



ANNIE DUNNING
ECHO / LOCATIONS
21 MAY-4 SEPTEMBER 2016



EAR ON THE WAVE, INK ON THE SPORE

In conversation with Annie Dunning

Over the course of a decade, Annie Dunning has explored the limits of an anthropocentric environment through projects which combine curiosity and playfulness. Her sculpture and installation often includes audio and kinetic elements, amplifying modes of productivity that can be found in the behaviours of other organisms. For *Air Time*, she crafted flutes to be worn by homing pigeons and recorded their in-flight performance. In the recent body of works entitled *Sapsucker Sounds*, Dunning reinterpreted the marks made by a woodpecker as audio-kinetic sculptures. At the core of her work is the search for a form of communication that is independent of language, a form or agency that is not merely our own.

Echo / Locations marks the gallery premiere of Dunning's latest work. The title of the exhibition is a reference to echolocation — a form of way of wayfinding that is practiced by both humans and animals. This process allows one to navigate through their surroundings by parsing echoes for crucial information about the objects in their vicinity. Independent of vision, echolocating can help one to understand scale, and risk, while also serving as a useful tool to communicate across distances and incidentally between species.

Central to the exhibition is *Cochlea*, an audio installation that draws from the experience of listening “to the ocean” by holding a shell to one’s ear. The spiral of the glass shell mirrors the shape of the inner ear organs from which the sculpture borrows its name. In both *Cavities* and *Spectre*, we encounter a series of marks made by both birds and fungi, each suggesting a ghostly form otherwise invisible to the human eye. With each of these new works, Dunning introduces a poetic shift in material and a fresh perspective on the hidden spaces and habits of other species. In the following interview, Dunning explains how her work has been influenced by watching what other living things do.

-Crystal Mowry, Senior Curator

CM Not so long ago we had a bit of correspondence on the nuances that separate collaboration from modes of production that engage the efforts of others. It made me wonder whether I consider conceptual collaboration and physical collaboration to be of equal value and whether one must knowingly embrace co-production to legitimately claim the title of collaborator. Your work over the last decade might be seen as series of attempts to understand the limits of co-production, particularly with other species. Was there a particular event or observation that started you on this path?

AD Collaboration is a murky term! Do the roles of the contributing parties have to be equal? Consensual? At what point does collaboration become co-authorship? Navigating these points, even with a human collaborator, can be tricky. What I like about this term is the spirit of cooperation and inclusivity it conveys; it gives value to the contribution of the other. I like to think of our relationship with other species as an adaptive collaboration: species developing alongside one another and mutually influencing the developments of one another. If I have to choose, I believe I value conceptual collaboration more. I have co-authored art projects with human collaborators but never with another animal species. This isn't to say that collaboration with an animal isn't possible; I believe it is.

While I was working on my project *Air Time*, I was doing a lot of research about pigeons. I learned that scientists classify pigeons and other creatures that thrive in a human-built environment as “cultural followers”. This term really captured my interest because it puts other species in a very passive role. I wanted to explore the other side of the equation and look at them from the perspective of “cultural contributor”.

CM In describing the pigeons, and by extension other non-humans, as “cultural contributors” it would seem that your process for making work also relies heavily on lateral thinking. *Air Time*, which was included in *Woodlot* (an exhibition at KWAG in 2007), makes that thinking tangible for us. The constituent parts found in *Air Time*—the flutes you modelled on historic Chinese examples, the projected footage of the pigeons wearing the flutes

in flight, a model of a pigeon wearing the wireless camera used to record the flight footage, still images and a cheeky poster featuring *Air Time*'s performers—create the impression that your research can be idiosyncratic. More importantly, we get the sense that your work is not the least bit prescriptive. You let us in on the adaptation of your ideas. Were there any harsh realities that became apparent when working with the pigeons? If so, how did it prepare you for working with birds in the future?

