

Honeybees and Animal Narratives

Overview of the art programme seen during the (Un)Common Worlds conference (7.-9. 8. 2018, Turku)

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The participants of the human-animal studies conference (Un)Common Worlds were able to thrive on several art projects during the three-day event. All the shown artworks were presented by artists from three different countries, and I was happy to have the opportunity to assist in the preparations of some of them. Altogether we saw four different art pieces which all involved experimental perspectives on the contemplation of human-animal -relations. University auditoriums as the setting for displaying art were challenging and didn't really do justice to all productions. Overall, however, the arrangements worked out nicely without any big mishaps. Performativity, experimentality and participatory encounters were central elements in the displays. In a way, these art shows visualised all the focal challenges that we schol-

ars of human-animal -relations confront at present and in the future. We cannot speak for animals but we can speak up for them, and the process of complete re-analysis might not be possible without experimental ways of empathising with the animals' points of view. In order to re-examine the overlooked agency of an animal world, we need to focus on the cultural language which is also written by scholars. In comparison to the scientific field, art has the advantage of encountering different topics more creatively and with alternative techniques, such as re-enactment or dancing.

The conference included two separate performative artworks concerning honey bees. The first one was a video art piece *Waggle Dance* by Riina Hannula. The video started by showing the honey bees' work in action. The camera focused

on their movement when labouring over the honeycomb. The bees' synchronised, continuous movement, the so-called waggle dance, resembled harmonious dance moves that I found almost hypnotising to watch. The dance was soon supplemented with people dancing in the meadow, mimicking the movements of the bees. Combining this action with quotes from Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, the video indicated that the mimicking moves were indeed about "becoming-honeybee" and not just imitating one. The dance-moves of the honeybees and the people were blending with smooth cuts accompanied by rhythmic electronic music. The waggle dance is a term used in ethology when referring to the body language that the bees use in order to communicate with each other. They move in a figure-eight-like-zone so that the foraging bees can for example share information about pollen yielded flowers near the hive. So the dance moves created by honeybees is not just about movement, it's also their way to interact with other members of the colony. Thus, the mimicking body movement created by people functioned as a communicative link between humans and honeybees, and that motion was, in fact, a key factor in the becoming-process. In order to engage with this non-human energy, it seemed clear to me that the embodying action would have to happen through movement and rhythm, since those were

so essential parts of the honeybees' communication. The accompanying music made the movement even more powerful and dynamic – the intensity of the dance moved along to my own body when I was watching the video. Alongside the reference to the Deleuzian/Guattarian view over the cross-species bond, the key element in Hannula's work was the interaction, which originated from the bodily experience. In that way, it also formed a bond with the audience.

The second art performance concerning bees was *Who is pollinating? The party is over* by Christina Stadlbauer and Ulla Taipale, and it commented on the significance of pollinators and the recent loss of their natural habitats. The performative act contained both choreography and still photographs projected on the screen of the auditorium. This art show started with Stadlbauer and Taipale performing a narrative on the stage while the pictures of honeybees and humans doing the bees' work were seen on the screen simultaneously. These images showed Chinese workers pollinating the plants due to the decline of wild bees living in the area. The slideshow pointed out the potential future scenario in which honey bees are extinct. The spectacle started to proceed towards the climax: at the beginning of the show, both Stadlbauer and Taipale were wearing beekeeper suits with veil-covered faces. As the performance progressed, these suits were

stripped off and Stadlbauer's flora-patterned dress was exposed under the bee suit. She was holding flowers, which Taipale in a more casual outfit was trying to reach with her pollination whisk. As the finale of the performance, blue-coloured popcorns on silver trays were revealed and served to the audience. This final act demonstrated a dystopian world, where the selection of food products would be limited if all the pollinators were to become extinct. Because corn is a crop that doesn't need any insects to pollinate it, popcorn could possibly be one of the few staples that we have available in the future. The difference between tasty, butter-smelling popcorns and artificial, almost repulsive blue appearance resulted in somewhat ambivalent reactions among the spectators. At the same time that the tray was circulating among the audience, Taipale and Stadlbauer were moving up the stairs and finally reached the top part of the auditorium. Now the performance had ended. Especially the last scene overtook the audience and I could spot some incredulous looks among the crowd when they were suddenly involved in the performance. Some of them nibbled the tray-served blue popcorn, some passed the tray quickly to the person in the next seat. Stadlbauer's and Taipale's work functioned as a delicate and choreographic approach to the topic of environmental threat. The decline of pollinators is a burning issue

and the menacing visions of their actual loss presents outcomes that affect all our lives through the changes in nutrition.

