

SARA ANGELUCCI'S AVIARY

This interview focuses on Sara Angelucci's photographic series Aviary (2013). Aviary marks the emergence of an engagement with environmentalism and species loss in the artist's work. The interview explores the origins of the series and the links it suggests between birds and photography. Thus, the artist's engagement with 19th Century photographic practice provides a backdrop for discussing the histories of collecting, photographic albums, spirit photography, taxidermy and the bourgeois parlour that the work touches upon. The interview also places the series in the context of the artist's larger practice and her history of exploring photography as a cultural technology of memory.

Interviewer: Matthew Brower

Interviewee: Sara Angelucci

Sara Angelucci's series *Aviary* (2013) combines found anonymous *carte-de-visite* photographs with images of endangered and extinct birds to create haunting human-bird hybrids. Raising issues connected to environmentalism, memory, colonialism, mourning, and collecting, *Aviary* is both aesthetically powerful and conceptually rich. Enlarging the small source photographs to approximately life-size, the series addresses its viewers in ways that are ethically and emotionally demanding.

Aviary was shown for the first time in 2013 at the Art Gallery of York University in Toronto as part of the exhibition *Provenance Unknown*. The exhibition was curated by AGYU Assistant Director / Curator Emelie Chhangur. Works from the series have been shown at the Art Gallery of Ontario; Harbourfront Centre in Toronto; the 6th Beijing International Art Biennale; the Canadian Embassy in Beijing; Patrick Mikhail Gallery in Montreal; and the Halsey Institute of Contemporary Art in Charleston, SC. The series has drawn international attention and has received extensive media coverage and critical attention. Furthermore, *Aviary* was the beginning of an extended exploration by Angelucci of species loss in relation to our technologies of remembrance.

Her subsequent work, *A Mourning Chorus* (2014), translated birdsong into human voice in collaboration with 7 woman singers. The work was an elegy for lost and endangered songbirds and built on the themes opened up by *Aviary*. The environmental themes of the work continue in her practice as evidenced by works such as *Uproot/Reroot* (2014); *Sightings* (Ivorybilled Woodpecker), (2015); and *Arboretum* (2016).

In combining images of anonymous and forgotten humans with extinct and endangered animals, Angelucci creates a profound and moving meditation on loss and the possibilities of preservation. This conversation explores the development of the series, its impact on the artist's practice, and the response the work has generated.

Matthew Brower: How did you begin working on *Aviary*?

Sara Angelucci: Before starting the series, I was on a self-directed residency on the Toronto Island and I was stuck on another project that wasn't evolving. I started reading about theories of memory and had brought with me all these anonymous portrait photographs that I'd been collecting

over the years. Considering these theories and photographs together I started thinking about the idea that when these images became untethered from their origins when their context was lost, nobody knew who these people were anymore. And so, I started thinking about a way to reimagine them, giving voice to the voiceless, or reinventing who these people might be and giving them another existence. I read in one of the articles a passing philosophical reference to the idea that in ancient times to capture a specific memory (the philosopher wasn't named) was equated to capturing a bird in an aviary filled with birds. So, I began to imagine the idea literally of a person who had been lost and that I couldn't identify or capture, and a bird that I couldn't capture. I wasn't sure if putting them together visually would work and I did some tentative sketches with some images that I'd scanned of *cartes-de-visite* and of birds that I downloaded and they were sort of interesting. So, I thought perhaps I could go to the Royal Ontario Museum and photograph some birds there. Then, I got to know the head ornithologist and started to think about, not just any birds, but extinct ones. Then I started to think about extinct and endangered North American Birds because I wanted to be more specific to where I lived. That's really how the project evolved. From there it just started growing and growing.

M.B.: One of the things that are really powerful about the works is the presence of the extinct, endangered, and threatened birds. Can you talk about the link between the cultural loss of the photographs and the species loss, or threatened species loss, of the birds? How do you see that link working?

