Re:place, Berlin 15.-18. Nov. 2007

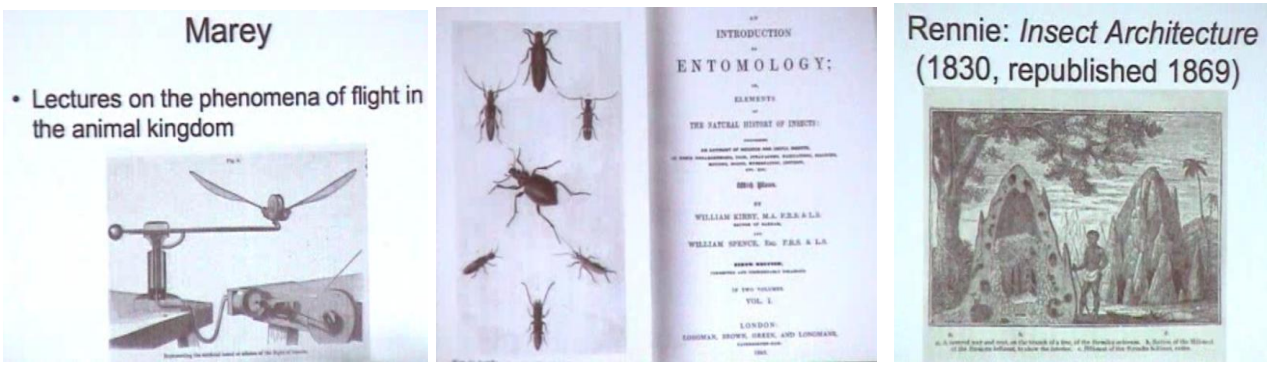
Panel 02: Intersections of Media and Biology
Moderation: Ingeborg Reichle
Panelists: Assimina Kaniari, Jussi Parikka, Michele Barker, Boo Chapple

This panel probably had the youngest panelist composition of the entire conference, and also one that incorporated speakers from vastly different study or artistic backgrounds and study epochs, which to a certain extent hindered the crossover amongst speakers. The first two speakers. Kaniari and Parikka, adopted an historical approach on understanding the relationship between biology and media art, while the last two attempted to incorporate theories into their respective art works: Barker reviewed how the life sciences interact with digital culture, while Chapple experimented on sounds' relation with the biological system.

Assimina Kaniari's presentation was based on her Oxford book project, which studies the reception of D'Arcy Thompson's biological concepts on modernism. She elaborated on LL Whyte's 1951 edition of Thompson's "Aspects of Form" which in turn was based on Richard Hamilton's ICA exhibition "On Growth and Form" (first published in 1917, see note 1). Her presentation touches on the different uses of morphogenesis in art, appropriations and interpretations of Thompson's texts which have affected artists and theorists until today. According to her, Thompson was truly Leonardesque in the sense that no boundaries between art and science were imposed in his examples illustrating natural laws. Such is a 'topologically' inclined biological approach to the development of form in nature and inversely in art. Based on these "morphogenesis" thinking, it was perhaps no coincidence also that the artists who first looked at Thompson, such as Nigel Henderson, Eduardo Paolozzi and Richard Hamilton were preoccupied at a fundamental level with imaging techniques and how they could shape not only new space and art practices but also aesthetic results. (refer also to Haniari's background texts posted in MAHArchive site: http://193.171.60.44/dspace/handle/10002/357//simple-search?query=assimina+kaniari

Jussi Parikka's talk interests me the most in terms of his presentation and also the topic under discussion: "Insect Media of the 19th Century". His presentation focuses on the early interests in experimenting on insects and the interfacing of such forms of intelligence with technological systems. He cited E J Marey's experiments with insects which studied the

