

# Flocking

on *Mews Room* by Lucy Meyle  
at play\_station gallery  
28 April - 21 May, 2022

by Jane Wallace

## I. Egg-shaped

During the COMME des GARÇONS Fall/Winter 2020 show, a model walks down the runway encased in a soft sculpture that can only be described as an egg. It looks like a practical joke, mostly because of how *un-egg-like* this costume is; the textile is far too baggy and a bit too pear-shaped, and the egg is wearing high heels as well. The inaccessible space of the egg is punctured, dissolving the threshold between inside and outside like a deflating balloon.

Mimicry necessitates a certain degree of absurdity. Giving up the qualities that comprise oneself and trying another's on for size is often an exercise in feeling embarrassed, uncomfortable and slightly silly, yet can also produce an embodied experience that might collapse the gap between different objects and living things. The process of imitation or simulation underpins Lucy Meyle's show *Mews Room* at play\_station, a strategy for getting closer to being a birdbrain. I am reminded of Abby Cunnane's list of somehow-synonyms in her text for Meyle's earlier show at Enjoy Contemporary Art Space: "Pigeon rain. Soft spot. Chicken boots."<sup>1</sup> In Meyle's work, ideas are generated through provoking new combinations of object, material and feeling.

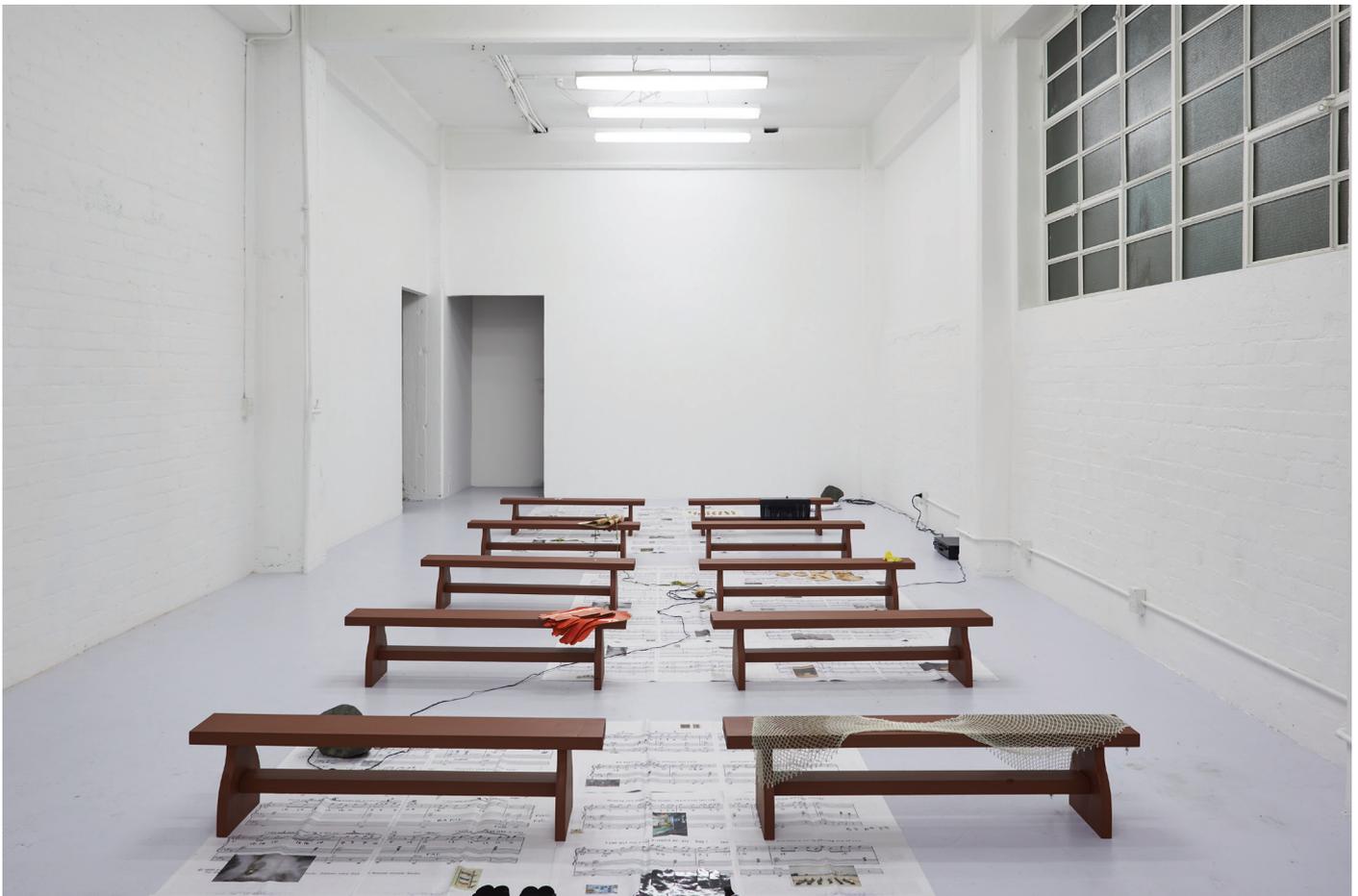
*Mews Room*, as a replica of The Abu Dhabi Falcon Hospital, presents a configuration of sculptural objects that mine the language of falconry and falcon rehabilitation, though notably vacated by any feathered friends. Pretending-to-be-an-egg is something found throughout *Mews Room*. Pockets of dummy eggs nestle underneath benches, highly believable copycats, but like the Comme model, they are dressed up in something plasticky. Unlike a real egg, they won't hatch a fledgling, nor break if dropped, and there is a comedy in this fallibility of the dummy egg. Its fragility becomes ironic, as the egg's status as an object is fractured by a failure to perform the essential duties of egghood. I think of planting false eggs in a nesting box to keep a chicken broody, and think, "if the difference doesn't bother her, why should I care?"



