



Brian Collier: *Teach the Starlings: An Introduction to the Project*, 2008, video, approx. 12½ minutes; at Paragraph.

## KANSAS CITY

### Brian Collier Paragraph

Brian Collier's images of bird-filled skies call to mind Hitchcock's classic thriller, but their aim is quite different. Filled with perching and ascending flocks, Collier's project, "Teach the Starlings in Kansas City," is part of a multifaceted crusade to inform people about the unexpected consequences of intervening with nature. The photographs, videos and sculptures in his recent exhibition (all 2008) at Paragraph present the starling as a "poster bird" for the loss of biodiversity.

Collier's project is rooted in the story of Eugene Schieffelin (1827-1906), who introduced the European starling to North America. Schieffelin was a pharmaceutical manufacturer and, more important for his legacy, a member of the Acclimation Society of North America, which encouraged, by unnatural means if necessary, the transfer of species from one part of the world to another. From 1890 to '91, he released around 100 birds into Central Park; the population today is estimated at more than 200 million and has spread from coast to coast and from Canada to Mexico. The starling opportunistically moved in as other birds, including the passenger pigeon and the Carolina parakeet, went into decline. Its quick spread was aided by the deforestation of the East Coast, which left vast areas of open space where starlings thrive.

Collier's show conveyed these facts through a 12½-minute public access television-style video, *Teach the Starlings: An Introduction to the Project*, which opens with historical photographs and maps, and is narrated by Collier. Although the issues he addresses are serious, Collier's wit rescues the project from didacticism. The crux of "Teach the Starlings" is the artist's endeavor to teach the birds how to say "Schieffelin," enlisting them as agents of environmental awareness by exploiting their parrotlike ability to mimic human speech. The video shows the methods he has devised for instructing

the birds, including hand-crafted feeding stations and nesting boxes equipped with audio devices that emit Schieffelin's name when the birds alight. Because starlings also mimic each other, Collier envisions that flocks of starlings with the ability to talk will spread like a virus, in a manner resembling their original proliferation.

The exhibition also included photographs of starlings perching and roosting on Collier's special devices as well as sculptures of perching birds made from painted fiberglass. Since beginning his work with starlings in 2004, Collier has established

several teaching sites around the country where volunteers put his methods into practice. The show offered a Saturday afternoon tour of some of his starling sites around Kansas City. (Collier also maintains a website, [teachstarlings.societyrny.net](http://teachstarlings.societyrny.net), featuring extensive information about the birds and his ongoing project.)

The second video, *Locating and Observing Starlings in Kansas City*, shows the birds gathering at various sites around the city, including buildings, construction cranes and telephone wires. While replete with all the chirping and fluttering sounds of an ornithology documentary, Collier's focus on urban habitat blatantly lacks the allure of sun-dappled woodlands and tropical forests. It stands as both a parody of and an addition to the natural history genre, as well as a sobering prognostication.

—Alice Thorson

## DALLAS

### Paul Slocum Dunn and Brown

Paul Slocum's *Pi House Generator* (2008) consists of an old-fashioned hi-fi receiver and speakers connected to a computer programmed to generate house-music beats from an algorithm that continuously calculates the (famously patternless) digits of the number  $\pi$ . In other words, house music's utterly reliable four-to-the-floor beat is transformed into something with a wholly unpredictable time signature. What's more, since  $\pi$  contains an infinite number of digits, Slocum's music will theoretically play forever without repeating itself. Built into the project is the artist's assumption that future upgrades to the computer equipment will become available before the complexity of the calculations overwhelms his current array.

For *You're Not My Father* (2008), Slo-

cum posted an internet advertisement inviting individuals to re-enact a 10-second scene from the TV sitcom *Full House* (1987-95) in which DJ (Candace Cameron) gets angry at Joey (Dave Coulier) for grounding her. Submissions flooded in for what became a just-under-4-minute video loop. The original segment is bad material, wretchedly performed, but the amateurs in Slocum's final cut, with their varying levels of enthusiasm and nonchalance, create a joyful communal experience even for those who, like me, know the original series only by name. Without Slocum's drastic editing you get the feeling that, like the house music pulsating from the computer across the room, the video might play forever with endless variation.

Both *Pi House Generator* and *You're Not My Father* use digital technology to confound time. Slocum balances the paired experiences of infinite variation and looping repetition in these two works with other pieces



Paul Slocum: *Four Seasons of Work Desktops*, 2007, inkjet prints on canvas, 46 by 16 inches each; at Dunn and Brown.

that address simultaneity and multitasking. His *Four Seasons of Work Desktops* (2007) is made up of 46-by-16-inch inkjet-printed canvases lined up in the strict serial presentation one might expect of a Minimalist. Each of Slocum's brightly colored panels, however, is overloaded with the information captured by screen shots of two upside-down desktop monitors, both with multiple application windows open at the same time. Multitasking is again the theme in a projected video loop of Slocum working on his desktop while simultaneously watching a Facebook video in which a young man discusses the panic he feels over his own sexual feelings. Slocum pays little attention to the young man's heart-felt dilemma. He is busy using Photoshop to rearrange giveaway baseball caps on an overstuffed armchair. Slocum's activity is as mindless as the young man's confession is inappropriate and unwanted. Whether you feel trapped, liberated or simply amused within these concocted networks will say as much about you as about the systems Slocum sets up and his own subtle but magisterial presence—he is, after all, the god in the machine—within them.

—Charles Dee Mitchell