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## Claims to Immediacy: The Artist as Historian and *Eclipse* at the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art

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### Abstract

From 2014-2015, we (Sayler / Morris) exhibited a large-scale video installation commemorating the extinction of the passenger pigeon at the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art (MASS MoCA). This article both describes the context of that piece and reflects more broadly on the role of the artist as historian. We argue for a form of history that combines both discursive and affective elements. Ultimately, we define history not as a scientific process of unearthing truths, but rather as making a particular claim to immediacy of past events. We argue that to conceive of the artist as historian is to conceive of history as a constant negotiation between the imaginary, the symbolic and the real within the collective psyche. We see artists as important contributors to such a historiography and see our work *Eclipse* as an example of this.

Keywords: passenger pigeon, Elizabeth Kolbert, Sayler / Morris, MASS MoCA, history, collective memory, extinction, ecological crisis, contemporary art, artist as historian

## The Artist as Historian

Can an artist be an historian? That is to say, can an artwork that treats historical events be construed as positively ‘doing’ history rather than merely commenting on it, critiquing it, or undermining it? The answer to this question depends, of course, on how we define history and how we understand the constructive capacity of art. The phrase ‘the artist as historian’ was coined by Mark Godfrey in a seminal 2007 essay by the same title.<sup>1</sup> In that essay, Godfrey notes an ‘historical turn’ in post-1979 contemporary art. Further, he distinguishes between those recent artists who are actively engaged in the ‘task of historical representation’ and those merely touching on historical topics or else critiquing the very process of history itself.<sup>2</sup> He points out that not too long ago, in the mid-19th century, historical representation was ‘considered the most serious role of art’.<sup>3</sup> Godfrey surveys an impressive array of contemporary artists who have once again made such historical representation a central task of their practice before turning to an in-depth analysis of one of those artists, Matthew Buckingham.

However, the phrase ‘artist as historian’ remains provocative. It is one thing to show contemporary artists such as Buckingham engaged in serious historical representation, and yet another to assert this activity as equivalent to the professional function and authority of an historian. In making this claim, Godfrey relies primarily on the theory of history advanced by two thinkers—Walter Benjamin and Hayden White—who have a common scepticism for any history that lays claim to objectivity and truth, as well as a common mission to elucidate the inner relation between historical narrative and ideology. This particular view of history allows Godfrey to express the value of several related characteristics of historical representation as practised by the artists under his purview: a ‘methodological freedom’ that does not hew to strict academic (i.e. real or imagined ‘scientific’) standards, but that still employs rigour; a capacity to deconstruct master narratives; a self-reflexive tendency to expose the historicity and ideology embedded in the one’s own work (a trait he finds particularly exemplary in Buckingham); and a willingness to represent previously unacknowledged or underrepresented stories.<sup>4</sup>

Godfrey’s essay and the artworks of historical representation that he discusses have been an important influence on our art practice. However, we find two main shortcomings in his analysis that we mention here to set the stage for our own argument in this article.

First, Godfrey speaks of each artwork as if it were an argument addressed to the viewer’s rational mind and does not make a concerted attempt to assess the affective impact of a work. In our view, an artwork’s inherent appeal to the affective and the visceral is of more fundamental significance to its role in the making of history than any of the other valid, but secondary, characteristics mentioned by Godfrey. Godfrey seems to want to fit his analysis of artworks into established and familiar strains of theory about the practice of historiography, such as Hayden White’s, in order to support his main thesis that artists too can be historians in the full professional sense of the word. Talk of the emotional is

embarrassing to such professional decorum. In our view, this is a shame and, further, forsakes the more radical promise of the other theorist of history Godfrey relies upon in his essay, Walter Benjamin. Any substantive exegesis of Benjamin's complicated, even apparently contradictory, theory of history, is beyond the scope of this essay—if it is even possible at all (!). However, Benjamin remains a popular source of inspiration for artists such as Buckingham (and us) precisely because of his enigmatic quality. His writing is expressive, even poetic, more than rigorous, and so embodies the principles it articulates. For example, in speaking of history Benjamin famously wrote: 'to articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it "the way it really was". It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger.'<sup>5</sup> Note that the appeal here is primarily emotional—a recognition of danger and urgency, an operation of empathy—and the method is primarily visceral—speaking/writing become 'seizing hold' through images. Further, note the relationship between memory and history in this quotation from Benjamin. Memory, which is here collective, societal memory, constitutes the mental/cultural environment in which we are inevitably immersed—the sum total of collective experience. Benjamin is fusing our understanding of individual memory into an assertion about collective memory and the formation of a societal psyche. History, then, is a particular willed operation of mining this memory for a narrative that can help us in the present. History occurs when needed and out of a position of need. It is the Symbolic/Imaginary rendering of the Real in memory.<sup>6</sup>

This brings us to the second shortcoming we find in Godfrey—the recognition of which informs the idea of history and its relation to memory presented in this article. Godfrey presents a weak case for the affirmative value of an artist's work in historical representation. In falling prey to the habit of mind that regards contemporary art's primary function as one of critique, Godfrey describes the impact of Buckingham's work in terms of its ability to deconstruct and disorient our established ideas about the past, but insists that the work is positive in the sense that it can 'open up new ways of thinking about the future'.<sup>7</sup> However, Godfrey asserts that what this new future looks like is a matter that must be left to each individual viewer to puzzle out for him or herself. We believe that for the artist to be truly considered as an historian, there needs to be a greater level of ownership for the vision and values presented in the work and a greater sense of what the work does in terms of collectivizing. The impact of the work cannot be merely seen as deconstructive but must also be constructive. History is the writing of the past, not the erasure of it. This too is consistent with Benjamin. The point of laying claim to an image of the past because it has urgent import in the present moment is not to strengthen the self, but to invigorate the socius. In this way, not only can the artist be an historian, but the historian too can be (and must inevitably be) an activist.

