

Annie Dunning - Air Time

Annie Dunning describes *Air Time* as a collaboration with pigeons. Dunning fashioned a set of Chinese whistles which attach to the tail feathers of pigeons and make haunting music as they fly. She worked with a pigeon keeper on Salt Spring Island, Mr. Hume, and they tried out the whistles with his birds. The resulting video and photographs (taken from a camera carried by one of the pigeons) create an evocative, thought provoking installation.

Air Time raises questions about interspecies power dynamics. If Dunning controls the technology, can the pigeons really be collaborating? Dunning explains that the pigeons “are not simply passive carriers of the instruments, but, according to Mr. Hume, actively play them. Some birds more than others are excited to make their whistles heard above the rest, and engage in dives, rolls and mock evasive manoeuvres to make their whistles play loudly and dramatically.”(1) Some skeptics might wonder; how can a pigeon appreciate music? Art historian Arthur Danto once asked a similar question. He described a scientific study in which pigeons were trained to recognize compositions by Bach and Stravinsky. Next they had to categorize pieces by other composers. “Without error, they classed Buxtehude and Scarlatti as Bach-like, Walter Piston and Eliot Carter as Stravinsky-like.”(2) This doesn’t prove that pigeons like music, but it does suggest that they can understand it.

Part of Dunning’s interest in pigeons is their ability to thrive in urban environments. Considering that pigeons have already evolved to deal with high-rises, smog and garbage bins, perhaps its only fair that they also partake in some of the more intellectually stimulating technologies that we have to offer. *Air Time* is aesthetically delightful, and it is a reminder that we humans can exercise humility and keep an open mind about the capabilities of other species.

1. Annie Dunning, Artists’ Statement, 2010

2. Arthur C. Danto, *Beyond the Brillo Box* (Canada: Harper Collins Canada, Ltd, 1992) pp.28-9

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