



**Every Word Was
Once an Animal**





Learning Lizard, lizard head bob interactions, site document, A-Z West, Joshua Tree, CA

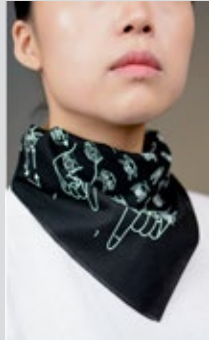
The exhibition's title, *Every Word Was Once an Animal*, falsely attributed to Ralph Waldo Emerson, challenges the mind/body and human/animal divide, and sets up the debate between those who claim all is language and those who claim all is material. Through scent, sound, sight, and gesture, *Every Word* calls attention to the surprising communication strategies of other creatures, and to the multiple ways in which humans and animals alike communicate via the senses. Inspired by Dr. Emilia Martins' research on the gestural and olfactory communication strategies of Western fence lizards, this collaborative, interdisciplinary project includes species-responsive interventions in the landscape; an immersive museum installation; and public events including dance and vocal performances, as well as scent sampling/tastings of a perfume based on lizard pheromones.

Every Word Was Once an Animal is a collaboration between artist **Carla Bengtson**, choreographer **Darion Smith**, composer **Juliet Palmer**, artist **Jessie Rose Vala**, and biologist **Dr. Emilia Martins**, ASU.

Communication Strategies of the Western Fence Lizard

Sceloporus lizards, also known as Western Fence lizards, or blue-bellies, use head-bob and push-up displays to communicate with one another across distances. Their species-specific movements, like human language, make use of syntax, and involve both "hard-wired", learned, and improvisational movements, resulting in a range of regional "dialects" and subtle individual embellishments. Fence lizards will respond to anything that mimics their movement patterns, and scientists use lizard videos, lizard robots, and their own bobbing fingers to study the lizards' movement patterns.

MOVING COUNTER-CLOCKWISE THROUGH THE GALLERY:



Learning Lizard

A hiker's bandana for learning lizard language playfully pairs the gestural language of lizards with that of a human gestural language, American Sign Language (ASL). On one side is a graph showing a *Sceloporus occidentalis* species-identification head bob pattern, on the other, a hand spells out LIZARD.

Instruction for interspecies communication: Lizards respond to finger bobs that correctly imitate their movement patterns. First, find a fence lizard. Bob your finger in a rapid up and down motion, following the graph. The horizontal axis = duration, the vertical axis = height of the head at the top of the movement.

Cotton, silkscreen, 21 1/2"x21 1/2", 2018
In collaboration with Dr. Emilia Martins



Dear Deer

Camo wallpaper for a hunter-strewn landscape references the origins of camouflage strategies in the animal world, and suggests that our current fetish with camouflage is materially and politically symptomatic of our political moment, whose primary techniques include the purposeful misdirection of truth, dazzlement, countershading, and tactics of active confusion.

Digital print on Phototex, dimensions variable, 2020



Body/Language

Throughout the duration of the exhibition, dancers were to periodically enter the gallery and initiate a non-verbal dialogue with museum visitors, segueing into a full choreographed dance performance that moves through the galleries. These camo patterned costumes were to be worn by dancers during the performances which had to be cancelled because of the coronavirus disease.

Digital print on lycra, sizes variable, 2020
Costume design by Carla Bengtson, fabrication by Christina Giannini
Choreography by Darion Smith in collaboration with *Every Word Was Once an Animal*
Dancers: Agnese Cebere, Kendra Lady, Amber Noel, Christopher Slayton



Rock Mirrors

Lizards will display to their own reflection. These handblown mirrored "rocks" are used to communicate with lizards in the field.

Hand blown glass, sizes variable, 2018-20
Fabrication by Sky Cooper, Sky Glass



Lizard Semiotics

Fence lizards respond to finger bobs that correctly imitate their movement patterns. These hand robots have been programmed with *Sceloporus occidentalis* head bob patterns, and can be used to communicate with lizards in the field.

Silicone, arduino, wire, dimensions variable, 2020
In collaboration with Dr. Emilia Martins and Melissa Lopez



Lizard Lady

Lizards respond to video that correctly imitates their movement patterns. Here, a video projection of a woman performing lizard push-up displays, attempts inter-species communication with lizards.

Video projection, 2:22 looped, 2015-20



Rock Duet

Site document video of a rock duet performed by Juliet Palmer and Darion Smith during a collaborative residency at the CJ Andrews Experimental Forest, Blue River, Oregon.

Video, 4:49 looped, monitor, excifiers, micca, 2020
Juliet Palmer in collaboration with *Every Word Was Once an Animal*, videography by Jessie Rose Vala.



The Heat of the Rock for the Lizard

Philosopher Martin Heidegger used the lizard's relationship to the rock on which it suns itself as an example of the basic difference between humans and animals. For Heidegger, the lizard has a relation to the rock via sensation: it seeks out its warmth and establishes it as its territory, but the rock is never experienced AS rock, that is, as something apart from itself that can be named and therefor open to interpretation.

