Becoming Insect!
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.

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COURSE DESCRIPTION

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. Simultaneously, contagious popularity of the photograph reiterates the contemporary world of social media that some have described as a technology of insect-like swarming of human attention, consumption and curiosity. The aim of this course is to explore and interpret such phenomenon by combining fundamental creative practices with a focus on individual expression, research, modeling technologies, as well as reflective speaking and writing in order to survey, analyze and develop experimental design ideas, photographic metaphors, social engagements and prototypes inspired by the remarkably diverse adaptive physical forms and social systems revealed by insects and other Arthropods. Furthermore, this interdisciplinary hybrid seminar seeks to enhance critical thinking as it explores the shifting line between contemporary art, visual imaging and social practice through the lens of what we consider the human and the non-human. By examining the figure of the insect as it appears in art, science, philosophy, technology 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. No previous knowledge of the topic is required, and students with open minds and a willingness to explore new ideas in the arts and humanities and sciences are encouraged to take this class.

TEACHING and LEARNING STRATEGIES of SOCIALLY ENGAGED ART

The study of contemporary social practice art is perhaps the most open-ended area of research in a university setting since it can potentially incorporate many other disciplines within its purview. What remains paramount above all is reinforcing the practice of critical and creative thought regarding both aesthetic and analytical approaches to art and society. The mission of the Queens College Art Department is to develop precisely these interpretive research practices in relation to specific techniques while generating a collaborative educational atmosphere of mutual trust and sustainable learning.

GRADE COMPOSITION

- 25% Attendance and engagement in class discussions.
- 25% Weekly assignments, reading comprehension and creative practice.
- 50% Your Final Research Project and accompanying Evaluation Paper and Field Journal (see grade criteria below).
COURSE REQUIREMENTS

- Investigate a specific topic (see proposed list below) and present research to class. *
- Maintain a small notebook/sketchbook that will serve as a field journal you must update every week.
- Articulate critical thinking, readings and learning accomplishments in written paper (five to eight pages with footnotes) that accompanies the FRP.
- Participate in all course discussions, and demonstrate you have done all of the assigned readings. ++
- Rehearse and improve spoken, written and creative communication skills to explain and defend your work.
- Incorporate research and discussion into the Final Research Project (FRP) that also is reflected in your Field Journal entries *
- Design, fabricate, and exhibit, or perform, install and document the FRP and present to class. *

* Research and Project can be carried individually or in small groups, but evaluation of collective work must reflect the combined efforts of all participants in equal shares of labor.

++ Readings and other resources are online at: http://www.sholetteseminars.com/becoming-insect-syllabus/

STUDENT LEARNING OBJECTIVES IN DETAIL

Project Evaluation (SLO 2) takes place in three steps:

1.) Members of the class will seek to objectively determine if your assignments and your final research/creative project is clear and makes sense in the terms that you, the student, have determined for yourself.

2.) Together we will unpack the types of research knowledge that you used to formulate the project.

3.) We will determine the imaginative or metaphorical leaps that you attempted with your project and how this creative expression relates to our broader social and cultural context.

Final Assessment (SLO 3) also has three components:

1.) You will write a five to eight page paper with footnotes that reports on your Final Project while reflecting on your activities over the semester including: 1.) demonstrating a clear process of the critical thinking, 2.) what type of creative learning you have developed during the course 3. what this new, interdisciplinary knowledge means to you and to your studies/disciplines; 4.) how this learning might be useful in the future; 5.) and how you understand this knowledge as situated within society more broadly today.

2.) In addition, you will be expected to develop methods of strong oral argumentation in order to defend your work regarding these three criteria: quality of research, degree of imagination/interpretation, and breadth of the broader social context made reference to in the project.

3.) Your Field Journal will also form part of the final grade evaluation and be judged on its upkeep, detail, creativity, and imaginative expressivity.

Expectations and Class Engagement (SLO 6)

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.
Disciplinary Learning (SLO 7)
A key aspect of each assignment involves learning, applying and becoming articulate about a particular set of interdisciplinary skills such as, though not limited to, creative combinations of social practice and literature, photography and sculpture, media and poetry, robotics and communications, three-dimensional printing and data visualization, all within a broader social and cultural context.

SYLLABUS

Week one: Introductions: 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 deaths-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 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.

Assignment: following the professor’s lecture you will break into investigative teams to locate at least five insect or Arthropods within Klapper Hall. Bringing these back to the classroom we will collectively investigate the physiological qualities of each specimen as students use a sketchbook to combing drawing and writing as the first pages of a field journal they will update throughout the semester.

Week two: Insect Media
Discussion: 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: 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=luVDiJQeTA
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H_rHYIuBrU
http://post-craft.net/art.htm
http://www.lilithgallery.com/feminist/domesticity.html

Week five: 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

Week Six: Phasmands 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:
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:** 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:** NO CLASS Special Assignment:
Students visit American Museum of Natural History entomology dept.: http://www.amnh.org/visitors/

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

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

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

**Week Fourteen:** 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
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=mm3CCX1_xk&NR=1
http://www youtube com/watch?v=ValnoTCwmwg
http://www youtube com/watch?feature=fvwp&v=tTpiw5tiwm0&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
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://wv2.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=qeV78KE38J4
Wasp Women: http://www youtube com/watch?v=E5zAPCwCh40
Beginning of the End : http://www youtube com/watch?v=uqVLa8lr-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_oj

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

Cloaca apparatus that digests and shits: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VdlLBWynmU](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VdlLBWynmU)
John Heartfield Photoshop Metamorphosis mash-up:  
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qSWRJLFbrPY

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

Edward O. Wilson on Insect Societies  

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.


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

*The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation*