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The world renowned Biennale art festival reaches out to expertise in Animal Cognition from the School of Psychology

On one of the first chilly winter afternoons in May this year, London-based artist and sculptor, Marco Chiandetti, and School of Psychology animal cognition scientist, Dr Andrea Griffin, held a public discussion at the magnificent, recently renovated, Sydney Mortuary Station. In the presence of about 40 members of the public, Chiandetti and Griffin discussed the symbolic significance of birds in human culture alongside the biology, ecology and fate of the common myna in Australian society. The discussion provided a unique, relaxed and wonderful opportunity for science undertaken by the UoN School of Psychology in avian behaviour, cognition and ecology and that of other scientists to be shared with the larger public.

But what brought a scientist and an artist together to discuss such a seemingly odd topic at the Mortuary Station in Sydney?

The public discussion was one of a series of public talks organised in the context of the 20th Biennale of Sydney. The Biennale of Sydney was the first biennale to be established in the Asia-Pacific region. It provides an international platform for innovative contemporary art and, in 2014, it received over 665,000 visitors. In the 20th Biennale of Sydney, the exhibition took place at seven main venues convinced as 'embassies of thought'. Mortuary Station was the Embassy of Transition, one of the leading non-museum venues of the Biennale of Sydney and the official site of Marco Chiandetti's work.

When Mr Chiandetti first contacted Dr Griffin in June 2015, asking her to share her long-standing knowledge of the ecologically highly successful common myna, she thought that like often in her experience, he was mistaken. Surely, he actually wanted to know about the native noisy miner? But no, his interest was well and truly in the introduced myna. It soon became clear that the choice of this uniquely displaced avian species could not have been more appropriate choice as a vehicle for the symbolism of his art. Over the following 12 months, Dr Griffin helped guide the implementation of his creation.

For the 20th Biennale of Sydney: *The Future is already here – it's just not evenly distributed*, Chiandetti designed an installation that took the form of a series of sculptural aviary structures inhabited by common mynas. The temporary exhibition of myna birds at Mortuary Station was designed to raise a greater social consciousness about our contemporary condition in relation to the excessive expansion of human population, prompting audiences to reconsider the way we perceive such a resilient species.

During a period of free questions after the discussion, the public was eager to understand more about the Chiandetti's motivations to exhibit a bird. Birds occupy a privileged position in the human psyche, occupying the skies, the space between the earth and the gods. At times they have been considered to be messengers of god. The public was also very keen to know more about the biology, behaviour and science of common mynas. Introduced to Australia late XIX century and now the most abundant species in many coastal cities on the eastern seaboard, the species evokes strong public emotions.



