

Illustrator As Activist: Conservation of Endangered Species And the Role Of The Illustrator

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Abstract. An enquiry into the impact the Illustrator can have in raising awareness of the issue of conservation of endangered species of birds. This paper examines collaborations between Illustrators, Artists and organizations including Ghosts Of Gone Birds, The RSPB, Birdlife International and Operation Turtle Dove and documents the outcomes of collaborative events that were undertaken by participants mentioned earlier. The enquiry will explore how primary research conducted at the annual Spring Hunt in Malta has led to new knowledge and understanding of a challenging political issue and how further connections can be made and activities undertaken which can be catalysts for change.

Keywords. Conservation, illustrators, hunting, Malta, Birds, Endangered Species

Introduction

This paper will explore the role an illustrator /artist might play in heightening awareness of politically challenging events through the creation of images which function to highlight and draw attention to certain themes with the intention of disseminating knowledge to a wider audience and thus encouraging a further call to take action.

The focus of this investigative paper is on the extinction and conservation of endangered species of birds and ways in which the ‘illustrator / artist as messenger’ can deliver powerful visual messages to audiences who may not be fully aware of the extent of environmental harm being caused by certain human practices which result in negative impact on endangered species of birds. Through exploring a variety of approaches intended to promote awareness of the theme, including public exhibitions, publications, music events and exposure through radio and social media, this paper will examine ways in which powerful visual messages can be articulated and made available to the public in an attempt to communicate important and controversial issues.

The starting point for this investigation was my participation in an exhibition at The Rochelle Gallery in London in 2011 titled ‘The Ghosts Of Gone Birds’ and this was to be the catalyst for a trip to Malta in 2012 participating with a team of image makers, writers and musicians led by the documentary maker and curator of the exhibition, Ceri Levy, in an attempt to create a peaceful, oppositional presence to the annual Spring Hunt in which many endangered species and migrating birds originating from North Africa are maimed and killed each year. The role of the creative teams was to witness the events and to document and respond to the hunt by creating artworks inspired by the themes of extinction and conservation. These artworks and initial responses would then be developed more fully and exhibited in public spaces in the U.K.

With reference to the overarching themes, this paper will explore the wider problem of the destruction of endangered species of birds, with a particular emphasis on the decline in numbers of the Turtle Dove in the U.K and the extinction of The Passenger Pigeon in the US. Last year marked the centenary of the death of the very last Passenger Pigeon in the US – Martha, who died in a zoo in Cincinnati in 1414 [1]. There will also be examples of activities undertaken by illustrators, writers, artists and film - makers that aim to support organizations including Bird Life International. The goal of such creative collaboration and activism is to intervene in damaging practices relating to bird life and promote conservation of endangered species of birds through a range of creative events designed to create considerable exposure through a variety of methods designed for maximum impact on the public.

