

MOMENTA BIENNALE

Balado / Podcast

Episode 1 - Verbatim

Mara Eagle

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Mara Eagle x Jamie Ross

Episode 1 (31 min)

Mara and Jamie meet for the first time in the Virage Sonore studio. Together, they talk about the works that Mara is presenting in the Biennale. Starting with her fascination with birds, the conversation wends through her curiosity about science and a phobia dating from her childhood. She also explains her relationship with sound, featured in many of her works, and talks about her fundraising efforts for a bird shelter.

“I’m interested in the voices, the voices as this point of escape where discourse becomes air and saliva and escapes the body”.

Mara et Jamie se rencontrent pour la première fois au studio de Virage Sonore. Ensemble, ils parlent des œuvres de Mara présentées dans la Biennale. Sa fascination pour les oiseaux mène le fil de la conversation en passant de sa curiosité pour la science jusqu’à une phobie datant de son enfance. Elle aborde aussi son rapport avec le son, partie importante de son travail, et de son implication auprès d’un refuge d’oiseaux par le biais d’une levée de fonds.

« Je suis intéressée par la voix, la voix comme source de fuite, où le langage devient de l’air et de la salive, puis échappe le corps ».

Jamie: You're listening to a podcast about images and the artists who make them brought to you by the 2023 edition of Momenta Biennale de L'image, curated by Ji-Yoon Han.

Entitled Masquerades Drawn to Metamorphosis, the 18th edition of MOMENTA, Biennale de l'image presents 23 artists whose projects activate processes of transformation, mimicry and mutation. Its goal is to shed light on the dynamics of visibility and invisibility, defining the relationships between self and other, between humans and our environment.

I'm your host. Montreal artist and filmmaker, Jamie Ross and I'm meeting up with the artists showing work at this edition of MOMENTA for generous moments of conversation. Je suis votre animateur, artiste et vidéaste Jamie Ross. Je rencontre des artistes faisant partie de cette édition de MOMENTA pour des conversations enrichissantes. Les entretiens seront en français et en anglais

I love artists. I love having the opportunity to sit with other artists about the work we make and to look at it with rigor, with curiosity and with delight. I'm interested in the messiness and the irregularity of communication, and I believe in the singular energy that is engendered by the places that inspire artwork. Not just our studios, galleries or the museums where they're shown. I'm interested in the resonance of a site and the objects that accompany each artist in their practice. For this series, I joined MOMENTA artists for an encounter at a site of their choice to hear about their process and to think about the questions their work asks. And I'm also fascinated by the paradox that is artists working with images, sharing their work in a decidedly non visual medium, that of a conversation, a podcast.

Jamie: Mara Eagle invited me to meet her in her garden near Mount Royal, but it was supposed to rain, so we took shelter in the studio, which we lit with hot pink lights after we both independently ended up intuiting that pink was the episode's dress code. Following the wet goopy weather warning, I brought some tapioca pudding as one of the objects to play with asmr style under the microphone. Eat your heart out.

At the sound of the bell, we begin the spell!

Jamie: So welcome to the MOMENTA Biennale Podcast.

Mara: Thank you !

Jamie: Mara Eagle. Um, let's begin with an object game.

Mara: Okay.

Jamie: So for this, for this sound game, because it's always fun to talk with visual artists who work visually and we work in sound as well, but our listeners won't be listening in with their sight. I like to play games with objects and sound. Of all of the objects on the table, of which there are one, two, three, four, five, six. Which would you like to touch?

Mara: Pudding.

Jamie: Go for it.

Mara: Okay. But this is a closed container that I'm encountering, but.

Jamie: Oh, that is a wet tapioca.

Mara: Okay.

Jamie: All right. To begin the interview, we've chosen the tapioca. Tell us about Pretty Talk, Mara. Tell us about the work that's going to be presented in the MOMENTA Biennale this year.

Mara: So I'm super excited. Pretty Talk is a 15 minute looping animation in 3D.

And what's unique about it as a project is that all of the sounds used in the animation, the entire soundtrack is actually produced by bird mimicry. So in making the soundtrack, which actually incidentally was made before any of the visual aspect of the animation to make the soundtrack I perused, scoured was on a lengthy quest on the Internet. I basically collected hundreds and hundreds of sound bites of what I call representational sound, so birds which mimic sounds in their environment, but to a sort of a hyper realistic degree. And I collected all these sounds. And so a parrot or a cockatoo or a budgie or a lyrebird, most of these birds that I was sourcing from are living in captivity. And so they're learning sounds from a human centered environment, and they've incorporated these sounds into their sort of vocabulary of quote unquote, "calls". And then once I had enough content in my archive, I began collaging the sounds together. And slowly a narrative emerged.

