

NEAR DWELLERS

THE TREE MUSEUM & STREET ROAD AUGUST 2023 – SEPTEMBER 2024

**RUTH K. BURKE
JULIE ANDREYEV**

**NEAR DWELLERS
AS CREATIVE COLLABORATORS**

FEBRUARY 2 – APRIL 13, 2024

NEAR DWELLERS AND THE SHARING OF BREATH

SARAH LE QUANG SANG

AUGUST 4 – SEPTEMBER 30, 2023

NEAR DWELLERS AS LEGAL BEINGS

FAWN DAPHNE PLESSNER

AND SUSANNA KAMON

OCTOBER 13 – DECEMBER 30, 2023

NEAR DWELLERS AS CREATIVE COLLABORATORS

RUTH K. BURKE AND JULIE ANDREYEV

FEBRUARY 2 – APRIL 13, 2024

NEAR DWELLERS AS URBANITES

JESSE GARBE AND DOUGLAS LAFORTUNE

MAY 3 – JULY 14, 2024

NEAR DWELLERS FINALE & SYMPOSIUM

BY YOU, OUR COMMUNITY,

WITH YOUR NEAR DWELLERS

AUGUST 9 – SEPTEMBER 28, 2024



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Near Dwellers is an exploration of animal-human relationships in five parts, with a focus on interspecies interdependencies in the spaces and places we share.

Through the lens of artists and scholars who work intimately with animals and/or with their representation, Near Dwellers opens up new and multi-faceted ways of troubling the purported human-animal divide.



Figure 2 – film still, Tales from the Bird Park, a film compilation of selected webcam footage from Julie Andreyev's Bird Park Survival Station. 29:27 mins, HD video, 2023



*Figure 3 – detail from Bird Park Survival Station
Popcorn gifted to crows by the artist is reciprocated in their gift of a barnacle.
Julie Andreyev, digital print, 2023*

The third exhibition in the Near Dwellers series brings together artists Ruth K. Burke and Julie Andreyev. Both press us to engage with the ethical implications of our quotidian relationships with more-than-human beings to raise questions about how individual acts of human-animal collaboration and stewardship can restore local ecologies.

Ruth K. Burke's art projects, emanating from her farming practice in rural Illinois, invite us to consider how one might re-imagine (farm) animal labour as an act of inter-species collaboration rather than one of exploitation. By contrast, Julie Andreyev, situated in the city of Vancouver, creates a rooftop sanctuary for local wild birds (Figs. 2 and 3), bringing into view not only a novel mode of care and support but also making visible surprising acts of interspecies communication and association.

Burke's artistic work is centred on Social Practice Art (SPA) and involves performing creative collaborations with her team of young oxen that challenge the notion of 'community' as understood by her fellow SPA practitioners and its theorists (Bourriaud, 1998; Kester, 2004, 2011; Bishop, 2012; et al.). Specifically, SPA assumes an anthropocentric world view of interpersonal and communal relationships and regards humans as solely constituting the social world. This is significant because, in its experiments in social engineering, SPA draws on the affective and

ethical dimensions of human relationships as its artistic medium. However, by advocating for human and more-than-human beings as collectively comprising the community, Burke's art projects are radically defiant of the logics and literature on Social Practice Art and Relational Aesthetics. The result is that her approach to SPA positions animals at the very center of the socio-cultural world and, in turn, provides us with models for examining the ethics and aesthetics of co-dependent relationships as expressed through animal labor. Indeed, one is quickly reminded that human relationships with animals, and in particular the domestication and use of animals in farming, are inextricably linked to how our social, political, and cultural lives have been shaped through time. However, Burke's artworks, informed by her intimate experience of literally laboring alongside farm animals and her involvement with animal husbandry, trouble the complex entanglement of human dominion, interdependencies, and companionship.