S.A.: Both have the problem of keeping and disappearing; I think we take both nature and photographic objects for granted. There is an innate promise in photography that if we take someone's photograph if we take someone's portrait, we can keep that person or maintain that portrait in some kind of historical context. But what happens at a certain point is that images become unmoored. There's this essential belief that there's a relationship between photography and memory and that with photographs we can keep things. But, we know that technologically it's not possible. In fact, we're in a kind of crisis at the moment with digital technology. I was reading Albert Manguel's book *The*

Library at Night recently where he talks about a huge project that took place in Britain to scan thousands of medieval documents.^[1] Within a 16-year period, the technology to read the documents failed and became obsolete. However, the original documents themselves were still perfectly readable. So, there is that simpler relationship one could say that images disappear and are threatened, and so is nature. But more deeply, we take for granted our power to affect nature. Look at the story of the Passenger Pigeon, the most numerous bird in North America wiped out within a 50-year period. I think that on another level there's a more existential connection and that is our shared existence as a species on the planet. We are hugely impacting other species. We see ourselves as separate and above that connection and that is creating dire circumstances for our planet, other species, and ultimately ourselves.

M.B.: It strikes me that there's a sense in which the project had its origin in a kind of ongoing investigation you've had about photography, family, identity, and memory.

S.A.: Yes, absolutely.

M.B.: But what also struck me, in relation to the residency at the AGO and the work that came out of this project, was a sense that at a certain point it also became at least as much, if not more, about the animals, about the birds themselves.

S.A.: That's exactly right and it's interesting to me that you've pinpointed it so well. My interest in photography started with something much more personal and an ongoing investigation in my work has had to do with photography and its connection to memory and identity. But, working on *Aviary*, things shifted and there was one day in the ROM's ornithology lab that I think illustrates this change in my thinking. One day I went into the lab and brought a selection of *cartes-de-visite* with me that I had been using as the basis for the *Aviary* images. At first, as I examined the faces of the people in the photographs in relation to the species laid out for me. I was trying to find the right bird to match the person. But, over time as I got to know the birds more deeply and love them, something happened and I started to look for the right person to match the bird. The shift in that relationship happened because I was reading more and more about the birds and their plight, their particular characteristics, and environmental needs. How they lived, where they lived, challenges to their habitat caused by us.



Sara Angelucci

Aviary (Male Passenger Pigeon/extinct), 2013, C-print, 26 x 38 inches © Angelucci

So, I started to understand them individually. For example, how is an owl different from a woodpecker? What are their physical traits but also what are the kinds of conditions they need to thrive? It really changed the way I thought about them as these individual creatures. And then some of them were more threatened than others and I wanted to understand why. Why in particular was this one bird facing extinction versus another that was flourishing?

M.B.: That's partially how I've read this work. I've heard you talk about memory and the connections and how you got here. But, there's always been a sense for me that this work is really more about the birds.

S.A.: Totally.

M.B.: I understand that there's a way of talking about it that comes from this is how the work came about. It connects to the impulse you have in your practice to follow a thread ... pulling on something and seeing what happens. There's the motivation and then there's the kind of odd turns it takes where the work ends up somewhere else.

S.A.: Completely. Great observation. That was unexpected. I didn't expect to fall in love with the birds the way that I did. It really shifted my thinking and my consciousness. Again, there's a moment in the ornithology lab working alone that I can identify as a moment when something happened to me when I was looking at the Eskimo Curlew which is extinct. The curlew is such an extraordinary creature and I thought wow—we wiped this creature off the planet. It really struck me. I thought wow we wiped this creature off this planet through our own ignorance, through our own will. Something went through me in that understanding. Of course, it's happening every day, but when that creature was sitting in front of me and I could touch it - it woke me up.