And the narrative is really sort of driven and constrained by the contents of the archive or of the sound effects library.

And what resulted is basically a sort of series of inter loosely interwoven vignettes that are set in a suburban neighborhood. And you have this kind of facade of normality that's very familiar, but it really kind of quickly degenerates into a much more absurdist, slightly horrific.

Jamie: I would say quite horrific.

Mara: It's quite horrific. It's quite grotesque. And, and the animation forms a perfect sort of seamless loop of repetition. And there's kind of this insularity about it and this repetitive, almost ouroboros kind of quality, which ... which I was inspired by, of course, the repetitive nature of a lot of bird speech. So that's the basis of the animation.

Jamie: That's so cool. And it's for those who haven't seen the show already, the visual language is garish and lurid and the colors are harsh and terrifying and also pleasurable and silly and weird and uncanny and campy.

Mara: Yes, absolutely.

Jamie: Very. It's like very signed Mara Eagle.

Mara: Yeah. You know, it's funny because you kind of excavate your aesthetic signature as an artist. I mean, it's ... it was found and then you're always reinforcing like, your own

quests, I think.

Jamie: Well, what's the motor that ... that runs the animation ?

Mara: Oh, so we were working between we had a whole pipeline, okay. Because we were working with the most sort of reduced free versions of everything. So we started off in DAZ, which is a sort of pay as you go, uh, software, the software itself is free and then you kind of accumulate kits. So yeah, we definitely had all manner of like kit sharing and like, you know. So that was the first step was designing the characters. But then the characters have to be exported through a pipeline, in which they are, you know, converted into a format readable by Iclone.

One person, his name is Callum McConnell. He animated the entire film, which is pretty amazing. Yeah, especially on our budget. It was a low budget, very DIY kind of workflow. But yeah, so then they would come out of Iclone and then they would go into Cinema 4D where ... yeah, largely myself, I did have technical assistance at the beginning, which is how I learned to do the texturing, how I learned camera rigging, how I learned lighting strategies, but at a very sort of generalist level. But yeah, then they would go into cinema and I would like for a lot of it, it was like, I'm the only person there.

Mara: Like, yeah, it's wild how much you can do. And then at the same time how difficult. Colt. It is when you don't really know what you're doing. So much of it is just the most valuable skill is having someone on board who can solve problems. It's not what their existing skill set is, it's their ability to troubleshoot issues.

Yeah, I'm not a technical person. I heavily rely on people like to help me solve problems and that's the most valuable thing I could ask for in a collaborator. It's a real like post-Internet piece in every manner of like in the sense even all of the sort of infrastructure of the making was relying on, you know, one of these sort of major corporatized hosting platforms. So, yeah, it's fun. That's when I made the making of the Desktop documentary, which is a secondary piece for people who are not familiar or who I don't know if everyone will get to see the exhibition, but there is the main animation, pretty talk, and then there is also a secondary accompanying companion piece which is called "Pretty Talk in the Making", and it's a seven minute desk desktop documentary style video in which basically a desktop documentary for people who aren't familiar is basically like the only camera is the it's like a screen capture. So the entire story is told through screen space. So you have zoom boxes or, you know, FaceTime boxes. You have someone doing research, you have chat things coming up, you have everything unfolding.

And it's a really great way to look at how information is structured on the on the Internet, how not just the information we consume, but also the way that it's hosted, the way that it's disseminated, the way that we consume it through various apps. And I think that's just so interesting to include that as a as a form of storytelling, you know, especially, of course, during the pandemic where that was like our lives, you know, the screen really was a portal.

Jamie: Totally.

Mara: So the, the, the second the film, the sort of desktop documentary in the film, the sort of desktop documentary in the making was I made it in that language. So and it's

really apropos because that, you know, even my collaborators, that's how we were always connecting. That's how we were sharing all of the projects, even the, you know, the rendering and things like the, you know, everything was really mediated by, yeah, these platforms which are very much of the moment and things.

"Teaser of Mara's work"

Jamie: When I was reflecting yesterday, like when I first encountered your work and I think it was *La machine qui enseignait des airs aux oiseaux* was the exhibition the group show? I think it was. I think 2022 at the MAC. Yeah, I just remember seeing that exhibition of your or the work of yours installed.