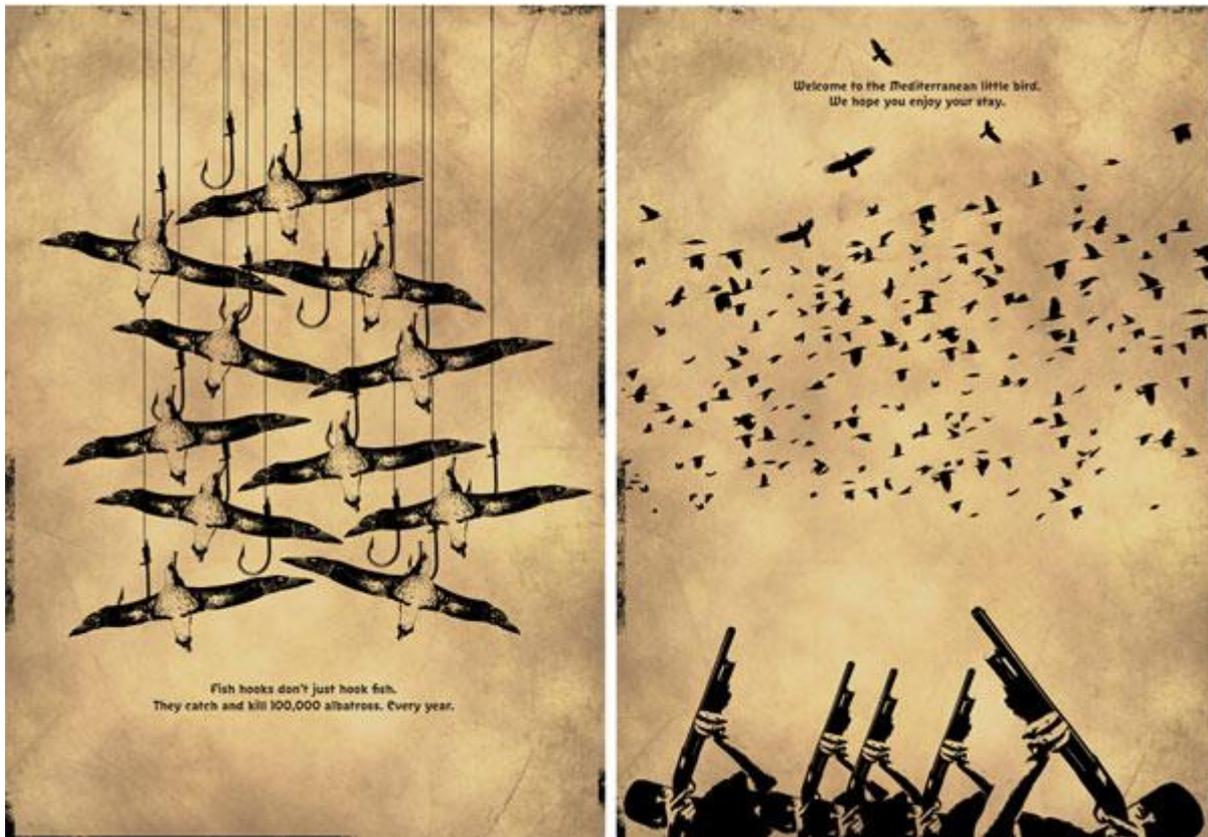


Figure I : Paul Curtis (Moose) 2011

In her book 'But is It Art? The Spirit Of Art As Activism', author Nina Felshin stipulates that 'Activist art, both in its forms and methods, is process - rather than object - or product oriented, and it usually takes the form of temporal interventions such as ...media events, exhibitions and installations. Much of it employs such mainstream media techniques such as the use of billboards.' [2] Felshin draws attention to the methods which Activist artists undertake to disseminate their messages to a wider audience and highlights the uses of media manipulation as a tool for widespread influence. She cites the many cultural and social revolutions during the 1960's as being catalysts for Activists during the following decades to undertake artistic interventions and work collaboratively to bring about change. [3]

The illustrator as political commentator and Activist

Within a broader historical context, there is a wide body of evidence available that highlights the illustrators and artists who have played important roles in response to politically challenging events and issues. These image-makers have created work that aims to raise awareness of these issues and bring them to the wider public arena, using their work as a vessel to reinforce and powerfully communicate their understanding and perspective on such themes. For example, in 1937 Picasso created his most famous painting 'Guernica' as a response to the brutal bombing of the Basque town of the same name during The Spanish Civil War and in doing so made a powerful and iconic political statement that has impacted on those viewing it not only within the context of the Reina Sofia museum in Madrid, but also through those having seen the numerous representations in the form of reproductions in books, posters and postcards.

Following the Mexican Revolution and during the 1920s and 30s and within the context of extensive murals, the artists and muralists Diego Rivera, Clemente Orozco and David Alfaro Siqueiros depicted socio-political themes pictorially. As the founder of The Mexican Muralist Movement and within the context of his murals, Rivera highlighted the contempt with which the indigenous Indians had been treated by the Spanish Conquistadors and attempted to represent and restore a national pride relating to the ancient traditions of the Indians, which had been denigrated by invading Europeans who considered their cultural and religious beliefs and practices to be of a superior nature. [4] Rivera's murals continue to impact upon wide audiences within the context of public spaces in Mexican and American Cities, and communicate his socio-political visual messages containing themes including capitalism and religion.

