

# 'Invocations' an Asygnifying Fieldwork Guide: Photographs of Moth Trapping and Other Night Animal Encounters'

## Introduction

This paper can be contextualized as an evaluation of arts-practice based research and my human experience of fieldwork as an artist's whilst producing the body of work 'Invocations' between 2011 and 2014. The four years which separate this retrospection and the dissemination of the work, exhibited and published in 2013-14, allow for an in-depth consideration of this period in time in my own practice. This paper reviews literature which could be placed within the post-humanist discourse as well as ecological object-oriented ontologies. The texts reviewed in this paper assist me in evaluating my own arts-practice based research and my human experience of field-work.

Shortly after starting a Documentary Photography Master's Degree in South Wales, UK, sometime in the winter of 2011, a piece of radio on the Moth Recording Scheme led me to a significant shift in research-based practice, which will be the topic of this paper. The scheme presents moth trapping as a valuable activity to monitor the environment, moths being an indicator species, helping ecologists and climate scientists determine subtle shifts in regional climates as part of a large scale map of climate change. Very impatiently I waited for the first moth recording meetings of the year in the Spring of 2012. Taking my cue from the photographic project '*Invocations*', in this paper I consider the ways in which humans, non-

human animals and insects encounter each other in the night. Drawing from animal studies and post humanist literature and thinkers like Cary Wolf, Thomas Nagel, Deluze and Guattari, Tim Morton amongst others, I aim to rethink and examine the way in which science and naturalist culture approaches insects in the context of contemporary Britain, following moth trapping groups. Through artistic fieldwork practice, other elements of the human-animal encounter are revealed and revisited.

*Invocations* focuses both on the experience of animal encounters, primary with nocturnal insects and by extension bats, but also on looking at the culture of science with an anthropological lens, positioning the artist as a non-scientist fieldworker or a reflective outsider. This paper explores notions of animal visibility, imagination, empathy and subjective experiences of animals in the Anthropocene to argue how outcomes of artistic fieldwork can assist us in the creation of a new space which sits between a romanticized approach to animal encounters and seeing animals as biological systems. This alternative way of relating and communicating, approaches animals primarily by 'mapping the differing modalities of expression of animal bodies that point toward asignifying semiotics', which in Guattari's perspective is not a separate non-meaning world, but the basis for our world of meaning, by transcending it.

## Insects, the Body and the Myth

Insects have long been considered, alongside a range of other animals, a form of instinctive and mechanical life, fully automated, providing a great matrix for the contrast with reflective intelligent life, to which humans are the most used example.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, the theorizations of scientists such as Darwin and Bergson on the activities of organisms such as insects, have runs parallel to a mystification of alien life forms, throughout the nineteenth and the twentieth century.

This reading around on how insects have been looked at and imbedded into culture, has played an important role defining the ways in which I have framed by artist fieldwork practice in recent years, whilst attempting to find meaning in these insect -human encounters. A first entry to this world of the cultural navigation of insect form is 'Introduction of Entomology' by Kirby and Spence, published in 1815, in it, the theme is evident: the Great Chain of Beings, the order of nature guaranteed by God. Below God, the angels, and man, came the animals with their own hierarchies. Insects were, as expected, quite low in this hierarchy. Although Kirby and Spence felt close to this scale naturae, their version was different: angels and insects present common traits. They describe witnessing a sunset of swarming insects, most likely to be Mayflies in the late summer of 1811 :

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<sup>1</sup> Insect Media p 22.

'The choral dances consisted principally of Ephemerae, but there were also some Chironomy, the former, however, being more conspicuous, attracted our chief's attention – alternately rising and falling, in the full beam they appeared so transparent and glorious, that they scarcely resembled anything material – they reminded us of angels and glorified spirits, drinking life and joy in the effulgence of the Divine'<sup>2</sup>.

To Kirby and Spenser, Angels might be expressions of a higher order of perfection, but insects, according to Kirby and Spence, despite their small size and apparent irrelevance, signal the hand of the divine due to their intricate design. 'Introduction to Entomology' assists us in understanding the foundation the weight of insects in the collective imagination a pre-Darwinian society, in a period of entanglement of religion and science. Within nineteenth century culture, insects were seen as a celebration of God and they help contextualize a set of principles related to science unfamiliar to our time.

Distant historical contexts and the way in which a vast and complex web of factors produce a conceptual lens in which to look at insects, is useful, not only as a precedent, but also as a reminder that the all too certain certainties we might attempt to establish at present are nothing but that.

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<sup>2</sup> Introduction of Entomology' Kirby and Spence

## Thinking Insects, Fieldwork and Art Practice

Giovanni Aloï, talks about insects as inhabitants of a remoteness that “makes the space between us so vast and difficult to bridge”.<sup>6</sup> Insect form of life is alien to us. This remoteness might also be what generates interest in the representation of insects in contemporary visual culture. In ‘Animals in Art’, Aloï writes about the idea of an unlearning process which is required if we are to be able to start to look at the biosphere, and animals in particular, in a different way, because we are programmed (by cultural and scientific knowledge) to understand animals as a “resource or something to anthropomorphise”<sup>7</sup>. My engagement as an artist with British moth groups stemmed from the proposition that Art and Science collaborations play an important role in this unlearning process, which will make possible new relations between humankind and the biosphere.

