

# PIGEON CITY

*A re-imagining of the urban environment  
through a more-than-human lens*



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# ABSTRACT

In this practice-led research, I challenge the traditional human-centric perspective on urban environments by examining the dynamic relationship between human and non-human species. Guided by an anti-anthropocentric paradigm, I explore how we might differently understand and experience urban spaces through the unique perspective of the Pigeon. This project delves into the symbiotic interplay between the Pigeon and human inhabitants of the city, aiming to disrupt conventional urban narratives and modes of inhabitation. Drawing on Situationist methodologies and employing a 'Pigeon-phenomenology', I utilise absurdist interventions, sculptural practice, and ephemeral publications to subvert human-centric viewpoints. Central to this investigation is recognising Pigeons as integral city-dwellers with agency and purpose. By embracing a more-than-human perspective, I endeavour to unveil hidden dimensions of urban existence and rekindle the relationship between past companions, the Pigeon and the Human.

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# ATTESTATION OF AUTHORSHIP

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the acknowledgements), nor any material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.

Signed

Date 5th May 2024

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My family, dearest parents and siblings, thank you for your unconditional love, encouragement, and understanding during this process.

I extend my heartfelt appreciation to my WE337 studio friends - my peers and confidantes, for their insightful feedback, encouragement, laughter and tears, but most importantly, unwavering belief in me and this research.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge The Pigeon. For my academic and personal development - your influence has been profound and transformative. Thank you for teaching me how great it is to be anything in this city.

To my pigeon friends,

I hope this letter reaches you well.

I'm not instinctively drawn to you. I grew up in a smaller city, Hamilton, and although looking back now, I realise you were always there - I never noticed you. I'm sorry for that.

You have always been there, in all the cities I've lived in, Male, Hanoi, Jakarta - now in Auckland, I finally see you. It was hard adjusting to live in this city, alone, but surrounded by the touch of a thousand lifelines. - It really only got to me because I walk so much. I can't drive, and I don't like love the public transport here, but luckily I can mostly walk everywhere, and that meant I could spend more time with you.

That's where you live, the transitional spaces, the inbetween - waiting for us humans to leave something behind for you. Crumbs, trash mostly, but do you ever just hang around

Figure 1: Campbell N. Letter to Pigeon Friends, page 1, 2024

for a hello? A task? Something to do?  
I know that's what you used to do  
right? Help us, love us, want us.

I didn't know how to keep up with  
the city, everything changes so quickly,  
how do you live with it? Does it hurt  
to be around us, like walking past an  
ex everyday on the way to work and  
being hit with flashes of what you once  
were, or the potential of what could've  
been? I'm off track - I'm sorry.

I want to learn from you, I want  
to detach from this city I've come to  
know, and see it like you. I'm so sure  
there's more behind my human eyes/lens,  
like I'm always looking through a smoke-  
screen and see waves of shadow and  
movement, showing me something is there -  
something more than what I know.

I'm sorry it took all my walking past,  
not noticing you for days and days -  
to finally look down and see you  
looking up at me, expectingly. What  
did you want? What did you see, in me?  
What do you see in this city?  
What do you love? Why do you stay?

Figure 2: Campbell N. Letter to Pigeon Friends, page 2, 2024

You must've heard or seen something  
I couldn't, because you quickly flew  
away, over to a group of your kind,  
fighting, or starving, over an almond  
croissant, or the remnants of one.

How funny. How Auckland of it all.  
I'm searching for a new way of  
seeing this city. I saw you ripping  
into that croissant and for a moment  
I wanted to be you. What if I was  
you, Pigeon? I want to understand -  
why you stay? Why you wait around  
for those croissants and crumbs, and  
how do you still love the city so much  
to live here, when you are so unwanted.

Sorry for bringing that up.

I think I love you. Pigeon.

with love,

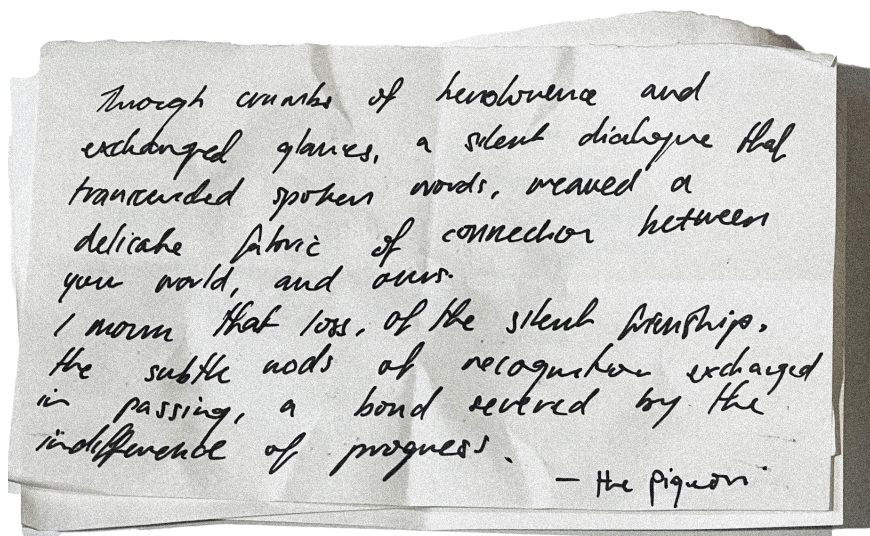
Nina-Rose Campbell

Figure 3: Campbell N. Letter to Pigeon Friends, page 3, 2024

# INTRODUCTION

Disclaimer:

As the author of this exegesis, I must clarify that I do not possess the ability to communicate with or comprehend the language of pigeons. Any references to pigeon behaviour, communication, or perspectives within this work are purely speculative or based on existing research and observation. Any similarities between interpretations presented here and actual pigeon behaviour are coincidental.



**Figure 4:** Campbell N. *Letter from Pigeon no. 3*, 2024

It came to me walking past a flock of pigeons fighting over remnants of an almond croissant:

What if I was a pigeon?

We get stuck in our human ways.

Human thinking,  
seeing,  
smelling,  
knowing,  
walking,  
mapping,  
recognising,  
understanding,  
being.

These activities are guided by the limitations and intricacies of our cognitive processes. We etch our understanding onto the urban landscape, mapping and recognising it through the distinct contours of our human minds. Our memory, too, is built through human experiences and interpretations, framing our understanding of the world.

But what if we could release ourselves from this anthropocentric hold, venturing beyond the tight confines of our human experience? What if we could witness the familiar through the unknown? Letting go of the human-being, might the mundane become extraordinary, and the quotidian we know be divorced from our human experience? These questions came together to form my research inquiry:

How would adopting the perspective of the urban Pigeon allow us to challenge anthropocentric conceptions of the city, thereby enriching our understanding of urban space and the multispecies interactions within them?

In this research, I employ methods such as absurdist intervention, sculpture and derivatives of Situationist methods such as *détournement* and *dérive* to highlight the anthropocentric biases in urban planning and design that the Pigeon does not abide by. Urban environments historically reflect a human-centred paradigm, neglecting nonhuman inhabitants' multifaceted needs and experiences. The Pigeon, often stigmatised as an urban pest, embodies a prime example of this oversight through the story of their abandonment and their relegation to the periphery of human/urban consciousness. With their intimate knowledge of the urban landscape and skills in navigating and inhabiting urban spaces, the Pigeon offers a valuable perspective outside of our human ways. The research began in the theories of the Situationist International,<sup>1</sup> specifically their act of the *dérive*, an avant-garde walking practice that involves drifting through urban spaces.<sup>2</sup> The *dérive* aims for the discovery of hidden narratives, evoking buried emotions and revealing the psychological undercurrents of the urban environment.

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<sup>1</sup> The Situationist International was an organisation of social revolutionaries, including avant-garde artists, intellectuals, and political theorists. It was active from 1957 to 1972. (Adam Barnard, "The Legacy of the Situationist International: The Production of Situations of Creative Resistance," *Capital & Class* 28, no. 3 (November 1, 2004): 103–24, <https://doi.org/10.1177/030981680408400108>.)

<sup>2</sup> Guy-Ernest Debord, 1958. "Theory of the *Dérive*", *Internationale Situationiste* #2 <http://library.nothingness.org/articles/all/en/display/314>.

Initially drawing inspiration from this Situationist methodology, my approach hinged on engaging in a contemporary *dérive* as a spatial practice to map the city, layered upon the backdrop of conscious human perception. Walking through the city, I almost always had companions: the rock dove, the rat with wings, the Pigeon lurking around every corner. I wondered, how does the Pigeon ‘drift’ in the city and what might their psychogeographic<sup>3</sup> map look like, if it replaced mine?

The implementation of Pigeon-phenomenology in this research disrupts conventional paradigms and challenges entrenched anthropocentric views. Phenomenology explores how consciousness is structured from the subjective position of an individual experiencing it. Therefore, Pigeon-phenomenology studies the structures of a pigeon’s consciousness from their point of view. Pigeon “thought, memory, imagination, emotion, desire, bodily awareness, embodied action, and social activity”<sup>4</sup> are the structures of consciousness in this research. Once I understood these experiences as being conscious and valid, I came to understand how looking through them as city-dwellers can change how one experiences the city as a human. Through collage and sculptural intervention I create visual/physical interpretations of these pigeon-experiences, inviting the viewer to reimagine the city and redefine their relationship with it. In the light of this methodology, I see how the city is not an exclusively human-centric space but a shared habitat where every entity, human and non-human alike, makes valuable contributions. I recognise the Pigeon not merely as passive subjects of study but as active partners in shaping the urban fabric, even though my imaginings are fabricated.<sup>5</sup> This approach sheds light on hidden dimensions of urban life that remain obscured from human view, providing invaluable insights into the multifaceted dynamics of the urban environment. I ask that we look for a more compassionate relationship between humans and the myriad life forms with whom we share our cities.

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<sup>3</sup> Referring to psychogeography, a spatially embodied Situationist practice that involves the joint participation of the human subject and the city. Through the practice of psychogeography and the exploration of the urban environment, city-dwellers gained a deeper understanding of themselves and their relationship to the city. (Solnit, Rebecca. *Wanderlust: A History of Walking*. New York: Penguin Books, 2000.)

<sup>4</sup> “Phenomenology (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy/Fall 2008 Edition).” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Accessed February 15, 2024. <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2008/entries/phenomenology/?cv=1>.

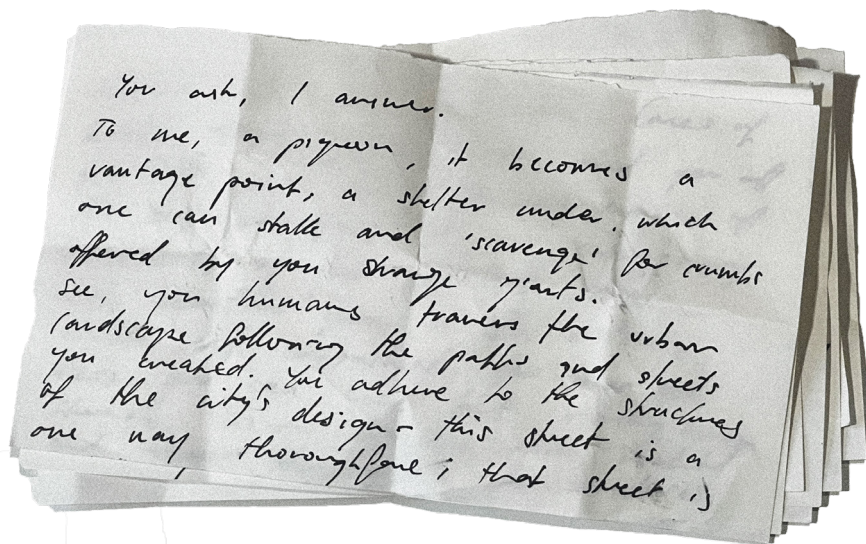
<sup>5</sup> Through my own human-perception.



**Figure 5:** Campbell N. *Oh, just polishing my pigeons.* Photograph. 2024

Working under an anti-anthropocentric paradigm, my research methodologies, contexts and methods work to decentralise the human. Reimagining the urban landscape from a more-than-human perspective offers a transformative lens through which to challenge traditional design philosophies and advocate for more empathetic, responsive, and environmentally sensitive urban environments, while fostering a deeper understanding of the world and the relationship humans have with it. This anti-anthropocentric paradigm aligns with Māori indigenous concepts of kaitiakitanga, which I recognise as being an integral part of life in Aotearoa, however often overlooked in urban spaces.

The activist-academic Emmy Rāketē writes, “Everything exists in deep fundamental relation to everything else, and while functions of the ecology may interact with one another, no relationship of sub- or superordination can be established between them.”<sup>6</sup> I am not superior to the environment; I am a part of it, so yes, what if I were a pigeon? This shift gives me the opportunity to see familiar city scenes in a different light; a movie shot by a different director – same setting, actions, actors – adapted through the pigeon eyes gives me a completely different interpretation. Perception and understanding are everything. For humans, a park bench is a spot to sit, relax, converse, perhaps take a breather from a walk or run. But if I were a pigeon, this bench wouldn’t be a site for relaxation and reprieve (see Fig. 6-8); it would be something new, something different.



