

Project Gallery

Bik Van der Pol

**Pérez
Art
Museum
Miami**

English

Speechless

The unique work of artists Liesbeth Bik and Jos Van der Pol hinges on research, collaboration, and close examination of the social dynamics that animate and provide texture to specific locales. Working collectively as Bik Van der Pol for more than two decades, the artists endeavor to elucidate the effects of a globalized economy on urban settings and natural landscapes, emphasizing the production of ephemeral discourse and experience over the creation of static art objects. The improvisatory situations they generate function as platforms for the exchange of knowledge, presenting viewers and participants with scenarios in which they themselves will often have the last word.

With *Speechless*, a project commissioned by Pérez Art Museum Miami, Bik Van der Pol presents a multilayered exploration of how we speak about the precarious state of the natural world. The artists transformed the Papper Family Gallery, located in the museum's lobby, into an aviary for two African grey and two double yellow-headed Amazon parrots that will be trained to speak over the course of the exhibition period. Inside the enclosure there is an array of sculptural representations of oversized alphabetic letters. These letters pose a three-dimensional exercise in concrete poetry, challenging visitors to make out the contested terms "global warming," "climate change," and "sustainability," which hide in plain sight amid the jumble. The artists were inspired, in part, by reports of a recent controversy involving an unofficial ban on such terms (in favor of more innocuous language, like "nuisance flooding") that spread throughout Florida's state government, leading to a number of resignations within the Department of Environmental Protection and other agencies.¹

Just outside the aviary, a sound system periodically plays a recording of excerpts from T. S. Eliot's poem "The Wasteland" (1922). Written in the aftermath of World War I, this seminal text is renowned for its evocation of barren territories wrought by the destruction of the modern war machine. In the context of this installation, the poem's implications shift, calling forth visions of a future made bleak by the effects of environmental degradation. Certain passages—such as "Hurry up please it's time"—seem to speak directly to the urgent crises we face today, despite the century that separates our timescape from that of the poem's writing.

Part poetic gesture and part radical expression, *Speechless* draws on the uncanny ability of parrots to mimic human speech as a way of exploring the Aristotelian notion that we are political animals, constantly engaged in the activities of influencing and governing one another. The project pivots on the idea – associated with a broad spectrum of thinkers, from Antonio Gramsci to Michel Foucault – that political power is inseparable from linguistic operations. Here, the parrots serve as playful interlocutors, "innocent" conveyers of information making plain the truths that have been buried or that have become difficult to utter amid a political atmosphere in which measured conversation is mired by conflictive worldviews and mistrust over hidden interests and unspoken agendas. The broader implication is that the ability both to access and voice vital public information – the communally held knowledge that holds the fabric of a given community together – is in as much need of defense as the natural environment.

Speechless is one of many projects by Bik Van der Pol that revolves around the idea of radical messaging. In an installation titled *Loompanics* (presented originally at White Box, New York, in 2001), for example, the duo compiled scores of books printed by the Washington-based independent publishing house Loompanics Unlimited. Defunct since 2006, the publisher specialized in manuals that "your mother and the state would rather you didn't read," from how-to books on sneaking into movie theaters to more controversial titles, including *How to Disappear Completely and Never Be Found* and *How to Start Your Own Country*. Visitors to the installation were invited to make copies of the manuals, adding another layer of transgression vis-à-vis the bypassing of reproduction rights and copyright laws. The project rests on the stance that the measure of a given society's tolerance for free discourse can only truly be taken in the presence of statements that press against the limits of tolerability. By bringing this challenging principle into museums and galleries, the work forcefully tests the ideals of social and individual freedom with which the space of art has come to be associated, reasserting its hypothetical function as a laboratory for daring, unsanctioned communication.

Speechless also relates to the vulnerability of the natural environment, another theme the artists have addressed in several projects. In *Are you really sure that a floor can't also be*

¹ Tristram Korten, "In Florida, officials ban term 'climate change,'" *Miami Herald*, March 8, 2015.



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a ceiling? (2010), which was first presented at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Rome, the artists created a scaled replica of Ludwig Mies van der Rohe's famous Farnsworth House, utilizing the enclosure as a microclimate for a butterfly garden. Considered a landmark in the history of modernist residential architecture, the original structure (located 55 miles southwest of downtown Chicago) is celebrated for its high degree of transparency between inside and outside, which allows it to integrate visually with its once-rural surroundings. In recent years, the house has been repeatedly damaged as a result of periodic flooding from the nearby Fox River, which is linked in turn to escalating urban development in the region. The iconic home has become, in a real sense, an indicator for the adverse effects of human encroachment onto natural landscapes. It shares this status with the butterfly, which is particularly sensitive to changes in its environment. In recent years, butterfly populations have experienced mass depletions due to habitat loss, the use of insecticides in agriculture, and global warming. By drawing a symbolic parallel between the two protagonists of the installation—house and butterfly—Bik Van der Pol poetically underscore the synonymy of human and natural systems, while implying that our fates are inextricably intertwined with those of our animal counterparts.

