

## Collision of Art and Ant Worlds

### Joasia Krysa in conversation with Elvin Flamingo and Jussi Parikka

*The Symbiosity of Creation* is a work by Polish artist Elvin Flamingo, that started in 2012 and is intended to continue for at least twenty years until approximately 2034. It was first proposed as doctoral thesis and has since been exhibited at WRO Media Art Biennale 2015, Wrocław, Poland, where the project received a special Critics and Editors of Art Magazines Award. The work was subsequently included in *Collective Making* (2015-2016), the exhibition series developed by Joasia Krysa during her tenure as Artistic Director of Kunsthal Aarhus, Denmark (until summer 2015) to explore new aesthetic possibilities for making and doing that extended beyond the (anthropo)centrism of the mainstream art world and ideas of artistic autonomy. *The Symbiosity of Creation* was presented in cooperation with WRO Art Centre. In this conversation, Joasia Krysa (JK), the curator of the exhibition series, talks to Elvin Flamingo (EF) about his collaboration with ants. They are also joined by Jussi Parikka (JP), whose book *Insect Media: An Archaeology of Animals and Technology* (from 2010) will be published in Polish later this year. *Insect Media* was awarded the 2012 Anne Friedberg prize for Innovative Scholarship, by the Society for Cinema and Media Studies.

JK: First of all, I'd like to ask you, Elvin, to introduce your work. I'd be particularly interested to hear about your artistic methods and how you position yourself as an artist/author in relation to this work and your nonhuman collaborators. What kind of work is this, and what kind of collaboration? Can you make subject and object distinctions?

EF: *The Symbiosity of Creation* project is a triptych installation comprising three autonomous yet integral parts, that in practical terms include: 1. *Reconstruction of Non-human Culture*, currently four interconnected incubators occupied by one colony of farmer ants (*Atta sexdens*), supported by Kąpielisko Morskie Sopot, Poland, Ministry of Science and Higher Education, Poland, and the City of Sopot, Poland; 2. *Kingdom of the Shared Quotidian*, currently one incubator occupied by one colony of weaver ants (*Oecophylla smaragdina*), supported by Kąpielisko Morskie Sopot, Poland, and Ministry of Science and Higher Education, Poland; 3. *After Humans—The Biocorporation*, currently one object occupied by two colonies of carpenter ants (*Camponotus vagus* and *Camponotus herculeanus*), supported by Ministry of Culture and National Heritage, Poland, and WRO Center for Media Art, Poland.

The issue of being the object or the subject is the cornerstone of my idea of being inside the process which I call the *shared quotidian* or the *symbiosity of creation* (not symbiosis). The main concern in this case is the shift in the position of the author (or artist) from demiurge to participant. In other words, I could say that in what we do there are undeniably no compromises and each of us – the superorganism and I – means nothing individually, and, indeed, we do not exist mutually as a work without each other. So, finally there are no subject or object distinctions in this process. There is no dualism here.

JK: Perhaps I could ask something similar to you, Jussi: to introduce the concerns of your book *Insect Media*. What does the book aim to argue in general terms, and what does it say about ants in particular? Why are we so persistently fascinated by these interconnections between animals, or more to the point, insects, and media technologies? Is there something to be said about social media in this connection?

JP: The book is an alternative genealogy of media through the animal affects, energies captured in relation to a variety of scientific and technological practices over the past 150 years. How do you read cultural history or media archaeology of technology through animals? What role do animal energies play in the world of technology when you reframe the way in which we think of media? Ants are a surprisingly recurring, important feature in the history of technological thinking and design. As one early part of the history of swarms and collective superintelligence, the ants' social system is a sort of superstructure, even a machine which allocates tasks to the individual ants in the fashion of emergent intelligence. William Morton Wheeler's work was one such example from early 20<sup>th</sup> century, a

prehistory of swarms, that considered the social life of insects, such as ants, as an emergent reality: a new sort of relation that sort of relates to what Elvin just mentioned in relation to the primacy of the participatory relationship.

