

***MOUND:***  
*Leaf and Twig Conservatorium*

Response by Klare Lanson

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How can we rethink some of the tensions around the regional social experience and its relationship with the ecology of the local bushland? By considering material participation and related interaction with the wildness of the bush, artist Forest Keegel uses creative practice methods to construct an investigative arts laboratory. In consultation with local elders and on Dja Dja Wurrung land, Keegel begins a one-month artist residency within the colonial architecture of the Bendigo Botanical Conservatory, inviting us to help activate the natural and messy aspects of the bush within this beautifully manicured space, and to better understand the natural surrounds of this rapidly growing city.

Using collective forms of cultural exchange such as making, talking and play, Keegel highlights the importance of tree debris in providing habitat and food source for birds, in particular the Bush Stone-curlew and Malleefowl. Through the creative motif of the large nesting mound of the Malleefowl, the artist encourages community participation, collective performance, conversation, and broader thinking around how the clean up behaviours of the gardener impact the contemporary ecosystem. Usually encouraged to clean up private property in preparation for fire season, Forest Keegel will inspire residents to become ground birds, to collect and transport leaf litter and tree debris from their gardens to the Conservatory instead of burning or adding to waste landfill areas. To make a large-scale sculptural mound.

And what of the actual birds? They quite simply must be protected, and in relation to this project, they also act as metaphor for the social movement of our ever-changing community. Amplifying the mutual relationship between humans and place, this project underlines the constantly moving assemblage that makes up the social experience of the region. If the social is understood as a form of material participation between people and things, it can be known even further by also letting the nonhuman in, such as location, trees, and wildlife.

This process of letting in transforms the social life, making it more performative and fundamentally more genuine. To identify this assemblage where humans *and* nonhumans have the ability to perform, we can now consider cultural participation as a specific mode of behaviour that moves and shifts with *all* participants within our ecosystem.

Birds, the bushland, weather, twigs and debris, other wildlife, technology and people—all are elements that have roles to play in maintaining the sustainability of an ecosystem. This intricate balance of viable living practice is paramount to the

wellbeing of the birdlife and their related environ. *MOUND* is a creative project that activates these understandings in playful and inclusive ways.

A mound is defined as a rounded mass projecting above a surface. An artificial elevation. A ceremonial site. Not natural yet being of nature. For the Malleefowl it is part of an annual ceremony, and most importantly it is their home. Inviting the City of Greater Bendigo Parks team and local residents to participate in *MOUND* elevates genuine dialogue with both public and private realms of the local community about what home is and what it can be within the local social milieu.

The organic matter collected is not only fundamental to the ecology of the surrounding forest but also forms essential components of the season long accumulation of nesting material for the Malleefowl. It is also vital for the Bush-stone Curlew and other endangered ground dwelling birds, providing a vital insectivorous food source. A flora-based curation of sorts will also occur within this project, where a Jurassic garden of tree ferns and Australian plants clustered around the conservatory's water feature will be co-created by Forest Keegel and Richard Lawson. Alongside this process of art and place making are groups such as Save Our Bush-stone Curlew, botanical illustrators, field Naturalists, and art students—all offering their contributions through talks, workshops and drawing sessions in the Conservatory.

The open structure of these participatory sessions support an organic social flow, where people are welcome to come in and draw, look through microscopes and make/play with the sticks in the mound. Marilyn Nicholls, Traditional Owner and master basket weaver, will also run a day of basket weaving workshops. Through public workshop and forum activity such as this, material will be contemplated through creative endeavours such as still life drawing, leaf rubbing, sculpture and various other reflective practices. These repetitive and monumental acts of debris reimagining will help to disseminate vital information about all of the birds local to this area and their plight. Afterwards, the leaves and twigs from *MOUND* will be gifted to the Save Our Bush Stone-curlews captive breeding and release program.

Forest Keegel performs both alongside and within this project. By inviting sound artist Amanda King to create an atmospheric sonic experience comprising soundscape of recorded local bird life blending naturally with the live sounds of the park—the bats, the weather, the trees, people and technology—Keegel enables yet another way to reconsider how we function within the social and how the solitary booming sound of the Malleefowl or the Bush-stone curlew's ghost-like call play a role in how we connect with the world.

Previous sound artworks devoted to birds such as *Catalogue d'oiseaux* (1958) by composer and ornithologist Olivier Messiaen, and the contemporary work *13 Japanese Birds* (2009) by the Japanese noise musician Merzbow enable us to grasp just how intrinsic birds are to our experience of place. The presence of birds in the everyday allows active listening to become routine practice. We must listen to place in

order to stay linked with environment, and sound art is an important way to help strengthen this habit.

Listening is more than just the sensory action of the ear. This contemplative delay is what sets it apart from ‘hearing’, where the idea is to suspend what we hear—in terms of genre, purpose, historical context—so that we can achieve a hearing that is the material heard, now. It generates the now, and enables us to better explore the world. Contemporary thinking of sound stimulates arguments around sustainable living practice, as it has the ability to transform current embedded language (such as race, gender and place) into a more pluralised way of thinking, where everyone and everything that makes up our environment can be understood as equal.

Both visual and sonic creative practice understandings of our environment enable alternative ways of ‘knowing’ through an embodied practice of imaginative play. Utilising playful modes of being and the collective experience assemblage, art continues to mediate broader social issues related to our contemporary ecosystem. Creative practice also has the ability to move across disciplines, and in the case of *MOUND*, it elevates the importance of investigating the world through the environmental sciences.

Beginning this project with a traditional Dja Dja Wurrung smoking ceremony demonstrates the mutual respect that is needed to save our environment. Socially meaningful creative practice projects such as Forest Keegel’s *MOUND* continue to add valuable dialogue to the cultural interconnections of the constantly shifting region of Central Victoria.