Off Season by Richard Frater

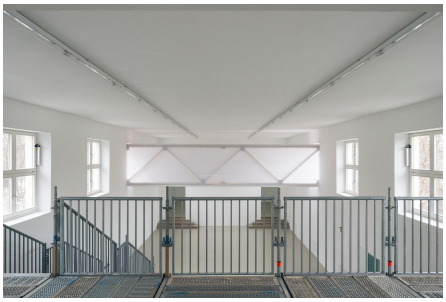
Kunstverein München

by Henry Babbage

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External view: Richard Frater, *Flight tunnel*, 2023; in: *Off season*, Kunstverein München, 2023. Photo: Maximilian Geuter. Courtesy of the artist.



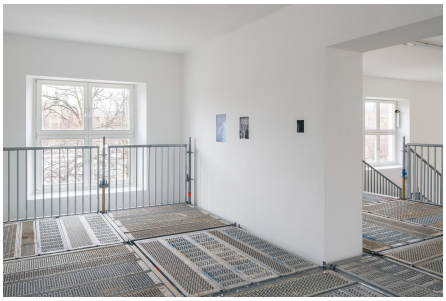
Installation view: Richard Frater, *Scaffold*, 2023; *Flight tunnel*, 2023; in: *Off season*, Kunstverein München, 2023. Photo: Maximilian Geuter. Courtesy of the artist.



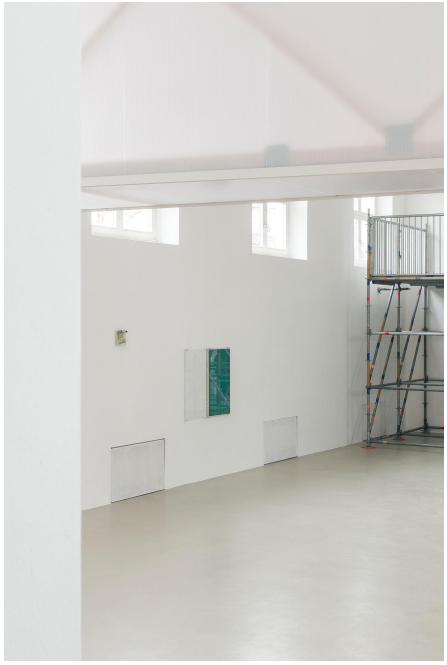
Installation view: Richard Frater, *Live Stream*, 2023; *Flight tunnel*, 2023; *Scaffold*, 2023; *Invitation dilemma (wood pigeon, Akademie der Künste, Hansaviertel)*, 2023; in: *Off season*, Kunstverein München, 2023. Photo: Maximilian Geuter. Courtesy of the artist.



Installation view: Richard Frater, *Flight tunnel (light reader)*, 2023; in: *Off season*, Kunstverein München, 2023 Photo: Maximilian Geuter. Courtesy of the artist.



Installation view: Richard Frater, *Off season*, Kunstverein München, 2023. Photo: Maximilian Geuter. Courtesy of the artist.



Installation view: Richard Frater, *Flight tunnel*, 2023; *Flight tunnel (light reader)*, 2023; *Flight tunnel (reference glass; test glass)*, 2023; *Scaffold*, 2023; in: *Off season*, Kunstverein München, 2023. Photo: Maximilian Geuter. Courtesy of the artist.

At Kunstverein München—sandwiched between public parks in the busy German metropolis—Richard Frater has cut a tunnel through the building, for the safe passage of birds. Aotearoa-born writer Henry Babbage discusses how Flight Tunnel *(2023) and other works in*

Frater's major institutional solo exhibition Off Season *pose problems about, and responses to, the fraught relationships between the built and natural environments.*

On the day I visited Munich, the long winter months had finally yielded to the first days of springtime, and the fine, white gravel pathways that lead into the Hofgarten maintained a steady flow of people in all directions. Beyond the Hofgarten, to the north, is Munich's largest park (longer than Manhattan's Central Park), the Englischer Garten, which follows the shape of the Isar River, extending to the north-eastern city limits and a peaceful, forested domain. The traffic flowed around the manicured and orderly Hofgarten and the shaded, quiet Finanzgarten. Between the Hofgarten and the Finanzgarten is the Kunstverein München, an institution helmed by director Maurin Dietrich, curator Gloria Hasnay and assistant curator Gina Merz, celebrating its 200th anniversary this year and where, from October 2022 through April 2023, Aotearoa New Zealand artist Richard Frater mounted his first solo institutional exhibition in Europe, titled *Off Season*.