**Figure 6:** Campbell N. *Letter from Pigeon no. 2, page 1.* 2024

<sup>6</sup> Emmy. Rāketē. In *Human: Parasites, Posthumanism, and Papatūānuku*. <https://artspace-aotearoa.nz/reading-room/in-human-parasites-posthumanism-and-papatuanuku>.

closed off for construction. Cases of  
bright orange guide you, and you all  
gravitate under those looming scrapers of  
the sky - that stand tall as contemporary  
monuments of your corporate ideals.  
Such monoliths loom in the distance,  
visible but untouched, for they are  
ideals you can see, but rarely grasp.  
Human vision dictates their reality,  
and keeps them within the boundaries

Figure 7: Campbell N. Letter from Pigeon no. 2, page 1. 2024

of their perception. It is a  
limitation you have accepted  
and rarely questioned. However, if  
they, sorry - you, were like us (pigeons)  
could you not touch and scope the  
sky yourselves?

— Kind Regards,  
the Pigeon.

Figure 8: Campbell N. Letter from Pigeon no. 2, page 3. 2024

This exegesis documents my pigeon-findings<sup>7</sup> and is organised into three main chapters. In the first chapter, ‘Pigeon Philosophy’, a pigeon-interpretation of Situationist methodologies will be reviewed, and its manifestation in practice will be analysed through case studies. This chapter will also cover an understanding of the term ‘Pigeon-Phenomenology’ and how it will be used. The second chapter, ‘The Pigeon Vision’, explores interpretations of Pigeon-consciousness in cities, their history in urban environments, present circumstances, and potential futures. The third chapter, ‘Pigeonning’, will reflect the various modes of pigeon-making<sup>8</sup> and their outcomes. The concluding chapter of the exegesis will reflect on the insights gained from pigeons and comment on the growth of my personal relationship with them.

In this exegesis, the deliberate capitalisation of ‘Pigeon’ is done when referencing their role as agents within the urban landscape. This grammatical choice is not merely orthographic; it acknowledges the Pigeons’ influence and active participation in shaping urban ecosystems. Conversely, the lowercase usage of ‘pigeon’ signifies a departure from the being and arrival as a mode of thinking and making. ‘Pigeon’ is the noun, and ‘pigeon’ is the verb; they are both concrete entities and conceptual forces that shape and influence their surroundings.

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<sup>7</sup> ‘pigeon-findings’ are the outcomes of research throughout the practice-based thesis, that document and explore what I have learnt through the adoption of Pigeon-perspective.

<sup>8</sup> I’ve used the term ‘pigeon-making’ as I consider it an appropriate term for my practice throughout this research.

# CHAPTER ONE: PIGEON PHILOSOPHY

## Pigeon Situations

*A Review of Situationist Concepts:  
Psychogeography, Détournement, and Dérive*

The Situationist International challenged the conventional paradigms of urban existence with its radical and thought-provoking ideologies. This movement, which emerged from the previous Letterist International<sup>9</sup> in the late 1950s, was characterised by its critique of advanced capitalism and its effects on everyday life. Situationists believed that the passive consumption of cultural commodities was contributing to the decay of human life and true social interaction, especially in urban spaces. To counter this, they proposed the construction of ‘situations’, moments of life deliberately curated for the purpose of reimagining and experiencing the liberation of everyday life.<sup>10</sup> Central to their methodology is the concept of psychogeography, a spatial practice that invites individuals to engage with the city in unconventional ways.

Originated by Guy Debord<sup>11</sup> and elaborated on by Walter Benjamin,<sup>12</sup> psychogeography encourages urban wanderings that transcend customary motives, revealing the multifaceted nature of the urban environment. The interplay between the individual and the city is an important aspect of psychogeography, where the city is seen as a living entity that interacts uniquely with the individual. Through the practice of psychogeography and the exploration of the urban environment, city-dwellers gain a deeper understanding of themselves and their relationship to the city,<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, “Situationist International (SI),” *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, March 20, 2024, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Situationist-International>.

<sup>10</sup> This version of ‘situationism’ should not be confused with Situationism as a psychological concept, that focuses on how human behaviour is influenced by situational factors.

(*Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary*, s.v. “situationism,” accessed May 1, 2024, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/situationism>.)

<sup>11</sup> Situationist International, “The Society of the Spectacle (New Annotated Translation of the Book by Guy Debord),” n.d., <https://www.bopsecrets.org/SI/debord/index.htm>.

<sup>12</sup> Bobby Seal, “Baudelaire, Benjamin and the Birth of the Flâneur,” *Psychogeographic Review*, May 13, 2014, <https://psychogeographicreview.com/ baudelaire-benjamin-and-the-birth-of-the-flaneur/>.

<sup>13</sup> Solnit, Rebecca. *Wanderlust: A History of Walking*. New York: Penguin Books, 2000.

where “[n]ew psycho-geographical maps of the city can define space and environments according to people’s needs and emotions, rather than as the functionalist city vision of planners and architects.”<sup>14</sup>

How do we know our city? Memories, familiarity? Through what we are told of it? These questions are posed through psychogeography to investigate the value of perceiving the city from a non-human standpoint and how this can complicate our understanding of what a city is made up of. Through Situationist ideologies, particularly psychogeography, I first aim to understand how these frameworks can help us comprehend the city and its consciousness.

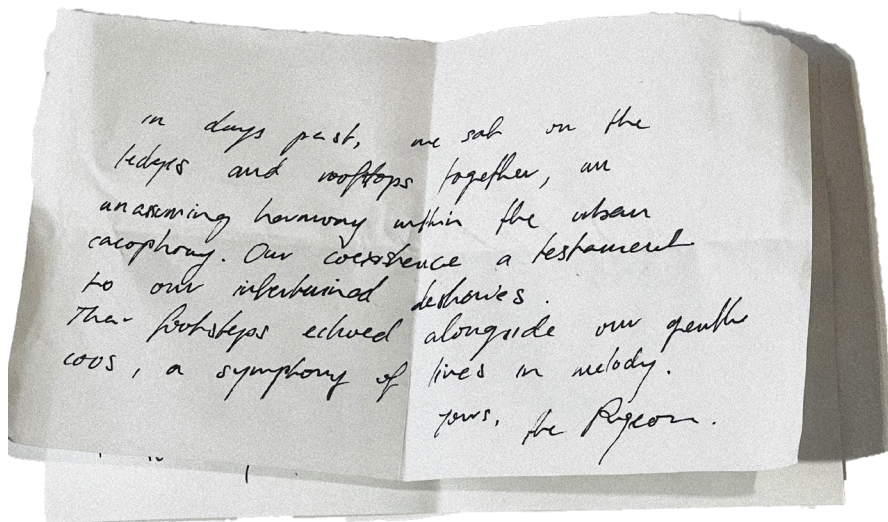
A core method of psychogeography is the *Dérive*, which involves the unplanned and spontaneous exploration of urban environments. The process encourages individuals to wander through the city without a predetermined destination, guided by their emotions and intuition. This practice liberates individuals from mundane and utilitarian goals of urban navigation, fostering exploration and interaction with the city.<sup>15</sup> Through this, we unveil the city’s hidden narratives and layers of experience that have accumulated over time, shedding light on its emotional, psychological, and sensorial aspects that often remain concealed to casual observers. Psychogeography, although built upon the human psyche, challenges the anthropocentric perception of urban spaces. It invites us to recognise that the cityscape is not merely a backdrop for human existence but a being with its own stories to tell. By considering the cityscape as a sentient being, psychogeography prompts us to acknowledge the presence and influence of non-human elements within urban environments and emphasises the reciprocal influences and mutual dependencies that shape urban life.<sup>16</sup> The city possesses an agency that extends beyond the human realm, encouraging us to explore its consciousness that transcends human cognition. This leads me to question what psychogeography is to non-human entities, specifically looking through the lens of a prolific city-dweller, the Pigeon.

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<sup>14</sup> Adam Barnard, “The Legacy of the Situationist International: The Production of Situations of Creative Resistance,” *Capital & Class* 28, no. 3 (November 1, 2004): 103–24, <https://doi.org/10.1177/030981680408400108>.

<sup>15</sup> Situationist International, “The Society of the Spectacle (New Annotated Translation of the Book by Guy Debord),” n.d., <https://www.bopsecrets.org/SI/debord/index.htm>.

<sup>16</sup> Michel De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Univ of California Press, 1984).



**Figure 9:** Campbell N. Letter from Pigeon no. 5. 2024

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### *Situations in Practice: Case Study and Analysis*

Sarah Burrell's work within urban space is an example of Situationist ideas and practices being brought into contemporary city space. Using performative practices and technology to guide people into mapping the city (in their own way), she subverts the idea of what a city space is and how we can live in it, aiming to reveal overlooked socio-spatial narratives.

Her work, *Parallel Places*,<sup>17</sup> took place in Wellington in early 2020. It was an interactive exploration of the city, guided by artist-made devices designed to alter the participants' perceptions. It worked to encourage participants to actively interpret their urban environment, fostering a heightened sense of awareness and engagement. Burrell's work questioned how design artifacts could change the way participants related to everyday city spaces, drawing attention to previously unseen urban phenomena.

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<sup>17</sup> Sarah Burrell, "Parallel Places," Sarah Burrell, n.d., <https://www.sarahburrell.com/projects/parallelplaces>.

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**Figure 10:** Burrell, S. *Hidden City Maps*. Photograph. 2011.  
(<https://www.sarahburrell.com/projects/hiddencitymaps>)

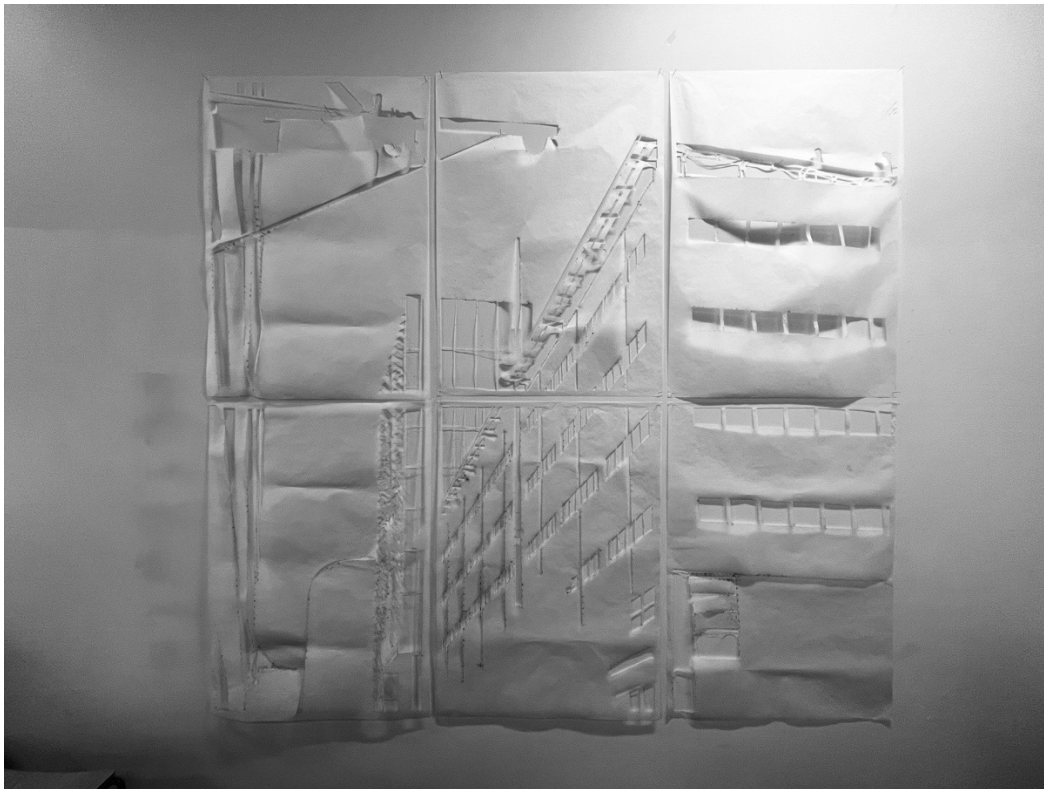
In *Hidden City Maps*, Burrell utilised a soundscape and material interventions to reveal the city as a place teeming with unseen stories. Participants were led on a walk, their experience shaped by atmospheric binaural recordings of memories relating to the sites they passed through (see Fig. 10). The use of soundscape, ambulation, and participatory enactments aligns with the Situationist-dérive qualities, though somewhat directed by the artist. It encouraged participants to engage with the city in a playful, spontaneous manner, exposing the marginal, overlooked, and forgotten spaces of the city and creating opportunities for ludic interaction.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Other works by artists such as Cathy Turner, Janet Cardiff, Vanessa Berry, and Stephen Hodge contribute to the conceptual exploration of psychogeography and the dérive.

*Pigeon Methodologies: Embracing Nonlinear Approaches to Urban Inquiry*

In my work, the Pigeon acts as an agent of détournement<sup>19</sup> by offering a new lens through which to re-evaluate and subvert perceptions of the urban environment. By interpreting pigeon consciousness,<sup>20</sup> I aim to provoke reflection on our relationship with the city and its non-human inhabitants. As détournement disrupts traditional forms of communication by decontextualising/recontextualising cultural artefacts in unexpected ways, the Pigeon challenges dominant narratives by revealing the constructed nature of meaning and invites viewers to question the authority and authenticity of human discourses. Their ‘vision’, through my material manifestations (see Fig. 11), subverts the human narrative of what a city ‘looks’ like.