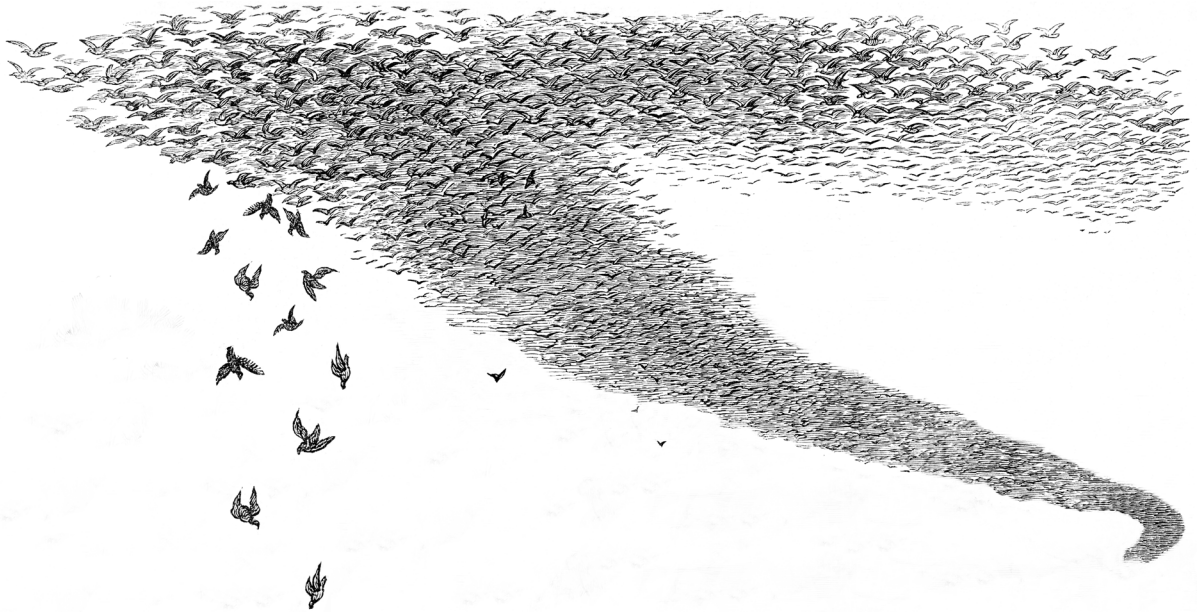
The following article discusses how we understand our own task as artist historians in this vein by describing the circumstances and motivations behind a video installation work called *Eclipse* that dealt with the extinction of the passenger pigeon in 1914. Following the symposium title for which we produced

this article, we will consider what it means to ‘trigger’ a memory given the relation between memory and history sketched above.

### An Invitation to Memorialize an Extinction

In January 2014, the writer Elizabeth Kolbert asked if we could create a meaningful commemoration of the extinction of the passenger pigeon (*Ectopistes migratorius*), which was once the most abundant bird in North America, possibly in the entire world.<sup>8</sup> In the 19th century, a single flock could number two billion birds,<sup>9</sup> and in 1813, the naturalist James Audobon observed a mile-wide stream of them flying over his head for three consecutive days.<sup>10</sup> At times, the flock that Audobon observed completely blocked the sun, a phenomenon he described as a noonday eclipse.<sup>11</sup> Despite its apparently inexhaustible numbers, the passenger pigeon rapidly declined as humans began to kill the birds for sport and cheap food and to destroy its habitat with new development.<sup>12</sup>

Figure 1. A drawing of passenger pigeons in flight for *Eclipse*, digitally adapted from woodblock engraving that appeared in *The Illustrated Shooting and Dramatic News*, July 3, 1875. Saylor / Morris, 2014.



By 1914, there was just one solitary member of the species alive. Her name was Martha and she lived in the Cincinnati Zoo. She died on September first of that year and her preserved corpse now sits in a storage cabinet in the Smithsonian in Washington, DC. The passenger pigeon had gone from billions to zero in less than a hundred years.

Figure 2. A specimen cabinet containing a passenger pigeon named Martha (named after Martha Washington), the last survivor of her species. Her body was donated to the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History, for preservation. Mounted in a display case with this notation: 'MARTHA, last of her species, died at 1 p.m., 1 September 1914, age 29, in the Cincinnati Zoological Garden. EXTINCT'. Photo: Saylor / Morris



Kolbert's challenge to us was to design a memorial that could allow viewers to contemplate the centenary of this final death. What we came up with was a large-scale video and sound installation, titled *Eclipse* in reference to Audobon's description of a pigeon flock. *Eclipse* opened at the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art (MASS MoCA) on 1 September 2014 and remained up for a year. The installation was accompanied by an artist book that we gave away in the museum in limited numbers each day until gone.<sup>13</sup> What did this work have to with memory? What did it have to do with history? Could it itself be considered history?

Page 54-55. Figure 3. Installation views of *Eclipse*, Sayler / Morris with Elizabeth Kolbert. Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art, North Adams, MA (left), Berman Museum, Collegetown, PA, 2016 (right), multi-channel video loop (7'41"), sound installation and artist publication. Photo: Sayler / Morris. The link is for a 3-minute excerpt of the full video loop.

<https://vimeo.com/108870516>







## How We Feel History

Ostensibly, our task was to ‘trigger’ the recall of a specific event—the death of Martha, the last individual of her kind. Yet, very few, if any, of our potential visitors would be aware of these facts previously. Further, not a single visitor would have an actual individual memory of the event or how it was received by the world at the time. This was an event that lay at the very edge of cultural obscurity. Therefore, what would be ‘triggered’ through our form of representation was not a mechanical recollection—if such a thing is even possible—but rather certain emotions and attitudes towards something in the past that would be introduced to the viewer as worthy of her consideration, likely for the first time. In other words, we would be ‘doing’ history.