Considering ants, they reappear in the post Second World War cybernetic era. Consider for example Herbert Simon's writings about the ant and its milieu: ant's intelligence is bootstrapped as part of its environment. So my interest was always in this wider cultural history, how animals such as insects inspire and feed as part of thinking and design of technology, and also how animal cultures are themselves media assemblages. The butterfly collections, other glass cases for private and public 'spectacles' of representing insects as visual culture and as forms of observed life – all form an odd sort of 'panopticon' version of life on stage.

The panopticon is of course a specific optical form arranging how we see, how we look – something very different than social media culture. I would in general be wary of looking at social media as insect hive, even if this sort of idea has been marketed as part of the post-industrial creative economy demonstrating collective intelligence: Bee-worlds under the corporate brand.

JK: Referring to Jussi's comments, if the installation can be seen as a peculiar panopticon for ants, how does it relate to new forms of control (control societies, that would go beyond the disciplinary model of Foucault for instance)? Furthermore, how does the idea of being observer and observed at the same time play within the work?

EF: The philosophy of Michel Foucault allows us to read my work as an illustrated form of hegemonic biopower/knowledge. Already repeatedly employed in the visual arts, Foucault's analyses, in fact, retain currency and return with doubled force. But relevant, too, are Michel de Certeau's polemics, which appear, thanks to some shrewd moves, as exploitations of these same systems and of mechanisms precisely described by Foucault—that is quotidian operations and the ordinary everyday, or, also, in an attempt to be consistent, our shared quotidian, these escape from the control of Foucaultian power and, in fact, avoid it. As the co-author of this work, I see it thus: Foucault stands outside, in front of the incubators; de Certeau, on the other hand, moves within them, in the corners of the laboratory's architecture; yet I, together with the ants, attempt to understand one another; although, I think that the ants understood this polemic long ago.

But I could also say this: merging the elements of our imagination and associations in experiencing all three parts of *The Symbiosis of Creation*, we receive some kind of gigantic, transdisciplinary "toy" for power/knowledge. This transdisciplinarity, however, can possibly wake us up from our accustomedness to classical language, and by that change our habits in the way we think about openness and the perception of things as they are. This toy for a "giant," for power, without implying any political option, can tell its history not as clearly as a classic work might do in a penetrating and performative manner, disposing of the perception of oneself or the human recipient as the center of things.

JP: The ant, and the colony, becomes a form of algorithmic emergent machine, in two phases: early 20th century (Wheeler et al) and then the emergence of cybernetics becoming a key feature for thinking about how we combine humans, animals and technology – as in artificial life, for instance. We can see how our research, ideas about nature and animals also – as part of how intelligence, including artificial intelligence, as well as robotics – gradually become understood as more than a disembodied cognitive process, and instead as a complex non-human form of becoming in the world.

JK: Creative processes seen in the way you describe is an emergent and unpredictable set of complex events and relations that give rise to new kinds of collective forms of action. It is easy to see how the action of ants captures our imagination and why we are compelled to model them. But do art and science understand these dynamics differently?

EF: I have no doubt that scientists have done, are doing now, and will continue to do their work very well. The German myrmecologist Karl Gößwald said a couple of decades ago that there is nothing to add to myrmecology, especially regarding the species of ants that I work with. In other words, the

artist's madness is a little bit different than that of the scientist. But I don't come to the scientific field only with an artist's specific way of thinking, with intuition and a tendency to present the dark side of matters. Before I crossed the border, I had to garner as much knowledge as I could. Consequently, the context of working with ants and working as a myrmecologist changed and became interesting in new ways.

JP: Art and science approach these issues differently, but this is also why these cross-sections like in Elvin's work become so enticing, so inspiring; a staging of real, yet speculative ant-worlds as alternative microrealities of ant cyberpunk, design fiction for animals. How do you speculate from worlds that are radically non-anthropocentric? Worlds that are of compound eyes, of six legs, of forms of communication so primitive, yet so advanced?

EF: The most important way of thinking from my point of view is not to see any similarity between one ant colony and one human society. I can definitely see a colony of ants as one person, one man, one body, one organism, one superorganism, but not as a human society as such.

JK: Can you also say something about the connection between ants and A.N.T. (Actor-Network Theory)? I know that you are also interested in the way that subject-object and nature-culture relations are reconfigured.