AD Lateral thinking is important to my process. It allows me to connect disparate ideas and build intent in the work. With *Air Time*, I thought of the lesser-used definition of “broadcast”—to scatter seeds by hand—and the more common audio definition of the word as being a bridge connecting the audio of the pigeons' performance to the experience of scattering seeds or crumbs for pigeons in a park. The audio became an anthem to elevate a lowly creature and influenced the title choice.

To make the *Air Time* recordings I (ironically) flew to BC to work with a pigeon fancier on Salt Spring Island. I met Timothy Hume on-line. He had seen documentation of my earlier work, *The Pigeon Homing Project*, and wrote to me. We kept in touch and when I was looking for someone with pigeons to work with for *Air Time*, I contacted him. Coincidentally he had plans to attend a pigeon conference in this area and came for a studio visit.

When I left for Salt Spring Island, I was prepared for a variety of potential disappointments. I wasn't sure if the flutes I had carved would actually produce any sound and I was worried that the pigeons could be distressed by the process. I was prepared to abandon the process if it seemed to be upsetting the birds. Timothy's birds were clearly well cared for and used to being handled. He showed me how to put the bird in my lap and tuck its head under the bottom of my T-shirt. The semi-darkness calms the bird, and we could work fitting the flutes onto their tail feathers while they sat calmly. The first time we put the flutes on, we just let them walk around inside the coop and get used to the new weight. The next day we put the flutes on again and released them from the rooftop. This is a regular part of their routine: they are released, they fly in a circular pattern above their home and when they are ready they



come back into the coop through a one-way door. After a few days of flights, Timothy remarked that he thought the birds were actively participating in the performance. He felt that they were competing with each other, using flight tactics to make their flutes sound louder than those of the other birds. While I personally couldn't distinguish this behaviour, I found other evidence of pigeons wanting to work with humans. Disneyland used to keep doves to release at the end of a live theatrical performance. I saw video footage of the pigeon keeper selecting birds for the show. He put the open crate on the floor of the coop and the birds fought to get in! He would then have to pull out any birds that were moulting or dirty and shut the cage before too many hopped in.

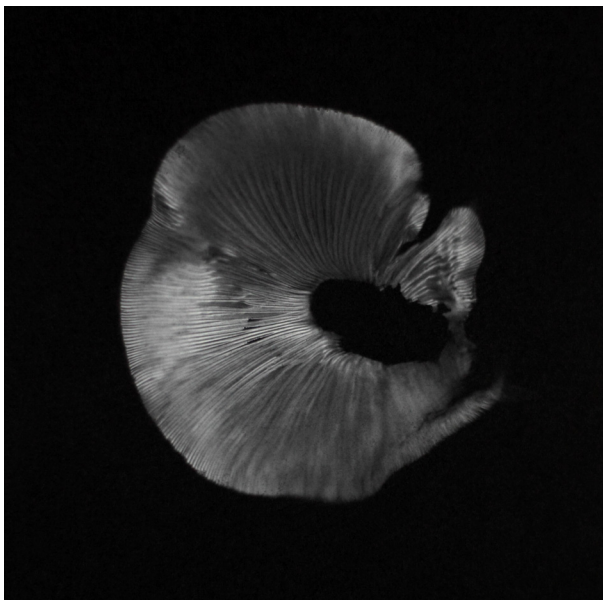
I was really lucky with *Air Time*. Other than having to abandon one flute that was too cumbersome, there were no “harsh realities” to confront. Having someone with a strong personal connection to the birds that could call off the project at any time was really important.