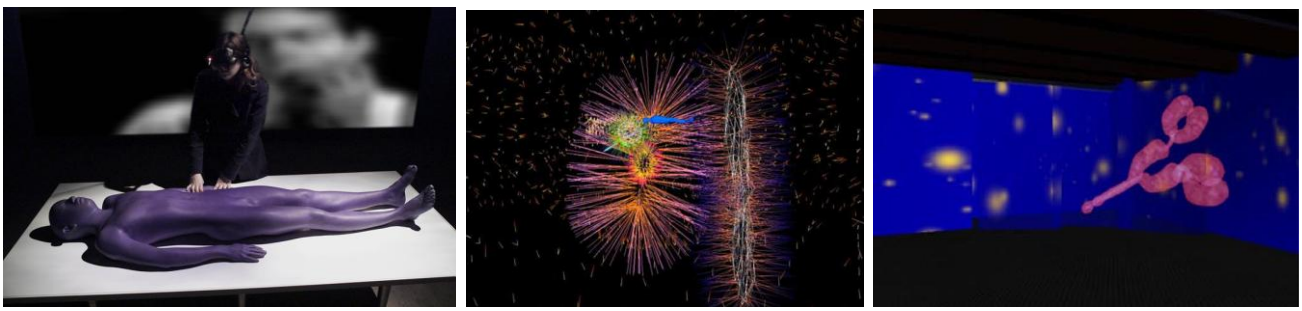
movements and flight capabilities of insects. Another important literature that offered discourses on “insect kinaesthetics” is a bestseller from the 19th century, namely, “An Introduction to Entomology” (1815-1826) by William Kirby and William Spence.



Slides from Parrikka’s presentation

Parikka, who has recently published a book on “Digital Contagions: A Media Archaeology of Computer Viruses”, is interested in dissecting “media” into various “forces” including biological, technological, social and aesthetic, with the hope of bringing in new perceptions into the discussion of “media systems”. More on Parikka under this link: http://users.utu.fi/juspar/

Michele Barker, herself a media artist, is concerned about the emerging role that cognitive science and theories of perception have begun to play within new media arts, especially the positivist neo-Darwinist tendencies of a life and genetics in new media arts. A broader conception of the relation between neurology and art has become popular, which she termed as “neuroaesthetics”. She illustrated her standpoint via Alan Dunning and Paul Woodrow’s “Einstein Brain Project” (see note 2) which used an interactive interface termed ALIBI (Anatomically Lifelike Interactive Biological Interface) filled with sensors that allow participants to interact with computer systems by touching, speaking or breathing. The biological and physical output of the participants including EEG data, skin temperature and gestures would be monitored and reflected via visual images.



Various installations under “Einstein Brain Project”

Barker also presented her own works including “STRUCK” (2004) which is a multi-channel video and sound installation work that critically addressed the complexities of being diagnosed with a neurological disease (see note 3).


image of installation STRUCK

Boo Chapple, also a practicing artist cum researcher, focuses her work on Sound and Flesh, experimenting on the material-technical transformation existing at the boundary of life and non-life. She quotes a lot of examples of art attempts including Joe Davis’ Audio Microscope, Anne Niemetz and Andrew Pelling’s “The Dark Side of the Cell, The Tissue Culture and Art Project” and her own work using bone as audio speakers. A series of Boo Chapple’s essays can be read and downloaded from this website: http://corpuseclectica.net/writing.html

Notes:

1. D’Arcy Thompson: “On Growth and Form” is a classic of biology and modern science that sets forth seminal "theory of transformation" -- that one species evolves into another not by successive minor changes in individual body parts but by large-scale transformations involving the body as a whole. Over 500 photographs and drawings, ISBN 0486671356, 1992.
2. The Einstein Brain Project consists of a number of installation, performance and projects. A series of works including “Derive”, “Madhouse”, “Pandaemonium”, “Mnemonic Body” etc using an interactive interface known by the acronym ALIBI (Anatomically Lifelike Interactive Biological Interface). ALIBI is a life-size cast of a male human body filled with sensors that allow participants to interact with computer systems by touching, speaking or breathing on the body. The body is covered with thermochromic paint that changes colour when touched. Used in conjunction with a brain wave recording device built into a Heads Up Display (HUD) the body interface monitors the biological and physical data of a participant’s own body including EEG data, skin temperature, electrical resistance, speech, gesture and motion. Details of the Einstein Brain Project can be found under: http://www.ucalgary.ca/~einbrain/new/main.html
3. “Struck” is a multi-channel video and sound installation that critically addresses the complexities of being diagnosed with a neurological disease. Using a combination of black and white photographic, video, graphic and textual images, the work wraps around the walls, surrounding the viewer in a space that makes reference to the process and visual outcomes of Magnetic Resonance Imaging (MRI) techniques. The images and text, along with the accompanying soundtrack, draw the audience into the turbulence and confusion of the emotional experience of disease and its relationship to contemporary medical and scientific imaging processes.