

Scott Rogers in conversation with Katharina Wendler

Skype Glasgow/Berlin, Sep. 18, 2020

KW: I would like to start with a rather obvious question: The bird theme seems to be very strong in your work. Are your sculptures – I think mainly of the Bird Feeders – are they supposed to be used by the animals?

SR: At Haus Wien I am showing a sculpture made of discarded Perspex museum displays turned into a bird feeder. It will be installed outside of Haus in the courtyard with little suet balls on it so that birds will hopefully come in and become part of the work. So yes, they are definitely to be used! I think I have a difficult time with the idea that art objects don't have function; I sort of think that they're all technologies – even painting is a kind of a technology (even if the way that we use it is different from many other things). I really enjoy the tensions that happen between something that's made as an art object and something that performs or has a function. Not all of my works are to be used but I usually have the sense that they have an application, as well as an aesthetic or conceptual intention.

KW: Do you like the idea of getting in touch with the animal world?

SR: A lot of what I've been interested in over the last few years are these interrelating themes of recognition and mutuality; the complex problems of trying to recognize animals as the 'other' and to connect with them (after Donna Haraway). I'm interested in both the ways that we bond with animals but also the ways that we can't connect, the tension between humans and animals. I've grown up being very involved in outdoor activities. I bird-watched and things like that my whole life, so that kind of connection is something that I've been around a lot. But I also feel that many overestimate the possibilities of it. Trying to connect to something that you don't share a language with is a difficult thing. We simply can't assume that animals have the same intentions that we have or even see us the same way as we see them, you know.

KW: We know so little about so many species...

SR: Exactly. I think in many ways we barely know anything. That's why it's so important to keep watching and seeing what's really happening, to keep learning from those creatures, whether they're antagonistic to us or not.

KW: One common type of relationship that humans have with animals is to feed them. Of course, only the creatures that we accept around us, which is in itself an interesting concept: Why do people feed pigeons in the street but not rats, for instance? The same with pets; it seems to be a very specific selection of which creatures we accept to be around us and which creatures we find disgusting, scary or simply unworthy. I have always found this cultural or psychological or religious approach to animals fascinating; why some species are considered as holy, others as dirty, some as eatable, some not.

SR: It's of course nice to consider getting rid of the hierarchy around those issues but it's also extremely difficult. I am very interested in these questions though and also in making people look at them from

different angles. In my work I'm often trying to get people to think about their own desires or psychology when it comes to how we project certain things onto animals or project our own desires onto them, also how they make people feel and how they might actually fulfil these desires. Bird feeding for example is a two-way relation; we wouldn't feed them if we didn't get pleasure from that. I like this ambiguity.

KW: Do you have a background in sculpture or painting or both?

SR: I have a rather unusual art background I suppose, in that as a teenager I trained with a wildlife painter, so I learned how to do photo-realistic painting. I never really even made sculpture until I became older and did my bachelor's degree. At that point I felt sort of limited by painting; context and space became more important to me so working with sculpture started to make more sense. Photo-realistic painting has remained one of my favourites though; I find it really uncanny actually, this attempt at a perfect form of representation. The professional wildlife painters that have mastered this form (the ones who do it for a living) seem to have very little relationship with contemporary art, which I also find very interesting.

KW: Their approach seems to be more related to craftsmanship than to fine art.

SR: Absolutely, they are highly skilled painters, it's a very technical and accurate approach. Compared to them, I'm really not that good at it. But working this way interests me and so I got back into it.

KW: Why go through the hassle of a photo-realistic painting though when you could just use a photograph? Do you want to pay tribute to this genre?

SR: There's something about the work of analysing a specific image and really properly looking at it; a bird scenario, a frozen moment – I find it actually quite pleasurable. It also changes the relationship to the documentation of an image. The motifs of my paintings are usually taken from video stills. The painting becomes a compression of an entire film, gathering the attention of the viewer. I know it's a bit auratic to put so much labour and focus into this one image but I would find it a bit too easy to simply take a snap shot and print it; there's something about this compression, of giving so much attention to this one specific image that I find more impactful.

KW: How do you collect your video material where you extract these single images from?

SR: In the past I have set up the bird feeder sculptures with cameras on them to record videos directly from the sculpture. The other way I've done it is to invite friends to send me videos from their bird feeders. My dad for instance has a hummingbird feeder at his house, so I asked him to record a video of the hummingbirds for me which I then used for a painting. It's become a nice exchange which may not translate to a bigger audience but I personally enjoy it a lot. I guess this personal connection is somewhat important, I have never randomly taken images from professional documentaries or films, neither have I collected images off the internet.

KW: I find these animal / nature documentaries sometimes very intriguing because I always wonder how they get these amazing images... I just saw this film on hummingbirds actually the other day, I think it's on Netflix. The images and slow-motion shots of these tiny creatures were wonderful, spectacular really, and in a way this film opens up a world that we would otherwise not have access to.

SR: With hummingbirds it's especially interesting; because they move so fast, the camera captures things that we can't even see. There's a pretty amazing documentary on YouTube about the hummingbird's tongue. Because of the slow-motion, you can see how the tongue moves inside the flower...

KW: *Oh yes, I saw that. I think this discovery actually had a pretty big impact on science.*

SR: Yes exactly. I'm not a technology fetishist but I'm fascinated by how optical devices influence the way that we end up seeing and, consequently, how we understand the world.