CM Since the completion of *Air Time* you have created works that reflect on the activities other birds, namely chickens and woodpeckers. Yellow-Bellied Sapsuckers played a particularly prominent role in the work made in 2014. In this series, aptly titled *Sapsucker Sounds*, you have created a series of sculptures based on the

marks made by the aforementioned bird on a found log. Most of the sculptures have audio-kinetic components, allowing one to see them as a suite of unlikely automatons, or mechanized approximations of bird behaviour. *Cavities*, which is an exception in the series, is included your exhibition at KWAG. The work consists of a series of aluminum castings that protrude from the gallery wall. One could be forgiven for mistaking these objects for meteorites, or material mined from the earth. The connection to the log and its cavities is levied against the suggestion of filled cavities in human teeth. This work is a great starting point for understanding how interpretation and translation function in your work. Both terms describe processes by which an idea or object shifts form, but with subtle distinctions. While interpretation describes a shift that also includes some form of clarification, translation preserves intent and meaning across different forms. Can you describe how those subtleties are honoured within your practice?

AD I have always enjoyed watching birds and they have often been a subject of my work. With the *Sapsucker Sounds* series I wanted to try to interpret the mark making of the bird as though it were a recording left behind for us to discover.

The sapsucker work was driven by an interest in acknowledging a form of communication used by woodpeckers. Sapsuckers and other woodpeckers drum on trees to communicate with other birds. As we have introduced metal objects into the environment, some woodpeckers have adapted to use resonant objects like road signs to make themselves heard. This has the potential of giving the bird a larger territory as its message carries farther. Woodpeckers do a call-and-response with their hammering and this is recreated in *Sapsucker Sounds*. When the sculpture *Record* is activated by the presence of a viewer, it taps out a rhythm on a hollow piece of wood. Across the gallery, *Road Sign* replies, banging out its own beat on the back of a custom-made metal sign. I believe there is both intent and meaning in the dialogues performed by woodpeckers, so translation (while an impossible task) is a nice way to indicate this intelligence and ingenuity. None of



CM Your mention of ingenuity and occupation make me think of the peculiar connection between Carpenter ants and *Ophiocordyceps unilateralis*, a type of fungus that can be found in tropical forests. I had first learned about this relationship when reading *Mr. Wilson's Cabinet of Wonder*, an engaging introduction to the Museum of Jurassic Technology (MJT) and paean to curiosity penned by Lawrence Weschler. The book describes a display in the MJT that depicts a Carpenter ant with a spike emerging from its head—an image that seems too strange to be anything but fantasy. We learn that the display is, in fact, rooted in reality; the earliest accounts of ants that have been parasitized by a “zombie fungus” describe the confused behavior of the host before the fruiting body of the fungus fatally exits the host’s head. The cycle of spore ingestion continues, always with the same unfortunate outcome for the ant. I remembered reading about this and realizing that I had completely underestimated the survivalist tendencies of fungi.

Our exhibition includes *Automatic Accumulation* (2016) and *Spectre* (2016), two related series that allow us to ruminate on the existence of fungal bodies and the movement of spores. References to fungi can be found in your earlier work as well, most notably in your *Foolproof Four: Superheroes of the Forest Floor* (2010) installation. While the aesthetic sensibilities embraced in the making of *Foolproof Four* differ from what can be seen in the KWAG exhibition, vestiges of a fungal “agency” are still present. In what way has your thinking about fungi shifted in the time that separates the works in question?

AD I’ve read about the “zombie fungus”! A similarly strange and fascinating (though less insidious) occurrence in the world of fungi is the idea that plants can communicate and share resources through an underground network of fungi that is being called the “fungal internet”. Trees can help smaller saplings by diverting some of their resources to them. Fungi are so mysterious; this is what draws me to them. I think of fungi as having almost supernatural characteristics, which I have explored in both *Foolproof Four: Superheroes of the Forest Floor* and the work at KWAG.

my attempts to play back the supposed recording of the found log sound anything like a real bird’s hammering. Each of the sculptures is an opportunity to spend time with an interpretation of something left behind by a bird and speculate about other ways to read the marks. Making the work was a contemplative task allowing me to spend a lot of time with one bird’s gesture. The clarification I hope that people take away from the work is a recognition of potential and ingenuity in what other animals are doing.

