

Becoming Insect:

Contemporary studio art, social theory, and swarm politics

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ARTS 731 - 2 Seminar in Problems of Representation
Klapper 672 Th 2:15PM - 5:50PM

Fusing project-based studio practice with individual research this hybrid seminar explores the shifting line between contemporary art and social practice through the lens of what we consider the human and the non-human. By focusing on the figure of the insect as it appears in art, science, philosophy, and popular culture students will develop collaborative projects that address one or more related topics including animal intelligence, networked technology, cyborg affectivity, and interventionist public art. Among the materials we will cover in class include sculpture by Louise Bourgeois, installations by Damien Hirst, tactical media interventions by Electronic Disturbance Theater, and a number of “giant bug” movies from the 1950s. We will also read selections from the theoretical books including “Insect Media” by Jussi Parikka, watch excerpts from movies such as *Them!* and *Starship Troopers*, and listen to the sound of crickets used to defend a virgin forest in California by the Center of Tactical Media.

Requirements

- Investigate a specific topic (see list below) +
- Present your research findings to class for discussion *
- Incorporate research and discussion into Final Project *
- Final Project is to be designed, created, and exhibited, or performed, and documented *
- Participate in all course discussions, and do all of the assigned readings ++

* Research and Project can be carried individually or in small groups
++ Readings and other resources are online at:

sholetteseminars.com

SYLLABUS

Week one: September 1: Introduction

Have you ever heard of *insect politics*? (Or, what is bugging us humans anyway?)

From Kafka’s hapless insect-boy Gregor Samsa in *The Metamorphosis*, to John Heartfield’s ironic photomontage of a larval German Fascism transforming itself into the death-head moth Adolph Hitler, to the tactical “Biological Contestation” of Critical Art Ensemble, a host of modern and contemporary artists, writers, musicians, and filmmakers have been drawn to the world of the insect. In fact the image or the idea of arthropods and invertebrates in art appears in all ages, including ancient Egyptian Scarab Beetle carvings, insect-like totems from Papua New Guinea, and 19th Century entomological engravings. More recently, the behavior of insects –as opposed to just their representation- has come to animate the thinking of robotics designers, war strategists, and network programmers. Meanwhile, practitioners of tactical media describe their decentralized activism as a type of collective swarming. The aim of this class is to research and generate artwork both collectively and as individuals. There are no set rules about how we go about this, no limits on the direction or shape this investigation will take, other than the broad thematic stated above. Our objective is to transform the classroom into an experimental platform that produces knowledge while critically transforming -or perhaps I should say critically meta-morphing?- our everyday practice of art, life, and learning.

Week two: September 8: *Insect Media*

According to Professor Jussi Parikka the figure of the insect as a metaphor and image has shifted over the centuries and now stand for some of the most advanced and experimental aspects of new media art and technology. The introduction to his book *Insect Media* explores this thesis in which he insists the new network culture is “a rather peculiar phase in our modern technical civilization, as it seems to be a combination of high technology and a fascination with such seemingly simple life forms as insects. We continuously make sense of emerging media and technology through references and metaphors borrowed from the biological world: viruses, worms, swarms, and other similar eclectic ideas that suggest a complex view of scientific culture.”

For readings and other resources see folder: **Insect_Media** and this Interview link:

<http://jussiparikka.net/2011/03/04/insect-media-interview-and-more/>

Excerpts from the book can also be found here: http://p2pfoundation.net/Insect_Media

Week three: September 15: *Swarms*

A multitude of frustrated youthful citizens swarmed into Tahrir Square in Egypt in 2011, forming a “hive-like” mass that directed traffic, swept and cleaned streets, and eventually brought down the country’s powerful dictator Hosni Mubarak. All of this was accomplished without definitive leaders, organizational hierarchies, or ideological positions. Several months later a similarly leaderless swarm took the form of marauding locusts in London, gleaning and carrying off goods and property denied them in day-to-day life. Meanwhile, in the virtual world of the Internet, another leaderless collective known as *Anonymous* hacks into the data streams of authorities and corporations sometimes just for fun, and sometimes to make a political statement as when they cyber-punished PayPal and Mastercard for withdrawing the account of WikiLeaks. How does this collective swarming operate when it not only eschews ideological positions, but also rejects centralized leadership? Is the group “consciousness” of social insects -ant, wasp, and bees- one possible metaphor for this new, leaderless collectivism? Does the hive body represent the future of the social imagination for nations, networks, and humanity?