This framework of desired new relationships could be put into context by post-humanism and ecological object-oriented ontologies. Cary Wolfe elucidates post-humanism as a multifaceted lens based on the decentering of the human, forcing us ‘to rethink our taken for granted modes of human experience’ and allows us to ‘describe the human and its characteristic modes of communication, interaction, meaning, social significations and affective investments with greater specificity once we have removed meaning from the ontologically closed domain of consciousness, reason, reflection and so on’<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> Cary Wolfe, *What is Posthumanism*, p.xxviii

Object Oriented Ontologies focuses on the awakening to our entanglement to the world we have been destroying. We cannot transcend our limitation or our reliance on the environment and other beings.

The critical framework of the Anthropocene has opened up new fields of enquiry for thinkers, artists and researchers to evaluate, hold accountable and re-think aspects of past and current dynamics. But not only that. As Tim Morton sees it, the former realization can be a liberation. If we give up the delusion that we can control everything around us, we might refocus ourselves on the pleasure we take from our environment, other beings, and life itself. And by doing so, reconnect with our own criticality, post-humanity, individuality and creativity, with our past and our future in meaningful and genuine ways.

'Invocations' exists in this logic of overlapped experiences of unlearning through moth trapping lived experience and the encounters it facilitated. Alongside that process, which takes place during the art making process, my work also aims to bring to light some more concrete information about the context in which it was produced. This implies a documentary discourse that simultaneously carries elements of the Art discourse, being part of what Stephen Bull calls a "reconfigured documentary photography".<sup>9</sup>

Relevant moments of intersection between my practice include the deliberate decision to make humans invisible, unimportant, bleached by the light which attracts the insects on the wing. Although that could be construed as a very literal visual way to decenter the human presence in this encounter, it all happened very much subconsciously and during the editing stage. The moths and bats are exposed so that we can see some detail in their bodies and

faces, whilst the humans and completely overexposed, almost as seen by a non-human or excluded from what is taking place, which ultimately is a solemn journey from the darkness to the blinding light.

Another crucial turning point of my experience as non-scientist in the field was the recognition that amongst the group sharing a night together around a bright light, something that could be thought of ritualistic, a handful of *homo sapiens* around the hearth, sharing stories, I was the only one actively using my imagination, desperately trying to relate to these beings whom we were also sharing the night with. At first, I could describe this process as instinctual but at once also exhausting. The learned processes of humanity-animality dichotomies settle at the first sign on guard down. Or as Tim Morton describes when he writes: 'Putting something called Nature on a pedestal and admiring it from afar does for the environment what patriarchy does to the figure of Woman. It is paradoxical act of sadist admiration'<sup>4</sup>. Following these first experiments, I came across Thomas Nagel's essay 'What is it like to be a bat?'<sup>5</sup> where Nagel argues that one is restricted by the resources of one's own mind, cultivated from one's own experience and that by the processes of imagination, it is not possible to ever truly begin to respond the question which titles the essay. It was only a few weeks after reading Nagel's text, that I remember Coetzee's 'The Lives of Animals', where, in lecture, the main character Elizabeth Costello removes experience from the answers to the question 'What is it like to be a bat?' by declaring: "to be a living bat is to be full of being, being fully a bat is like being fully a human, which is also to be full of being. Bat-being in the first case, human being in the second, maybe; but those are secondary

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<sup>4</sup> Tim Morton, Verso interview.

<sup>5</sup> Nagel

considerations. To be full of being is to live as body-soul. One name for the experience of fully being is joy'.<sup>6</sup>

Of course, this was not the first time that questions of vitality and mortality had been expressed in an attempt to answer the question of how can we relate to another – human or otherwise – being full of life and fully present. In 1942, Virginia Woolf wrote 'The Death of the Moth', an astonishingly beautiful text which poetically illustrates Elizabeth Costello's - or rather Coetzee's - reflection. Woolf writes: 'The same energy which inspired the rooks, the ploughmen, the horses, and even, it seemed, the lean bare-backed downs, sent the moth fluttering from side to side of his square of the window-pane.'

In my attempts to engage with moths, night-insects and bats in a new way, I saw myself doing something I had been familiar with whilst engaging in creating art objects, turning off my internal monologue, not hearing myself speak and triggering a process of emptying the mind, one I have heard many Art practitioners mention. By doing this, I followed fluttering wings in the night, jumped as high as I could to prologue an encounter before that one moth risen beyond the reach of my hand held flash, repeating many times in one night, the journey between the pitch black – which quickly becomes shadows of black and blue – to seeing a flicker of intense white light and, as I come closer, as being drunk with light.