The exhibition opened in Germany's coldest months and saw the building and the surrounding park capped with snow, but by the end of the exhibition's run flower buds had become visible on the trees that border the promenade outside the museum, and colour had sprung up in the grassed, hedge-lined sections of the park's interior. A large green nest of twigs was visible and naked in the upper branches of one tree and I could hear the sound of birds calling to each other above the din of visitors in the park. Alongside the archways that flank the museum's south wing, a competitive game of pétanque was being waged by enthusiastic players in uniform. Apparently the pétanque players had been using the gallery toilets all day, and as the cider bottles gradually accumulated beside the bins outside, their coming and going had raised uneasy questions about how the gallery—as a public space—should interface with uninvited guests.

Climbing the stairs to the Kunstverein's second floor, I found the entrance to the exhibition framed by *Scaffold* (2023); metal guardrails and the cross-bracing of a scaffold structure. The scaffold bisected the double-height entranceway. Atop a platform

reached via the scaffold's stairway, the visitor could look out through the windows that are ordinarily well above head height. This new mezzanine level also worked as a viewing platform to observe Frater's major intervention across the gallery's main space. Between a window on the south side of the building and a window opposite, on the north side, a flight tunnel had been installed—an adaptation of a structure developed by the Austrian avian research facility AURING, whose work tests the visibility and preventative efficacy of window patterns that may deter birds in flight from fatal collisions. Noting that, coincidentally, the length of AURING's original flight tunnel matched the width of the gallery's interior, Frater worked with engineers and ornithologists to develop an adapted passageway that would be suspended over the gallery space. Below, visitors could watch for birds that would either fly through or stop to take advantage of the feeders placed inside, finding a moment of shelter between the tree canopies that abut the Kunstverein building.

This central sculpture, titled *Flight Tunnel* (2023), bisected the gallery and set in motion a correspondence with the world outside. For the viewer standing inside the gallery space, the frame of the work had suddenly expanded to encompass other beings and phenomena outside. From the viewing platform, I was absorbed into a mode of patient observation, looking and waiting for a glimpse of activity, in a way analogous with the practice of birding.[01] The elevated bird's-eye view of the park through the windows from the scaffold presented a survey of the public that used the park: people on blankets on the grass picnicking, or walking along its various pathways, crossing the diagonal axes to sit in the shade of the Dianatempel (a twelve-sided gazebo at the centre of the garden), or walking along the main axis in the direction of the Bayerische Staatskanzlei (the Bavarian State Chancellery building), an Italian Renaissance-style domed entranceway adjoined with modern glass wings on its left and right that extend the length of the Hofgarten's arcades. In the furthest reaches of my view from the Kunsteverein's temporary scaffold mezzanine, people made their way towards the busy high street beyond the park, Munich's Odeonsplatz. But in the foreground, before the park, the viewer could peer into the line of treetops where some of the 40–50 species of birds that are endemic to Munich's parks nest

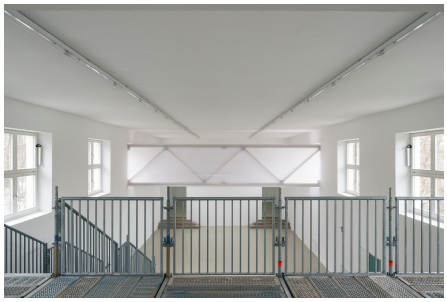
and can be spotted.[02] If nothing was seen at first, then the waiting would become not a prelude but part of a correspondence, in the way anthropologist Tim Ingold has described, wherein one corresponds with the world by following the occurrence of natural phenomena and using the environment to think with, attuned to "the movements of one's own sentient awareness with the flows and currents of animate life."[03] Ingold explains this as a way of attending to the world around us so that our activity and the activity we correspond with "wrap around one another like melodies in counterpoint."[04] Frater's tunnel served to invite the outside world inside. In alerting us to the possible appearance of a bird flying through the tunnel, it focused our attention.



