

Life, the universe and everything: the artist's book as a means of theoretical, political and social consideration of the natural world

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Abstract

Nature and the landscape surround us and we depend upon them. Many artists explore our relationship with the natural world and society at large, and those discussed in this paper work predominantly in the format of the artist's book. Their work also utilises the Internet, performance, video and music to explore the wider questions of how we live in, observe, treat and understand our wider natural surroundings. The Canadian artist Bill Burns begs us to respect humanity, nature and wildlife through books such as 'Safety Gear for Small Animals'. His political works around Guantanamo Bay detention camp, and the accidental bombing of National Farm Seed Bank at Abu Ghraib, demonstrate the far-reaching implications on our current and future landscape. Angie Waller (USA) wonders why people assume they are in the most boring place in the world, and artists Julie Johnstone (UK) and Eric Watier (France) each use minimalist texts to ask us to stop and reflect for a moment on the small but significant changes that take place in nature. The Norwegian artist Kurt Johannessen has performed and published many artworks since 1984, that seem incredibly simple yet ask searching questions about the universe and exactly how we might fit into it. From requesting that artists, poets and writers telephone at a certain time and recite a story about the moon, to his use of humour in the book and performance lecture "Am I a frog?" where he discusses scientific and philosophical theories of sense and consciousness to find out whether he is indeed a frog.

This is an exploration of some productions, from paper-based to performance, installation and digital productions around the book, by artists who use this context to question how we live in the world that surrounds us.

The Norwegian artist Kurt Johannessen's practice involves questioning the universe and how things actually work (www.zeth.no). What may initially seem humorous instructions or observations are actually asking us to consider some deeply philosophical questions about our relationship with the world around us. Johannessen has been producing and publishing his own books since 1984, including the seminal *Exercises* in 1999, "a handbook of exercises that hardly anyone has tried". This book contains exercises such as "Kiss the wind" or "Follow a snail for a day". These concise, straightforward instructions belie the effect that they have upon our thoughts as we digest them. What would you learn if you followed a snail for a day? Quite a lot I imagine; to slow down in pace, to be aware of your immediate surroundings from a completely different viewpoint, to study the minutiae of plants and flowers... I found this artist's book so inspiring that I performed one of the exercises myself which was "Write 100 stories and bury them in the forest" and published the documentation as a free download tribute artist's book: *An Exercise For Kurt Johannessen*.¹

For Johannessen's performances it is always crucial to find the perfect location, "the ultimate place" to ask his question, or reflect upon what it is that he is asking, and for this piece: *TO KEEP A DEAD FLY IN THE HAND JUST IN FRONT OF A GLACIER*, 2009, it was the Nigardsbreen glacier in Jostedal, one of the most beautiful and majestic glaciers in Norway. His open hand cradles a dead fly, protecting this miniscule body from the might of its surroundings. He stands, silent, humble and barefoot, for 50 minutes in contemplation of this meeting between the seemingly insignificant and the overwhelmingly magnificent. As the writer Dag Sveen who published an online commentary of Johannessen's performance, suggests, the comparison is not only in size but also in nature's hierarchy; a fly compared to a glacier. A suggestive meeting between the small and the large, the ties between the fly and the glacier, for how exactly can you define a fly as so small unless you know how to define a glacier as so huge?² It confirms the identity of each in the scheme of the natural world. And this is something that we dwell on long after we have witnessed the scene.

Johannessen's projects can have an air of simplicity that initially conceals his deeper, sympathetic understanding of human nature, for example, *The Hair Collection*, launched in March 2009, and ongoing for another five years, has as its first aim: "To collect one hair from everyone in the world who wants to give a hair." Then follows with:

Aim 2a: All collected hairs will remain together for eternity.
Aim 2b: So that they can all meet each other and enrich their life-experience.
Aim 3: Not to be completely sure of how the project will develop.
Aim 4: That all administrative tasks will completely collapse. <http://www.zeth.no/hair.html>

As of 24th October 2010, Johannessen had collected 2,006 hairs from participants around the world, which as he states is 0,0000291% of the world's total population. His diagram shows he is aiming for 80% by 2016, which he obviously knows will not happen, so why is he collecting them? The performances he has been working on with these hairs interweave strands of stranger's hair together, un-named - we don't know who they are, their age, sex, what they might look like, whether they are rich or poor, or good or bad people, but there they all are, together in one collection, just like society; and we know that Johannessen will work his magic with them and even if he ends up with a huge hair ball by the end of 2016, he will have achieved what we cannot seem to manage ourselves; a harmonious whole.