COMME des GARÇONS Fall/Winter 2020 mainline show, look 8, via Vogue Runway

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1. Abby Cunnane, "Whose clothes are falling in a pigeon rain?", *Enjoy Contemporary Art Space*, 2020, <https://enjoy.org.nz/publishing/exhibition-essays/soft-spot/whose-clothes-are-falling-in-a-pigeon-rain>



Lucy Meyle, *Mews Room* (2022), play\_station gallery, photograph by Hendrix Hennessy-Ropiha

Maybe the object or idea has some autonomy over how it is interpreted. Sometimes interpretation is generated in a way that we can't quite grasp, through its friction up against the world. Argentine artist Federico Manuel Peralta Ramos' giant egg installation, *Nosotros afuera* [We, the Outsiders] (1965) declared the artist's exhaustion for language and where it might begin and end. Writing on the work, curator Chus Martínez quotes a paragraph from Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass* to illustrate the fraught relationship between speaker, word and meaning:

“When *I* use a word,” Humpty Dumpty said, in rather a scornful tone, “it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less.” “The question is,” said Alice, “whether you *can* make words mean so many different things.” “The question is,” said Humpty Dumpty, “which is to be master—that’s all.”<sup>2</sup>

When *I* say egg-shaped, I mean pretending-to-be or “what-came-first?”. If there is anything I know about eggs, it is that they have parameters. Egg-shaped, then, is to roughly trace an oval around the situation. This seems a fitting (for once) idea to approach the show with. The source images, objects and tune for *Mews Room* already existed in the world, just not in proximity to each other. So what came first—the song or the egg? The internet is ripe with potential to be an egg-shaped thing and this is what



Federico Manuel Peralta Ramos, *Nosotros Afuera* [We, The Outsiders] (1965)

2. Chus Martínez, “We, The Outsiders”, *e-flux journal*, 26 August 2014, <https://www.e-flux.com/live/64907/we-the-outsiders/>



Lucy Meyle, *Mews Room* (2022), play\_station gallery, photograph by Ziggy Lever

Meyle has done with it, by casting a loop around “songs with a limited note range and lyrics that include the word ‘bird’” or “images containing falcons or leather gloves.” Subsequently, the composition of the show is left partly up to chance and other people’s aesthetics. While, like Humpty Dumpty, Meyle intentionally collates and deploys these items, their far-flung migration patterns destabilise the meaning that they are expected to hold in the context of the show. The process of making can also produce unpredictable outcomes, a crack between a beginning thought and an end outcome. Some items are smaller or different than Meyle imagined, they are singed or marked, a bit off-kilter, but this is not to say damaged. Egg-shaped: an imperfect sphere, a gown for a girl, a thing to roll around one’s mouth until the meaning comes out right.

## II. Keeping score

Tessa Laird’s essay “In Tooth and Claw,” traces the humour of newspaper headlines where the animal is antagonist or saboteur. In the reportage of a snake who closes a factory in India, or a squirrel shorting wires to the NASDAQ mainframe, a kind of animal agency is emphasised. The personification of these unruly animals generates the hybrid *l’animot*, a figure of text coined by Jacques Derrida that enabled a bestial participation in the narrative. However, as Laird writes, “lines of text,

for all their emancipatory potential, can also be the bars of a cage.”<sup>3</sup> The hybrid nature of Derrida’s neologism means that the animal is always trapped inside a story written for them, destined to always be black and white and read all over.

Letters are not always confined to lines, however. A musical staff offers a system that allows its homing notes to perch higher or lower, on or between the five conventional lines. Though still recognisable as its own kind of cage, the mobility allowed within this musical architecture is a starting point for moving around, from branch to wire and back. Another octave, or several more, can appear spontaneously, another bough of a tree emerging with perfect timing. Those little notes and their proud breasts and flinching tails are able to duck and dive freely. So, if the written word might condemn beak and feather to an unfairly caged life, Meyle’s offerance of a score for a rendition of Sinead O’Connor’s *Nothing Compares 2 U* (composed for falcon bells), might actually give the bird back their song. This score has been printed as a newspaper, unfolded on the floor of the gallery, and also stacked in the corner so you can take one if you wish—hot off the press. By carpeting *Mews Room* with these bars of an avian cover single, they form a surface upon which we become involved in annotating the score. This is a strange reversal of roles and now I am the bird on the wire, hearing myself orchestrate a lovelorn tune, while my instrument rests on a nearby bench, the bells now birds at roosting hour.