What does it mean for an artist to ‘do’ (to write) history? First and foremost, it means regarding facts in the particular way articulated by artist Walid Raad:

We are concerned with facts, but we do not view facts as self-evident objects that are already present in the world. One of the questions we find ourselves asking is, How do we approach facts not in their crude facticity but through the complicated mediations by which they acquire their immediacy?<sup>14</sup>

In a previous edition of this journal, Kendall Phillips hit the same nail on the head when he noted that the ‘unique quality’ of particular ‘artistic interventions into public memory’ was to ‘invite an experience of memory that gestures toward its excess—that which lies beyond discursive facticity and within the realm of the visceral and affective’.<sup>15</sup> In this article, Phillips was careful to stipulate that this quality he identified in certain artworks does not necessarily apply to ALL artworks that deal with the past. But doesn’t it? Is not an engagement with the affective and visceral in collective memory the *sine qua non* of the artist as historian? Simply try to imagine something you would want to call art that was disinterested in sense and emotion and instead just stuck to the facts. This is not as trivial an observation as it may seem. At stake is not just marking a role for the artist as historian, but also arriving at a version of history that can escape the tyranny of modern mathematical science’s way of seeing the world always in terms of propositions, facts and ‘a calculable coherence of forces’.<sup>16</sup> For this, the affective and visceral cannot be seen as something extra, but as essential to any full understanding.

As Raad implies, a memory cannot be parsed into a solid, core fact and a nebulous, ‘excessive’ affect. They are bound together. When we speak about facts involved in individual memories, we speak ostensibly about the recall of an originary impression left by some visceral experience in the world. Yet, we know how unreliable such ‘facts’ are. Akira Kurosawa’s *Rashomon* story, in which several people have completely different and utterly self-serving memories of the same experienced event, is so immediately recognizable because it describes the fundamental truth of all memory.<sup>17</sup> Memory is not the originary experience itself. It is not static and fixed, ready to be unearthed or ‘triggered’. Memory is the

recall, the process of recall. What governs this process, and what in turn makes facts so mutable, is the interplay between the discursive and affective ‘realms’ within a given subject, by which we mean the totality of an individual psyche. What we feel (the affective) is in constant dialectic with what think we should feel (the discursive). We will remember what we want to, so to speak, but that wanting is a complicated business.

These observations apply to collective and individual memory alike. The analogy between individual and collective memory appears imperfect because, whereas in individual memory the originary, visceral experience is taken to be essential, in collective memory the experience of events is often second-hand and mediated, i.e., originating wholly in the discursive rather than in the visceral. We are told the facts: in school, in the media, and other sites of putative authority. Yet, this imperfect appearance of the analogy between individual and collective memory is a function of our failure to fully imagine the collective as a psyche, replete with both a conscious and unconscious and all the mechanisms thereof. Inevitably, some bodies within a given collective have indeed—once upon a time—had the visceral experience in question. That visceral experience, is therefore, internalized and carried forth within the collective psyche even if as a mere trace, in our attitudes, customs, etc. A collective can repress its traumas and a collective can suffer from neurosis, or indeed psychosis, just as individuals can. (Witness Nazism, Trumpism, etc.).

In this connection, it is extremely important to note that while the facts of an originary, visceral experience are subject to change, the affect produced by that experience is itself immutable. Paradoxically, the affect has more solidity than the fact. The affect persists and returns. The fact flickers and changes form by the wind of affect. This is perhaps most clear in traumatic memories—whether individual or collective. The recall of specific facts as they relate to traumatic events are not necessarily reliable, but recall of the pain and its psychological import is beyond question.<sup>18</sup> The core emotional residue of a trauma, no matter how malleable to narrative in its positioning within the subjective or social ecology, remains inviolate and indelible in its fundamental meaning.<sup>19</sup> The pain itself can be triggered, often by apparently trivial or random stimuli, because the pain is itself crystalline and immutable. In time, the affect finds new facts to inhabit. For that reason, there is something allegorical in all art that is also history.<sup>20</sup>

The persistence of affect is also the reason Phillips was spot on in bringing forward the idea of an excess to discursivity in artistic treatments of the past. The affect—as originally produced by the visceral, but eventually displaced, transferred, wandering—indeed has the appearance of a sort of excess, never finding anything to fit or subdue it. Yet, the affect is excessive not to some facts, but only to the discursive authority that seeks to fix memory in the name of facts. In modernity, this discursive authority has been going by the name ‘history’ under the guise of science. Such historical authority likes to create the illusion that cultural memory is somehow outside itself and can be observed, isolated, even measured, when, in fact, it is, just like individual memory, internal. It should strike us as obvious by now that the historical authority,

as all science, is a part of culture and thus a mere organ of cultural memory rather than its impartial observer and faithful chronicler.

That is to say, history and cultural memory are not synonymous, but neither are they dichotomous, as Pierre Nora would have us believe. Nora argues that (cultural) memory, on the one hand, 'is life, borne by living societies founded in its name', while history on the other 'is the reconstruction, always problematic and incomplete, of what is no longer'.<sup>21</sup> History, he alleges, has conquered and eradicated true memory. Yet, this has the scent of a Heideggerean primitivism. When was cultural memory, or any memory for that matter, ever free of representations, reconstruction, and discursivity? Was the emergence of writing the dividing line? Then why do Homeric epics yield so easily to an analysis of the moral values, customs, and even national pride embedded in its words? All the same, we are in sympathy with the animus driving Nora. The economy of cultural memory has most certainly changed. In modernity, post-Enlightenment, it has become dominated by the discursive, the scientific, the superegoic and the propositional at the expense of the affective and the visceral. Our question is: must history itself be defined by these modifiers of enframing?<sup>22</sup> Is not history simply any attempt, or perhaps the gestalt of attempts, to represent the past, to bring it into the present? Our definition of history would simply be: a formal claim, inevitably based on some position of authority, to the immediacy of something in the past. In no way will such claims ever entirely determine cultural memory (as Nora alleges). There will always be something excessive in cultural memory, something that escapes history's attempts to fix it. History is provisional, but still, nonetheless a claim, that once made is re-subsumed into the ongoing churn of memory. Again, it bears emphasis that memory (cultural or individual) is processual not static.