As the closure to the three-day conference, the art piece *Unknown Parrot with Princess* (2017) by Ute Hörner and Mathias Antlfinger provided an intriguing series of images of old portraits projected on two adjoining screens. These portraits involved both distinguished ladies and participative parrots by the side of the posing women. The same paintings were projected on both screens with a short time-lapse, so that the audience could first see the title given to the painting in question and after that, the identical pictures appeared one after another. When reading the first-seen titles in a big and dark auditorium, the viewer could soon realise that the given titles to these paintings were not identical. How does a title affect the reception of the artwork we are observing? What kind of power-related questions are bound up with naming works of art? These title variations by Hörner and Antlfinger framed many issues that we are trying to reach within the field of human-animal studies. It's not irrelevant whether we title the painting "A Lady with a Parrot" or "A Parrot with a Lady". The name can both direct our perception toward some elements in the canvas and make our eyes ignore certain things we see in front of us. In addition, Hörner's and Antlfinger's artwork raised questions about the agency of the

animals represented in fine arts. Conventionally, animals depicted in paintings are interpreted as attributes, symbols or simply as objects inferior to the main figures in the scene. Traditional art history has commonly dismissed the agency of animals and refused to consider them as active characters. Without question, this “slideshow-art piece” by Hörner and Antlfinger provoked the audience to challenge one’s way of observing old portraiture. Manipulating the content by renaming art got us focused on the system in which we are viewing or analysing art. A parrot was an apt character to use in this kind of an experiment because it is a commonly depicted animal in art in numerous cultures with varied iconographic drift. A parrot is both a pet and an exotic creature with feral instincts and needs. It’s easy to become attached to it since it can mimic human words. Thus, the parrot was a fitting choice to be exalted as the main character in this approach.

During the conference, another display concerning animal agency in the artistic medium was provided within a collective session. An *Input-Workshop on Animal Biographies* led by scenographer Anne Hölck was a participative and experimental approach to animal biographies and the experiences of animals as independent actors. At first, the participants of the workshop were given an introduction and a short lecture by Hölck. The rest of the workshop consisted of

three main rehearsals that aimed at finding new perspectives about animal narrative. The first rehearsal began by watching a film clip about octopi. The footage from the 1920s presented the octopus as a Curiosity-like creature, which aroused amazement mostly over its uncanny movement and characteristics. After watching the video, we were instructed to write from the octopus’s point of view without departing from it. The second rehearsal had all the participants gathered in the middle of the lecture room. The idea of this re-enactment rehearsal was to move forward in a circle with our eyes closed and aim at the centre so that we would be acting like birds in a dense flock. I noticed that the warmth increased while I was close to the core of the flock and, vice versa, I felt colder if I reached the verge. In addition, I felt almost segregated from the group when I was about to exit the circle of people. Hence the other members of the flock, particularly at the centre of it, functioned magnetically, pulling us toward each other, making us feel comfortable and safe. The third rehearsal concerned the habitats of insects. We were assigned to leave the lecture room and walk around the yard of the University building. Our purpose was to observe any kind of insects we managed to spot in the area and try to perceive what their homes were like and how one could characterise the home of an insect. We got one piece of paper to go, which we

would fold in order to visualise an insect's home. Next, we all gathered back in the classroom where each participant would exhibit his or her own vision of the given theme. It was amusing to see how many different aspects this exercise by a group of people brought to light. As a part of Hölck's ongoing project on animal contribution in our culture, this workshop widened the spectre of scoping animal agencies. In a way, this session mixed the two separate discourses of art and science into an experimental state where participants from different fields were able to draw interest from, broadening their perspectives on human-animal studies. For me, this session turned out to be a refreshing addition to my comprehension of how animal depictions are intertwined with anthropocentric subtexts.

All things concerned, every art project seen alongside the conference was a favourable addition to the programme, and it was great to have all the artists contributing to our successful event. The art collaborated well with different scientific disciplines; in fact, all the shown art pieces were either somehow inspired by the observations of the scientific research or commented on the current issues that are debated within many branches of science. All the themes brought forward by these artists were about viewing animal perspectives via corporal activities and the re-evaluation of the Western canon. They all fit well

together but were perfectly divergent at the same time. Alongside the popularisation of the scientific knowledge, artistic approaches can serve as alternative ways to present the current topics and results reached by the academic community. Additionally, they can provide a counterbalance to the load of information served in the working groups and keynote lectures during the conference.