



Becoming Insect (Fall 2022 edition)

Contemporary Studio Art, Social Theory

ARTS 388 / Pathways: Queens College CUNY Art Department

Instructor: Gregory Sholette: gsholetteSTUDIO@gmail.com

LOCATION **Klapper 284** / FROM **2PM – 5:30**

Online Syllabus: <http://www.sholetteseminars.com/becoming-insect-2020/>

This is an experimental interdisciplinary seminar investigating contemporary art, spatial structures, visual communications, literary culture, digital imaging, and the social significance of critical thinking and aesthetic interpretation. A single ant is photographed dragging a hand-cut jewel across a linoleum-tiled floor. The image goes viral on social media networks, but it also tells a powerful visual story about the dramatically different scales, motivations and morphology between insect and human societies. 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.

BECOMING INSECT PROJECTS FROM PAST CLASSES: [CLICK](#)

Requirements:

- + Collaborate with other student researchers in a work group in an ongoing investigation
- + Investigate a specific research topic and use visual art to generate new knowledge on it *
- + Incorporate research and discussion into Final Project
- + Maintain a small notebook/sketchbook and update this “field journal” every week
- + Present your research findings to class for discussion
- + Final Project is to be designed, created, exhibited, or performed and documented
- + Participate in course discussions/demonstrate you've done assigned readings, viewings etc...

Key Delivery Dates

Sept 6: Research Groups formed and a research topic is selected.

Oct 11: First presentation of initial research and ongoing project development (sketches etc...).

Nov 15: Second presentation of far more developed research and projects (things we can see, touch, etc...).

Dec 6 & Dec 13: Final presentations of final projects.

Grade Composition:

+ 25% Attendance and engagement in class discussions

+ 25% Weekly writings in you Field Journal

+ 50% Your final research project and Evaluation Paper

Expectations:

Throughout the course you will be tasked with stretching your imagination and your tacit social interpretation of the world in order to consider the relationship of visual art to such fields as media arts, communication, digital imaging, architecture, urban planning and even issues of social relations and social justice while using the specific characteristics of insects as a material and conceptual vehicle towards creative learning. Through the evaluation and discussion of your projects this *heuristic process of self-learning* will be brought into the foreground.

PATHWAYS LEARNING OUTCOMES

- Gather, interpret, and assess information from a variety of sources and points of view.
- Evaluate evidence and arguments critically or analytically.
- Produce well-reasoned written or oral arguments using evidence to support conclusions.
- Identify and apply the fundamental concepts and methods of a discipline or interdisciplinary field exploring creative expression, including, but not limited to, arts, communications, creative writing, media arts, music, and theater
- Analyze how arts from diverse cultures of the past serve as a foundation for those of the present and describe the significance of works of art in the societies that created them.
- Articulate how meaning is created in the arts or communications and how experience is interpreted and conveyed.

* List of Possible Research Topics for this Class: Insects &:

Architecture and Bees *or*
Robotics and Dragonflies *or*
Needlework/Weaving and Spiders *or*
Mantid Insects and Camouflage *or*
Wearable Art and Beetles *or*
Social Cooperation and Ants *or*
Sound Communication and Night Insects

And what are your Ideas!?

6 prompts for Buzzing, Thinking, Flying, Metamorphosing:

If you were an armed jellyfish like this one in the video, what would you defend from whom? How would you think *un-humanly*? Could you adapt to be a New York City resident? How? Who would be your friends? How would you be treated by other New Yorker's?<https://gizmodo.com/upside-down-jellyfish-release-weaponized-goo-packed-wit-1841664632>

How would you apply the characters and elements in this story to your own life today? Could you act that out? Illustrate it? Make a puppet show about it? Make outfits for people to wear and a script for them to follow based on it? <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/5200/5200-h/5200-h.htm>

What sort of METAMORPHOSIS would you go through to be a better student or parent or citizen? What would you go through to work with others better? If you were transforming into a protector of the environment, what would you become? <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ocWgSgMGxOc>

Think of a woven art work or piece of clothing or a useful object (a hat or accessory or a bag to hold things) inspired by this animal and its web? <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=luIVDiJQeTA>

How do these recorded insect sounds suggest or describe: Spaces? Behaviors? Languages? Communications? Social exchanges? Happiness? Working Together? Being Angry? Losing your temper? Greeting Friends? Measuring Passing Time? (Could you make an insect clock using sound alone?)<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D6shA0yJ8W4>

Based on our previous readings what kind of board game (or video game) would you design?
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QsDu1GJJz8>

Production Resources on Queens College Campus:

MAKER SPACE

KLAPPER DIGITAL LAB

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:

SAL ASARO's INSECT SCIENCE RESOURCES PAGE: [CLICK](#)

OTHER ART & MEDIA RESOURCES FOR CLASS: [CLICK](#)

HUMAN & INSECT INTERACTION *Wikipedia*: [CLICK](#)

THE SYLLABUS

** Changes to class content and readings may take place during the semester: always check online.*

** * All readings, viewings and other resources are available at the online syllabus:*

Week one: Aug 30: Introductions

Meet: Artist Sediq Kholdi who will assist with this class

INTRO PPT

Have you ever heard of *insect politics*? 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 *Deathshad 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. Put differently: What is it that bugs us humans anyway?