The *Cavities* sculptures are a slight variation because they are casts of holes made by downy, hairy and pileated woodpeckers rather than sapsuckers. These came out of a desire to physically experience spaces created by woodpeckers. The cavities are inaccessible to us but were once occupied and shaped by the bird’s activities. I also really enjoyed the repeated process of inversion between positive and negative spaces required to make the aluminum casts. The original carved hole was filled with concrete, the concrete covered with rubber, the rubber filled with wax, the wax coated in ceramic shell, and finally, the shell filled with molten aluminum.

In *Foolproof Four* I was equating edible, wild mushrooms with comic book superheroes. Both exist in a marginal space between the known and unknown. I used thousands of buttons with comic book speech bubbles and scientific descriptions on them spread over the gallery floor. Autodeliquescence (self-digestion), Telemorph, Spore Liberation and Cytoplasmic Fusion, are terms appropriated from life-cycle descriptions and reassigned as super powers inscribed on buttons. People who saw the show took buttons away with them, allowing the project to spread, spore-like, outside of the gallery walls. I think the same agency is present in *Automatic Accumulation* and *Spectre* but I have taken a more formal approach. The spore prints have a distinct photographic quality, even when they are raw spores on paper, as in *Automatic Accumulation*. Spore printing allows us a look at the movement and accumulations of spores that are usually invisible. The images have a ghostly appearance and remind me of Victorian, staged ghost photography and the desire to capture something outside of our world. With the mushroom work in *Echo / Locations* show, I was interested in a more poetic presentation and the nature of the spore being both the beginning and end of a life cycle.



CM And yet, the spore print also serves a practical purpose within scientific research. It is one of several strategies that may be used to identify a particular species of fungi. Not surprisingly, the system of creating and reading spore prints was developed in the Victorian era, springing from the same zeitgeist that cultivated Alfred Russel Wallace’s discovery of the zombie fungus and the novelty of spirit photography. As nations industrialized, a middle class emerged with a novel new resource: free time. Leisure activities, naturalist hobbies, and popular amusements that riffed on mysticism flourished during this time. Do you see your work as having an affinity with that particular era in general? Are there contemporary technologies that have opened up new, unexpected avenues for your curiosity?

AD I don’t think I have a particular affinity to the Victorian era per se, but I am drawn to the ingenuity of many hand-built mechanisms that came out of that time, and the newness of it all that allowed people to believe their eyes! As a late addition to the *Sapsucker Sounds* body of work, I made a piece called *Magic Lantern*. I looked at a lot of examples of early magic lanterns that were often made from old coffee cans and used oil lamps as their light source. Some of these were used in séances, where the projectionist would make ghosts appear. Unfamiliar with projection and moving images, Victorian audiences were more receptive to the suggestion of an apparition. My lantern uses a stove pipe as its housing and has two hand drawn slides; one that is stationary and one that moves to create the projection of a sapsucker endlessly hammering. Though the image projected has a very tactile, simple quality, the mechanism incorporates Arduino technology and circuitry instead of hand-cranked gears. I think of this piece as being in relation both to magic lantern shows and GIFs. Arduino microprocessors opened up new possibilities for me in the *Sapsucker Sounds* work, allowing the incorporation of motion sensors and wireless communication between sculptures for the first time. Working with this technology is all very new to me. Ben Grossman was critical in getting *Record* and *Road Sign* functioning the way I wanted. I really enjoy mixing the circuitry and programming with physical, analog technologies.



CM I know Ben’s expertise was also instrumental to the evolution of *Cochlea*, the sound sculpture that anchors our exhibition. *Cochlea* consists of both material and sound. The sculptural component—a large cast glass and resin snail shell buoyed by a bronze net—sits static, moored by its own weight. In contrast, the audio represents something elusive and gradual. The word “erosional” comes to mind, and here I think of your process of playing the recorded sound of waves through an aperture in the shell sculpture to create subsequent, abstract recordings. I also think of Gustaf Sobin’s observations that we, as a species, are always “resuscitating the oldest sounds”¹. Despite being a newly-minted work, the work affords us a slow reveal, an experience that seems archeological.

