

# Urban Bird

and the human-nature relationship

Artistic residency in Prague (CZ)  
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## Introduction

This project results from an artistic residency carried out in Prague between August 25 and October 25, 2022. The AiR@CU artist residency, hosted by Charles University in Prague, is part of the research program Mistra Environmental Communication (Mistra-EC) and offers the selected artist the opportunity to investigate and explore environmental and sustainability issues through an immersion in the Mistra-Research EC at the Institute for Communication Studies and Journalism (ICSJ) from Charles University. It is part of a larger residency program coordinated by ICSJ's Mistra Environmental Communication Media & Art team, with additional support from the NGO Sqrige.



## Artist's statement

The topics covered by the MISTRA program aroused my interest when I read their call for applications. Indeed, in addition to their desire to involve actors from different backgrounds than academia, their approach to environmental issues and sustainable development echoed my reflections on ecology and environmental protection. Having studied graphic design and illustration, the purpose of which is to communicate ideas, and concepts visually, developing a project related to environmental communication seemed evident to me because it links these areas that fascinate me. The visual arts raise public awareness of many issues; through my artistic practice, especially, I seek to communicate philosophical and spiritual concepts related to the consciousness and perception of each within and towards their environment.

During a previous project, I was interested in people's emotional relationship with their environment; in a society where people are increasingly connected virtually and disconnected from reality, do they feel a connection with the places they frequent daily? The fact of creating works of art has made it possible to establish a tool of communication between people and their home, to awaken in them personal questions. Inspired by the Buddhist and philosophical concepts of contemplation, my project invited these people to discover the subtle links between the different forms of this practice.

In its common sense, contemplation is the attentive observation of things (for example a work of art), which results in a complete absorption of one's attention in the things perceived by the eyes. There is no reasoning or analysis. Contemplation takes place in a mental calm and inner silence, the observer allowing himself to be drawn in by the things that make up his environment. In ancient Greek philosophy, «théôria» is the contemplation of ideas, the examination of concepts. This attitude makes it possible to free oneself from the sensitive, to detach oneself from «opinion» and its conditioning to approach pure and perfect knowledge. It is similar in this sense to Buddhism, which aims to dissolve mental impurity through meditation practice, resulting in a balanced mind open to the experience of joy and compassion.

To contemplate is to pay attention to what is in front of you but also inside you. In both cases, contemplation allows you to reinstall yourself in the present by calming your mind and detaching yourself from parasitic thoughts.



## Urban Bird

The Urban Bird project is a continuation of this reflection. My research and observations on the different dynamics between humans and the urban environment resulted in this visual project. Particularly between humans and what they consider «nature»: fauna and flora. A concept discovered in particular during my research is the concept of ecopsychology, which is interested in the development of a reasonable relationship between humans and nature and advocates the study and the strengthening of the emotional bond between human beings and the living broadest sense. Due to his progressive disconnection over time with wild nature, the city dweller sees the city as his creation, a territory belonging to him, and has created a break with what he considers primitive. Proof of this is the increase in holiday offers that promote escape into nature, often emphasizing being able to approach wild animals and smell the fresh air. Through his discourse as well, by naming and categorizing all things, humans have created this invisible border between themselves, non-human living beings, and the inert environment.

The series of collages seeks to explore different ways of seeing and feeling the presence of these various entities in the city, each work can be interpreted either from a personal point of view or by putting oneself in the shoes of the subject represented or even an external, neutral, omniscient point of view. I imagined several ways to symbolize these invisible borders that separate humans, non-human animals, and their environment, and then how to blur these frontiers, to abolish this hierarchy preconceived by Man. For example, intersecting mediums that are distinct from each other (collage, painting, drawing) used independently for each element (human, animal, environment) is one of the ways of illustrating this diversity.

The approach of the project and the images produced raise several questions; do the difficulties of cohabitation between species (addressed in town planning, for example) come from these invisible borders? What are they, and where are they located?



## Spiritual principles and philosophical views

Buddhism also views humans as part of nature, not separate from it. The boundaries which isolate Man are created by the barrier of the ego, from which he can emancipate himself through the practice of meditation (vipasana) which, in time, leads to an awakened consciousness that recognizes the interdependence of all things, and the existence of anything as part of a Whole. To harm nature is to hurt Man because they constitute this idea of the Whole.

This idea that feeling oneness with the world around us is naturally linked with caring for the environment is present in Ayurveda as well: By recognizing our relationship and inherent connection with nature, we can begin to see how taking care of nature is a way of taking care of ourselves, and how taking care of ourselves is, in turn, taking care of the environment.

