



Nina Katchadourian, *Natural Car Alarms*, 2002, modified car alarms, sound, cars, bumper stickers, and decals, dimensions variable. Installation view outside MoMA QNS.

## NINA KATCHADOURIAN SCULPTURECENTER

Nina Katchadourian was hiking last year in Trinidad when she heard a naggingly familiar sound. It was, she knew, a birdcall, shrill and intermittent, patterned by the deep urges of instinct. But it sounded just like a car alarm. Thus was born her *Natural Car Alarms*, 2002, sponsored by SculptureCenter and migrating through the streets of Long Island City until the center opens its new building there in November.

Katchadourian approached ornithologists from the Macaulay Library of Natural Sounds at Cornell University, who were intrigued by her idea of matching the timbre and sequencing of urban klaxons to the cries of the aviary. From the initial sampling they provided of thirty-three birdcalls, Katchadourian selected eighteen; six of these unique sounds were mixed into cycles for each of three alarms. With assistance from the Interactive Telecommunications Program at New York University, Katchadourian constructed the actual alarm devices and installed them in a minifleet of three cars parked on the street and distinguishable only via bright yellow windshield decals of diversely shaped birds and bumper stickers that read THIS CAR PROTECTED BY NATURAL CAR ALARMS. When something sets off

the alarms, spectators peer into the trees to locate birds they imagine are lurking there, and passing dogs strain to suss out this robotic-sounding prey. Katchadourian has calibrated her recordings to the double-take point where their rhythms replicate the artificial tweets, shrieks, and dying falls of normal alarms but retain a depth that betrays them as the voices of living beings.

Found sound and tacit modes of communication are recurring interests for Katchadourian, as are the junctures where human invention overlaps organic productivity. Previously she has “repaired” torn spiderwebs by darning them with red thread and has built a machine that translates the sound of popping corn into Morse code. Yet *Natural Car Alarms* is to date the most complete liaison of nature and culture in Katchadourian’s work. Occurring in the car’s “natural habitat,” the alarms respond to fellow creatures in the cityscape, be they lumbering trucks or curious art lovers who have been seen kicking the wheels in attempts to rouse performance.

Of course, the Australian Superb Lyrebird and the Great Potoo (to name two creatures whose calls were sampled) sing not only to while away Edenic hours, but to send warnings. Bending the nature/culture line into a Möbius strip, Katchadourian examines the universal idiom of alert that is signaled by repetitive piercing pitch. If such wails constitute a basic earthly music, then the ubiquitous rendition offered by the car alarm is a corollary Muzak whose purpose—to galvanize rather than to soothe, but also, like its elevator-music counterpart, to promote obedient consumerism—has fallen into irrelevant annoyance. *Natural Car Alarms* pokes fun at the tinny monotony of civilization and the absurdity of believing that *your* car stands out in the bleating flock.

But Katchadourian refuses to valorize the animal. The birdcalls are for her simply sound bites in the ambient database, snatches of interpretable noise whose adaptation to the concrete jungle does not alter their original context of vigilance and display—context, of course, being the sine qua non for determining the meaning in a message. Teasing the divide between pleasant and invasive sensation, she does not invite her auditors to escape to some exotic paradise where twitterings in the distance are picturesque. Instead we must enter more deeply into a complex ecology in the lush demesne of Queens.

—Frances Richard