EF: Throughout the project, we have proved there is no border between nature and culture. We live on a symbiotic and interactive planet. I hope my idea to stop being the only artist in the project and to transform my position from demiurge to one of the thousands of actor-workers creating these "networks" clearly tells us something important. The most valuable thing is that Latour adds knowledge to art.

JK: How does the project add to Latour's discourse on the relation between the social, the technological and the natural? And how do we understand agency? Jussi, perhaps you would add something here?

JP: there's no connection between ant and A.N.T besides the amusing coincidence, but of course the implications for different sorts of models of agency is real. As Latour himself puts it, A.N.T is a contribution to what we consider as a group, what as action, what as object, what as facts; it offers a methodology to track a lot of these connections, and in many ways I see media archaeology of some of the translations between science and media technology as tracking also these various ways in which agency transforms from natural formation to social. In that process, there is nothing natural – all is produced. But the connected dots are themselves also changing: our understanding of technology is impacting the perception of nature; scientific results, from fieldwork to theoretical studies of nature has an impact to how we think the social. My project has a specific angle to the media cultural and media technological ways in which these interconnected poles, terms are dynamically changing in this web of associations as Latour might put it – but for me, this is a question of media archaeology.

EF: Do you see any connection between Latour's ANT and the Symbiosis theory?

JK: It seems to provide insight into how making is dispersed through networks to include multiple actants. This was my interest in relation to 'Collective Making' as well of course. Despite their rather simple neuronal constitution, ants build the most elaborate architectural structures found in the animal world. But importantly they work as a group. They act as if they were one single organism. How useful is the analogy for thinking about sociality and politics, and even art making or academic research?

JP: The celebration of single superorganisms, or supercommunities has worked in so many ways. It can be connected to communist themes, to anarchism (Kropotkin's animal worlds of sociability and symbiosis) but even to national socialism: Maya the Bee was seen as the ideal Nazi in some of the cartoons of the era! Sacrificing her individual desires for the well-being of the community. So no, politics does not emerge from nature by way of direct translations although we need to be aware of

the ways in which in scientific work, or by way of social organisation, different sorts of naturalisations are working.

JK: Lastly, Elvin, could you tell us about the research component of your artistic practice. This was a PhD project wasn't it? How does that make it different?

EF: Indeed, the project was proposed as a doctoral thesis and I was awarded a PhD in 2014 by the Academy of Fine Arts, Gdańsk. This work was presented as research project, as a doctoral thesis (not an illustration or representation of a doctoral thesis but **AS** a doctoral thesis), and the accompanying text I wrote served as an 'illustration' of the main work. My purpose in deciding to put such tremendous effort into the work was that it had a potential to offer something new, to make change, not only a change in my life, but to change something important in relation to being an artist in general.

On a more specific level, the open formula of the project and the special bond that the relationship between the artists and the ants seems, in my view, to offer the possibility of revisiting and updating the original *Symbiotic Art Manifesto* of 2004 proposed by Leonel Moura and Henrique Garcia Pereira.<sup>1</sup> I have proposed a new concept *The Symbiosis of Creation*, that emerges as the accidental conjunction of four areas: 1. bio-art, initiated by the Brazilian Eduardo Kac and the Australian duet SymbioticA of Oron Catts and Ionat Zurr; 2. Nicolas Bourriaud's Relational Esthetics; 3. Jan Świdziński's contextual art; and 4. social performance (in which a fifth additional and most important area in this calculation is the everyday, which is redefined in the direction of the shared quotidian). In addition to this, I have added the following eight points:

- a. The Symbiosis of Creation is a change in the position of the author from demiurge to participant;
- b. The Symbiosis of Creation is a categorical departure from narcissism and a concentration on the creation of one's own personality as an artist;
- c. The Symbiosis of Creation is a redefinition of interactivity understood now as the relationship of living beings, humans, and non-humans;
- d. The Symbiosis of Creation is a complete departure from the conviction that everything can be art;
- e. The Symbiosis of Creation is the rejection of any manifestations of arrogance or lack of respect;
- f. The Symbiosis of Creation is shared creation conducted with utter devotion and full respect for all participating beings;
- g. The Symbiosis of Creation lacks the possibility of creating only for the time of exhibition—it is necessary to foresee carefully the future of the work;
- h. The Symbiosis of Creation is a process in which everything has meaning, both the decisions of the human-artist and the non-humans participating in the process; the decisions of both parties have a creative influence on one another, and it does not matter which decisions are more important.