This vision meets the philosophy described by Bruno Latour, a philosopher who developed the idea that there is no dualism between nature and culture, these two notions being abstract and created by the human discourse that we know. The anthropologist Philippe Descola shares this vision, putting the human being on the same level as all other species by no longer defining it as an individual dissociated from nature, but rather as a being that is part of a whole, the term «nature» being replaced by the notion of «Living».



## Link with social sciences

We find in the social sciences the notion of biocentrism, which gives equal value to all living beings. This discourse corresponds to the spiritual and philosophical visions mentioned above and therefore constitutes a bridge between the scientific/economic/social fields and the philosophical/spiritual/ethical aspects of the project.

The biocentric discourse is opposed to anthropocentrism, which considers human value above all others, and to granting moral dignity only to human beings, and considering nature only as a collection of different resources destined for servitude. of Man. There are other visions, including ecocentrism, which echoes the animist philosophy, or even multicentrism.









## ICSJ research work in the MISTRA project

These different discourses and many others have been one of the main topics around which various projects carried out by the team of researchers at the ICSJ revolve. They develop media-based and art-based projects, one of which explores the relationship between man and nature and how nature has often been silenced.

Their research focuses on the often underrepresented interconnections between conflicting discourses, environmental ethics, and sustainable development. They explore how media and the arts can be studied and used to document and communicate these interconnections, in ways that connect conflict transformation and environmental action.

They are conducted primarily across the spectrum of the social sciences, such as economics, sociology, journalism, and communication studies, and therefore bring an analytical and scientific perspective to the causes addressed by the overall project.



## Conclusion

Through this project, I hope I have been able to show that in one way or another, many of the concepts that were created are related to each other, even very similar. We find spiritual and philosophical ideologies that seem at first sight very far from science, and yet some of their visions are similar to each other but expressed by different words. This proves that we create a certain caesura between things, just from the use of our language.

The visual arts make it possible to add a different dimension to these concepts, in which the discourse, as we understand it, is not used, in favor of illustrative works that can be interpreted differently by each spectator. They make it possible to elicit reactions and questions across the spectrum of experiences lived by each person, avoiding the judgments and preconceptions often brought about by the use of language.

Urban Bird is part of the desire to question our place within this ecosystem that is the city, by visualizing and expressing different looks, not centered on the human, on the relationship between man and nature, and by changing our way to think while paying attention to the immediate environment and to the biodiversity that exists within the buildings.



## Installations

This project aims to be in contact with the general audience and to arouse curiosity, emotion, or questions in the viewer. This is why I chose to exhibit it outside the context of a gallery so that it would be accessible to anyone passing by. The collages were displayed in different places in the city, in the windows of organic products stores, specialized grocery stores, cafes, tea rooms, and vegan restaurants, to respect the sustainable development values of the MISTRA project as well as my convictions.



## Miniature exhibition

This bird-scale exhibition took place in the Karlovo Náměstí park and on the bank of the Vltava. By reproducing the works of birds and arranging them in places where the animals gather, I offered the possibility for my work to be confronted with the gaze of any passing being.

In the park, animals rub shoulders with humans and occupy the space in the same way as any other citizen. They look for interactions with people who have come to draw a little serenity and take advantage of the crumbs that have fallen from their sandwiches. They also benefit from the freshness and thirst-quenching of the various fountains. With contemplation, we realize that they enjoy both the human presence and the flora offered by this small oasis of greenery in the middle of the capital effervescence.

At the edge of the river, a small beach is a meeting place between the elements: the kingdom of the air finds itself alongside the water and the earthly ones. Pigeons, ducks, nutria, and humans meet there to share a meal, take photos or contemplate the Charles Bridge and its reflections. It is a place where it is easy to come into contact with the fauna; just reach out with something to eat and it comes running without embarrassment, making this place feel like their territory. Rightly so, because it is theirs, and it should be respected like any other place that humans share with other species.



## Parallel project

Initially thinking of creating a project around the animals of the city in general, I finally chose to focus on birds, because these are the animals that we see the most every day. However, I stayed on the lookout for the details I noticed and the creatures I encountered. While looking to photograph city animals, I composed a series of photographs and noticed that I could draw parallels between them.

I saw eyes that observe, not always the ones you expect; that what humans throw away is rehabilitated by wildlife; that behind kindness can hide cruelty.



## Credits

Thanks to Mistra Environmental Communication (Mistra-EC) and the Institute for Communication Studies and Journalism (ICSJ) team at Charles University in Prague.

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