AD Yes, I expect that the sound experience of holding a shell to an ear is one of the oldest sounds. Sobin also notes that the external part of the human ear is referred to anatomically as *concha*. So it would seem that this form has a deep connection with experiencing sound. I wanted to build my own shell structure to play

with this sonic quality. I chose glass as an elemental material that is connected with sand, has a resonant quality, and can reveal some of the inner structure of the form. As with most sculpture, casting the shell was a long, multi-staged process. Little discoveries occur during this kind of prolonged focus that seem to confirm that the intuitive choices are right. I found that on a molecular level, glass behaves as a liquid. I was also made aware of how complex the spirals of a shell are as I struggled to reproduce them. Ben and I talked a lot about what effect the shell form has on sound. He taught me about resonant tones, and introduced me to the sound art piece *I’m Sitting in a Room* (1969) by Alvin Lucier. Lucier recorded himself reading a text in an empty room. He then replays the recording in the same space and records again. This process is repeated until the tone of the room overpowers his voice. This is the same process we used to create the sound component of *Cochlea*. There is a hole at the core of the glass shell where a small microphone can be inserted. A recording I made of ocean waves on a pebble beach was then played into the open end of the shell; the new

recording captured at the core is then passed through the form again and recorded. With each pass the sound changes. It is “erosional”; the peaks of the sound seem to wear away until only the tone of the object is left.

CM The experience of hearing *Cochlea* within the gallery makes me think of a short piece of Victorian science fiction called *The Automaton Ear* (1873). The catalyst for the plot comes when a scientist decides to take a break from his study to read in the woods. There, he is distracted by the overlapping sounds of the forest and stumbles on the following passage in his book:

As a particle of the atmosphere is never lost, so sound is never lost. A strain of music or a simple tone will vibrate in the air forever and ever, decreasing according to a fixed ratio. The diffusion of the agitation extends in all directions, like the waves in a pool, but the ear is unable to detect it beyond a certain point. It is well known that some individuals can distinguish sounds which to others under precisely similar circumstances are wholly lost. Thus the fault is not in the sound itself, but in our organ of hearing, and a tone once in existence is always in existence.²

He has an epiphany. What if it were possible to create an instrument that allows one to hear any sound ever made? I am fascinated by the poetic, if implausible, premise of this narrative. It speaks to a desire to be connected to a broader history, to exceed what we understand as mortal limits. Since *Cochlea* alludes to archeological time, I wonder if in its making you were prompted to think about time differently.

AD I wasn’t consciously thinking about time while making this work, but of the overlapping qualities we have with other animals. Maybe this is just another way of saying the same thing. Perhaps by exploring the connections we have with other creatures, however small, we are reaching back to a time when we were less removed from one another. I can certainly relate to building poetic and implausible instruments in order to have a particular sound experience!

CM And as the woodpeckers have shown us, everything is an instrument.

AD Everything is an instrument, and cultural production is not limited to humans.

IMAGES: (inside cover) *Cavities*, 2013-2016. (pages 3 & 5) Installation view of *Echo / Locations* at the Kitchener-Waterloo Art Gallery. (page 4) *Spectre 1*, 2016. (page 6) *Cochlea* (detail), 2016. All images courtesy of the artist. Photography on inside cover and pages 3, 5, & 6 by Robert McNair.

¹ Gustaf Sobin, *Luminous Debris: Reflecting on Vestige in Provence and Languedoc* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999)

² Florence McLandburgh, “The Automaton Ear”, *Scribner’s Monthly*, 5 (1873), 711 – 720. <https://www.unz.org/Pub/Century-1873apr-00711?View=PDF>. Accessed: June 1, 2016.

LIST OF WORKS

Cochlea, 2016
Cast glass, bronze, audio
152.4 x 243.8 x 243.8 cm
10 min 32 sec audio loop

Spectre 1-7, 2016
Giclee prints on Hahnemuhle paper
76.2 x 60.9 cm.