Digital print on aluminum, (2) 16" x 22", 2020
Photography by Jonathan Bagby



Transmission

Stoneware, neon, acrylic, 5'6" x 17" x 16", 2020

Jessie Rose Vala in collaboration with *Every Word Was Once an Animal*



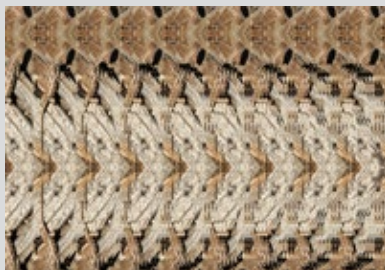
Sceloporus

The fence lizard's scientific name, *Sceloporus*, means scented pores, and fence lizards use scent, along with gesture, to claim territory, express their individual identity, and attract a mate. Intriguingly, fence lizard's primary scent compounds include jasmonates, a common ingredient in perfume, as well as pyrazines found in citrus, coffee, chocolate, and white wine. The perfume *Sceloporus*, based on the lizard's primary scent compounds, is a surprisingly fresh, green, floral perfume that blends with the wearer's own skin chemistry to create a soft, sheer, more-than-human presence.

Perfume bottle containing a perfume based on lizard pheromones.

Glass, scents, alcohol, metal, cloth, 5 3/4" x 20 1/2" x 3 3/8", 2018/2020

In collaboration with Dr. Emilia Martins, bottle fabrication by Sky Cooper, Sky Glass, technical assistance by perfumer Jessica Hannah



Word

Language surrounds us, we only need the correct sensory apparatus and the cultural keys to access it. Stereograms require that the viewer have binocular vision, and have the correct technique.

Instructions: If you're not trained to look at stereograms, this might take you some time. There are two methods for viewing a stereogram. 1) Stand really close to the stereogram (until you touch it with your nose) so that your eyes cannot focus on the image and instead look somewhere behind the image. Now, slowly walk away, while trying to keep the eyes off focus. At some point you will see the hidden image. 2) Another method is to cross your eyes by trying to look at a point behind the image.

Digital print on Phototex, dimensions variable, 2020



Every Animal

Humans and animals have socially learned gestural languages in common. Here, "animal" is spelled out in American Sign Language.

Ink, pen, flocking on paper, 22" x 30", 2020



Lizard Chalice

Chalice for *Every Word Was Once an Animal* tasting events. At tasting events, the public is invited to blend their own skin chemistry with that of lizards, while tasting the perfume's related scent compounds in sauvignon blanc, to which it lends the wine's signature grassy notes, along with grapefruit, coffee, and jasmine flavored chocolate, in order to enact a sensory bond between human and nonhuman cultures—revealing other species as meaning-making subjects ensconced in their own, uniquely vibrant, and parallel yet different lifeworlds.

Stoneware, 8"x4"x4", 2020

Jessie Rose Vala in collaboration with *Every Word Was Once an Animal*



Hand Platter

Stoneware platter for *Sceloporus* scent sampling and tasting events. The platter holds jasmine, coffee, and grapefruit flavored chocolates, scent compounds found in lizard pheromones for sampling and tasting events.

Stoneware, 7 1/2" x 12" x 12", 2020

Jessie Rose Vala in collaboration with *Every Word Was Once an Animal*



Fragrance Notes

Ceramic cones scented with *Sceloporus* lizard perfume interweave on a sound activated wall. Five singers respond to fragrance notes with spontaneous vocalizations—head notes, heart notes, base notes.

Ceramic, scents, audio components, wiring, dimensions variable, 2020

Juliet Palmer in collaboration with *Every Word Was Once an Animal*

Vocalists: Olivia Shortt, Andrea Kuzmich, Michelangelo Iaffaldano, Jackson Welchner, Tova Kardonne

RELATED EVENTS

Your Body, Our Language Performances

In an effort to stem the spread of COVID-19, the museum has canceled all performances until further notice.

Direction - Darion Smith

Composer - Juliet Palmer

Costumes - Carla Bengtson

Dancers - Agnese Cebere, Kendra Lady, Amber Noel, Christopher Slayton

The 45-minute interactive performances, directed by choreographer Darion Smith in collaboration with composer Juliet Palmer, are based on nonverbal communication through the lens of Carla Bengtson's work with Western fence lizards (*Sceloporus occidentalis*), commonly known as the blue-belly. Smith, Palmer, and dancers create a world where sound and movement challenge our senses to reexamine our surroundings and how gesture, innate or learned, reads and is read. To begin, the public is invited to observe as well as interact with the dancers who communicate with each other and the public solely through an exchange of gestures, as they move throughout the exhibit. The interactive dance exhibit segues into a performance that follows the dancers in a procession from the Focus Gallery into the Barker Gallery. In the open space of the Barker Gallery the public can observe the dancers perform more nuanced gestures within movement scores in which dance finds common ground with the world of Western fence lizards. This exhibition is part of a collaborative creative project led by UO Professor of Art, Carla Bengtson that merges art, science, dance, music, and olfaction.

JORDAN SCHNITZER
MUSEUM OF ART

**Every Word Was
Once an Animal**

March 7 - July 26, 2020

Every Word Was Once an Animal is made possible through a JSMA Academic Support Grant, grants from the University of Oregon's College of Arts and Sciences and the School of Art + Design, along with funding and support from the Oregon Arts Commission, the Ford Family Foundation, Spring Creek Projects' Longterm Ecological Reflections Program, and the Center for Art Research.

Many thanks to Dr. Peter Wetherwax, Agnese Cebere, Amber Noel, Christopher Slayton, Kendra Lady, and Sky Cooper for their irreplaceable contributions to the project.