KW: *Can you tell me more about your Proposal for a Hunt Without Killing that you held at Fieldwork International Summer School in 2019? Is this a performance piece?*

SR: I occasionally do live works but I don't really call them performances because I don't have any training in this field. It's more like a lecture but with props. I use sculptures and images and objects as a way of talking about these different intricately complicated ideas about how we rationalize our relationships to animals. I talk about how decoys were used for hunting and then I switch over and talk about how decoys are now being used in conservation areas to attract birds to nest in certain areas; so their use has been inverted from something that's meant for killing to something that's meant to protect.

I also lecture about different conservation organizations and their strange relationship to the world. For example: There's an organization called Ducks Unlimited which is one of the most successful conservation groups in North America. They've protected more habitat than almost any other group, but they're essentially a hunting group. They have almost 750,000 members who all shoot ducks, basically. At the same time, they have protected more wetlands in North America than any other association, but of course out of a motivation to continue to hunt there... That's ethically very tricky. I was then comparing this kind of hunting with the culture of hunting in Britain, which is more of a class-oriented activity for the privileged and has nothing to do with conservation at all. Quite the opposite, it's very destructive to the environment and local wildlife.

So yeah, those were just two examples from this lecture, where I'm basically expanding on how complex all these issues are, how contexts and therefore meaning changes.

KW: *Humans seem to be continuously trying to regulate the animal world – destroy, protect, destroy, protect; just think of all the species that are now endangered because of human action and that we're trying to protect... There are so many different – oftentimes antagonistic – interests involved, for example what you just mentioned, that this hunting organization has an interest to preserve wildlife because otherwise they would go out of business or lose their purpose.*

SR: It's never as clear-cut as it sometimes seems. I'm interested in those kinds of gritty areas that aren't that easy to figure out. Hunting is a good example, because it has such a different meaning depending on the place and people that do it. In Canada, where I grew up, it is an essential way of life for indigenous people, whereas in Britain it's a sport of people who really are the most privileged in society. So, it's the same activity but it doesn't have the same importance for people or even cultural impact.

KW: *In your works, you are using a broad variety of materials – some seem to be found objects and materials, for instance the Perspex that you found in an exhibition space and turned into bird feeding sculptures. Another example is a soap dispenser that you paired with a wasp nest. What's*

your relationship to these everyday things and objects or to the material in general that you use in your artworks?

SR: Actually, I am currently involved in a book project titled *No Need to Hunt – We Just Wait for the Roadkill* (edited by my friend Paul Barsch) featuring artists that use found objects. I guess I can say that this is true to some extent in my practice; I don't have an aesthetic language in that sense but I'm interested in things that aren't particularly sculptural, that are sort of generic and have an inbuilt design structure. Because they were designed for a specific purpose, these objects carry with them a whole bunch of inscriptions that already exist in culture. This way, it's not about me expressing my own ideas; these things already have expressions. Hence, a wasp nest inside a soap dispenser gains a kind of disturbing potential. I am attracted to arrangements that are a bit unnerving or even uncomfortable. Michael E. Smith's work has been influential, for example. He takes these throw-away items and by changing them slightly or by pairing them with another object, things immediately become uncanny and loaded with narrative. I can say that I am definitely influenced by the things that I find around me and I like the idea that works can also be a bit accidental, if that makes sense.

Scott Rogers (born Calgary, CA) lives in Glasgow. He has an MFA from the Glasgow School of Art, and also studied at the Stedelschule in Frankfurt am Main (DE). Recent solo exhibitions include Franz Kaka (Toronto, CA), Collective (Edinburgh, UK), and Southern Alberta Art Gallery (Lethbridge, CA). He has contributed to group exhibitions, residencies, and live works with Haus Wien (AT), The Kamias Triennial (Manila, PH), The Tetley (Leeds, UK), Hospitalfield (Arbroath, UK), Aldea (Bergen, NO), Nordisk Kunstnarsenter Dale (NO), Edinburgh Sculpture Workshop (UK), Oracle (Berlin, DE), La Ira de Dios (Buenos Aires, AR), and KW Institute for Contemporary Art (Berlin, DE). Publications featuring Scott's work include *Daisyworld* (ed. Zazie Stevens), *No Need to Hunt*, *We Just Wait for the Roadkill* (ed. Paul Barsch), and *Recognition*, the 14th issue of *FR DAVID* (co-editor with Will Holder).

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Katharina Wendler (born 1988 in Hamburg, lives and works in Berlin and Weimar) is an art historian and exhibition maker. She studied Cultural Sciences and Psychology at Leuphana Universität Lüneburg as well as Art History at Humboldt Universität zu Berlin and the University of Iceland. From 2013 to 2017 she directed the project space Safn Berlin/Reykjavik and since 2014 has realised and coordinated numerous exhibitions, publications and other projects with German and international artists. She currently works as Curator of the Bauhaus University Gallery and Artistic Associate at the Faculty of Art and Design at Bauhaus-Universität Weimar as well as a freelance curator and writer in Berlin.

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In early 2018 she initiated the exhibition format *in conversation with*, that takes as its goal to bring people into conversation and thus into collaboration. Artists are invited to enter into dialogue and to develop an exhibition from it. The conversations are formulated into texts and serve to accompany the exhibitions as text material. They enable the visitors to develop a deeper understanding of the working methods of the artist and their artworks.

in conversation with is based on the assumption that artists themselves are best able to provide information about their works, their working methods, their ideas and inspirations. One simply needs to ask.

Exhibition

Das Haus
September 21–27, 2020
Haus Wien, Kobelgasse 3, 1110 Vienna

<https://haus.wien/>