The German Expressionist artist Kathe Kollwitz made numerous drawings, paintings and prints depicting the human suffering of the working poor, sick and suffering during the early part of the twentieth century; living in the poorest part of Berlin, her images reflected the suffering she witnessed through her exposure to sick and poverty stricken patients who came to seek relief from her husband - a doctor, and these were to provide her with much of the content for her images. The Nazi's were opposed to the subjects and political tone of her imagery, labeled her work 'degenerate' and demanded that it be destroyed.

George Grosz became known for his satirical visual commentary that highlighted socio-political themes including class, politics and economic and power imbalances between social groups in Berlin during the earlier part of the twentieth century.

The political commentator William Hogarth made satirical etchings of challenging scenarios including his famous 'Gin Lane' created in 1751 in which the central theme is of poverty stricken London and the impact of the lifting of laws against alcohol consumption. Central to the overriding theme is that of inebriation and a mother under the influence who is incapable of caring for her young child, who is falling to a certain death.

Contemporary political cartoonists including Steve Bell and Peter Brookes have used political satire to great effect within the context of newspapers – the impact of their work is far reaching, the mediums and technologies that enable their work to be published resulting in their political messages being disseminated to very large audiences.

Since the 1980s the 'Radical Illustrator' Sue Coe has used her illustrations as a means to promote her political ideologies. These often address challenging themes including the preparation and consumption of meat – Coe has extensive experience visiting and drawing from observation in slaughter houses; she grew up next door to a slaughter house in Liverpool and spent six years in the United States documenting the hidden world of the meat industry [5]. Coe has had her work widely published within the context of books and magazines and has exhibited internationally. In her lecture at Falmouth School Of Art on November 5th 2014, she described how she has also documented other challenging themes, including prostitution, which she depicts through the use of a graphic and explicit visual language and has recently tackled the subject of the outbreaks and spread of the Ebola Virus in Western Africa. [6]

Ralph Steadman, is a prolific illustrator who has worked on a broad range of projects, including an illustrated version of Hunter S. Thompson's 'Fear and Loathing In Las Vegas' and has also produced many leftfield political cartoons throughout the years which have been published in newspapers and politically themed magazines. Steadman contributed a large body of work, consisting of more than a hundred drawings for 'The Ghosts Of Gone Birds' exhibition at The Rochelle Gallery in 2012



Figure II: Giant Hoopoe 'Extinct Boids' by Ralph Steadman 2011

Methodology

Primary research was undertaken in the form of a field trip to Malta in 2012, organized by curator and documentary maker Ceri Levy in conjunction with Birdlife Malta, in an attempt to witness and document the legal annual hunt of defined species of birds, which also impacts negatively on migratory birds passing through the country or those stopping off to nest. In addition to the permitted and legal hunt of birds, many migrating birds are illegally maimed and killed during the Spring Hunt. Groups of professional birdwatchers, members of Birdlife Malta, artists, writers, film - makers and musicians took up strategic positions in the Maltese countryside with the purpose of documenting the hunt through a range of methodologies, including capturing evidence on film, photography, drawing and writing.

Evidence of the hunt was gathered out in the field and strategies included recording numbers of rounds of gunshot and observing permissible times for hunting (some hunting occurred outside of the physical environmental boundaries legally prescribed and at times which were not permissible, as regulations required). The wearing of specific armbands by hunters signified they had paid for passes giving them permission to hunt and those hunters not wearing these were acting illegally and this activity was also documented. Photographs and film footage of injured and dead birds not on the list of permitted hunted birds were also used as proof of illegal activity.

Through participation in The Spring Hunt in Malta over a period of five days in 2012, experiential evidence was gathered which was to underpin this document. Further secondary research was undertaken utilizing resources including books and articles sourced through the Internet.

