

BUTTERFLIES: SPECIES AT RISK AT THE EDGE OF REASON

Robyn Moody

A joint publication between Hamilton Artists Inc. & White Water Gallery



Installation view courtesy of the artist

Hamilton Artists Inc.

April 10 - May 16, 2014

Opening Reception: April 10, 7:00 - 9:30 PM

White Water Gallery

January 16 - March 7, 2015

Opening Reception: January 16, 7:00 - 11:00PM



Welcome to the Anthropocene

Books under light surrounded by darkness. Their pages opening and closing like butterflies at rest. Ideas have a flight unto themselves, and the truth of ideas can keep the darkness at bay, *certainly*. And yet, in the exhibition *Butterflies: Species at Risk at the Edge of Reason*, Robyn Moody's installation complicates this simplistic philosophy in a very interesting manner. Suspended and isolated by light, the pages of Moody's books—chosen from among those works of human understanding which have threatened the legitimacy of religious and secular authorities—flutter like mechanical butterflies at rest, animated by a mechanical process which invokes the paradox of print literacy. An ecosystem of human ideas, with the implication of Darwin's 'survival of the fittest'.

The realization of an authentic self is the principle challenge for the subject within contemporary (post)modernity. As the critic Paul Virilio notes, contemporary mass technologies articulate a means of controlling and defining subjects by imposing a globalized sense of time and environment informed by a simultaneity which makes obsolete any local analogues. Unlike the monolithic rigidity of prior systems of control, the proliferation of information production technologies allows subjects to be interpellated as individuals, their differences rationalized as 'personal profiles' that stimulate modes of consumption. And yet, the Western philosophical tradition has prided itself on liberating the individual from hierarchical circumscriptions dictated by social protocols, into a realm where the modern subject is expected to realize and satisfy their own needs in society. From this humanistic foundation came the scientific tradition, in which the authority and legitimacy of ideas derived not from the place within the social hierarchy from which the idea emerged, but rather, from empirical data which was freely analysed and experimented upon by any individual who had the expertise to do so. Scientific progress proved both threatening and beneficial to the hierarchies of power, as those religious and secular aristocracies which did not adapt to new ideas found themselves rapidly displaced by the new merchant and industrial classes whose power came from exploiting the ideas of the scientific revolution.

While industrial and economic growth have brought wealth to an increasing number of people, the liberation and comfort which defines their individuality obscures the collective predictability of individual



Installation view. Image courtesy of the artist.

action as well as the apocalyptic consequences of collective action. Nietzsche's übermensch are not liberated individuals whose enlightenment encourages an enlightened civilisation, but rather liberated corporations-as-people whose will is reshaping the entirety of the 'natural' world. *Certainly*, we say to ourselves to retain our frayed confidence in the aesthetics and philosophy by which humanity has defined itself as the pinnacle of reason and the irrational alike, a pinnacle which has brought onto the Earth a global technocratic industrial civilisation fuelled by consumption and which, for better or, much more likely it seems, for worse, alters the entirety of the global ecosystem in its image, *the fact of design is and must be a human fact*. Welcome to the era of the anthropocene. And so we come back to social conventions and the power of ideas.

Following Frederic Jameson's reclamation of Adorno's critique of the capacity for self-agency within mass culture, Robin Moody's installations often re-articulate the ideas and objects of popular culture into new processes of expression which critique the dynamics of power and control as fundamental to contemporary society. In past work, Moody has incorporated gramophones and player pianos with automated control interfaces of his own design. Many of these control systems alter spectator conceptions of time and 'access' to the

information encoded within commercial recordings. Much of Moody's work also interrogates the potential of light to realise the manner in which spectator (audience) processes interact with, and alter the piece. Indeed, this participatory aspect of Moody's work directly invokes the control society theorised by Virilio above. The audience feels liberated through their participation, while ignoring the fact that the piece controls their behaviour by means of its demand for interaction. This interplay between conscription and agency guides Moody's work.

