Water Front City Docklands, Ashley Dyer, Madeleine Flynn & Tim Humphries, Fiona Blandford, Golo Maurer, and all the participating bird conservationists and volunteers.