The intersection of aesthetic and ethical concerns comes to the fore in Burke's series of earthworks, titled *Domestic Rewilding*, where artist and oxen prepare a terrain for regeneration by plowing the earth and then sowing the seeds of native plants. Burke refers to these interventions as collaborative acts of 'eco-participation'. As she says, each iteration is "fabricated, maintained, and activated through collaborative



Figure 4 – *Itchy in the Grass*, film still, Ruth K. Burke, 2018



Figure 5 – Seed Tiles, a component of the *Domestic Rewilding* earthworks project, Ruth K. Burke, 2024

interspecies labor: from a team of oxen hauling materials [and plowing the earth], human hands planting beneficial species, to the labor of pollinator insects."

An iteration of this project will be performed at Street Road in April, and by way of providing some context for that event, on view in the exhibition is a portrait of Burke and her oxen companions, Clark and Sparky, pulling a plow (Fig 1). Alongside the photograph is a series of art objects that will be used in Burke's performance at Street Road: rectangular tiles made from cow dung and dry seeds of native plants (Fig 5). The tiles will be buried in a patch of ground plowed by draft animals at Street Road, and once buried, the expectation is that the seeds will germinate and grow into a newly rewilded earthwork. Each tile is also debossed with the words Burke utters for communicating with her oxen: GEE, HAW, WHOA, COME, UP, ONE, BACK, GOOD, STAND, and EASY. By drawing attention to these commands, Burke does not ignore the disciplinary regimes of farming and the tacit violence implicit in the manipulation of animals. Nor do these works pretend that agrarian culture is necessarily idyllic, beneficent, and humane. Instead, these artworks and the means of their production are a testament to Burke's honesty in navigating farming's ethical dilemmas while acknowledging its histories as affectively messy and morally complicated.

However, another one of Burke's artworks speaks to the depth of affection between artist and companion cow. A film titled *Itchy in the Grass* (Fig 4) shows a close-up of the artist's hand repeatedly rubbing a head and ears of a cow, who visibly enjoys the experience tenderly bobbing and nuzzling, and drooping her eyes in pleasure. Equally heartwarming is witnessing the cow reciprocate the artist's affection by grooming Burke's hand with pink tongue licks. Licking, of course, is not only how many animals clean themselves and others, but it is also an act of emotional bonding – a highly charged moment of requited trust. Similarly, Burke's print, titled *Lick Map* (Fig 6), offers another perspective on licking. It is a photographic collage of patches of wetted fur from various animals, showing the different patterns and traces of tongues that have met fur and flesh, yielding a visual archive of intimate animal gestures.

On display alongside *Domestic Rewilding*, *Itchy in the Grass*, and *Lick Map* is a glass replica of a thick chain such as that used in the harnessing of oxen to a yoke and plow. This piece, titled *Line of Draft* (Fig 7), is pivotal to the reading of Burke's artworks and the dual nature of her subject matter and its ethical terrain. Not only does the chain connote the violence of human management and the legacy of human use (or abuse) of animals, but it also speaks to the fragility of that positionality when animals are



Figure 6 (top) – Lick Map, Ruth K. Burke, Detail of photographic print, 37" x 36", 2024
Figure 7 (bottom) – Line of Draft, Ruth K. Burke, Annealed glass chain, 2022

seen for who and what they are: powerful, spirited, and agential beings. As she says, this artwork is about "the sheer strength of the animals themselves. [It is] a metaphorical representation of the fragile nature of human-animal relationships specific to stewards and their working animals and of an animal's ability to resist, agree, and the perpetual illusion of human control." With this in mind, Burke's artworks can be seen as a testament to the capacity of art to push conflicting and violent histories up against one another in generative ways while honouring and imagining a future in which all beings are recognized for their contributions to the co-creation of the social and ecological world.

The ethics of human and more-than-human relationships take a different form in the work of Julie Andreyev. The two art projects on display are *Bird Park Survival Station* and *Crow Stone Tone Poem*. Both projects take a somewhat 'hands-off' approach to human and more-than-human encounters and speak to slightly different ethical concerns regarding interspecies relations and responsibilities.

Bird Park Survival Station (Figs 2-3, 8, 12) is central to Andreyev's commitment to addressing the climate emergency and habitat conservation, with the wider aim of making visible human and more-than-human co-dependencies within her local urban ecosystem.