JK: This is a good place to finish perhaps – with the recognition that this project is open to influence from other creative forces that offer potential to question and rethink some of the anthropocentric paradigms we live and work by.

## BIOGRAPHIES

Elvin Flamingo (Dr. Jarosław Czarnecki) born in 1967 in Pelplin, is an artist and lecturer in the Department of Sculpture and Intermedia, Academy of Fine Arts, Gdańsk. He is a recipient of grants from the Ministry of Culture (2015) and the Ministry of Science (2014). He has been developing artistic projects since 2008 with his debut para-documentary film about musical improvisation entitled *Small Spaces*, which won a Golden REMI (2009) at the 42nd WorldFest-Houston International Film Festival. His recent project entitled *The Symbiosis of Creation* (2012) was nominated for the award of the President of the Council of Ministers, and received the Critics' Special Award at the WRO Media Art Biennale 2015 in Wrocław. Additionally, the project has been exhibited at the Kunsthall Aarhus in Denmark (2015), at the seminar entitled *Art-Science Conversations* in Kassel, Germany, at the *Cultivated Cultures* exhibition in Lviv, Ukraine, at the Biennale Mediations in Poznań, at the Latour Seminar in Wrocław, at a TEDx event in Gdynia under the title of *Among Species*, and at the Wyspa Institute of Art in Gdańsk. He is an initiator of the action to save the sign "Sopot" from the PKP train station in Sopot (2011), and the author of the installation *Dwaj ludzie z napisem Sopot* (Two People

and the Sopot Sign) (2012), which won the GRAND PRIX at the Gdańsk Biennale of Art 2012. He is author of the film entitled *Wytwórcy wyobraźni* (Manufacturers of Imagination) (2015) and *Dzień 1119* (Day 1119) (2015), which were awarded the GRAND PRIX at the Triennale of Art 2016 at the PGS in Sopot. In 2015, he started developing a project entitled *My - Wspólny organizm / Wanitatywność* (We—The Common Body / Vanitasy) and in 2016 made the musical project entitled *SHMIB - Symultaniczna Hybryda Muzyki Improwizowanej z Bioartem* (Simultaneous Hybrid of Music Improvisation and Bioart). He lives and works in Sopot.

Dr Jussi Parikka is a Professor of Technological Culture and Aesthetics at University of Southampton's Winchester School of Art and Docent in Digital Culture Theory at the University of Turku, Finland. He is the author of *What Is Media Archaeology?, A Geology of Media* and several other books. A Polish translation of *Insect Media: An Archaeology of Animals and Technology* is forthcoming in 2016. Most recently, he co-edited *Writing and Unwriting Media (Art) History: Erkki Kurenniemi in 2048* together with Joasia Krysa. More info at: <http://jussiparikka.net>

Dr Joasia Krysa holds a collaborative post at Liverpool John Moores University in partnership with Liverpool Biennial, where she is Director of Exhibition Research Centre and Head of Research, respectively. Prior to this, she was Artistic Director of Kunsthall Aarhus, Denmark (2012-2015), and served as part of curatorial team for dOCUMENTA(13), Kassel (2009 - 2012). She co-edited (with Jussi Parikka) 'Writing and Unwriting Media Art History' (MIT Press 2015) and contributed chapters, amongst others, to 'The Routledge Companion to Art and Politics' (Routledge, 2015) and 'Networks' (Whitechapel Gallery/MIT Press, 2014). Her recent curatorial work include two year thematic exhibition series 'Collective Making' (2015-2016) and 'Systemics Series' (2013-2014) for Kunsthall Aarhus, Denmark, and a contribution to dOCUMENTA 13 (Kassel 2012). She is currently part of the Curatorial Faculty for Liverpool Biennial 2016.

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<sup>1</sup> Leonel Moura, Henrique Garcia Pereira, 2004, <http://www.leonelmoura.com/manifesto.html>, accessed July 8, 2014.