Same-day workshop: following the professor's lecture and our discussion of news articles that you bring to class, you will break into an investigative team to explore and imagine what kind of spaces an insect or other arthropod would want to inhabit within Klapper Hall. You will use your weekly field journal to take notes, create sketches, make measurements of the light and space, the exits and entrances and hiding space potential of the room or space that you are observing. And should you encounter an insect or other arthropod consider also taking a photo of it, or if dead, bring it back to the classroom and we will collectively investigate the physiological qualities and taxonomy as part of your first field journal entry that you will continue to update throughout the semester.

PLEASE READ "CULTURAL ENTOMOLOGY" BEFORE OUR FIRST CLASS AUGUST 30TH:
30:w.sholetteseminars.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/CulturalEntomology.pdf. ([on the website](#))

Week two: Sept 6: *Create Groups & Research Topics*

Task 1: Establish working groups and research topics (6 with 3 members each)

Task 2: Your Research Group focuses on a medium and insect type (see examples above).

VISIT: Linda Jackson at the KLAPPER DIGITAL LAB

Week three: Sept 13: *Insect Media & Swarms*

Task: After Presentation & discussion: Break into working groups / Report on Brainstorming at the end of class

Readings: Excerpts from book *Insect Media*: https://wiki.p2pfoundation.net/Insect_Media

PDF of: [Insect Media Jussi Parikka](#)

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

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:

[Lauren Wilcox, "Drones, Swarms and becoming-insect: feminist utopias and posthuman politics."](#)

[Brian Holmes, "Swarm Machine."](#)

[Insect swarming inspires jazz software](#)

[Karin Wetzel — Swarming \(music\)](#)

[Village of the Damned \(film trailer 1963\)](#)

Esther sent this: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SMNIoqh7okU>

Week Four: Sept 20: SPECIAL FIELD TRIP Event

With Artist David Brooks (details: TBA)

**** No Class For Two Weeks (Sept 27 & Oct4) ****

Task: Continue to research, read and communicate with your research group remotely & please review the following topics:

Insect 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 widespread 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.

From Esther Berry:

"The art of weaving is a profound metaphor for understanding the workings of the universe and our place in it. Through the physical process of weaving, we gain a better understanding of this world and how we as human beings are woven into it.

We are bound to our bodies with the fragile threads of earth. Our skeleton is a loom on which every system is strung and woven with our blood. The meeting of opposite elements woven into a whole is the quest of every spiritual seeker. No wonder the art of weaving is so appealing: it is the c of creating the unified one out of two opposites." <http://www.weavingalife.com/about/weaving/#.XkthzC2ZPyU>

Insect 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:

[Israeli.MilitaryPostStruct](#)

Additional Optional Reading:

[\(In\)visibilityTACTICS](#)

And march over to these sites for more action:

- <http://www.darpa.mil>
- <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/4808342.stm>
- <http://arstechnica.com/science/news/2009/08/hacking-a-remote-controlled-moth-with-insect-venom.ars>

Week Five: October 11: *Insect Warriors* cont.

Task: After presentation: Break-out into working groups / End of Day: report on group research project methodology up to this point

We will also continue our discussion with a focus on robotics and the way DARPA (Defense Advanced Research Project Agency) is using insects as potential weapons of war. Resources: <https://www.newsweek.com/darpa-biological-weapons-insects-scientists-warn-1152834>

Readings and resources:

[DARPA \(The Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency\)](#)

[Controllable Cyborg Beetle](#)

[Robotic Starfish Killer](#)

[Microbot Microbes](#)

Week Six: October 18: *Phasmids and Mimics*

Task: After presentation: Break-out into working groups

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?

[Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia Roger Caillois](#)

Esther Berry's powerpoint: <https://www.slideshare.net/Allen3/inclass-presentation-presentation>

[MAMAN](#) by artist Louise Bourgeois

[INSECT MIMICRY & INSECT ART: A QUIZ](#)

Week Seven: October 25: *Architects*

Task: After presentation: Break-out into working groups

From termite mounds to Paper Wasp nests to Caddisfly larva's portable homes made of stones and sticks found on river bottoms, insects are formidable constructors and makers. We will look at some of these remarkable fabrications and discuss ways their forms might become part of our human world in imaginative ways. Please review the following projects and ideas and find at least one example related to insect architecture to share with the class this week online:

[Furniture for Insects to Live inside](#)

[Robots Weaving Insect-Web Architecture](#)

[Furniture Inspired by Insects](#)

Week Eight: November 1: *Bug Movies*

Task: After presentation: Break-out into working groups

We will look at excerpts from a number of movies featuring insects as monsters or as something else strange and challenging in order to understand what social figure bugs play within the popular cultural imagination.

Week Nine: Nov 8:

POSSIBLE VISIT (OR SPECIAL FIELD TRIP Event

With Artist Terike Haapoja (details TBA)

Reading: [Looking Straight At THEM!](#)

Week Ten: Nov 15: [An Insect's Point of View](#)

Task: After presentation: Break-out into working groups

Jeff Goldblum's monologue in David Cronenberg's movie remake of "The Fly" asks have you ever heard of insect politics [CLICK](#)

But what does being an insect really feel like? Scientist Jakob Johann Von Uexküll famously tried to describe what he called the signifying experience of a tick using his concept of the [umwelt](#). Tick's Eye View: [A Stroll Through the World's of Animals and Men](#)

Week Eleven: - *Thirteen Research Seminar* TBA (Nov 22, 29, & Dec 6)

Today's class is run by research individuals/groups Readings and resources folder: To be selected by students for final projects.

Week Fourteen Dec 13: *All Final Projects Due*

Task: *Wrap-Up*, View all projects, Note/Sketchbooks

Resources and Possible Research Topics: See Website:
<http://www.sholetteseminars.com/becoming-insect-2020/>