M.B.: I think part of what is going here is that to use Levinas's term, where for Levinas it's the face of the other that evokes an ethical responsibility in us, that there is a sense in which these works are giving the birds a face so that they can look back at us in a way that puts a demand on us.^[2]

S.A.: Well, yes. The fact that they have human eyes is where that demand comes from I think. It's the other... there is an otherness because they're very strange creatures, but

because they have human eyes we also recognize ourselves in them. I think that something really key to these images, to these portraits, was to keep something in them that we could recognize. But it was also important to keep something strange and disturbing that made us pay attention.

M.B.: The way you exhibited the work in the Provenance Unknown show tied it into a whole set of issues around the 19th-century parlour including practices around the *carte-de-visite*.^[3] There's an exploration of the history of photography tied into that 19th century moment. People who have written about the work have talked about it in conjunction with spirit photography and the evocation of presences. How central is that historical moment to your understanding of the work?

S.A.: I think that some of those references are there and I've certainly done a lot of reading into the Victorian period and the idea that an interest in science was on the rise and all the rage. But the spiritualist movement with its parlour based séances was born in this period too. So, I think it's an interesting time when these two strains, things which are on opposite ends of the spectrum, can sit concurrently with each other. Photography was also born in this period, and I was interested in how photography served the colonial project. As the British colonies expanded, people went to exotic lands, viewed exotic people, collected exotic creatures and brought those things home in the form photographs, objects, and living creatures (like birds and other species). That was all part of the Victorian project. So, when I brought the parlour into it, it was because it was a place where the *carte-de-visite*, the family photo album, the collecting of specimens, and spiritualism all came together in the same space. So, in a way, I could imagine that perhaps on a strange evening these bird/human creatures came into being because there was a bird vitrine (like I had in the exhibition) and a family album occupying the same space and these creatures were given birth through some kind of extraordinary collision. I was really interested in how photography aided the desire for these strange species.

M.B.: How do you see that colonial project in relation to your experiences being the specimen room? Where you have drawers and drawers of specimens...

S.A.: Well, I think scientists have different – somewhat



Sara Angelucci

Aviary (Eskimo Curlew/extinct), 2013, C-print, 22 x 33.5 inches © Angelucci

different – motivations. But the museum, the birth of the museum really went hand-in-hand with the colonial project. To collect everything on earth and have a copy of everything, right. The V&A was founded in the 19th century. So, certainly, I think scientists have benefited from the desire to collect but I don't think their reasons are the same. But certainly, yes, there are drawers and drawers full of specimens. And unfortunately, we keep filling them because there are birds that are hitting our buildings every day in downtown Toronto because we are in their ancient flight paths, and they are dying on our streets. Every year they get thousands more specimens for their collections.

M.B.:Some critics have talked about the work in relation to mourning; as if the work is mourning a loss, a loss of species or a connection to the natural world.⁶⁴Is that something you were trying to motivate? There's a distinction that Freud makes between mourning as a thing where you can learn to love something as lost and that's a process whereby you can get over the loss versus melancholy which is the sense that you lose an object but you can't get a grip on it so you can never recover.⁶⁵I'm wondering how see this work in relation to that distinction? You've also spoken about the work as elegiac or commemorative?

S.A.: I think that's certainly part of it. Given that the work that immediately followed *Aviary* was *A Mourning Chorus* – a performative work in which the singers perform the sounds of disappearing songbirds.

The sound piece was something I considered making along with the photographs, but both wouldn't fit in the exhibition space. So, certainly at the time that I was making the *Aviary* series, I was having those thoughts. When I was given the artist residency at the AGO the following year, I knew immediately that I wanted to develop that aspect of the project. So yes, I think the idea of mourning and loss has always been part of what I was thinking about both in relation to the people in the images and the birds. I don't think you can look at those old photographs without feeling a sense of loss. You know those people have passed. It's interesting the way that you described Freud's sense of mourning as something that you get over because I don't think with these pictures that the loss they point to is something you can get over given that the loss of species is an ongoing condition. So, maybe the *Aviary* portraits suggest a continuous state of mourning. In the lab, I was

looking at specimens, right, well in a way photographs are specimens too. The birds I photographed in the lab are dead creatures that are taxidermied, and the *cartes-de-visite* are of a person on a flat surface of albumen. Both are indexes, stand-ins. The birds and the images are in a similar state of suspended existence.