Speechless constitutes a kind of cross-fertilization between this interrogation of the human/animal relationship and the artists' longstanding engagement with the politics of language. The project draws from an immense body of theory on this intersection, to which nearly every major Western philosopher

has contributed, from the ancient Greeks to Jacques Derrida. The topic has a central place in the work of the father of modern philosophy, René Descartes, who posed a definitive conceptual break between the body and the mind/soul. Assuming a clear distinction between reflexive or automatic reactions to stimuli and the ability to respond verbally to a given situation, Descartes, along with a long line of thinkers who followed him, proposed language as the element that constitutes the essence of what it is to be uniquely human.

In his essay "Why Look at Animals?," John Berger reminds us that the relationships among humans, animals, and language were not always so schismatic: "The 19th century, in Western Europe and North America, saw the beginning of a process, today being completed by 20th-century corporate capitalism, by which every tradition which has previously mediated between man and nature was broken. Before this rupture, animals . . . were with man at the centre of his world."² While noting that this centrality has certainly always been based on our dependence on animals for food, labor, transportation, and clothing, Berger argues that "to suppose that animals first entered the human imagination as meat or leather or horn is to project a 19th-century attitude backwards across millennia. Animals first entered the imagination as messengers and promises. [They] had magical functions, sometimes oracular, sometimes sacrificial."³ The rupture that Berger describes was accompanied by the loss of a profound communicative relation with nature that animals once afforded us.

2 John Berger, "Why Look at Animals?" in *About Looking* (New York: Random House, 1980), p. 3.
3 *Ibid.*, p. 4.



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It is not exactly in an effort to restore this communicative relation that the artists introduce a set of winged oracles into the discursive space of art. Such a relation is irretrievably lost. Indeed, to the extent that the question of language has served as primary justification for the labeling of animals as “other,” it is entangled with the unprecedented intensification of human exploitation and industrialization of nature witnessed over the course of the last two centuries. What *Speechless* accomplishes, rather, is to underscore the twisted irony that the same capacity for language that played a role in overdetermining the divide between ourselves and the natural world is also partially responsible for how we find ourselves mute and deaf before the ecological devastation that this divide has helped to render. We find ourselves longing to hear—perhaps in need of hearing—the voices of those we silenced long ago. The project probes at assumptions deeply rooted in our very self-conceptions as human beings, which have contributed to our widespread reluctance or inability to take action against the existential threats that imperil the long-term survival of our species, and of countless others.

Biography

Rotterdam-based artists Liesbeth Bik and Jos Van der Pol have worked collaboratively since 1995. Solo exhibitions of their work have been presented by several prestigious institutions, such as The Power Plant, Toronto; Museo d’Arte Contemporanea di Roma; Creative Time, New York; Centre for Contemporary Arts, Glasgow; Van Abbe Museum, Eindhoven; Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam; Secession, Vienna; and the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam. Their work has been included in group contexts at numerous venues, including the biennials of São Paulo, Jakarta, Mercosul (Porto Alegre, Brazil), Venice, Lyon, and Istanbul; China Central Academy of Fine Arts, Beijing; Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art, Rotterdam; Padiglione d’Art Contemporanea, Milano; Neue Gesellschaft für bildende Kunst, Berlin; Center for Contemporary Art, Glasgow; New Art Space Amsterdam; Cooper-Hewitt National Design Museum, New York; Walker Art Center, Minneapolis; Pratt Institute, New York; Cooper Union, New York; Tate Modern, London, and many others.

Cover African Grey Parrot (*Psittacus erithacus*) © Thawat Tanhai / 123rf.com

2 Bik Van der Pol, *Loompanics*, 2006. Installation view, Museum of Contemporary Arts, Taipei. Image courtesy the artists.

3 Bik Van der Pol. *Are you really sure a floor can't also be a ceiling?*, 2010. Collection Enel Contemporanea. Installation view, Museo d’Arte Contemporanea di Roma. Image courtesy the artists.

Project Gallery: Bik Van der Pol
August 13, 2015 – February 21, 2016

Bik Van der Pol
Working collaboratively since 1995; live in Rotterdam

Speechless, 2015

Four parrots, custom-built aviary, audio recording, wood and Plexiglas letters, assorted bird toys and accoutrements

11 1/2 x 24 x 18 feet

Courtesy the artists

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Kingdom of the Netherlands



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