Automatic Accumulations 1-10, 2016
Shiitake mushroom spore prints on
Stonehenge paper, viewing boxes
7.6 x 27.9 x 27.9

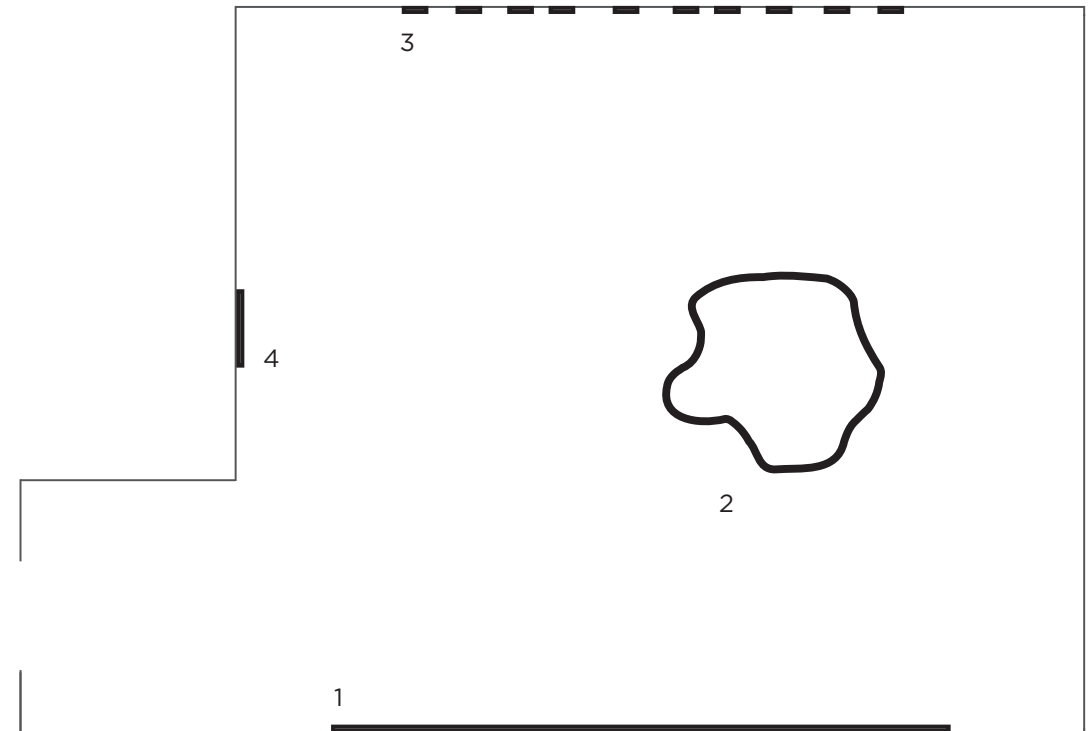
Cavities, 2013-2016
Cast aluminum
Dimensions variable

Annie Dunning maintains a multidisciplinary practice, based in sculpture and installation. Her practice also includes mail art, collaboration, book works, video and sound work. Dunning holds a BFA from Mount Allison University, NB and an MFA from the University of Guelph. 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.

The artist gratefully acknowledges the support of the Canada Council for the Arts, Ontario Arts Council and the School of Environmental Sciences at the University of Guelph.

Crystal Mowry is Senior Curator at the Kitchener-Waterloo Art Gallery.

ISBN 978-1-897543-26-9



ANNIE DUNNING **Echo / Locations** **21 May - 4 September 2016**

- 1 *Spectre 1-7*, 2016
- 2 *Cochlea*, 2016
- 3 *Automatic Accumulations 1-10*, 2016
- 4 *Cavities*, 2013-2016

All works are courtesy of the artist.

**KITCHENER-WATERLOO
ART GALLERY**

KITCHENER-WATERLOO ART GALLERY 101 Queen St N, Kitchener ON N2H 6P7 | 519-579-5860 | KWAG.CA