M.B.:It was Kitty Hauser who compared photographs to taxidermy by suggesting that they take a skin of the world. Trying to preserve it by emptying out the inside and just capturing a surface.⁶⁶

S.A.: Yeah, so in a way, those two sit on the same level. The taxidermied bird and the *carte-de-visite* from the 19th century. Some of them were probably concurrent. If I looked at some of the *cartes-de-visite* that I had and some of the bird specimens they might have even been photographed or "shot" (pardon the pun) around the same time.

M.B.:How did you know you were done?

S.A.: Exhibition deadlines are good for that. But also, I think for me a project is done when I don't feel in the execution I can learn something new from it. It doesn't mean I'm necessarily finished with the subject matter. It means I may be complete with that approach to the subject matter. I could have certainly made another seven or ten birds but at that point, it would have been repetitive for me, and I'm not interested in repeating it once I know what it is I'm doing.

M.B.:So, there's a process of learning involved.

S.A.: There's a process of both technical learning because that project was incredibly technically challenging, but also setting out what would constitute a flock for me. What I felt was a resolved group that could speak to each other. I needed a certain number to feel that there was some substance. After that, it just started to feel like I was repeating myself.

M.B.:It's interesting to see how much is enough. There are 13 works in the series and they're almost all bust portraits except for the one of the duo standing. Can you talk about the technical process and how that evolved through the course of the project?



Sara Angelucci

A Mourning Chorus, performance documentation, Art Gallery of Ontario, 2014 © Angelucci

S.A.: I had to learn a lot of Photoshop. At the beginning, it was very tough but about halfway through the project I was getting really good at it. By the end, I was very fast and really adept at it technically. But also, what it required was for me to go to the lab and photograph the birds. I made myself a sort of lazy Susan and I would put the mounted birds on it and I would rotate them very, very slightly each time. I photographed them 360 degrees. Not all the birds that I worked with were mounted though so that made it a little more challenging. Sometimes I had to shoot from above

and rotate the bird on a flat surface. I'd shoot close-up details of the heads and so forth. Often, I had to go back and reshoot because once I decided which person needed to be which bird what I realized was that the angle of the beak had to exactly match the angle of the face. There's a lot of things you can manipulate in Photoshop but some things just don't look convincing if you don't get it right in the original image. So, then, I had to go back to the lab a number of times and re-photograph the beak at exactly the right angle of the face so that it fits perfectly.



Sara Angelucci
Aviary (Northern Bobwhites/endangered), 2013, C-print, 34 x 49 inches © Angelucci

M.B.: So, at the heart of this is a really in-depth project of photographing specimens.

S.A.: Yes, definitely.

M.B.: I think a lot of people talk about it more as a Photoshop project and less as a photo project.

S.A.: Oh yeah. They don't see all the outtakes, or all the under layers of images. I have hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of photographs of specimens from every angle, which I may use for something else at some point. In fact, I've exhibited a couple of them quite recently as just specimen photographs. I didn't intend them to be images, they were sort of studies but some of them are quite beautiful on their own.

M.B.: Do you think that work will go somewhere else?

S.A.: It's hard to say. Things evolve over time. Sometimes you revisit something that you didn't expect to.

M.B.: Can you talk about the emotional content of the work? Is there a different emotional aspect to this for you as the producer than for the viewer?

