

A PIGEON'S PERSPECTIVE



Feeding Pigeons, Third Avenue, ca. 1940
Photograph by Roy Perry
Museum Purchase

In "the pigeon game," introduced by immigrants late in the 1800s, opponents waved their flocks into aerial circles which crossed one another, allowing lesser trained birds to be captured by the opposing players.

Museum of the City of New York/Roy Perry

The presence of pigeons in cities stands on a paradox: they are physically excessively present but remain conceptually invisible. By focusing on their presence and behavior – by making them visible, in a sense, – the walk aims at commenting on other invisible everyday realities concerning urban change, notions of dirt and health, human ideologies in NYC, past and present, as well as more global concerns about the future of biodiversity.

The research done at the Muséum National d'Histoire Naturelle's CESCO laboratory, where I am an associate artist, focuses on inter-specie networks. Looking at life as an accumulation of symbiotic relations between organic beings challenges the idea that humans live out of nature and that other forms of life – fauna and flora – survive out of culture; an approach that implies a redefining of life and humanness, as well as a reassessing of historical and ideological narratives. This walk hopes to inscribe itself in this scholarship.

1. Multi-Morphed Pigeons, Stakeholders in Evolutionary Theory

Scientifically referred to as rock doves, rock pigeons or columbia livea, pigeons, like humans, each have their own set of unique characteristics: their plumage can come in grey, rust, gold, white or black with various wing bars and body spots. These are called morphs. Feathers can be straight, undulated or curly, longer around the tarsus (ankles), sprout in various directions around the throat, crown, belly or breast, and eye coloring can vary between white, grey, pearl, blue, coral, orange and black.

Humans have had a key role in developing these various differentiations through domestication, or rather, pigeon-human collaboration over the past 10,000 years. Probably the most famous of these associations was Charles Darwin's pigeons that, with their numerous intergenerational morphs, were important in changing how humans conceive of biological evolution.

2. The Mediterranean as Public Housing

A pigeon is very faithful to its nest – both to its physical location and to the partner it shares it with. Pigeons are also very progressive when it comes to gender equality and domestic affairs. The rock dove is 'socially monogamous' for life, meaning that, even if extra-conjugal affairs occur both partners will not only stay together, but also take equal responsibility in the child rearing; the nest-construction is done by both parents; during the three weeks of incubation the male stays from mid-morning to the end of the afternoon and the female from late afternoon till the morning; and during the following weeks of feeding both parents produce a milky bile from their throat to feed their young. In the spring couples 'kissing' are actually exchanging bile, demonstrating they can provide sustenance for the future generation – this is called billing.

Pigeons build nests in places that provide conditions similar to their native terrain: the cliffs on the Mediterranean. Pigeons are very imaginative and see protected ledges under overpasses, store awnings or abandoned cracked façades as analogous to this sea-side habitat.

Opened on December 3, 1935, this housing complex, called First Houses, offers these ideal conditions. Humans also use these premises for shelter. In fact First Houses is considered the first public housing project in the United States and is an early example of a period of intensive and often contradictory state intervention in the Lower East Side in which the State emerges as the central stakeholder in the struggle over the future of the area's tenements.

3. Pigeons, Nutritious for Body and Soul

Unlike their cousins the passenger pigeon (extinct since 1914) and the mourning dove, pigeons are not native North Americans. European humans brought them on ships as a key and easy source of protein: pigeons procreate and grow quickly and have no desire to escape their man-made nests (coops). This last point, the result of the pigeon's nest-fidelity and exceptional orientation skills, means that historically human communication is both concretely and symbolically intertwined with rock doves. During World War II American soldiers parachuted in Normandy were still given pigeons to request back-up help, and looking much further back to the time of the Sacred Texts, the white pigeon – the dove – is repeatedly symbol of God's message: informing Noah about the end of the flood in the First Testament or a s

the Holy Spirit for the Christians. Today doves serve as the 'spokesperson' of a well-known soap company.

Built between 1851 and 1852, the Church of the Most Holy Redeemer was the most important Catholic centre of the Lower East Side's Little Germany or Kleindeutschland where, from the 1840s till the late 19th century a continuous flow of Germans migrated to. Like the first Dutch settlers of the 17th century, these newly arrived Europeans simultaneously bred pigeon, ate squab (a four week old pigeon) and prayed for God's benediction under their white depiction.

4. From School for Humans to Home for Pigeons...

At the turn of the century, the city's growing population and new ideals concerning hygiene and education meant that soon after NYC's consolidation in 1898, this school was commissioned. Finished in 1906, the former P.S. 64 was built on an innovative 'H' plan for each classroom to have access to bright windows – a luxury for children brought up in the tenements.

When the school closed in 1977 the student body had gone from 2,500 pupils to 844. This decrease has many potential causes – including but not limited to the end of NYC's manufacturing sector from the 1950s onwards, the city's contradictory housing management, the development of freeways to reach the growing middle-class suburbs – but concretely resulted in the new wave of immigrants, mainly Port Ricans, to live in poverty and drug-stricken communities rather than having a chance at the American dream.