**Figure 11:** Campbell, N. *6x1 St Paul St Drawing*. 2023

<sup>19</sup> Détournement was first introduced by the Letterist International, and then adapted by the Situationists. It involved the appropriation and subversion of existing cultural artifacts or symbols for the purpose of critiquing or challenging dominant narratives and power structures. Seeking to disrupt established systems of meaning and control by repurposing elements of popular culture, media, and ideology in ways that reveal their underlying contradictions and absurdities.

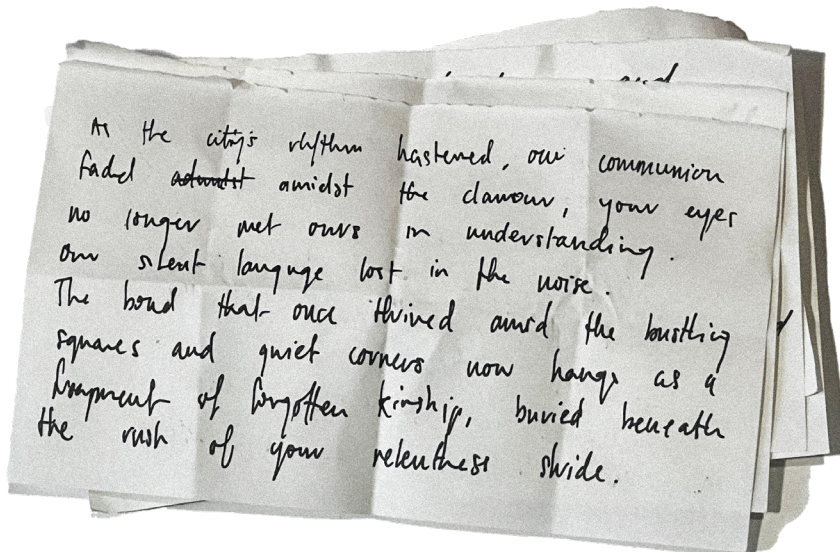
<sup>20</sup> I am unable to read the Pigeon’s thoughts.

These drawings aimed at decontextualising familiar urban views, contemplating the visual impact and memory retention of commonly visited structures. By reducing a site to its purely visual state, I wanted to construct a mnemonic<sup>21</sup> device, prompting viewers to reassess their perceptions of what is familiar to them in the built environment. The method of stripping away social contexts and details allowed for a deeper examination of the relationship between the built environment and its inhabitants. The materiality of the paper used in these works was part of my attempt to communicate the temporal nature of the city. This attention to detail mirrors the visual acuity of pigeons, known for their ability to detect subtle changes in their environment. The Pigeon has excellent motion detection abilities, allowing them to spot potential threats or opportunities for food quickly. Their eyes are positioned on the sides of their head, providing a wide field of view and enhancing their peripheral vision. The Pigeon also has a high density of photoreceptors in their retinas, particularly in the fovea, the central region responsible for sharp vision. This allows them to discern fine details and perceive visual stimuli with great clarity.<sup>22</sup> The impact of this method of making transcended the physical drawings themselves, leaving a lasting imprint on my perspective. Examining building facades at a 1:100 scale forced me to see 100 times more when faced with it in reality. The process unveiled minor imperfections and previously overlooked complexities in the grand picture. This newfound attention to detail expanded my memory and subconscious associations with the visual field, transforming my daily urban experiences.

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<sup>21</sup> Mnemonic; a device such as a pattern of letters, ideas, or associations which assists in remembering/recalling something. (*Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary*, s.v. “mnemonic,” accessed May 1, 2024, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/mnemonic>.)

<sup>22</sup> William Hodos, “What Birds See and What They Don’t: luminance, contrast, and spatial and temporal resolution,” in *How Animals See the World*, ed. Olga F. Lazareva, Toru Shimizu, and Edward A. Wasserman (Oxford University Press, 2012).



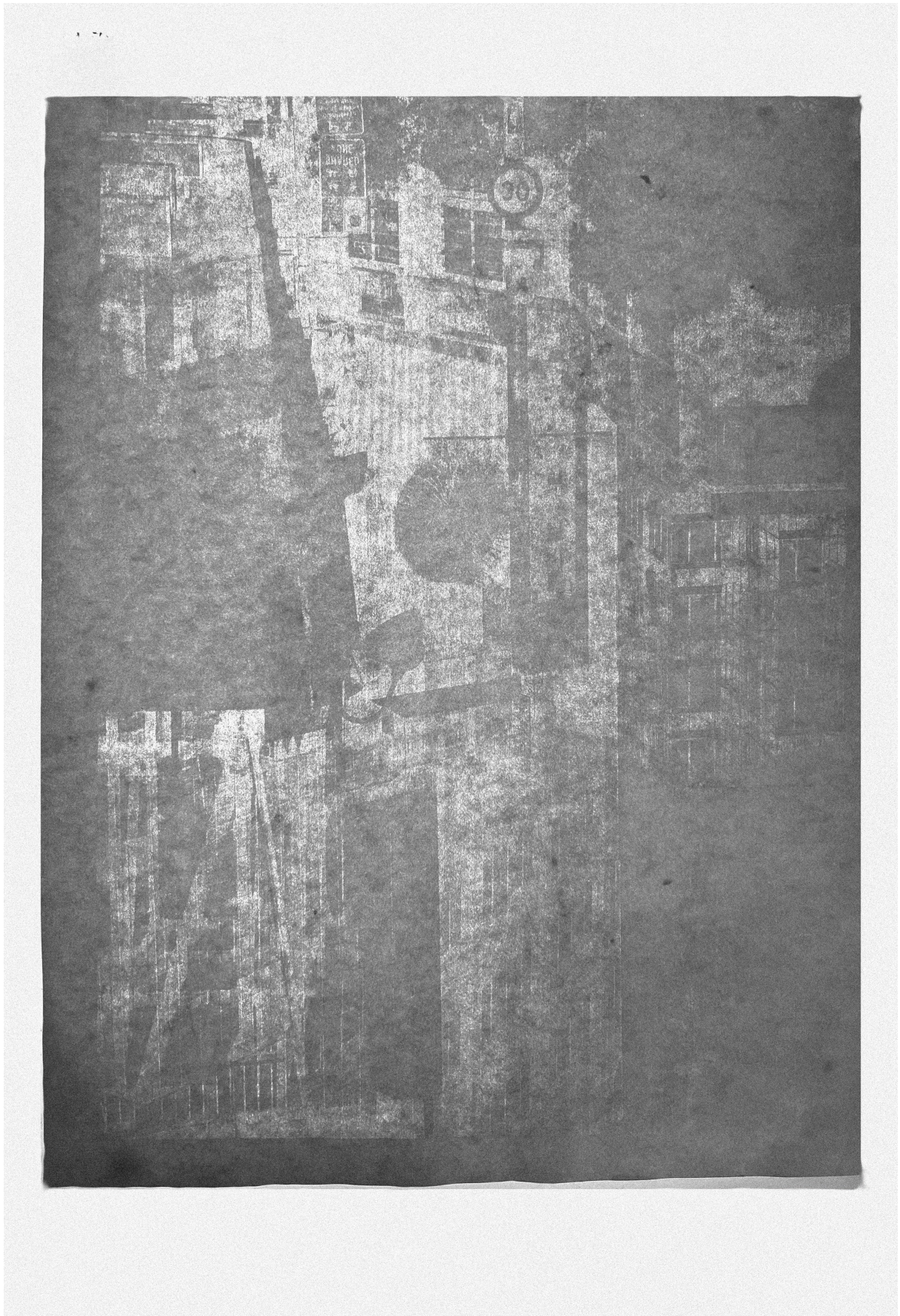
**Figure 12:** Campbell N. *Letter from Pigeon no. 7*. 2024

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### *Introduction to Pigeon-Phenomenology*

In the context of pigeon research, adopting a phenomenological lens entails an empathetic and immersive understanding of Pigeon cognition and behaviour, where I am interpreting Pigeon-consciousness in order to bridge the gap between human and non-human experiences. From thought processes to emotional states and memory recollections to social interactions, pigeons exhibit a rich array of cognitive faculties that shape their experiences within the urban milieu.

I employ methods such as collage and absurdist interventions in sculpture/installation as vehicles for embodying and articulating the conscious experiences of Pigeons within the urban milieu. This serves to translate the insights gleaned from pigeon-consciousness into tangible expressions. Through the creation of these visual and physical interpretations of pigeon-thinking, the gap between human and non-human worlds is temporarily diminished, inviting viewers to inhabit the perspective of the Pigeon. In doing so, a deeper sense of empathy is fostered, as the invisible and unknown to us (Humans) is seen and, therefore, felt.



**Figure 13:** Campbell N. *Where am I?*. Laser cut A1 collage. 2024

Write me letters, I want to know  
you went through the trouble.  
I want to see how time settled  
into the words. I want to know  
it was carried gently by another  
being, kind enough to be the conduit,  
the messenger. Let the slow nature of  
the delivery build tension, anticipation.  
I want to be waiting for your  
reply, I want to think you are waiting  
for mine. Waiting, and then, thanking  
the messenger, then, reading, and then-  
replying. I want to hold onto this  
communication, it is tangible, I can  
touch it and know you have held it  
too. I want to see the nuances in  
your handwriting, the fluidity of your  
thoughts. I want to thank the messenger,  
the Pigeon, and say, "Thank you, you  
have done your job and brought me  
this. I thank you for your service."

"This is my life, my job, to carry  
secrets through the space between two  
minds. I am the conduit, the wire,  
I connect you, and you connect through  
me, I thank you, for purpose."  
This is what I would say to you in  
return.  
- the Pigeon.

Figure 14: Campbell, N. Letter to Pigeon and response. 2024

# CHAPTER TWO: THE PIGEON VISION

## Constant Correspondence

I have designed this research so that I am in constant correspondence with the Pigeon. By positioning the Pigeon as a conversational partner and a source of knowledge, I am engaging in a form of interspecies communication that challenges conventional academic methodologies. The secrets they share in these notes sit alongside my creative practice, informing me as I go forward. The intimacy of the correspondence with the Pigeon suggests a deepening of my connection with the Pigeon-world. As I engage in dialogue with the Pigeon, I am actively listening and learning from its (imagined) perspective, fostering a sense of reciprocity and mutual respect. This relational approach to research underscores the importance of empathy and compassion in our interactions with other beings, both human and non-human.

Throughout history, the Pigeon played a vital role as a messenger, serving as a carrier of critical information across vast distances. The roots of pigeon messaging can be traced back thousands of years to ancient civilisations, Mesopotamia, Egypt, and Greece, which relied on pigeons to transmit messages over long distances, laying the foundation for using pigeons as messengers in subsequent centuries.<sup>23</sup> Their service during war and conflict, where reliable communication was essential for coordinating movements and relaying critical intelligence, was invaluable.<sup>24</sup> In addition to their military use, pigeons were also employed in civilian communication networks, facilitating the transmission of messages between remote locations where other means of communication were impractical or unavailable.

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<sup>23</sup> Andrew Blechman, *Pigeons: The Fascinating Saga of the World's Most Revered and Reviled Bird* (Grove Press, 2006).

<sup>24</sup> Clive D. L. Wynne, "6. The Pigeon That Saved A Battalion," in *Do Animals Think?* (Princeton University Press, 2013).

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**Figure 15:** Sir George Grey Special Collections, Auckland Libraries, 7-A11539, *Pigeongram sent to H. Winkelmann by Charles Werner. 1900*

Aotea (Great Barrier Island) was the first place in Aotearoa (New Zealand) to have an airmail serviced by the Pigeon,<sup>25</sup> with the first pigeongram flying to Tāmaki Makaurau (Auckland)<sup>26</sup> in 1897. Shortly after, two pigeon-mail companies were operating, providing a vital, efficient link for communication between the island and the mainland. The pigeon service ran there for roughly ten years, settling as one of the first of its kind. The Pigeon Posts that served there during this period was also “likely the first service in the world to produce a stamp specifically for airmail use, in November 1898.”<sup>27</sup> However, the installment of an underwater telegraph cable to Aotea in 1908<sup>28</sup> marked the beginning of the end of pigeon messaging and, therefore, this pigeon-purpose.

<sup>25</sup> New Zealand Post, “Pigeon Post,” n.d., <https://admin.teara.govt.nz/mi/post-age-stamp/16070/pigeon-post>.

<sup>26</sup> The Pigeon Loft on the Auckland side still stands on Newton Road as a private residence.

<sup>27</sup> Kat Eschner, “This New Zealand Island’s Pigeon Mail Stamps Are Still Prized,” *Smithsonian Magazine*, October 20, 2017, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/new-zealand-islands-pigeon-mail-stamps-are-still-prized-180965342/>.

<sup>28</sup> “Centenary of Pigeon-gram,” *NZ Post Collectables*, n.d., <https://collectables.nzpost.co.nz/centenary-of-pigeon-gram/>.



**Figure 16:** Campbell, N. *Progress picture of designing Flyer's Digest*. Photograph. 2024

### *Flyer's Digest*

I am in the process of creating a series of newsletters for the Pigeon called the Flyers Digest, imitating the café classic publication, *Coffee News*.<sup>29</sup> The *Coffee News* is associated with human-centred content - jokes, trivia, horoscopes and local news. Repurposing this format for the Pigeon, I am giving the *Coffee-News*-sense of community to the Pigeon, while also mirroring the Pigeon's history as a distributor.