In this sense, a conception of the artist as historian goes far beyond the now familiar observation that the creative faculty is always required for historiography because history is always at root a narrative with a narrator. Paul Ricoeur is emblematic of this fundamental sort of analysis, which is helpful to bear in mind, but not the end of the story. Striking a note resonant with Raad regarding the nature of facts, Ricoeur reminds us that:

A vigilant epistemology will guard here against the illusion of believing that what we call a fact coincides with what really happened or with the living memory of eyewitnesses, as if facts lay sleeping in the documents until the historians extracted them.<sup>23</sup>

Yet, Ricoeur does not exclude a propositional form of historiography, or as Phillips phrases it, a 'discursive facticity'. History will be written and rewritten. This does not mean, however, that history is condemned to the singular mode of the discursive. Dependent as history must be on representation, might it not mimic more closely the process of cultural memory to which it contributes? That is to say, could history itself not be activated through the 'complicated mediations' giving facts their immediacy, mediations that involve at their core the 'affective and visceral'? Is that not the way we actually orient ourselves to the past?

With respect to this symposium and its title, there is never a question of simply ‘triggering’ a cultural memory. The register of the word ‘trigger’ is fully mechanical. Its etymology is from the Dutch *trekken*, meaning to pull. The primary contemporary connotation is the trigger of a gun. The trigger is pulled and the bullet is released—the bullet that lay ready, fully determined, only in need of that release to come forth as itself, moving with no deviation towards a mathematically predictable point in space. ‘Trigger’ as a verb lays no claim to origin or even mutation. Yet, the very act of calling forth an event from the past, making a claim to its immediacy, mediates that fact, makes a judgement on it, positions it, juxtaposes it, nuances it, alters it. Thus when an artist ‘intervenes’ on cultural memory, she is actively ‘doing’ history. History is something to be done, rather than merely written. The doing is a revealing, a claim on immediacy.

Thus, to conceive of the artist as historian is to conceive of history as a constant negotiation between the imaginary, the symbolic, and the real within the collective psyche. Within our present culture, the artist is almost always aligned with the Id, and her role is considered by default to contest the Superego, intrude upon the Symbolic, immerse the viewer in the Real. This habit of mind is unfortunate because it overlooks the affirmative, active role of the artist as historian. To intrude on the symbolic order is to alter it. But more than this: to engage the visceral and affective within collective memory is no mere comment on history—it is the process of history itself.

### What We Assert in an Artwork

Just as we cannot parse the fact from the affect in memory; we cannot completely sever the discursive from the visceral in artworks. Some rhetorical element is always baked in, even when ostensibly ‘abstract’, but especially when the artwork in question is dealing with historical topics (and thus doing history itself). Our *Eclipse* project was no exception. In our case, we made no attempt to conceal the rhetorical content of the work. Our claim to immediacy for the story of the passenger pigeon is the current extinction crisis, which is looking more and more like the world’s sixth mass extinction event. The seminal book on the crisis for a mass audience, *The Sixth Extinction*, was written by Kolbert herself and it was clearly on her mind when she proposed the idea of a commemoration to us. That we drew attention to this event, and that we sited the work in a museum, a *lieu de memoire*<sup>24</sup>, is a plain statement that it deserves to be remembered in this moment. To exhibit a work on the passenger pigeon in an institution of cultural authority is an act of the same ilk as state-sponsored memorials. It is a statement about what we should value and pay attention to. It is a moral, symbolic statement, discursive at heart. At the same time, our claim to immediacy would be very weak if it rested solely on this rhetoric. What are the mediations activated through the work as we see it?

One of the things we are proudest of with respect to *Eclipse* is that people of all ages engaged with it. Viewers, including children, often viewed the entire seven-

minute piece and then stayed for a second or third viewing. It is unlikely that the young viewers were drawn to the piece because of its relation to the discourse around extinction. So what was the basis of their fascination? We think it was the uncanny sensation of being perched between the real and the imaginary; between dream and waking.

Our primary goal with *Eclipse* was to represent a flock of birds in space, to create an experience of what it might have been like to observe passenger pigeons fly overhead. To this end, we took a number of steps towards a ‘realistic’ representation. We worked with an animator (Nick Roth) to adapt a CGI model of the passenger pigeon’s closest relative, the rock pigeon, and researched what was known of the movements of the bird in isolation and in flock. We researched and duplicated something of their roosting habits, which consisted of large clusters, sometimes birds on top of other birds.<sup>25</sup> We tweaked algorithms governing the movement of the flock in flight, looking to achieve a ‘natural’ feel of undulations. We read first-hand accounts of witnessing the massive flocks. Curiously, these accounts often emphasized the sound. The sounds evoked by these first-hand witnesses varied greatly. Some heard sleigh bells ‘as though an army of horses was advancing’; some heard ‘clapping’ as the birds alighted onto trees; some heard ‘a loud rushing roar’ like a tornado; some heard ‘low notes almost like the breathing of great trees’; some ‘bell-like wooing notes’; some heard human voices.<sup>26</sup> We created a sound piece (with Matthew Patterson Curry) that evoked these sounds and more importantly their confusion. Further, we worked to spatialize the sound in the echoey brick walls of MASS MoCA so that it seemed like it was coming from everywhere and nowhere.