### III. Hoodwinked

I am thinking of things that furl and unfurl, like newspapers and gloves and feathers. This is a visual rhyme that flutters in the wind. In *Mews Room*, a pair of gloves is left unstitched, so laid flat like the morning paper. And the newspaper, open or closed, but really a plane for ink-feathers that can’t be ruffled, or if they are, only in a papery sense. Draped over a bench: bells, glass mice and chain mail. There’s a riddle here somewhere: the paper arrives by mail, a game of cat and mouse in the mews.

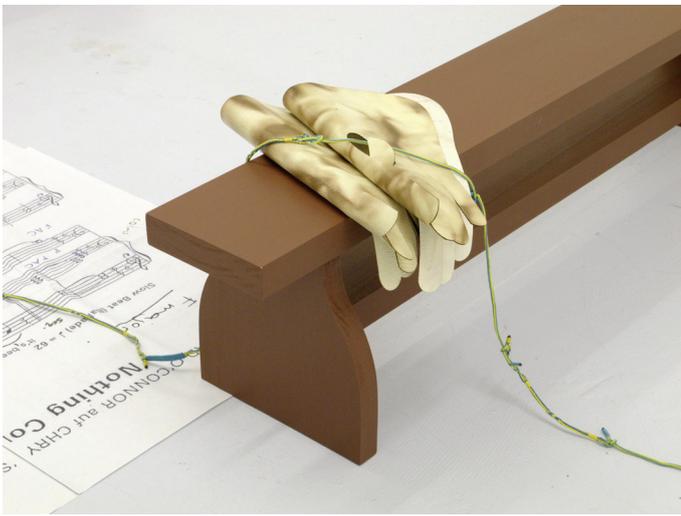
Falconry seems to have always been quite obsessed with its accessories. A work by Christoffel Pierson in the collection of Washington DC’s National Gallery of Art, *Niche with Falconry Gear* (c. 1660s) is a trompe l’oeil depiction of a jumble of equipment used in the pursuit of falcons. There’s a horn, a net, a hood, a plume. Accumulating a cache of stuff seems to be big in falconry, in the form of gloves, bells, charms, chain mail, hoods. The accessorisation of falconry is almost the main point, a fact my parents would have disdained had I been in any position to take it up in childhood (“you’re just in it for the outfit!” being a common refrain). Nonetheless, falconry’s paraphernalia has spawned a rich linguistic and material history.

Pierson’s trompe l’oeil image seems like the perfect illustration of attempted reenactment, an image built on pretending-to-be. Though the paint and its thing-ness only as pigmented substance instantly betrays that Pierson’s work is not a falcon niche, the allure is in the trying.



Christoffel Pierson, *Niche with Falconry Gear* (c. 1660s), oil on canvas, in the collection of National Gallery of Art, Washington DC

3. Tessa Laird, “In Tooth and Claw”, in *Time to Think Like a Mountain*, edited by Louise Menzies and Allan Smith (Auckland: split/fountain, 2018), 59



Lucy Meyle, *Mews Room* (2022), play\_station gallery, photographs by Ziggy Lever

When I talk to Lucy Meyle, she tells me that she thinks of gloves as an original sculptural form. They are a particular kind of net that reference the body in form, but can be left unstitched so as to no longer be able to contain a hand, yet still gesture to its outline. Hand out and palm open, fill with seed to feed the bird. A rubber glove, inflated, becomes ornithological too, five fingers erect as the comb for a chicken.

The intrigue of falconry for Meyle is in its tendency to embellish, or put on a show with these birds at the centre: as, in Meyle's words, "something to 'lay flat' or unstitch," rather than control. This is an activity taking place in the seams. Like falconry, accessories occupy the outer edges, in the moment where body or object turns into the rest of the world. By this, I mean that accessorisation tends to be a direct and specific sensorial intervention. To put on a pair of gloves is to feel texture as mediated by yarn or leather; a piece of headgear will alter your height, even minutely, or obscure environmental conditions and vision. So, the material emphasis in falconry and its aim are intertwined, as minor performances taking places on the threshold.

It seems that the history of falconry, its phrases and associated objecthood has long influenced cultural developments at large. I find it funny that the gear of falconers is suddenly in the cultural zeitgeist. Now it's my turn to be a copycat. A shadow of Meyle scrolling internet marketplaces and image searches for "falcontent", I trawl Depop and SSENSE for accessories derivative of the objects and images reproduced in the *Mews Room* newspaper. Gloves and gauntlets are everywhere this season, as are charms and headwear. For the savvy falconer, Rick Owens offers a purple pair of mitts. Marland Backus has the glass charms covered. A silver chainmail-esque hood quickly surfaces on Depop, an archival Issey Miyake piece.

"It's not a fashion show!," the falcons call from their mews, but that's where they're wrong. We're hunting through their dress-up box instead of for them, totally hoodwinked; the birds will make good eggs of us yet.