The American, multi-media artist Angie Waller (<http://couchprojects.com>) utilises the Internet as a tool for enquiry into, and documentation of, the state of our society. *The Most Boring Places in the World* (2009) is a Google Earth tour pinpointing the locations of bloggers, live-journalers and chat room commentators in the USA, each of whom claims to live or be stuck in - the most boring place in the world. "Most locations do not repeat (with the exception of North Carolina, Ohio, Zurich and Singapore). What these destinations share in common is their ability to inspire existential crises, home-from-college woes, and the suffering specific to beautiful scenery, suburban sprawl and shopping malls."³ What is it about being surrounded by nature that evokes such melancholy? A state of ennui, usually only applied to the landscape that young people live in and want to escape from, also seems to have affected travellers around the world who complain that "if you're not an outdoors kind of person then believe me that Switzerland is probably the most boring place in the world." I did a Google search for 'the most boring place in the world' it popped up with 6,430,000 results (0.16 seconds) listing many options around the globe. My favourite reply was on the BBC website which had asked for visitors' recommendations for the most boring place on earth, and one respondent rather than complaining about the dullness of their surrounding landscape wrote that: "The most boring place on earth is in front of the television."⁴

The Canadian artist Bill Burns (www.billburns.ca) established *Safety Gear for Small Animals*, as a 'museum' in 1994. Burns has installed, published and exhibited works internationally, including *How to Help Animals Escape from Degraded Habitats* (1996) which highlights the plight of animals trapped in unstable environments such as land which is being cleared for logging or damaged by oil drilling. These works consider the impact of humanity upon the natural environment and its repercussions for humans, animals and plants. *How to Help Animals...* includes directions for rescuing animals by smuggling them out of the damaged environment in custom altered appliances such as cameras or electrical equipment, with tiny survival kits ready to rehabilitate them into their new environment. Of course, Burns is not actually asking you to do this but is asking you to understand more about these animals and their needs, and how human intervention can do as much harm as it can good. He wants you to learn to recognise a particular bird songs, and animals' means of living and surviving in their natural habitat and is asking us not to damage it through ignorance. Recent works include a series of books about the experiences of animals in wars and battle zones, including *Bird Radio* (Walther König, Köln and KW, ICA, Berlin, 2007) which describes in words and in pictures how to recreate the sounds of birds from Afghanistan; *0.800.0FAUNA0FLORA: The Guide to the Flora and Fauna Information Service* (published for an installation at the Institute for Contemporary Arts, London, 2008) a guidebook outlining how to use his toll-free telephone service to help preserve and protect plants and animals. "The toll-free telephone service operated throughout the United Kingdom in January and February 2008. While the guide strives to protect animals around the world it emphasises the plight of flora and fauna in the region that includes Iraq, Iran, Syria, Jordan and parts of Turkey, Chechnya, Uzbekistan and Afghanistan. The guide suggests practical solutions to the restoration of plants and animals through the purchase of safety and rescue equipment for animals or through the sponsorship and cultivation of ancient plants whose heritage is endangered by events such as the accidental bombing that destroyed the National Farm Seed Bank at Abu Ghraib, Iraq", and most recently, *Two Boiler*

Suits and a Playlist (published in 2010 by YYZ, Toronto, Canada) depicting all the chattels that prisoners are issued with on arrival at the prison camp in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba including miniature versions of flip flops, orange boilersuits, water flasks and tiny copies of the Koran. *The IKEA Playlist Kit for Primates* forms the last work in Burns' series of books about animals at war, also known as *Guard Tower Plans*, *Prison Cell Plans*, and *the Songs of Guantanamo Bay*, it consists of IKEA-style DIY instructions for building a guard tower and a prison cell and an 'orange playlist' of the metal, hardcore, rock and pop songs that prisoners are forced to listen to at several prison camps including Guantanamo. These consist of a bizarre mix of tracks to torment, offend and dominate, from *Click Click Boom* by Saliva, to *Dirrty* by Christina Aguilera, or *I Love You* by Barney the Purple Dinosaur.

