

Transcription of paper presented at the Animal Borderlands conference
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WIDOWHOOD Interruptive Wildness And Unruly Domesticity In Pigeon Racing Systems
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Slide 1 Title

This paper is called 'Widowhood: interruptive wildness and unruly domesticity in pigeon racing systems'. It is a discussion about the shared subjectivity experienced during a race by the pigeons and by the men who train them. It considers the categorical and metaphorical borders that that experience throws into question, with a particular focus on The Widowhood a racing strategy designed to improve the form of the birds on race day.

Slide 2 Image from the show

'Widowhood' is also the name of a performance I put together at Matt's Gallery in London in 2018. Observations discussed here are taken from that performance, from a partner publication due to be published later this year, and from field research which was conducted in the run up to that event. These observations have been shaped in part by a reading of Donna Haraway's 2008 text 'When Species Meet'.

Slide 3 Collection of images from the show

First, some notes on the performance. Pigeon racing is not a public spectacle. It occurs within a tightly knit community, and even for those taking part, most of it happens out of sight. The 2018 work took the form of a live pigeon race, but one which makes its own particular shape, collapsing race preparation and the race itself, and surfacing elements that are usually hidden from view.

In practical terms the work involved 27 birds racing from Matt's Gallery in South London to their home lofts some 60 miles away in Kent. Here we can see some some stills from the day.

A key aspect of the work was its liveness. It was, at times, uncomfortably live, relying on mutual trust in newly forged human relationships, a fragile technical set up and an unknown outcome for the competing pigeons. It felt important both structurally and conceptually for the work to be subject, on its own terms, to some of the vulnerability and risks undertaken by the human and non-human participants in the race.

The work deliberately focussed on moments where, during my field research, I had witnessed an intimate connection between the human and non-human members of the racing teams.

Slide 4 Still of Eltham Club

Before a race the birds are taken to a marking station where they have their racing rubbers attached. The first marking up session I witnessed was in Eltham, South East London, in a small shed at the back of the Working Men's Club. There, 5 men worked between them, skillfully lifting each pigeon out of its basket, turning it over and holding it still. The fluency of the movement between the men, and the quiet submission of the birds as they were handled was deeply affecting. This weekly ritual signals both the separation of the birds from the loft, and the entwining of human and non-human subjects. It is the moment where the birds and the men are produced as a compound animal (Haraway's word), the 'what' that competes in the race.

In the bigger races, the release of thousands of birds into the sky can be spectacular. But these events usually take place in the early hours of the morning on open ground, away from urban centers and are witnessed in person only by the driver and the race controller, and perhaps a few surprised passers by.

Slide 5 release and journey

For the race at Matt's Gallery both the marking up process, and the journey to the release point were incorporated into the performance. The birds were ringed in the gallery garden, and then transported pied piper style along the road to a suitable gap in the trees. Here, they circled a few times, finding their bearings and then headed off leaving an empty sky.

Slide 6 video of release

The liberation of the birds marks the final crossing point from human controlled territory into the 'wild' space of the sky. Here the 'what' or compound animal, configured during the ritual of marking up, forms a complex ever-changing shape as it takes to the air. As it moves out of sight, its twists and turns are experienced speculatively by those left on the ground. During racetime the connection with the birds is kept alive through a mixture of calculation, approximation and the production of race data.

Slide 7 blackboards / club (creation and final)

For the performance I reconfigured the usual sheaf of club papers noting loft distances, windspeeds and final velocities as large chalk blackboards.

Slide 8 full blackboard

Here viewers could see the racing systems, sweepstake numbers and colours of the competing birds - chequered, mealys and peds for example. Both illuminating and mysterious to the outsider, this distinctive pigeon racing lexicon binds the racers to each other, and maintains an ongoing narrative with the birds whilst they are out of sight.

Slide 9 sky

Racetime, characterized by the absence of the birds, is an act of waiting. During a race the pigeon-men gather in small groups at a participating loft, or take up a position in their garden, checking the weather and exchanging messages with other racers. They drink tea or beer and speculate on potential hawk blackspots, likely speed and position of the birds, as well as the ins and outs of racing and relative form of different lofts that season.

Slide 10 broadcast

For the race at Matt's I connected up these pockets of conversation, dialling in the 6 competing lofts to create a local broadcast in the gallery.

With speakers positioned around the space, and in the garden, viewers listened in as they might to a game of cricket over the course of an afternoon. The conversation lasted the length of the race, its mix of banter, anecdote and speculation maintaining the connection between different parts of the 'what' heading for the lofts in Kent.