Yet, for all this, we knew, of course, that we would not fool anyone. Nor would that be desirable. We wanted ghosts not hi-tech representations to wow the viewers and focus primarily on the technological achievement. For a ghost to be a ghost it must have once been living, thus the efforts at making the birds life-like. Yet, we took equal pains to foreground the unreality of the birds: we rendered them and the tree upon which they alighted in an inverse black and white. When the birds came from a long distance away (an obvious trick of animating perspective) to roost upon the tree, they stayed there an unnatural length of time with an unnaturally urgent activity. The birds became like leaves on the tree in a storm; or like flames engulfing it. When the birds lifted up in a column, they were unnaturally constrained by the narrow dimensions of the space. More birds rose from the tree than seemed possible. They kept coming and coming. A redemptive force, an army, or a swarm of spirits. The sound at this moment modulated to something soaring, even hopeful, before returning to an elegiac key.

The fundamental experience of *Eclipse*, therefore, was to create a feeling for the strangeness of life and the necessary existence of ghosts. Further, we hoped to generate a sense that non-human animals are alive and spirited and perhaps sense things that we do not, such as the approach of a tsunami. In particular, humans have long associated birds with augury and the oracular. They move beyond the horizon and they return. These feelings inherently relate

to the current extinction crisis and facilitate an ecological consciousness, whether or not the viewer made that connection explicitly by engaging with the wall text or the publication we made.

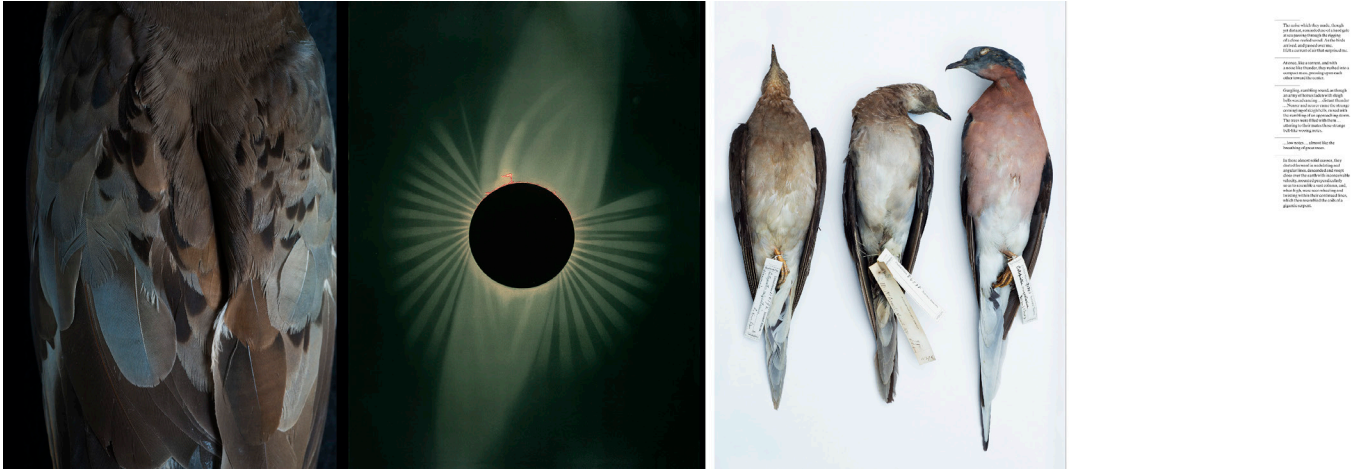


Figure 4. Pages from *Eclipse* artist publication, 11" x14", 32 pages, newsprint, edition of 10,000, (cover, back page and pages 26-27), Saylor / Morris with Elizabeth Kolbert, 2014.

For those that did connect the audio-visual experience to the written material—i.e. the propositional history—which was available in the wall text, the limited edition booklet, and also in a small reading room we constructed, we wanted to ensure this extinction event did not seem remote. In this respect, the loop is an essential feature of *Eclipse*. The piece begins with an empty, white tree. The room is mostly dark. The birds approach from far off; they come to land on the tree; they swarm in the tree, becoming both leaf and flame; then they ascend, flying up to the ceiling and across it, over the heads of the viewers. The numbers of birds increases. Now the birds themselves are illuminating the room. They increase in speed as well, until the ceiling has the flickering aspect of TV snow. Then, imperceptibly at first, the numbers of birds begins to dwindle and slow down. This continues, with fewer and fewer birds, flying more slowly, until there are only a few birds making the trip from tree to ceiling and across. Then, finally, there is only one, slow bird. Then nothing, just the white tree and darkness, and the loop starts again. This looping feature, as well as the inverse silhouette of the tree and birds, the invocation of Plato's cave, were intended to give the piece an allegorical feel that was in tension with the historical specificity.

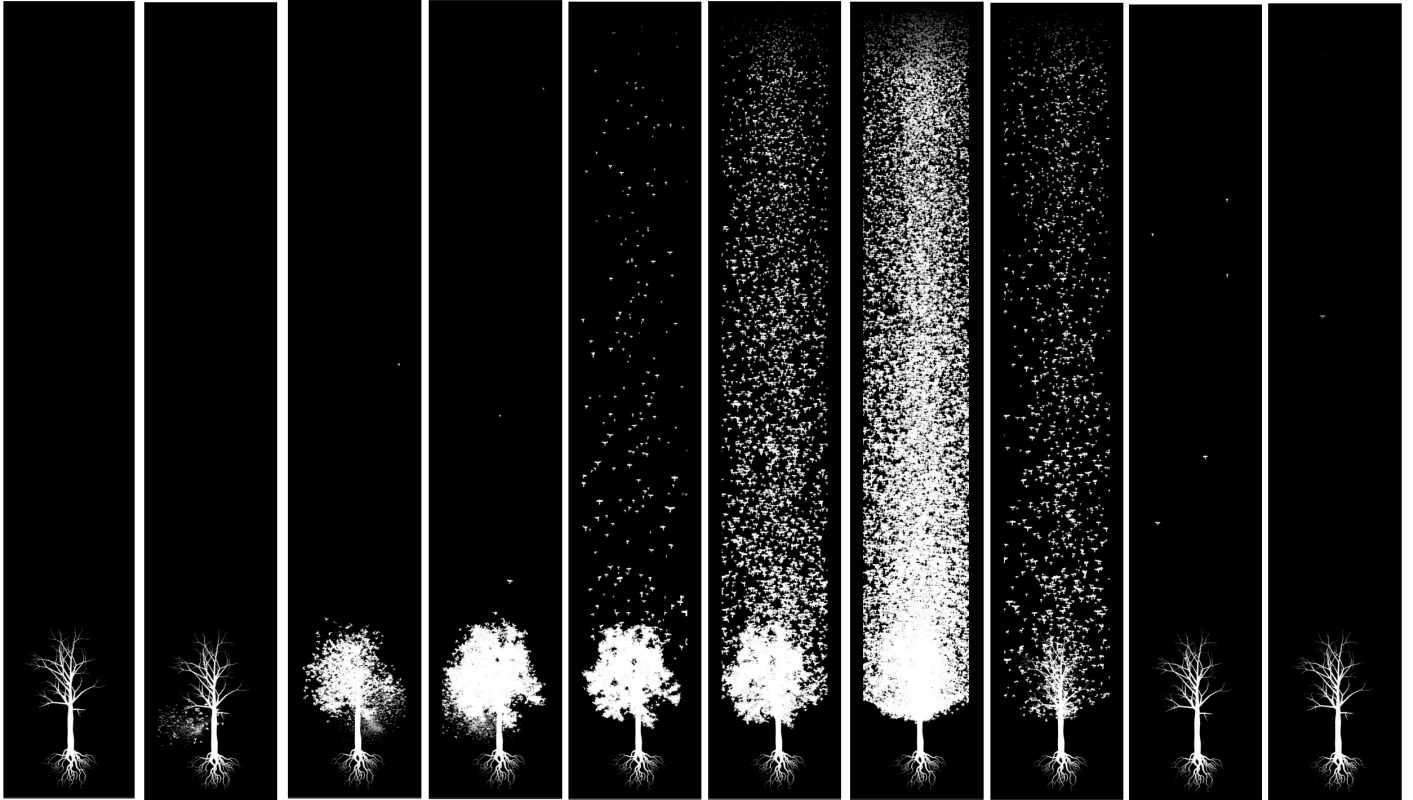


Figure 5. *Eclipse*, video stills, Sayler / Morris, 2014.

As Elizabeth Kolbert noted, '[t]he extinction of the passenger pigeon was an event witnessed, in a manner of speaking, by millions of people'.<sup>27</sup> These billions of deaths happened in plain daylight, yet the affect it had on people at the time is uncertain and varied. The very notion that an animal could truly go extinct and completely vanish from the planet, was relatively new and not universally accepted. Even where it was accepted, rationally on some level, it was not believed with sufficient strength to act. At some point, it must have been obvious that, given the rates of decline, it was inevitable the bird would die out, and yet it was not until this particular extinction was a *fait accompli*—as well as the near extinction of the buffalo—that legislation began to pass that addressed future possible extinctions, including migrating birds explicitly.<sup>28</sup> When Martha died there was a tragic tone struck in the reportage of the day, but the tragedy had already occurred many years before. It was just too diffuse to elicit a strong political response until the entire event could be consolidated into the symbol of the last bird, Martha.

By commemorating Martha, we (Kolbert included) inevitably participated in a movement to reinvigorate this symbol. A Google search will yield dozens of articles from the likes of National Geographic and the Smithsonian making the claim that this extinction event was crucial in creating the conservation movement.<sup>29</sup> Mostly these articles are from around September 2014. That all this memory activity made an impression is evidenced by a 2017 blog post from a local Cincinnati TV station that was hyperbolically titled, 'How Martha, Cincinnati's celebrity passenger pigeon, shaped conservation in America'.<sup>30</sup> Not many people had heard of Martha before 2014 and now she is a celebrity responsible for shaping the environmental movement.

Yet, Kolbert warns against drawing too simple a message from this connection between the extinction and the legislative reaction to it. In her various writings about the passenger pigeon, including for our publication that accompanied the *Eclipse* installation, Kolbert argues that: 1. 'When we tell ourselves that since Martha's death we've learned to take better care of our fellow creatures, we are, sadly, kidding ourselves'<sup>31</sup>, as evidenced by the current extinction crisis among many other things; 2. the passenger pigeon extinction 'is part of a much bigger story, a story only beginning to unfold' and that no isolated piece of protective legislation will address this larger ecological crisis;<sup>32</sup> 3. further, we are all currently complicit in this ecological crisis, so any attempt to make a neat, happy ending out of the passenger pigeon lets us off the hook.

The larger extinction event of which the passenger pigeon was a part is still happening. Further, the political gains made at a time of pitched emotional reaction, recede, making it all the more necessary to generate the emotion anew—the same emotion in a new form. The arc of the piece allows you to viscerally experience the frightening and beautiful aspect of the flock in full flight and also its decline. The loop allows you find a different salient emotion each time, but also to know that you cannot ever get out of the loop, you can never arrive at utopia.