Installation view: Richard Frater, *Scaffold*, 2023; in: *Off season*, Kunstverein München, 2023. Photo: Maximilian Geuter. Courtesy of the artist.



Installation view: Richard Frater, *Scaffold*, 2023; in: *Off season*, Kunstverein München, 2023. Photo: Maximilian Geuter. Courtesy of the artist.



Installation view: Richard Frater, *Scaffold*, 2023; *Flight tunnel*, 2023; in: *Off season*, Kunstverein München, 2023. Photo: Maximilian Geuter. Courtesy of the artist.

The flight tunnel has been described by the artist as a "breathing space."[05] For birds in urban environments, the reflections of attractive habitats—such as trees and foliage planted in front of glass façades—are a significant threat that confuses birds in flight and leads them into fatal collisions. In the case of the Kunstverein, the windows pose a material threat. Additionally, however, the pitch of the building's roof matches the height of the crown of the tree canopies, piercing the bio-acoustic theatre that would connect

those two habitats. In cities, noise pollution represents a considerable form of habitat destruction, and without sufficient trees to mask or diffuse the sound of urban noise, birds suffer an encroachment into their cognitive space and their ability to exist and thrive. Against this context, *Flight Tunnel* created a passage between those neighbouring spaces, remaining open throughout the duration of the exhibition. The tunnel was also designed to function as a refuge during the winter months, when shelter and sources of nutrition are most scarce.

Birds are commonly regarded as indicator species, because their sensitivity to environmental factors makes them useful proxies for understanding ecosystem health. Much scientific study is conducted tracking their movements and recording their calls and songs to produce a census of migration and species numbers. It is these statistics that indicate bird populations in Europe are under significant threat. A pan-European bird monitoring study conducted by the European Bird Census Council and BirdLife International found losses to bird life to be in the magnitude of one out of every six birds over a nearly 40-year period.[06] Studies suggest that climate change, habitat loss, fragmentation and deterioration may be key contributors to these patterns.[07] It is clear that the environments where humans make their homes are the environments where other species must do so as well. *Off Season* frames this coexistence and proposes a correspondence with other beings in our shared environments. Indeed, Frater has asked elsewhere how listening—as a kind of correspondence—could be an aesthetic criteria for an artwork.[08] Here, Ingold is again instructive when he asks: "For material things to be enrolled in cognitive processes, must they already have been rendered in cultural forms?"[09] Frater's works are made into a sensing layer—to use the terminology of philosopher Benjamin Bratton—in order to apprehend an immediate attunement to signals from within "the air, the ground, mountains and streams, and other living beings."[10] Rather than producing *content* about *subjects*, Frater's work collapses the conceptual distance between the gallery and the wider environment—rather than describing the world, the work answers to that world.

In an artist's talk following the opening of the exhibition, Frater described his experience of finding a bird moments after it had

collided with a glass façade: “I went to a museum where a very small hawfinch had hit the window just before I arrived, and was still shaking but sadly dead. … I had it in my hands and there was … this moment where I was no longer thinking about a … conceptual work or about how to communicate an idea I had. I was just facing an existential reality.”[11] For *Off Season*, Frater forensically documented fatal window collisions through an ongoing series of photographic works, each titled with the prefix *In vitation dilemma*. As Frater has explained elsewhere, the phrase is used by ornithologists to describe the peril posed to birds by windows and architectural glazing, given their inability to parse glass reflections of an appealing habitat from reality.[12] The works are representative of Frater’s wider body of inquiries into the various perceptual worlds of human and non-human actors, and the conditions under which one becomes known to the other. The small-format photographs are produced from a range of photographic techniques and are frequently presented with additional information in the title, documenting the species and the location of the incident. Frater’s own explanation of how these recordings are produced provides important context: “When a bird collides with a window, the impact draws fats and dust out of the feathers. The bird involuntarily gives out a film for the feathers to press into, preserving a proto-image of itself in flight, while simultaneously capturing the moment of its untimely death.”[13] So me of the photographs capture this delicate imprint of the bird’s body on the glass at the site of impact: the pair of works titled *Invit ation dilemma (wood pigeon, Akademie der Kunst, Hansaviertel)* (2023) were captured in silver halides from 35mm black-and-white film scanned and printed as silver gelatin; and colour film digitally scanned and printed as c-type prints. In other cases, the photographs capture the matter remaining after the strike, such as a single feather left behind in a work titled *Invitation dilemma (juvenile Goshawk)* (2023), which is produced as an ambrotype, otherwise known as a collodion positive print, in which photosensitised glass is used to expose an image directly onto its surface. This range of techniques was deployed by Frater from the canon of photographic forms that have historically been used by humans for seeing and rendering our surroundings. Through an asymmetry of vision, the series becomes a testament to cities as

infrastructures that are experienced and perceived variously by cohabitants who possess perceptual biologies different to our own.



Installation view: Richard Frater, *Scaffold*, 2023; *Invitation dilemma (wood pigeon, Akademie der Künste, Hansaviertiel)*, 2023; *Invitation dilemma (wood pigeon, Akademie der Künste, Hansaviertel)*, 2023; *Invitation dilemma (honey buzzard)*, 2023; in: *Off season*, Kunstverein München, 2023. Photo: Maximilian Geuter. Courtesy of the artist.



Installation view: Richard Frater, *Invitation dilemma (juvenile Goshawk)*, 2023; in: *Off season*, Kunstverein München, 2023. Photo: Maximilian Geuter. Courtesy of the artist.



Richard Frater, *Invitation dilemma (juvenile Goshawk)* (detail), 2023, Ambrotype (collodian positive print on glass), 14 x 11cm. Image courtesy of the artist.



Installation view : Richard Frater, *Invitation dilemma* together with *Scaffold* photographic series (2020-), dimensions variable. Photo taken by the artist on 35mm analog film. Courtesy of the artist.

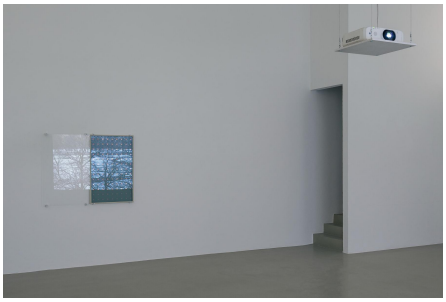


Richard Frater, *Invitation dilemma (Honey buzzard)* (detail), 2023, Ambrotype (collodian positive print on glass), 14 x 11cm. Image courtesy of the artist.

In their 2014 essay "The Geology of Mankind? A Critique of the Anthropocene Narrative," Andreas Malm and Alf Hornborg are steadfast in their assessment of this asymmetry of access within the built environment, writing that "intra-species inequalities are part and parcel of the current ecological crisis and cannot be ignored in attempts to understand it."[14] The late curator Marion von Osten took this further by insisting that "to reimagine the city means to overcome its anthropocentric assumptions."[15] City parks, in particular, are a central figure within the constellation of actors and infrastructure that *Off Season* is concerned with, as an interface between human and non-human cohabitants. Parks are an important symbolic utility for urban planners. Not only do they perform and naturalise the intended uses of public space, they also represent a redemption from the loss of nature within urban environments, particularly in larger European cities where there is a scarcity of green spaces. Urban development projects, and mandates for promoting green spaces to developers, have in some cases rewarded the signifiers of urban greening over longer-term and less-visible biodiversity investments. The Green Space Factor programme, first initiated in Berlin in 1994 and subsequently widely adopted as a policy tool for urban greening in numerous other cities, has in certain implementations been complicated by the framework's scoring measures and a lack of consultation with ecologists on the part of city council teams.[16] In Munich, between 2000 and 2011, the city embarked on a project to re-naturalise the Isar River; removing the concrete braces, canals, weirs and embankments that had historically been implemented to tame the waterway. The city's plan was to "improve flood management, to create a near-natural river landscape, and to increase the quality of leisure and recreation."[17] While the results have been largely successful and popular with residents, the intensive use of the Isar as a public recreational utility has had mixed effects on the habitat of many at-risk species. Locally, some endangered species, such as the little ringed plover or the white-throated dipper, breed in the habitat along the city's river banks that wind the length of the Englischer Garten, a stone's throw away from the Kunstverein München. However, the presence of dogs, the displacement of the brush along the banks after flooding, and the pollution brought by humans—especially during the park's popular summer months—make this habitat too precarious to sustain their flourishing. In

contrast, at KW, Berlin, in 2017, Frater installed *Fall*, a wild garden planted on a rooftop space above the main gallery. Frater sought out underutilised space that could be put to other use, taking the question of who constitutes the museum's public audience and expanding that category to include other urban dwellers—without whom ecosystems come apart. Anthropologist Anna Tsing suggests that these "mutual worlds" should be thought of as collaborative survival bound through accountabilities, obligations and entanglements.[18] Indeed, Tsing asks, "what is 'public property' if not an oxymoron?"[19]

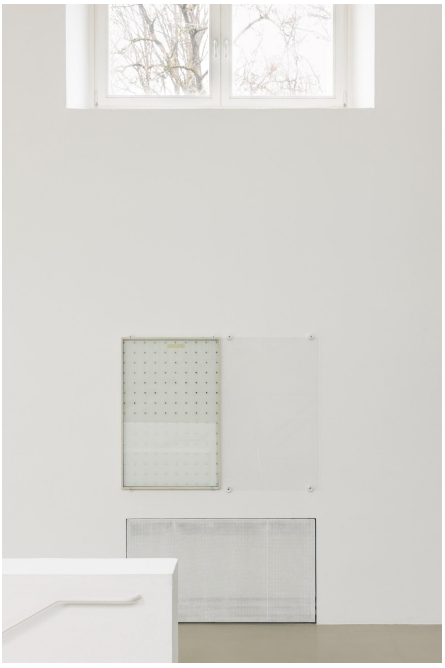
Situated immediately between these symbolically and ecologically complex sites, *Off Season* takes a space that is closed to its environment—a gallery being the perfect example—and creates the possibility not only for correspondence with the site's surroundings but also for "species-meeting."[20] In the absence of buying-in to utopian proposals like Edward O. Wilson's Half Earth thesis—which proposes to designate half of the earth's surface as a human-free natural reserve to preserve biodiversity—cities will, instead continue to annex space from non-human species. Biologist, science historian and feminist philosopher of science Donna Haraway has used the terms 'attachment sites' and 'contact zones' to advocate for the ways in which the inhabitants of a given ecosystem might become attuned to one another, approaching something akin to a symbiotic city, where the built environment might "make perceptual sense both to people and to birds."[21] Throughout the gallery spaces, pairings of glass sheets that appeared to match the size of the Kunstverein's window panes were presented affixed to the walls as diptychs. Each comprised a pane of test glass from the Kunstervein, and another of insulating glass with an anti-reflective coating fabricated by the German manufacturer Fraunhofer ISE used by AURING in their flight-tunnel tests and together titled *Flight tunnel (reference glass, test glass)* (2023). Taken together with Frater's photographs of avian window-strikes, the glass prototypes evidence the dissonance of our coexistence with other city-dwelling species.



Installation view: Richard Frater, *Flight tunnel (reference glass; test glass)*, 2023; in: *Off season*, Kunstverein München, 2023. Photo: Maximilian Geuter. Courtesy of the artist.