Built on the roof of her home, the Park provides fresh water, food, caching sites, nesting, shelter, and perching features that together offer sanctuary to migrant and local birds. Importantly, too, Bird Park uses technology as a medium and method of communication. That is, a camera and sound system record the birds' activities, and the media is then analyzed by Andreyev to not only improve the Park's affordances in assisting the birds' survival but also to explore the possibilities of fostering creative reciprocity between herself and the birds. For example, in Andreyev's film compilation titled *Tales from the Bird Park*, we not only see how the Park itself is arranged with large plant pots for trees and shrubs providing cover, but also how bespoke perches made from large branches tied together to support different kinds of feeders are clearly designed with individual species in mind. Not only has Andreyev fabricated and arranged perches and feeders to suit the foraging habits and needs of individual bird species, from songbirds to crows, but she also provides a fresh supply of water in perfectly shaped bowls that take on multiple functions, from bathing and drinking to a ready-made kitchen of sorts, where crows in particular dip dried food, such as popcorn and crackers, before eating. Crows prove to be the most exuberant and indeed dexterous visitors to the Park and like enthusiastic foodies visiting their favourite restaurant, they excitedly root out stashes of popcorn from



Figure 8 (top)

Detail, *Tales from the Bird Park*
 J. Andreyev, film compilation
 29:27 mins, HD video, 2023

Figure 9 (right)

J. Andreyev's exchange of pebbles
 with a crow that led to
Crow Stone Tone Poem, 2020

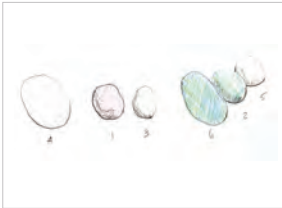


under rocks, pull at cables and other technological paraphernalia, clamber and peck at the eye of the camera, and enjoy a game or two of bowling rocks along the roof of the Park. Their curiosity, vigour, and inventiveness shine through, as does their high-spirited chatter.

Andreyev provides us with an innovative model for rethinking the very idea of a park – not as a public space designed for humans to commune with wildlife per se, but as a private space of play and refuge for animals to live on their own terms and as they reside alongside us, sharing the same terrain. However, this park also satisfies that deep need to watch and scrutinize the activities of our immediate non-human neighbours and to feel close to those who dwell near us, intensifying that experience through the eyes and ears of cameras and audio apparatuses. In this regard, Andreyev's Bird Park neatly collapses the intimacy of the animal home into the human home, while sidestepping the problem of direct human presence that can (unintentionally) undermine the lives and wellbeing of animals. As she says, "I engage an ethics of respect in each encounter with other beings and am interested in the development of multispecies technologies to support non-invasive, more-than-human creativity."

In Andreyev's second art project, *Crow Stone Tone Poem (CSTP)* (Figs 9-11), we are introduced to an evocative sonic interpretation of a sequence of

playful exchanges between crow and artist. This sound artwork began with Andreyev noticing as she was refilling her park's water bowl one day that a crow had left her a tiny pebble from the water dish – a gift – placed conspicuously on a nearby railing. Crows are known for their openness to communicating with humans through objects, and they will even enter a house through an open door or window if some small shiny thing catches their attention and if they have had some personal contact with the people who reside there. They are also surprisingly adept at distinguishing between individual humans, as they are at manipulating, indeed, gifting, objects. However, Andreyev took the very act of gifting one step further: she responded in kind by placing a second pebble on top of the stone that the crow had left for her, and so began a longer conversation. Alternating between artist and crow, one stone, two stones, three stones, four, and so on until Andreyev and crow had stacked and unstacked, arranged in rows or placed in small piles, a total of 6 stones. We see this exchange mapped out in a series of Andreyev's drawings that document the sequence of stones repositioned by her and the crow in turn. Not only do the fine pencil lines of Andreyev's drawings capture the tender playfulness of this relationship, but the arrangement and, indeed, rearrangement of stones were then imaginatively reconceived as a musical score. Alongside the