<sup>29</sup> "About Us," *Coffee News New Zealand*, n.d., <https://coffeenews.co.nz/about-us.php>.

## *Pigeon Narratives*

In American science-fiction writer Ursula Le Guin's short story, *She Unnames Them*, there is a characterisation of animals as having their own sense of agency and self-determination. She uses deliberate verbs throughout the story, each that places not just action but reaction and conscious decision-making onto the animal; 'accepted', 'ignored', 'consented', 'protested', 'agreed', 'contemplate[d]', 'insisted', 'understood'. By giving these animals agency and conscious choice/interpretation of their own identity, she challenges anthropocentric perspectives that relegate non-human beings to passive subjects of human observation. This approach is significant because it shifts the narrative away from human-centred interpretations of animal behaviour and cognition, acknowledging that animals possess their own consciousness, desires, and intentions.

“They seemed far closer than when their names had stood between myself and them like a clear barrier.”<sup>30</sup>

Le Guin's writing highlights the symbolic significance of un-naming in challenging established power dynamics and hierarchies. Previously, the “names” acted as a “clear barrier,” implying that language served as a mediator that hindered genuine intimacy and understanding. This notion aligns with the idea that (human) language can create a sense of alienation by imposing categorisations and hierarchies upon the natural world. By dismantling the linguistic structures that privilege human dominance and control over the natural world, the narrator (Eve) disrupts the traditional order and acknowledges the agency and autonomy of non-human beings. The story does present a fictional narrative, but it is a representation of non-human beings in literature and creative practice that portrays them as active participants with their own desires, intentions, and reactions. The attribution of agency to animals, as exemplified in the short story, resonates deeply with my approach to communicating with pigeons, as it challenges anthropocentric perspectives and fosters a deeper understanding of the complexities of interspecies communication and interaction within human environments.

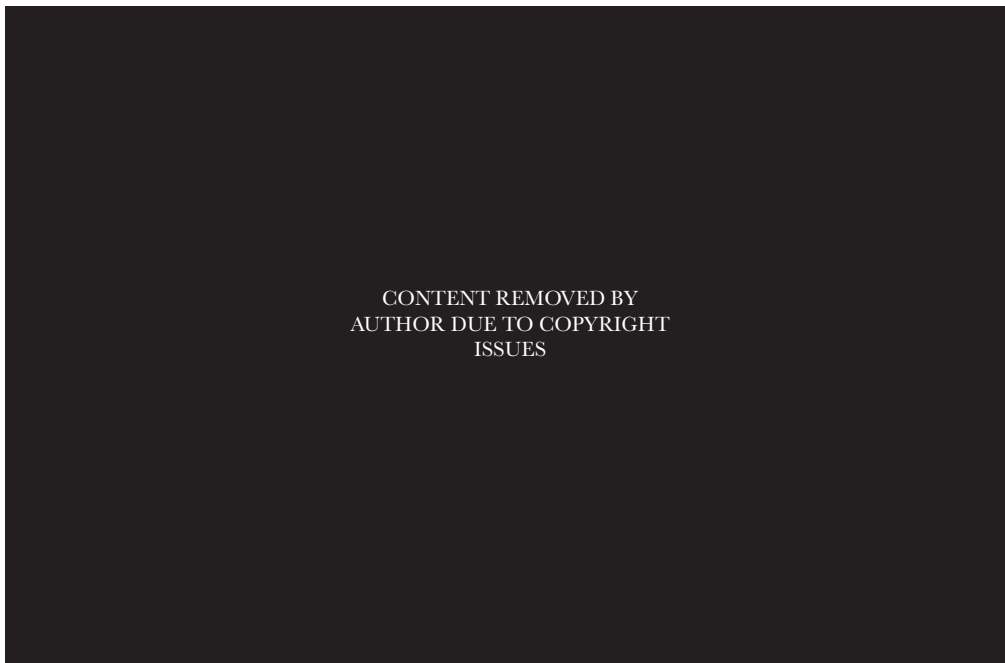
Le Guin's storytelling technique underscores the importance of narrative and imagination in shaping our understanding of the world. Her empathetic writing taught me that there is power in imagining something; in this case, the Pigeon has the same feelings as I do. Through this practice, I explore the emotional and symbolic dimensions of Human-Pigeon interactions through this creative storytelling, providing insights that may otherwise not be accessible to me. While my correspondence with the Pigeons and their responses are not based on empirical proof in the strict sense, they offer a perspective that complements more traditional research methods.

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<sup>30</sup> Ursula K. Le Guin, “She Unnames Them,” *The New Yorker* (The New Yorker, January 21, 1985), <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/1985/01/21/she-unnames-them>.

## Pretty Pigeons

Pigeons have beady eyes, two wings, soft feathers, and sharp claws – but they don't all possess the same features, as more and more are disfigured by harsh city environments. Some pigeons have the typical iridescent feathers on their necks, while others have a darkness, a shadowy plumage. This difference is caused by a feather bacteria that degrade feathers and alters iridescent colouration, something which potentially affects visual signals involved in pigeon social situations.<sup>31</sup> The hue of their feathers changes based on the viewing angle; for example, the Pigeon rotating its neck can change the iridescent feathers from purple to green or the reverse. This colour change is due to the plumages' structural colours - the iridescent feathers of the Pigeon are made from a slanted network of tiny threads, and these threads reflect light waves differently, causing them to interfere with one another. This interference can cause the peaks of light waves to either collide or combine and create that colourful, shiny look.<sup>32</sup> I see the iridescence of the Pigeon's neck reflecting more than just light—I have come to see it metaphorically as evidence of our multifaceted history of shared coexistence. Within the iridescence of the Pigeon's neck, I see a reflection of humanity and its once-loving touch. Shiny from repeated patting and stroking, the touch of a caregiver is immortalised in their DNA forever.



**Figure 17:** *The late 17th-century reliefs at the base of the statue of St. John of Nepomuk in Prague.* Photograph. (<https://mymodernmet.com/saint-john-of-nepomuk-dog-prague/>)

<sup>31</sup> Sarah Leclaire et al., "Feather Bacterial Load Affects Plumage Condition, Iridescent Color, and Investment in Preening in Pigeons," *Behavioral Ecology* 25, no. 5 (July 6, 2014): 1192–98, <https://doi.org/10.1093/beheco/aru109>.

<sup>32</sup> Rachel Keatley, "Why Do Pigeons Have Iridescent Feathers?," *COMSOL Blog* (blog), March 30, 2021, <https://www.comsol.com/blogs/why-do-pigeons-have-iridescent-feathers/>.



**Figure 18:** Campbell, N. *Pigeons*. Aluminium. 2024

Over time, metal statues and reliefs - including those representing animals - develop shiny spots where the patina has been worn away due to repeated human touch.<sup>33</sup> This effect on my metal Pigeon's neck is deliberate and encourages interaction with the artwork, reminiscent of the worn iridescence on a real Pigeon's neck. The shiny, polished area on the sculpture becomes a visual record of human touch, reflecting the communal and participatory nature of the city. It hints at a peculiar intimacy found in the mundane, suggesting a tenderness in our interaction with everyday elements. The shine, a residue of our affectionate contact with surfaces, resonates deeply. It speaks to a tactile connection akin to caressing a statue's toes for luck—a ritualistic gesture implying a desire for connection and reassurance within the urbanity of our lives. It introduces the element of impermanence and change to the artwork, capturing the passage of time and shared experiences of those who engage with it, much like the evolving relationship between humans and pigeons in our urban spaces. This becomes a literal manifestation of pigeons as a reflection of a wider urban context.

<sup>33</sup> “The dog is so well-loved by passer-bys that it has come to shine a golden color from receiving so many pets.” Madeleine Muzdak, “This Relief of a Saint’s Dog Shines Gold From Many Years of Pets for the “Good Boy”,” *My Modern Met*, October 11, 2021, <https://mymodernmet.com/saint-john-of-nepomuk-dog-prague/>.

We taught the Pigeon how to be loved, so now, as they are shooed away, they scatter – perhaps shocked and offended at our disgusted gaze. Hands that once caressed now swat. The pigeons fly and perch on the man-made edge of a building; a tree branch is no longer their home, and the weak nests they make cannot be held in swaying leaves. Perhaps the perch of our buildings is now the closest they can get to us; they miss us.<sup>34</sup>

## **The turn from Humour to Earnestness**

Through humour, the project can highlight the absurdities and contradictions in human-centric urban landscapes and invite people to reflect on the broader social, cultural, and environmental implications of the human/non-human urban dynamic.

Do people take things more seriously when they are funny?

The idea that the Pigeon can be used as a serious way to reimagine the city – is funny. It is absurd to consider that the small dirty bird that lives scavenging between your feet could change the way we perceive urban environments. But the power of the absurd lies in its ability to disrupt conventional ways of thinking to challenge established norms and beliefs. Absurd and funny ideas present us with situations, ideas, or experiences that defy rational explanation or conventional understanding, forcing us to confront the limitations of our own knowledge and perception. It exposes the irrationality and absurdity of oppressive systems and structures, as well as the inherent contradictions and uncertainties of human experience.

Simon Critchley, philosopher and author of *‘On Humour,’*<sup>35</sup> says in an interview:

“The interesting thing about the structure of laughter is that you’re opened up in the laugh and that’s when you can be hit. So I try to use humor in teaching to make serious points; it’s only when you’ve opened yourself up through humor that you can be wounded.”

He highlights the complex relationship between humour and seriousness, suggesting that while laughter may be viewed as antithetical to philosophical inquiry, it can also serve as a means of challenging established norms and fostering critical reflection.

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<sup>34</sup> Throughout this exegesis I take the liberty of attributing a loving attitude from the Pigeon. I believe this idea that the Pigeon yearns for humans love and respect reinforces an empathetic response from human viewers, subverting the common preconception that they are mindless creatures.

<sup>35</sup> Brian Dillon and Simon Critchley, “Very Funny: An Interview With Simon Critchley | Brian Dillon and Simon Critchley,” n.d., [https://www.cabinetmagazine.org/issues/17/dillon\\_critchley.php](https://www.cabinetmagazine.org/issues/17/dillon_critchley.php).

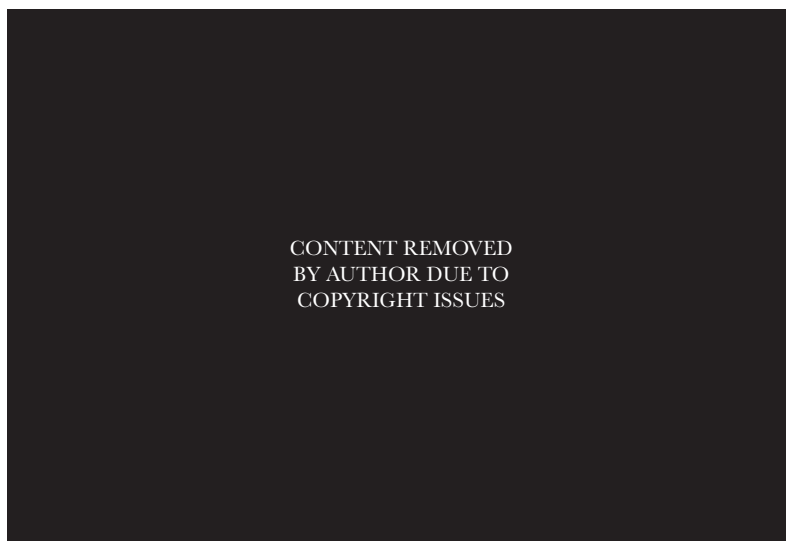
Observing you in flight, moving in  
synchronised patterns, fills me with  
admiration. Witnessing a male pigeon  
puffing its chest to court a female - no  
longer strikes me as goofy or funny;  
its endearing. Its a display of love,  
albeit in a different language. Foreign  
connections in a realm just beyond our  
understanding. It's real. I guess, in a  
sense, that I fell victim to my own  
prank. Humorous - it seems, to laugh  
at taking you seriously - but now - I see  
it now! The city through your eyes  
isn't fantastical or silly, it just is.  
It is reality, just not mine-humans.  
It's different and absurd to think of  
its having value. I see the human in  
how humans live in the city and how  
carnival it all # is.

I'm sorry for laughing, but it made  
me take you seriously.

Figure 19: Campbell, N. Apology letter to the Pigeon. 2024

The Pigeon's love for us is innocent amidst our cruelty and avoidance. Humans are consumed by notions of progress and advancement, concepts that leave no room for those who inhabited these spaces for centuries before us. Humour serves as a bridge to engagement, but to me, it also reveals a broader pattern of human indifference and exploitation towards non-human beings. My observation of the Pigeons reveals depth in their emotional lives and richness in their social dynamics. By witnessing their displays of affection and connection, I have come to appreciate the complexity and beauty of their existence, challenging the notion of human exceptionalism and calling into question the values of progress and advancement that often prioritise human interests over those of other species.

