

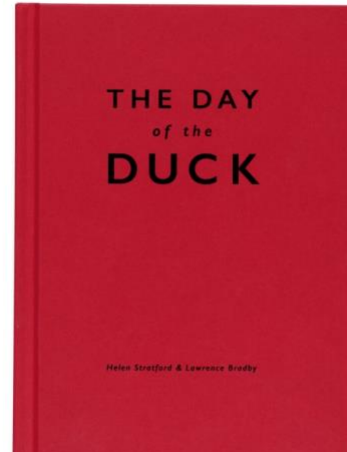
Helen Stratford and Lawrence Bradby

## The Day of the Duck

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*The Day of the Duck* follows a Muscovy duck through Ely, Cambridgeshire, as she attempts to discover her 'lost brethren'. Distressed at the lack of other Muscovy ducks in the area, the unnamed duck embarks on a fact-finding mission to discover the cause of the disappearance. Spoiler alert: it doesn't end well.

Written by artists Helen Stratford and Lawrence Bradby, the book is part of a larger live-art research project by Stratford focussed on the Ely Riverside. Ely, which battles for the position of England's smallest city, doubled in population between 1991 and 2011, changing the city's character. Stratford's project responded to the Council's master-planning process and focussed on one contentious area: the Riverside. For a few months, Helen walked in Ely and 'logged the mundane and the extraordinary life on the Riverside', producing a series of tables, maps, diagrams and drawings, which are included in the book. One day she followed a duck and interviewed people she met along the way, thus the Day of the Duck was born.

The resulting artists' book contains a series of 21 scenes for voices and 23 Plates, consisting of the aforementioned images. It is plotted in a pseudo-noir style, with the duck functioning as a detective who interrogates members of the town regarding a mysterious duck disappearance. The duck population in Ely is being culled, and the Muscovy Duck wants to find out why! The book functions as a kind of artistic deep map as the duck's encounters with the city and her attempts to understand human priorities for the organisation of space reveal Ely's physical and cultural geographies. Through her journey, she speaks with people both hostile and sympathetic: the overzealous Amateur Duck Expert, who has been tracking the decline in the duck's numbers; the Boatyard Owner, who is happy to chat as long as she continues to move on ('he's seen the mess [the ducks] make of the riverbank'); the Cleaning Operative in the Alley who gently moves her out of the way and instructs her to the Riverbank, where the cleaning's already been done. Along the way she is directed, prodded, captured and set free by the folks she encounters, before finally being allowed to speak her piece at the Magistrates Court.

Thematically, the text addresses a number of pertinent contemporary issues—environmentalism, urban regeneration, sustainability, immigration—through an overarching theme of displacement. The political perspective of the play is set in its opening scenes involving a discussion between two rambblers in the Fens. The First Rambler asks if the destruction of the Cathedral on the riverbank would 'make the view more English'. The Second Rambler, an ineffectual middle-of-the-roader, attempts to deflect with statements

such as 'We don't have to like something for it to belong, do we? We just get used to it.' In case you missed it, the metaphor is made explicit in the next scene: the First Rambler complains about Polish immigrants from the 'packing plants' clogging up the pathway—'They'll all be back in Poland by Christmas'—as the Second Rambler studiously changes the subject. The setting itself references historical debates around land use and immigrant workers in England, in this case, Dutch workers being brought in to drain the Fens.

In another scene, the duck critiques the straight lines and hard surfaces of the civic fountain and the neatly mowed lawns not suitable for grazing. The plate next to the scene shows a map of the grass mowing schedule in town. Only one small strip of land is left wild, ideal for the Duck, while most of town is mowed on a 21-day rotation (at most). This contrasts with the human use of the space—a young girl delights in the moving waters and pulsating lights of the fountains, and loves chasing the birds in the area. Like the reconstruction of the Fens, the Civic Fountain was created with only humans in mind. The Duck is left out of the design.

The Duck speaks in vaguely postmodern language – a jumble of academic jargon, pedantry and philosophical musings. I find myself nodding along with her—she makes good points, this Duck! - but her language leaves the majority of the people she encounters along the way shaking their heads with no clue what she is saying. This is ultimately her undoing. When she makes an impassioned plea for allowing her fellow ducks to continue to reside in the Fens, the assembled public won't listen. Despite the erudite argument—or is that just my ability to decipher the jargon? - the book ends with a Chorus shouting 'DUCK OUT OUT!', followed by a declaration that the duck problem is solved and an invitation to join the assembly for lunch. The penultimate plate shows the menu for the afternoon's lunch: Duck a l'Orange.

The duck's strange language highlights her otherness, and sets her apart from the Ely natives; but it also highlights the otherness of the book's audience, who likely speak a language closer to the Duck's than the Ice-Cream Vendor's. Throughout reading, I was struck by the wilful obscurity with which academics and artists often present their ideas. The duck speaks for me, but cannot properly communicate—there is a gap in the language. It is this conflict of communication—the different population's inability to speak to each other—that developers and moneyed interests take advantage of as they swoop in to fill the gap. This gap is the true tragedy of the book.

As an American immigrant who has never visited Cambridgeshire, I missed many of the local nuances of the writing and diagrams, such as the schematic of the duck labelled with local sites in Ely. Instead my reading foregrounded national debates rehearsed in the book, primarily the book's response to and critique of Brexit, a metaphor that at times felt too heavy handed. As we get further away from the urgency of the Brexit crisis, the larger themes of the text—who controls access to the land and how its resources are used—will take a more central role in the imagination of future readers. Regardless of our position in the European Union, the borders and walls we continue to build won't change nature's fundamental disregard for them. Day of the Duck asks us to consider how we treat those who immigrate for any number of reasons. Do we share the wealth, or eat them for lunch?