This process of unthinking was used in this instance to become less human, becoming the animal that I am. The concept of becoming by Deleuze and Guattari can be explained as a zig

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<sup>6</sup> Coetzee



zag in which no imitation or reciprocal exchange happen, but is a process by which I become other, so that the other may become something else, which could be attained, happens only is a work is produced.<sup>7</sup> In Deleuze and Guattari's essay, work seems to be of literary nature – examples of 'Moby Dick', Jorge Luis Borges, 'The Waves' by Virginia Woolf, where story-telling and it's mechanics reveals a becoming.

Deleuze and Guattari's 'Becoming animal' is an improvised concept not meant to be clear, concepts such as becoming are a way to articulate complexities, in an almost deliberate way to avoid resolving an idea or a proposition. The whole book is defined by this transition from unity to complexity: the becoming and ryzome sections being prime examples of this. To me, this mode of existing is useful as it expands, transforms and entangles thought into a frenetic use of fertile language. These texts are to an extent generous and open to transposition and interpretation. Such texts enrich one's one experiences and internal logic as they compel us – art practitioners - to look beyond metaphor in the works that as art practitioners, we birth.

Deleuze and Guattari write, 'We do not become an animal without a fascination for the pack, the multiplicity'<sup>8</sup> The authors relate this to what they call Abstract Machine. They write 'Its pieces are the various assemblages and individuals, each of which groups together an infinity of particles entering into an infinity of more of less interconnected relations.'. This idea of multiplicity, the whole and the parts was very much central to a second section of my work with Mayfly swarms. Not unlike Kirby and Spence, I too felt these swarming individuals were

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<sup>7</sup> A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia p.239

<sup>8</sup> A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia p.239

almost not material, but when they seemed to be and their physicality became obvious, as the mayflies kept falling and rising, it was extremely onerous to forget I was not witnessing a ballet show, it all its power and beauty or 911 media footage, in all its power and horror. The Abstract Machine, in this instance, only remained abstract through a process of avoiding the habitual paths of perception.

As Tim Morton writes 'I think art is a way to talk about the way things are in general: an umbrella, Sagittarius A, coral, breadcrumbs, photons. I believe art is a way to attune to what reality is, which is a weird reality'<sup>9</sup> Attuning is a very suiting verb to describe what the process of fieldwork would become for me. The sight of the oscillating mayflies is beautiful. But of course, this is not never a resolution and so I entered the swarm in mating season and moved my body through it, embeded myself in it and the swarm responded. Although mayflies are also attracted to bright lights they are on the wing earlier than moths, mostly at dusk, our encounters did not involve a moth trap. My body heat, sent and breath attracted them, much like light, and very much like moths, there is no obvious reason for the insects to behave in this way, they do not bite and they are only on the wing for a short period and do not feed during this time. As I purposefully exhaled long breaths, the swarms took my breathed shape and, in this way, I don't wish to say we communicated but beyond language we certainly were not mute.<sup>10</sup>

This experience was for me a way into the concept of Assignifying semiotics, which became of major importance to me, both in my practice and in the way I relate to the world in which I

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<sup>9</sup> Tim Morton letters with Bjork.

<sup>10</sup> Cary wolf - Cary Wolfe says: beyond language however, animals such as insects map territories, contract forces, fold their bodies and establish relations

live. Asignifying semiotics, in Guattari's work deal with operations which do not in and of themselves function according to meaning or signification. Insects are animals that do not fit into the communicative and discourse logic of human language.

Wish reminded me of a nineteenth century story, recounted by Eleanor Morgan<sup>11</sup>, of a group of schoolgirls in Kensington, West London. Each morning during hymn practice huge spiders would descend from the ceiling on strands of silk and hang about these girls as they sang. Once the girls had finished singing, the spiders would climb up their silken line and retreat to their webs in the rafters. As spider webs are primed for vibrations and human beings primed for signing, the encounter was highly meaningful, even when not signifying.

The lived experiences of 'Invocation' were highly impactful to me, and the images facilitated a search for meaning and transformation in my practice. Above all, I have learnt that any expression of animal bodies that points towards asignifying semiotics, cannot be reduced to the human signifying practices, which is to say, to things that make sense to us. According to Guattari The asignifying spectrum of the world is not beneath human beings, neither should it be silenced and/or unheard by human beings, as it is indeed the basis for our sphere of meaning, transcending it.

In 2016, Tim Morton tweeted this: ' You think ecologically tuned life means being all efficient and pure. Wrong, it means you can have a disco in every room of your house' pointing to how joyful, eccentric and individual the experience being fully present in our own

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<sup>11</sup> Eleanor Morgan Vibrating with Silk, *Antennae Journal of Nature is Visual Culture*, 2018, Issue 46

environment can truly be. To me, the moths, mayflies and bats were the discos in every room of my house.