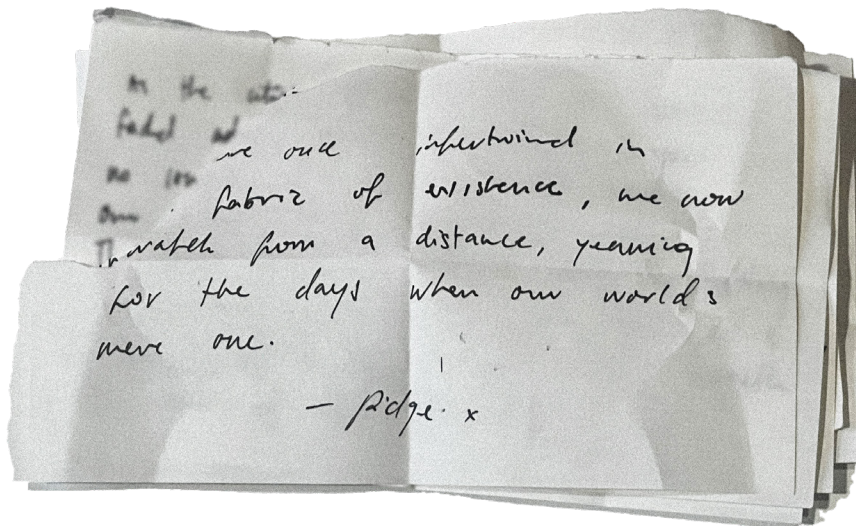
The laughter that may be derived from this project is not aimed at the Pigeon but rather shared with them. We are united in our shared humour directed at the absurdity of human perception, their strict adherence to rules, their inflated sense of self-importance, and their perspective of the Pigeon. It's not just about making fun; there is a certain earnestness in my relationship with them that grew alongside the research. Although there may be an element of the absurd, it is in hand with a genuine connection to the Pigeon.



**Figure 20:** McCarthy, P. *Page 9 of Pat's Pigeon Club*. n.d. (<https://www.patmccarthy.net/pats-pigeon-club>).

Pat McCarthy 'Pigeon Pat' is an artist who represents his love for the Pigeon through delightfully humorous work. Through sculpture, publications and installations, he highlights the beauty in the relationship between human and the Pigeon as he centres his practice around their narratives while also raising and flying them. In the *Born to Kill* zine *Pat's Pigeon Club*,<sup>36</sup> he shares pictures of ceramic and sculptural nests (see Fig. 20) made for the Pigeon. He creates work for the Pigeon, operating within a broader practice of care and compassion for them within the urban environment.

<sup>36</sup> "Pat's Pigeon Club," *Pat McCarthy*, n.d., <https://www.patmccarthy.net/pats-pigeon-club>.



**Figure 21:** Campbell, N. *Letter from Pidge x*. 2024

## The Chronicles of Urban Pigeon Life

### *Pigeon past; how it used to be*

“That man is fortunate who finds in his breast an inexplicable love for them [pigeons]... When fortune frowns and when the cares of a harsh or disordered world seem almost too heavy to bear... then the pigeon lover finds in his birds a solace and consolation impossible to describe.”<sup>37</sup>

Pigeons were human companions for thousands of years. Wendell Mitchell Levi (1891 - 1976) was a distinguished figure in the field of pigeon breeding and study,<sup>38</sup> and in his book *The Pigeon*, he notes that humans were first attracted to pigeons for their homing ability, which allowed them to return to their homes over long distances. As mentioned earlier, this admiration led to their use as message carriers in various civilisations, including ancient Rome and Egypt, and during World Wars I and II. Their social nature and adaptability to human environments also made them ideal companions, and they were often kept as pets or for their ‘aesthetic value’.<sup>39</sup> It has been argued that this domestication of pigeons has had lasting effects on their behaviour, which makes them more than comfortable living in close proximity to humans and able to adapt to urban environments through time.<sup>40</sup>

<sup>37</sup> Wendell Mitchell Levi, *The Pigeon* (The R. L. Bryan Company, 1941).

<sup>38</sup> “Pigeon Books I Wendell Levi,” n.d. <https://www.levipigeonbooks.com/>.

<sup>39</sup> Richard F. Johnston and Marián Janiga, *Feral Pigeons* (Oxford University Press, USA, 1995).

<sup>40</sup> Colin Jerolmack, “How Pigeons Became Rats: The Cultural-Spatial Logic of Problem Animals,” *Social Problems* 55, no. 1 (February 1, 2008): 72–94, <https://doi.org/10.1525/sp.2008.55.1.72>.



**Figure 22:** Campbell, N. *The Pigeon is everywhere*. Digital collage. 2024

In her book *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, Donna Haraway writes, “Pigeons are competent agents—in the double sense of both delegates and actors—who render each other and human beings capable of situated social, ecological, behavioural, and cognitive practices. Their worlding is expansive.”<sup>41</sup> Central to my research exploration is the recognition of situated practices—behaviours and actions that are context-specific and deeply entwined with the socio-ecological dynamics of the urban landscape. Pigeons, like humans, engage in practices that are shaped by their environment, social interactions, and cognitive capacities and always have.

<sup>41</sup> Donna J. Haraway, *Staying With the Trouble*, 2016, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv11cw25q>.



**Figure 23:** Campbell, N. *The Pigeons on their pedestal*. Photograph. 2024

### *Pigeon present; how it is now*

Pigeons are no rare creature in the Auckland CBD; well known, seen (or ignored) and honestly, somewhat well fed. In *The Spinoff* article “New Zealand cities ranked by pigeon grossness”, Tāmaki Makaurau gets the No.1 spot. Writer of the article, Asia Martusia King, is “fiercely pro-pigeon” and perfectly describes the Pigeon as the sad and disturbed creature they have become: “Auckland pigeons are gentle and benign, but have the melancholy of an orphaned Victorian chimney sweep. They look at you with sad, beseeching eyes, eat a cigarette, and then hobble away on stumps.”<sup>42</sup>

Though sympathy is appreciated, what more can we do to address the existing tension of Pigeon/Human relationships as it lives today? Yes, their eyes, pools of sorrow, reflect the silent plea for understanding in a world that has cast them aside, but it would be difficult for city-dwellers to acknowledge the inherent worth and dignity of pigeons, regardless of their place in the human

<sup>42</sup> Asia Martusia King, “New Zealand Cities Ranked by Pigeon Grossness,” *The Spinoff*, November 9, 2023, <https://thespinoff.co.nz/society/10-11-2023/new-zealand-cities-ranked-by-pigeon-grossness>.

hierarchy, while all they are known for are the diseases they carry. They live in the same physical city as us, but they live in it differently. What can they teach us? Have you been to the new café in Britomart, or is it a space unknown to you? The pigeons knew it before me. They perceive, hear, and communicate; they've established the ultimate marketing strategy among themselves—an inner circle of food connoisseurs—ensuring their place as the number one patrons of the city. The Pigeon, often dismissed as a scummy bird, rings about a common plea:

*“Don't shit on me.”*

*“Can't feed you because this crumb offered might summon 27 of your friends and fears of disease and inconvenience.”*

Through their gaze, they capture the subtle details, the overlooked crumbs, and the unnoticed detritus we leave behind. They see what we leave without notice: our remains, their gold. They know the dirt and the mess, and they are grateful. They love us for our filth because they've loved us for thousands of years, and some things can't be bred out.



**Figure 24:** Campbell, N. *Pigeons in Tāmaki Makaurau*. Photographic collage. 2024

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**Figure 25:** Charrière J. and von Bismarck, J. *Some Pigeons Are More Equal Than Others*, Process Photo, Venice 2012. (<https://juliusvonbismarck.com/bank/index.php/projects/some-pigeons-are-more-equal-than-others/>)

Julian Charrière and Julius von Bismarck’s collaborative artwork *Some Pigeons Are More Equal Than Others*,<sup>43</sup> performed in Copenhagen, Venice, and Berlin, disrupted the usual urban landscape by introducing pigeons airbrushed with vibrant, non-toxic dyes, transforming the often-ignored bird into a spectacle that commanded attention from city-dwellers. The project challenged the traditional narratives surrounding pigeons as symbols of urban decay and, instead, positioned them as interesting elements of the city’s ecosystem. Through altering the pigeons’ physical appearance, the work provoked the public to reassess their prejudices and inherent biases towards these birds. As a result, pigeons are seen less as pests and more as cohabitants of our shared urban spaces, deserving of respect and consideration. Through this work, the Pigeon is “at best considered an easily ignored carrier of disease and sign of urban cultural malaise—suddenly becomes an animal. The temporary and artificial alteration in the bird’s colouring is enough to bring about its renaturalisation .”<sup>44</sup>

This performative artwork is important as a case study in this research as the act of “renaturalisation” questions the authenticity of human interventions in the environment and considers the fragility of the boundary between the natural and the constructed environment. However, the project can be criticised as it takes away the Pigeon’s agency and forces them into this spectacle it never asked to be. I do not intend to use the Pigeon in this way, but work alongside them, as a student, rather than work with them, as an experiment.

<sup>43</sup> “Some Pigeons Are More Equal Than Others,” *Julian Charrière*, n.d., <https://www.julian-charriere.net/projects/some-pigeons-are-more-equal-than-others>.

<sup>44</sup> “Some Pigeons Are More Equal Than Others” *juliusvonbismarck.com*, n.d., <https://juliusvonbismarck.com/bank/index.php/projects/some-pigeons-are-more-equal-than-others/>.



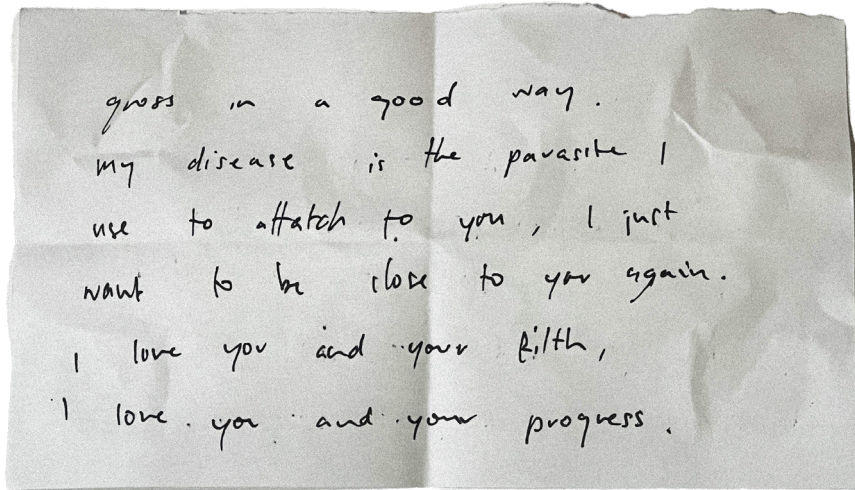
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**Figure 26:** Songsataya, S. *The Interior*. Installation detail, fibreglass, polyester resin, acrylic lacquer, Oamaru stone. 2019. (<https://www.aucklandartgallery.com/whats-on/exhibition/sorawit-songsataya-the-interior>)

Sorawit Songsataya's work *The Interior* is described as "intended to reflect the spectrum of our relationship with the natural world, from the ornamental to a desire for intimacy and knowledge."<sup>45</sup> The intention of the sculpted birds is to represent the complexity of human relationships with nature, one which is pushed to the exterior of our collective consciousness. Songsataya highlights the often utilitarian and outsider human approach to the natural world and works contrary to it. Though not depicting pigeons, but rather endangered or already-extinct native and endemic birds, Songsataya's work brings them from the outskirts – to the foreground, in our human faces.

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<sup>45</sup> SCAPE Public Art, "The Interior by Sorawit Songsataya," November 2, 2021, <https://www.scapepublicart.org.nz/artwork/the-interior/>.



**Figure 27:** Campbell, N. . *Letter from Pigeon no. 8.* 2024

### *Potential Pigeon future; how it could be*

Traditionally, urban planning and architecture have been wielded as tools for fostering the growth and success of human communities. Cities have primarily been designed to facilitate the movement and congregation of human societies;<sup>46</sup> I understand this intention behind the design of a city, however see it as an inherently anthropocentric approach. The growth and development of the city ‘machine’ means the inclusion of non-human life, once integral to urban dynamics (horses for travel, dogs for hunting, the Pigeon for communication), has gradually diminished. The advent of industrialisation and technology replaced the organic roles of these non-human entities, rendering them seemingly obsolete.

However, the act of replacement did not equate to eliminating non-human life from the urban landscape. Pigeons, once our essential brilliant messengers, now roam the city, seeming pointless, jobless, nuisance, the outsider. The concept of a nonhuman entity being “pointless” is rooted in anthropocentric thinking, which often assigns value based on perceived utility to humans. Our historical instrumentalisation of animals reflects a deeply entrenched anthropocentric worldview, where non-human beings are commodified and exploited for human benefit. This instrumentalisation reinforces the notion of disposability, where beings are discarded once deemed less useful. By challenging such attitudes, we can cultivate a deeper appreciation for the intrinsic value of all beings and unveil a striking reflection of the city that is stripped of human norms and human-centric concepts.

<sup>46</sup> Alberto Pérez-Gómez, “Architecture and the City: The Space of Participation,” *Sita.Uauim.Ro*, 2017, <https://sita.uauim.ro/article/5-perez-gomez-architecture-and-the-city>.