There was this huge sort of snake support where you could sit on it and then the two channels of the video featured an animation with this character who was giving sort of scientific information a little bit. And she had like a, I don't know, like a balaclava that was printed with with like ornithology or something. And then there was all the flowers that are opening and closing.

Mara: Yeah, yeah. That piece is called *Théâtre de l'inconnu*. And yeah, she was wearing a butterfly mask. She was stumbling over her words and trying to deliver this narrative of the life cycle of a moth. At the same time as there was this kind of ambiguous, like robotic pollinator interacting with time lapse of flowers who are almost like violently blooming in this techno color. And then there was interrupted by a constant sort of blasts of opera, an opera called *Poveri Fiore*, which means poor flower. And it's the story of a female. It's an aria in which the female protagonist is she's smelled from a bouquet of flowers, and it's

her death scene, which is similar to the moth, is describing her own death scene. And then the disco kind of inflatable thing is actually an enormous kind of a recreation of a silk gland. Oh, wow. Yeah. Which is the organ that produces the silk protein.

Jamie: From within a silk moth ?

Mara: Yeah, from within a silk moth. And I come across this study of these like, bioengineered silk glands that were actually being used to produce human collagen for use in cosmetic products.

So and there's this whole part in the narrative which is cobbled together, by the way, from various writers, including ancient writers, including W.G., Sebald. And there's a the part that's that I'm quoting there where she's describing a dissection comes from Sebald. And it's like if you slit one open along the length of its back, you will discover a cluster of small, intertwined tubes resembling intestines. And then she goes on to describe the tubes, start at the mouth and like something about the juices flowing forth. Anyways.

Jamie: I love it, but is it really? It's not at all.

Mara: It's a lot of information for that piece.

Jamie: Would you, would you tell our listeners what is on the hat you're wearing as well?

Mara: Oh, there's a butterfly.

Jamie: Oh.

Mara: So repetitive. It's so funny. It's nice when you have like then everything just matches in your life, you know? I love.

Jamie: It. I love it. I love it.

Mara: It's like always chasing butterflies. I love.

Jamie: It. But there's this really beautiful through line, I think between that project and Pretty Talk, which is that the characters are going outside and it's not a nature that we're very familiar with. It's not a pastoral nature whatsoever. But I think that there's something really interesting in the in the outdoors as it's represented in Pretty Talk where the suburban characters are finding like Christmas lights and they're sort of passing out and they're finding these like sort of there are there are flowers waving in the grass, but it's it's like there's an Xbox maybe in the grass, like there's all sorts of tech in there. Yeah. And it's just a backyard as well. It's a very culturally mediated space. It's not you're not showing us the any sense of nature with a capital N.

Mara: You know, I love how you put that. And it's really, really apropos of sort of my some of my intellectual foundation came from when I was studying at McGill. And I was I was studying in Psych, but most of the classes are science classes. You're studying hormones in the body, brain anatomy. And then there was like one extracurricular class that was an anthropology of medicine class who was taught by one of my mentors, Tobias Reese, who

is a philosopher of science, an anthropologist of science, And he's been super formative for me, especially around this idea of like the history of nature as a concept. And one of the things that I always carried forward with me from what I learned studying with him over the years is this idea of the that all concepts have a history. And so when we're asking or when we're talking about nature in a intellectual or artistic milieu, it's always like, well, when did like what? What's the etymological network of this word? What is the historical technological network? Work. At what point does a concept emerge ?

Jamie: In the category? Where is that category from? Where is the boundary?

Mara: Exactly ! And it as a sort of like a counterpart to culture, it as a like mechanism for distinguishing humans as and culture from being outside of nature, which is like part of probably what allows us like to exploit because it's something that is outside of us and we see it as like a resource to be mined, at least in, you know, sort of Western European philosophy and culture, which is sort of what I've inherited largely in my education and which I critique at the same time. So yeah, I'm really interested always in these moments where the boundaries and they're, you know, at this point it's like there is no, there are no there is no I like this idea of the human wild because as much as there's no nature outside of humans, there's also like humans who are constantly being, like, haunted by you know, nature in this quote unquote, you know, traditional version. So I'm really interested in the constructedness of that category. And anything that allows me to kind of explore that is and I'm also really interested in the voice, always the voice as this sort of point of escape where like discourse like becomes like air and saliva and it like escapes the body. So I'm really fascinated All of my major projects that I've done in the past 5 to 7 years. They've always started with sound and they always have

started with voices. The voice and the sound is not an after fact for me, as it often is for like video and animation artists who tend to be like really driven by the visuals. I am extremely visual, but at the same time, I think that working with sound allows me to work from a space that is like less intellectual and less analytic.