Ghosts of Gone Birds – A Creative Army

The first ‘ Ghosts Of Gone Birds ‘ exhibition opened at John Moore’s School Of Art and Design in Liverpool in 2011 and evolved in response to the challenge experienced by the conservation organization ‘ Birdlife International ‘ who needed to develop novel ways to raise awareness about the possible extinction of endangered species of birds and bring these concerns to a wider audience. Documentary film maker and Curator Ceri Levy, who was working on a film ‘ The Bird Effect ‘and had links with John Fanshawe, Senior Strategy Adviser at Birdlife International, put design and marketing strategists GOODPILOT in touch with Fanshawe with the objective of creating a powerful campaign. The next exhibition opened at The Rochelle School in 2012 and following on from its success, a new venue in which to exhibit was procured in Brighton at ONCA in 2012. There has been another, smaller scale exhibition at The Aldeburgh Beach Lookout gallery space during the summer of 2014.

In November 2012, The Ghosts Team and ONCA (One Network For Conservation And The Arts) collaborated in an exhibition that ran for three months at the ONCA gallery, which is situated in The London Road area of Brighton. ONCA’s founder, Laura Coleman, conceived of the concept whilst she was traveling in Bolivia. The organization was launched in November 2012 on her return to the UK and was inspired by her journeys between London and Bolivia over a period of time, in which she became increasingly aware of the impact humans were having both on the environment and animals and decided to take action to create a space in the UK in which artists could create work in response to conservation issues.

In 2014, a book of the same name, documenting the ‘ Ghosts Of Gone Birds ‘ events and including images from the exhibitions, was published by Bloomsbury [7]. The publisher released another title ‘ Extinct Boids ‘ [8] in 2012 with images by the political illustrator Ralph Steadman and text by Ceri Levy. The book contains a collection of paintings and drawings exploring the theme of avian extinction, which Steadman created in response to Levy’s invitation to participate in one of the ‘ Ghosts ‘ exhibitions. He produced a hundred drawings and paintings resulting in an entire room being dedicated to his contribution.

Operation Turtle Dove

Ceri Levy, who played an instrumental role in the trip to Malta, has also collaborated with the illustrator Matt Sewell on the theme of bird conservation. Sewell has gained a reputation in recent years for his pop art inspired depictions of British birds. The pair have worked together on the theme of birds within the context of ‘ Caught By The River ‘, a series of talks in which Levy has been a regular contributor, which features as part of the Port Elliott festival. [9]

Matt Sewell, operating under the name Spearfish and commissioned by the RSPB, was responsible for creating a bird themed mural with local schoolchildren on an underpass on the Trans Penine Trail. He worked on a similar project in the Dearne Valley, painting the exterior and interior walls of an underpass with scenes including birds.

Sewell has also been commissioned by The RSPB to create murals on other selected underpasses in the UK, with the intention of impacting the public and raising awareness of the importance of conservation. In addition to his presence at Port Elliott, Matt has also made appearances at The Green Man and Glastonbury Festivals, talking about birds and delivering drawing workshops related to the theme. An image depicting a Turtle Dove has been selected from one of his illustrated books and made into a Giclee print to raise funds for the RSPB. Sewell’s Turtle Dove poster has also been instrumental in raising awareness of the potential extinction of Turtle Dove within the context of Operation Turtle Dove of which the RSPB is a partner. [10]