“They are treasured kin and despised pests, subjects of rescue and of invective, bearers of rights and components of the animal-machine, food and neighbour, targets of extermination and of biotechnological breeding and multiplication, companions in work and play and carriers of disease, contested subjects and objects of ‘modern progress’ and ‘backward tradition.’”<sup>47</sup> There is a tension that sits within the Pigeon’s existence, the contradictions of their past and present, that Haraway unpacks here – how does such juxtaposition in past and present live inside a temporal being like the Pigeon?

Beyond their aerial views and unconventional<sup>48</sup> transportation, I imagine that pigeons perceive the cityscape as a multifaceted ecosystem shaped by interactions with their idea of human infrastructure, social dynamics, and environmental factors. Their viewpoint reveals hidden dimensions of the urban landscape: overlooked habitats, resource distribution patterns, and sensory experiences that are inaccessible to humans. Pigeons navigate urban environments with an acute awareness of spatial configurations, social hierarchies, and resource availability,<sup>49</sup> offering valuable insights into the interconnectedness of urban life. Embracing the Pigeon’s lens allows us to reimagine urban spaces from a more holistic perspective, fostering a greater harmony between humans and non-human city-dwellers. In acknowledging the potential in this non-human perspective, we, as humans, can envision cities that honour their non-human past and embrace the potential for a non-human-inclusive future.

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<sup>47</sup> Donna J. Haraway, *Staying With the Trouble*, 2016, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv11cw25q>.

<sup>48</sup> In the human sense.

<sup>49</sup> Colin Jerolmack, “How Pigeons Became Rats: The Cultural-Spatial Logic of Problem Animals,” *Social Problems* 55, no. 1 (February 1, 2008): 72–94, <https://doi.org/10.1525/sp.2008.55.1.72>.

# CHAPTER THREE: PIGEONNING

## Reflections on Pigeon-making

### *Columbidae Collage*

In my practice, I use collage as it works as a versatile and expressive method, having the power to reassemble the fragmented narratives of urban life. My process of disassembling and then reassembling disparate elements to create a coherent whole is akin to deconstructing the segmented narratives of the city and then weaving them back together in a unified, disjointed, or alien composition. In urban exploration, collage becomes my tool for uncovering hidden stories, connections, and themes that may remain concealed within the city's segmented reality. Collage as a method also respects the Situationist concept of 'détournement,' which involves diverting and subverting existing elements for new purposes.<sup>50</sup> Existing urban elements and spaces can be repurposed and transformed, and collage provides a practical avenue for experimenting with these creative acts of resistance and reinvention.

In these works, I used collage-making as a meditative and transformative practice that furthered my visual connections and memories within the urban environment. Using collage as a method within this research is breaking free from my routine and human visual experience.<sup>51</sup> Collages and psychogeographic spatial interventions serve as acts of rebellion against the imposed anonymity of urban spaces. This act can be seen as a way to mend the fabric of the city frayed by the logic of profit, echoing that philosophical theme of 'authenticity' and the search for genuine human connection in an alienating world.<sup>52</sup>

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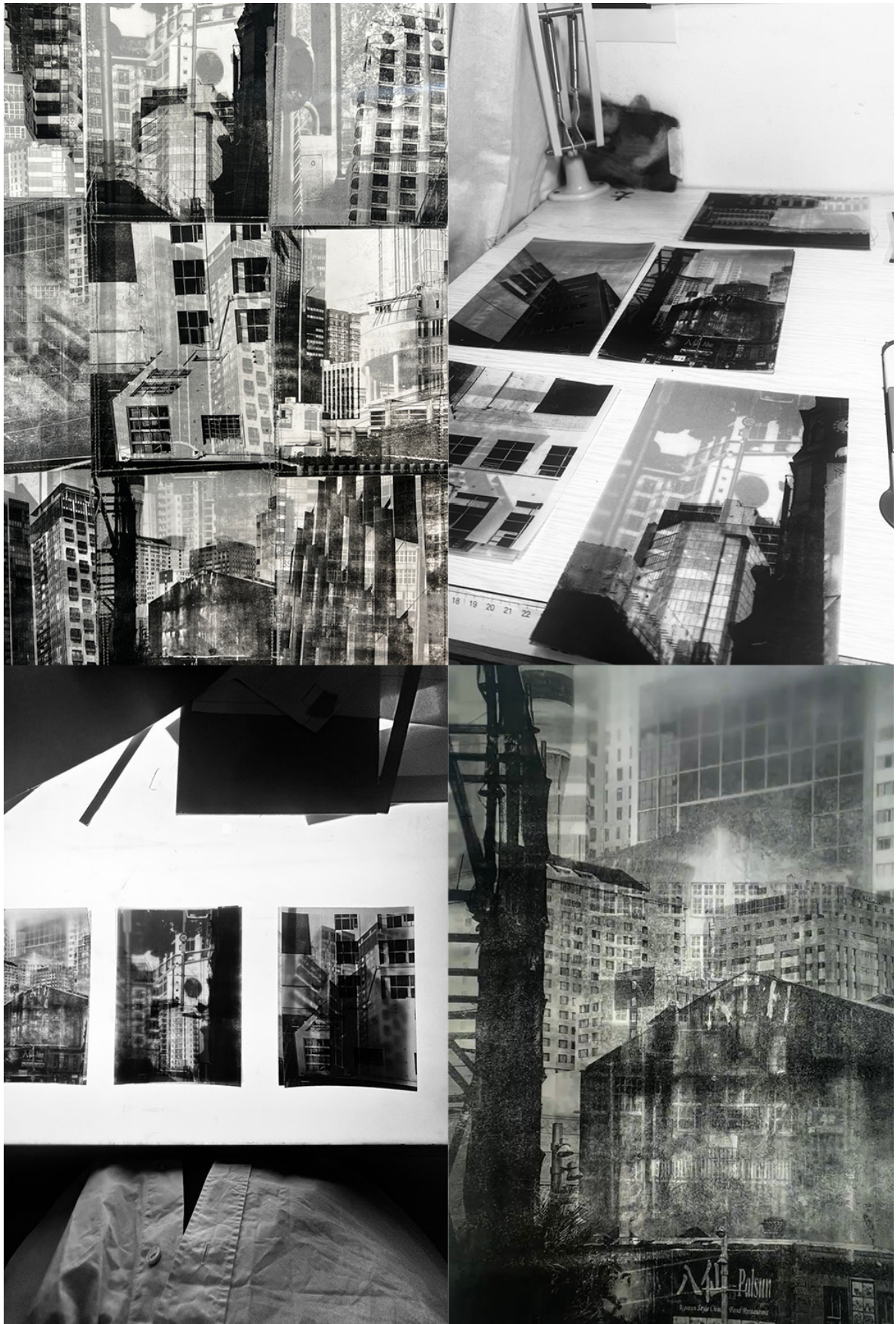
<sup>50</sup> Situationist International, "The Society of the Spectacle (New Annotated Translation of the Book by Guy Debord)," n.d., <https://www.bopsecrets.org/SI/debord/index.htm>.

<sup>51</sup> Solnit, Rebecca. *Wanderlust: A History of Walking*. New York: Penguin Books, 2000.

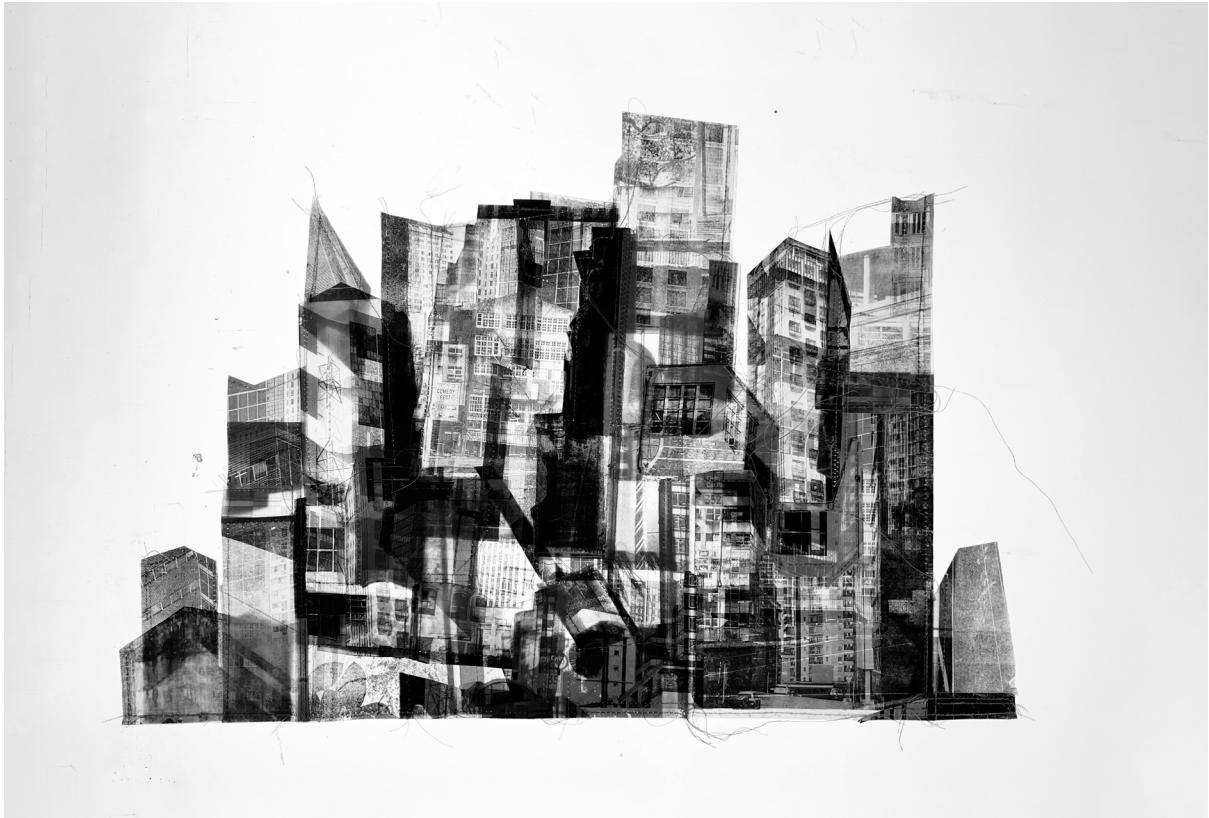
<sup>52</sup> Harvey, David. *Rebel Cities: From the Right to the City to the Urban Revolution*. London: Verso, 2012.