Mara: It was wild. I was looking when I was when I was making *Pretty Talk*, I really thought because there's so many sort of archives of bird sound where you can find all kinds of wild bird calls. And I was hoping to find an archive of like domestic bird calls, but it's not considered worthy of scientific study. And I was so the archive that I made, like there's no other archive like that. You have Irene Pepperberg studies of Alex and she has like lots and lots of tapes. I'm sorry, Alex is a famous African grey parrot and Irene Pepperberg. Dr. Irene Pepperberg is a very well known like scientist of bird cognition, and she did a lot to show how intelligent parrots are.

And then it's really not a matter of mimicry. It's they actually understand the symbolic function of language. And their intelligence is about the level of a three and a half year old. So emotional intelligence as well as linguistic intelligence. They can identify materials, they can count objects. They know colors. It's wild. And so she really did a lot to show that birds were not just these machines who are mimicking, but that they have a much more complex relationship to language and that we would have thought. And so anyhow, I'm actually going to reach out to her. She's like adorable and amazing and super cool. So I'm going to I'm excited. I have a bunch of people I want to reach out to with the project to sort of that are outside the discipline of the arts, just to be in conversation. I really love sharing my work with philosophers and scientists. Um, I love I love working with other thinkers that

are not necessarily artists. Of course I love artists too.

Jamie: That's awesome. Now there's something really elegant about the way that the birds are being how we're projecting the mimesis onto the birds as they take our language. But in your project you're taking the bird language, which is already filtered or duplicated once and recharacterizing the voices from just the voice from the birds. So there's sort of a copy of a copy of a copy of a copy happening, which it just feels really iterative and beautiful to see that. It's like it's taking the assumption we have about the bird and re anthropomorphizing it.

Mara: Yes. It's also interesting because, you know, each bird voice and so each character is not always acted by the same bird, but sometimes there'll be multiple utterances which are and that bird is has imprinted that vocal pattern from a human. So it's fascinating because, of course, a part of me really would love to like reach out to certain people, bird owners. But then I'm also really scared because there would be absolutely no it's all collaged sound. Just to remind people. Found sound. And because the collage is so massive, it doesn't have like, like I'm not going to I don't there would be no grounds for a lawsuit of, you know, appropriation. Yeah. Because it's so complex. Like there's hundreds of sound bites that are used and there have been repurposed and recontextualized to a degree that I would land, I would be protected, you know, But at the same time, not everybody knows that. And so you can I'm just so I would be so scared to like end up with a lawsuit. But at the same time, um, you know, I one thing, one sadness that I have is to not really be able to, to feel like I can't share the project with people and the birds. Yeah. And the birds. And there's a few people that are bird advocates. So part of the exhibition and part of the way that I'm framing this work is also with a fundraiser event. So I've have

produced these, you know, sort of thematic tote bags that are going to be sold in the exhibition as a part of a fundraiser for birds who have been abandoned and who are hopefully being rehomed.

Mara: It's a major problem because a lot of, you know, these birds live for in captivity. They can live for over 60 years. Yeah, some of them are 70, 80 years. Macaws can live a very long time. African Greys cockatoos in particular. And it's very difficult because, um, they bring incredible companionship to people and people have these beautiful relationships and yet at the same time, no one can predict that far ahead in the future.

And so, you know, even if so, if you pass on and you leave this bird who doesn't even know it's a bird because it's been so socialized by humans and is so emotionally attached to its owner in particular, there are huge amount of work. It's like having. An eternal four year olds at home. And you can't expect a family member to necessarily want to or even be capable of taking on an animal like that. So and they're really, really like just high maintenance as animals. They're, you know, they're really they're not domesticated. They're wild animals. And so it's very difficult and thorny issue. I feel the question of whether they should be kept as pets at all. But then at the same time, you know, the issue that there's thousands probably of birds, even just in Canada, which is a small country waiting to be adopted.