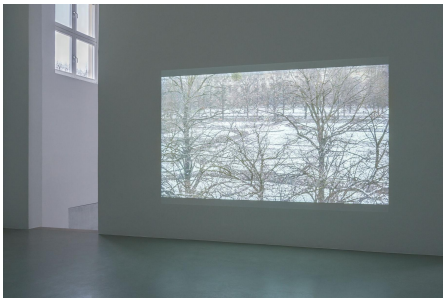
Installation view: Richard Frater, *Flight tunnel (reference glass; test glass)*, 2023; in: *Off season*, Kunstverein München, 2023. Photo: Maximilian Geuter. Courtesy of the artist.



Installation view: Richard Frater, *Flight tunnel (test glass; reference glass)*, 2023; in: *Off season*, Kunstverein München, 2023. Photo: Maximilian Geuter. Courtesy of the artist.



Installation view: Richard Frater, *Live stream*, 2023; in: *Off season*, Kunstverein München, 2023. Photo: Maximilian Geuter. Courtesy of the artist.



Installation view: Richard Frater, *Live stream*, 2023; in: *Off season*, Kunstverein München, 2023. Photo: Maximilian Geuter. Courtesy of the artist.



Installation view: Richard Frater, *Live stream*, 2023; in: *Off season*, Kunstverein München, 2023. Photo: Maximilian Geuter. Courtesy of the artist.

Throughout *Off Season*, a real-time survey of human and non-human cohabitation was recorded. The pastoral, 18th-century Finanzgarten on the north side of the building and the 16-century, Renaissance Hofgarten on the south side, were recorded by cameras aimed towards the park from within the Kunstverein. Live

video feeds from these two cameras—each positioned in front of separate windows in the museum's attic space—were projected into the rear gallery. One camera provided an elevated long-shot of people walking in and out of frame along the park's many forking pathways, and the other a closer zoom, framing a foreground occupied by the upper branches of the trees that line the park's border. The film's sequence was punctuated by an automatically timed cut between the two feeds, giving a cinematic tempo to the images streamed into the gallery from outside. The way this composed a parallel view of different parts of the park and its occupants was central to the work's ethic; the dual view insisting that the commingling of species must be thought together and at once.

According to the Baltic German biologist Jakob von Uexküll's thought, living beings—humans and non-humans—do not exist in isolation from their environments. Human senses and actions are not sufficient to totally conceive of and understand the senses and actions of non-humans. Yet modernist principles of landscape design and architecture found in metropolitan city planning have progressed following a paradigm that preserves the urban environment foremost according to human needs and wants, separating these concerns from those of other beings. Countering this tendency will require acting against the concealment of multispecies dependency and exploitation, embracing a world of reciprocity and cooperation; one in which, as Haraway asserts, we must be "at stake in each other's company."[22] In *Off Season*, I found myself in an environment that was both theirs and ours. To imagine the foundations for a common, liveable world, the work composed a frame calibrated to environmental signals from beyond the gallery space and its illusions of self-containment. Instead, the work attempted to correspond with the beings with whom we cohabitate and are reciprocally intertwined.

Footnotes

01. Birding: The practice of observing, monitoring, recording and engaging with the habitats, activity and migrations of avian species.

02. Bayerische Verwaltung der staatlichen Schlösser, Gärten und Seen "Englischer Garten—Munich," https://www.schloesser.bayern.de/englisch/garden/objects/mu_engl1.htm.

03. Tim Ingold, *Making: Anthropology, Archaeology, Art and Architecture* (London: Routledge, 2013), 98.

04. Ibid.

05. Richard Frater, interview with Maurin Dietrich and Gloria Hasnay, January 29, 2023.

06. "New report reveals huge declines in Europe's birds," *Bird Life International*, 16 November 2021, https://www.birdlife.org/news/2021/11/16/press-release-huge-declines-in-europe-birds-eurobirds/.