S.A.: I think when you work on something for a long period of time your concerns shift. That initial delight that I found when I discovered the idea or when I started playing with it – it sorts of gets suspended for a while because you just have so much work to do and you just get caught up in the production. But then once in a while in that process you step back and you say ooh – I really like this one. It's really, really interesting. Like the one on the cover [of the catalogue] for example, the *loggerhead shrike*, which is a bird that I'm told could be extinct in the next five years. So that emotional resonance that you have, it goes up and down depending on what stage of the project that you're in. Now that I'm finished it, and it's been a while since I've looked at them, I can stand back and think hmm, some of these are pretty interesting. I still really love that image and then there are others that I'm not as connected to. But it's interesting for me to see people's responses and some of them are fascinated, some are outright dislike, and others are horrified. Sometimes people think they're funny. I don't think

they're funny. I've never thought they were funny. But, I'm not surprised by that mixed reaction. Sometimes when I look at them, I can't even believe that I made them. So that strangeness of response is totally expected.

M.B.: I know I've seen some people respond to them, because they're birders, and they have a kind of identificatory delight in being able to catch the bird.

S.A.: Yeah, yeah, yeah, right. Interesting.

M.B.: The works really fascinate me. I think some of them are really quite haunting. One of the things I've noticed about the practice is that you needed to take the two things: the specimens and the photographs and make a third thing out of them. But that you did it in a way that wanted to preserve both. That you didn't want to intervene in the specimens, you didn't want to intervene in the underlying photographs; whereas other artists who work with historic photographs often will manipulate them directly or do things to them. Can you speak to the desire to keep the source materials safe?

S.A.: I know, I remember Maia Sutnick (long-time curator of Photography at the AGO) said to me she was really happy to see that I hadn't cut up the old photographs. I can't bring myself to do that somehow. There's a sacredness, I guess, to a photograph that I still feel. I know that there are thousands and thousands of *cartes-de-visite* online and people don't know who they are. I've got a lot of *cartes-de-visite* that are just in super bad shape, they're disintegrating. But nonetheless, I still feel like this may be the last image of this person. It feels sacrilegious somehow to... it's almost like a grave you know ... it feels sacrilegious to scratch it out or to do something to it. So, I can't bring myself to do that. I can't even bring myself to throw photographs out. I'd rather just put them on the sidewalk and let someone else take them, but I can't put them in the garbage. I want them to be taken care of by someone.

M.B.: So, they're like a burden?

S.A.: Yeah, for sure. They are. They're a burden, or a responsibility, maybe, that's another way of looking at it or it could be both.



Sara Angelucci
Barn Owl Specimen, Royal Ontario Museum Lab, 2013 © Angelucci



Sara Angelucci

Aviary (Barn Owl/endangered), 2013, C-print, 22 x 33.5 inches © Angelucci

M.B.: So, the series is in some ways a desire to share some of that responsibility or that burden with others?

S.A.: I haven't thought of it that way. I suppose it's a way to extend the life of these images in another way and make us reconsider them. They were just sitting in a box and no one would ever see them again. In fact, what I've started doing is, I have a very small wooden shelf in my office, it's quite a beautiful small carved wooden shelf, and I go through this box of photographs that I have and I rotate them. I'll bring one out and I'll have it up for a while and then I'll take out other ones and switch them around. It's sort of like I give it singular attention – rather than cover a wall with a whole bunch of them. I'll just take one out at a time and switch them up so that I can give it some attention and think about it.

M.B.: Interesting, which is different from the need for there to be a flock.

S.A.: Yes, true, but nonetheless, each one is very individual. The melding that you've talked about is interesting because I think in each one I had to consider how much of the underlying image came forth. In the *Loggerhead Shrike*, you see some of her forehead and her ears. In other ones like the *Sage Thrasher* his tweed jacket just seemed to blend so seamlessly with the feathers of the bird. Or the decorative, frilly, lacy details in Victorian women's clothing that would blend with decorative feathers. It worked really well in the Red-headed woodpecker image where you can see her lacy Victorian collar working beautifully with the white neck feathers. So, where I made those decisions, it was because the ornamental aspect of the Victorian hairstyling or clothing coincided with the birds. You know "fine feathered friends" there was the same sort of idea of decoration.

M.B.: This was the same period where people were using birds for feather decorations on hats.