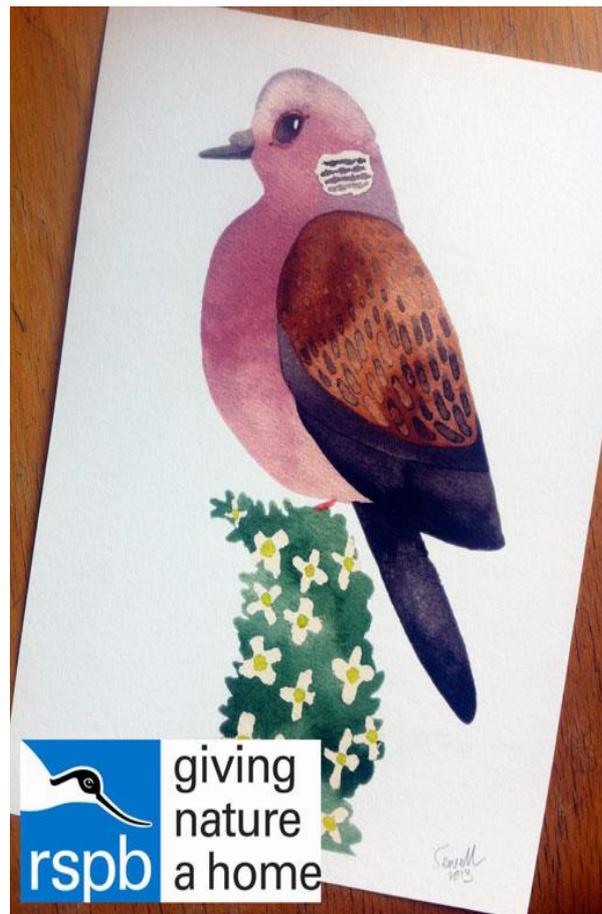


Figure III: RSPB Matt Sewell 2013

Project Passenger Pigeon

On the other side of The Atlantic and with similar objectives to The Ghosts of Gone Birds movement, Project Passenger Pigeon is a multimedia event in which filmmakers, artists, writers, scientists, educators and musicians have collaborated to promote the conservation of endangered species of birds [10]. The project advocates introducing legislative resolutions and aims to work with interested parties in Canada, The United States and other countries.

There are parallels between the decline of The Turtle Dove in Britain and that of The Passenger Pigeon in America, which became extinct in 1914. The last of the Passenger Pigeons, a bird named 'Martha' died on September 1st 1914 in Cincinnati Zoo, North America aged 29. There has been a centenary event in 2014 to mark the anniversary and this may be the wake up call needed for raising a wide scale awareness of the issue and also a catalyst for a concerted effort to save The Turtle Dove in the UK. The decline in the American birds between 1800 and 1900 has been estimated at a population of 5 Billion birds around 1800 through to their extinction in 1914.

Audubon was an American artist who documented a wide - ranging spectrum of birds, including The Passenger Pigeon, which he painted many times. The bird has since been painted and depicted by illustrators and artists alike in an attempt to keep the memory of the bird alive and to serve as a historical reminder of the devastating impact of humans on the natural environment. Similar to The Turtle Dove in the UK, the Passenger Pigeon was once a commonplace bird seen throughout North America, but within a century the bird had become extinct as a result of human impact both on the environment and in terms of the hunting and killing of the species.