When the birds take to the air there is a shift in power towards the non-human element of the competing team. For the men left waiting on the ground, this moment is both a loss of control, and also the possibility of something else. We still don't fully understand how a pigeon finds its way home. Geo-location certainly plays its part, but sight, smell and ultra-low frequency sound are thought to have a role. The men discuss the mystery of this power with pride, and for them, the race is not just an experience by proxy of the beyond-human ability to fly through the air. It is also an experience of a different way of knowing.

Slide 11 - Page from Publication

During the broadcast one of the racers, Mark talks about this different sense of knowing when he describes the behaviour of the birds in the loft. He says, and I quote,

(ref text on slide)

Here his own sensory ability is blended with and extended through the additional perceptive capability of the birds. He sees the hawk by watching the pigeons.

This shift in power away from human control, is also an experience of wildness. The idea of the racing pigeon as a wild creature is fundamental to the pigeon racer's interest in the birds they keep. Mark talks about this when I ask him how his interest in pigeons began.

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Again I quote,

(ref text on slide)

During the audio broadcast we discuss the naming of the birds, or rather their lack of names. I had the idea that this nameless state keeps the birds at a safe emotional distance in case they should be lost during a race. This may be true in part, but the lack of names might equally be a function of their wildness. In denying them personhood they can fully be themselves, and, in this way, are able to return to a wild state during the race.

As well as creating an emotional distance, conversely this lack of personhood opens up the possibility for closeness with a human counterpart. It facilitates the creation of a blended self, the 'what' that competes in the race.

A wild creature during racetime, the pigeon takes on a variety of roles when they are in the loft. At different moments in the racing cycle they might be athletes or 'racehorses of the sky', working partners, pets or valuable property. Melvin, a fancier based in Southwold describes caring for his birds as 'having 88 children in the garden'. As the birds shift from one role to another so the race itself moves in and out of different categories, and can be observed as a hobby, form of work, sport or act of pleasure, suffering or perhaps one of love.

For birds racing on the widowhood, love, loss, longing are built into the structure of the race. At one level the race operates as a dramatization of these very human emotions and the social and cultural institutions that surround them. Race day is the culmination of a pigeon racer's knowledge and preparation. It is also a test of the strategy he is using with his pigeons. Racing strategies have evocative names, widowhood, darkness, jealousy, roundabout. The Widowhood uses desire as motivation to encourage the bird to fly home faster. Mark describes how it works

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And so the bird, full of desire (imagined, observed or felt), heads for home. If the racing bird has a fatal encounter with a hawk, runs into a powerline, or if their homing skills fail them, then its partner back at the loft will have their temporary widowed state made permanent. En route the system itself is also threatened by acts of sexual preference. The pigeon men have plenty of anecdotes about their prize birds dilly dallying on their way home and turning up at the loft with an amorous street pigeon, or hen birds who turn their attention to partners of the same gender.

Slide 14 live stream

In the Matt's Gallery performance, desire and its close shadow of grief, is explored through a live stream of the hen bird waiting for her partner to race home to nest.

We observe the hen pacing around the nest box, fending off intruders in the loft, and looking up at the sky when she senses her partner's imminent return. Intriguingly she is the one that initiates the sexual encounter.

The magnetic pull of home is also a magnetic pull back to the system. It is a competition between two conflicting desires: the love of home, and the longing for the wild. Situated at the edge of the garden, at the outer borders of domestic space, the pigeon loft acts as a portal between these two worlds. It is both an exit to the race and the open skies, and an entry to the pleasures and the confines of the nest box.

Shrouded in secrecy and myth, The Widowhood can be understood both as an act of separation and rejoining between paired birds, and also metaphorically as an act of love that overcomes obstacles in its way.

Arguably it is performed not just between partnered birds, but also between birds and their human counterparts. In the shift from a domestic to a wild space in a race, the last touch is not between the bird and its partner, but occurs across species between bird and human, as the departing pigeons are handled and marked up for the race. Again at the finish line the first touch is not with another bird but with that same pair of hands, this time removing the racing rubber, before the bird seeks out its partner in the nest box.

For the pigeon men back at the lofts on race day, the speck in the sky that signals their first returning bird, is what they wait for. That speck is an affirmation that the bird has chosen once again to return home to the domestic space they have created for them.

Slide 15 Ends