The British artist Finlay Taylor has been working with insects for over 10 years, looking at the natural world from the perspective of the interaction between humans and specific species of snails, silk moths, butterflies, and sometimes slugs. His book works use their subjects as participants in the making of the artwork, giving the impression that they have assumed consciousness of the subject matter that they describe through their eaten trails, as he says: "it's about giving the appearance of thought and intention to something that doesn't know what it is doing", for example using snails to eat through the paper to spell out texts such as 'Occupied Territory' or 'Holy Land'. Recent book works include Darwin's 'Origin of Species' processed through being buried, decomposed and exhumed over a one year period in his garden to allow plenty of snail, worm and woodlice activity, before being exhibited near Darwin's house in London. Another artist's book, containing only a snail-eaten text spells out its title *The Weight*, playing again on the notion of conscious intelligence and the responsibility of knowledge.

The British artist and poet Julie Johnstone's minimalist works are based on "perception, distillation, silence, and contemplative experience" "minimal yet resonant works exploring the visual and linguistic nuances contained in short phrases and gatherings of words." (www.essencepress.co.uk). With a similar approach as Kurt Johannessen's deceptively simple statement books such as *Exercises*, these small, text-based, pamphlet books also make us reflect on those elusive observations of the small changes that take place in the natural environment that surrounds us. *Easily Missed* unfolds to reveal a short statement printed in pale green ink on white paper "the day in spring when grass becomes green". Johnstone's *Is that an island in the mist?* follows a similar format with the text printed a pale whitish grey on white paper. The French artist Éric Watier (www.ericwatier.info) *Paysages avec retard (latescapes)* also asks us reflective questions through minimalist texts. Watier's *latescapes* appear to show a selection of beautiful pastoral scenes - open gates leading into fields and meadows, forests or dells. Each *latescape* offers one of these views. What they actually consist of, are photographs of 16 plots of land offered for sale, that have been photographed through estate agents' windows in Montpellier, France; swaths of the countryside offered to those who can afford to purchase it.

Radoslaw Nowakowski (www.liberatorium.com) in Poland, works within the concept of the 'Liberature' movement, using every available means; paper, cover, text, image, typeface, etc. to convey his written and visual intention throughout the whole medium of the book. His visual focus is the natural surroundings in the tiny hamlet of Dabrowa Dolna where he lives, using subjects such as the view of the mountain outside his window to question the nature of the universe. This is his *NON-DESCRIPTION OF THE HILL*: "Once I wrote: *You, the mountain, you've hidden yourself behind the labyrinth of the leafless tree, got lost in the misty air. But I do have almost one hundred pictures taken almost from the same place, in different parts of a day and of a year. I will turn these pictures into subtle prints, cover them with unclear tales small as little clouds, tales about everything and nothing, written in three languages... And somebody wishing to see you will have to open noisily the paper window and go through it to the text or through the text to the picture or through the picture to the picture or through the text to the text... What do I make it for? This idea is so common among masters and fakers. But nobody has done it with this mountain. From this place. In this place. A tangled thicket of branches. A net. Spider web. Curtain. Lace. Labyrinth. And nothing in it. The mountain is too clever. Too sly. Too cunning to let it be caught, wrapped, trapped.*"

Nowakowski is a prolific writer and artist who has been publishing books since the early 70s, each usually in three languages, his native Polish and English and Esperanto, each of which he is fluent in. As technology has progressed and become more available in his native country, he has moved with it, from his initial editions of 5 copies made with carbon paper on a manual typewriter, through digital print to his current publishing output in the process he always

dreamed of working with (even though he didn't know it would exist at that time) – hypertext.