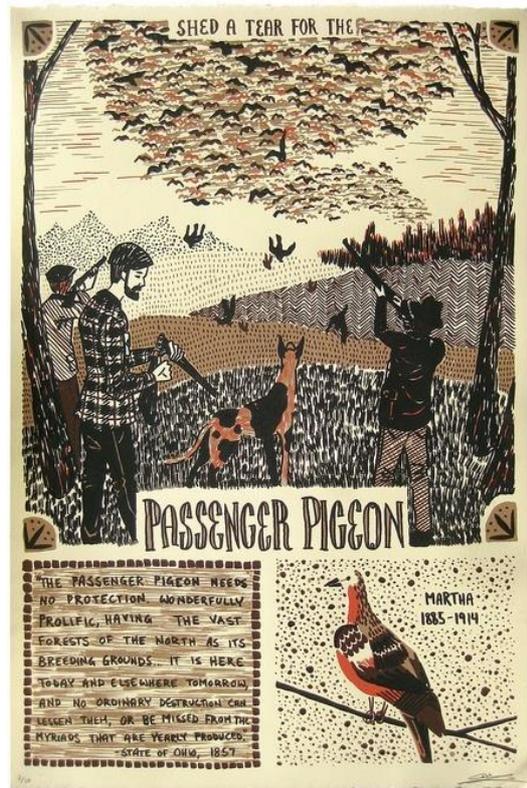


Figure IV: Passenger Pigeon by Caleb Luke Lin

The birds provided food for people but they were also responsible for the devastation of farmland. Hunting was relatively easy due to the size of the flocks - there are descriptions of the birds filling the skies for as far as the eye could see. New technologies including the telegraph and development of rail networks allowed hunters to track and travel to regions where the birds settled: ‘ "The telegraph allowed word to go out: "The pigeons are here,"" says David Blockstein, a senior scientist at the National Council for Science and the Environment and a founder of Project Passenger Pigeon ‘ [12].

Researchers have agreed that the extinction of the Passenger Pigeon was mainly caused by humans, both in terms of habitat destruction and the extreme hunting of the birds. They were massacred using a variety of methods, including shooting, laying traps, poisoning with whisky – laced corn and asphyxiation through the burning of sulphur. The objectives of Project Passenger Pigeon include raising awareness of the devastation of extinction and the importance of conservation. It aims to build a network between educational institutions, government, zoos, museums and other participants. [13]

Impact

The work of those involved with The Ghosts Of Gone Birds events, produced in response to the themes of extinction and conservation of endangered species of birds has wide reaching and considerable impact. The presence of groups of artists in Malta, collaborating with volunteer activists from the UK, Germany and those from Birdlife Malta was instrumental in attracting a significant amount of attention from the press, both in the UK and Malta. Evidence documenting interactions between the hunters and conservationists within the duration of the

Spring Hunt in 2012 was captured by film crew from BBC Bristol and by documentary maker Ceri Levy. In response to the presence and activities of the teams, headed by Levy, The Times in Malta became involved and published an article highlighting the perspectives and experiences of the participants out in the field. Within the context of a live interview with Radio Devon on returning to the UK, I described my trip to Malta to witness the Spring Hunt and also discussed the implications for the future of bird conservation in Malta. The impact and reach through media technologies enabled information to be disseminated both in the UK and Malta to a wider public audience with the intention of drawing attention to the severity and future implications of sustained hunting and killing of endangered species.

Communities and hunters local to the regions of Malta where the Spring Hunt takes place were impacted in a variety of ways by the presence and activities of the teams lead by Birdlife Malta and Ceri Levy. One example of artwork impacting on the immediate environment and domain of the hunters was through the presence of murals painted on interior and exterior walls of several hides in which hunters positioned themselves. The murals, painted by artist Lucy Mc Laughlin, depicted large - scale images of extinct and living species of birds. The impact of the artwork in such an exposed environment resulted in hunters and communities using the area witnessing the paintings and being confronted by larger than life images of those birds affected by the hunt

Mc Laughlin's prints were also included as part of a box set of bird images created by contemporary Illustrators including Rob Ryan, Angie Lewin, Ralph Steadman, Kai and Sunny, Le Gun and Ben Newman in response to the theme of bird conservation. All Illustrators had participated in 'The Ghosts' exhibitions and proceeds from the sale of prints were donated to Birdlife International. In her book 'Art and Politics Now – Cultural Activism In A Time Of Crisis' Susan Noyes Platt notes the importance of printing techniques in bringing political themes to a wider audience; 'Graphic images that are silk-screened, lithographed, or etched, reach everyone from the street radical to the art collector. Prints appear in protests as posters, flyers, banners, murals, signs, and also as artworks in portfolios.' [14] Printmaking has been regarded, historically, as a crucial technology which has far reaching impact in terms of delivering political messages. Noyes Platt continues, 'Ever since Jaques Callott and Francisco Goya addressed the disasters of war in series of unflinching black and white etchings, artists have used prints for protest'. The relative cheapness of a print as opposed to an original piece of artwork and the ability to produce multiples makes it a viable option in terms of raising money for just causes.