S.A.: Exactly, and so in the *Redheaded Woodpecker*, she does have feathers in her hair. It's a wing; it's one of her own wings actually. The *Redheaded Woodpecker* is a great example of where the beak had to be shot from that angle. Most of the time when I shot the specimen it was slightly angled to the left or to the right. To have it coming straight out at you is not a way that you would normally shoot it. I



Sara Angelucci
Aviary (Sage Thrasher/endangered), 2013, C-print,
22 x 33.5 inches © Angelucci

had to shoot it exactly that way or it wouldn't fit on her face or look convincing. It's the only one that looks directly at you I think. In all of them, I think it's this one, *The Shrike*, I think *The Shrike* makes direct eye contact with the viewer. This is a Victorian convention of portraiture – where you don't make direct eye contact with the camera. You look demurely off to one side or the other.

M.B.: Because it's a question of the type of social relation that the *carte-de-visite* is involved in and the way it evokes that. The way the photograph is to stand in for someone and allow you to have a relationship with them without coming across as immoral or confrontational.

S.A.: Exactly, I think there's a prudence in that sort of posture.



Sara Angelucci

Aviary (Red-headed Woodpecker/endangered), 2013, C-print, 22 x 33.5 inches © Angelucci

M.B.: Any final thoughts about the work that we haven't touched on?

S.A.: You've been so thorough and the questions have been so interesting. I'm glad that you talked about the importance of the birds and not just the history. Not that the history of photography didn't motivate me to start this project. I think it's an important underlying continuum in the work that I've done over the years and continues to be. But, as you said so well, and I think it's a great observation, that sometimes I follow a thread and it takes me in a different place that I wasn't expecting at all. Certainly, with this project and the projects that have followed it, an environmental consciousness has developed that is now part of me. It's really something that I'm thinking about a lot more and coming back to. I think there have been three projects that involve birds since *Aviary*. I think you're one of the first people that has really pinpointed the importance of the birds themselves.

M.B.: It's the part of the work that spoke to me the most.

S.A.: Thank you. Me too. And if you look in the back of the catalogue there is a scientific description of each of the birds. It was really important to me that the title of each work included the name of the bird but also its environmental categorization "threatened", "endangered", "extinct".



Sara Angelucci
Aviary (Loggerhead Shrike/endangered), 2013,
C-print, 22 x 33.5 inches © Angelucci

Notes

[1] Manguel, A. (2008). *The library at night*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

[2] Levinas, E. *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*. (1969). Trans. Alphonso Lingis, Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press.

[3] Chhangur, E., curator. Sara Angelucci Provenance Unknown. (2013). Toronto, ON: Art Gallery of York University. April 10 – June 16.

[4] Baillargeon, C. (2015). 'Enchanting Reimaginings'. Provenance Unknown. Emele Chhangur, ed. Toronto, ON: Art Gallery of York University. 33-41.

[5] Freud, S. (1917). 'Mourning and Melancholia. The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud', Volume XIV (1914-1916): *On the History of the Psycho-Analytic Movement, Papers on Metapsychology and Other Works*, 237-258.

[6] Hauser, K. (1998-1999) 'Coming Apart at the Seams: Taxidermy and Contemporary Photography'. *Make: the magazine of women's art*. No. 82, Dec-Feb.

Sara Angelucci is a Toronto-based visual artist who works primarily with photography, video and audio, exploring vernacular archival materials such as home movies, snapshots and vintage portraits and their limited ability to convey the exact sense of a lived experience. Working with these images Angelucci seeks to reposition them in the present, shedding light on their broader context and histories outside of the frame. She is an Adjunct Prof. of Photography at Ryerson University.

Matthew Brower is a curator and academic. He is the Director of the Museum Studies Program in the Faculty of Information at the University of Toronto. He included Max Streicher's *Dream of Guernica* in *Mediated Memory*, a Canadian Focus Exhibition for the 6th Annual Beijing International Art Biennale that he co-curated in the Fall of 2015.