If they did not inherit the American dream, Port Ricans did continue the LES's tradition of pigeon domestication. While P.S. 64 was an active school, pigeon coops were all over the neighbourhood. There are stories of pigeon-coops on roofs of squats that led to tensions between the inhabitants, or of more tragic accounts of children falling from roofs while trying to catch birds. With the development of antibiotics, the generalisation of electricity and the overall industrialisation of the food process, the chicken replaced the pigeon in the American diet and it is most likely that by the 1970s pigeons were bred as entertainment rather than as protein. As it is still done in Brooklyn, Queens or the Bronx, pigeon flocks are let free to trick birds from neighbouring coops to head back to the wrong home base.

In 1999, the City auctioned off the former P.S. 64 to Gregg Singer. Two years later Singer evicted the community centre, El Charas/El Bohio that occupied the west wing since 1977, and applied for permits to construct a 19-story college or student school dormitory for NYU. Torn façades, public outrage, a heritage status and a suspicious death later everything has remained more or less at a standstill – to the joy of the pigeon community.

5. ... and Garde-Manger for Christo and Dora

But the neighbourhood's rock

doves are not the only happy ones, Christo and Dora, the two red-tailed hawks that nested till last February on an air-conditioner vent off of the Christodora Building, used it as their garde-manger.

The Christodora was built in 1928 and was intended to be a self-sustaining community centre with a music and drama school, a pool and gymnasium, a library, clubhouses, housing for the poor and rentals for community income. It was sold to the city in 1948, then semi-abandoned before being totally abandoned and squatted by a few homeless and Black Panthers. Since 1986, when it was redeveloped into condos, it is a symbol of the area's gentrification. During the tense 1980s, it was the ritualised end-point for the anti-gentrification protestors and their cry "Die Yuppie Scum!"

The famous incidents of August 6th 1988 in Tompkins Square Park finished in such a manner. These riots were the result of growing frustrations within the mutating community – the squatters, the home-stealers, the 'yuppies,' the homeless, the Hispanics, – and against the city who seemed to favour capital through evictions and destruction, rather than protecting its local inhabitants and housing. They were not wrong, the city as much as the country had moved into a Reagan era where tolerance for financial liberties replaced those that has been applied to street life till then. This meant the implementation of city-wide "quality-of-life" policies. Started by mayor Ed Koch (1978 – 1989) and in full maturity under Rudy Giuliani (1994 – 2001), "quality-of-life" policing was based on the theory that small urban vandalism leads to serious crime. In NYC the prosecution and punishment of public drinking, pot smoking, after-hours park hang-outs or graffiti led to a decrease in crime but also of other cultural and social activities that encouraged the influx of new capital, real estate developments and gentrification.

6. New Petopias: The City's First Dog Run

These policies impacted more than the human specie. After many homeless lived in Tompkins Square Park for a little over six months in 1989, the park closed for renovations – something many consider a "quality-of-life" manoeuvre. And indeed when the park re-opened in 1992 the bandshell was removed, a midnight curfew in place and the "First Run," NYC's first official dog park, a reality. While the dogs were happily invited to partake in the city's new "quality-of-life," domesticated pigeons were not on the guest list. Roof running,

constructions or roof trespassing are a pigeon breeder's typical misdemeanours. Confronted by these new policies many abandoned the trade. Homeless and feral, their pigeons found a home in former P.S. 64 where, their descendants are striving.

Recently the park again played a role both as agent and marker of a new city model: the green, the eco-friendly, the sustainable city. This latest urban ideology, like the hygienic movement of the early 20th century or the "quality-of-life" ideas of the 80s, promises healthier inhabitants, a better life and an overall "cleaner" living environment. The return of the red-tailed hawk to NYC is a symbol of this positive 'greening' of urban space where there is less smog, no pesticides, and in Tompkins Square Park no rat poison (in part for the safety of the red-tailed hawks). But like the past urban visions for New York, the green city hides a bleak reality controlled more by capital than by the future welfare of the planet's organic life. New York humans are still polluters but the smog, chemical waste and smells resulting from the production of their consumer goods have been displaced to other parts of the globe.

It was to under the vigilant eyes of the blogosphere that the repairing of the air conditioning vent led to the gentle displacement of Christo and Dora. They built a nest on Ageloff Towers a block away on a store called Petopia that sells vegetarian food for dogs and nail polish for cats and a small section of toys for caged birds.

7. Anton's Pigeon Coop

Anton is an artist who moved to this block with his wife and their two small children in the early 80s. He was attracted to the "liveliness" of the area as well as the cheap rents: "I stay because I am still interested in seeing how this area will develop." He is now the last pigeon breeder in the area. He recalls how back in the 80s local youth would sometimes steal a few of his pigeons (something rather futile as pigeons return to their nest/mate/coop, faithfully). Years later he learned the kids in the area had given him the nickname "limo" because of his pristine doves and impeccable coop. There was a store on 10th that sold pigeon supplies and birds. It has since closed and now he buys his props at Pigeon Broadway in Bed-Stuy where mostly men from newly arrived immigrant groups gather to talk pigeon.

Come a few hours before sunset and observe his dove flock's ballet above and around their coop.