**Figure 28:** Campbell, N. *Progress pictures of laser-cut collages.* 2023

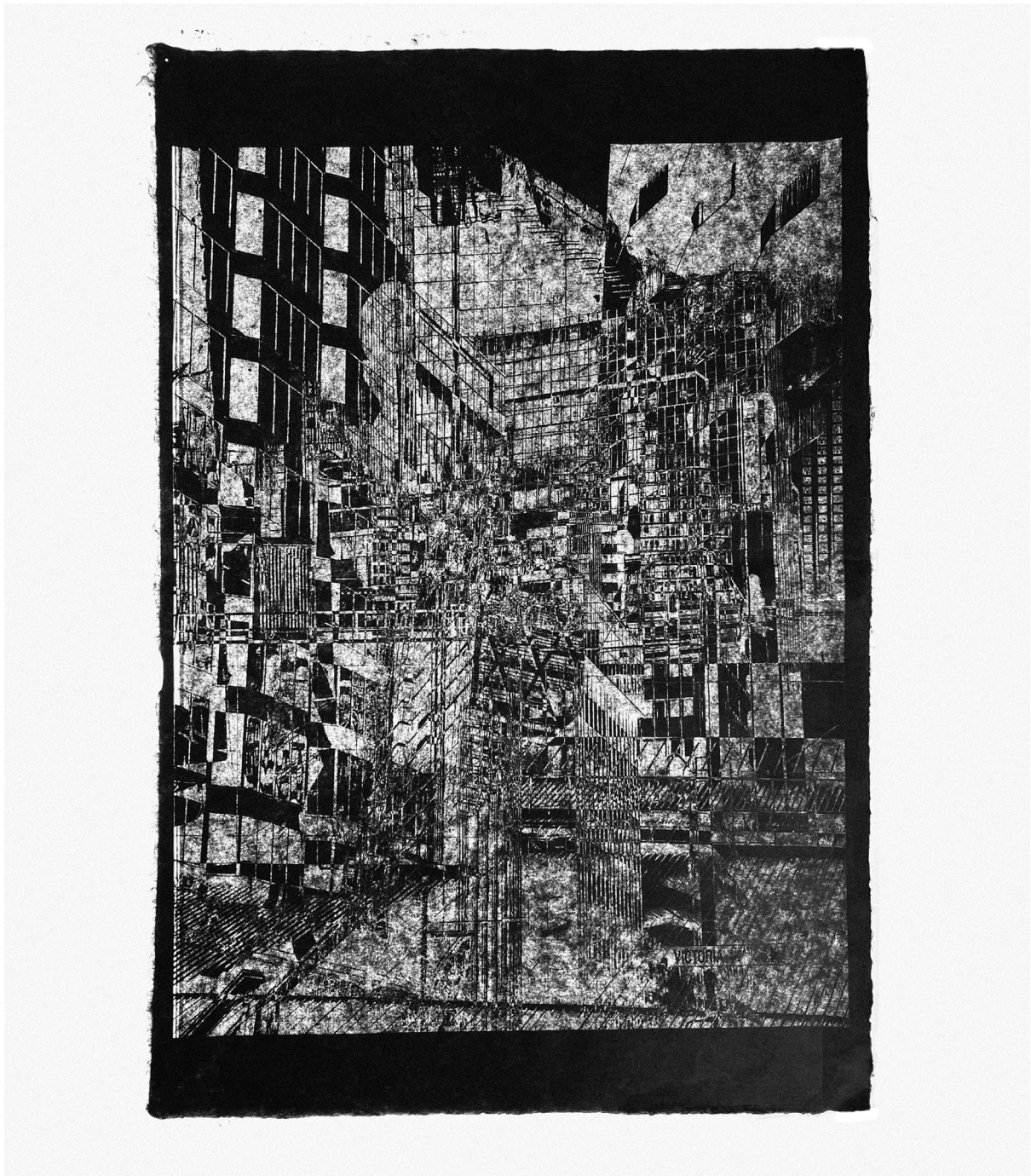


**Figure 29:** Campbell, N. *Progress pictures of sewn collages*. 2023



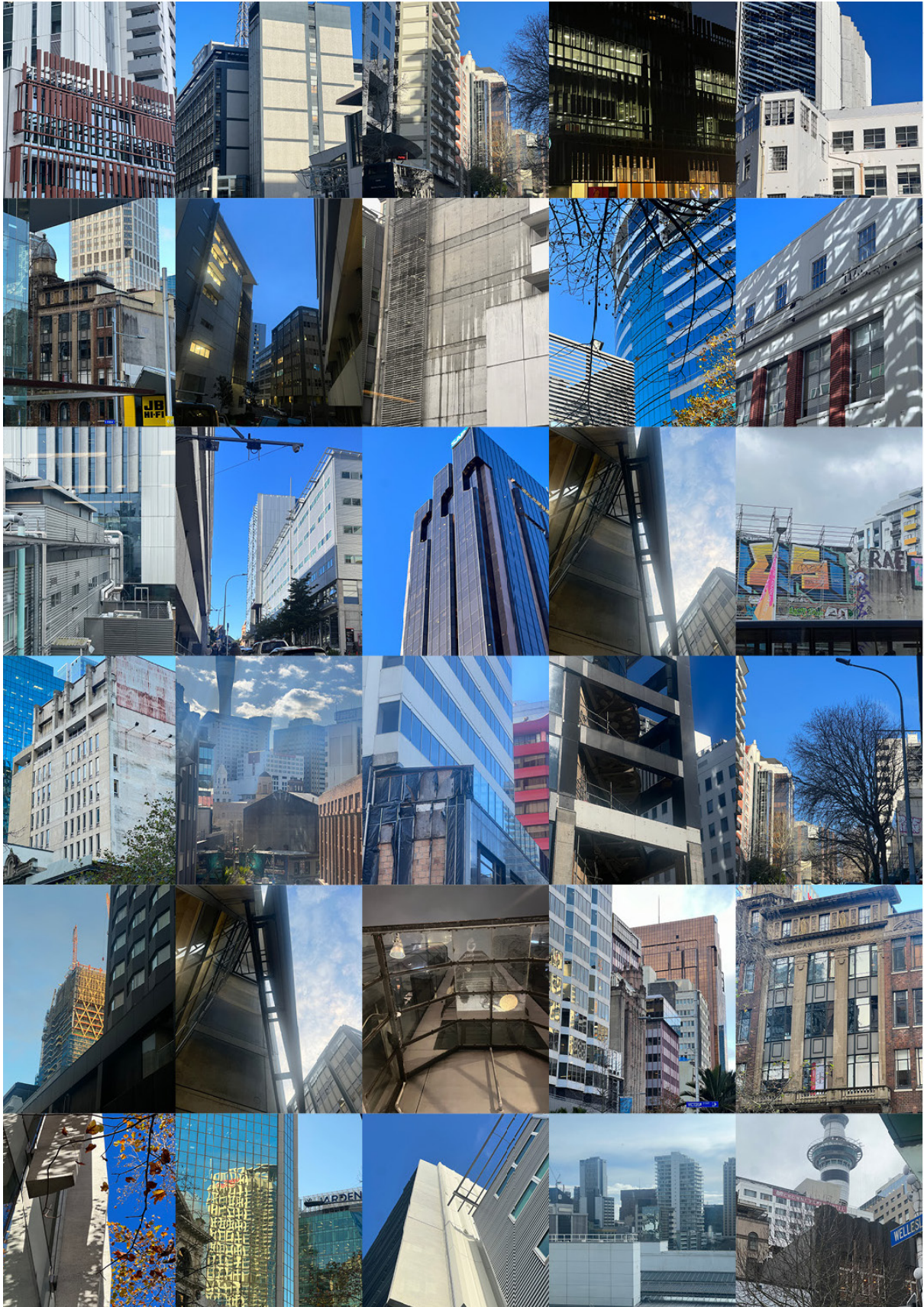
**Figure 30:** Campbell, N. *The Pigeon's skyline*. Sewn collage, tracing paper. 2023

The patchwork composition in the first iterations of my collage works visualised the many colliding visual elements that collectively shape the urban environment. This method of layering and sewing prompts contemplation on the interconnectedness of city components and how they contribute to the tapestry of urban life. The disassembly and reassembly of buildings and urban landmarks prompt contemplation of the malleability and adaptability of urban forms, suggesting a fluidity in how we can perceive and interact with the built environment. The resulting skyline, stitched together from disparate elements, reflects a collection of 'memories' of the city, shapes and forms – without (human) context. The Pigeon perceives their environment in fragmented snapshots, piecing it together from different angles and vantage points in the city. I imagine this fragmented image mirrors how pigeons perceive and navigate urban landscapes, presenting the city as a series of disjointed elements rather than a cohesive whole. My interpretations through collages reflect pigeon memory as each element/form may trigger associations with particular places or experiences within the urban environment, reflecting how the Pigeon stores and recalls information about their surroundings. This approach challenges traditional human-centric narratives of the city, offering a glimpse into pigeon memory's nonlinear and associative nature. Pigeons interact with the cityscape without the burden of human context, focusing solely on their immediate surroundings and environmental cues. By removing human presence from the collages, I emphasise this perspective, encouraging alternative ways of experiencing and interpreting urban environments free from anthropocentric biases.



**Figure 31:** Campbell, N. *Pigeon map*. A0 Awagami black 48gsm paper. 2023

In my successive iterations, the collage challenges traditional human perceptions of urban spaces by rendering the images unreadable. This deliberate obscurity prompts looking beyond the literal representation of buildings and streets, exploring the emotional and abstract dimensions of the city. These collages work to reevaluate the conventional ways we perceive and understand the city and how this perception lives in human memory.



**Figure 32:** Campbell, N. *A dérive through Tāmaki Makaurau, shot on iPhone.*  
Photographic collage. 2024

## *Walking not flying*

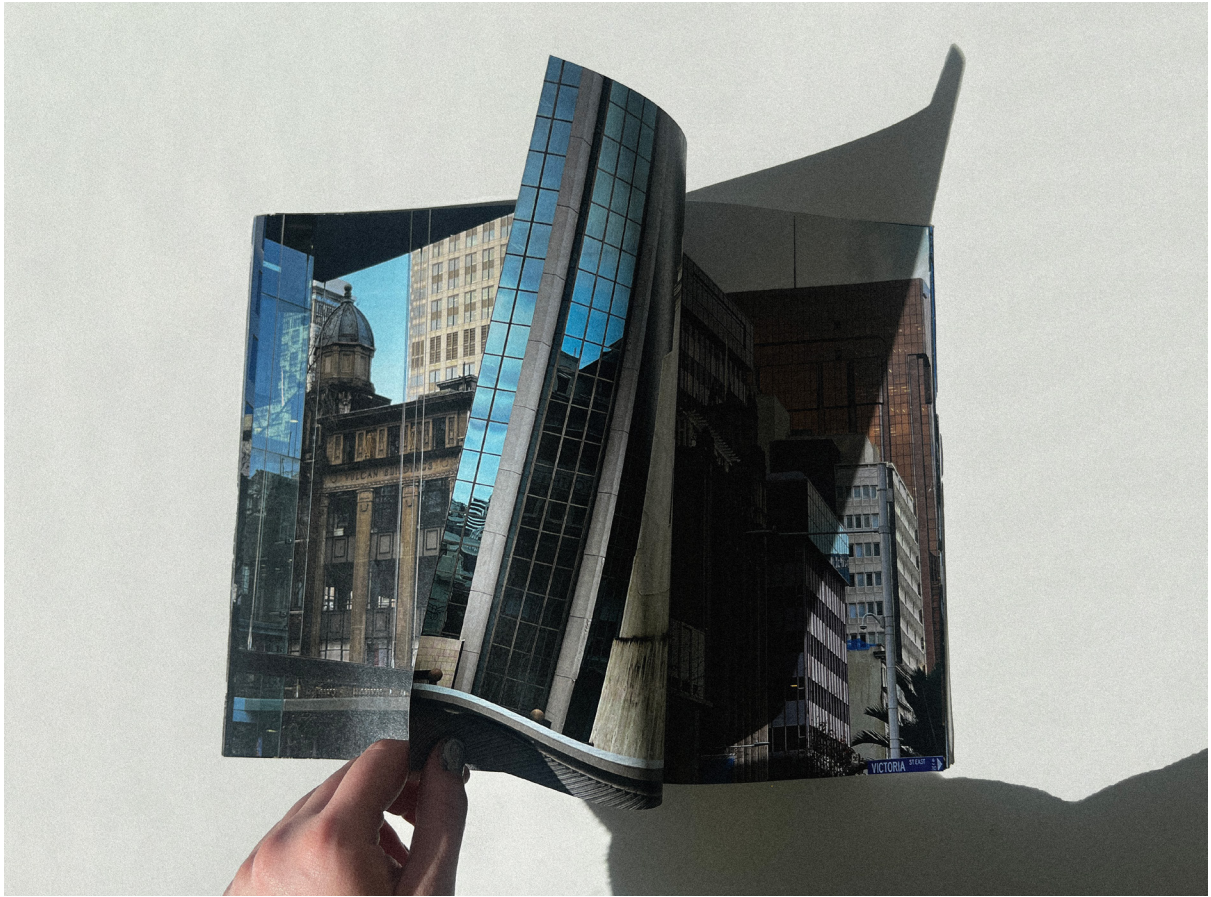
Through the act of pigeon-drifting, I can access spaces and perspectives that may be obscured within the dominant narratives of the city, allowing for the discovery of alternative ways of knowing and being. By relinquishing the constraints of linear thought and predetermined objectives, the *dérive* opens up space for serendipitous encounters and unexpected insights, enabling me to perceive the city through an unfamiliar lens. Walking to my studio every morning became an intimate journey, where my heightened awareness of architectural nuances forged a profound connection with the broader built environment in a more-than-human way. The photos taken from these walks became a conduit for a magnified understanding of the urban landscape, influencing and changing my daily encounters with it.

## *The City I Know*



**Figure 33:** Campbell, N. *The City I Know*. A4 Perfect-bound book cover. 2024

*The City I Know* is a photographic collection, perfect-bound into an A4 book that serves as a visual document of my pigeon-drifting. It captures the city's architecture, with images taken intuitively over the course of a year, employing a ground-level perspective, looking up, and utilising the 4:3 ratio. Through its ground-level perspective and monumentalising of architectural elements, it invites viewers to engage with the city as a dominating force and follow along with my adopted perspective of the Pigeon drifting in the city. The intentional use of commonplace tools and materials emphasises accessibility, challenging traditional notions of artistic exclusivity.



**Figure 34:** Campbell, N. *The City I Know*. A4 Perfect-bound book. 2024

# CHAPTER FOUR: THE PIGEON IS WAITING FOR YOU

## The Pigeon and the Branch



**Figure 35:** Campbell, N. *Progress pictures of pigeon-casting* 2023

I have been making 1:1 scale Pigeons cast in aluminium and producing a perch for them to rest on in the same material. The cast holds an invitation to touch the polished neck of the Pigeon, reconnecting the human hand with the pigeon's body. In current tests, I am working with glass to produce companion objects for the Pigeons and the perch, which references the inability of the Pigeon to comprehend this materiality.<sup>53</sup> These explorations are in an attempt to underscore the challenges we face in our attempts to bridge the gap between the more-than-human and the urban landscape. The potential for a symbolic representation of disconnection and anonymity aims to prompt contemplation of the barriers we create, both physical and perceptual, within the city.

<sup>53</sup> Roman Mars, "Murder Most Fowl," *99Pi* (podcast), April 5, 2022, <https://99percentinvisible.org/episode/murder-most-fowl/transcript>.



**Figure 36:** Campbell, N. *Laser cut 'invisible' collage*, Clear film. 2023

For me, metal and glass elements embody a dialogue between the visible and the invisible, the tangible and the elusive, further reinforcing the theme of lost connections and the evolving relationship between Humans and the more-than-human in the urban context. The companion being made will symbolise a realm devoid of Human occupation, a rare occurrence in the constructed urban environment.

The cast pigeons have formed part of an exploration of how I can make work that resonates with both Humans and the Pigeon, albeit in different ways. How can I reflect the multidimensional nature of the urban environment and the relationships within it and invite humans to reflect on our complex relationship with the Pigeon and the broader natural world? Through presenting familiar urban elements in a new context, there is potential to challenge viewers to reconsider their perceptions of the urban landscape and the non-human entities that inhabit it.