This does not mean activism is fruitless, as Kolbert seems to indicate at times in her writing. As an illustration of this, we will relate, in closing, one anecdote



that we came across in the course of our research.<sup>33</sup> It concerns a minister from Louisville, Kentucky, a city frequently visited by flocks of passenger pigeons in its day. One night, this minister received a strange note from the famous Shakespearean actor (and father of the man who shot Lincoln), Junius Brutus Booth. Booth was in town for a performance and requested the minister's advice on the matter of finding 'a place of internment for his friend[s]'. The bracket around the plural of friend was in the original note. When the minister obliged and paid Booth a visit in the middle of the night, he discovered, after some theatrics from Booth, that the friends in question were a 'bushel' of passenger pigeons, which Booth has laid out on a sheet and described as 'distant relatives'. Booth's intent was to stage a full funeral, complete with a procession through town and a coffin, ultimately laying the birds to rest in a churchyard cemetery—all without ever conveying to anyone assembled the buried were not human. He wanted the minister's help. He asked: 'You see these innocent victims of man's barbarity?' he said. 'I wish to testify, in some public way, against this wanton destruction of life. And I wish you to help me. Will you?'

However, the minister refused despite expressing sincere sympathy for what Booth had in mind and expressing admiration for him. Booth cut right to the core in asking the minister why he would not help. 'Do you fear the laugh of man?' he asked. This remains the question given the seeming impossibility of addressing climate change and species extinction. Was Booth crazy then? Is he now?

The idea of abolishing slavery in this country once seemed radical and took so-called radicals to advance the cause. The idea that we should be concerned about the fate of an animal species, like Booth, seemed outright crazy. These notions hardly seem so out-there now. How does it happen that a fringe idea, like gay marriage to take a more recent example, moves from outlandish to mainstream? It happens in large part through the stories we tell about our past. It happens through history. Emotion in this process is not an embarrassing excess, but absolutely central. This is true not only for art, but other modes of historiography as well. In walking recently through the National Museum of African American History, the irrepressible tears that we and many others felt forming in our eyes were the engines and evidence of what might be more analytically described both as a re-orientation towards the past *and* as decisive re-making of the very world around us. Artists participate crucially in this sort of thing and this sort of thing is precisely what history is: an ordering, a claiming of certain parts of the undifferentiated, teeming mass of collective memories in order to make our world the way we feel it should be.

## Endnotes

1. Mark Godfrey, “The Artist as Historian,” *October*, 120 (Spring 2007): 140-172.
2. Godfrey, 141-146.
3. Godfrey, 141.
4. Godfrey, 168-172.
5. Walter Benjamin, “On the Theory of Knowledge, Theory of Progress”. In *The Arcades Project*, translated by Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), 474.
6. We use these terms in the sense given them by Jacques Lacan in *Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* trans. Roberto Harari (New York: Other Press, 2004).
7. Godfrey, 171.
8. There are many sources that put forth these claims regarding the passenger pigeon numbers. The seminal book relating the history of the passenger pigeon and its demise is Joel Greenberg, *The Feathered River Across the Sky: The Passenger Pigeon’s Flight to Extinction* (New York: Bloomsbury USA, 2014). See also for example, David Briello, “3 Billion to Zero: What Happened to the Passenger Pigeon?” *Scientific American Sustainability Blog*, June 27, 2014, accessed 10 July 2018, <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/3-billion-to-zero-what-happened-to-the-passenger-pigeon/>.
9. “Passenger Pigeons: Gone Today but Once Abundant”, American Museum of Natural History, accessed 20 September 2018, <https://www.amnh.org/explore/news-blogs/from-the-collections-posts/passenger-pigeons-gone-today-but-once-abundant>.
10. John James Audobon, “The Passenger Pigeon, accounts by Peter Kalm (1759) and John James Audobon (1831),” in *Annual Report, Smithsonian Institution, 1911* (Washington, DC: The Smithsonian Institution, 1911), 419.
11. Audobon, 419.
12. A complete explanation for the extinction of the passenger pigeon is still debated, as Kolbert herself notes in “They Covered the Sky and Then...”, *New York Review of Books*, 61, no. 1, (January 9, 2014): 35. Further, there is some evidence that the flocks were only as numerous as they were at the time of the earliest accounts of their swarms, as indicated in a letter in response to Kolbert’s article published in the *New York Review of Books*, 61, no. 3 (February 20, 2014). However, these debated technical details, are not necessarily pertinent to main points of this article nor to our work *Eclipse*. The main points being: 1. that while the eventual extinction became obvious in the 19th century, nothing was done until it was too late; 2. human activity led to the extinction (whether from hunting or deforestation or both); and 3. they are indeed extinct, gone from the earth. Causes for the extinction, including the commercialization of the bird as a cheap food source, can be found in numerous sources, such as Greenberg, *The Feathered River*, 68-108.