Butterflies: Species at Risk at the Edge of Reason examines the ways in which ideas float in and out of popular consciousness, as well as the means by which they are controlled. For the print culture invoked in Moody's piece, the objectification of ideas into mechanically-reproducible objects was precisely the source of their power. It was as consumable, tradable objects that the brave new ideas of the enlightenment and the scientific revolution were disseminated among a new reading public oriented around, and created by, print culture. And it was as objects that such ideas came to be censored from public consumption by religious or secular authorities whose power was suddenly under threat—not from armies of soldiers but from freshly minted armies of readers.

The artist explores those ideas which have come to define the modern consciousness as also those which most threaten traditional notions of power, suggesting that the horror of displacement is foundational to the beauty of mechanization. And yet, Moody's fascination with machine processes interestingly serves to occlude the readability of the texts presented. The books open, and the books close. Indeed, the use of the book enables the installation at two levels: language as a centralising agency of power which amplifies the sovereignty of individuals, and machine automation as an externalisation of human memory. The occlusion of readability in Moody's work implies the paradox of modern reason, which hides and destroys as much as it reveals and creates. As artificial life forms, these moving books gracefully trace both human achievement and human blindness. Indeed, like real butterflies, they dare the audience to chase after them in search of adventure or quietly admire them in restful contemplation.

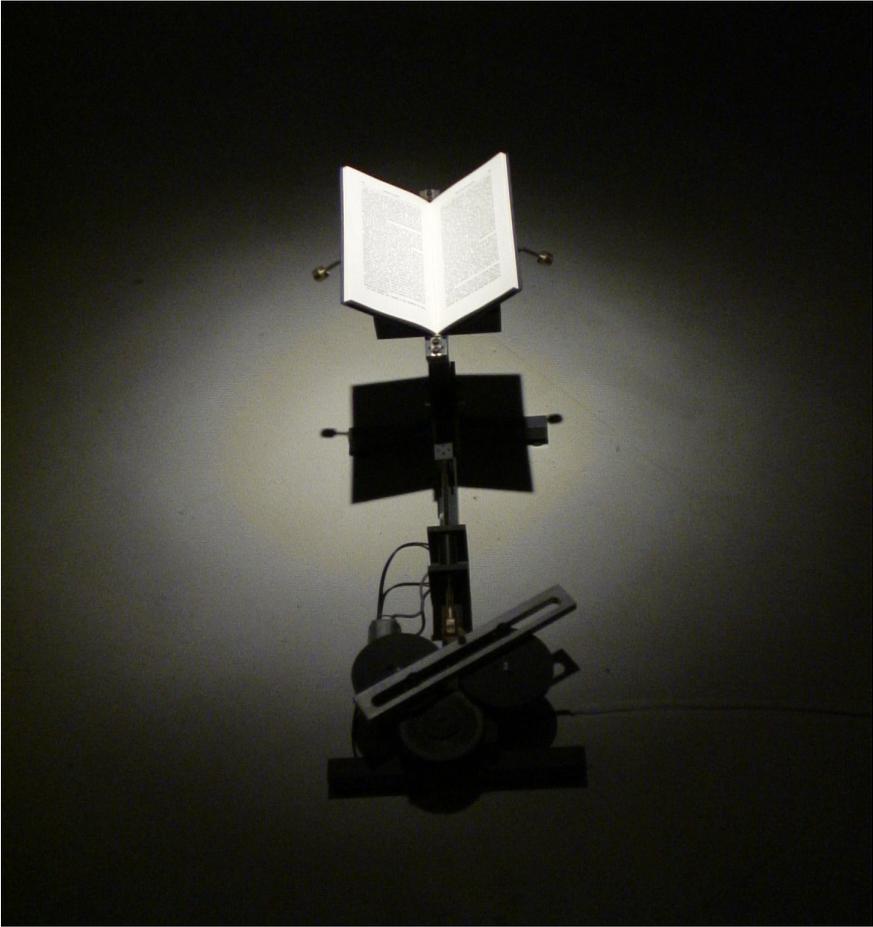
Quintin Zachary Hewlett

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Robyn Moody works with the concepts of technology, people, and the ideas that unite them. He explores pathways of scientific assumption while incorporating historical reference into his work whenever possible. His approach focuses on obscurity and oddity as he intentionally stays away from elements that would normalize his practice in any way. At a glance Moody's work may be considered post-structuralist, although it is not his intention to connect with any specific movement, be it either philosophical or arts based. This fits in well with contemporary art discourse as conversations in the arts over the past century have steadily moved away from movement-based arguments towards neo-individualism, throwing each artist into their own form of cultural obscurity while still grounding them firmly in the collective arts consciousness.