For Nowakowski and his work with books "describing the world is like endlessly asking questions 'what is the world like?' 'why does the world function the way it does?' and many others of that kind. Very often I feel more like a scientist than an artist - I only use different tools. There is a problem to be solved - I'm trying to solve it - my book is just a report on my work, achievements or failures, a sort of side effect of the research effort."⁵

Nowakowski's major hypertext work is the *End of the world according to Emeryk* (the entirety of which can be experienced online at: <http://www.liberatorium.com/emeryk/emeryk.html>). Nowakowski describes *End of the world according to Emeryk* thus: "in the near future the local authorities have decided to accomplish one of the projects described in the triangle book - to carry the statue of Emeryk to the top of Lysiec. According to the local legend for several centuries Emeryk has been moving forward at the distance of one grain of sand per year; when he climbs to the top of the Lysiec mountain, then the world will end. Well, and how about helping Emeryk? If Emeryk is transported in a colourful procession and put on the hilltop then the world will end and what a fantastic show this will be! – The biggest show in the world and its authors and producers will gain forever a glorious place in history... Well... The events of this day are described by nearly two hundred very different beings, such as a falling apple, shining brook, stone statue, little spider or baker – the beings living in their own worlds, worlds parallel but merging one another, although often not conscious of the other's existence."

The first part of *End of the world according to Emeryk* appeared in the Internet in 2002, and in 2005 it was released on CD (edition of 2000) by the art publisher korporacja ha!art (www.ha.art.pl) as the first publication of that kind in Poland. "The story is first told by a human being, in three colours, as normally a lot of things are going on in our heads simultaneously, for example, at the same time that I am talking to you I could be consciously thinking about different things. The main thread of the narrator's thought is here, then he notices a bird which makes him think of something else, so if you click the bird, you get a story told by a bird, but of course a bird uses a different language. As does the creeper, or the fly, each talk in their own language, telling their own story through visual patterns and language. The dark water links to a story told by the river, which you have to scroll along horizontally. Not only humans are taking part in this story, clouds, stones, and abstract ideas are also telling their own stories. I have used only three font designs, but use a range of sizes and colours to convey meaning. Whilst you are reading and clicking, you might think you are ahead of the story, but if you click in the wrong place you might go back to the very beginning. That is the beauty of using hypertext, it involves an element of chance; it may happen that you will never find some parts of the story, every person's reading will be different to another's."⁶

And of course everyone's reading of any artwork will be different to another's, and we might each give a different answer to the questions that these artists are asking us, but what they all have in common is that they are asking us to just stop for a moment and consider what it is that goes on around us every day. However small or insignificant it may seem, it is all a part of the thing that surrounds us and that we live within - nature, and what they all want to know is: who are we and how do we live?

Notes

1. *An Exercise for Kurt Johannessen*. Free download artist's book is available at: <http://www.bookarts.uwe.ac.uk/kurtj10.htm>

2. The performance by Kurt Johannessen: *TO KEEP A DEAD FLY IN THE HAND JUST IN FRONT OF A GLACIER*, took place at Ved Nigardsbreen, Jostedal, Norway, 5 September 2009, lasting 50 minutes. Photographer: Torill Nøst. *KURT JOHANNESSEN: STEINEN OG ANDRE NATURRELATERTE ARBEIDER* text in Norwegian by Dag Sveen is at: <http://zeth.no/tekster/2010dagsveen.html#detahalda>

3. <http://angiewaller.com/video/the-most-boring-places-in-the-world-2009>

Posts of the most boring places in the world were collected by Angie Waller, from January 10 –

May 1, 2009. The project includes 55 entries, with 52 unique locations to date.

4. 'The most boring place on earth is in front of the television'. One of the replies to the BBC online survey: *Where is the most boring place on earth?*. Reply from Bart Gruzalski, Northern California. Thursday, October 1, 1998, 14:33 GMT. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/184418.stm>

5. From email correspondence between the author and Radoslaw Nowakowski. 20 November 2010, 19:46:48 GMT.

6. From a recorded interview between the author, Tom Sowden and Radoslaw Nowakowski in June 2008, discussing *End of the world according to Emeryk*. The video can be watched at: <http://www.bookarts.uwe.ac.uk/nowakowski2.htm>