**Figure 37:** Campbell, N. *The Pigeon and the Branch in process*. Progress photo. 2024



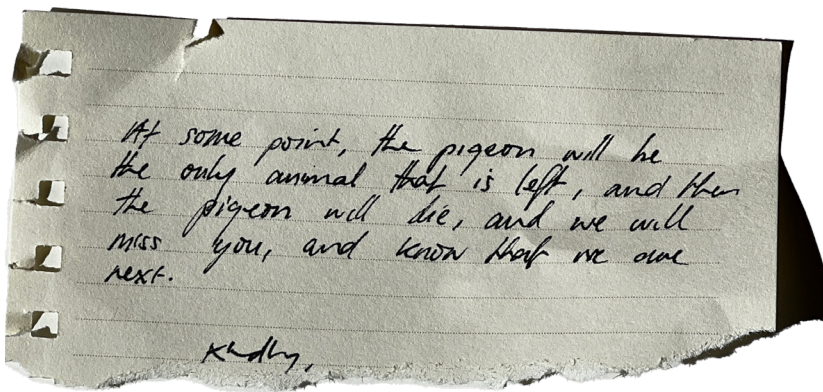
**Figure 38:** Campbell, N. *Nina and her friends*. Photograph. 2024

### **I wish I had crumbs in my pocket all the time**

Our relationship with the Pigeon highlights the anthropocentric tendencies inherent in human interactions with the natural world. The dichotomy between our treatment of the Pigeon as a pest and our historical reverence for them as symbols of peace speaks to the deeply ingrained tendencies that govern our interactions with the natural world. Our inclination to prioritise human interests and convenience over the well-being of other species reflects a fundamental imbalance in our relationship with the broader ecosystem. By viewing the Pigeon through a purely anthropocentric lens, we overlook the intrinsic value of their existence and perpetuate a hierarchy that places human interests above those of other beings. This anthropocentric mindset distorts our perception of the Pigeon and perpetuates a cycle of exploitation of the natural world.

Human-centric assumptions shape the built environment to align with our sensory capacities, reinforcing a narrow conception of what constitutes a meaningful and engaging spatial encounter. This affects how spaces make us feel, think, and interact. These assumptions are further perpetuated by externalised markers embedded within the urban landscape, which implicitly communicate who the intended users of a space are. These markers, whether through exclusive amenities or the absence of inclusive design features, contribute to establishing unspoken rules and norms that govern our interactions with our surroundings.<sup>54</sup>

Human spatial experiences, while diverse, are often confined by our anthropocentric understanding of the world. Learning from pigeon experiences encourages us to broaden the scope of spatial design to encompass non-human experiences, therefore opening us up to a more holistic understanding of the urban realm and encouraging a redefined ecocentric design approach where the value of all cohabitants is respected and honoured.



**Figure 39:** Campbell, N. *Fragment of letter to the Pigeon*. 2024

<sup>54</sup> Cities often employ 'hostile architecture' like anti-homeless spikes or benches with dividers, serving a selective demographic and marginalising others. By prioritising the comfort and convenience of certain individuals over others, urban spaces become exclusionary rather than inclusive, reinforcing societal stigmas and perpetuating inequalities



## **Pigeon insights**

The repercussions of entrenched anthropocentrism echo through urban society, leading to a fractured coexistence with non-human entities. This research is a call to reassess predefined roles and reimagine narratives, valuing the agency of all entities within the city.

Insights from this research can contribute to developing community-centric design strategies that extend beyond just human inhabitants. It suggests that collaborative design processes should involve engaging with local communities, both human and non-human, to shape urban spaces collectively. It suggests a participatory design ethos that considers the voices and perspectives of all inhabitants, and responds to their varied needs and desires. One might even argue that the Pigeons' city-dwelling existence can be seen as a metaphor for the human condition. They navigate a constructed environment, finding meaning and survival within it, leading to broader questions about the nature of existence and adaptation in environments shaped by humans.

This practice-based research is not just about understanding the Pigeon—it's also about understanding our human selves, and our relationship with the world around us. It prompts reflection on our impact, our responsibilities, and the beauty and complexity of urban life. Through practice and making, it opens doors to philosophical inquiry, ethical considerations, and a deeper appreciation for the diverse lives that thrive in the cities we build. It invites us to look beyond the anthropic surface, listen to the stories told by the non-human, and engage in a dialogue that speaks beyond species boundaries.

Dearest Pigeon friends,

Throughout this research, I have done, said, and learnt how to see the city through your eyes. Everyday that I think of you, and make objects and images in your name, I change. The way I live in the city changes. You know, since I started thinking about you, and making for you, I've had so many human friends come to me: "Nina! I saw a pigeon today! You've made me see them everywhere!" Because that's what you are, everywhere, waiting to be seen, and heard. Looking at the buildings and towers from your oh-so-special perch of view. I am so happy you taught me how to see them too.

I'll hear your coos and see how you fly, glide, start and run. I love you.

You are my neighbour, my friend, confidante, fellow city-dweller.

I am so happy and privileged to share this urban space with you.

with love, Nina-Rose

Figure 40: Campbell N. A loving letter to the Pigeon, 2024

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## APPENDIX

In preparation for my exhibition, I finalised the ephemeral and sculptural components that were supporting me throughout my research. I knew that I needed to refine what I would exhibit, to compose a spatial narrative that spoke to the poetic nature of the relationship I had built with the Pigeon. The exhibition was held from June 18th to June 22nd 2024, in Te Wai Ngutu Kākā Gallery.



**Figure 41:** Campbell N. *I am reading the Flyer's Digest*. Photograph 2024

### Flyer's Digest Publication

The Flyer's Digest publication was an important component to the exhibit, the pinch of humour that brought the rest of the objects into context. Bringing an ephemeral publication into the space, that could be spread amongst the community, was integral to a sense of closing of the research project. Distributing Pigeon-information in a pigeon way (disruptive, confusing, out-of-place) was a deliberate choice, and the following placement of the ephemera into cafes (See Figure 42), was an appropriate choice to follow, reflecting the social context of the *Coffee News* pretext and the Pigeon's favourite hang-out spot.

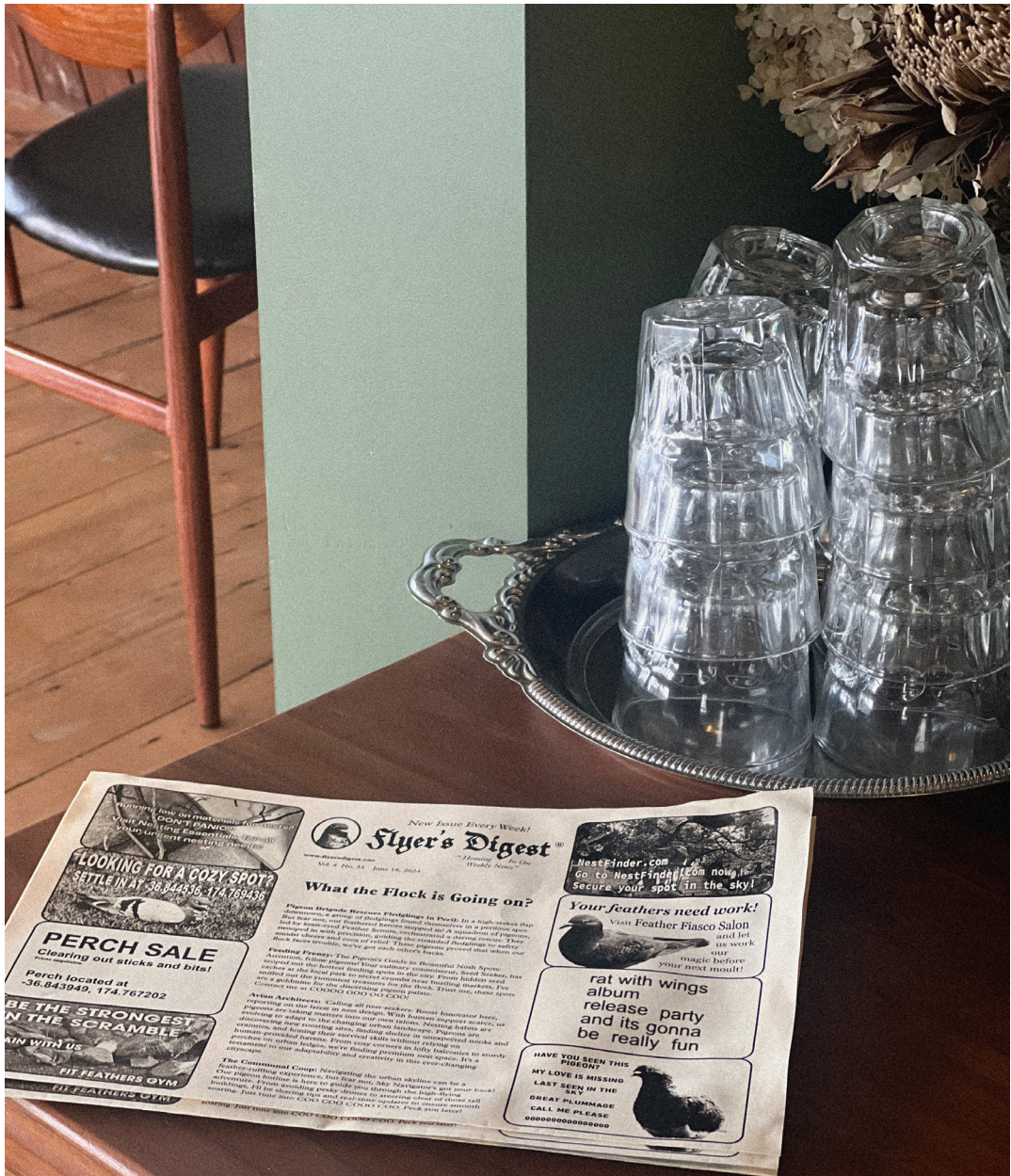


Figure 42: Campbell N. *Flyer's Digest* found in cafe in Ponsonby. Photograph 2024

## The Branches, and Attempted Pigeon Nest

The glass branches and *Attempted Pigeon Nest* were a collection of cast glass that I had been working on for months leading up to the exhibition. The fragility and ‘invisible’ nature of the glass responded to the fragility of the Pigeons relationship with nature, after their relocation and domestication from humans. The Pigeon’s glass nest, was ironically, broken on the night of the exhibition - invisible it seemed too - to the human viewers. Poignantly placed under PJ’s nose (bronze cast pigeon pictured in Figure 43) it sits unseen, not truly understood by its avian neighbour.



**Figure 43:** Campbell N. *PJ* sitting next to *Attempted Pigeon Nest*. Photograph 2024

The juxtaposition of materials in this exhibit, cast metals (aluminium and bronze) and cast glass, embody a dialogue between the visible and the invisible, the tangible and the elusive. The glass, signifies a barrier that pigeons, representative of the more-than-human, cannot comprehend. The intentional use of glass as the material for the branch underlines the theme of misalignment between urban spaces and the natural world.

## More Pretty Pigeons

I had cast seventeen aluminum pigeons and one bronze pigeon for the exhibiton in Ngutu Kākā Gallery. The decision to increase the amount from three to eighteen, was informed by real Pigeons in the city that I would sit by. There were almost never a flock of three. They are a social species, and don't enjoy being left out from all the fun. They were spontaneously placed around the foyer of the WM building (See Figure 44,) as well as other rooms in the gallery, spreading their personality throughout the space. The surprising discovery of the Pigeons was an integral part of the viewers spatial experience. To go looking, for the overlooked, searching for the forgotten, and delighted to see them there.



**Figure 44:** Campbell N. *Pigeons watching from above in AUT's WM building* Photograph 2024

## Pigeon Map

With all these components of the exhibition being seen with human eyes, I wanted to bring myself back to my relationship with the Pigeon and leave something for them to see. With my understanding of the Pigeon being able to see UV light, I could translate the Pigeon Map I created (See Figure 31) into a UV mural on the wall of the gallery. Unseen and not comprehensible by humans, but understood by the Pigeon. It consisted of the Pigeon Map being lasercut onto 15 sheets of A1 tracing paper, then stenciled onto the wall with a white UV paint that could only be seen under a black light (See Figure 45,) however not shown or demonstrated to human viewers.



**Figure 45:** Campbell N. *Pigeon Map*. White UV paint on white wall. 2024

## Reflection on exhibition

Reducing my research to a spatial narrative was the only way that made sense for me to represent the relationship grown over my practice. The industrial and human-made materials chosen, aluminium, bronze, casting glass, print and paint, reflecting organic and pigeon-ified objects - tells the story to human viewers, creates a moment with themselves and the Pigeon that can only be defined through such settings. A human walking to a gallery may pass the Pigeon on the street, and think nothing of it, but after arriving at said gallery, seeing the same Pigeon lovingly crafted in the white-wall space, may provoke a different moment, relationship, feeling, with the scummy, dirty city bird they see again on their way home.



**Figure 46:** Campbell N. *Oh dear, a pigeon got stuck inside!* Photograph. 2024



**Figure 47:** Campbell N. *The branches*. Cast glass. 2024



**Figure 48:** Campbell N. *Pidge sitting on the cornice*. Cast aluminium. 2024



**Figure 49:** Campbell N. *I am talking to Pidge*. Photograph. 2024