13. A re-formatted version of this piece has also been shown at other institutions, including The Philip & Muriel Berman Museum of Art (2016), The David Brower Center (2016), and the Rocky Mountain Land Library (2018).
14. Walid Ra'ad, "Walid Ra'ad by Alan Gilbert" interview by Alan Gilbert, *Bomb*, October 1, 2002, accessed 10 July 2018, <https://bombmagazine.org/articles/walid-raad/>.
15. Kendall Phillips, "The Excess of Memory: Rhetorical Interventions of Weems, Schuleit and Attie," *Memory Connection 2*, no. 1 (May 2016): 29.
16. Martin Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology," in *Martin Heidegger: Basic Writings*, trans. David Farrell Krell (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1977), 303. This quotation of Heidegger is not meant to be a wholesale endorsement of his ideas about history or even about the dangers of 'modern mathematical science'. For a fuller treatment of our thoughts on Heidegger vis-à-vis these questions see, Susannah Sayler and Edward Morris, "What is a River in California?", *Boom California*, 21 September 2017, accessed 10 July 2018, <https://boomcalifornia.com/2017/09/21/what-is-a-river-in-california/>.
17. The term "Rashomon effect" has become a recognized term in communication theory to describe the phenomenon of conflicting accounts of the same event. See for example, Robert Anderson, "The Rashomon Effect and Communication." *Canadian Journal of Communication*, 41, no. 2 (2016): 250-265.
18. See for example, Cara Laney and Elizabeth Loftus, "Traumatic Memories are Not Necessarily Accurate Memories," *Canadian Journal of Psychiatry* 50, vol. 13 (November 2005): 823. Bessel A. Van Der Kolk, "Trauma and Memory," *Psychiatry & Clinical Neurosciences* 52, no.5 (January 2002): 97-109. In this latter article, Dr. Van Der Kolk finds that "The study of traumatic memories challenges several basic notions about the nature of memory: (i) that memory always is a constructive process; (ii) that memory is primarily declarative (i.e. that people can articulate what they know in words and symbol) (iii) that memory is present in consciousness in a continuous and uninterrupted fashion; and (iv) that memory always disintegrates in accuracy over time'. These findings support the main arguments of this paper.
19. Van Der Kolk, 97-109. While these assertions find clinical support in work such as by Van Der Kolk, the authors are indebted first to the theories of Jacques Lacan on the distinctions between the Real, Imaginary and Symbolic orders and also directly on the nature of trauma and memory as articulated in *Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* trans. Roberto Harari (New York: Other Press, 2004).
20. This observation opens up onto a line of reasoning that would be interesting to pursue, particularly in reference to Walter Benjamin's ideas about allegory and the nature of historiography. Art that produces history is intrinsically allegorical because by engaging the affective, the artistic treatment of history puts any given event into relation with all events in history that potentially engender the same affective content, quite apart from any secondary discursive spin that seeks to impose a particular, historically contingent version of victory and defeat upon that event. Of course, the discursive dictates what can produce this or that affective content, or even what is visible at all. Yet, this observation

only reinforces our point: the facts shift, the affect remains constant. There are notions of solidarity and redemption hiding in this thought that would need a different context to flesh out.

21. Pierre Nora, “Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Memoire,” *Representations*, no.26, *Special Issue: Memory and Counter-Memory* (Spring, 1989), 8.
22. The concept of enframing is again Heidegger’s from “The Question Concerning Technology” and elsewhere. We discuss enframing also in Saylor / Morris, “What is a River in California?”
23. Paul Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting* trans. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 178.
24. *Lieu de memoire* is a reference to Nora, “Between Memory and History” *Representations*, no. 26, *Special Issue: Memory and Counter-Memory*, (Spring, 1989). Nora argued that a society such as ours in which cultural memory is not embedded in lived experience relies on sites (*lieux*) of memory production/ performance such as museums. Whether or not you accept Nora’s stark assessment of the status of cultural memory, which we do not, it is hard to argue against his observation that certain places and institutions have an elevated authority in shaping cultural memory.
25. This is described in many sources. For example, Kalm and Audobon, “The Passenger Pigeon, accounts by Peter Kalm (1759) and John James Audobon (1831)”, 409, 420. See also the Walton Ford painting, *Falling Bough*, 2002, which served as a primary source of image inspiration for *Eclipse*.
26. These accounts include the Kalm and Audobon reports cited above in note 2. Also: Morris Schaff, *Etna and Kirkersville*, (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1905) 117; Craig Wallace, “The Expression of Emotion in Passenger Pigeon,” *Auk* 28 (1911), 420-421; “The Wild Pigeon of North America by Chief Pokagon,” *The Chauttaquan*, vol. 22 1896.
27. Kolbert, “They Covered the Sky”.
28. A summary of this litigation is helpfully provided in Joe Rosemeyer, “How Martha, Cincinnati’s celebrity passenger pigeon, shaped conservation in America,” WCPO, website, April 17, 2017, accessed 15 July 2018, <https://www.wcpo.com/news/insider/martha-cincinnati-passenger-pigeon-reshaped-conservation-in-america?page=2>: ‘In 1900, Congress passed the nation’s first wildlife-protection law, the Lacey Act, which banned anyone from shipping unlawfully killed game across state lines. The bill’s sponsor, U.S. Rep. John F. Lacey, R-Iowa, lamented the disappearance of passenger pigeons in a speech on the House floor. In 1913, Congress passed an even tougher law called the Weeks-McLean Act. In 1918, the Migratory Bird Treaty Act added protection for eggs, nests, and feathers’.
29. See for example: Carl Zimmer, “Century After Extinction, Passenger Pigeons Remain Iconic—And Scientists Hope to Bring Them Back,” *National Geographic*, 30 August 2014, accessed 15 July 2018, <https://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2014/08/140831-passenger-pigeon-martha-deextinction-dna-animals-species/>; William Souder, “100 Years After Her Death, Martha, the

Last Passenger Pigeon, Still Resonates,” *Smithsonian Magazine*, September 2014, accessed 15 July 2018, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smithsonian-institution/100-years-after-death-martha-last-passenger-pigeon-still-resonates-180952445/>.

30. Rosemeyer, “How Martha”.
31. Kolbert, “They Covered the Sky”.
32. Ibid.
33. James Freeman Clarke, “Junius Brutus Booth: An Incident in His Life,” in *Memorial and Biographical Sketches* (Boston: Houghton, Osgood and Company, 1878), 263-279.

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## Biographical Note

Susannah Sayler and Edward Morris (Sayler / Morris) work with photography, video, writing, installation, and open source projects. Of primary concern are contemporary efforts to develop ecological consciousness and the possibilities for art in support of social movements. In 2006 they co-founded The Canary Project—a studio that produces visual media and artworks that deepen public understanding of climate change and other ecological issues. They have been awarded fellowships including the New York Artist Fellowship (2016), the Smithsonian Artist Research Fellowship (2014), the Loeb Fellowship (2008-09). Their work has been exhibited broadly in the US and abroad including the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art, the Cooper Hewitt National Design Museum, the Kunsthall in Rotterdam, the Museum of Science and Industry in Chicago, etc. They are currently teaching in the Transmedia Department at Syracuse University. Their archives are collected by the Nevada Museum of Art / Reno, Center for Art and Environment.

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