Readings and resources see folder: **Insect_Swarms** and these links by and about Anonymous:

<http://anonplus.bombshellz.net/>

<http://english.aljazeera.net/news/middleeast/2011/05/201151917634659824.html>

Week four: September 22: *Weavers*

Despite a pervasive cyber-aesthetic a recent wave of younger craft-based artists have revived needlecraft as a vital form of artistic practice, sometimes combined with public art, and/or social activism. This so-called “yarn bombing,” and “craftivism” has not so much rejected the dominant digital paradigm as it has made use of the networking power of the Internet to generate wide-spread knitting circles made up of individuals who will likely never meet in person. Sharing and transmitting information about wool and patterns actually makes perfect sense if we reflect on the very moniker: the World Wide Web. At the same time, the production of woven materials and crafted objects has played a central role in human civilization including classical myth: think of Penelope’s making and unmaking of the tapestry in the *Odyssey*, or the golden thread Ariadne weaves through the Minotaur’s labyrinth.

Actual weaving activities carried out by animals have inspired scientists and philosophers. Spider silk is being genetically engineered within goats to produce a super-strong, yet flexible filament; the feminist artist Faith Wilding created an influential web installation at Women House in the late 1970s; and Karl Marx famously made reference to both the architecture of bee colonies and the natural labor of the silkworm in his 19th Century analysis of Capitalism.

Readings and resources folder: **Insect_ Weavers** and follow these links:

<http://www.thirdspace.ca/journal/article/view/pentney/210>

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=luIVDiJQeTA>

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H_rHYIUwBRU

<http://post-craft.net/art.htm>

*** School Closed Thursday September 29 ***

Week five: October 6: *Warriors*

Nomadic raiding colonies of Army Ants and Marauder Ants (*Pheidologeton*) sweep over their pray, sometimes tactically stationing soldiers along pathways to protect their mass movement. Robotic drones developed for the United States war on terror locate and destroy human targets In Afghanistan. And military planners study the swarming behavior of social insects in order to rethink the tactics of war.

Readings and resources folder: **Insect_Warriors** and march over to these sites:

- <http://www.darpa.mil/>
- <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/4808342.stm>
- <http://critical-art.net/Original/conbio/conBio.swf>
- <http://www.sodahead.com/living/10-insects-that-fight-with-military-tactics/question-1875391/>
- <http://arstechnica.com/science/news/2009/08/hacking-a-remote-controlled-moth-with-insect-venom.ars>

Week Six: October 13: *Phasmids and Mimics*

Camouflage, mimicry, the radical morphing and adaptation to one's external environment, these are the tactics of survival in a hostile world. As theorist Michel De Certeau once argued everyday resistance to oppression requires a tool box of primordial "simulations, tricks, and disguises" that are not unlike certain fishes or plants. He could have added that this cryptic "art of the weak" is also the empire of the insect, in particular the Phasmida order that includes stick insects some that physically resemble flowers, vegetation, and even inert materials. But what if being an artist also requires an act of trickery and disguise? Have artists and informal art collectives incorporated insect-like mimicry as a form of survival?

Readings and resources folder: **Insect_Mimics** and these links:

- <http://www.cals.ncsu.edu/course/ent425/tutorial/Ecology/camo/index.htm>
- SurvivaBall <http://www.survivaball.com/>

Week Seven: October 20: *Group 1 and 2: Research Seminar*

Today's class is run by the first two research groups on topics they have selected and explored collectively.

Readings and resources folder: To be prepared by students

Week Eight: *Group 3 and 4: Research Seminar*

Today's class is run by the second and third research groups on topics they have selected and explored collectively.

Readings and resources folder: To be prepared by students

Week Nine: October 13: Recap of seminar lectures and class discussion on group research and final projects.

Readings and resources folder: To be selected by students for final projects.