Mara: So really it's super important that, you know, I guess that people adopt at the same time in the desktop documentary. So I explore this and the perspective of people who are really doing the work advocating for Adopt Don't Shop, But I felt it was really important to

have a bit of a political conversation on the side just looking at consumption of these animals, looking at the sort of political, economic, environmental violence, emotional, psychological violence that is an undercurrent in the film. I feel that the anxiety and frustration really comes out in the film in a way that for sure, I collaged it, but I really do see myself as working in collaboration with another species and sort of the film as being a manifestation of like their cognition, the, the what they choose as sounds that are relevant. That's what I had to choose from, as well as the historically specific moment in which they live. They're imitating Apple ringtones, they're imitating very specific electronic appliances.

And you know, also just the fact that we live in this sort of global economy in which you have animals that are like trafficked from Africa and the Amazon, you know, on a really wide scale, and that you can just go buy a parrot for \$1,500 and it can be kept in your basement, basically, and it can just hang out and like learn swear words all day and like, yeah.

Jamie: What do we do with that?

Mara: There are like these incredible, like, flamboyant, like gorgeous creatures. I actually I want to mention that I have a phobia of birds since childhood, and it's kind of why I started this project was because I, I was working on a different animation and I discovered what a sound effects archive was. I didn't know because I said, as I said before, I have no training. And I was like, Ooh, sound effects archive. This is so fascinating because again, I have this fascination with categories and like how a genre is constructed through categories which are easily found in a sound effects archive. And I find that fascinating. But

in the evening at the same time as I was working in the sound effects archive all day, I would go home and just to relax, I had kind of become preoccupied with this all these bird videos and in part it's because I was so repulsed and attracted at the same time. So yeah, it's so funny now to be like doing a fundraiser for I don't even think I could go into a bird sanctuary because it would just cause too much of a panic reaction. Uh, so it's so funny how these things, you know, lead you. Yeah.

Jamie: How we're drawn as artists towards things that really affect us.

Mara: Yeah.

Jamie: That we don't necessarily feel comfortable being beyond the obsession orientation.

Mara: Yeah. And doing a fundraiser for animals, which I'm like, actually kind of scared of and like being, like having become educated in such a way that now I'm like, I'm an advocate for like, birds that are need rescuing. And it's funny, you know, all of these things aligned. Like, of course, my last name is Eagle, which is ironic. And my collaborator Callum, that means Dove, as you know,

Jamie: my middle name.

Mara: Callum. Yeah. Funny. You know, it's like, yeah, it means dove in Gaelic and columns. Cat was named Rooster. It's just funny, these things.

Jamie: That's so interesting. I have one more game to play, I think, to close up our

conversation. Sure. It's been so fun talking to you Mara.

Mara: Likewise.

Jamie: I have a game of word association.

Mara: Oh, no, I'm scared.

Jamie: If you'd like, you can close your eyes.

Mara: I'm going to.

Jamie: Okay. There's some good words, though. Illuminati.

Mara: Lasers.

Jamie: Swirl.

Mara: Oh, Alex, the parrot sang, mixing up his words.

Jamie: What did he say?.

Mara: He would try to say, Whoa, whoa, whoa. At the same time as like, he would try to say something else, and he comes up with these really bizarre, recombined words like swirl.

Jamie: Oh, Alex.

Mara: Yeah. He's dead now.

Jamie: Thicken.

Mara: Pudding.

Jamie: Meryl

Mara: Streep.

Jamie: Thrush

Mara: Thrust.

Jamie: Quintuplets.

Mara: Too many?

Jamie: Apologies to any quintuplets listening. You're fine.

Mara: There was a question mark.

Jamie: There, I think, to mine. Just in the room.

Mara: Too many ?

Jamie: Our room is also colored pink at the moment.

Mara: So nice.

Jamie: We must, we must shout out to the producers of this podcast. They have made the room pink for us. Thank you so much for joining us on the podcast today.

Mara: So lovely.

Mara: Thank you.

Jamie: Yeah, thank you !

Jamie: Thanks for listening to this podcast presented by MOMENTA Biennale de l'image . The present edition guest curated by Ji-Yoon Han, is entitled Masquerades Drawn to Metamorphosis. Join me, Montreal artist and filmmaker Jamie Ross for more episodes released weekly throughout the run of the Biennale. We have some really cool artists this year. This podcast was produced by Virage Sonore and the Biennial runs in galleries and museums in Mooniyang, Montreal from the 7th of September to October 22nd, 2023, on unceded territory. Thanks for listening !