Moody seeks to find meaning in our existence through technology, relationships and the greater universe, while operating within a sea of individuals. Moody not only recognizes those beside him in the arts milieu, he situates himself as the official broadcaster of "artist" and "thinker". Moody uses technology to defend rights and point out truths as his work acts as a reflector acknowledging the world at each turn and adding his own sentiment effectively in the absolute. He defends ideas from the perspective of a history book looking back at his own career as he tackles issues that have defined present day society. There are no boundaries, no insecurities, and no worries, as his arguments are against colossal socio-political oppositions and not individuals. Moody works against himself as the only being in his conceptual realm creating a safe haven for thought-infinite as he challenges "life" through his creations.

Moody's practice continues along this path with his newest exhibition *Butterflies: Species at Risk at the Edge of Reason*. Books, as the vessels of ideas, are brought to life through mechanized structures, mimicking the relaxed posture of butterflies, and each of the texts used have been threatened in one way or another for their political or potentially revolutionary views. Both the physical and conceptual representations of these ideas appear to be fragile, but by choosing to represent such a delicate subject matter at ease Moody could be



Installation view. Image courtesy of the artist.

making a statement that no peril actually exists. This would position Moody as a defender against those who threaten the knowledge held within these texts and convey omnipotent strength as opposition, asserting power and maintaining calm. More likely, this scene has been intentionally created in a much more sinister manner.

Moody often incorporates humour and irony in his art forms and hides aspects of his intentions away from his audience. There is often the illusion of dark humour on the surface while he holds a knife under the table. Moody may have situated these artificial creatures at ease in their beams of solid light as a deadly performance where humans play the role of predators in the dark moving silently toward unsuspecting prey. This performance is triggered subconsciously bringing out deeply buried genetic traits from our ancestors who often used the shadow as protection while stalking. As Moody elevates his arguments he also casts his audience into the same sphere as his subject matter cautioning them to look at their behaviour. They symbolically become the "masses", those that would destroy these butterfly-ideas, perpetuating ignorance and conformity. The irony of the spectator being the source of both our future potential and our potential failings as a species is Moody's calling card and tongue-in-cheek way of presenting his work, keeping people both guessing and suspecting his true motives at all times. Insufficient facts always invite danger.

Clayton Windatt

Robyn Moody (b. 1975, Lethbridge, Canada) currently lives and works in Calgary, Canada and received his MFA from NSCAD University in 2006. He takes a whimsical and multifaceted approach to artmaking, lately focussed on electronics, mechanics, installation, sound, and sculpture.

Often humorous, often strikingly beautiful, and often hiding a dark secret, Moody's work explores (in whole or in part) the complex relationships between technological advances, human belief and interpretations of the world, and humanity's relationship with science, politics, and nature.

In the past decade, Moody has shown his work regularly across Canada and in Europe. Notable examples include *Seconde Nature* (Aix-en-Provence), *Transitio* festival (Mexico City), *Kling and Bang* (Reykjavik), *PM galerie* (Berlin), *Lydgalleriet* (Bergen), *AND festival* (Liverpool), the 2013 Alberta Biennial of Contemporary Art (Edmonton) and the Confederation Centre for the Arts (Charlottetown). He has

Quintin Zachary Hewlett is a PhD candidate in Communication & Culture at York University. His research and writing focuses on cinema, social and cultural theory, videogames, technology, and new media, with a particular focus on the manner in which identities and agencies are enabled and suppressed by technological processes.

Clayton Windatt Born in St. Catherines, Clayton has lived in the Northern Ontario region for almost his entire life. He is a Métis arts administrator currently working as Director at the White Water Gallery in North Bay, Ontario. Clayton works as a columnist for the North Bay Nipissing News producing a weekly arts column for the Nipissing District and engages through *Aanmitaagzi* and their different community arts events. He contributes actively as a writer, designer, curator, performer and theatre technician and is an active multi-disciplinary artist.

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