Week Ten: November 3: **NO CLASS** Special Assignment:

Students visit **American Museum of Natural History** entomology dept.: <http://www.amnh.org/visitors/>

Week Eleven: November 10: *Group 1: Final Project Presentations*

Week Twelve: November 17: *Group 2: Final Project Presentations*

*** School Closed Thursday November 24 ***

Week Thirteen: December 1: *Group 3: Final Project Presentations*

Week Fourteen: December 15: *Group 4: Final Project Presentations*

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Resources and Possible Research Topics (please add to this list):

Art

Nicholas Lampert: Machine-Animals

<http://machineanimalcollages.com/>

Surrealist Treehoppers

<http://whyevolutionistrue.wordpress.com/2010/11/26/the-surreal-treehoppers/>

Post Human Art http://www.nytimes.com/slideshow/2010/05/04/science/20100504_angier.html

Maria Fernanda Cardoso

Flea Circus <http://www.mariafernandacardoso.com/category/flea-circus>

Butterflies <http://www.mariafernandacardoso.com/category/animal-art/butterflies>

Audio

Timo Khalen: SWARM audio installation

<http://www.staubrauschen.de/sounddrift/>

<http://www.timo-kahlen.de/soundsc2.htm>

<http://www.naturesongs.com/insects.html>

Museums

<http://www.mjt.org/>

<http://blog.insectmuseum.org/>

<http://research.amnh.org/iz/>

Insectropolis <http://www.insectropolis.com/>

Tactical Media (Yes Men SurvivaBall)

<http://www.survivaball.com/>

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=joUVgVEZx7U>

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eO1Bm8Wrwe8>

<http://theyesmen.org/>

Insect Sex

MicroCosmos

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-BseGLUTkD8>

Green Porno with Isabella Rossellini

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mkm3CCX1_xk&NR=1

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VaInoTCwmwg>

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=fvwp&v=ITpiw5tiwm0&NR=1>

Literature

Art for Animals by Matthew Fuller

<http://www.spc.org/fuller/texts/8/>

Nabakov's Butterflies

<http://english.ruvr.ru/2011/02/21/45412327.html>

Euology (Animal Collectivism)

intro: <http://www.enotes.com/topic/Eusociality>

Mole Rat colonies

<http://thedodolives.wordpress.com/2011/01/28/naked-mole-rats-or-how-i-learned-to-stop-reproducing-and-love-the-queen/>

Bee genes are responsible for in-hive hierarchy

<http://www.wired.co.uk/news/archive/2011-04/12/bees-social-class>

Man Versus Insect

Starship Troopers

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=faFuaYA-daw>

Winnipeg “bug control”

<http://www.winnipeg.ca/PublicWorks/bugline/>

Wax Bees & Spirituality

<http://www2.iath.virginia.edu/wax/>

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eBto_xnz2tw

DARPA (The Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency)

<http://www.darpa.mil/>

“B” Bug Movies

THEM!: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qcV78KE38J4>

Wasp Women: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E5zAPCwCh40>

Beginning of the End : <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uqVL8blr-rw>

The Black Scorpion: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vfKakOgshxw>

Deadly Mantis: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bKW39MUQhKE>

Tarantula: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dKGcgDo_ojI

Insect Camouflage: <http://www.cals.ncsu.edu/course/ent425/tutorial/Ecology/camo/index.htm>

iPhone fireflies: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EI7yQnRy7QQ&feature=player_embedded

Cloaca apparatus that digests and shits: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VdILBWymnU>

John Heartfield Photoshop Metamorphosis mash-up: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qSWRJLFbrPY>

Stan Brackhage MothLight 16 mm Film: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XaGh0D2NXCA>

Edward O. Wilson on Insect Societies <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=97848794>

A Brief History of the Superorganism: <http://www.wired.com/wiredscience/2007/07/a-brief-history/>

Recommended Books

Insect Media. An Archaeology of Animals and Technology. Jussi Parikka.

The Dada Cyborg: Visions of the New Human in Weimar Berlin. Matthew Biro

The Animal That Therefore I Am (Perspectives in Continental Philosophy). Jacques Derrida

Animal Capital: Rendering Life in Biopolitical Times (Posthumanities). Nicole Shukin

The Affect Theory Reader. Melissa Gregg.

Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things. Jane Bennett.

Guerrilla Metaphysics: Phenomenology and the Carpentry of Things. Graham Harman;

The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation. Jacques Ranciere.