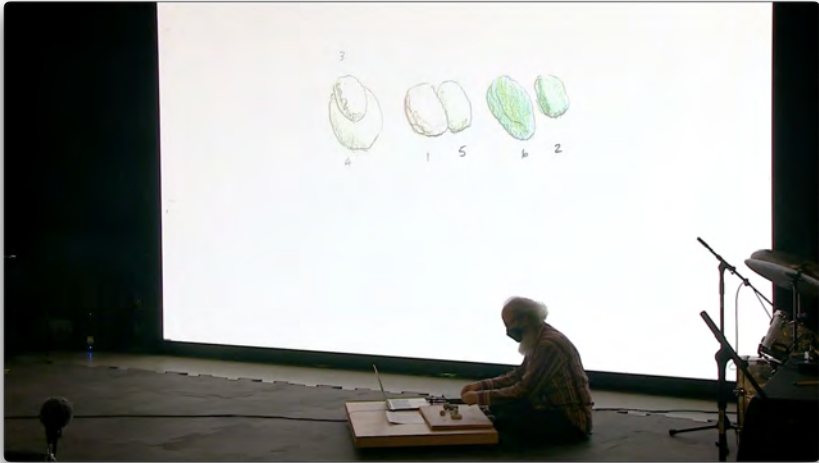


Figure 10 (left) – drawings for *Crow Stone Tone Poem*, following the pattern of exchange between Andreyev and crow shown in Figure 9, 2022

Figure 11 (above) – Performance of *Crow Stone Tone Poem* by Vancouver New Music, 2022

drawings is a film of a performance* of the score showing a musician, Giorgio Magnanensi, seated next to an unusual musical instrument made from a computer, sensors, a wooden board, and stones. The amplified sound of stones being moved and dragged across the board creates an eerie haunting that is suggestive of the initial moments of the artist's and crow's interaction. Without doubt, listening to the *Crow Stone Tone Poem* performed adds yet another layer of interpretation to a moment of interspecies communication. In sum, Burke and Andreyev not only share their personal journey in forging and maintaining their

relationships with more-than-human beings through their art projects, but each provides insights into how one might model thoughtful ways of living with our animal neighbors on a daily basis and in ways that enact an ethics of respect. What we do to one another – how we work and collaborate with animals – matters, and these artists help to tackle the ecological challenges of our time by first and foremost altering their behaviour to support the lives and wellbeing of their animal near dwellers.

* CSTP was performed for Vancouver New Music with Giorgio Magnanensi, Adrian Avendaño, Martin Reisle, Anju Singh, and Stefan Smulovitz.

**Near Dwellers
Public Lecture Series**
(online, via Zoom)

Street Road and the Tree Museum cordially invite you to join us for discussions of human-animal relations between the artists exhibiting and guest scholars.

Five public talks will take place from Autumn 2023 through September 2024. Dates and times are announced on Street Road's Near Dwellers' webpage and will subsequently be published as a collection of podcasts.

For the Near Dwellers as Creative Collaborators talk, guest speaker Jane Desmond will join artists Ruth K. Burke and Julie Andreyev to discuss the role that art plays in fostering empathetic relations with more-than-human beings. Desmond is Professor of Anthropology and Gender and Women's Studies at the University of Illinois Urbana Champaign and Co-founder and Director of the International Forum for U.S. Studies. She has published widely on assessing the intersection of art and human-animal relations.

For connection details, and further information about the full year's programming, artists, and speakers, please visit our website, and sign up for our mailing list:

www.streetroad.org/near-dwellers

For more about Julie Andreyev's work, visit: www.julieandreyev.com

For more about Ruth K. Burke's work, visit: www.ruthkburke.com



TREE MUSEUM

The Near Dwellers exhibition program is a collaboration between Street Road Artists Space, located in Cochranville, Pennsylvania, and the Tree Museum, located on Pender Island, British Columbia.

Exhibitions and performances for Near Dwellers are sited principally at Street Road Artists Space.

All public talks will take place on Zoom.

For more information about the Tree Museum see: www.tree-museum.com

Visiting

Street Road is open Fridays and Saturdays 11am-3pm, and by appointment

Virtual visits can be arranged.

Street Road Artists Space
725 Street Road
Cochranville, PA 19330

Contact

hello@streetroad.org
www.streetroad.org

Figure 12 – J. Andreyev, *Bird Park Survival Station*



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