Figure V: Mural by Lucy Mc Laughlin Malta April 2012

The impact of the exhibitions, the marketing of these events and recent outputs, including a book showcasing work from the 'Ghosts Of Gone Birds' exhibitions and the publication of the book 'Extinct Birds', which is a collection of images and writing created as a result of the collaboration between the illustrator Ralph Steadman and Ceri Levy, has ensured that the message of possible bird extinction and conservation continues to impact a wide audience. A Face Book page was also created with the intention of disseminating information via the Internet and would therefore, potentially, have a very wide reach. The page also functioned as a tool with which to encourage participation from the public, participants and founders in the ongoing commentary on the 'Ghosts Of Gone Birds' events. [15] In her book 'Digital Media and democracy' Megan Boler discusses the uses of digital media by political activists, 'In TM (*Tactical Media*) we are dealing with individuals and nonprofit groups of artists / activists working with DIY media ... Media tacticians cross more than one boundary and subject position, in particular, the very controversial one between politics and art, between being an artist and an activist' [16]. The power of technology and, in particular, that of the Internet has transformed the way in which information can be communicated and has subsequently resulted in support from individuals and communities being garnered within short time spans and on local, national and international levels. Support from the public for the 'Ghosts' events was also encouraged through their participation at physical events in which there opportunities to purchase artworks and merchandising to raise money of which a percentage would be donated to conservation organizations including Birdlife International and The RSPB

The impact of media in the form of posters advertising 'Ghosts' events in public spaces, exhibitions in locations in the Southeast of England and radio and TV coverage in the UK and Malta resulted in a wide reach both nationally and internationally. As Nina Felshin has outlined in her book, 'But Is It Art? The Spirit Of Art As Activism' 'the uses of and manipulation of media technologies have been employed by arts activists since the 1960s' [17] and this enables them to deliver their messages into the mainstream, rather than keeping them within the context of elitist galleries where fewer people will be exposed to them.

Conclusion

The value and importance of the role in which illustrators and artists might play in raising awareness of the extinction and conservation of endangered species of birds has been demonstrated by the participation of those involved in the 'Ghosts Of Gone Birds' exhibitions and events and the outcomes and impact of this body of work on the public. Collaboration with conservation organizations including the RSPB, Birdlife International and ONCA in the UK and Project Passenger Pigeon in the US emphasizes the impact that Artist interventions and activism can have in raising awareness of politically and environmentally challenging themes. Through creating a presence in opposition to the many destructive forces impacting upon birdlife, collectives of illustrators and artists in recent years have contributed to a growing awareness of the issues. Through the creation of thematically lead images and events that are staged within the public realm and further disseminated through a variety of media including radio, television, newspapers and social media, the themes discussed in this paper have been presented as topics for debate and possible further action.

The power inherent within certain images and their ability to communicate important messages has long been known. Propaganda posters including those designed by politically motivated artists such as the Russian Constructivist El Lissitzky in the early twentieth century were used as powerful political tools implemented to deliver strong messages that aimed to affect people psychologically and motivate people to take action. Susan Noyes Platt cites how Peter Selz in his book 'The Art Of Engagement, Visual Politics in California and Beyond' describes how, in his youth he became aware of the Nazi manipulation of culture and recognized 'the crucial importance of politically engaged art that resists oppression.' [18] GOODPILOT, the Creative Strategists who were responsible for the branding of the 'Ghosts Of Gone Birds' events, used a number of strategies with which to convey the important themes of extinction and conservation. 'Gone Birds was our subject matter, the topic under discussion. The medium would be Art: image making, word smithing and portraiture. It would be capturing the essence of what has gone and re-presenting it to viewers so they gained a better, more poignant understanding of what has been lost.' [19]

Those who have contributed their creative outputs to 'The Ghosts Of Gone Birds' events, have been given the title 'A Creative Army' and represent an Eco - political collective, which has created a diverse body of work – from

images to music, sculpture, installations, performance and soundscapes. Exposure to these creative outputs and the underlying issue based themes, through a range of approaches - including technological, has proved to be effective in impacting upon the public's knowledge and perception of a cause and has subsequently activated the potential for protest and action within the public realm in response to the issue of bird extinction and conservation.

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