07. See: "Plummeting insect numbers 'threaten collapse of nature'," *Guardian*, 10 February 2019, https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2019/feb/10/plummeting-insect-numbers-threaten-collapse-of-nature; and Caspar A. Hallmann, Martin Sorg, Eelke Jongejans, Henk Siepel, Nick Hofland, Heinz Schwan, Werner Stenmans, Andreas Müller, Hubert Sumser, Thomas Hörren, Dave Goulson, Hans de Kroon, "More than 75 percent decline over 27 years in total flying insect biomass in protected areas," *PLoS ONE* 12, no. 10, 18 October 2017, https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0185809.

08. CubaDupa, "Curators of Cuba: Robert Heald Gallery with Richard Frater," 17 June 2020. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OHCJSCwXLNc.

09. Tim Ingold, *Making: Anthropology, Archaeology, Art and Architecture* (London: Routledge, 2013), 98.

10. Ibid.

11. Richard Frater, "From Richard Frater at Kunsthaus Glarus, Switzerland," *HUMcard: notes from an artist, #11* (September 20, 2020), https://mailchi.mp/f2f31a75f563/humcard-11-richard-frater-at-kunsthaus-glarus-127521?e=9df19a2e4d.

12. Ibid.

13. Ibid.

14. Andreas Malm and Alf Hornborg. "The Geology of Mankind? A Critique of the Anthropocene Narrative," *The Anthropocene Review* 1, no. 1 (7 January 2014): 62–69, https://doi.org/10.1177/2053019613516291.

15. Marion von Osten. "Cohabitation," June, 2020, https://archplus.net/de/cohabitation-EN/.

16. Matthew Ponsford. "Swede Dreams: Can Malmö's Green Points System Help Rewild London?" *Guardian*, 5 February 2021, https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2021/feb/05/malmo-sweden-success-rewild-london-aoe.

17. "Ecopolis Munich Exhibition/Munich and the Isar: The City Makes the River?" *Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München Environmental Studies Certificate Program*, 18 September 2017, https://www.en.envstudies.carsoncenter.uni-muenchen.de/student-broadcasts/ecopolis/isar/index.html.

18. Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017), 61, Kindle.

19. Ibid, 148.

20. "Donna Haraway, Anna Tsing: 'Unblocking Attachment Sites for Living in the Plantationocene' | 4/17/19," *Center for 21st Century Studies*, 12 September 2019. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wbQmtPI25lI.

21. Geoff Manaugh, and Nicola Twilley, “Surveilling the Birds,” *The Atlantic*, July 11, 2013. https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2013/07/surveilling-the-birds/277650/.

22. “Donna Haraway, Anna Tsing: ‘Unblocking Attachment Sites for Living in the Plantationocene’ | 4/17/19,” *Center for 21st Century Studies*, 12 September 2019. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wbQmtPI25lI.

Biographies



Richard Frater (b. 1984, Wellington, NZ) lives and works in Berlin. He received an MFA from Glasgow School of Art, UK, in 2012. In 2016, he was a participant in the Berlin Program for Artists and has continued on the program as a guest mentor.

Recent exhibitions include: *A Fatal Attraction*, Galerie Barbara Weiss, 2019; *Common Birds*, Oracle, Berlin, 2018; *Compound series*, KW Institute for Contemporary Art, Berlin; *Resisting Images*, Heidelberger Kunstverein, curated by Boaz Levin, Farewell Photography, Biennale für aktuelle Fotografie; *Produktion: Made in Germany Drei*, Hannover Kunstverein, Hannover; *Earth League Symposium 2017*, exhibitor and discussant, PIK- Potsdam Institute for Climate Research, Potsdam; *Living Cities 2011-*, Adam Art Gallery, curated by Laura Preston, Wellington, NZ, 2015; *New 15*, ACCA, Australian Center for Contemporary Art, Melbourne, AUS, 2015; *Let’s Destroy the Earth but Keep Humans*, curated by Matthew Richardson, Galerie Gregor Staiger, Zürich (2014).



Henry Babbage (Te Rarawa) (b.1989, Te Whanganui-a-Tara Wellington, Aotearoa New Zealand) lives and works in Berlin.

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